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MAPPING LOS ANGELES: SPATIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MARGIN IN
FICTION

by

ANNA BARATTIN

Under the Direction of Audrey Goodman, PhD

ABSTRACT

The geocentric study of literature has often been fixed with canonical western texts. New approaches to spatial literary interpretations, however, invite the incorporation of marginality in the study of fiction, suggesting that the margin is a necessary component of the whole, thus challenging physical and metaphorical notions of centrality. *Mapping Los Angeles: Spatial Representations of the Margin in Fiction* examines four Los Angeles novels that in different ways establish the social significance of concepts such as place, location, landscape, architecture, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography. This dissertation argues that a localized understanding of the urban literary model can serve a larger frame of reference for a global interpretation of the non-conformative text. Organized chronologically, *Mapping Los*

Angeles combines the study of geography with historical perspectives. Starting in the modernist period, my project defines some of the crucial elements in reference to the multiethnic urban dimension, such as city structure and space organization in John Fante's *Ask the Dust*. In a similar fashion, the second chapter takes into consideration the place occupied by the main character of Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*, reflecting on female perspectives and the balance between the agency of nature and the one of humans, between private and public spaces. The third chapter focuses on Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* and identifies how elements such as technology, change in infrastructure, and international goods transportation reshape the idea of geography and temporality, while the fourth chapter, examining Octavia Butler's *Parable of The Sower*, considers how climate change and social instability affect the way the environment is inhabited. A coda examines the value of the geocentric approach in the analysis of non-conformative literature.

INDEX WORDS: Los Angeles, Space, Maps, Geocentrism, Geocriticism, Ecocentrism, Spatiality, John Fante, Joan Didion, Karen Tei Yamashita, Octavia E. Butler, Edward Soja, David Harvey, Thirdspace, *Ask the Dust*, *Play It as It Lays*, *Tropic of Orange*, *Parable of the Sower*, Multiethnic Literature, Non-Conformative Literature, Twentieth Century Literature, Southwestern Literature, American Literature.

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FICTION

by

ANNA BARATTIN

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATD: Ask the Dust

PAL: Play It as It Lays

Parable: Parable of the Sower

RBLLA: Rayner Banham Loves LA

TS: Third Space: Journeys to Los Angeles Real and Imagined Spaces

Tropic: Tropic of Orange

1 INTRODUCTION: A GEOCENTRIC UNDERSTANDING OF LOS ANGELES IN FICTION

“Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else”(Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972).

In *Invisible Cities* Italo Calvino speculates on urban representations and the function of the city in the human experience. The places visited by Marco Polo during his journey are described in fragmented impressions: his accounts mix imagination with memory, past with future, wishes with fears. At the end of the novel, when Polo has terminated his expeditions, he discusses the future of urban aggregations with Kublai Khan. The two look at the atlas of Khan’s empire and describe the cities that have yet to be discovered:

The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins. In the last pages of the atlas there is an outpouring of networks without beginning or end, cities in the shape of Los Angeles, in the shape of Kyōto-Ōsaka, without shape. (139)

Among the utopias and dystopias imagined by the traveler and the emperor, Los Angeles emerges as the city of the future, an urban conglomerate without shape, a post-metropolis in all its formal ramifications. My research originates in this specific vision of Los Angeles: an urban container of stories that encapsulates fragments of U.S. twentieth-century narratives.

In the early 1970s, while reflecting on the city of Los Angeles, the architectural critic Reyner Banham declared that “the form matters very little, you can shape a city anyway you like as long as it works” (*RBLLA*). According to the architect, the unconventionally shaped city

offered everything a person could hope for in a modern city, making problems such as traffic, pollution, road privatization, and weather-related issues secondary. His vision changed the way Los Angeles has been looked at since, contributing to the shift in public perspective: from “crooked town” (Raymond Chandler 95) to the capital of the avant-garde. Its urban acclaim, however, did not come without its fair share of problems. The concerns Banham interpreted as marginal have since become more prominent. Urban upheaval, crime, poverty, climate change, and unsustainability grew with the international recognition of the city as capital of the twentieth century. Marginality has shaped the city, defining its edges, becoming a critical reference for artistic representations. *Mapping Los Angeles* explores the meaning of borders and the embodiment of them. In *Borderlands/La Frontera* Gloria Anzaldúa writes of her home in terms of borders: “this is my home/this thin edge of barbwire” (12). Like Anzaldúa, the protagonists of the stories analyzed in the following chapters embody different forms of borders, frontiers that in this study are contextualized in the city of Los Angeles¹. In Fante’s *Ask the Dust* the edge is embodied by the characters of the novel, whose respective ethnicity constitutes a central location in the definition of boundaries and their negotiations with the surrounding environment. The second chapter, that focuses on Joan Didion’s *Play It as It Lays*, segues to the definition of body as critical site for border determination and argues that physical bodies are an expression of the built environment, encouraging the reader to rethink the composition of internal and external edges. Chapter three explores Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, reflecting on the consequences of border mobility and the construct of border materialization, underlining how the redefinition of material and abstract frontiers affects the communities at the margins. Chapter four, the concluding section, connects the idea of urban frontiers—manifested in the description

¹ I use the word “stories” because there are multiple tales within the novels analyzed in each chapter.

of enclosed communities—with the effects of natural disasters in Octavia Butler’s science fiction novel, *Parable of the Sower*. My research hence delineates a literary interpretation of borders and marginality in the context of Los Angeles, and it investigates how different definitions of “edges” (re)map the limits of the city to identify how boundaries are established and performed.

As Calvino’s Marco Polo interprets each city according to his own sensibility, so much that it seems as if the traveler is describing Venice in all of his tales, the stories collected in this project reflect the geographical background of their narrators. Specifically, Los Angeles is put against a past that happened somewhere else, creating a dialogue between “here” and “there” that translates into a tension between “present” and “past” and oftentimes, just like Polo and Khan do, reflects on future representations of the city. The city is reimagined in the narratives in very different ways, the dreams articulated in different forms, both ideal and physical.

The project considers four novels--each introduced by a specific map--that mirror the way space is lived, imagined, and reconfigured by the characters in the narratives. I constructed this project as a literary journey throughout the twentieth century. The concept of travel is extremely significant, as I started visualizing this research through the work of Italo Calvino in *Invisible Cities* in relation to the way in which the author disrupts the idea of the Silk Road. The path between Europe and Asia in the eyes of both European traders and intellectuals has been for centuries central and exclusive. The introduction of the American continent in Calvino’s narrative questions the European intellectual dichotomy between Europe and Asia and brilliantly reinterprets the meaning of the journey, which does not start in Venice and end in Beijing, but goes so far east that it arrives in California.

Spatiality is a key term in all these narratives. Roads in particular occupy a central role: the first novel presents a picture of Los Angeles still attached to a pedestrian perspective, in

which the protagonist slowly familiarizes with the idea of moving with a car. The novel concludes in the desert, which the protagonist reaches with his new automobile, anticipating the role of the vehicle in the literature of the city. The description of the freeway in the second novel summarizes the beginning of the anxiety related to the postmodern condition, where the subject feels alienated from the surroundings. The protagonist aimlessly drives in the Los Angeles traffic; closed into her vehicle, she isolates herself from the environment, going in and out of places quasi invisible. In the last two narratives, traffic becomes a synonym for confusion, and traffic jams conclude in apocalyptic scenarios. While in *Tropic* the routes taken by the characters are affected by their positionality within the urban realm and thus generate different maps, the protagonist of the last novel is forced to reconsider the authority of road atlases, and the meaning of the Californian freeways and borders.

Los Angeles is at the center of this project for multiple reasons. In terms of spatial analysis, Los Angeles has been fundamental in drawing and defining spatial theoretical approaches. While Fredric Jameson contextualizes the postmodern hyperspace in Los Angeles (15), Edward Soja defines the city as the capital of the twentieth century, a claim that is directly in dialogue with Walter Benjamin's idea that Paris was the capital of the nineteenth (*My Los Angeles* 59).² For Mike Davis, Los Angeles is a double-faced place: a city and an anti-city, where the sublime and dreadful mix together. In reference to literary analysis, in her article "The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism," Rachel Adams uses Los Angeles to theorize the shift from postmodernism to globalism. Los Angeles has lent itself well to different critical interpretations because of its exponential growth, both in terms of population and surface

² This interpretation is consolidated in *Invisible Cities*, in which Los Angeles appears as the imagined city of the future, offering a description of possible future outcomes related to the past of California, and somehow of humanity. Calvino's late attraction to the United States as a whole also emerges in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.

occupied—for this reason Soja calls it an *exopolis*, a city distinguished by its outward expansion, constantly redefining its edges. Another reason why Los Angeles is suitable for this type of analysis arises from the fact that the city is associated with imagination. The capital of the movie industry, Los Angeles is “the city of dreams” where aspiring actors, directors, and writers alike go to make their dreams come true. The dialogue between space and imagination is thus extremely pertinent. The people inhabiting Los Angeles generate stories, reinterpreting the cityspace and creating places that, while not physically discernible, are factual and have tangible repercussions in “real” life.

As Robert T. Tally affirms, “literary geography is not always as simple as the registration of ‘real’ social spaces in an ‘imaginary’ textual world” (8). In theoretical terms, Yi Fu Tuan explains how the human conceptualization of space is often taken for granted and that spatial awareness is not intrinsic to human experience: the concept of space is acquired, and once it is learned, it is subjected to interpretation (3-7). Imagination plays a large role in the definition of space. It is under this perspective that the narratives conceptualizing the city of Los Angeles assume a particular relevance, as they expose the coexistence of different types of spaces, tangible and imagined. Edward Soja calls the tension between tangible and intangible space “thirdspace”, a concept that has set the theoretical reference for this research. Thirdspace can be defined as the sum of first space (the physical environment) and second space (the representation). What is generated in this combination is a hyperreality—borrowing Jean Baudrillard’s term—that exemplifies the unseen, the personal, the imagined.³

³ The symbiosis between Los Angeles and thirdspace is masterfully depicted by David Lynch in his movie *Mulholland Drive*, where the protagonist, Betty Elms, who appears to be a young and successful actress, is in fact an embittered woman who lives in her own illusion to cope with her failures. The two dimensions, fantasy and reality, mix together to the extent that it becomes impossible for the spectator to understand where one ends and the other begins.

Since the publication of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, spatiality has become a key term in literary studies, especially in the context of geocentric textual analysis. Within this discipline, maps have been used to diagram genre, plot, and characters.⁴ Literary cartography has served scholars to frame sociological interpretations, while novelists such as Calvino have long been integrating maps into their writing to underline how characters come to terms with the territory they inhabit. An atlas's primary function is to help the users establish their location and to make sense of the space represented. However, much of the literary fascination around cartography derives from the fact that a map is abstract in nature. It reflects a specific, singular perspective, which is often associated with the ideology and authority of its creator.⁵ Correspondingly, the relationship between a character and its environment is subjective and essentially idiosyncratic. With the appearance and rediscovery of different literary texts, specifically those arising from non-traditional and non-conformative perspectives, new maps emerge. These representations reframe space under a logic that, however subjective, provides the reader with new notions and a different frame of reference. When considered in tandem, these narratives can connect local, marginal matters with global concerns. Together the primary works selected for this dissertation demonstrate how spatial representations arising from the margins

On a personal note, thirdspace was for me going to Mulholland Drive soon after watching the movie for the second time. Standing where the accident scene at the beginning of the movie was shot had a cathartic effect. The relationship with that place was irremediably affected by my experience, while my travel companions interpreted the place in a completely different way.

⁴ Franco Moretti, for example, introduced the idea of replacing literary history with literary geography through the use of maps.

⁵ As Carl Friedrich Gauss pointed out in his study, maps always generate ambiguity and errors, as the surface of a sphere cannot be converted into a plane. Google Maps, for example, is still cartographically inaccurate. Continents appear distorted, privileging the Northern hemisphere. Moreover, the function of a map affects the way it is represented; the rendering is always limited and restricted. (See Rankin in Works Cited.) The unreliability of maps in reference to literary interpretations will be explored later in this project through the works of Borges and Eco, specifically in regards to scale reduction.

provide a key to grapple with universal issues. Since the project is organized chronologically, the sum of the maps reported at the beginning of each chapter spatially conceptualize time as well, exposing the implications of time and space while also elaborating on how the sum of different local perspectives can reflect important global shifts.

In the foreword to *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Bertrand Westphal argues that “For a long period, time seems to have been the only coordinate—at least the main *scientific* coordinate—of human inscription into the world. Time was aristocracy. Space only was a rough container, a plebeian frame for time” (ix). The aim of my research is not to overturn the hierarchy between time and space—that has been done already—but to reclaim that “plebeian frame” because it is from the margins that social change happens. In *Thirdspace* Edward Soja also insists on the significance of space, which he claims has the same relevance of historical and social perspectives in the interpretation of the world. His argument is particularly relevant as spatiality assumes a political connotation in regard to matters such as “poverty, racism, sexual discrimination, and environmental degradation”(1), themes that intersect with the literary commentary of this project.

Moreover, as David Fine points out, the history of twentieth century California has been one of migrations (vii). Considering the transition between “there”—the place left behind—and “here”—Los Angeles—puts the Angelinos’ narratives in a geographical frame. The presence of immigrants created a constant conflict between past and present, what was defined as “the migrant writer's sense of removal” (Fine vii) that originated a good deal of California fiction and is traceable in all four narratives studied in this dissertation. The identity of Southern California is further complicated by its history of colonization, the conflict with Mexico, and the contentious relationship with Native Americans indigenous to the land. If the Southern

California literary tradition has on the one hand been dominated by an essentially and voluntary male and white trend, which has been influenced by Hollywood and the fictionalization of luxury, it is on the other hand impossible to define the history of literature in the region without taking into consideration the role played by minorities. It would be an ambitious but equally fascinating project to piece together all the missing perspectives that canonical twentieth-century literature left out. However, this study is neither a textbook nor a guide to Los Angeles literature. Even though there are a few intersections with some of the literary styles that helped establish L.A. as a literary city--specifically Hardboiled Fiction, New Journalism, and the Hollywood Novel--this dissertation does not favor a literary genre perspective. The scope of this research is limited to four novels, four fragments that represent social shifts in the twentieth-century history of the city and that, for ethnic or gender reasons, deal with marginality.

Los Angeles author Carey McWilliams writes that “the analyst of California is like a navigator trying to chart a course in a storm: the instruments will not work; the landmarks are lost; and the maps make little sense” (7). He goes on to define Los Angeles as “a giant improvisation” (qtd. in Fine viii). Giving sense to a city of extremes, with its tales of fortune and misery, its unruly architecture, and its sprawling boundaries, is not an easy task. As Joan Didion explains in “Los Angeles Notebook,” everything in the city is complicated by the climate: “Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse, ...the violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability. The wind shows us how close to the edge we are”(217). In fact, as I type this introduction, wildfires are spreading in the city, carried by the very same wind Didion talks about, forcing evacuations in Bel Air. Natural and human agencies are in constant negotiation in Los Angeles. Climate, architecture, and urban arrangements offer spatial

perspectives that are often connected to a physical and metaphorical “edge.” This edge might be forgotten, covered up with new architecture, or it could be a place reachable only by plunging into the mind of the observer. It is specifically in this interpretation that the maps collected here assume a particular relevance: they testify to the temporal experience, while also supporting literary self-reflexive examinations of the city of Los Angeles in some of its fragments.

1.1 Chapter Division and Structural Organization

The four chapters of this dissertation take into consideration city transformation and image production. The authors analyzed in each section advance different literary interpretations of the city of Los Angeles, constructing personal images of urban spaces that together identify the non-conformative imaginative history of the city. Starting in the modernist period, my project defines some of the crucial elements in reference to the multiethnic urban dimension, such as city structure and space organization, through the eyes of an Italian American protagonist. In a similar fashion, the second chapter takes into consideration the place occupied by the main character, reflecting on female perspectives and the balance between the agency of nature and the one of humans, between private and public spaces. The same theme is elaborated in the third and fourth chapters to identify how the concept and attitude toward geography, time, and space changed in the history of the twentieth century. Elements such as technology, change in infrastructure, and international goods transportation reshaped the idea of geography and temporality, while climate change and riots affected the way the environment is inhabited.

Calvino made each city in *Invisible Cities* self-reliant; hypothetically, the reader could jump from city to city without losing the sense of the novel’s narrative structure. The idea behind this choice arises from the author’s reflection on time and its limits as an eschatological method, the willingness to create a narrative that goes beyond itself, that challenges the narrative contract

between narrator and reader. Using Edward Soja's words: "The discipline imprinted in a sequentially unfolding narrative predisposes the reader to think historically, making it difficult to see the text as a map, a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic" (*Postmodern Geographies* 1). In its loose structure and independent vignettes, the book is able to draw a connection between time and place that points at different outcomes and different ends, both physical and imagined, thus challenging the idea of a single outcome (the reference to eschatology is here used in literary terms). Although organized chronologically and tightly bound together by a sense of evolution (or de-evolution), the chapters collected in this dissertation offer fragments of the city as they were envisioned and interpreted by the authors considered. The different geographical outlines in each section are also independent and self-reliant, in the same way as the tales in *Invisible Cities*. The paradox envisioned by Polo and Khan—that the end of cities is represented by cities with no ends—is here articulated by following the different perspectives of the texts taken into consideration. Each novel's conclusion is valid on its own terms and, however singular and sometimes apparently divergent from other interpretations, becomes more meaningful when it is contextualized with other narratives.

1.2 Arturo's Los Angeles: Real and Imagined Spaces in John Fante's *Ask the Dust*

The novel analyzed in the first chapter centers on Arturo Bandini, a young Italian American man who moves to Los Angeles to establish himself as a writer. In the city he encounters Camilla, a waitress of Mexican descent, who during the course of the narrative becomes mentally unstable and vanishes in the desert. Using Soja's concept of thirdspace, I consider the novel's triangle of historicity, spatiality, and sociality to trace the meaning of the unseen social activity and marginality in the context of Los Angeles. This section takes into

consideration the race and ethnic dynamics that shape the city and traces the evolution of the environment as seen by the main character. In particular, the second half of the chapter focuses on car mobility.

With the aid of John Fante's archives at UCLA, this chapter focuses on the relationship between center and margins—what the center means for the protagonist and what it means in a city that is defined by sprawl and has no center in a traditional sense. Arturo's stigmatized ethnic condition plays a crucial role in the way he interacts with the city of Los Angeles, especially in regards to the neighborhood of Bunker Hill. This section provides an historical overview of the district, from its creation to the present day, as the old Bunker Hill was completely demolished in 1960s and the Victorian houses that originally constituted the area were replaced with business buildings and skyscrapers. The historical analysis puts in relation the narrative with street biographies that develop into a thirdspace.

The last part of the chapter moves toward the desert, focusing primarily on the ethnic tension between Arturo and Camilla. After having defined some important terms in reference to the Italian community in the United States, the study looks at the representation of other ethnicities in the novel. What this section takes into consideration is the position of the male narrator in opposition to that of the female character in the story. My textual analysis thus defines the crucial role of modern spatial interpretations in relation to alternative ethnic positions in the context of Los Angeles as seen by an Italian American aspirant writer in the 1930s.

1.3 The Four Ecologies of Maria Wyeth: Body and Space in Joan Didion's *Play It as It Lays*

In the second chapter of my dissertation I investigate the relationship between body and city in Joan Didion's classic novel *Play It as It Lays*. The theoretical terms used to define the

relationship between the body of Maria Wyeth, the protagonist of the narrative, and the environment draw from Elizabeth Grosz's study published in *Sexuality and Space*. I investigate the reciprocity between the environment and the body, analyzing inside and outside spaces. The section considers how the protagonist occupies, lives, and interacts with the cityspace and its surroundings. The structure of the chapter references Reyner Banham's work on the ecologies of Los Angeles. Adapting the architect's modus operandi to the space of the novel and considering the novel's symbolism as a rhetorical device to describe civilization postmodernity, I trace the ecologies of Maria Wyeth's: the freeway, the domestic, the outside, and the hospital.

By focusing on the experience of a woman who lacks any sort of drive, Didion raises questions pertaining to the relationship between the environment and mental and physical health, drawing a picture that moves from the subjective to the objective, encapsulating a time period, the late 1960s, that is characterized by a loss of ingenuity and faith in the future and in technology. The chapter considers how the protagonist, who occupies a privileged space (she is an actress married to a successful Hollywood director), is in fact depicted as a character at the edge, as she struggles with depression arising from external misappropriations of her body. This section illustrates how the female body comes to terms with the postmodern environment, how the body rewrites space, and how urban space marginalizes the female body.

1.4 Socio-Historical Remapping of Space in Karen Tei Yamashita's Tropic of Orange

The third chapter of this dissertation considers the fabrication of multiethnic identities in relation to the urban environment in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*. This section explores the relationship between the seven different stories presented in the narrative and the complex net that connects people and places. Like the second chapter, chapter three looks at traffic on the L.A. Freeway from the perspective of the marginalized, balancing oppositions and

examining the consequences of crossing borders. This section particularly explores the way in which the characters come to terms with spatiality and how space is lived differently according to the position of each individual. The novel invites questions pertaining to the use of maps. In this section, I analyze the representation of each character considering their interactions in their different environmental dimensions. The aim of this chapter is to reveal how positionality affects the characters' relationship with the territory and how different forms of authority shape geographical interpretations of the environment. My argument draws from the idea that the process of cognitive mapping for each character is a subjective process; each character's spatial thinking depends on their unique relationship with concepts of place, environment, nation, borders, home, and city. Lines can be stretched; shifting borders, however, does not mean making perimeters invisible. The book, published in 1997, hints at the possible complications of the new media era, suggesting that progress will inevitably alter the concepts of time and space and of the world as we *knew* it.

1.5 Topography of a Private Dystopia: Crossing Borders in Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

The last chapter of my dissertation is dedicated to the analysis of Octavia E. Butler's 1993 book, *Parable of the Sower*. The novel, set in the mid 2020s, has as a main character Lauren Olamina, a teenage girl who grows up in a gated community in the outskirts of Los Angeles. The environment described in the story is apocalyptic: water is a luxury item, and the streets are filled with poverty, crime, and violence. The fictional space becomes a platform through which Butler discusses racial issues, gender dynamics, and environmental problems spurring from the degradation of the city of Los Angeles during the early 1990s.

This part of the dissertation looks at the political and economical hierarchies of Los Angeles and the United States as they are spatially developed in the novel. Power has different ramifications that reflect the position of minority groups in Los Angeles, affecting social structures, gender relations, and racial dynamics. Through the reflections of the main character, the novel explores a number of concerns, including the repercussions of political choices that do not take into consideration the aforementioned social practices while also reflecting on ecological consciousness and sustainability. The protagonist's strategy for overcoming hardship and instability is to cross borders and to constantly redefine structural space. Underlined by a tension between inside and outside, the narrative challenges boundaries between both physical and metaphorical realms seeking ways to cope with social injustice and ecological disaster.

1.6 Coda

In a concluding essay, I examine the value of the geocentric approach in the analysis of non-conformative literature. I argue that a localized understanding of the urban literary model can serve a larger frame of reference for a global interpretation of the non-conformative text. *Mapping Los Angeles* attempts to underline how the social significance of concepts such as place, location, landscape, architecture, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography assume a different meaning when approached from an alternative position, one that values marginality as part of the whole and questions hegemonic notions of centrality. Different threads of organization are explored, pointing at the ambivalence between the spatial and the historical interpretation. This last section also aims at drawing some parallels with the present time while stimulating ideas for future research development.

2 **CHAPTER ONE: ARTURO'S LOS ANGELES: REAL AND IMAGINED**
SPACES IN JOHN FANTE'S ASK THE DUST

“Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town” (John Fante, *Ask the Dust*, 1939).

The character of Arturo Bandini was conceptualized in California when Fante moved from Colorado in the early 1930s eager to start his writing career. Bandini officially appears in four novels: *The Road to Los Angeles*, written between 1933 and 1936 but published posthumously after the author's death in 1983; *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), his first published novel and the one that brought national attention to his writing; *Ask the Dust* (1939); and finally, *Dreams from Bunker Hill* (1982), which Fante dictated to his wife Joyce while blind and bedridden due to the consequences of diabetes. The character of Arturo Bandini, however, can also be found in a few unpublished stories set both in Colorado and California. Despite his Midwestern origins--the young Arturo publicly appears for the first time in the fictional town of Rocking, Colorado--in the past few decades the character of Arturo has come to be associated more with the literature of Los Angeles thanks to John Fante's ability of incorporating the city in his writing and offering vivid images of neighborhoods and streets, a strategy that transformed Arturo into a quintessential Los Angelino. As this chapter will illustrate, the Italian ethnic background of the protagonist affects the way spatiality is conceived in the novel. Edward Soja's theory of thirdspace, as I will elaborate throughout this section, provides a new way to come to terms with the display of ethnicity in the novel and the controversial treatment of the

subject. The cognitive map of the city Arturo creates is determined both by factors external to the main character, such as city plan and structure, that due to the financial straits of the protagonist limit him and force him in determined places; and by the subjectivity of the protagonist who interprets the environment according to his personal point of view. Moreover, Arturo's positionality and spatial understanding influence the depiction of urban space and nature in the novel. The pre-conquest territory of the outskirts of Los Angeles overlaps with the character of Camilla, Arturo's love interest, while Arturo places himself in the heart of town, in an attempt to emerge from a position of invisibility. In the dichotomy between center and margins Los Angeles assumes a specific role, becoming a character in its own right.

As a few critics have noticed before, 1939 was a prolific year for the arts in Los Angeles. The movie industry saw the release of *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Ninotchka*, *Mr. Smith goes to Washington*, *Stagecoach*, and the adaptation of *Of Mice and Men*. Literary production was not less successful; novels such as Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, and Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* were published the same year.⁶ 1939 was also the year of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, an author that John Fante greatly admired.⁷ Fine defined 1939 as "an *annus mirabilis* in Hollywood" ("John Fante and the Los Angeles Novel in the 1930s" 122), the competition was clearly substantial and partially influenced the selling of the novel which did not meet Fante's expectation and ended up more or less forgotten, excluding a reissue in the 1950s and a few

⁶ See David Fine's *Imagining Los Angeles* and "John Fante and the Los Angeles Novel in the 1930s" and Stephen Cooper's *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante*.

⁷ In the 1940s while Fante was working on a novel about Filipino workers and he asked John Steinbeck for a recommendation letter for a grant that would allow the writer to travel to the Philippines to gather first hand material. Steinbeck refused to do so, wishing Fante the best of luck (See Cooper). The situation must have generated some resentment in Fante who held the writer in great esteem.

international publications in the same decade, until Charles Bukowski discovered the book in the Los Angeles Public Library in the early 1980s and urged his publisher, Black Sparrow Press, to start a reissue of Fante's novels that was initiated with the reprinting of *Ask the Dust*.

The new edition, with an introduction written by Charles Bukowski, created a cult around *Ask the Dust* (*ATD*), and Arturo Bandini, just like Homer and Tod from *The Day of the Locust*, became the symbol of the uprooted American migrant, the Los Angelino by acquisition, whose oxymoronic condition—a foreigner and a Los Angeles inhabitant at the same time—made him the representative of the Los Angeles pastiche, the model of the cultural exopolis, a city established from the outside.⁸ “The Los Angeles novel of the 1930s” explains David Fine, “offers a prime example of this sense of estrangement and displacement. It is a fiction about arrival and entrance, but also about exile and alienation. It is, like the autobiographical fiction written by immigrants to America, about the claiming of the new land, but also about memories of the land left behind” (“John Fante and the Los Angeles Novel in the 1930s” 124). On this topic, in the book *Imagining Los Angeles*, Fine rightly remarks that from Raymond Chandler to F. Scott Fitzgerald most of the Los Angeles literature of the period was composed by writers that came from other parts of the United States. In *ATD*, Fante was able to capture the sense of removal that reflects both the abandonment of Colorado, where the protagonist grew up, and the estrangement from the Italian community.

Helen Hunt Jackson, who wrote *Ramona*, the popular 1884 novel that inspired *ATD*, was another author who obtained fame in California while she was in fact a New York journalist. The novel obtained so much success that at the time when John Fante was sketching *ATD* the book

⁸ Borrowing Soja's definition of exopolis and his urban reasoning as “virtually unbounded extremes of urban centeredness and decenteredness”(17) I add the already implicit connotation based on the fact that the city moves its axis when it is inhabited by people from outside its borders.

was still a bestseller. *Ramona*, Fine explains, “enmeshed in the conventions of 1880s sentimental, domestic, and local color fiction, was taken by its contemporary audience as a dramatic, yet realistic, narrative about ill-fated lovers in a land that still had its storied charm”(JTLA 31). In a few instances Fante mentioned that he conceived *ATD* as a “*Ramona* in reverse.”⁹ *ATD*, as *Ramona*, presents a romance. In the story, the character is a male instead of a female (reverse explained) and is embedded with the racial and ethnic implications explored by Jackson through reflections pertaining to alienation and madness. When referencing *Ramona*, John Fante was probably alluding to its pseudo-historic characteristics in terms of context more than content, though. What he had in mind was the symbolism of *Ramona*, its connection to Southern California and the influence it had on generations of readers. The romanticism of the early novel, imbedded in an environment that is still rural, where the activities of the people involved revolve around the life of the Rancho and surrounding villages, is elaborated in *ATD*, transported in the urban realm, turned into the reality of California that was known and made sense to Fante’s contemporary readers.

In *ATD* John Fante tastefully plays with California’s symbolism to evoke the Los Angeles he knew when he moved to the city in 1931. The image of the orange for example, symbolic of the sunny California, where summer is all year long, is in the book the only fruit Bandini can afford. Arturo eats oranges for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The author plays with their ironic symbolism as the fruits become dispossessed of their positive value, turning into one of the representations of the broken American dream, with which the City of Dreams is so

⁹ See reissued prologue of *ATD* and personal letters.

saturated.¹⁰ The unfulfilled American dream represented with the metaphor of the orange has an architectural counterpart that emerges through Arturo's description of the city:

The old folk from Indiana and Iowa and Illinois, from Boston and Kansas City and Des Moines, they sold their homes and their stores, and they came here by train and by automobile to the land of sunshine, to die in the sun...And when they got here they found that other and greater thieves had already taken possession, that even the sun belonged to others...Dust of Chicago and Cincinnati and Cleveland on their shoes, doomed to die in the sun, a few dollars in the bank, enough to subscribe to the *Los Angeles Times*, enough to keep alive the illusion that this was paradise, that their little papier-mâché homes were castles. (45)

Arturo's considerations cast light on the reality of Los Angeles, thinking about its inhabitants as people coming from elsewhere, attracted by the sun, while also pointing out one of the most crucial themes of the narrative: "illusion," which according to the narrator, is fundamental, since by dreaming one can survive and adapt to the environment. The architecture reflects the illusion: "papier-mâché homes" become "castles." The image of the urban and social hodgepodge that was consolidated in the twentieth century becomes very specific in *ATD*, specific to the Los Angeles of the 1930s, of the depression era and later in the narrative, of the transition to the age of the automobile. The passage from railroad to car is indirectly acknowledged in the book. When Bandini is finally able to buy a car the margins of town open to him. The purchase coincides with a change in attitude of the protagonist, who acquires a new perspective on his life and the story through his love interest, Camilla. The reader can easily visualize the place depicted in the novel. The comparison with the historical Los Angeles is

¹⁰ Other Los Angeles narratives elaborate the symbolism of the fruit. In later chapters, I will explore how the orange is imagined and how it functions within the urban context of the city. See chapter 3 in particular.

eased and encouraged by the narration and its constant naming of neighborhoods, streets, and buildings. If one had to draw the wandering of Arturo in the novel, the depiction would probably look fairly similar to the following representation:



Figure 1 The Wonder City of America: Where to go and What to See-1932

The map depicted above, conserved in the Los Angeles Public Library, is one of the few cartographical representations of Los Angeles in the 1930s that is still available today. The image, though not reliable in terms of scale and accuracy--the buildings of downtown coexist with the Mojave Desert that is visible on the top right corner--is a good representation of how the author of the map, a male immigrant artist, interpreted Los Angeles approximately around the time in which John Fante began his writing career in California. The unconventional points of interest mentioned here, such as “Crystal Pier Nude Sun Baths” or “Sebastian’s New Cotton

Club,” hint at an interpretation of the city which has many similarities with the Los Angeles lived by Arturo Bandini, the protagonist of *ATD*. As Glen Creason points out, in this artistic representation, Hollywood is in the background but it is not a dominant presence on the map (139); what stands out at a first glance is the city grid and its roads, the very roads accounted for in Fante’s narrative.¹¹ The streets offer a vision of the city that although not cartographically precise, gives a sense of the dimension and urban development Arturo experiences as his meandering takes him around the area. Leushener, the artist who drew the map, decided to focus on the Greater Los Angeles area, providing another reason as to why this representation is in line with Arturo’s interactions with space. The novel, as the map, moves from a centripetal to a centrifugal point of view that gives increased relevance to the margins of the city. By the end of the novel, the axis, that at first seems to coincide with the very center of the map expands to the sides incorporating the periphery.

Beginning with a historical perspective that highlights the spatial context of the Los Angeles known by Arturo, the chapter will then move to questions related to the ethnicity of the protagonist and his perception of other ethnicities, in particular focusing on his relationship with Camilla, a Mexican-American waitress. The considerations are elaborated within a spatial configuration determined by the interpretations of Arturo, who sees Camilla as an inhabitant of the margins. Physical spaces mix with metaphysical ones, in particular the fictional realm elaborated by Arturo. Both the city and the surrounding nature anticipate and echo the concerns

¹¹ See John Fante’s letter to H. L. Mencken of *American Mercury* where he says that *Ask the Dust* won’t be the classic Hollywood story. “Do I speak of Hollywood with its tinsel kikes [crossed off in pencil in the manuscript], of the movies, do I speak of Bel Air and Lakeside, do I speak of Pasadena and the hot spots hereabouts—no and no a thousand times. I tell you this is a book about a girl and a boy in a civilization: this is about Main Street and Spring Street and Bunker Hill, about the town no further west than Figueroa, and nobody famous is in it and nothing publicized will be mentioned because none of that belongs here really, or will be here much longer”(4).

and developments of the story. Following Edward Soja's theorizations of thirdspace, I will demonstrate how history, social interactions, and the urban realm affect the dimension of space in the novel. Together these three dimensions create a thirdspace, or hyperreality that fuses elements pertaining to the lived and imagined world, forming a reality of its own. In the introduction to *Thirdspace*, Soja affirms that "Understanding the world is, in the most general sense, a simultaneously historical and social project." (2) In the case of *ATD*, the historical perspective that emerges from the urban setting is intrinsic to the social aspect, which in the novel revolves around dynamics of ethnicity. The graphic tension between center and periphery is determined by Arturo's self-perception as a young Italian-American and his interpretation of the people who surround him and the ethnic connotations he assigns to such people. This chapter will analyze the relationship between ethnicity and marginality, in the attempt to show how the city of Los Angeles and its larger landscape are interpreted and affected by the protagonist in *Ask the Dust*. The novel's representation of the tension between center and margins evolves in the narration, following the pattern of a bildungsroman, in which a main character constructs his own narrative to succeed as a writer and forget about his stigmatized ethnic heritage.

2.1 Imposing a Center: Bunker Hill

The novel begins in Bunker Hill, which, as the narrator explains in the incipit of the novel, is exactly "down in the very middle of Los Angeles" (11). The subject is at the center and as such is surrounded by the entire city and its occupants. The action of placing himself in the middle is for Arturo a way to impose his presence in the city and, doing so, achieving the *Americanness* he so desperately longs for. What is interesting in this perspective is the fact that Los Angeles is a multi-centered city, without a single, social gathering nucleus in the European sense. Arturo stands in "the middle" geographically--the tension between center and margins

originates from a topographical reasoning that acquires a political meaning through the actions and considerations of the main character. The center coincides with a position of power as it establishes an advantage point for Arturo; the arterial roads connect the downtown to the periphery, but at the same time they attract the periphery to the center, as manifested in Arturo's accounts of in-town nightclubs, factories, and "the broken people" of Bunker Hill. In this perspective, marginality is embodied in the very center. What establishes the hierarchical connotation of the center is the fact that by living in the middle Arturo gets to experience all, empowering him as a writer and helping him in his personal development: "I sat in a dream of delight, an orgy of comfortable confidence: the world was so big, so full of things I could master. Ah, Los Angeles! Dust and fog of your lonely streets, I am no longer lonely"(125) Arturo explains. The position he chooses for himself grants him easy access to the "things" he "could master" making everything revolve around him.

As Melissa Ryan states in her article *At Home in America*, the character of Bandini is associated with a desire for conquest, which manifests itself in Arturo's relationship with the surrounding environment. Conquering the environment is a way to establish himself as a rightful American, and, as evident in the following passage, it is also a way to become a Los Angelino. Arturo states, "I climbed out the window and scaled the incline to the top of Bunker Hill. A night for my nose, a feast for my nose, smelling the stars, smelling the flowers, smelling the desert, and the dust asleep, across the top of Bunker Hill" (19). Arturo does not limit himself to gazing at what he sees but he actively engages with the city through the act of smelling it, physically absorbing the landscape.

The role of the city was clear since the first stages of Fante's drafting of *ATD*. In an early prologue of the novel, written by Fante as a letter to his editor at Stackpole Sons and never

mailed, the writer explains that *ATD* “ is a book about Main Street and Spring Street and Bunker Hill, about this no farther west than Figueroa.”¹² The author insists on the importance of Downtown in a few personal letters as well¹³--in the correspondence he contextualizes Arturo within the confines of downtown, away from Hollywood, to give the character more truthfulness in a context that is not inhabited by movie stars but by the working-class. John Fante’s idea was to create a true to life character, son of immigrants, who arrives from Colorado with just a little money in his pockets, and establishes himself in the center of town, Bunker Hill. Bunker Hill is relevant in the discussion of real and imagined urbanism for reasons that connect his position to the interpretation and development of the environment surrounding Arturo. To understand the meaning of this space and the conceptualization of this area as *thirdspace* I will provide a short historical perspective of the district.

In 1995 urbanists Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Gail Sansbury worked on a project that converged in their article “Lost Streets of Bunker Hill” in which the two researchers assembled a history of the area and its later redevelopment. In this study they explain that the first recorded settlement of Bunker Hill was built on Gabrieliño Indian territory. The streets comprising the district according to the first official survey of 1849, were Calle Loma, Calle Esperanza, Calle de las Flores, Calle Primavera—names that reflect the Spanish heritage of the city. In the 1860s two residents of means bought the area and, by the next decade, transformed it into a wealthy Victorian neighborhood. In the 1920s the upscale mansions of the district began to be vacated by the rich families that moved to more prestigious locations, such as Beverly Hills, and to more tranquil areas farther from downtown. The houses and buildings of Bunker Hill were divided into rooms and small apartments mostly rented out to single and elderly men (395-96). In

¹² The prologue does not provide page numbers. See previous note for further detail.

¹³ See *John Fante Selected Letters*.

ATD Arturo lives in the Alta Loma Hotel, which resembles one of these apartments. The reference for the description of the room and the building was probably the Alta Vista, where John Fante resided for a brief period in the early 1930s.¹⁴ The similarity between the two places is based more on the people residing in the hotels, the description of the rooms, and the morphology of the territory than the actual structure of the building. The following excerpt helps understanding the peculiarity of the fictional hotel that appears in *ATD*:

The hotel was called Alta Loma. It was built on a hillside in reverse, there on the crest of Bunker Hill, built against the decline of the hill, so that the main floor was on the level with the street but the tenth floor was downstairs ten levels. If you had room 862, you got in the elevator and went down eight floors, and if you wanted to go down the truck room, you didn't go down but up to the attic, one floor above the main floor. (15)

The odd and almost comical upside-down building description of the fictional hotel mixes with real life elements such as the morphology of the territory. Transients and single men inhabit the hotel. One of these people is Mr. Hellfirick, whose description follows: "Mr. Hellfirick was an atheist, retired from the army, living on a meager pension, scarcely enough to pay his liquor bills, even though he purchased the cheapest gin on the market" (28). Arturo's neighbor is the archetypal Bunker Hill resident, one of those low-income single men that the 1940 census registered and that, quoting Loukaitou-Sideris and Sansbury "heavily weighted" the hill (396). In the book there are a few mentions of other characters that occupy the streets of the district. One of them is the Japanese grocer who sells Arturo oranges. The main character states, "Down at the Japanese market he saw me coming, that bullet-faced smiling Japanese, and he

¹⁴ For more information regarding Bunker Hill in relation to the work of John Fante see Cooper's *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante* and Fine's essay "John Fante and the Los Angeles Novel in the 1930's" contained in *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*.

reached for a paper sack. A generous man, gave me fifteen, sometimes twenty for a nickel”(27). The picture of Bunker Hill that emerges from Arturo’s accounts is of a lively place, populated with people from different ethnic backgrounds, in which a few of these individuals seem to recognize him and help him.¹⁵ It is not hard to imagine how Bunker Hill looked in the early 1930s. With a few road adjustments, the sidewalks were built in the 1920s and by the next decade the quarter “saw the proliferation of small retail establishments, mom-and-pop stores, cafes, restaurants, drugstores, shoe-repair shops, and dry-cleaning establishments” (Loukaitou-Sideris, Sansbury 398). As Jane Jacobs would argue, the presence of sidewalks probably contributed to the ferment experienced by the district, giving people the chance to easily walk from one place to the other and establish a network of relationships with the rest of the neighborhood residents.¹⁶

Stuart Timmons’ biography of Harry Hay, gay advocate and founder of the Mattachine Society, offers a description of 1930s Bunker Hill that underlines its multicultural qualities, its community, and gives a little bit of perspective on the interconnected architecture of the time.¹⁷ In the following excerpt Hay is running from the police with the help of Bunker Hill locals, after hitting a policeman with a brick during the 1933 “Milk Strike”:¹⁸

Sympathizers murmuring in Yiddish, Portuguese, and English grabbed him. He heard, “We’ve got to hide this kid before the cops get him.” Hands led him backward through a

¹⁵ Especially bartenders. See *ATD* pp. 83

¹⁶ See Jane Jacobs’s *The Death And Life Of Great American Cities*

¹⁷ Stuart, Timmons. *The Trouble with Harry Hay: Founder of the Modern Gay Movement—A Biography*. Not only relevant for its considerations about Bunker Hill, this book has been matter of interest to Edward Soja, Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, and Moira Kenney in relation to the analysis of the spatial struggles of the gay and lesbian community in Los Angeles. For further information on the subject see Kenney’s *Strategic Visibility: Gay and Lesbian Place-Claiming in Los Angeles, 1970-1994*.

¹⁸ Strike in solidarity with under-privileged mothers who asked the government for an alt in the disposal of surplus milk.

building connected to other buildings – a network of 1880s tenements that formed an interconnected *casbah* on the slopes of the sprawling old Bunker Hill quarter. He was pushed through the rooms that immigrant women and children rarely left, across catwalks and planks, up, up, hearing occasional reassurance, “Everything’s fine. Just don’t look down.” Once out of the structure, near the top of the hill, he was hustled to a large Victorian house where he found himself standing, dizzy and disoriented, in a living room full of men drinking coffee. (66)

Radically different from its wealthy heyday, the Bunker Hill of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s was a multiethnic area that despite the shanty appearance was still culturally thriving. Another (later) description of Bunker Hill appears in Raymond Chandler’s 1942 book *The High Window*, where the district appears degraded and in the verge of implosion:

Bunker Hill is old town, lost town, shabby town, crook town. Once, very long ago, it was the choice residential district of the city, and there are still standing a few of the jigsaw Gothic mansions with wide porches and walls covered with round-end shingles and full corner bay windows with spindle turrets. They are rooming houses now, their parquet floors are scratched and worn through the once glossy finish and the wide sweeping staircases are dark with time and with cheap varnish laid on over generations of dirt. (53)

The picture provided in the passage above is of a run-down Bunker Hill that somehow is still able to convey some of its old charm. The sentence “there are still standing a few of the jigsaw Gothic mansions” underlines the fact that some of the historical houses of Bunker Hill were already demolished by the early 1940s, anticipating the complete destruction of the neighborhood that took place in the 1960s. By the end of this decade the Bunker Hill of *ATD*

completely disappeared, leaving room for a conglomerate of skyscrapers and business offices. Not even the soil was left untouched, it was lowered a few inches before the reconstruction.

“Street biographies” as Loukaitou-Sideris and Sansbury define them, such *ATD* are a testament to the lost city both in its private and public spaces.¹⁹ The descriptions of downtown and the writer’s room in which he lives and writes mix with the historical accounts of the lost Bunker Hill. So much so that it is impossible to tell apart fiction and reality in the novel. The fictional recreation of Bunker Hill using topological elements from the historical Bunker Hill of the 1930s creates a dimension that Baudrillard would define as hyperreality. Analyzing the work of Borges, whose fascination with cities and geography is well known, Baudrillard arrived at a definition of hyperreality which is crucial in the understanding of spatial relation between fiction and reality in *ATD*. The story used by the French philosopher in his *Simulacra and Simulation* is “On Exactitude in Science.” Through his fiction Borges takes into consideration the paradox between replica and reality, exposing the impossibility for the two dimensions to coincide. Reported below is a brief but explanatory passage:

The Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and

¹⁹ Another literary example of gentrification at the expenses of marginal communities, specifically the Japanese and the African-American, is Nina Revoyr’s *Southland* published in 2003. In the book, multicultural neighborhoods become more and more ghettoized, in favor of racially homogeneous communities.

Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography. (IV, XLV)²⁰

The story reflects on the obsession of reproducing reality, of creating an artifact that can overlap and coincide with the model of representation. Once the representation is complete, however, it irremediably detaches itself from the prototype, it becomes different, hyperreal:

It is no longer a question of either maps or territory. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between them that was the abstraction's charm. For it is the difference which forms the poetry of the map and the charm of the territory, the magic of the concept and the charm of the real. This representational imaginary, which both culminates in and is engulfed by the cartographer's mad project of an ideal coextensivity between the map and the territory, disappears with simulation, whose operation is nuclear and genetic, and no longer specular and discursive. (Baudrillard 166)

When the reproduction is created, which in the case of *ATD* coincides with the representation of Bunker Hill, a new reality arises. The replica or *thirdspace*, could be defined as an uncanny reality that is both related and estranged from the historical perspective. What makes this *thirdspace* even more pertinent to the discussion brought on by Baudrillard and Soja is that the district of Bunker Hill has been completely erased, so that the description of it in the novel becomes a simulacrum of a reality that is not real anymore because the prototype no longer exists. As Baudrillard explains, “It is no longer a question of a false representation, but of

²⁰ The short story mentioned above has been the matter of interest of many scholars. Umberto Eco in the chapter “Dell’Impossibilità di Costruire la Carta Dell’Impero 1 a 1” included in *Secondo Diario Minimo*, satirically provides examples to explain why, even with a clear, suspended map it would be impossible to create a map comprising the territory and the map itself. See also Odifreddi, Piergiorgio. *Un Matematico Legge Borges*.

concealing the fact that the real is no longer real”(25). Thinking about the relationship between history, reality, and fiction is crucial as the “original” Bunker Hill is lost forever, but the fiction creates a thirdspace of existence for the district, a reality that is still available today in the form of the narration.²¹

Soja has analyzed the interconnection between model and reproduction in his reflections on thirdspace. The concept of hyperreality, which Soja takes into consideration throughout his study, is particularly relevant in the discussion regarding downtown Los Angeles, especially in reference to the use of the verb “conceal”. Soja defined Los Angeles as the capital of the twentieth century for its postmodern qualities--from Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities* to Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of the Lot 49*, arriving at more contemporary examples such as Sesshu Foster’s *Atomik Aztex*, L.A. figures as the archetypical postmodern city in a variety of works of fiction. The characteristics that render the metropolis a symbol of postmodernism are many, yet its constant reinvention is what stands out more. Los Angeles, the city of Hollywood, is the city of dreams, the city made of expatriates, the city with no past. Los(t) Angeles, because the past is lost as if it never existed. This historical amnesia is not the result of the absence of a past but the concealing of it. For Baudrillard, in the postmodern world reality too loses part of its value, it becomes a replica of an aspiration, the copy of an idea.

It is interesting to work retrospectively with a novel published in 1939, when the discussion on postmodernism was yet to be initiated. It is important to notice in this regard, that the anti either/or logic related to the framing of *thirdspace* makes the chronological approach secondary. This work should not be intended as revisionism or, as Soja argues, “what the postmodern

²¹ Original in the sense that it is the model from which the fictional Bunker Hill of *ATD* was conceptualized. As mentioned in the historical perspective offered in this chapter, the area went through many changes and existed long before the Anglo settlement.

scholars have described as the deconstruction and strategic reconstruction of conventional modernist epistemologies,”(3) but as a reconceptualization of space, a space that takes into account the historical dimension of Los Angeles, the social interactions of the novel at hand, and the urban environment occupied by the characters of the story. At the same time, it is still impossible to read an account of Bunker Hill without stumbling upon a mention of *ATD* and John Fante. Today what is left of *ATD* in Bunker Hill, urbanistically speaking, is a plaque in front of an intersection, that reads “John Fante Square,” a meager attempt at commemorating the work done by the Italian-American author in Los Angeles. The token is not very much in line with what Bandini envisioned in the first prologue of the novel: “Up two hundred stairs to Bunker Hill in the middle of town, consecrated steps, sir, Bandini trod upon them to immortality, and over yonder on that high wall shall be a plaque of gold, and upon it a bas relief—the image of my face. Am I alone now?-Proof.” Modesty is certainly not Bandini’s stronger trait, but the complicated treatment of the ego, in which the character recurs to a larger than life projection of himself to hide his ethnic and financial struggle is a foretelling of the themes explored in the novel.

2.2 Ethnicity and Personal Space

Despite his location, the protagonist wanders the streets with an indelible sense of inadequacy and misplacement, characterized by his unstable financial situation for which he is not able to pay the rent, making his presence in the neighborhood precarious. His struggle to become a successful writer and his ethnic connotation are what determine his instability as a resident of the city, which is reinforced by a constant sense of wandering from one place to another, from the public library to the Grand Central Market, from the Church of Our Lady, back

to Bunker Hill. His position within the urban and social apparatus of the city is further complicated by his sense of self.

As a good number of Fante's critics have suggested, the topics of identity and ethnicity are at the core of the narrative.²² To reinforce this idea, Fante gave the protagonist a name and a last name of Italian origins because he wanted Arturo to be unmistakably Italian. Differently from Fante, whose first name is English, Arturo cannot hide his heritage. In choosing a name and a last name of Italian extraction for the character, Fante brought the Italian immigrant struggle to the forefront of his narrative. However, the connection with Italy might not have been the only reason why Fante chose Bandini. Arcadia Bandini was a prominent Los Angeles landowner who must have in part influenced the name choice of the protagonist of *Ask the Dust*. Her connection with California underlines the intrinsic bond between the main character and the surrounding environment. Reading Stephen Cooper's *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante*, one can find other hypotheses regarding the name choice of the protagonist of the saga. According to Cooper, there are three other possible reasons that justify the appellation. The first one, the author suggests, is related to a brand of fertilizer popular at that time called Bandini: "Even if Arturo's surname did not come by that route directly, Fante would certainly have been aware of, and appreciated, the ironic juxtaposition of the word *art* in Arturo and the implied shit in the Bandini bag" (77) Cooper says. The second hypothesis reads the name as an mock-Italicization of the word "author" and "Banning" in another juxtaposition that contrasts the character's failure with the success of Phineas Banning, a nineteenth century business man, known as the founder of the Port of Los Angeles. In the third explanation, similar to the hypothesis I presented earlier, Cooper maintains that in order to internalize the Californian landscape Fante would study

²² See Jessica Maugione, Emanuele Pettener, Matthew Elliott, and Melissa Ryan.

historical works at Wilmington, the Los Angeles Library, and the Long Beach Public Library. In these readings,

he may well have come across the figure of Don Arturo Bandini, whose forebears, like the Picos, the Sepulveda and other landed family dynasties, had been prominent in early southern California. Approaching old age at the close of the nineteenth century, Don Arturo could still remember many of his Bandini forebears, a vigorous line of rancheros renowned for their revolutionary passions and physical beauty. (77-78)

This hypothesis, besides being plausible, also proves to be humorous and very much in line with Fante's style and treatment of the character of Arturo Bandini. Even though we might not be certain as to what might have been the reason behind the author's name choice, what appears undeniable is that all the postulations pertaining to it are deeply rooted in the context of Los Angeles, grounding Arturo in the literary history of the city while at the same time, underling his own singularity by writing about an Italian-American in an environment in which there are hardly any Italians. The absence of a home community is a curious element; in *ATD* Arturo is the only Italian. The lack of Italians is intentional as the protagonist emigrates from his hometown in Colorado to remove himself from his cultural heritage and start a new life as a writer. In Los Angeles he does not associate with Italian people, his *italianità* is an internalized state more than a shared space. One of the few moments in which his home culture emerges is when he goes to Catholic Church. His belonging to Catholicism is related to his ethnic background that, although shared with a few people like his mother in the letters he sends her, remains a private practice. Arturo approaches religion to find comfort and seek forgiveness, yet, the relationship is controversial as the place of worship doesn't always accept him, such as in the case in which he

looks for a priest in the hope he would help him with his trouble with Camilla but the pastor rejects him:

Leaning back in his chair, he made it very plain that he didn't like me, his angry eyes centered on my forehead, his cigar rolling from one side of his mouth to the other.

"Now," he said. "What is it you wish to see me about?"

I didn't sit down. He made it very clear in his own way that I wasn't to use any of the furniture in the room. "It's about a girl." I said.

"What have you done to her?" he said.

"Nothing" I said. But I could speak no more. He had plucked out my heart. Hogwash! All those nuances, that superb dialogue, that brilliant lyricism—and he had called it hogwash. Better to close my ears and go away to some far off place where no words were spoken, Hogwash!

"I changed my mind," I said. "I don't want to talk about it now."

He stood up and walked toward the door.

"Very well," he said. "good day."

I walked out, the hot sun blinding me. (74)

The place does not offer Arturo any form of comfort. Arturo stands in a contentious space as he is unable to find a situation in which he feels at ease but in his fiction. As Catherine J. Kordich explains, *ATD* can be considered a border narrative "with an eye fixed on the borders its characters traverse"(17). It should be added that the location in which the novel is set reinforces this type of reading in terms of Los Angeles heritage and immigration.

The tension between the environment and Arturo's persona manifests in his attempts to make himself visible, which is often a synonym for border crossing, since Arturo incessantly

tries to redefine himself as white. His position is peculiar as the character lingers in a controversial ethnic space, where he is unable to identify with either the whites or with the non-whites. “John is as American as Huckleberry Finn” (*Selected Letters* 291) Cary McWilliams wrote to Murphy-Plittman, addressing her publication reserves regarding the ethnicity questions raised in Fante’s narrative. Fante is indeed an American author, and thinking otherwise might appear ridiculous to the contemporary audience. Nevertheless, at the time of the publication of *ATD* the public attitude towards Italian-Americans was not as neutral as it is today, as the hostility at the expenses of this group manifested in episodes of rampage and brutality.

The reasons of such bitterness for the Italian-American community are multiple and rooted in the immigration history of the United States. The fact that Italians have been largely associated with the Mafia plays a substantial role in the demonization of the ethnic group, aggravated by the belief that Italian immigrants, poor peasants with no access to education in their motherland, were invariably destined for a life of violence and ignorance. The public resentment led to expressions of violence such as the larger mass lynching of the United States on March 14, 1891, which was perpetrated on 11 Italians in New Orleans, LA. John Fante was brought up in this type of climate; the ethnic discrimination that reverberates in his prose is indeed related to the experiences lived firsthand by the author. Arturo stepping in and out of white culture is embedded in a very complex and controversial discourse that should take into consideration the historic narrative of Italian race in the United States.

According to Thomas A. Guglielmo, the first naturalization documents of Italians in the United States show a classification that follows these guidelines: the color of their skin was reported as “white,” their “complexion” as “dark” and their “race” as “Italian.”²³ In the

²³ Also reported in Jennifer Guglielmo’s “White Lies, Dark Truths.”

introduction of the book *Are Italians White? How race is Made in America*, Jennifer Guglielmo addresses bell hooks' question regarding "how is race linked to cultural and material practices that reinforce and perpetuate racism"(12) providing a comprehensive picture of the condition and development of the discourse of whiteness and Italians. According to the author, the relationship between culture and "material practices" is influenced by their poverty and working-class status of these immigrants. Jennifer Guglielmo explains that the people arriving from the peninsula remained in precarious conditions longer than most Europeans who integrated themselves in white communities at a faster rate. Furthermore, Guglielmo remarks that Italians "have often lived in the nation's blue collar neighborhoods, amid people of color," (4) and thus were identified with black and brown groups, a quite remarkable consideration if we think about the implications with spatiality.

In Guglielmo's elaboration, space becomes a racial marker, an argument that indirectly defines one of bell hooks' material practices.²⁴ The urban disposition and settlement of communities affect the way race is perceived. It is important to notice that the discourse is rooted in the urban realm, which in turn opens up a series of other implications. First of all, as already mentioned, the difference between Southern and Northern Italy was a common parameter through which race was established. A few anthropologists from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century such as Augustus Henry Keane and William Z. Ripley advanced the theory regarding the existence of a Mediterranean race that was hypothetically distinguished from other European races such as the Alpine and the Nordic. The Dillingham Commission in its 1911

²⁴ See bell hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* where the author talks about the practices quoted by Guglielmo in reference to the creations of images and representation of race. According to the author, the consumption of products such as the ones offered by the media, which asserts white supremacy is not questioned. In the same way, the built environment and neighborhood allocations reflect a hierarchical structure that is dependent on the racial discourse.

Dictionary of Races or Peoples validated this racial classification in the United States, dividing Italians into multiple subcategories. The new classification affected the registration of the immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island. As a general practice, the South and North division remained the most used, even though the system created more than a few problems since the Mediterranean race was supposed to encompass peoples that lived in the proximity of the Mare Nostrum, yet some of the immigrants coming from more internal parts of the South, with no direct proximity to the sea, were still classified as “Mediterranean”, disrupting the North-South division and making the officers’ decision on how to establish the racial connotation somewhat arbitrary.²⁵

The racial discourse was further complicated by the lack of an Italian identity. Italy as a nation was founded in 1861, unifying the peninsula’s different regions with their own specific languages and cultures. As remarked by J. Guglielmo, for many of the immigrants who arrived in the United States the idea of an Italian nation was still remote, and “loyalties were formed at the local level to kin and *paesani*” which literally means townspeople (10). The idea of self-associating following a parameter dictated by settlement, in this case the town, leads me back to the observations made earlier in regard to race as a spatial classification. In this instance though, we are talking about towns and not cities, a remarkable distinction in the Italian context considering that the concept of town is connected to the rural dimension, directly in opposition with the idea of *civiltà* or civilization, whose meaning in both Italian and English centers around urbanity and technological progress²⁶. The same interpretation is applicable to the definition of

²⁵ For this reason some immigrants from Liguria were classified as Mediterranean even though the region is located in the North-West of Italy.

²⁶ According to *Treccani* “Nell’uso com. e più tradizionale, è spesso sinon. di progresso, in opposizione a barbarie, per indicare da un lato l’insieme delle conquiste dell’uomo sulla natura, dall’altro un certo grado di perfezione nell’ordinamento sociale, nelle istituzioni, in tutto ciò che,

the word *cittadino* (citizen), which is strictly related to a sense of belonging to the city while it also encompasses the more modern sense of “native or naturalized”.²⁷ The two definitions have been used to define the distinction between North and South, in relation to the presumed South underdevelopment, an excuse to justify the racism against southern Italians. Mussolini and Fascism worked actively against this distinction, in the attempt to promote a national identity that referenced the great *civilizations* that occupied the South, such as the Greek, the Etruscan, and the Roman.

While Italy was slowly building a more cohesive identity, the immigrants who arrived in the United States were still struggling with the stereotype pertaining to their peasant origins. “It was not just that Italians did not look white to certain social arbiters,” historian Matthew Jacobson affirms,” but they did not act white,”(qtd. in Guglielmo 11), a rationale that is based on the concept of proximity (to the lower classes Black and Brown neighborhoods) and association to low income settlements and activities. According to Jennifer Guglielmo, this situation generated an anxiety in the Italian American community pertaining to race and upward mobility that translated into a desire for assimilation (4), and to great extent, to the abandonment of cultural traditions related to the motherland.

The problem that arose with assimilation resides in the fact that Italians undeniably benefitted from the privilege of being white—as “they had access to citizenship, could vote, own

nella vita di un popolo o di una società, è suscettibile di miglioramento.” (In the common usage and in the most traditional, it is often synonym with progress, in opposition to barbarity, to indicate both the human conquest on nature and a certain degree of perfection in the social order, in the institutions, in everything that in the existence of an ethnic group or a society, can be affected by improvement). The definition is debatable to some degree, but it clearly elucidates the imposition on nature and the concept of conquest, which is at the core of Bandini relationship with the environment. Even if slightly different, the definition provided by *The Merriam-Webster* also insist on “a relatively high level of cultural and technological development.”

²⁷ See *Treccani e The Merriam-Webster*. It should be noted that the term in Italian is commonly used to indicate urban people and places (of the city).

land and serve on juries; and were not barred from marrying other Europeans”(Guglielmo 11).

This privilege is often obfuscated by the self-made myth that led to the creation of today’s “white ethnic working-class right-wing conservatism” among the Italian-American community. This attitude can be interpreted as a strategy to tackle the race anxiety (Guglielmo 4) that often escalated in forms of racism and that can be seen in its germinal state in the attitude of Arturo in *ATD*.

The paradox pertaining to the racial and social perception of Italians, who on the one hand identified with the immigrant struggle and on the other perpetuated racism to establish their American identity lasted for decades, and it is not fully resolved yet. In the 1920s, at the time in which Fante was discovering his passion for writing, as Mussolini and Fascism took power in Italy, Italian immigration was restricted in the United States on the basis of racial difference. At this point, the American public view toward Italians was once more skewed toward prejudice and intolerance. Being an Italian American in the business world must have been synonym with double scrutiny and diffidence. Records show that at one point in Fante’s career he was believed to be an Italian born in Italy²⁸. Even if per se this fact does not account for much, it serves as an indication of how his work may have been received by the public and a reminder of the fact that he was hardly “as American as Huckleberry Finn.”

The considerations mentioned above attest to and help explain the complexity of the treatment of ethnicity in *ATD* that affect the sociological analysis of the characters. The following passage, an internal monologue in which Arturo addresses his lover Camilla, covers some of the themes explored in Fante’s previous novel, *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*, regarding the discrimination faced by Arturo as a child:

²⁸ Cooper. *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante*. P.

When I was a kid back home in Colorado it was Smith and Parker and Jones who hurt me with their hideous names, called me Wop and Dago and Greaser, and their children hurt me, just as I hurt you tonight. They hurt me so much I could never become one of them, drove me to books, drove me within myself, drove me to run away from that Colorado town, and sometimes Camilla, when I see their faces I feel the hurt all over again, the old ache there, and sometimes I am glad they are here, dying in the sun, uprooted, tricked by their heartlessness, the same faces, the same set, hard mouths, faces from my hometown, fulfilling the emptiness of their lives under a blazing sun. (46)

In the passage his last name is displayed as a parameter for discrimination. Arturo's wounds are mostly related to his childhood in Colorado but, as the narrator explains, they reemerge unexpectedly in California. The relationship between his ethnicity and Los Angeles is peculiar; the narrator tries to conceal the overt type of discrimination he suffered from in his hometown but he carries with him the burden of his ethnic struggle. Another element emerging from the excerpt is the association of California with Arturo's attempt to run away from his ethnic heritage. The attempt does not always prove to be effective, as Bandini seems to be followed by a facsimile of his perpetrators. "Smith, Parker, and Jones" also wound up in Los Angeles.²⁹ For Bandini, voluntarily uprooted from his community in Colorado, his last name becomes the most stigmatized trait and public manifestation of his ethnicity. "Do you like your name?" Camilla asks Arturo, "Don't you wish it was Johnson, or Williams, or something?" she adds, aiming at the core of Arturo's anguish, a cutting remark at which Arturo replies stating that he is "satisfied" with his own name. "No you're not," concludes the girl (64). As Mark Laurila explains in his article "The Los Angeles Booster Myth," the dialogue between the two goes a

²⁹ Another reference to considerations made at the beginning of the chapter in relation to the cultural *exopolis*, a city made up, a conglomerate of different (hi)stories.

long way in explaining the desire of the non-conformative³⁰ characters to pass for white, Camilla adopting the Anglicized version of her name “Lombard” instead of “Lopez” and Arturo detaching himself from his home culture. In *ATD*, Laurila points out, Fante was able to describe the entrenched racism present in the 1930’s Los Angeles society. According to the scholar, the non-fiction counterpart to the novel is Carey McWilliams’ *Factories in the Fields*, which like *ATD* reinforces the idea of the Los Angeles boosterism myth. In his article Laurila aims at demonstrating that the image of the city as a “paradise of sunshine, and prime real estate”(112) is counterbalanced by a not so rosy “sun-dried” scenario. In *ATD*, this scenario doesn’t spare anybody, not even “Smith, Parker, and Jones,” but on a personal level, the boosterism myth is made evident in the treatment and discrimination Arturo experiences.

A passage that goes along with the considerations pertaining to Bandini’s escape from Colorado, the character’s ethnic struggle, and the discrimination, is the moment in which Arturo reminisces about his arrival at the Alta Loma Hotel, in particular the response he receives from the landlady in charge of his check-in. The woman is concerned with Bandini’s ethnicity, while Arturo tries to move her attention to the fact that he is a writer, author of the short story “The Little Dog Laughed.” The woman does not seem interested in his literary aspirations:

“Young man,” she said, “are you a Mexican?”

I pointed at myself and laughed.

“Me, a Mexican?” I shook my head. “I’m an American, Mrs. Hargraves. And that isn’t a dog story, either. It’s about a man, it’s pretty good. There isn’t a dog in the whole story.”

“We don’t allow Mexicans in this hotel,” she said.

³⁰ I will use this term in reference to all the characters/people who do not conform to the dominant culture of the environment in which they live.

“I’m not a Mexican. I got that title after the fable. You know: “And the little dog laughed to see such sport.”

“Nor Jews,” she said. (49)

In order to prove that he is American, Arturo tells the woman that he is from Boulder, Colorado, but his statement is once more the cause of trouble for the man. According to the woman, Boulder is not in Colorado but in Nebraska, and the only way for Arturo to get the room is to agree with the landlady (64). He intentionally leaves out the fact that he is the son of Italian immigrants to avoid a possible rejection. Once he is able to get the room, Arturo’s Americanness is validated at the expense of other minority groups such the “Mexicans” and “Jews” mentioned above. In a subsequent dialogue with Camilla, Arturo warns the girl that in his hotel “they don’t allow Mexicans”(69) in the attempt to demonstrate his superiority.

Despite the fact that he openly admits to his suffering from the injustice of being part of a minority group and carries his *italianità* as a badge of shame, his relationship with other ethnicities is not affected by the same standard he expects for himself. What emerges from the protagonist’s relation to the other cultural groups he encounters is a sense of superiority, which is manifested in remarks, allusions and actions such as the moment in the prologue in which Arturo recalls “The fat Nigger who took Camilla and me down a long black sinister alley to Central Avenue” and subsequently when he contemplates the state of things in Downtown Los Angeles: “The hundreds of crummy lower Fifth Street night clubs crammed with beautiful women, girls writing home to Iowa and Indiana that they were clicking, they were fucking anybody and anything, Filipino, and Jap and Negro in a place glutted with a plethora of beauty” (Unpublished Prologue). The beauty Arturo sees consists in the opportunity of writing a story about these

characters. The fact that white women decide to have relationships with men of other ethnicities is depicted as something not only out of the ordinary but immoral as well.

In his novel *The Road to Los Angeles*, written in 1936 but published after Fante's death, Bandini reveals a similar if not stronger approach to the minorities working at the cannery where he is also employed. Even though the treatment of the character of Bandini is decisively different in the two novels, considering aspects of both books proves helpful when taking into account his relationship with multiculturalism, a theme that escaped a great number of Fante's critics.³¹ In the early novel *Arturo*, a self-destructive, young nihilist undergoes a long series of manual jobs because for one reason or another he is unable to hold on to one position. During the time he spends at the cannery the Filipino laborers are depicted as malevolent and sadistic figures who dump on Arturo all their frustration.³²

As Suzanne Roszak points out in her article "Diaspora, Social Protest, and the Unreliable Narrator: Challenging Hierarchies of Race and Class in John Fante's *Ask the Dust*," the racist ideology is definitely present in the character of Arturo Bandini. According to the scholar, Fante uses his main protagonist's prejudice to underline the slippery slope of Bandini's ethics. Roszak's conclusions are supported by evidence from the book, especially in relation to Bandini's self-examination, in the recurrent moments of self-confession, typical of Fante's writing. One should also remember that John Fante was a good friend of Filipino writer and

³¹ Among all the Fante critics who raised compelling arguments about the author's treatment of themes related to his Italian origins, only a few exposed the racist ideology of Arturo Bandini. To learn more about the ethnic controversy in Fante's narratives see the work of Matthew Elliott and the already cited Suzanne Roszak.

³² On the topic Cooper comments: "he resorts to the openly brass-knuckle tactics of racist name-calling." In reference to a particular scene in which the cannery workers make fun of Bandini for his literary aspirations, the scholar adds, "It is an ugly scene, painful to read, and it goes on for several pages, with Bandini shrieking "nigger" and "Spick" and "slimy Oriental," until an exhausted silence overcomes him" (*Full of Life* 135).

activist, Carlos Bulosan, aware of the social injustices referenced in his books, and also conscious of the Marxist ideology that is so prominent in his early novels. Despite his knowledge and understanding, though, what the narrative insists on is the centrality of the ego, which interprets the social struggle in very personal terms. Fante's own position in the discussion is not far from the attitude displayed by Arturo Bandini. In a correspondence with editor and mentor H.L. Mencken regarding activism and social protest Fante wrote, "My business in life is to save myself. That's a tremendous job. I shall not dirty my hands trying to save the masses" (Cooper 115). Fante and Arturo's social views are similar in the sense that they figure as mere observers who occupy an advantaged point of view. Much has been said on Italian ethnicity in the prose of the author. Fante undeniably incorporates the debate in his writing, yet, especially in *ATD*, the protagonist occupies a privileged position that although undefined, displays an implied superiority, which is determined by his egocentrism. The following letter, written by John Fante to his wife Joyce in the late 1950s when the writer resided in Naples to work on an Italian production, demonstrates why the position of the author in regard to ethnicity is strongly affected by a concentration on the self. In this perspective Italians are also racialized, made into others, distinguished from the more sophisticated writer:

July 28, 1957

Honey:

The women of Naples are pigs. They are fat pigs in frumpy dresses, usually black, and stained with tomato sauce, urine, grease, or baby's bowel movement. Their breasts hang down to their knees, and their asses drip like water-filled balloons to the ground. When they walk, they don't—they shuffle, a sliding flop-flop on wooden or leather sandals out of which can be seen ten dirty toes. But I must explain that they are also wonderful

women, each with the face of the mother of God and the twisted, calloused, tender hands of women who have spent a lifetime looking after their children and their men. Those giant flopping breasts, so ludicrous, so monstrous, comfort weeping children, and it is not hard to imagine that they arouse men. It is even possible that in Naples men prefer their women hulking and brutalized, with ponderous stomachs and eyes that have looked at God. I imagine the men want the women to possess a strong smell of sweat and menstruation because it is so close to the animal, it is as close as one can get and still live in a civilization. For, they are civilized, sophisticated, generous, kind, polite, gallant, and terribly brave people. (*The John Fante Reader* 310)

As it can be evinced, there is no sense of belonging in the passage above, and the pondered description of the inhabitants of Naples exemplifies how distant Fante felt from them. An example of how with Fante the self is always in the middle. The comparison between author and protagonist arises spontaneously. Both in his life and in his narration, it is a question of self in relation to other ethnicities more than the supremacy of one ethnic group against the other.

The complexity of the ethnic treatment emerges in other endeavors of Fante, such as his attempt at writing a novel centered around the Filipino experience in Southern California. As mentioned above, Fante was good friend with Carlos Bulosan, who was one of the only Filipinos who encouraged the project; Fante was also very close to Carey McWilliams, whose journalistic efforts were mostly political, revolving around matters such as immigration, farm work, and the internment of Japanese Americans. Furthermore, the cultural atmosphere of 1930s Los Angeles gravitated around Labor Unions and workers' rights--Fante was immersed in this kind of setting. The author was both aware of and sensitive to the working class and immigrant struggle, a fact that explains why his prose is embedded with references pertaining to the working conditions of

minorities. The issue doesn't rely on whether or not the author explored these themes but how he did so. The prime example of the problem is evident in the title of the Filipino novel which was never published, *The Little Brown Brothers* (1943). The condescending and offensive wording might not have resonated so much with the average white American readers of the 1940s, but it surely did to the editors to which the manuscript was submitted and who declined it. The same lack of understanding toward the Filipino community is displayed in *ATD*, specifically in Arturo's remark about the mixed couple he used to encounter in Los Angeles:

One day she was gone, and another day I saw her again, walking the streets, her copper hair catching sunbeams, a short Filipino holding her arm. He was very proud of her. His padded shoulders and tight waisted suit were the ultimate of tenderloin fashion, but even with his high leather heels he was a foot shorter than she. (52)

Arturo is emasculating the man, focusing on his stature and demeanor. The peculiarity of Arturo's approach is that the reader is not really able to establish the extent to which the ethnic depiction is an unconscious effort by the narrator, as most of the characters in the novel seem to employ the same standard of discrimination to other ethnicities. When, for example, Arturo tells Camilla that he wants to play soccer with some Japanese children in Terminus Island she replies saying, "With them?... Those Japs?"(132). Both characters are unable to put an end to the repetitive pattern of discrimination. Therefore, even if on the one hand Arturo shows a clear ethnic bias, on the other his attitude is also a way to point out the dynamic to the reader.

The difference between Arturo and Camilla relies on the fact that, as explained before, Italians could take advantage of all the benefits of whiteness, therefore as Italian-American, Arturo occupies a privileged position in comparison to Camilla. In these regards, Rosak defines Arturo's ambivalence between diaspora and assimilation as an intermittence. The narrator,

explains the scholar, is “intermittently aware of his own missteps,” and he is used by Fante “periodically as a voice for anti-racist and anti-classist discourse,” while at the same time he also undercuts “his racial and class prejudices by painting him as egotistical, self-delusional, and therefore unreliable”(186). Unreliability that at times is demonstrated through self-acknowledgement: “You are a coward, Bandini, a traitor to your soul, a feeble liar before your weeping Christ” (20).

2.3 Camilla—Towards the Outskirts of Town

In the face of the discrimination Arturo experiences, he passes from victim to perpetrator with Camilla. Camilla is a young Mexican-American waitress who works in a downtown bar called Columbia Café. From the very first encounter between the two characters a relationship based on shame and humiliation is established. Arturo recalls, “I began to sneer, watched her closely and sneered. She did not approach my table. She moved near it, even to the table adjacent, but she did not venture beyond that. Each time I saw the dark face, the black large eyes flashing their laughter, I set my lips to a curl that meant I was sneering”(35). The reciprocal feeling of attraction and repulsion, an interaction characterized by derision, that at the same time gives signs of mutual acknowledgment and interest, is reinforced by Arturo’s description of the girl. The series of stereotypes that set the basis of their relationship cast light on the controversial treatment of ethnicity in the novel:

Her nose was Mayan, flat, with large nostrils. Her lips were heavily rouged, with the thickness of a negress’ lips. She was a racial type, and as such she was beautiful, but she was too strange for me. Her eyes were at high slant, her skin was dark but not black, and as she walked her breasts moved in a way that showed their firmness. (34-35)

Arturo racializes and exoticizes Camilla in the attempt to distance the girl from himself. In the eyes of Arturo, she is “a racial type,” indirectly pointing at his own identity as a stigmatized Italian-American. During the course of their relationship there are numerous instances in which the two exchange racial slurs pertaining to each other’s heritage; most of the time these moments are initiated by Arturo, who is relentlessly trying to prove his racial superiority. At the same time Camilla appears idealized, she has “Mayan” traits, she becomes an archetype. Bandini’s desire for Camilla does not seem accidental, but purposely fabricated. Specifically, in the first pages of the novel, Arturo confesses his generic interest in Mexican girls before meeting Camilla, as if the nature of his love for the waitress was a personal construct more than a genuine infatuation:

Oh for a Mexican girl! I used to think of her all of the time, my Mexican girl. I didn’t have one, but the streets were full of them, the Plaza and Chinatown were afire with them. . . they were Aztec princesses and Mayan princesses, the peon girls in the Grand Central Market, in the Church of Our Lady, and I even went to Mass to look at them. (15)

Mexican girls become for Arturo generic, almost mythical figures, something to achieve, to conquer. They are part of the city, of the streets of Los Angeles and as such Arturo is attracted to them. The relationship between the protagonist and Camilla is affected by the stereotype that allows Bandini to establish a connection with the territory. In order to do so, the protagonist strips Camilla of her personal connotations, as illustrated below in Arturo’s words:

“Little Mexican princess,” I said. “You’re so charming, so innocent.”

She jerked her hand away and her face lost color.

“I’m not a Mexican!” she said. “I’m an American.”

I shook my head.

“No,” I said. “To me you’ll always be a sweet little peon. A flower from old Mexico.”

(61)

Camilla’s ethnic struggle is very similar to the one undergone by Arturo. The characters are both Americans who must constantly demonstrate and reestablish their identity in a space of exclusion. Bandini ignores the resemblance to his own situation so he can construct a position of advantage for himself.

The colonizer attitude that Arturo displays in regard to Camilla bears a strong connection with the interpretation of the territory. In conquering “old Mexico” Arturo dominates the land and establishes his space in the territory. In order to do so, he fuses the character of Camilla with the surrounding natural elements, a strategy clear in the following passage where Arturo states, “She made me a stranger unto myself, she was all of those calm nights and tall eucalyptus trees, the desert stars, that land and sky, that fog outside” (123). Camilla becomes one with nature, the nature of the outskirts of town. According to Arturo there is no space for her in the city; she is irremediably destined to be confined to the margins: “She belonged to the rolling hills, the wide deserts, the high mountains, she would ruin any apartment, she would lay havoc upon any such little prison” (142). Again, in an earlier passage, Arturo imagines himself talking with Camilla: “All of this land and this sea belongs to you. All of California. There is no California no Los Angeles, no dusty streets, no cheap hotels, no stinking newspapers, no broken, uprooted people from the East, no fancy boulevards. This is your beautiful land with the desert and the mountains and the sea”(94). As Ryan notes, the landscape associated with Camilla is always a pre-conquest one, and according to the scholar the “union with Camilla would be a kind of return, a way of resuscitating the promise of the New World by erasing the detritus of history,”(205) as if, by dominating Camilla Arturo could rewrite history, a tale where he is the pioneer conquering the

territory of southern California, “I’m a conqueror” Bandini declares, “I’m like Cortez, only I’m an Italian”(94). In his article “In Imagination of the Past: Fante’s *Ask the Dust* as Italian-American Modernism” George Guida connects the image of Camilla as a “Mayan Princess”(41) that returns multiple times in the narrative with the place where she works, which is called Columbia Buffett, “Columbia” the scholar points out, “being the pre-Anglo name America”(136) becomes “her castle” (*ATD* 41).³³ In accordance with Ryan’s and Guida’s line of thought, the instances in which Arturo moves away from industrialization or when, such as in the excerpt below, nature is manifested in the urban realm, the idea that Camilla is intrinsically connected with nature emerges, specifically, in the character’s words: “Over the city spread a white murkiness like fog. But it was not the fog: it was the desert heat, the great blasts from the Mojave and Santa Ana, the pale white fingers of the wasteland, ever reaching out to claim its captured child”(151). It is the “wasteland” that attracts the girl. There is hopelessness at the core of Arturo’s interpretation of the character of Camilla. She belongs to the desert, but she has no chance of surviving anywhere. Her journey toward the “wasteland” is punctuated by the protagonist’s remarks on Camilla’s inadaptability to life. The description of her apartment is one of these moments:

We drove to her place on Temple Street. It was a sick building, a frame place diseased and dying from the sun. She lived in an apartment. There was a Murphy bed, a radio, and dirty blue overstuffed furniture. The carpeted floor was littered with crumbs and dirt, and in the corner, sprawled out like one naked, lay a movie magazine... This was her home, her ruin, her scattered dream. (142)

³³ It is interesting to notice that the reference to Columbia and Columbus does not appear in the first manuscript of the text, where the restaurant is called “Liberty Buffet.”

Arturo's recollection of the space occupied by Camilla, an environment that oozes death, prefigures her slow decline and fall into a state of insanity. The unpublished prologue of *ATD*, written in first person by Arturo, serves as an explanation and validation of the relationship between the two characters and the development of Camilla's downfall. The narrator explains: "when I saw her in the moonlight I had a hunch, that very first night I had a hunch that she was the sort of girl sho[sic] cracks under social pressure, there was something beautiful about her even then and always" and again, later on the same page:

I felt it lying beside her then—that feeling that I would never get to this girl, felt that she was poison and that it would never happen, felt poison without desire, felt the strangeness of her, felt it within me with the sureness of my mother's breast, this thing eating up a beautiful Mexican girl who belonged to the land, under the sky, and was not welcome.

This passage connects her madness with her belonging to nature, while also anticipating that her situation is an external imposition, because "she is not welcome." Camilla is therefore drawn in by death because she is incapable of enduring life and creating a space for herself, a fact that is corroborated by her love for Sammy, a waiter with tuberculosis who withdraws in the desert. The morbid attraction to death appears in different moments, and once again nature functions as an agent in the act of swallowing her, making her disappear. When the two characters drive to the beach one night after Camilla's work shift and the couple swims in the ocean, there is an emblematic scene in which the woman is pulled back and forth by the waves in what appears a compulsion that has many similarities with the Freudian Fort-Da game: "She waded to her knees, saw a breaker coming, and run toward the shore. Then she came back. She shouted with delight. A breaker struck her and she squealed and disappeared"(66). During the

course of the novel she is constantly pushed out and pulled back, until the very end when the woman completely disappears.

In the unpublished prologue of *ATD*, therek appears to be another direct explanation regarding the figure of Camilla, specifically pertaining to the end of the novel, a postulation written by the narrator that cannot be found anywhere else. The author probably decided to omit it to create a halo of mystery around the woman and to leave the reader to establish her fate. The passage addresses the end of Camilla after she ventured out in the desert:

Her car is still up there, the tires stripped from it, everything movable stolen from it. She is gone, swallowed up by the desert. Maybe someone picked her up and took her to Mexico. Maybe she got back to Los Angeles and died in a dusty room. All I know is that she is gone, the dog is gone, and there is nothing left [sic] but her story which I want to tell.

The desert becomes a synonym for non-existence, as Camilla is swallowed by it, entering a state of invisibility. The dust seems to be the only element that retains the story of the character. The recurring phrase “Ask the dust on the streets” that opens every paragraph in the prologue, hints at the fact that the dust preserves the tales of these “broken” characters like Camilla but need a writer, in this case Bandini, to convey the tale and preserve it. Being a minority, cast in the outskirts of town, Camilla inhabits marginality in the narrative. It is interesting to notice that the only chance of survival noted by the narrator is an escape to Mexico. Camilla, however, is not fully Mexican, and a return to the land of her ancestry would not guarantee her a safe space. The presumed death is corroborated in another passage from Arturo’s prologue in which he states, “I saw the dog prints in the sand, and I saw the footprints of Camilla’s alongside the dog’s, and she has never come back to Los Angeles, her mother has

never seen her again, and unless a miracle happened she is dead out there on the Mojave tonight and so is Pancho³⁴”. “There is nothing left” of her, states Arturo. Camilla is pushed to the margins to such extent that she figuratively exits the space of the narration; the end of the novel coincides with the end of Camilla.

In another moment in the prologue the narrator explains, “And I was grief-stricken and crawling in the dust, myself so soon to die. So write a suicide note, Bandini, write a good one-a long one for Camilla.” What Bandini is implying with this statement is that he is lending his own voice for the sake of Camilla and her story to be told. The girl’s assumed invisibility is particularly important in relation to the space created for her in the narrative. The story exists and creates a thirdspace, a projection that enables the writer to preserve the image of the woman, but at the same time, the tale is mediated by the character of Arturo and his personal interpretation of the facts lived by the couple. The narrating voice and the fact that it is not Camilla who tells her own story are a reaffirmation of the girl’s invisibility. Not only is she swallowed by the desert, she is also stripped of her own voice. Therefore, her existence in the narrative space appears altered by Arturo. Her thirdspace is characterized by the mediation between (her)self and the narratorial projection which also influences the representation of physical space as demonstrated by Arturo’s accounts:

Ah, Los Angeles! Dust and fog of your lonely streets, I am no longer lonely. Just you wait, all of your ghosts of this room, just you wait, because it will happen yet, and that Camilla, she can have her Sammy in the desert, with his cheap short stories and stinking prose, but wait until she has a taste of me, because it will happen, as sure as there’s a God in heaven. (125)

³⁴ The name of the dog is Pancho instead of Willie in the prologue.

Camilla is placed outside in what seems a mixture of imposition and personal choice, while Arturo chooses to stay in the middle of town. In order to capture the good Los Angeles story, he must remain within the confines of the city.

It would be too simplistic to deny Arturo awareness of Camilla's position and her racial struggle. While Arturo engages in the colonizer-colonized relationship with the girl, manifested both in his actions and through narrative devices, there are also precise moments in the novel in which the character exposes his rationale, pointing out the absurdity of his own behavior:

I have vomited at their newspapers, read their literature, observed their customs, eaten their food, desired their women, gaped at their art. But I am poor, and my name ends with a soft vowel, and they hate me and my father, and my father's father, and they would have my blood and put me down. ... I am young and full of hope and love for my country and my times, and when I say Greaser to you it is not my heart that speaks, but the quivering of an old wound, and I am ashamed of the terrible thing I have done. (*ATD*, 47)

It is in these passages that Arturo reveals the nature of his discrimination. To remedy his own actions Bandini constructs a narrative that allows him to come to terms with his situation and create a space where he builds his own persona. In this precise moment the relationship between ethnicity and imagined space becomes particularly relevant. The narrative space offers Arturo the chance to account for the untold stories of the invisible people around him. Camilla is indeed the character who is given more relevance; however, important considerations emerge from other figures such as Hellfrick and Vera Rivken who help frame and contextualize Arturo's relationship with the environment. As briefly noted in the section pertaining to Bunker Hill, Hellfrick—his name sounds like hell-freak, a freak from hell—is Arturo's neighbor, an alcoholic whose obsession with meat leads him to venture out of Los Angeles to steal and kill a calf. While

Vera appears in Arturo's life unexpectedly, infatuated by his prose, she follows him home. The two bond over a passion for literature, as Vera reads Edna St. Vincent Millay to him. Their relationship, though, is not without complications as Arturo projects the image of Camilla on her and uses the woman as a substitution for the girl. In turn, Vera's dysfunction manifests in physical connotations. The most evident representations are the scars on her body that she forces Arturo to look at, getting naked and thus showing herself in all her vulnerability. There is also a spatial element relative to Vera's maladjustment to the environment. Her house is "down on the Long Beach Pike, across the street from the Ferris Wheel and the Roller Coaster" (91) as if Vera Rivken was too one of those fake attractions, condemned to disappear in the earthquake that will strike the area. When Arturo visits her, the first thing he notices is the smell in the stairwell. "The odor" (91) is a spatial marker that delineates her territory. Once Arturo is in the apartment he is stricken by the commonality of it, which he describes in these terms:

I sat with my teeth gritted, looking at a room like ten million California rooms, a bit of wood here and a bit of rag there, the furniture, with cobwebs in the ceiling and dust in the corners, her room, and everybody's room, Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Diego, a few boards of plaster and stucco to keep the sun out. (91)

The apartment is impersonal and connotative of southern California at large. Vera lives in this abstraction, which is reinforced by Arturo's attitude toward her. She is merely functional for him, she is dispossessed of her personal qualities, a canvas that Arturo superimposes with the picture of Camilla. His desire to replace Vera for Camilla goes so far that that Arturo is able to drag Vera into playing a game in which she transforms herself into the Mexican-American girl: "I'm so lonely," she said. "Pretend that I am she." "yes," I said. "That's your name. It's

Camilla””(94). Make-believe becomes the paradigm through which Arturo learns to cope with reality, an expedient that is reflected both in his actions and in his narrative.

2.4 The Narration within the Narration—Fiction as Thirdspace

Bandini is a writer; his major obsession is to become successful and gain recognition in the literary world. Since he is unable to achieve the status he desires, he finds refuge in dreams. His fantasies translate into his fiction: Bandini imagines different turnouts to his own experiences and uses these unfulfilled fantasies to build his literary persona. Even though *ATD* was conceptualized as an anti-Hollywood story that purposefully leaves out actors and fame to concentrate on lost characters that have nothing to do with the movie industry, there are vivid elements pertaining to the American Dream and the fictionalization of Los Angeles, typical of the Hollywood story³⁵. The aspirations of the characters that arrive in the city from different parts of the United States are related to the interpretation of Los Angeles as the City of Dreams, that can be compared to Nathaniel West’s *The Day of the Locust*, especially in regard to the failed aspirations of success and upward mobility that the characters of these stories came to represent.

In addition to the indirect reference to Hollywood, the book is permeated with literary allusions that go hand in hand with the fictionalization of the experiences lived by Arturo:

³⁵ His intention to leave Hollywood out of *ATD* is interesting considering that after the publication of the book Fante worked the movie industry, occupation that he conducted for almost all of his life, contributing as a screenwriter to different Orson Wells productions and more or less successful movies such as *Walk on the Wild Side* that granted him fame in the business and a reliable source of income for himself and his family, while also demonstrating that he was well aware of the influence of the industry in the literary panorama. The aforementioned considerations are relevant in light of the fact that his conscious removal of Hollywood from the narrative in actuality does the opposite, Hollywood becomes a sort of taboo that is there but is unseen, all the aspirations of the characters echo in the City of Dreams indirectly bringing Hollywood into the narration.

Hya, hya: there's a place for me, too, and it begins with B, in the B shelf, Arturo Bandini, make way for Arturo Bandini, his slot for his book, and I sat at the table and just looked at the place where my book would be, right there close to Arnold Bennett, not much that Arnold Bennett, but I'd be there to sort of bolster up the B's, old Arturo Bandini, one of the boys, until some girl came along, some scent of perfume through the fiction room, some click of high heels to break up the monotony of my fame. Gala day, gala dream!

(13)

Bandini wants a place within the classics. The metaphorical space that he is trying to occupy has a physical manifestation in the Los Angeles Public Library³⁶ where he envisions his work. In addition to his awareness of the canonical writers, Arturo appears sensitive to the literary figures of influence of his own time. Arturo elaborates experience through the act of writing, but he does not only write fiction, he writes letters as well. J. C. Hackmuth, prominent New York editor, is one of his main recipients. This figure has the resemblance of H. L. Mencken—who is also mentioned in the narration as “one of the boys” (13)—making Arturo an aspiring modernist.³⁷ On this subject, writers such as Jay Martin, Fred L. Gardaphe, and George Guida interpreted the figure of Arturo Bandini as a Modernist hero, who, as Gardaphe explains, is what Philip H. Melling describes as a “picaro,” a reflex of the literature of his times: “The novel of the 1930s is dominated by the figure of the itinerant traveller who lives on the periphery of society and is

³⁶ The story of *ATD* is connected to this library, where Bandini roams around to fight boredom and where, outside fiction, Charles Bukowski found the first edition of the novel and presented it to his publishing house to reprint it. It should also be noted that the Los Angeles Public Library is of particular importance to Arturo Bandini in the rest of the saga as well. In *The Road to Los Angeles* for example, the library is where Arturo encounters Miss Hopkins (13).

³⁷ Also a reference to Edmund Wilson's “The Boys in the Back Room,” a review of California authors such as James M. Cain, Horace McCoy, Richard Hallas, John O'Hara, William Saroyan, John Steinbeck, and Hans Otto Storm. Fact that confirms Fante-Bandini's desire to be recognized in the literature of California.

forever seeking new adventures. This character is seldom cerebral or self-involved and wanders aimlessly through a land devoid of cultural tradition”(Melling qtd. in Gardaphe 46). Arturo Bandini is clearly self-involved, yet, his marginality and his constant movement within the city and its periphery is in line with Melling’s description of the modernist character. Jay Martin reflects on what W. H. Auden defined “West’s Disease,” which he describes as “disease of consciousness which renders it incapable of converting wishes into desires” (19). Martin believes that Fante treats the theme similarly to West, in the sense that both writers speculate on the dependency on false illusion, focusing on characters whose aspirations are void. While Martin’s comparison is certainly true, it should also be noted that Arturo’s aspirations do not constitute a dead end, as he is able to convert his wishes into desires and he finds refuge in them.

Arturo’s fantasies are rooted in the urban environment of Los Angeles and in his constant wandering; they originate from the sense of inadequateness he feels when he compares himself to the Anglo models he notices walking in the streets of the city. Arturo finds refuge in a parallel Los Angeles, the city of his dreams. The environment that he imagines and reproduces on paper is a utopia that assumes validation through the act of writing. “The generative utopia,” Soja remarks, is “a make-believe paradise that successfully makes you believe in make-believing”(TS 274). The fantasies that Arturo generates become true to Arturo, and “Under these transcendental conditions, it is no surprise that image and reality become spectacularly confused, that the difference between true and false, fact and fiction, not only disappears but becomes totally and preternaturally irrelevant”(TS 274). Fante intentionally plays with the difference between reality and fiction, making his protagonist jump back and forth between fabula and lucid dreams. The dialogue reported below is a lucubration of the character in which he fantasizes about an interview after winning the Nobel Prize and exemplifies the condition of Arturo:

Bandini (being interviewed prior to departure for Sweden); “My advice to all young writers is quite simple. I would caution them never to evade a new experience. I would urge them to live life in the raw, to grapple with it bravely, to attack it with naked fists.”

Reporter: “Mr. Bandini, how did you come to write this book which won you the Nobel Award?”

Bandini: “The book is based on a true experience which happened to me one night in Los Angeles. Every word of that book is true. I lived that book, I experienced it”. (23)

While the conversation never happens, it assumes a specific significance in the novel, so much that Arturo incorporates it into his own reality and starts to believe in its validity, using it as a justification for his need to experience and rationalize his desires such as the one of meeting with a prostitute. When he succeeds in meeting one, he is overcome by fear and, again, his escape is fiction, he tells the girl that he is a writer and that he “is gathering material for a book”(25).

Arturo’s projected persona as the famous writer assumes a symbolic value when he looks at himself in the mirror:

I stood in front of a pipe shop and looked, and the whole world faded except that window and I stood and smoked them all, and saw myself a great author with that natty Italian briar, and a cane, stepping out of a big black car, and she was there too, proud as hell of me, the lady in the silver fox fur. We registered and then we had cocktails and then we danced awhile, and then we had another cocktail and I recited some lines from Sanskrit³⁸, and the world was so wonderful, because every two minutes some gorgeous one gazed at me, the great author, and nothing would do but I had to autograph her menu, and the silver fox girl was very jealous.

³⁸ Another reference to Modernist masters such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

Not only does Arturo imagine himself differently, he sees himself differently. The window of the pipe shop becomes a mirror through which Arturo interprets himself and molds his own persona, his desired public image³⁹. Ryan elucidates that “His possessive gesture upon which identity is founded includes the imaginative assumption not just of territory or things, but personhood”(201) which means that his desire to achieve and conquer is not limited to Camilla and the territory but extends to his own self as well, when the twenty year old man mentally performs the transformation into a great author. Arturo is walking in Downtown; the episode is contextualized refuge where he is momentarily dissociated from his own ethnicity and part of the Los Angeles of his dreams. The scene serves as an example of the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity in public spaces. The Pipe Shop is representative of the Los Angeles of wealth, but his reflection clashes with it, so Arturo recurs to imagination to give the discordance an order. In this scenario fiction becomes another space, which embodies the sum of the physical environment (the pipe shop) and the protagonist’s projection/interpretation of himself within this space.

³⁹ When Arturo receives his first substantial paycheck he decides to spend it on clothes and luxury items to finally live and embody his dream. But what happens after wearing the expensive outfit contradicts his expectations: “Standing in the mirror, I tilted my hat over on [sic] eye, and examined myself. The image in the glass seemed only vaguely familiar. I didn’t like my new tie, so I took off my coat and tried another. I didn’t like the change either. All at once everything began to irritate me. The stiff collar was strangling me. The shoes pinched my feet. The pants smelled like a clothing store basement and were too tight in the crotch. Sweat broke out at my temples where the hat band squeezed my skull. Suddenly I began to itch, and when I moved everything cracked like a paper sack. My nostrils picked the powerful scent of lotions, and I grimaced. Mother in Heaven, what had happened to the old Bandini, author of *The Little Dog Laughed?* Could this hog-tied, strangling buffoon be the creator of *The Long Lost Hills*? I pulled my old clothes. They were very glad to have me again; they clung to me with cool delight, and my tormented feet slipped into the old shoes as into the softness of Spring grass” (59). The decision of slipping back into his old clothes and his own self happens again in front of a mirror.

The narrative space that Arturo creates establishes a compromise with reality. As mentioned above, this space is problematic in regards to Camilla as it alienates her, but at the same time, the fictional dimension is a valid and fruitful alternative for Bandini:

So you walk along Bunker Hill, and you shake your fist at the sky, and I know what you're thinking, Bandini. The thoughts of your father before you, lash across your back, hot fire in your skull, that you are not to blame: this is your thought, that you were born poor, son of miseried peasants, driven because you were poor, fled from Colorado town because you were poor, rambling the gutters of Los Angeles because you are poor, hoping to write a book to get rich, because those who hated you back there in Colorado will not hate you if you write a book. (20)

Fiction is a space of survival for Arturo, the narrative within the narrative is what drives him out of the misery of Colorado and what gives him a purpose. The fictional space is not a conclusion at which Arturo arrives, but a space of co-existence that permeates every moment of his life. When the protagonist and his girlfriend go swim in the Pacific and the girl disappears in the waves, Arturo's reaction is that of entering the fictional realm:

So this was the end of Camilla, and this was the end of Arturo Bandini—but even then I was writing it all down, seeing it across a page in a typewriter, writing it out and coasting along the sharp sand, so sure I would never come out alive. Then I was in water to my waist, limp and too far gone to do anything about it, floundering helplessly with my mind clear, composing the whole thing, worrying about excessive adjectives. The next breaker smashed me under once more, dragged me to water a foot deep, wondering if I could perhaps make a poem out of it. (67)

The passage, which is a brilliant example of Fante's sarcasm, reveals how his own reality is subordinated to his fantasies and his desire to become a writer. Edward Soja describes spatiality as "lived, perceived, and conceived" (*TS* 75). In the case of Arturo this trialectic logic is influenced by the fiction he creates, which affects the "conceived" reality of the character.

Arturo molds his experience fusing his dreams with the quotidian in order to create a parallel reality that suits him, and that at the same time, convinces the reader as well. The narratorial devices are crafted to bring the reader to believe in Arturo's accounts. The prologue is told in first person: Arturo insists on the fact that "everything [he says] is true" to prove the veracity of the story. Looking at the actual narration of the novel, one may notice that it presents sudden switches into the third person, revealing Arturo's attempts to confer solemnity to his words and, at the same time, validate it through the use of an outsider voice. The voice is, of course, just an artificial projection that confirms the character's in the urban realm. His lucubration is the result of his interpretation of the environment, in relation to the place he wishes to occupy. The imaginative reflection creates a thirdspace for Arturo, an escape into the fictitious dimension he created for himself.

2.5 Conclusion

The conceptualization of space in the novel is determined both by factors external to the main character, exemplified by architecture and buildings allocations, financial depression, and by the subjectivity of the protagonist who interprets the environment according to his personal point of view. Arturo's positionality and comprehension influence the way the conflict between urban space and nature is portrayed. The pre-conquest territory of the outskirts of Los Angeles overlaps with the character of Camilla, while the heart of town is matched with Arturo, whose desire for upward mobility reflects his attempt to emerge from a position of invisibility. In the

dichotomy between center and margins Los Angeles assumes a specific role, becoming a character in its own right. Nature intercedes in the narration and in the urban sphere. It recurs through images of palm trees contaminated by carbon monoxide, a representation through which Fante conveys the idea of the broken American Dream and the failed expectations of the characters while also underlining the problems of civilization and of a city that is smog and dust, where, using the words of the author, “nothing will grow, a culture without roots, a frantic grasping for entrenchment that will not accede to the empty fury of lost hopeless people frenzied to reach an earth that cannot belong to them” (Prologue). Nature rebels against the people of the story, manifesting itself in all its power and violence, such as in the case of the earthquake in Long Beach, an episode that Arturo interprets as a personal punishment, a god’s castigation when he writes, “It was an earthquake. Now there were screams. Then dust. Then crumbling and roaring. I turned round and round in a circle. I had done this. I had done this”(98). But the earthquake is also a symbol for the emptiness of a civilization, the same civilization Arturo tries so desperately to be part of, but which is founded on nothingness, and as such is destined to disappear, “Los Angeles was doomed. It was a city with a curse upon it. This particular earthquake had not destroyed it, but any day now another would raze it to the ground”(102). Both the city and the surrounding nature reverberate with the concerns of Arturo and actions of the story. In this regard natural manifestations acquire relevance both in the personal sphere, such as Arturo’s private fears, and in larger consideration involving the existence of the people of Los Angeles who, according to the narrator, have “the dust of Indiana and Ohio and Illinois and Iowa in their blood,” and are condemned to “die in a bootless rootless dusty land”(Prologue).

Arturo looks at the Los Angelinos with a mixture of understanding and distance, since he too arrived in Los Angeles to fulfill his dreams and contempt, as the migrants from the Midwest

that established themselves in California remind him of the people that victimized him for being an Italian during his childhood in Colorado. It is from his past that he is trying to escape, and in order to remove himself from his origins he desperately tries to assimilate into mainstream white culture. However, his desire for acceptance often translates into racism against other ethnicities. Aware of his misconducts, Arturo creates a fictional world in which he is a great American writer. The fiction that Arturo creates, longing to be recognized as “one of the boys,” to enter the white canon of Anglo-Saxon literature, in the end does not satisfy Arturo. He creates a space that is personal, that accepts his difference and marginality and recognizes the power of literacy, that makes its positionality one of its strongest points.

3 CHAPTER TWO: THE FOUR ECOLOGIES OF MARIA WYETH: BODY AND SPACE IN JOAN DIDION'S *PLAY IT AS IT LAYS*

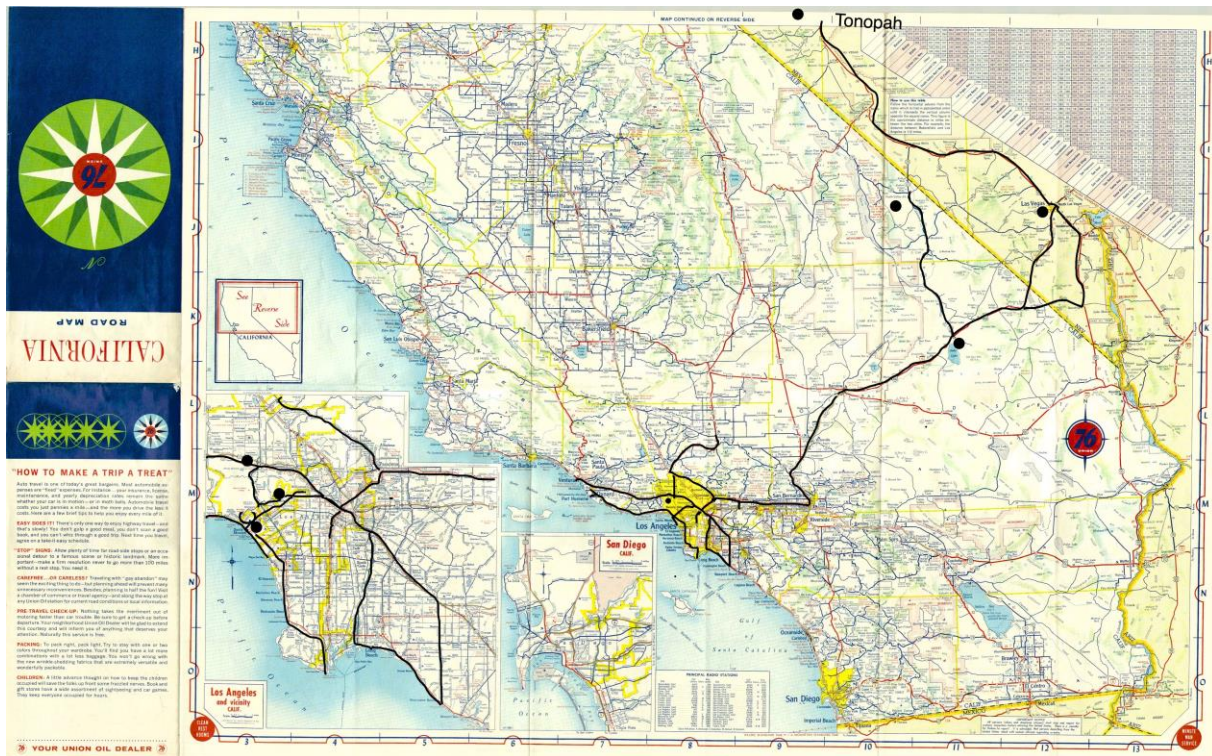


Figure 2 76 Union California Road Map

The map depicted above is a 76 Union California Road Map copyrighted in 1969. If Maria Wyeth, the heroine of *Play It as It Lays*, had to consult a road atlas, this representation could have been what she would have used. Now a collectible artifact, at the time of its publication the map was one of the many road maps purchasable at any gas station in California. The description of Los Angeles offered in the map clearly prioritizes a driver's perspective, focusing on the freeway that connects the city, highlighted and reproduced in a larger scale on the bottom left corner, to the peripheral roads leading outwards. The black itinerary, that I added to visualize the movement of the main character in the novel, traces both the urban wandering of the protagonist and her drifting outside of the city limits. Maria drives out of Los Angeles, out of

California, and figuratively out of the map, reaching the town of Tonopah in Nevada, which I purposefully placed outside of the map. The black dots reported in the atlas represent the locations in which the movement is interrupted or paused. These places are crucial in the development of the story. Las Vegas is one of these spaces, functioning as a parallel urban reference to Los Angeles and a nodal point in the narration. Other relevant places reported in the map are the clinic in Encino, the house in Beverly Hills, the town of Baker on the way to Nevada, a location that appears multiple times in the story, and the movie set location. Even though this last place is a fictional location, an abandoned talc mine called The Queen of Sheba (188), the narrator provides clear references to identify it, being situated “between Death Valley and the Nevada line” (187). Not less importantly, the map of Southern California includes both the Pacific Ocean and other bodies of water. As I will explain later in the chapter, water has different implications pertaining to both the geography of the novel and the body of the protagonist.

Furthermore, in light of my analysis, the map is relevant because it displays the route between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, providing a visual reference of the roads and the freeway mentioned in *Play it as it Lays (PAL)*, the itinerary of the main character, and the western geographical sites that appear in the narration. Maria has a particular connection with her car as she spends most of her time driving from one place to another in the sprawling Los Angeles area. Visual representations in the novel ground the narrative and give an order to the scattered and aimless wandering of the protagonist. From the fragmented images presented emerge a powerful connection with space. The spatial awareness of the protagonist is determined by her sensibility. This sensibility fuses her interiority with the environment, creates reciprocity between the body of the protagonist and the place it occupies. In the second chapter of my dissertation, I

investigate the relationship between body and city to demonstrate the way in which the protagonist occupies, lives, and interacts with the cityspace and its surroundings. The structure of the chapter references Reyner Banham's work on the ecologies of Los Angeles. Adapting the architect's *modus operandi* to the space of the novel and considering the symbolism used as a rhetorical device to describe urban configurations, I trace the ecologies of Maria Wyeth: the freeway, the domestic, the outside, and the hospital. The aim of this study is to illustrate how the female body comes to terms with the postmodern environment, how the body rewrites space and how space marginalizes the female body.

One of the reasons why it is important to contextualize *PAL* within Banham's interpretation of Los Angeles is primarily related to the perspective employed toward the city, precisely the driver's perspective. Famously, Banham declared that as Dante's scholars would have to learn Italian to appreciate his texts, one had to drive in order to fully comprehend Los Angeles (23). Under this logic, the map reported above becomes a useful tool to understand and organize the novel, to visualize the relation between the protagonist and the city of Los Angeles and its periphery. The space that Maria inhabits is made of gas stations, Ralph's supermarkets, and drive-in restaurants, places that Banham defines "as crucial to the human ecologies and built environment of Los Angeles"(22) and that are invariably related to the car mythology. We are exactly speaking of mythology when we consider the work by Didion and the one done by the architect, as they both crystalized urban pictures that entered the collective imaginary of the early 1970s Los Angeles. If on the one hand, the observations collected in *The Architecture of Four Ecologies* are products of their time and therefore somewhat outdated, on the other, they are necessary in the interpretation of *PAL* specifically because they refer to the Los Angeles of Maria Wyeth, a city that might not be physically available today, but that acquires tangibility

with documentation. Similarly to chapter one's considerations on the neighborhood of Bunker Hill, one of the aims of this chapter is to expose Los Angeles not just for what it is but also for what it was, an approach needed to understand the evolution of the city in literature. Under this frame of reference, "Autopia," Banham's fourth ecology, assumes a particular relevance: "coming off the freeway is coming in from outdoors. A domestic or sociable journey in Los Angeles does not end so much at the door of one's destination as the off-ramp of the freeway, the mile or two of ground-level streets counts as no more than the front drive of the house". Los Angeles becomes the sum of different places, a combination of locales representative of "a state of mind" (213). What Banham sees from his rear-view mirror are the beaches from Malibu to Balboa, the houses in the foothills and the flat plains, and of course, the freeway itself, which is "where the Angelenos live a large part of their lives" (214). Maria inhabits all of these places. The necessity of generating a new frame of reference for Maria arises for two different reasons: the first is related to her connection to specific locations, subcategories, within Baham's ecologies; the second one pertains to the fact that spatiality in the novel relates to a movement bound outwards. Since Banham's ecologies do not take into consideration the space outside the city limits, it would be counterproductive to confine this analysis only to the architect's division. In addition to the considerations I just mentioned, I selected Maria's ecologies taking into consideration body representations and symbolism, the references of this analysis.

Didion paints the character as a protagonist who lives in the Hollywood's lavishness but is estranged from it. Bringing attention to the relationship between marginality and the citified body results extremely effective in the interpretation of *PAL* because this type of approach casts light on the socio-environmental dynamics that are central in the experience of women. Maria does not live a regular life; however, in her exuberance and refusal of conformity her subjectivity

becomes universal, or emblematic. The conceptualization of the character of Maria is both related to the time period in which she was conceived, the late 1960s and their climate of rebellion and the place in which the narrative is contextualized. Drawing considerations on the Western genre in relation to the work of Didion, Casey Shoop affirms that, “Rugged individualism finds its ritualistic enactment in the very landscape that resists any such appropriation”(587). This consideration is especially true in *PAL* and in the character of Maria, whose singularity is very much connected to the territory. Rituals are embedded in the narration through symbols and repetition. It is through these images that Didion translates a deeply individualistic picture into “A form of existential quietism not only about the failure of the conventional national stories we tell, but also about any viable alternatives to them”(Shoop 587). The novel challenges the 1950s values of the economic boom, the patriarchal family, and progress.

The author, distinguished for her dry prose and subject matters often revolving around characters of upper class extraction, boasts a Californian lineage that traces back centuries. Her connection with the territory seems to provide the author with a privileged position, from which she unforgivingly scrutinizes the reality of California with a sensibility that is always aware of her roots and does not hide its sense of belonging.⁴⁰ Even though Didion was born in Sacramento, this sensibility seeps in the treatment of space in Los Angeles and Southern California, particularly in the novel at hand. The emotional awareness that constitutes Didion’s Western identity plays with spatial interpretation and border crossing, creating a picture of the territory that expands in latitude, incorporating northern portions of the state, as well as Nevada.

⁴⁰ This assumption is complicated by the history of settler colonialism. Didion is not only aware but also fascinated and taunted by her family history, by their pilgrimage west and their consequent settlement. For more details on the topic, see *Where I was From* in bibliography.

It is not only the inclusion of the outskirts that justifies the reading of the novel as marginal, but specifically is how the main character interacts with the environment, as she can be defined a character of the margins in relation to her personal condition. The protagonist is a 31-year-old former model and actress, mother of a 4-year-old, named Kate, who lives in an asylum due to an unspecified mental disorder. The child is the only interest Maria has, as she passively goes through her daily life marked by driving, taking psychoactive drugs, and sleeping. “While most of the characters in this novel teem with desire,” Chip Rhodes explains, “either normative and aggressive or ‘abnormal,’ and others try to pass themselves off as romantics, Maria is remarkable for her total lack of desire”(The Cambridge Comp. of the Lit. of Los Angeles 140). By focusing on the experience of a woman who lacks any sort of drive, Didion raises questions pertaining to the relationship between the environment and mental and physical health, drawing a picture that moves from the subjective to the objective, encapsulating a time period, the late 1960s, characterized by a loss of ingenuity and faith in the future and in technology.

At the dawn of the technological era, the characters of the story appear reliant and yet very skeptical of technological progress. During a party, for example, Maria overhears a conversation in which a “cinematographer and...two Lesbians discussed the dehumanizing aspect of American technology, in French”(37). Maria does not take part in the debate, which is discussed in a foreign language. The meaning is for the protagonist hard to grasp, as it is envisioning the aftermaths of technology. There is a sense of catastrophe imbedded in the words of the conversation, something impalpable that is bound to happen. This feeling is pervasive in the novel and reverberates in the depictions of the environment. Maria senses “malign electricity”(73) in her house, images of poisonous snakes recur at steady intervals, the water is polluted, and rivers are dry. These representations are imbedded in the landscape, specifically

the one of California. As Wolff affirms in her article “*Play it as it Lays: Didion and the Diver Heroine*,” “Didion repeatedly demonstrates the moral derangements of modern society by patterns of images, sometimes even by abstract verbal patterns or by patterns of association, which capture the inherent distortion of value”(485). The patterns mentioned by Wolff are often defined by subtraction: the novel is filled with blank spaces, mirroring the mental state of Maria, whose goal is to achieve nothingness. The prose is stripped of any unnecessary information, but in its bareness is able to allude to a multiplicity of ideas connected to the psychology of the main character, which in turn reflects a postmodern sentiment of disillusion.

Didion’s images form narrative vignettes whose power relies in the symbolic. There are recurrent figures, such as the eggs, the aforementioned snakes, and water functioning as markers that illustrate Maria’s interpretation and interaction with the environment. The use of allegory in the novel is connected with the protagonist’s perception of her body in relation to her spatial interpretation. Territory and body are tight together by reciprocity through symbolism. The reciprocity between the two elements brings the inside out and the outside in, as the connection with the body’s inside and the explicit environment emerge in the narration.

This research takes into account the definition of “body” in reference to the human apparatus distinguished by bones, muscles, and organs. The correlation between the subject of the novel and the territory is informed by the inner physical structure. It should be noted, however, that this research also values the term in relation to applied or metaphorical definitions. The arrangement of the corporal ensemble, encompassing botany, material forms, metaphysical concepts, and philosophical reasoning will emerge in this interpretation of *PAL* especially considering the historical postulations on body-politic, where the collective of people making up a nation are interpreted as a living organism, a body structured according to the human

apparatus, with organs that refer to the head or the government for their healthy functioning.⁴¹ From an historical perspective, the metaphor, that changes depending on the political organization of the nation taken into consideration and the time, appears generally unchanged in the dualism presented, whether it is the relation between body and mind, male and female opposition or inside and outside. From the distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*, the Cartesian logic has been reinterpreted and historically adjusted. Considerations pertaining to interiority and exteriority have influenced the way cities are perceived, structured, and understood as the image provided by the body-politic has come to represent the urban organization as well. This study does not aim at establishing a hierarchy between interiority and exteriority, but to provide a key to interpret the moments in which the two blend together. Looking in particular at the way Maria is presented in the territory, how she relates to both the architecture of Los Angeles and the interior design of private spaces, the reader can infer a number of considerations on body and the postmodern city. The urban reinterpretations of body-politic are particularly relevant in the novel in terms of the relationship established between Maria and the elements that come together to form the environment she occupies, while also challenging the idea of manifest destiny connected to the western landscape as all modern certainties crumble. Furthermore, the computerization of the stock exchange that happened in the 1970s forces us to reconsider the organization of body-politic even in terms of urban configuration. The dichotomy that characterizes the representation of body-politic is complicated by a network of direct and indirect communication that connects people and institutions. The new approach replaces the vertical system with a more horizontal one. This reconceptualization originates in this time period, evolving in the following decades. The idea will be further

⁴¹ From Rousseau and Christine De Pizan to contemporary theorists, such as Jean Luc Nancy, whose work is referenced in this chapter.

explored in the following chapter through the aid of map juxtaposition. Literary analogies between Los Angeles and the human body have been drawn in the first chapter of this dissertation in relation to Arturo and the pulsating heart of the city and other comparisons will be drawn in relation to *The Tropic of Orange*, where the organ trafficking and urban implications are observed in parallel with technological advancement. In this section the focus will be on the synergy between the female body and the environment.

One of the most interesting reflections on the relationship between city and body is Elizabeth Grosz's "Bodies-Cities," chapter from the book *Sexuality and Space*. In this study the author frames the interpretation of the two entities as mutually influenced. Grosz begins her study with a few thoughts regarding the body and the misconceptions pertaining to the relationship between inside and outside. According to the author, physical exteriority is generated. The physical interior, in turn, projects the social construction in a mutually influenced dependence (242). This dynamic, that brings the inside out and the outside in, is reflected in the relation between body and urban space. "The ways the body is psychically, socially, sexually, and discursively or representationally produced" explains the author, is paralleled by the ways in which "bodies reinscribe and project themselves onto their sociocultural environment so that this environment both produces and reflects the forms and interests of the body"(242) This perspective abandons the dualism in favor of an interpretation based on correspondence and unity. Interesting in these regards are the considerations advanced by Antonia Birnbaum in Nancy's *Corpus*. According to the scholar, "Interiority continues to weigh on all such grounds for exteriority, even when that interiority is constitutively alienated from the other, or bound by a moral law transcending the sensuous realm, on promoted in solitude's privilege as the most proper mode of being"(146). Even if in apparent contrast with Grosz's postulations, Birnbaum's

statement, included in her essay published in 2009, makes clear that the debate pertaining to interiority and exteriority is far from being resolved because the line between the two often blurs, leaving room for inquiry, especially if we consider how technology affects the relationship between body and mind and body and city.⁴²

The reflections Grosz advances on the relation of reciprocity between city and body are overtly in dialogue with Soja's postulations on thirdspace. The fusion of the two entities creates a space comprising of qualities from both ends, the body interiorizes the environment and the cityscape reflects the cultural values inherently embodied by the subject. When the subject is in the urban realm, it becomes part of the built environment. In the words of the author:

The body and its environment, ... produce each other as forms of the hyperreal, as modes of simulation which have overtaken and transformed whatever reality each may have had into the image of the other: the city is made and made over into the simulacrum of the body, and the body, in its turn, is transformed, "citified," urbanized as a distinctively metropolitan body. (242)

These reflections are particularly stimulating when applied to Joan Didion's *PAL* since the relationship between Maria's body and the environment is so cogent. There are numerous instances in which the protagonist displays a bond between her body and the city. The references indicate that it is not only upon the reader to make the connection between the two, but it is

⁴² If we contextualize the relationship between technology, body, and city in the present time, a number of considerations should be addressed. With the introduction of 3D Prosthesis Machines, post-humanist theories arising from the creation of robots such as the recent Hanson's Sophia, the interpretation of urban bodies changes. The female body especially, considering for example the backlash of comments after the robot was granted citizen rights in a country, Saudi Arabia, where women weren't allowed to drive until recently. Technological innovations complicate human interactions with the environment, as well. Self-driving cars, checkout machines, and humanoid service robots will inevitably affect the way cities are designed and occupied. The conclusion of this dissertation hints at possible similar scenarios, South California dystopias arising from end of the century anxieties.

Maria that is interested in the relationship in the first place. As the narrator explains in reference to the protagonist's visit to Las Vegas: "she was thinking constantly about where her body stopped and the air began, about the exact point in space and time that was the difference between Maria and other"(170). Maria's preoccupation suggests that her awareness of time and space is a sensibility that tries to transcend physicality. Maria does not speak; rather, "she hears herself saying," (65) as if she was detached from herself. This Lacanian perspective alternates between a deeply sensorial awareness and attempts to annihilate any sort of emotion. As Nancy explains:

Thought is always overwhelmed by existence, and existence never stops being exceeded in thought. To exist is to exit the point: the point of the fiction "that I have no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, as having no sense," not in order to seal off reason in its self-identity but to accede, in pure pulsation of the soul, to the freedom of determination peculiar to thought. (Nancy 149)

The tension between thought and existence explored by the French philosopher is detailed by Maria in her quotidian, in her struggle between feeling and reason and her desire to self medicate. Invariably, the relationship is exemplified through the use of symbols.

Although there are many symbols that Didion uses in the narration, I want to introduce the use of allegory through the figure of the egg, for the egg is the example that best summarizes the unity between body and space in the novel. The egg becomes the symbol of Maria's problematized relationship with femininity, as the object functions as a metaphor for fertility. The figure recurs in different forms throughout the narration, for example, when the protagonist is on the phone with Freddy Chaikin, the producer who is responsible for her job, discussing her crumbling career, she mentions a Fabergé Egg. The narrator offers a description of the room

where the man is sitting with “Barcelona chairs and the Giacometti sculpture” (28). The luxurious environment and the tone of the man denote an implied superiority that Maria contrasts with her remarks: “What are you doing right now, Freddy... You sitting there playing with a Fabergé Easter egg? Or What?” (28). The classic symbolism of the egg mixes with implied references that together help profile the protagonist and the environment she is immersed in. Maria’s ironic comment is meant to underline Chaikin’s opulence, far removed from reality. The handing of the egg is a metaphor for Maria, suggesting that the producer has Maria’s career in his own hands. The subtler reference alluded by the object is that the Fabergé Egg is part of the Imperial Easter eggs collection. Made for the Russian Imperial family, the eggs are connected to the tragic death of the Romanov family, executed by the Bolshevik troops during the Russian Revolution. The historical contextualization of the object spurs a connection with Maria’s career, and an imminent sense of catastrophe that seems to pervade the novel. The object, that traditionally represents femininity, life, and fertility, is thus charged with death allusions, anticipating the evolution of the novel.

The figure recurs explicitly and implicitly throughout the narrative, yet it is in her morning ritual that the object acquires its most powerful meaning. In particular, the act of cracking the boiled egg on the steering wheel and eating it while driving reveals the communion between Maria’s body and the freeway, setting the basis of her daily routine on the freeway. Pregnant with another child but forced to undergo an abortion by her husband Carter Lang, Maria survives by not thinking, however, her nightmares surface through symbols: “So that she would not have to stop for food she kept a hard-boiled egg on the passenger seat of the Corvette. She could shell and eat a hard-boiled egg at seventy miles an hour (crack it on the steering wheel, never mind salt, salt bloats, no matter what happened she remembered her body)”(17).

The connection between body and environment emerges strongly from this passage; her ritual is accentuated by the steady speed, “seventy miles an hour,” that she imposes herself, a sort of dance in which the rhythm must not be interrupted. In this moment of high concentration, Maria displays a curious awareness for her body that clashes with her nihilism, as to remind herself that her figure remains the asset through which she is able to survive. The inside (the egg) is brought outside (to the freeway) to be brought back inside through ingurgitation. Her action underlines a claim to repossess her body because she has been stripped of decision-making.

3.1 The Freeway

Abiding by her daily ritual of driving on the freeway at 10:00 every morning, being one with traffic, Maria incarnates “the metropolitan body,”(Grosz 242) that internalizes the cityscape and projects itself into the surrounding environment. Maria interacts with the freeway, morphing into the urban realm. The narrator describes the protagonist’s aimless habit of driving on the freeway and her moving diagonally across lanes in the following description:

Once she was on the freeway and has maneuvered her way to a fast lane she turned on the radio at high volume and she drove. She drove to San Diego to the Harbor, the Harbor up to the Hollywood, the Hollywood to the Golden State, the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura...Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic. On the afternoon she finally did it without once breaking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night she slept dreamlessly. (14)

To better understand this passage it is useful to refer to another piece by Didion, “Bureaucrats,” an essay published in 1976, in which she explains the union between Angelinos and the freeway.

“The freeway experience” the author states, “is the only secular communion Los Angeles has. Mere driving on the freeway is in no way the same as participating in it”(WA 83). Participation establishes the exchange system between body and city. Didion continues:

Anyone can “drive” on the freeway, and many people with no vocation for it do, hesitating here and resisting there, losing the rhythm of lane change, thinking about where they came from and where they are going. Actual participants think only about where they are. Actual participation requires a total surrender, a concentration so intense as to seem a kind of narcosis, a rapture-of-the-freeway. (83)

According to Didion, in this moment the subject does not think. It is the rhythm that prevails. Time perception is altered, distorted, just like in the instants before an accident occurs (83). It is exactly this state of mind that characterizes Maria’s relationship with driving on the freeway. “Participation” and “rhythm” are the key words here. The presence of music indicates that Maria’s experience on the freeway is multisensory. The perfect lane crossing requires synchronicity with the beat on the radio. Once Maria conquers this maneuver, she is granted a dreamless night. Sleep is at the center of the protagonist’s actions even when she drives: the protagonist tries to achieve a quasi “narcosis” while on the Freeway—the sensorial loss constitutes the goal of her journey. The state of trance is more important than the destination, for Maria is actually not bound to somewhere in particular. David Fine describes the protagonist’s driving compulsion as an “endless mobility without destination”(248). In other writings by Didion, reflections on aim and destination return. In particular, in the essay titled “On the Road,” she insists on the question “Where are we heading?” (306). According to the author, the question is endemic of the 1960s and 1970s. What emerges from her postulations is the conviction that the present moment holds more value than the obsession with a hypothetical

destination, as for the author the future seems to be always projected as uncertain and catastrophic. This line of thought perfectly matches Maria's sensibility, which is characterized by a loss of control grounded in the action. The protagonist brings this idea to the extreme, not only by ignoring possible outcomes, but also by trying to lose touch with the feelings involved in the action itself, turning her acts into a mechanical procedure.

Rayner Banham's book, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, that has lent its structure to this study, was cited by Didion in "Bureaucrats" providing other tips to understanding the importance of the freeway in *PAL*. According to architect, the freeway is endemic of Los Angeles and constitutes the fourth ecology of the Angelino. The author explains that the location synthesizes the combination of private and public, characterizing what he defines as the "mechanized urban society"(216). The car, representing the private sphere, and the freeway, coinciding with the public, come together to form the Angelino democracy, where the subject gives up their personal freedom and submits to the traffic logic.

In his article "'The' Freeway in Southern California" Grant Geyer points out how the freeway in Southern California, whose name stresses the non-toll aspect, reinforcing the democratic idea advanced by Banham, is generally referred to by the article "the". As in the example above, Maria drives to "the Harbor" "the Hollywood," "the Golden State," "the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura." The use of the definite article in the road nomination is exclusively related to Southern California. The third person narrator of *PAL*, shortens the "the Harbor Freeway" to "the Harbor" to denote a certain familiarity with the road system, that extends to the character of Maria. Glen Creason reflects on the construction of the freeway stating that: "One by one, the four-lane roads were carved out along well travelled roads, old streetcar paths, or early routes used even by the indigenous Tongva Indians" (180).

The completion of the first freeways dates to the 1940s, by the time of the narration the road system had already become part of the cityscape, part of the ecology of Los Angeles.⁴³

One of the first things Maria explains “to set down the facts”(4) is that she comes from Nevada, born in Reno, she grew up in a small town, Silver Wells, owned by her father. This town, she explains, “would have been advantageously situated at a freeway exit had the freeway been built”(5). This comment exemplifies how engrained the relationship with the road is to her. The quote also underlines the paradox between mobility, meaning advantage, and lack of direction, since the town was just hypothetically conveniently located: the freeway was never built and the town turned into a ghost town. Maria’s family memories seem to be inevitably tight to the road, when she talks about her parents, she remembers: “the three of us driving down to Vegas in the pickup and then driving home again in the clear night, a hundred miles down and a hundred back”(7) These are the reassuring images of her past, which as dysfunctional as they may seem, constitute a sense of stability to the protagonist, as she constantly longs for these moments, so much that, at intervals, the narration is interrupted by these images. The connection to the road in relation to her parents escalates when the reader discovers that Maria’s mother dies in a car accident. Before the body is found, Maria explains, she has been eaten by coyotes. This fact establishes a double bind for the protagonist, and the road comes to exemplify all that she

⁴³ This consideration is particularly relevant in light of my dissertation, as the scope of the overall project is to demonstrate the spatial evolution of the city of Los Angeles in the twentieth century. As anticipated in the introduction, the ideas of journey and travel set the basis for this project. The first chapter of this dissertation presented a picture of the city in which the protagonist familiarizes with the environment walking around the streets of Los Angeles. The car is introduced only in the second part of the novel. The relationship with the freeway and the protagonist’s car displayed in *PAL* summarizes the beginning of the anxiety related to the postmodern, where the subject feels alienated from the surroundings. *PAL* anticipates the problems that will be explored in the following chapters of this dissertation; in particular, when traffic becomes synonym with confusion and the end of progress from which only a recession is possible.

knows, life itself, in all its facets; it becomes a touchstone around which she frames her understanding. Furthermore, through images of the freeway and the act of driving Maria reaches a detachment from reality that becomes a space of survival. In the moments preceding her abortion, for example, the narrator does not focus on Maria's internal thoughts, but thoroughly describes her journey to the doctor's. Maria is accompanied by an unknown man, dressed in white duck pants who talks about buying a Camaro:

“Get pretty good mileage on this? Or no?”

“Pretty good,” she heard herself saying after only the slightest pause. “Not too bad.”

“You may have noticed, I drive a Cadillac. Eldorado. Eats gas but I like it, like the feel of it.”

Maria said nothing. That, then, had actually been the question. She had not misunderstood.

“If I decide to get rid of the Cad,” he said “I might pick myself up a little Camaro...I got a friend, he can write me a sweet deal if it's on the floor much longer. They almost had a buyer last week but lucky for me—here, Maria, right here, pull into this driveway.”

Maria turned off the ignition and looked at the man in the white duck pants with intense and grateful interest. In the past few minutes he had significantly altered her perception of reality: she saw now that she was not a woman on her way to have an abortion. She was a woman parking a Corvette outside a tract house while a man in white pants talked about buying a Camaro. (79)

This passage constitutes almost the entirety of chapter twenty-four. The segment does not specify where Maria is going, until the closing remarks the focus is on the conversation about the car. By the end of the passage, the narrating voice reveals its closeness with the protagonist. Maria

appears disinterested in the conversation, but at the same time listening to the man she forgets where she is headed and she seems satisfied with the shift in perception. The technical discussion about the difference between a Cadillac and a Camaro exemplifies the fixation on the value of the motor vehicle. Banham affirms that, “If you regard the freeways, with Brock Yates, as an ‘existential limbo where man sets out each day in search of western-style individualism’ then the assertiveness of the style of the art-automobile might be regarded as an aid in that anxious search” (222). The aesthetic aspect is definitely prominent in the passage above, not only in regard to the cars but also in regards to the clothes of the man and the overall imaginary that emerges from the description. To be specific, the goods are idealizations of the subjects, turning them, according to Maria, to rarefied images, distant from actuality, caricatures of themselves, or of the image of themselves they want to project to the public. Esthetics is extremely curated by Didion and the choices of cars reflect this sensibility.

In *PAL* the car becomes a subcategory of the freeway, almost an ecology of its own. A great part of the narration takes place in Maria’s Corvette, a space where the protagonist often alters her perception of reality. The relationship with the car and the freeway acquires a specific weight in the novel, becoming an extension to the body of Maria. The car is the means through which the protagonist connects her ecologies, the non-place that traverses the geography of the novel, non-place not because the automobile is not physical but because it transcends immobility. The car is endemic of Los Angeles, yet at the same time it can be transplanted into a completely different landscape, for example the one of Nevada. While the transportation takes place the car maintains the same characteristics, functioning as a home away from home, a shelter, a confirmation of the character’s identity that reminds the driver of where she came from.

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, especially looking at it as a technological device, the car does not only have positive qualities. In the second movie Maria takes part in, *Angel Beach*, which revolves around the road, she is raped by a gang of bikers. According to the author biker movies portray “the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is seen not as psychopathic but as a right” (*White Album* 101) Consideration that most of her characters seem to ignore, with the exception of BZ, who puts into words the effects Carter’s movie has on Maria, in the only time the matter is addressed openly: “How did Maria feel about the gangbang, the twelve cocks, did she get the sense they’re doing it not to her but to each *other*, does that interest her, you don’t get that, you’re missing the story” (111) Maria’s body is objectified by Carter, it becomes a fetish. The image created in the movie will in some ways replace Maria’s identity. In her various encounters with strangers, she is rarely taken into account or addressed. Later in the narration, Freddy Chaikin offers her a part in the movie *Interstate 80* and her role serves as a confirmation of the body commodification projected by Carter in Maria’s second movie. It is interesting to notice that, once again, the film revolves around the road. A close reading of chapter 54, in which Maria meets with a director to discuss her role in *Interstate 80*, helps understand how the automobile vocabulary is engrained in the binomial of space-body. The incipit of the chapter focuses on location: “MARIA STOOD IN THE SUN on the Western Street”(140) The use of the word “western” settles the western landscape in the imagination of the reader, while also providing a clear picture of Maria’s position. In the same sentence, the narrator explains that the man she is waiting for drives a Volkswagen, a cheaper car compared to the Corvette Maria drives. After the encounter with the director, Maria is compelled to drive away:

Once in her car she drove as far as Romaine and then pulled over, put her head on the steering wheel and cried out loud. She cried because she was humiliated and she cried for her mother and she cried for Kate and she cried because something had just come through to her, there in the sun on the Western street: she had deliberately not counted the months but she must have been counting them unawares, must have been keeping a relentless count somewhere, because this was the day, the day the baby would have been born.

(141)

The passage above exhaustively summarizes how time and space come into relation with the body of the protagonist. While on the road, Maria falls prey to her feelings, which, thanks to the geographical reference provided by the narrator, establish a synchronicity between body, space, and time. Another mention of “the Western street” appears while the journey also marks time, specifically the day Maria’s baby would have been due. The narrator specifies that the count of the days must have happened unwarily, as if it is her body that reminds her of what is happening, and the thought, the narrator explains, is not justified by a conscious motivation.

Maria’s unsettling encounter with the Hollywood actor who takes her to his home after meeting her at a party provides another example of how the body of the protagonist is constructed, displaced, and questioned in the narrative. Maria goes through the sex encounter passively, then, barefoot, she steals the actor’s Ferrari and starts driving aimlessly, “turning then not toward Beverly Hills but toward the Valley, and the freeway”(153). Before she knows it, she is in Vegas and then Tonopah. She is attracted by the location for an unclear connection with her parents’ grave. In the proximity of this town she is arrested. The police officer finds her still barefoot in a silver vinyl dress from the night before. The image suggests, once again, a concentration with her body and an attention to the way the body is presented. Subsequently, Freddy Chaikin, who

convinces the actor to withdraw the complaint regarding the stolen car, flies to Nevada to get Maria. While on the plane on the way back to California, he hands Maria a drink:

She was still wearing the silver dress and she was still barefoot and her face was streaked with dust and when she tasted the drink it all came up, all the pills and the not eating and the liquor and the fear and the way she had felt about the actor and the way she had felt when the matron had her finger up her looking for drugs, all that came up in a trail of mucous on the floor of the Lear that Freddy had borrowed in his day-long effort to protect Carter. (156)

The exchange between inside and outside is forcefully pictured in the passage above. The description of the moment begins with the physical representation of Maria who carries with her the dust of the road. The reciprocity between exteriority and interiority constructed around Maria's "sexed body" (Grosz 242) emerges through the act of vomiting. Condensed in this act are social inscriptions: the relationship with the actor, the physical intrusion of the police officer looking for hidden drugs, and implicitly, the male chauvinism behind the rescue of Maria, which is performed to protect Carter.

The passage considered above exemplifies how important it is to frame Maria's experience as feminine; her interaction with space is determined by her gender and so is her relationship with the road. A number of comparisons have been established between Maria Weyth and another female protagonist conceptualized roughly in the same period, Odepia Mass, the heroine of *The Crying of the Lot* 49.⁴⁴ Both women are forced to move around Los Angeles. They both try to come to terms with the environment moving through Western roads whose direction is lost, where maps are inadequate or irrelevant. One of the elements that distinguishes

⁴⁴ See comparison made by Kevin McNamara in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*

PAL from different Western road narratives of the period is the ability of the novel to dig deep into a condition that is distinctively feminine, to capture moments, such as the bikers' attempted robbery in or in the different descriptions of Maria's relationship with her body, that defines an experience that is deeply feminine, that vividly illustrates what is like for the protagonist to travel alone, considerations so intimate and close to the female consciousness that can only spur from a woman's mind.⁴⁵

For these reasons, of all the ecologies of Maria, the Freeway is definitely the most meaningful, for it ties the Western road mythology to a distinctively feminine body with a sensibility that it is engrained in its time, in situational anxieties, that include a loss of faith in authority, and apprehension for the future and technology. Maria drives in Los Angeles, in Las

⁴⁵ With this comment I do not mean to generalize the women's experience, which differs from subject to subject but to point out the profound considerations that emerge in the narrative related to the protagonist's sensibility as a woman.

It is interesting to consider how a woman author, who undeniably occupies a privileged position in terms of means and social status, deals with and appropriates herself of an aesthetic that is predominantly associated with male authors; a female writer who studied and deliberately reproduced writing structures of Modernist masterpieces: from Ernest Hemingway to T.S. Eliot, her habit of analyzing, decomposing and recomposing words, clauses, and sentences from her favorite novels is well known. Her dry and direct prose contributed to the canonization of her work, making it not only appealing to the female audience but making this novel and her writing universally recognized.

Vegas, through the desert, and the Western landscape, “It seemed to her now” the narrator states, “that she had been driving all week toward precisely this instant” (173). What is Maria driving towards? What is the significance of the “instant” evoked in the narration? No explanation or direct answer are provided in the novel. Maria “drives West into the desert”(173) and by driving across different landscapes without a specific aim, the reader understands what the narration leaves out. The road becomes an escape, a space of survival.

3.2 The Domestic

The organization of the domestic is dictated by the awareness of performativity: both room disposition and choice in interior design reflect roles enactment. As Colomina explains, “The house is the stage for the theater of the family, a place where people are born and live and die”(85). Home spaces are characterized by gender divisions that reinforce the idea of play (Colomina 73-128). Female and male separations intersect with concepts related to visibility and invisibility. Bedrooms, for example, are often secluded spaces, hidden from the eye of the visitor, whereas living rooms are designed as places of entertainment for both the family and its guests. The distinction between private and public domestic spaces is interestingly elaborated in the novel as bedrooms acquire visibility and living rooms become private realms. The body of Maria is always at the center of this division, when she becomes the victim of BZ and his wife in their bedroom, or when she walks in while BZ is watching her movie alone in her darkened living room. Performance and entertainment are clearly two key words in the novel, with Hollywood always in the background and houses turned into party locations, the private overlaps once again with the public sphere.

Graphic descriptions of lived space intersect with lucid dreams of idyllic family life, bringing attention to the meaning of domesticity while at the same time reflecting on women’s

ambition, career, and upward mobility. The novel seems to grapple with the ambivalence of Maria's role as an actress and her desire for a nuclear family. Her ambitions, however, are shattered by actuality: her lack of commitment in her career, and a family that is displaced. The family that Maria projects in the domestic spaces of her fantasy and the reality counterpart offered by the narrators are at odds with each other. Through the different voices in the novel the reader gets an understanding of how the subject comes to terms with home spaces. The same voices also offer an historical perspective that reflects concerns pertaining to a time of radical change and social turmoil in relation to the space occupied by women in both public and domestic realms. The Tate Murders, that so violently signed the end of the 1960s, casting a shadow on the history of Los Angeles, implicitly posed public questions on human nature and evil, while also physically and symbolically butchering the idea of family and the expectations related to it. In 1969, the same year of the murders, one year before the book was published, California was the first US state to pass the "no-fault" divorce law. In the late 1960s abortion (with restrictions) was legalized in California and was finally decriminalized federally in 1973 (Roe v. Wade). Didion's elaborations on Maria's divorce and her abortion were not only informed by this climate of reform but in dialogue with it. Cinzia Scarpino advances a fascinating theory regarding the treatment of abortion in the novel: according to the scholar, the fact that the abortion at the center of the narrative conveys the protagonist's sense of guilt and a lack of female solidarity⁴⁶ is related to the time period in which the story was written, when abortion was still illegal in most states. Specifically, Scarpino argues, once abortion is legalized it loses its semantic and symbolic weight. Therefore, writing about it in such deeply iconic

⁴⁶ Maria is not assisted by any female figure in the novel.

images right before its legalization is a “narrative calculus” to emphasize the female condition in relation to loss (465).

Critics have pointed out how Didion has been the subject of “routine criticism since the 1960s for her critique of the feminist movement and her public and often commercially successful representations of marriage, [and] motherhood” (Worden 584). Even in *PAL*, the treatment of these themes is somewhat controversial, as the author seems to point the finger at the Hollywood way of life, careerism, and the loss of a traditional family structure. What should be noticed, however, is that Didion deliberately plays with the controversy as a way to explore and understand the clash between career and domesticity. The author, who with husband Gregory Dunne worked for the movie industry and at the same time cherished motherhood in very public ways, was well aware of the dynamics between the desire of establishing oneself professionally while being devoted to family.⁴⁷ Furthermore, *PAL*, which may appear as a non-political novel for its elitarianism and estrangement from the racial uprising making the news in its time, delivers in fact a very political statement regarding the role of women in a transitional period. As explained by Delikonstantinidou in her essay “Desperate House-Dolls: The Cult of True Womanhood and the Myth of Beauty in 1970s Feminist Dystopias,” the idea of domesticity “constructed women as minor economic contributors, on the one hand, and as important defenders of the nation's prosperity, on the other, seeing them as mothers of the nation's future citizens, consumers, and guardians of morality”(53). The character of Maria fails to meet all the standards expected from her as a mother, but at the same time is trapped in the logic of domesticity, being dependent to her husband. In order to understand the way in which the author addresses the dualism between career and domesticity, it is useful to look at one of her later

⁴⁷ The adoption of Quintana Roe, her death, Didion’s divorce and reconciliation with Dunne and his death are all documented in published works by the author.

essays, in which she analyses the figure of Martha Stewart, before she was convicted with felony charges, specifically addressing the opposition that the public demonstrated to her entrepreneurship:

The message Martha is actually sending, the reason large numbers of American women count watching her a comforting and obscurely inspirational experience, seems not very well understood. There has been a flurry of academic work done on the cultural meaning of her success...but there remains, both in the bond she makes and in the outrage she provokes, something unaddressed, something pitched, like a dog whistle, too high for traditional textual analysis. The outrage, which reaches sometimes startling levels, centers on the misconception that she has somehow tricked her admirers into not noticing the ambition that brought her to their attention.

With this statement Didion demonstrates a sensibility toward the career of a woman who turned domesticity into a business, putting together two terms generally opposed. The author expresses interest in the way in which Stewart's persona is interpreted by the public, specifically in regards to the backlash of comments from the people who felt betrayed by Stewart's success. The perspective offered in the essay not only makes clear that Didion has been elaborating the topic of emancipation and domesticity for years, but also reveals how the author does not line up with a specific ideology, as her considerations do not satisfy feminists, and her liberal orientation do not appeal to the conservative audience. It is specifically this independence that makes *PAL* a hard text to decipher, for Maria, like Didion, is hard to categorize, to place in a reassuring labeled box. In the novel at hand, the relationship between careerism and domesticity is taken a step further, as Didion conceptualized a character that is not driven by neither emancipation nor parental dedication but lives in a world of illusion.

Didion deliberately plays with the ideological controversy as a way to understand and frame Maria's lack of principles. She conveys this idea in strongly visual terms, with charged symbolism that sees the body of the protagonist as the medium through which the contention is delivered. A body that is in constant dialogue with the space it occupies, moving between public and private, mixing, and disrupting the boundaries between outside and inside. As stated by Daniel Worden, "Didion is the writer who expressed most eloquently the eternal-girl impulse, the one that follows us into adulthood: the desire to retreat to our room, to close the door, to spend some time alone with our thoughts and our feelings"(583) Maria, just like Worden's imagined readers of Didion, does spend a lot of time alone. Her loneliness is not only physical, but mostly psychological: "Sometime in the night she had moved into a realm of miseries peculiar to women, and she had nothing to say to Carter"(62). The narrator insists on the fact that her experience is quintessentially feminine, suggesting her gender as a key to interpret the character of Maria and the reason for her silence. In the moments of solitary retreat, however, Maria's realm is disrupted by the intrusion of the outside, such as in one of the most significant scenes of the novel, the moment in which BZ commits suicide in her bed. The suicide becomes a spectacle in which Maria is made complicit, in which her body is made complicit, as she lays senseless beside him. Another intrusion of the outside in the domestic is the documented in Carter's first movie, in which his camera eye follows Maria around:

The first picture, the picture never distributed, was called *Maria*. Carter had simply followed Maria around New York and shot film. It was not until they moved to California and Carter began cutting the film together that she entirely realized what he was doing. The picture showed Maria doing a fashion sitting, Maria asleep on a couch at a party,

Maria on the phone arguing with the billing department at Bloomingdale's, Maria cleaning some Marijuana with a kitchen strainer, Maria crying on the IRT. (20)

The passage above displays how the intrusion of the public into the private is established in Carter's film. The director's sensibility, in its Warhol-like taste, is constructed around the disappearance of the boundaries between outside and inside. The actions performed by Maria, such as sleeping during a party or crying on the train, amplify the aforementioned intrusion, as they are private acts performed in a public space and projected cinematically for an even larger audience⁴⁸. Cinema becomes a voyeuristic act, a means through which the audience can intrude into the private life of a subject. Subject that, in the case of Maria, functions more like an object, as her experience is filtered through the eye of the director. Maria does not recognize herself in the picture commenting that: "The girl on the screen in that first picture had no knack for anything," (21) a remark that reinforces the idea that the perspective is mediated by Carter. The narrator seems to suggest that the esthetic of the movie is conceptualized in spatial terms: defining the places that the protagonist occupies and offering an interpretation that distinguishes between New York and California in relation to reality and fiction respectively. Specifically, the first location is where reality happens and the second one is where fiction is produced. The figure of Carter is central in defining the cinematic twist that coincides with the move to Los Angeles and the man's manipulation of the public figure of Maria. The chapter titled "CARTER," narrated by the director, exemplifies his perspective eloquently:

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

⁴⁸ To the contemporary audience, the technique used by Carter inevitably points at the commercialization of Reality TV Show that started at the end of the century and of which *Maria* is a precursor.

found none. All I can say is this: it was after a succession of such small scenes that I began to see the improbability of a rapprochement with Maria. (14)

Carter conceptualizes the relationship with his wife as if it was a movie composed of different scenes. Unable to find an order, the director gives up on his marriage. According to Chip Rhodes *PAL* is:

the novel that best represents the auteur era because its writing coincides with the careers of so many directors who would soon achieve great personal fame. Artistically ambitious directors could get funding to make movies well outside the studios' purview, and these films were often debacles financially...and artistically... Maria's husband is one of these celebrated auteurs; his depiction is pretty clear mockery of those in Hollywood who considered themselves pure artists. (140)

The satire referenced by Rhodes is used in *PAL* to provide a closer look into the lives of people gravitating around Hollywood. The book, just like a movie, is composed of different scenes that together form the profiles of these characters. The criticism toward Hollywood is harsh; however, in elaborating on the fragile domestic dynamics of the characters, Didion was able to experiment with the Hollywood novel genre, integrating its common patterns, such as search for identity and unfulfilled dreams of success with very intimate considerations regarding the private spaces occupied by the characters.⁴⁹

In her memoir Edith Wharton stated that her experience in Europe during the war influenced her writing: when walking around streets of French villages devastated by bombing, she found herself looking at houses that lost their façade, exposing the private lives of their

⁴⁹ These considerations are not limited to Maria, but can be extended to other characters as well. BZ and Helene's marriage, for example, is a monetary arrangement stipulated with BZ's mother, Carlotta, to hide the fact that the man is homosexual.

occupants, revealing “the setting of a farce”. After getting back to the United States, she used that perspective to describe the characters in her book; she wanted to slice off the walls of New England’s upper class houses to see what was going on inside them (294). A comparison between the two authors is not only justified by the similarity in style and subject matter but also by the fact that Didion’s point of view in *PAL* is analogue, with the difference that she does not draw from war, but from her experience in the movie industry. Just like Wharton did in the Northeast, Didion slices off the walls of Hollywood’s houses to reveal the interior, forming scenes resembling a tableaux vivant, self-sufficient and meaningful in their own right. It is in these scenes that the domestic emerges and the relationship between public and private is exemplified.

During these moments of revelation, Maria’s body is used as a vessel to display the antagonism between public and private realms. It is helpful to delineate the relationship Maria has with her body because her attitude toward it is influenced by the presence of others. Once again, we can distinguish between public and private, inside and outside, interiority and exteriority when we look at the ways in which the protagonist treats and displays her figure. In one of his observations regarding the contemporary body, Jean Luc Nancy suggests that: “Sin is no longer a topic; we have saved our bodies, bodies of health, sports, and pleasure. But this only aggravates the disaster, as we all know: because the body is ever more fallen, the fall being further inward, more agonizing. The body’ is our agony stripped bare”(7). Nancy refers to a condition that is specifically related to postmodernity, to a period in which the obsession with body representation is more prominent than ever before. In his interpretation, the body is configured in terms of its weight; the Western desire to make the body lighter, less visible, creates the opposite effect: the body becomes a matter of anxiety and as such, it occupies more

space, it becomes heavier. Nancy's descriptions are relevant in the interpretation of the body in *PAL* as the novel addresses a number of anxieties related to aging, body weight, sedation, menstruation, abortion, and rape, concerns that are related to the body in both its manifested and psychological terms:

“WHAT DO YOU THINK,” Maria could hear one of the men saying. She was trying to eat an egg roll in the Sands and the two men and the girl had been watching her ever since she sat down.

“About what,” the girl said.

“That.”

The girl shrugged. “Maybe.”

The other man said something that Maria did not hear and when she looked up again the girl was still watching her.

“Thirty-six,” the girl said. “But a good thirty-six.” (169)

The narrator remarks suggest that Maria is aware of the conversation. The fact that the episode is reported denotes the protagonist's concern regarding her age and her appearance. While the two men and the woman converse, Maria eats an egg roll. The instances in which food is displayed in the narration are revealing in that through her meals the reader gets to understand the character's relationship with her body, her status in terms of her career as a model and an actress.

Nourishment is for Maria a necessary but casual act; no pleasure is involved in it. In addition to the aforementioned egg and egg roll, Maria eats burgers and gas station food, confirming the causality of act, done solely for the preservation of her body. Her approach to food is complicated by a memory of her time in New York, as the narrator recounts: “She had not been able to eat that year because every time she looked at food the food would seem to

arrange itself into ominous coils.⁵⁰ 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). Her fast is related to the loss of her mother. The symbolism associated with food, precisely the image of the rattlesnake, leitmotif of the narrative, explicates Maria’s food connection with her family and, in turn, domesticity. In the moments in which Maria fantasizes about a possible reconciliation with her husband and daughter, her food choices become more elaborate, however, as it appears in the excerpt below, these fantasies are never actualized:

To avoid giving off the signs, Maria shopped always for a household, gallons of grapefruit juice, quarts of green chile salsa, dried lentils and alphabet noodles, rigatoni and canned yams, twenty-pound boxes of laundry detergent. She knew all the indices to the idle lonely, never bought a small tube of toothpaste, never dropped a magazine in her shopping cart. The house in Beverly Hills overflowed with sugar, corn-muffin mix, frozen roasts and Spanish onions. Maria ate cottage cheese. (123)

The incongruity between reality and fantasy addressed above, the desire that Maria has to buy all the groceries that nobody will eat because she is in fact alone, speaks to the engrained images of domesticity that Maria longs for but is not able to achieve. When, for example, she calms herself thinking of canning preserves with her daughter Kate (210), in an idyllic life, far removed from her every-day-life, she draws a picture of what her life should be but it is not:

Calmed, she would fall asleep pretending that even then she lay with him in a house by the sea. The house was like none she had ever seen but she thought of it so often that she knew even where the linens were kept, the plates, knew how the wild grass ran down to the beach and where the rocks made tidal pools. (114)

⁵⁰ The mention of New York offers the reader another spatial reference that puts in relation the East Coast with the West Coast.

When Maria wakes up from her dreams she is struck with the spatial awareness that reminds her that the “center of the daylight world was never a house by the sea but the corner of Sunset and La Brea” (115) which interestingly, in the narration corresponds to the location of a fast food restaurant; a reflection that suggests that the road is in fact her main ecology. Her fantasies are often contrasted, brought back to actuality by very physical signs.

Maria makes use of these physical reminders to anchor herself to reality, yet, at times, she turns physical signs into symbolism and omens through which she interprets her present and her future. In the case of her second pregnancy, for instance, when she notices that she is not menstruating, she starts wearing white clothes in the hope that the white garments “would effect some charm, that she would...find them stained with blood” (63). The description of the weeks preceding the abortion is intimate, private, imbedded with hallucinations and apocalyptic references.

Moving from a very close and intimate (self) analysis, to detached, matter of fact observations, the representations of Maria’s body in the novel help understand how the body is interpreted, framed, and projected in public and private spaces. Notions of domesticity, elaborated by different authors in the modernist period are reinterpreted by Didion and contextualized not only in a different time, but also within an esthetic that explores how the body moves in and out of public and private places, challenging the distinction between the two.⁵¹ Concepts of domesticity, idealized by the character and spatially configured in her fantasy, are contrasted by physical spaces that are the antithesis of her dreams: Hollywood party villas, hotel rooms, and the furnished apartment on Fountain Avenue where she lives in solitude (98).

⁵¹ Especially considering the works of early American modernist authors that center their work around middle-upper class women experiences, writers such as Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Edith Wharton, and Dorothy Parker.

Through the thoughts and actions of Maria, the narration redefines boundaries; physical and psychological, public and private, internal and external.

3.3 The Outside

A great part of *PAL* takes place outside the city boundaries, in the freeways of Northern California and in the roads of Nevada, leading to Las Vegas. Stepping out of the urban perimeter offers a chance to take a different perspective on the city, to look at it from another angle, to analyze its significance in the western landscape, in its symbolism and mythology. As Kevin McNamara stated in the introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*:

Los Angeles is defined by sprawl. Much of iconic Los Angeles...lies beyond the city limits...As a literary subject...Los Angeles is less a city, county, or “metropolitan statistical area” than a state of being (of grace, fear, emergency, or exception, depending on whom one reads) anchored in the area south of the Tehachapi Mountains, north of San Diego, west of the desert, and squarely in the collective imagination of utopia, dystopia, and, more recently, the urban future. (1)

The “state of being” referenced by McNamara tackles one of the crucial considerations pertaining to Maria Wyeth, as the anxieties regarding the environment she inhabits follow her into the desert and the hotel rooms of Las Vegas. The concept of dystopia is elaborated by Didion in Maria’s nightmares, in her premonitions, in her constant fear of catastrophes. These images—flooding, people killed by rattlesnakes—are as much urban as they are rural; and in both cases they are predominantly western. There are distinctive echoes of the Gold Rush in reference to greed and land acquisition, such as in the case of Maria’s father and the possession of the town of Silver Wells, whose name encloses promises of prosperity, which are in fact

shattered by the crude realization of failure. The cost of these trades is not only monetary, it has other implications related to both the hardship faced by the pioneer in the new land and the punishment for the greed, the illegitimate occupation, and corruption. The narrative places two iconic cities in contrast: Los Angeles and Las Vegas. One is the capital of the movie industry, the other of gambling; both summarize the promise of success and the failure of dreams in a context that is profoundly American, in relation to the individualism of the self-made-person. Through the character of Maria, said individualism acquires a communal connotation, especially considering the use of symbols that transform the scenes of the novel into icons.

It is in this symbolism that the relationship between environment and the body emerges forcefully. Looking into the character's involvement with the spaces that extend beyond the city limits, reflections on the meaning of water emerge. Didion defined what is like to be a woman as "that sense of living one's deepest life underwater, that dark involvement with blood and birth and death" (*We Tell* 262). This statement parallels distinctive parts of the narrative: Maria's abortion experience and her posttraumatic nightmares in its more intimate contextualization, her obsession with water or the lack of it; in particular the realization that "There would be plumbing anywhere she went"(104) and the fact that the movie set in which she starts working is situated "ON A DRY RIVER bed between Death Valley and the Nevada line"(187).⁵² Maria drives out of the city toward the beach and what she see is "oil scum on the sand and the red tide in the flaccid surf and mounds of kelp at the waterline" (65) while at her house the pool water is always at the same temperature (24). The image of the pool recurs numerous times in the narration, such in the instance in which BZ and his masseur are by the water. Their bodies are described as "gleaming, unlined," recalling "an arrangement with mortality" as water is associated with

⁵² Such as in her nightmares where the fetus of her unborn baby floats in the East River and obstructs the city's plumbing system.

disaster (46). In Colomina's introduction to *Sexuality and Space*, she reflects about the division between outside and inside—which is an implicit nod to Grosz's considerations on the same subject—through the observation of the house Loos designed for Josephine Baker she notices that the split between home exterior and interior is nullified by the addition of the pool. The pool is designed as an extra room bringing the inside out. Furthermore, the swimming pool, “paradigm of sensual spaces” (88) with its voyeuristic implication (watching people while they swim) makes it the prime reference point of the entire house's architecture. The different scenes revolving around the pool in *PAL* reference a similar direction. The inhabitant, Maria Wyeth, is what Colomina defines as “the primary object” (88) while guests are the looking subjects.

In the town where Maria goes to shoot the movie there is a bathhouse, that according to the narrator attracts “old people, believers in cures and the restorative power of desolation” (187). In the passage reported below, the description focuses on the reasons Maria gives herself for sleeping besides the swimming pool at night, and again the connection with catastrophes emerges:

She told herself that she was sleeping outside just until it was too cold to sleep beneath beach towels, just until the heat broke, just until the fires stopped burning in the mountains, sleeping outside only because the bedrooms in the house were hot, airless, only because the palms scraped against the screens and there was no one to wake her in the mornings. (16-17)

Even though the outside described here is not intended as “outside the city limits,” the opposition between indoor and outdoor serves as an indicator of the continuous crossing between lines in what Scarpino defines as the “Neither/nor places” of the narration in which the

protagonist is “neither able to abandon herself to the *genius loci* nor to maintain a form of insularity”(460).⁵³

The idea of border crossing is particularly relevant in the interpretation of the novel. California, the ultimate US frontier, is presented in the narrative as a collection of very distinctive landscapes, connected to each other only by the presence of the protagonist. Maria drives aimlessly between them and once she arrives in a new place she invariably looks for a phone. Through the use of the telephone she manifests the connection between her ecologies, uniting the places that are meaningful to her. In her wondering in and out of places other symbols emerge. Coca Cola for example, the American drink *par excellence*, is repeatedly presented in the narration. The significance of the beverage resides in its ideology, in the images of the road, and of post-war prosperity.⁵⁴ According to Lee Clark Mitchell, “[t]he West in the Western matters less as verifiable topography than as space removed from cultural coercion, lying beyond ideology (and therefore, of course, the most ideological of terrains)” (qtd. in Shoop 588). All the symbols that Didion uses are related to the territory and serve as a liaison between past and present, seeding questions on the ideological frame that made the environment into what it is, where the echoes of Manifest Destiny reverberate, as the nightmares of the future respond to old affairs.

The choice of passing in between borders in a geographical sense, moving from city to city, to and from different states, in a temporal sense, connecting memory and the facts of the narration, is a strategy that is mirrored stylistically, as the novel does not present a solid temporal structure. According to Shoop, “Didion’s ‘Western’ style arrogates to itself a certain clear-eyed realism by its willingness to leave an idea in the lurch” (587). The meaning is conveyed by

⁵³ My translation.

⁵⁴ Coca Cola was also Didion’s preferred drink at the time.

omission, which, just like the symbolism of the desert and of the ghost towns in the narrative, presents images charged with significance. The spatial implications of such rhetorical devices are noteworthy. On the topic, Shoop affirms that, “The secret of the Western—like the secret of Didion’s style—has been to dress an impossible nostalgia in the outfit of its heroic refusal” (590). A sense of untamable tension permeates the narration, a feeling connected to the land, something that seems to linger unresolved, that crosses the boundaries between spatiality (the landscape) and temporality (through the said nostalgia and fear of the past), arriving to the character of Maria herself.

Maria is not only faced with geographical limits, the frontiers she crosses are corporeal as well. As Kristeva would argue, the obsession with body fluids in the narration--vomiting, expulsion of the placenta, and menstruation--is a form of abjection, specifically the horror associated with these elements and the desire to reject them as they symbolize Maria’s fears.⁵⁵ The implications between Maria’s body and the treatment of her “abjections” have a spatial reference in the narration, space that is connected to the water symbolism and that I identify in the image of the hospital.

3.4 The Hospital

With the term “hospital” I refer to all the tangible spaces connected to physical and mental health that Maria comes in contact with. These spaces vary from the clinics to the institutions mentioned in the narration. The meaning of this ecology is extremely important in the interpretation of the character of Maria because her chronic depression affects her relationship with space. As Robert McRuer pointed out, mental disability is related to a series of

⁵⁵ The connection between body fluids in the narration and Kristeva’s postulations on abjections are also explored by Cinzia Scarpino in her article “‘I, the Implacable I: l’opera di Joan Didion negli anni settanta.’”

terms such as “sexuality, normalization, and marginalization,”(55) words that are connected to body representation and conceptualization and that are particularly significant in the experience of Maria as she enters these spaces to get normalized, controlled, “cured.” As Dasgupta explains, before Ivan Illich’s publication of *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemeses* in 1975, the term “medicalization,” referring to the way “individuals with disabilities have been categorized as “sick” and placed under the jurisdiction of the medical establishment and medical professionals,” (Dasgupta 120) was unknown. There was, however, at the time of publication of *PAL*, an increasing awareness of the problems related to the conditions inside mental facilities, considerations made public through works such as *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, that raised questions regarding the efficiency of traditional medical intervention.

The increased public interest in the relationship between medicine and patients roughly coincides with the emergence of disability as a field of study. The academic discipline helped raise awareness about the ways in which disability affects social relations while also bringing attention to how the body is represented, opening interesting debates on the relationship between disability and the female body. In the past decade, intersections between this new academic interest and geocentrism arose as well. In particular, more relevance has been given to studies pertaining to the relationship between disability and architecture, in the attempt to reveal “architecture’s deepest assumptions about what is valued and noticed, and what is marginalized and forgotten” (Boys 3). In spatial terms, the distinction between seen and hidden is fundamental when we talk about hospitalization and mental health: when illness is considered a non-normative condition, everything related to it has to be confined to secluded spaces, far from the public eye. *PAL* offers different examples of the ways in which Maria is removed from social life

when she enters the medical space. Medical locals are subjected to different rules, to a structure that lingers in between the rigidity of a prison and the educational coercion of a boarding school.

The narration begins with Maria at the mental institution where she is hospitalized after the death of BZ. Other spaces that emerge in the narration are the structure where Kate lives, and the clinic where Maria gets her abortion. The description of these spaces is noteworthy because it raises questions pertaining to both the treatment of the patient in terms of her body and the efficiency of the medical practice. The chapters offering Maria's point of view read as a psychotherapy, which is reinforced by the recurrence of hypnoses practices in the narration:

To look for 'reasons' is beside the point. But because the pursuit of reasons is their business here, they ask me questions. Maria, yes or no: I see a cock in the inkblot. Maria, yes or no: A large number of people are guilty of bad sexual conduct, I believe my sins are unpardonable, I have been disappointed in love, How could I answer? How could it apply? NOTHING APPLIES. (4)

Maria interprets her confinement as a punishment for her "bad sexual conduct." Her response to the treatments is to remain passive, to remove herself from both the past and the future. In her words: "I watch a hummingbird, throw the I Ching but never read the coins, keep my mind in the now."(8) Her apathy is the result of a careful self-analysis, a desire to remove herself from any thoughts that would engage her socially, it is, once again, a rejection of any kind of epistemology: "WHAT MAKES IAGO EVIL? some people ask. I never ask"(3) Maria states. Engaging with this type of question would mean give in to the logic of finding reasons. The question is already posed, however, it stands out at the very beginning of the narration and will linger until the end of the novel, inviting the reader to reflect on the nature of human actions and their consequences. The most tangible consequence for Maria is the fact that she is confined to

the mental institution. In spatial terms, the detention means a termination of her wandering that, as demonstrated in the previous ecologies, is part of her identity.

There is, however, a curious fact that affects the way space is conceived by Maria exemplified in the passage below, in which the protagonist explains the way she lives in the institution:

Now I lie in the sun and play solitaire and listen to the sea (the sea is down the cliff but I am not allowed to swim, only on Sundays when we are accompanied) and watch a hummingbird. I try not to think of dead things and plumbing. I try not to hear the air conditioner in the bedroom in Encino. I try not to live in Silver Wells or in New York of with Carter. I try to live in the now and keep my eye on the hummingbird. (10)

Two fundamental considerations emerge from the passage. The first is that the places that are vivid in Maria's memory are not only confined in her past; she still "live(s)" in them; a reflection that leads to the interpretation of these spaces as thirdspace. The physical spaces projected by Maria are affected by her own interpretation, her obsession with "dead things and plumbing." Her vision is what constitutes the thirdspace lived by Maria, as it is not the mere reproduction (second space) that makes up a thirdspace, but its intersection with physical space (first place). Living in her projection is natural for Maria, while living in the present is an act she enforces onto herself. Her practices of concentration that include focusing on visual and sensorial elements grounded in the present time are exercises that remove her from the other dimensions, which is what she aspires to.

These meditation practices are connected to the philosophy she inherited from her father, a doctrine that centers around survival. The phrase "play it as it lays," a sport and gambling term used in the novel as an encouragement to play your best with whatever you are presented with, is

connected to the survival ideology. The manifestation of the cards affect the way the surrounding environment is interpreted, it implies the presence of other players, influencing spatial relations. For Maria “play it as it lays” is a form of meditation, a non-action practice, which not only affects her social relations, but it also impacts the medical practices she undergoes or she comes in contact with.

Her attitude is exemplified in relation to her daughter Kate: Maria displays an acute concern for her daughter but at the same time she doesn’t show any sign of understanding of what the girl suffers from or any desire to obtain any knowledge. The narrator states that Kate is given “Methyphenidate hydrochloride”(72) which suggests she could have an attention deficit or a hyperactivity disorder, but the only explanation given by Maria is that she “has soft down on her spine and an aberrant chemical in her brain”(5). The protagonist refers to the institution where her daughter is as “the place where...they put electrodes on her head and needles in her spine and try to figure out what went wrong”(4). The ambiguity in the explanation reflects Maria’s distrust in the environment. Maria is kept away from the hospital by the nurses and her husband Carter, who think it is best for the girl not to see her mother. Once again the man intercedes deciding what Maria can and cannot do while also affecting where Maria is allowed to go. The influence Carter has on Maria’s space intersects with decisions pertaining to her body. In persuading Maria to get the abortion, Carter suggests that if the woman does not follow through with his plans she won’t be allowed to see Kate: “If I do this,” Maria asks Carter, “then you promise I can have Kate? You promise there won’t be trouble later?” “I’m not promising anything”(55) Carter replies, holding on to his power.

As Maria is slowly deprived of her decision making, her depression becomes more acute. Contextualizing her mental distress in Hollywood, the narrator states that, “failure, illness,

fear...were seen as infectious, contagious blights on glossy plants. It seemed to Maria that even the receptionist was avoiding her eyes, fearing contamination” (922). This critique directed at the movie industry reinforces the ideas connected to body representations made in the previous ecology, specifically in relation to the protagonist’s career. Other people’s projections of Maria and her body affect the way she presents herself and perceives herself.

Her abortion has different repercussions in her career as well, as a pregnancy would translate to the impossibility to find a job and a separation from Carter. In spatial terms, the performance of the abortion is particularly relevant. The room is thoroughly described and the protagonist’s perception of time and space constitutes the focal point of the action. One of the strengths of the abortion chapter relies in its ability to provide a very detailed sensorial description that gives the reader all the discernable clues to experience the scene. Before the operation begins doctor and patient discuss the temperature of the room, which is quickly put in relation with Maria’s body: the room, the doctor states, is too cold for Maria because she does not weigh enough (82). As it soon will be explained, in addition to the temperature description the narrator focuses on setting and sound, to then move to a more psychological analysis of thoughts of Maria. In the excerpt below the narrator plunges into Maria’s perspective, to detail the woman’s thoughts during the operation:

The walls of the bedroom were cream-colored, yellow, a wallpaper with a modest pattern⁵⁶. Whoever had chosen that wallpaper would have liked maple furniture, a maple bedroom set, a white chenille bedspread and a white Princess telephone, all gone now but she could see it as it must have been, could see the even the woman who had picked the

⁵⁶ The “yellow wallpaper” inevitably points the reader to Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Ibid note 54.

wallpaper, she would be a purchaser of Audubon prints and scented douches, a hoarder of secret sexual grievances, a wife. (81)

The concentration on the décor is peculiar in a moment as delicate as an abortion. It is, however, a strategy that Maria employs to remove herself from the action. The space described does not look like a clinic; it is in fact an apartment turned into an operating room: “The table was a doctor’s table but not fitted with stirrups: instead there were two hardbacked chairs with pillows tied over the backs”⁵⁷ (81-82). The act is hidden, illegal, performed in what looks like a private house. “Hear that scraping, Maria?” The doctor asks the protagonist. “That should be the sound pf music to you...don’t scream, Maria, there are people next door, almost done, almost over, better to get it all now than do it again a month from now.”(83) The doctor suggests she focus on the scraping sound as if it was a piano playing in the background. The implications in this statement are noteworthy: her body produces the background noise that is perceived as music by the doctor, who has an impact in the activity as he is the one performing the action on her. The perception of the sound clearly differs between the doctor and Maria, what is music to him is a painful reminder to her. She contrasts the awareness of her body with a singular consideration: “two minutes in Silver Wells, two minutes on the wallpaper, it could not last forever”(81). Her mind creates the space that allows her to bear the operation. By living in these places, she affects her sense of time.

Time and place are subjected to her own personal interpretation, which often involves the use of sedation or the imagination of using it, such as in the following passage: “she fixed her imagination on a needle dripping sodium pentathol into her arm and began counting backwards

⁵⁷ It should be noticed that the floor is covered with newspapers for their antiseptic qualities (80). Maria reflects on the use of newspapers as medical tools, as blankets for emergencies, to suggest that their original purpose is lost as the meaning of words is the focus is only on survival.

from one hundred”(162). This strategy she uses to affect her sense of time and place can be read in conjunction with her relationship with mobility as a form therapeutic trance. Before Carter suggests to her the doctor who does “clean work” she goes to see another one to confirm her pregnancy. The explanation she gives her husband pertaining to why she chose that particular doctor is relevant in terms of spatial awareness: “He was near Saks,” she whispered finally. “I was having my hair done at Saks.”(51) Her choice is accidental, the result of a mere spatial coincidence.

What emerges from the reflections on the hospital is that space is experienced by the protagonist as the combination between physical images, such as the built environment and its décor, mental implications such as memory, and sensorial awareness which together point at the relationship between her body and the surrounding environment. Specifically, in relation to how temporal and spatial coordinates determine Maria’s interaction with the environment she occupies.

3.5 Conclusion

In Grosz’s words, “the city orients and organizes family, sexual, and social relations” (250) delineating specific locales for specific purposes, separating the public from the private sphere. If the critic’s urban organization is to be valued as a theoretical approach, then the city becomes the place where power is created and distributed. This power produces urban bodies and negotiates their presence in the city. Maria’s four ecologies are subjected to these logics, social space is categorized according to a hierarchical structure affecting the character’s presence in spatial terms. The idea is however complicated by the fact that space, especially the urban, is produced by the very same body that occupies it and is affected by it. In this paradoxical situation, Grosz’s reciprocity becomes crucial. The clinic where Maria gets the abortion exists

because of the female body and at the same time, as illustrated in the section pertaining to “the hospital,” the female body is subjected to the place. In a similar way, the realm of the domestic, in which social divisions are materialized through architecture and interior design, divided between female and male space, is displayed by the house occupants, while the occupants are also subjected to the spatial division. The body of Maria undergoes the same kind of distinction, as her perception of corporeal and environmental often fuse together.

The relationship between body and city in the novel is strongly related to the female perspective of the protagonist. The female body moves through her different ecologies, through private and public spaces, blurring the lines between them. As Banham explains, the freeway in Los Angeles is elevated in relation to the rest of the city, offering the driver an excellent position (24). From her car, the protagonist gazes at Los Angeles and moves from one place to the next. Architecture and urban design have a direct effect on the way Maria interacts with her surroundings: the built environment reflects social constructs to which she both subscribes and resists. This apparent opposition is justified by the protagonist’s attempt to fight spatial constraints by becoming less visible. The structure of the novel, made of very short chapters, filled with blank spaces, displays a spatial organization that reflects the same idea of detachment. Furthermore, western geography and historical implications of human agency and nature play an important role in spatial terms. Her particular relation with place speaks of subjectivity, what has been referred to in this study as individualism, which, through symbolism and its connection to the territory, becomes iconic. Emphasis is placed on the transition between different ecologies. Movement is a form of escapism for the protagonist, a device used to come to terms with both the untamable power of nature and the unforeseeable consequences of technology.

4 CHAPTER THREE: SOCIO-HISTORICAL REMAPPING OF SPACE IN KAREN TEI YAMASHITA'S *TROPIC OF ORANGE*

“*There are maps and there are maps and there are maps,*” (56) Manzanar Murakami declares while standing on top of the Los Angeles freeway, directing traffic like a music composer. The ex-surgeon turned traffic director can see all the maps at once. He can perceive all the different layers composing the cacophony of the LA geo-social substrata. While Murakami sees all the maps at the same time, the other characters of the narrative seem to run on different atlases, each following their path, each drawing their personal route. The third chapter of my dissertation considers the impact of globalization in the urban environment as represented in Karen Tei Yamashita’s 1997 novel, *Tropic of Orange*. This section explores how the characters come to terms with spatiality, how space is lived differently according to the position of each individual and their personal relation with technology. The novel, which presents seven different characters, invites questions pertaining to the use of maps. In this section, I will analyze the representation of each character considering their interactions in their different environmental dimensions. The aim of this chapter is to reveal how positionality affects the characters’ relationship with the territory and how different forms of authority shape geographical interpretations of the environment. My argument draws from the idea that the process of cognitive mapping for each character is a subjective process, each character’s spatial thinking depends on their unique relationship with concepts of place, environment, nation, borders, home, and city.

Due to the multiple layers and the multiple voices in the text, setting the basis of this chapter on a single map would have been a reductive attempt. Therefore, I decided to juxtapose three different interpretations, to visually reproduce some of the main preoccupations of the novel

such as the function of roads, the role of technology, and the one of borders in the definition of space. These concepts are crucial for the characters because they affect the way the environment is perceived and lived.

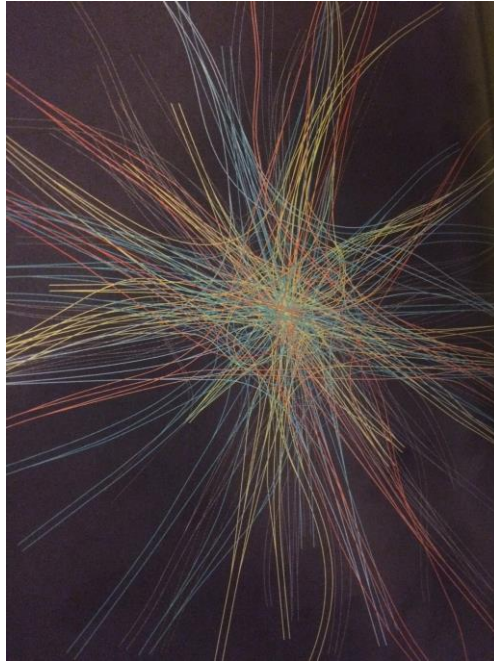


Figure 3 Los Angeles Freeway

The first map reported here, made by Los Angeles cartographer David Deis, depicts the Los Angeles freeway. Similarly to the previous chapter, that considered the freeway as the nodal point through which the narration develops being the main character's connection to the outside, the third chapter of my thesis considers how the concept of the freeway is elaborated in *Tropic of Orange*. The road system is a central location in the narrative, bringing people and goods into the city and at the same time taking them out of it. "Its rhythms are those of human motion; traffic is not a narcotic artificially introduced into the system but the very lifeblood of the city," (249) Rachel Adams explains in her illuminating article "The End of America, the Ends of Postmodernism." The roads in the narrative are "a great root system, an organic living entity" (*Tropic* 37). The freeway is compared to the human body in different instances throughout the

novel. Los Angeles appears like a pumping heart connected by the freeway and roads, which are represented as veins and arteries. For this reason I wanted the freeway to be at the forefront of the map's elaboration: even though the narration unwinds outside the city limits, the road system remains an important and necessary "living" connection to the margins.



Figure 4 Mapping the Internet

The second map is Barrett Lyon's 2002 art piece titled "Mapping the Internet." As part of *The Opte Project* at the MOMA, this map represents the early stages of the Internet as we use it now, a depiction of the beginning of the Information Age. Technology is one of the main themes of the narration. As critic Robin Blyn points out, "Modeled on the World Wide Web, Yamashita's postmodern networks simultaneously figure the world space of neoliberalism and a mode of collectivity endowed with the potential to instigate radical change"(192). As *Tropic* describes and questions the beginning of a new technological era, contrasting the innovation with traditional forms of physical transportation. Following this line of thought, the first two maps presented expose the contrast between exchange of physical goods and exchange of information.

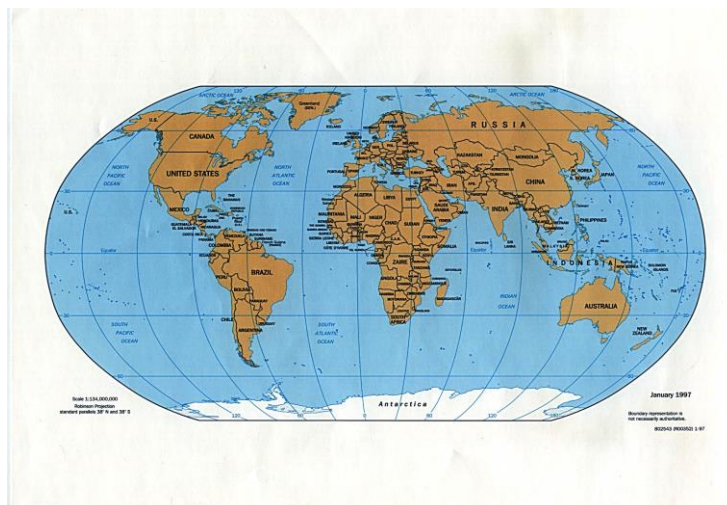


Figure 5 United States Atlas of the World

The third map is a United States Atlas of the world from 1997, the year in which *Tropic* was published. This representation is particularly important in relation to the Internet map because if on the first we see a world wired, connected by lines and dots, a world in the shape of a sphere, that looks almost portable like the orange in *Tropic*, the second one displays a different outlook. In the world atlas, each country appears clearly delineated, with borders marking the divisions recognized by the United States at the time of the narration. If on the one hand, borders cease to be relevant, as technology offers ways to evade the logic of national limitations, on the other they are still a constraint, especially for the people at the margins. This consideration is one of the issues that Yamashita raises in the novel, as some of the characters are able to move fluidly across borders, while others are forced and limited by the divisions enforced.



Figure 6 Polyvocality

The final representation reports the juxtaposition of these three layers that are equally important in the development of the narration. The confusion that the fourth and last map generates, alludes at the cacophony of the novel and what Adams defines as the “internet polyvocality”(249). The ensemble of voices, places, and multiple technological modes creates a multi-layered atlas that compresses time and space. Under this frame of reference, Southern California becomes “a nodal point where globalization threatens to erupt into environmental and human catastrophe, but also where people find themselves creating unlikely coalitions that might work to remedy these problems” (Adams 252).

In Yamashita’s writing, symbols, place, and time come together to describe borders and redefine space. The orange is the central metaphor in the novel. In order to analyze the symbolism of the fruit it is useful to go back to some of the considerations raised in chapter one, in relation to *Ask the Dust*. In the first narrative the fruit is contextualized in Los Angeles in relation to the myth of city boosterism. Los Angeles is the land of the sun, where people move to seek fortune or escape the harsh climate of the East and the Midwest. The irony in Fante’s interpretation relies on the fact that being poor, oranges are the only food that Arturo can afford.

Advancing an anti-boosterism idea, Fante wittingly introduces the theme of failed ambitions and unfulfilled dreams in Los Angeles through the use of the orange. The symbolism is further complicated in *Tropic*: with its round shape, the fruit becomes the symbol of the earth, of a world that technology is rendering smaller and smaller, to the verge of being portable, carried around by people. In the inside the orange is shaped by fibers that, just like the net of the connections described in the novel, hold the fruit together. The fruit's symbolism is not only related to its appearance. The orange recurs at steady intervals to signify global warming, when for example a single orange grows during winter in Gabriel's orchard in Mexico. The commerce related to the fruit is also particularly relevant. As some critics have pointed out, the novel's elaborations about transportation of goods between the United States and Mexico is a reference to NAFTA and the implications of the free trade implemented by the Clinton administration in 1994.⁵⁸ The agreement facilitates commerce but does not protect the consumers: the orange may be poisoned by the time it arrives on the shelves of Los Angeles grocery stores. At the same time, while transported across borders, the orange becomes the means through which cocaine arrives into the United States, opening another avenue of interpretation in relation to the fruit. Lastly, running parallel with the illegal transportation of drugs, is organ trafficking. In this case, the symbolism of the orange relies on its internal configuration: the red pulp and the fibers of the fruit mirror the composition of a human heart.

The concept of migration does not only pertain to the transportation of goods but it extends to people's movements as well. Movement is what generates new maps, and with new

⁵⁸ See Jensen, Blyn, Palmer, and Mermann-Jozwiak. At the wake of the NAFTA ratification, these authors analyze the consequences of neoliberal policies in relation to both the people in Los Angeles (looking specifically at the African American, Asian, and homeless communities in the city) and the native and labor communities in Mexico and South America. According to these scholars, free trade enriches global corporations but at the same time it undermines liberal democracy.

atlases, new intersections arise. Transportation, traffic, movement of information are looked at from the perspective of the marginalized, balancing oppositions and examining the consequences of crossing borders. Lines can be stretched; shifting borders, however, does not mean making perimeters invisible. The book, published at the turn of the century, hints at the possible complications of the new media era, suggesting that progress will inevitably alter the concepts of time and space and of the world as we *knew* it.

Due to the time of its publication and the themes explored, *Tropic* is a hard novel to categorize. As Adams points out, Yamashita's "fiction reacts against the aesthetic sensibilities of high postmodernism while providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents." (251) Comparing Yamashita's work with the postmodern masterpiece, *The Crying of the Lot 49*, Adams defines *Tropic* as the work that initiates globalism in literature. According to the critic, *Tropic* presents some of the features typical of postmodern narratives, specifically considering its experimental fiction and use of fragmentation. However, the construction of the novel and Yamashita's introduction of global networks places the narrative beyond postmodernism. Literary critic Robert T. Tally Jr. advances similar considerations in relation to the beginning of globalism. Tally makes use of Jameson's notion that postmodernism is the "cultural logic of late capitalism"(qtd. in Tally 39). According to the critic, "a crucial feature of late capitalism is globalization"(39). The late stages of postmodernism introduced structural changes that manifested in a new global era. While Adams's global shift coincides with the 1990s, Tally traces it back to the mid 1970s when the Ford model was replaced with "flexible production" reflected in capitalistic accumulation (39). It is interesting to notice that regardless of the different timelines, both approaches take into consideration the time-space compression generated by the new mode of production and delivery of goods and information.

Furthermore, the computerization of the stock exchange also influenced the reciprocity between time and space and how these are perceived. As anticipated in the previous chapter, the system replaced a pyramidal type of structure with a horizontal model, creating an instant network of connections that revolutionized the way capital and investments are moved around the globe. Focusing on spatial representations of Los Angeles and Southern California, *Mapping Los Angeles* explores different connections between time and space. It is with the analysis of *Tropic* that the transition into globalism becomes evident and the compression of time and space emerges distinctly.

The novel begins with a chart titled “HyperContexts.” The representation connects the seven main characters of the story with the days of the week in which the different plots develop. Each day has a subtitle that references spatial or temporal coordinates, and cultural concerns. In the same fashion, each character’s section is divided into different divisions with their own subtitles. As Adams explains, the chart with all its references is supposed to provide an order “to a narrative that ultimately refuses to come together in any coherent manner”(259). The spatiotemporal indications provided in the text are not enough evidence to justify and explain the events that happen in the narration. Yamashita often recurs to magic realism to complete the passages that lack a traditional logic. Critics such as Jinqi Ling have connected the use of magic realism to a process of decolonization (126) while Robin Blyn interpreted the stylistic choice as a form of resistance (193). At the end of the novel most of the character die or, as Blyn points out, are rendered impotent. As I will explain in the following sections, the connection between different plots resulting from the faith of each character reflects different perceptions of time and space. The seven character of the narrative individually reflect on the meaning of living on the edge and crossing boundaries in relation to technological advancement.

4.1 Not Too Far From Mazatlán

The first location introduced in the novel is particularly important in terms of spatial representation. The book opens with a scene that takes place in a house near Mazatlán in Mexico, symbolically situated on the Tropic of Cancer. As the title suggests, the first chapter of the book is set on a Monday of a summer solstice. The information provides a temporal reference that has a number of different implications in relation to the spatial organization of the novel. Yamashita visually organizes the narrative according to the international week standard (the week starts on Monday and ends on Sunday). The weekly organization becomes a map in itself: with its coordinates, it serves as a means to orient the reader. At the same time, it reflects one of the political ambitions of the novel, to offer a transnational, global perspective. The narration imagines a Southwest that is connected to Mexico, a Global South. The novel begins on the day of the summer solstice and not on a calendar day. On this day the rotation axis of the earth is most inclined toward the sun, providing a reference that is both spatial and temporal. The image of the sun related to the solstice recurs a number of times in this section. The tension between the Earth's geographical pole and the sun will move the line marking the Tropic of Cancer through the image of one particular orange that grew on the line. The movement of the fruit will reshape borders and affect traffic. The shift will have tangible repercussions in the city of Los Angeles.

The character introduced at the very beginning is Rafaela, a Mexican-American woman living in a remote house with her son, Sol. She works as a housekeeper for Gabriel, a Chicano writer who lives in Los Angeles but owns the house in Mexico. The spatial awareness and domestic configuration of this chapter is made clear from the very beginning: Rafaela is cleaning the house barefoot "printing the moisture" of her feet "in dark footprints over baked clay"(3). Her footprints leave concrete visual references, a map, to trace her movement in the house.

While the woman is occupied with her daily chores, she notices small a crab on the floor, a peculiar occurrence since the house is located far away from the ocean. The crab, whose significance relates to the iconography of cancer, is the first signal that something is happening. The magnetic pole of the Tropic is in fact pulling to itself these types creatures, introducing the first elements of magic realism in the story.

At the same time, the magical elements are contrasted by very practical problems, such as the functionality of the vacuum cleaner that Gabriel bought in California. The appliance, the narrator suggests, is out of place in the new environment. Rafaela is not able to buy the vacuum bags necessary for the Electrolux and ends up clogging the machine with pieces of the crab (4-5). The vacuum cleaner is not the only product transported across the border; even the toilet bowls that will be installed in the bathrooms come from the United States. The irony surrounding this last purchase is that the bowls are in fact produced in Mexico but cheaper to buy in the United States, so Gabriel decides to re-import them into Mexico. The transportation of these products puts into question the existence of borders in relation to product acquisition and affordability while also pointing at two different sensibilities that originate at different sides of the border. The difference emerges in the description of the house. While Gabriel imagines his house as an “a old-style rancho, circa 1800, with rustic touches, thick adobe-like walls and beams, but with modern appliances,” (6) Rafaela is clearly more practical. Gabriel gets his ideas from architectural magazines while Rafaela gets her from *House Beautiful* and *Sunset* (6,7). Gabriel buys a vacuum cleaner and Rafaela replaces it with a broom. The house, which is an endless work-in-progress, is depicted and designed by Gabriel as a site that opposes technology. The old style rancho is conceived as a sanctuary, a place that contrasts the reality of Los Angeles. The house is a place grounded in the memory of the past, in which technology and traffic do not

figure. The vacuum cleaner does not work and in order to use the phone, Rafaela has to go to her neighbor's house, to Doña Maria's place. Yamshita creates different locations, some of which are saturated with technology, while in others, just like the house near Mazatlán technology is non-existent. There is an ambivalence pertaining to telecommunications that will recur in different spatial forms throughout the narrative.

The narration considers how cultural influences and ideology affect the way space is perceived and occupied. Gabriel's desire to build a house near Mazatlán is also the result of spatial considerations, specifically the memory of his grandmother:

The workers, who all eventually abandoned their work, smiled graciously and wondered at this young Chicano who had a college education and whose grandfather had fought with Pancho Villa and ended up in Los Angeles. Nobody remembered the grandmother who supposedly came from right around there—a little girl who got kidnapped by the grandfather and taken away North. (5-6)

There is for Gabriel a romantic attachment to the house that has a lot to do with its location. The fact that the Tropic of Cancer passes through his property reinforces the spatial connection with the territory. The narrator explains that, “in Gabriel's mind the Tropic ran through his place like a good metaphor”(5). To make the line concrete, the man plants two orange trees where the circle is supposed to pass. The metaphor referenced by Gabriel takes shape in the description provided on page 11, in reference to the history of the orange. There is one particular orange tree that for reasons soon to be established, is particularly important in the narration:

But Rafaela was only concerned about one tree in particular. It was a rather sorry tree, yellowing perhaps from lack of some nutrient or another, but for some reason, she had been watching it everyday. It was the only citrus tree in the garden that had a fruit on it.

Gabriel had actually brought this tree from Riverside eight years ago. It was a navel orange tree, maybe the descendent of the original trees first brought to California from Brazil in 1873 and planted by L.C. Tibbetts. This was the sort of historic detail Gabriel liked. Bringing an orange tree (no matter that it was probably an hybrid) from Riverside, California to his place near Mazatlán was a significant act of some sort. Gabriel had taken some pains to plant the tree as a marker—to mark the Tropic of Cancer. (11)

The historical perspective offered above hints at the colonial past that connects the image of the orange with its geographical movement across countries and continents. The fruit that originated in Asia was brought to Europe by Italian and Portuguese merchants, who in turn, brought it to Brazil during the slave trade. The narration thus invites the reader to associate the spatial history of the fruit with the spatial history of colonialism. The characters of the novel reflect a parallel geographic lineage, from Japan to Singapore, passing through Mexico, converging in Los Angeles. Another relevant plant analogy in connection to colonialism that emerges in the first section of the book is the reference to hybridity. The passage reported above clarifies that the orange tree marking the Tropic is a hybrid. The concept of hybridity returns numerous times in the novel. The narrative plays with the nineteenth century notion of hybridity as an aberration or the idea that genetic crossing undermines purity. Yamashita challenges this racist ideology describing hybridity as a site of resistance. This postcolonial approach echoes Homi Bhabha's publication of *The Location of Culture*, in relation to the ethnic heritage of the characters. In particular in relation to Sol, who with his mother Rafaela, are at the center of this section. Doña Maria, Rafaela's neighbor, while talking to the housekeeper, defines the physical appearance of the child in a curious description: "He's got a little of your curly hair and your coloring, but really he's such a little Chinese," she marveled. "A true mixture"(7). Positionality has a lot to do

with social interpretations of race and hybridity, especially in relation to the people inhabiting a particular environment. In the passage above, Sol is interpreted as the hybrid subject; he is different from what Doña Maria is accustomed to. It is interesting to notice that the definition of his identity is offered not by the narrator, but by a character who is looking at the boy from an “othering” perspective. In order to understand this phenomenon, it is useful to look at what Homi Bhabha wrote in relation to hybridity and the space that traceable in subjects in between multiple identities:

The move away from the singularities of 'class' or 'gender' as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions - of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation - that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (2)

“The subject position” is at the basis of identity interpretations. Bhabha interprets the “in-between” spaces as a turn of the century intersection between space and time. The new identities emerging from this environmental plurality are what constitute “innovative sites of collaboration.” In the novel, Sol is representative of this change. During the course of the narration, the child will shadow Archangel, the supernatural character who is travelling north to fight the evil SUPERNAFTA. The narration seems to suggest that Sol will be taking the baton to

carry the revolution forward. It is specifically his positionality in relation to the child's multicultural identity that makes him the right candidate to contrast cultural and economic imperialism.

The book poses a series of questions in regards to globalism and postcolonialism that, as previously explained, are not only related to the characters but to the geography of the territory. In addition to the orange trees, for example, Gabriel plants a number of other trees in his house in Mazatlán. In the book they are referred to as “exotic northern trees” bought in the United States (11). The act of planting a foreign plant is depicted as an attempt to change the morphology of the territory. The earth, however, refuses these unfamiliar trees in what appears like an act of resistance. The papaya and the mango are the only ones that survive the climate. This brief passage condenses an important message pertaining to the indigenous presence and land's contention. In her article “The Cartography of Justice and Truthful Refractions” Ruth Hsu eloquently explains the relationship between mapping, globalism, and the importance of the morphology of the territory in the novel at hand. According to the scholar *Tropic*,

decenter[s] the dominant Anglo-Euro-American narratives about Los Angeles, the ones that empower and maintain the dominant image of white and Western superiority. And the novel does so by appropriating and redeploying the hegemonic tropes of cartography and geography in ways that map Western colonialism and the buried sites (longitude and latitude figured in the parole of history) of prehistoric rivers, flora, and fauna, and 'native' resistance as well as the ongoing transgressions of African Americans, Asian migrants, Latino/as, just to name a few of the other who have and are inhabiting the geography—in the deep sense—of Los Angeles. (77)

In the first section of *Tropic*, a number of cartographical representations intersect. Considering specifically Rafaela, one can trace the map she draws on the floor that visually reproduces her movement in the house and the space she engages with⁵⁹. Furthermore, Rafaela is able to read palms, a form of topographical and embodied representation that connects the magic elements of the novel with the future of the characters. These two personal forms of cartographical configuration combine with larger atlases. Colonial maps, traced by the movement of the orange brought in the American continent by traders and explorers, are referenced in regards to the orange tree in Gabriel's property; the tree that also marks the Tropic of Cancer, drawing another map. The line forming the Tropic reinforces the separation between north and south, between the United States and Mexico. When analyzed in relation to the city of Los Angeles, the imaginary line points at the meaning of borders and the arbitrary enforcement of these limits. Los Angeles, that once was part of Mexico, is now on the other side. As the narration progresses, and the magic orange from the hybrid tree is transported north, the axis of the Tropic shifts, redesigning the configuration of the territory and its borders.

4.2 Tijuana via Singapore

This section reflects on alternative ways to look at the city of Los Angeles. The narrative suggests that the urban space inhabited by multicultural individuals in Los Angeles is a complex network of alliances with different ethnicities. The immigrant experience in the city often converges into racial blurring⁶⁰. Through the stories elaborated in *Tropic*, the narration reflects on the complexity of identity formation and self-determination in border communities. Looking specifically at the Japanese-American experience, Yamashita reflected on her own writing in her

⁵⁹ Rafaela used to work for Bobby in his cleaning business. It is interesting to notice that her map deals with cleaning. Despite the fact that she cleans, her footprints remain as stains.

⁶⁰ See Kosaka Eliko.

article “Traveling Voices” where she states that having to consider the nature of her work in translation, “the idea of Japanese American began to have another meaning, less as a political identification for an ethnic minority, increasingly as a kind of transnational identity”(5). The creation of this “transnational identity” mentioned by the author applies to most of the characters in *Tropic*, not only to the ones of Japanese origin. The interpretation of the urban space in the novel is subjected to the existence of multiple ethnic identities that overlap. Spatial representations in *Tropic*, not only do connect the outside to the city (Mexico, for example) but also create urban spaces where these multi-layered identities are questioned and examined. One of these elaborations pertains restaurants and food, especially in relation to the characters of Emi and Gabriel. Other instances in which “transnational identities” are framed into a spatial logic in the novel are through descriptions of neighborhoods and shops, such as Chinatown and Koreatown. “Down the corner, there’s a sign: Chinese burritos. Fish tacos. Ensopada. Camaron Chow Mein. How especial: \$2.99. Comida to go. Por qué nó?” (101). The cultural mash between Asian and Central American traditions transforms the city, encouraging the creation of transnational identities.

The central character who inhabits these places and who is also in the intersection between Tijuana and Singapore is Bobby Ngu. The narrator of this section explains the antecedents of Bobby’s story in a brief but compelling account. Bobby is a Singaporean who, at age twelve, flees to Vietnam with his younger brother due to economic hardship. In order to seek political asylum in the United States Bobby changes his identity and his name. In the United States he meets his wife, Rafaela, who is originally from Mexico:

That’s Bobby. If you know your Asians, you look at Bobby. You say, that’s Vietnamese. That’s what you say. Color’s pallid. Kinda blue just beneath the skin. Little underweight.

Korean's got rounder face. Chinese's taller. Japanese's dressed better. If you know your Asians. Turns out you'll be wrong. And you gonna be confused. Dude speaks Spanish. Comprende? So you figure it's one of those Japanese from Peru. Or maybe Korean from Brazil. Or Chinamex. Turns out Bobby's from Singapore. You say, okay, Indonesian. Malaysian. Wrong again. You say, look at his name. That's gotta be Vietnam, Ngu. Bobby Ngu. They all got Ngu names. Hey, it's not his real name. Real name's Li Kwan Yu. But don't tell nobody. Go figure. Bobby's Chinese. Chinese from Singapore with Vietnam make speaking like a Mexican living in Koreatown. That's it. (*Tropic 15*)

Bobby moves between Koreatown and Chinatown embodying a pan-Asian identity that echoes the Vietnam War and the geography of the Pacific Rim. His identity is ambiguous, shaped by political circumstances. The choice of having a character who is divided between multiple personae reflects both the misplacement felt by immigrants in the United States related to identity loss and the complex position of Asian-Americans in particular. Considering and contrasting the Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese experience, Yamashita reflects on the problem of clumping such diverse cultures together, especially in relation to the collective memory of ignorance and discrimination. At the same time however, the grouping establishes a way to create alliances. Bobby's fragmented identity depends on this multiethnic cooperation. The Pacific Rim perspective is particularly relevant in these terms. California and Los Angeles have geographically been a significant location in the history of migration since most Asian immigrants landed on these shores. Los Angeles has been the meeting point for cross-cultural encounters and cultural exchanges, such as the ones described in the book. The narrative encourages the reader to imagine a map that takes into consideration these exchanges, in particular those arising from Asia and Latin America. The narrative focuses on the Pacific Rim

to direct the attention to the history and contemporary developments of Asian immigration into the United States and the way Asian identities have been shaped by the American environment and the encounter with other cultures.

In addition to the transnational considerations, the literary geography of the novel, especially in relation to this section, is affected by a strong sense of transgenerational memory. Bobby's memory of the Vietnam War and his escape in the United States recur through images that overlap with other stories of migration. An atlas of water, occupied by rafts, boats, and planes crossing the Pacific Ocean represents the geography of this section:

Bobby's only twelve. How you get from Singapore to America? It's 1975. People getting on boats, rafts, dinghies, anything, swimming south out of Vietnam. Get to Singapore, but Singapore don't want them. They tell the Americans, it's your problem. Put them in camps. Keep them there. Count them. Sort the, out. Ask questions. Americans lost the war. Gotta take care of the casualties. Call them boat people. Call them refugees. Call for humanitarian aid. Call for political asylum. Meanwhile, they're in camps, Singapore don't want them. What's America gonna do? Count them again? Sort them out. Ask them more questions. Pretty soon refugees get put on planes. Little by little. Distributed to America. (15)

Bobby takes advantage of the status of war refugee even though he is not Vietnamese to grant access into the United States. The complications emerging from war and transnational relations are not taken into consideration by the American law. The narration thus conceptualizes a pan-Asian diaspora that transcend technicalities in nomenclature, to point out how people coming from different nations are in fact united by similar experiences. The expedient that saves Booby's life, his decision to take on a Vietnamese identity, is what condemns him to a life of

lies: once in the United States he will perpetrate the idea of being Vietnamese. The pan-Asian diaspora condensed in the character of Bobby is put against the Mexican one, through the love story between the man and Rafaela and later through the arrival of Bobby's alleged cousin to Tijuana. In the attempt to rescue the young woman who arrived illegally in Mexico, he is forced to cross more borders. In a physical sense specifically, the border between the United States and Mexico.

The image that emerges from the intersectional space occupied by Bobby is almost caricatured. The character is a hard-working, self-made businessman, a stereotypical Asian immigrant. To reinforce the portrayal, the close narrator employs a voice that mimics the character's experience: "Washing dishes. Chopping vegetables. Cleaning floors. Cooking hamburgers. Painting walls"(79). The sentences are short and the rhythm of the narration is fast paced. Yamashita crafted Bobby's voice to reflect the experience of this Chinese-Singaporean in the United States. On the topic of voice, the author raised some interesting considerations that are worth reporting:

Obviously for the Asian American or the Asian-Anglo-omniphone writer, a term suggested by my friend and scholar Ryuta Imafuku, the blank page is a kind of mine field, a field of pitfalls, over which we struggle with the colonization of language and mind and the difficulty of communicating with our immigrant parents and grandparents—their difficulty in speaking correct English, our difficulty in becoming completely bilingual—and thus to pass on memory and truth. We struggle with our own sense of pride, power and authority over language, but realize that there is an absence of history and culture when language is not translated. Still, there is also an uneven presence of history and culture that has been selected for us for translation. We have to question

what to choose and what to believe, remembering that our understanding of culture is learned, not necessarily inherited. We may have good English, but work with poor memory, with filtered memory, with the dubious nature of memory and history told by succeeding generations. At the same time, the use of narrative may reveal or heal old wounds, may recuperate dignity from enforced silence. (“Traveling Voices” 9)

The idea of transgenerational memory mentioned before returns in the words of Yamashita. The narrative process is the means through which memory is elaborated and brought back to the surface. In order to do so, Yamashita creates different voices. Each voice has a different story. In his book *Strangers from a Different Shore* historian Ronald Takaki reflects on Asian American identities in relation to their long and complicated history of migration into the United States. The scholar explains how migration from Asia was regulated throughout the years, how different nations underwent different types of rules. From the Chinese immigration of the 1850s to the Southeast Asian refugees of the 1980s, the author covers how Asian immigrants established themselves in the United States. What emerges from this study is that, despite the difference in both experience and law, once in the United States these immigrants had to face similar challenges for integration and acceptance. Takaki challenges every form of racial binarism to address how immigration from the Pacific has been disregarded and silenced for decades. In the second edition of his book, published in 1998, just one year after the publication of *Tropic*, the author states that, “the history of Asian Americans offers an important lesson. In the telling and retelling of their stories, these immigrants and their descendants contribute to the creating of a larger memory of who we are as Americans”(IX).⁶¹ The recuperation of memory elaborated by

⁶¹ The second half of the 1990s was the time in which discussions on race and ethnicity, especially from a hybrid perspective, were publicly popularized. In the last twenty years the discussion developed, revealing the problems connected to the oversimplification of the

both Yamashita and Takaki is as much spatial as it is historical. The tales emerging from the forgotten history of the Pacific Rim, help us visualize the dialectic of triplicity theorized by Lefebvre and elaborated by Soja. The spatial trialectic is constituted by historicity (the history of migration), spatiality (the place occupied in the new land), and sociality (the social network of relations), dynamics that affect how space is lived, perceived, and conceived. In the novel at hand, the trialectic is synthesized in the urban space of Los Angeles. Space that does not only consider the material, physical forms of the built environment, but whose strength relies on the reaffirmation of what was erased, of the memory that although hidden, forcefully reverberates in the streets of Southern California.

Los Angeles author Sesshu Foster wrote the introduction to the last edition of *Tropic*. In his compelling reflection, he elaborates on the role of different narrative voices in the context of Los Angeles. The author thinks about the ways in which Hollywood displayed to the world an image of the city that however dynamic and constantly reinventing itself, rarely has taken into consideration the history of ethnic erasure:

Roman Polanski's 1974 noir classic, *Chinatown*, ostensibly set in 1937, makes no mention, of course, that in 1936 most of Chinatown was razed and buried under the newly built Union Station. Dodger Stadium commemorates in no way the Chicano neighborhood of Chavez Ravine, whose residents were forcibly evicted, whose properties were buried under landfill for baseball parking lots. Entire Japanese American neighborhoods emptied of residents for concentration camps during World War 2: East San Pedro Japanese American residents were given 48 hours to pack and leave—their

hybridity approach and the problems connected to the use of terms such as multicultural and multiethnic in connection to the othering process. It is important to notice however, that the contemporary dialogue on race and ethnicity would not have been possible without the works of critics such as Bhabha, Said, and Takaki.

fishing village then razed, their boats sold or burned. Entire Mexican American neighborhoods were razed and buried under famous freeways. Displacement, dispossession and dislocation continue these days under the guise of gentrification. These are stories that Hollywood can't seem to imagine, because they're actually happening. Look in vain for them in Chinatown, Blade Runner, Short Cuts, L.A. Confidential. The ostensibly intergalactic imagination of the movies doesn't begin to approach hard-bitten realities reflected in the lives of the seven characters central to *Tropic of Orange*. (Sesshu Foster)

Tropic creates a network of narratives that rewrite the recent history of Los Angeles through seven different stories, taking place in seven days of the week. The rehabilitation of memory creates a frame of reference that affects the geography of the novel. Marxist geographer David Harvey stated that "if it is true that time is always memorialized not as flow, but as memories of experienced places and spaces, then history must indeed give way to poetry, time to space, as the fundamental material of social expression"(218). The ambition of *Tropic* is condensed in this paradigm. The spatial context of the novel is displayed through subjective, fragmented images that combine memory with fantastical, poetic accounts to cure the lack of inadequate historical narratives. The combination between geospace and textual space, with Los Angeles on one side and a shifting border on the other, becomes a means through which the reader can question social exchanges as product of political situations.

4.3 Hollywood and The World Wide Web

In the prologue of the novel, the reader is told that "what follows may not be about the future, but it is perhaps about the recent past; a past that, even as you imagine it happens". *Tropic* traces the evolution of history with a critical eye to the present. For the author, the reality of Los

Angeles at the time of the narration coincides with the presence of technology and telecommunications. “We were all there; we all saw it on TV, screen, and monitor, larger than life” the prologue concludes. The memory originating from the media, however, is short-lived. An analysis of the main characters suggests that it is necessary to preserve traditional forms of narrative in order to put the lessons learnt from the recent past to good use. The protagonist that most reflect this proposition is Emi. As a TV news executive, Emi is committed to produce and sell bits of information to be aired and consumed in a matter of minutes. She feels at ease in this technological world, where the key is not quality information but standard and format. Her reality is made of “electric currents racing voltage into the open watts of millions of hungry energy-efficient appliances; telephone cables, cable TV, fiber optics, computer networks” (57). This type of dimension does not leave space for memory but looks at the future, generating new content, distinguished by movement, in constant redefinition. “This is what the future is about. A paperless existence”(23) she declares looking at her computer agenda; a paperless existence, projected to the future where memory is only a feature in a computer. Emi is a Japanese American who does not seem interested in her heritage or in her past. In her case we don’t see a recuperation of memory but an attempt at a total annihilation of it. In one of the first descriptions of the character, the narrator states that she was “so distant from the Asian female stereotype—it was questionable if she even had an identity”(19). The idea of identity in the character of Emi is more complicated than what the passage suggests, however. One of the things that the narrative seeks to point out is the impossibility to be removed from the past. In the case of this character for example, who tries to distance herself from her Japanese origins and who reputedly refuses to meet Murakami, the traffic director, history emerges unexpectedly; and toward the end of the novel, she discovers that the Japanese Sensei is actually her grandfather.

The news reporter, who appears obsessed with the commercialization and promotion of commodities and brands, is in fact disillusioned by capitalism. She transfers this sense of disillusionment and defeat to the matter of diversity, treating her own identity like a commodity buyable with a credit card. A specific example of this phenomenon occurs in the representations of food and restaurants in the novel. Emi and Gabriel's choices of restaurants reflect the Los Angeles up and coming scene that offer exotic items such as expensive imported mushrooms in Italian restaurants. Restaurants are the excuse for the couple to talk about the commercialization of foreign traditions, reflecting on who ultimately can take advantage of this multicultural society. Emi does not believe in multiculturalism. Sitting at the bar of a Japanese restaurant she openly questions the meaning of cultural diversity. "Don't you hate being multicultural?"(128) She asks the sushi chef. The discussion culminates with the involvement of a white woman sitting next to Emi and Gabriel, who overhearing the conversation, tries to defend the importance of a diverse society. Her intervention is silenced when Emi points out that she is using two chopsticks to pin her hair. Capitalism and consumerism are the logics that govern multiculturalism. In this system cultural appropriation is not condemned, "You're invisible. I'm invisible. We're all invisible. It's just tea, ginger, raw fish, and a credit card"(128) Emi declares.

Even though Emi embodies modernity she is still a character of the margins. At a first glance, she may appear like a Los Angeles parvenu, but the narration eventually suggests that her cynical attitude and provocative disposition are the result of her family history of disenfranchisement. "Live on the edge I say. Live to the max"(22) she tells Gabriel. She moves around Los Angeles riding on the news van. The constant mobility reinforces the idea that Emi is trying to reject stability. Refusing to attach herself to any roots, she moves between Westside, Hollywood South and Downtown. She drives on the freeway "doing the Joan Didion freeway

thang. You know, slouching around L.A”(58) because “it’s hard to feel exhilarated going five miles an hour”(58). Ironically, the van will end up being the place where she dies. Traffic congestion and the ultimate car accident of the novel will sign the end of Emi’s mobility.

The tension between micro ecosystems, like the news van and the restaurant, are placed against larger atlases. Colonial food maps are juxtaposed to information age maps reconfiguring local realities in a global panorama. Hollywood appears in the background of this section, reminding the reader that this is a Los Angeles story. Hollywood entered the collective imagination, meaning that even people who have never been to Los Angeles have an idea of what the place looks like based on the movies they watched. The different images of the city produced by its inhabitants and by the outside viewers create a mixture of reality and fantasy. The narrative plays with this interpretation, with this hyperreality. The implication of technology and in particular of the screen, that projects local images to an international audience, directs the attention to a multilayered, global network. “Gabriel stared at the TV screen in Mexico City. Emi stared at it in the van. They saw the simultaneous image, give or take for satellite lag and time code correction. Did their eyes therefore touch? Did this count?” (180) The narrator asks the reader.

This idea of multi-authored database complicates the notion of memory, especially in terms of paper versus digital archives. If on the one hand the narration through the character of Emi seems to suggest that the computerization of reality will obliterate memories of the past, on the other hand the creation of information banks seem to point to the opposite direction. Before dying, cuddled in Buzzworm’s hands, Emi reflects: “Hey, I read that there’s some guy digitizing L.A. Gonna put this treacherous desert outpost on-line. Maybe the big sleep is a big digital wet dream. And life is just a commercial break. Maybe Gabe can call me up in cyber, and we can do

it in my sleep”(252). The digitalization of the city will create a parallel reality where not only personal histories are collected, but where people can interact and affect their reality. Emi’s reflections shared with Buzzworm in the instants before dying definitely complicate the pervasive idea of mobility, of borders, and maps. Information, like products and capital, moves organically not only across nations but across physical and digital realms. Individuals, however, are not always subjected to the same free trade rules.

4.4 This Old Hood

The parallel between local and global comes forth in the chapters set in South Central. At the wake of the riots that took place in the South Los Angeles neighborhoods (the area changed its name in the attempt to leave behind the history of violence), Yamashita reflects on the status of enclosed communities populated by blacks and immigrants as containment of space has relevant physical and cultural significance. What emerges from the spatial descriptions of these sections is a fragmented Los Angeles, devoid of any of the privileges explored in the chapters about West Side and Hollywood. In a conversation between Emi and Buzzworm, an African American Vietnam veteran and former addict whose occupation is to aid and rescue young people from the streets, the disparity between locations emerges. The description is visual and points out how urban design is affected by social dynamics:

“Baby sister, don’t patronize me,” Buzzworm pointed. “I’ve seen the David Hockney retrospective. He don’t come to my part of town.’

“What? No light and space? No stucco and tile roofs? No shrubs, brick paths, bougainvillea? No poison oleander?”

“No,” Buzzworm growled. “And no jacaranda, climbing roses, topiary, sidewalk bistros, tanning parlors pillowed weenie-dogs, golf courses, or decaf espressos either!” (175)

The narrator explains that, “Buzzworm was born and raised near about the corner of Jefferson and Normandie”(31) located between the Harbor Freeway and the Santa Monica Freeway. As Elizabeth Mermann-Jozwiack writes “the history of the neighborhoods in South central L.A. speaks very directly of the regulation and social control of space”(9) that are based on exclusion. The neighborhoods the only area in which “African Americans could buy property before 1948”(10). From the 1950s on, this region as been the theater of racial tension and violence that led to the formation of gangs. Black, Latino, and White gangs begun local wars to claim the territory.

Buzzworm is aware of this precarious balance that defines territory and borders. In a conversation with a young gang member the social worker remarks: “think you’re cool and whatcha doing? Out with the crews marking your territory like some dog. Some dog comes piss on your wall, you gonna shoot him”(26). In another reflection pertaining to local street vendors, selling fruit and snacks in South Central the narrator observes: “They had their unspoken territory, too. He never saw them in fight about it. They were very civilized about their territory. Plenty of corners to go around. Plenty of freeway ramps”(84). Street maps, edges, and delimitations are crucial for Buzzworm. His intent is making marginality as a site of resistance. The concept of marginality as a site of resistance is explored by bell hooks in her *Feminist Theory: From the Margin to Center* (1990) and later elaborated by Edward Soja in *Thirdspace*. The idea is to look at marginality not as a place of degradation but of social exchange and possibility. In the perspective of reclaiming the territory for the community, interesting considerations in regards to the geography of area arise. As noted above, the vegetation of South Central is dramatically different from other neighborhoods in L.A. Buzzworm grows up without the notion of what a tree is, his floral knowledge pertains exclusively to palm trees, the only

plants growing in his neighborhood. The man develops an obsession over these plants, drawing and cataloguing each variety. The explanation behind his fixation is not only spatially relevant but also symbolic in social terms. In a moment of close, internal analysis of the character through the narrator, Buzzworm comes to the conclusion that these plants,

were fed by something else, something only the trees of his hood could offer. It was a great fertilizer—the dankest but richest of waters. It produced the tallest trees in the city, looking out over everything, symbols of the landscape, a beauty that could only be appreciated from afar. (33)

This type of reasoning spurs from the realization that riding on the freeway one could easily bypass South Central. Buzzworm notices that you can live in Los Angeles never coming in contact with the realities of these neighborhoods. The palm trees, however, are visible from the freeway, a token that these areas exist. They indeed exist and are affected by the outside world. In the case of Margarita, for example, a local fruit vendor poisoned after eating an orange filled with cocaine, the influence of border trades is dramatically telling. The woman, like the rest of the inhabitants of the area, is subjected to political, economic, and jurisdictional rules, without having the power to actually get across the boundaries of her neighborhood and make her voice heard. When Margarita is transported to the hospital, she is pronounced dead by overdose. Buzzworm laments the lack of investigation by the authorities, knowing she was not a drug addict. Not defeated by the circumstances, he uses the story to proceed with his social work. His dedication to his neighborhood is informed by a peculiar sense of spatial awareness.

A definitely bizarre character, “Big black seven-foot dude, Vietnam vet, an Afro shirt with palm trees painted all over it, dreds, pager and Walkman belted to his waist, sound plugged into one ear and two or three watches at least on both his wrists”(27) Buzzworm is in fact one of the most

grounded characters in the novel. He keeps repeating that there is “Time for everything,”(29) displaying a concern with the way time is represented, idea reinforced by his collection of watches and constant obsession with radio transmission. His radio and the watches he wears are the instruments that keep him connected with the rest of the country. His spatiotemporal preoccupation defines his understanding of reality: “Buzzworm figured that some representations of reality were presented for your visual and aural gratification so as to tap what you *thought* you understood. It was a starting place but not an ending”(25). Almost like a psychic figure, Buzzworm knows that not everything that exists is visible. This is the reason why he is not satisfied with cartographical representations:

Buzzworm studied the map. Balboa'd torn it out of a book for him to study. *Quartz City* or some such title. He followed the thick lines on the map showing the territorial standing of Crips versus Bloods. Old map. 1972. He shook his head. Even if it were true. Even if it were true, whose territory was it anyway? Might as well show which police departments covered which beats; which local, state and federal politicians claimed which constituents; which kind of colored people (brown, black, yellow) lived where, which churches/temples served which people; which schools got which kids; which taxpayers were registered to vote; which houses were owned or rented; which businesses were self-employed; which corner liquor stores served which people... And where in Compton did George Bush used to live anyway? If someone could put down all the layers of the real map, maybe he could get the real picture. (80-81)

Buzzworm laments the omissions of the South Central map published in *City of Quartz*, so he engages in a remapping project. Geographer John Brian Harley famously declared that “what we read on a map is as much related to an invisible social world and to its ideology as it is to

phenomena seen and measured in the landscape”(35-6). Through the character of Buzzworm, Yamashita develops Harvey’s predicament. According to Buzzworm, the map used by Mike Davis in *City of Quartz* is unrealistic because it is not able to represent the multilayered system of relations between the people inhabiting South Central. The map is supposed to represent the division between gang members, Crips and Blood, and their redistribution of the territory. The definite, clear-cut division between blocks provided in the representation reflects a stability that for Buzzworm is not representative of the reality of South Central. The map, the man implies, was clearly designed for people who do not have an understanding of the complex network that characterizes the life of people in the area. In addition to these considerations, Buzzworm seems skeptical of maps as they do not take into account gentrification: “Buzzworm remembered conversations that he had with people saying they used to live here or there. Now here or there is a shopping mall, locate the old house somewhere between Mrs. Field’s and the Footlocker”(81–2). He calls his plan to fight land dispossession a “do-it-yourself gentrification”(83):

Latinos had this word, *gente*. Something translated like *us*. Like *folks*. That sort of gentrification. Restore the neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people. Trim and water the palm trees. Some laughed at Buzzworm’s plan. Called his plan *This Old Hood*. They could laugh, but he was still trying to go to haven. (83)

Buzzworm’s attachment to the local territory reflects very profound concerns. The implications of gentrification and its cartographical reference have the strongest repercussions on local communities and social groups: “Somebody else must have the big map. Or maybe just the next map. The one with the new layers you can’t even imagine. Where was his house on this map? Between Mrs. Field’s and the Footlocker?”(82). In order to implement the freeway, his space is altered, houses moved, and shops forced to close down. Gentrification is a new form of

colonialism that overlaps with older maps of the territory. As Mermann-Jozwiak argues, the title “This Old Hood” implicitly points at the history of the quarter, not only the black and immigrant history, but also the history of colonialism and displacement of indigenous people that firstly inhabited the land (11). This idea is connected to the representation of Global South in the novel and at the common history of ethnic displacement. The first section set in Gabriel Mexican rancho raises similar considerations. Despite the adverse situation, Buzzworm keeps a positive outlook. He is one of the prophetic characters in the narrative that suggests how individuals and community can come together despite the social crisis, teaching people how to regain their space.

4.5 The Freeway Canyon

On top of the Freeway Canyon, directing traffic like a music composer, we find Manzanar Murakami. His story is one of trauma and loss. After suffering from amnesia in the mid 1980s, the man decides to rename himself “Manzanar”, the name of the camp in which he was interned during World War II. Yamashita painted a character whose connection with history and spatiality is strong and subtle at the same time. Strong because Murakami’s perspective reflects the experience of Japanese Americans in the second half of the twentieth century, subtle because the author does not provide any direct account of the life of the Sensei, his presence is purely performative but as such highly significant. The reason why the author decided to omit details about the man’s life and instead display them through his actions is related to memories of internment and the sense of invisibility of Japanese people in the United States. Murakami, once a prestigious surgeon, is represented as a homeless man, forgotten and ignored by society. Constructing a character who has no recollection of his past, but whose action symbolize his history of trauma, Yamashita reflects on the overlooked experience of many Japanese Americans, who at the end of World War II had to reestablish themselves, to start a new life in

the environment that excluded and imprisoned them while coping with the baggage of internment trauma. However, as Japanese studies professor Gayle K. Sato argues, there is a compelling attachment to the environment in the character of Murakami, a desire “to feel at home in America”(128), to feel at home in that California that dispossessed Japanese Americans and tried to erase their connection to the land. Another crucial observation that Sato points out is the novel’s implicit reference to the 1942 government instruction to the Japanese living in the West Coast “to pack only what they could carry”(129). The scholar argues that the predicament gave rise to a process of counter-memory, in which people of Japanese ancestry, in order to hold on to both family history and artifacts, created a multi-genre archive of internment memory in the decades following World War II (129). In the case of Murakami, however, memory is implied and not explicitly narrated. Every morning, directed to the freeway overpass, the man carries only what he can fit in his pockets. This lack of materiality is directly related to the history of dispossession and invisibility that the Japanese community had to face during and after World War II.

To come to terms with memory and trauma, Murakami establishes a bond with the traffic in the freeway, a relationship based on his musical sensibility. Every morning, the man walks over the freeway overpass and with his silver baton starts directing traffic. The music is inaudible like the man is invisible; yet, his artistic performance is a powerful tool in the narration. Yamashita recurs to artistic devices to describe transformations and occurrences that, even though part of the human experience, are not physically reproducible or easily understood. I am referring to Murakami’s geo-social sensibility in particular, that emerges in his process of cognitive mapping:

There are maps and there are maps and there are maps. The uncanny thing was that he could see all of them at once, filter some, pick them out like transparent windows and place them even delicately and consecutively in a complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic. Although one might have thought this capacity to see was different from a musical one, it was really one and the same. (56)

Murakami's maps are historical, social, and geological at the same time. "For what were these mapping layers? For Manzanar they began with the very geology of the land, the artesian rivers running beneath the surface, connected and divergent, shifting and swelling"(56). Murakami is able to see the ecological evolution of the land, from the time in which no human inhabited the environment. Murakami's geological map intersects with an historical one, where indigenous presence overlaps with later colonization. These simultaneous representations overlap with the traffic in the freeway, real estate interests, and racial segregation. The complex layers of mapping that Murakami is able to see compress time and space. In this perspective, time is not linear but a juxtaposition of different segments that come to life when the director stands on top of the freeway canyon:

On the surface, the complexity of layers would drown an ordinary person, but ordinary persons never bother to notice, never bother to notice the prehistoric grid of plant and fauna and human behavior, nor the historic grid of plant and fauna and human behavior, nor the historic grid of land usage and property, the great overlays of transport...variations both dynamic and stagnant, patterns and connections by every conceivable definition from the distribution of wealth to race, from patterns of climate to the curious blueprint of the skies. (57)

Manzanar's layout exists the city of Los Angeles and defies the existence of borders. His maps include South American cities, Canadian ones. His vision crosses the Pacific and arrives in Asia. "Manzanar looked out on this strange end and beginning: the very last point West, and after that it was all East"(170). Manzanar can see the Earth in fragments, he can perceive the shape of it. For the former surgeon, everything happens at once, reality is dynamic and static at once. The contradiction generated by the co-existence of different maps suggests that understanding reality as unique and singular is impossible. Thinking about the social relations presented in the narrative, the fragmentation of reality becomes particularly relevant. The scope of the narrative is precisely that of exposing how personal relations to the territory are affected by power dynamics, political predicaments, and economic reasoning. People live different realities according to their positionalities. Their process of cognitive mapping does not only depend on their personal inclinations but on the political structuring of space. As suggested in Murakami's vision, this perspective goes beyond the idea of coming together as body-politic. A comprehensive spatial awareness takes into account all the identifications and intersections between geography, social position (including race and gender), and history. Once again, this trialectic logic overlaps with Lefebvre and Soja's definition of thirdspace.

4.6 Skirting Downtown

The international and cosmogonist perspective manifests itself in Los Angeles, the global city. Here first world and third world converge. The novel depicts a city that praises itself for its multiculturalism, while at the same time racial disparities make people invisible.

Multiculturalism is encouraged when it can be capitalized, but the people generating the culture are often seen as problematic and as such they are confined too the margins. This kind of view has tangible spatial repercussion in the territory: in the book the urban environment is divided

into different zones, connected or excluded from the freeway system depending on race and social status. Yamashita uses the road system, what Banham defined as the Angelino's first ecology, to elaborate on social disparities, migrations, and borders. The freeway, symbol of mobility and freedom, a connection to both South (Mexico) and North (the rest of the United States) is depicted as the location of traffic jams and accidents. In the case of the homeless freeway block in particular, in which the Los Angeles homeless population moves into cars abandoned by drivers in the freeway trying to escape a Canyon fire, illustrates both the passage from invisibility to visibility and the contradictions emerging in the coexistence of first and third worlds. Taking possession of Volvos, Mercedes, Porches, Corvettes, Jaguars, and Broncos (121, 122) the homeless are finally making their presence known. This repossession is turned into a spectacle, watched by the same cars' owners on television:

As the homeless flocked onto the freeway, there were also the usual questions of shelters and jobs, drug rehabilitation, and the closing of mental health facilities. And as car owners watched on TV sets or from the edges of the freeway canyon, there were the usual questions of police protection, insurance coverage, and acts of God. The average citizen viewed these events and felt overwhelmed with the problems, felt sympathy, or anger and impotence. (122)

The irony of this passage, that the owners want their cars back but at the same time they feel for the homeless, is in line with Yamashita's complex vision of first world and third world's problematic reciprocity. Yamashita exposes a number of contradictions with no possible solution. It is impossible in the narrative to come to a situation in which both first and third world, in this particular case homeless and car owners, establish any kind of equilibrium. In a end of the century Los Angeles, where climate change, over-population, racial injustice

culminating in street riots are threatening the life in the city and reshaping social interactions, Yamashita gives voice to seven Angelinos whose stories illustrate the challenges of living at the margins. The traffic jam, symbolizing the unsustainability of the problems at hand, the narrative climax in which all the stories come together, has in fact an unpredictable implication:

Amazing thing was everybody in L.A. was walking. They just had no choice. There wasn't a transportation artery that a vehicle could pass through. It was a big-time thrombosis. Massive stroke. Heart attack. You name it. The whole system was coagulating right then and there. Some of the boulevards had turned into one-way alleys. Cars so squeezed together, people had to climb out the sun roofs to escape. Streets'd become unrecognizable from an automotive standpoint. Only way to navigate was to feel the streets with your own two feet. (218-19)

Even though the narration does not provide any solution from the chaos, it hints at possible coping strategies, social aggregations, and alliances that as Rachel Adams says, give rise to “utopian hopes for the future”(268).

The figure that exposes the disparities of Los Angeles is Gabriel Balboa. Character conceived as a detective à la Philip Marlowe, he is the only first person narrator in the novel. The Chicano journalist is the more apparent connection between the characters, he is Emi's boyfriend and Rafaela's landlord, and he also works with Buzzworm to uncover the lives of the homeless in Los Angeles. While gathering material for this project he meets Manzanar Murakami, an encounter that establishes another connection between the different stories. Not only is Gabriel the link between people but he is also the subject who puts different places in relation to each other. When in Los Angeles, he drives his car, moving from one place to the other. The title of this section, “Skirting Downtown” refers precisely to his driving. The implication in the verb

“Skirting” is that Gabriel can move freely and decide what areas to avoid, unlike other characters in the novel who are confined to their neighborhoods without the possibility of getting out. Gabriel seems to be in between different worlds. As a Chicano, he occupies a position of marginality, yet, as explained he is the most mobile of the characters. He is the only one who is able to fly. Through his eyes, Los Angeles embodies the full definition of Global City. The recurrence of the image of the airport is an example of the global network, of a city connected to the rest of the world. While Rafaela’s journey back north is a long bus ride, Gabriel gets to live in a reality where in a few hours you can be in a different nation: “KAL from Seoul ARRIVED. VARING from Rio ARRIVED. QUANTAS from Sidney DELAYED. JAL from Tokyo LANDING. MEXICANA from Mexico City LANDED” (86). The airport board, summarizing the international mobility Gabriel is exposed to, points out how the perception of time and space is determined by the subject’s position. Works of global literature such as *Tropic* reinforce the idea that in a connected, global world, time-space compression affects people in different ways. Social disparities are at the base of spatial subjectivity, shaping the way individuals perceive time in relation to their surrounding environment.

4.7 On the Tropic

In addition to space-time compression and subjectivity, the narrative introduces elements of time-space fluidity through the use of magic realism. Once the orange growing in Gabriel’s property is picked and carried around by Arcangel, the prophetic, mystical figure of the novel, the line begins to move and with it the border between Mexico and the United States. Los Angeles is reconnected to Central America when the orange shifts the border north. The elements of magic realism used to describe the movement of the orange and the consequent accident that the passage of the fruit will cause, is a strategy employed by the author to contrast

and critique the policies of neoliberalism implemented with the introduction of NAFTA. The spatial disorientation put into effect by the magic orange creates two contrasting scenarios. The chaos and the explosion of a truck transporting petroleum in what looks like a “giant Molotov Cocktail” (112) depict an apocalyptic reality where everything seems to succumb under the weight of a free-trade traffic implosion. At the same time however, faith is restored through the actions and will of the characters, from the homeless attempt to peacefully recreate an ecosystem on the freeway, to the desire of characters such as Buzzworm and Arcangel to sow hope in the future in the rubble of a dystopian Los Angeles.

From Mexico Arcangel is directed to Los Angeles to fight his enemy SUPERNAFTA. Once in the city, Arcangel will change into his alter ego, *El Gran Mojado* (The Great Wetback), a mix between a Mexican fighter and a political comic book character. The character’s performativity combined with his political ambitions has led a few critics to suggest that the character was modeled after Guillermo Gomez Peña⁶². Described as a very old man, capable of lifting a truck with his own hands, Arcangel has different associations. His name refers to a biblical angel, and he self-proclaims himself a messenger (like the archangel Gabriel). At the same time he is an ageless, post-Columbian figure who witnessed the evolution of colonialism in Central and South America. His function in the narrative is to represent both historical memory and the perspective of time. The message he is carrying across from one country to the other is one of resistance. Looking at the history of the Global South, Arcangel exposes the idea that national borders are a human construct. In the conversation reported below in which the man is interrogated by Customs Officers, his perspective and background emerge clearly:

“What is your name?”

⁶² See Vint and Palmer.

“Cristobal Colón.”

“How old are you?”

“Quinientos y alguno años.”

“When were you born?”

“Doce de octubre de mil quatrocientos noventa y dos.”

“Where were you born?”

“En el nuevo mundo.”

“That would make you—“

“Post-Columbian.”

“You don’t look Post-Columbian. What is your business here?”

“I suppose you would call me a messenger.”

“And what is your message?”

“No news is good news?” (199)

As Francisco Delgado suggests, the geographical crossing in *Tropic* overlaps with a chronological crossing, or “the attempt of retrieving the past”(152). In the case of Arcangel for example, the chronological crossing manifests itself in the character’s awareness of how borders as political constructs:

Have you forgotten 1848 and the

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo?

With a stroke of the pen,

México gave California to the gringos. (133)

Arcangel is the voice of geographical memory. He remembers the arrival of European settlers, land acquisition and border divisions. He witnessed the ongoing exploitation of Central and

South American natural resources and labor. He is aware of the fact that while under NAFTA products can travel across borders, people, especially those who come from Third World Countries, are not subjected to the same rules. The economic and cultural monopoly emerges sarcastically when, while in Mexico, Arcangel stops at the “Cantina de Miseria y Hambre” to have something to eat, hoping to find something local and realizes everyone is drinking Bud Light, eating “hamburger, Fritos, and catsup”(131). The local culture is inevitably and unquestionably replaced by a cheap, American alternative.

The Third World exploitation is not only confined to Mexico but can be traced in Los Angeles as well. In her interpretation of the novel, Melissa Sexton reminds us “of the ways in which the economy of Los Angeles is built through the violent exploitation of people and natural resources.” According to the scholar, “to truly capture all the layers of the city’s map means seeing and acknowledging these elements of its history, too”(27). With Arcangel’s poetic intermissions, in which he remembers “*the halls of Moctezuma and all 40,000 Aztec slain*” with “*their bodies floating in the canals*” and the arrival of “*smallpox, TB, meningitis, E coli, influenza, and 25 million dead Indians*” history is brought to the surface (*Tropic 200*). The border becomes a temporal passage through which not only people, money, and products are plainly exchanged but where historical knowledge becomes tangible, represented by this flux of socio-material elements that are directly related to the history of the territory. The orange Arcangel carries with him destabilizes the order at the frontier. In a moment of magic realism, goods and money start floating across the border with “hundreds of thousands of the unemployed,” in what Arcangel defines as “the blessings of monetary devaluation that thankfully wiped out those nasty international trade deficits”(200). When the economic trade is brought to the surface, material and ecological networks are also exposed. In this moment of utter

confusion, the narrative calls for the repossession of the land and the redistribution of its natural resources.

Arcangel, for example, takes advantage of the commotion to enter the country and proceed in his mission of fighting SUPERNAFTA. The messenger will eventually die in the battle in a unpredicted turnout:

As NAFTA thrashed about the ring, Mojado's great wings flapped back and forth and back and forth, fanning a great storm, fanning the flames to cold smoke and stoking NAFTA to a live nuke. Everyone gasped as the great SUPERNAFTA imploded. . . his finger a missile launcher that set its tiny patriot into Arcangel's human heart. (262)

With the death of both fighters the narrative plays with alternative utopias and dystopias possibilities. The wrestling match concludes with a tabula rasa that could bring change in the environment. The erasure of both characters might be the occurrence needed to start anew and destabilize the status quo, although just hints of this new phase are suggested in the text. The complete obliteration of both parties could also signify the decline of a system that is not sustainable by neither people nor the environment, a situation that would translate into an irrevocable defeat for everybody. The narration voluntarily leaves these two open possibilities to both indicate the failures of the Global era, whose system is built on the exploitation of the people at the margins and environmental resources, and the possibilities of a connected world, where in places like Los Angeles, people are spatially prone to establish unusual but promising coalitions.

4.8 Conclusion

Moving back to Los Angeles after almost ten years in Brazil and some time in Tokyo, Yamashita encountered a different city compared to what she left in the 1970s. The new

metropolis appeared even more connected to South America than what she remembered. The new wave of immigrants coming from different parts of Central and South America and the cultures they brought with them redefined the city and its spaces.⁶³ The re-shaped city called for new stories to be told, different stories, from multiple perspectives. These new perspectives intersected with the history of migration familiar to Yamashita. The author, born in 1951, is part of the first generation of Japanese-Californians who grew up in the United States after the tragedy of internment camps. The ambition behind the novel at hand is to piece together fragments of the city that combine lost memories with the city new multicultural panorama and global anxieties to capture the essence of a turn of the century Los Angeles. *Tropic's* multi-genre composition reflects the idea that to have a polivocality, an adequate narrative is necessary. The author thus combines classic LA fiction modes such as noir and hard-boiled narratives with a sensibility that recognizes alternative ways to write about the city. *Tropic* incorporates elements of magic realism and meta-narrative allusions related to city interpretations. Some of these elements reflect her time abroad. There are, for example, clear references to works of South American writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges, especially in the conceptualization of lived and literary space. The human experience in the novel and its relation with both the built and the natural environment is a mix of real and imagined spaces. The coexistence of these two realities is not only conveyed through the imagination of the characters but also through a narrative that encompasses different genres and styles.

The cacophony of styles is mirrored by a variety of different narrators. The multi-layered collection of voices offers the chance to see how space is manipulated, interpreted, and lived

⁶³ See Yamashita's lecture at the UCLA symposium "Design Knowledge: Making Urban Humanities." The author's intervention was part of a section called "Working Model 3: Speculative Literature" organized by Ursula K. Heise.

differently according to different perspectives. At times, as the author have suggested, the characters appear as ethnic caricatures that play with the perception of the reader⁶⁴. The result, though, is not a shallow reinforcement of stereotypes but a way to produce an inclusive narrative that gives voice to the underrepresented people of Los Angeles and their complicated relationship with the concept of home. The narrative advances different possibilities for border crossing. Physical crossing mixes with cultural, technological, spiritual networks, all immersed in the context of 1990s Los Angeles. According to Rachel Adams,

To become a citizen of this North America does not mean echoing the economic agendas of Nafta or endorsing the scary prospect of a “fortress continent” envisioned by some national security experts. It does not require a loyalty oath or proof of residence. Instead, it means developing multiple linguistic and cultural literacies; a deep knowledge of history; and a commitment to looking across, if not necessarily eroding, national borders. (*Continental Divides* 27-28)

Yamashita’s work is essentially this: the research of different modes of literary interpretation to represent new American identities. In her elaboration, space is defined by history and not vice versa. This assumption means that environmental representations are at the forefront, and history is the element that gives sense to these spatial interpretations. The hyper-context reference included at the beginning of the novel is a reflection of this *forma mentis*: a spatial configuration, similar to a map, that uses time (the seven days of the week) to organize the actions of the narrative. Looking at it from a geocritical perspective, it is impossible not to notice the similarity of this graph to the projects done by Franco Moretti, especially in reference to his book *Maps, Graphs, Trees* in which “the reality of the text undergoes a process of

⁶⁴ Ibid.

deliberate reduction and abstraction”(1). A close cousin to what Moretti calls “distant reading” the chart in *Tropic* emphasizes how to classify the themes of the narration, offering at a first glance, a navigation map to the novel. The graph is horizontal and vertical, another visual intersection between space and time. The conceptualization of this graph has a direct correlation with the computerization of knowledge and information. The narrative seems to adjust to the introduction of digital collections and databases creating a content chart, a sort of excel content catalogue. This approach to the text is developed throughout the narration with other references to digitalization. From the digitalization of knowledge to one of the city, the book touches upon advances ways to generate new map content. *Tropic* adds to the concept of cognitive mapping, or the way each character isolates determinate elements in the territory to draw a map that reflect their particular perspective, Internet atlases, and as in the case of Murakami, geological maps, and historical ones as well. The juxtaposition of these different maps encourages the reader to rethink the way space is conceived, drawing attention to matters such as ecological justice, land repossession and redistribution, with an undivided attention to the multicultural dimension in a global financial system.

**5 CHAPTER FOUR: TOPOGRAPHY OF A PRIVATE DYSTOPIA: CROSSING
BORDERS IN OCTAVIA BUTLER'S *PARABLE OF THE SOWER***

Parable of the Sower works as a suitable continuation of the chaos represented in the last pages of *Tropic*. Even though the 2024 dystopia was published in 1993, four years before *Tropic*, in some ways Yamashita envisioned her novel as a prequel to *Parable*, a connection that the author establishes in the preface and in the epigraph of the book. The narrator explains that the events described in the following pages happened in an undefined past. In light of this clarification, Butler's novel can be interpreted as a continuation in the future. Yamashita had Butler's work in mind when she envisioned the development of the Los Angeles freeway. In fact, the meta-text reports a quotation of *Parable* pertaining to the function of the freeways in California that seems to address some concerns about the future in relation to the road system:

It's against the law in California to walk on the freeways, but the law is archaic.

Everyone who walks walks on the freeway sooner or later. Freeways provide the most direct routes between cities and parts of cities... Some prostitutes and peddlers of food, water, and other necessities live along the freeways in sheds or shacks or in open air.

Beggars, thieves, and murderers live here, too.

The freeway crowd is a heterogeneous mass—black and white, Asian and Latin, whole families are on the move with babies on backs or perched atop loads in carts, wagons, or bicycle baskets, sometimes along with an old or handicapped person... Many were armed with sheathed knives, rifles, and of course, visible holstered handguns. The occasional passing cop paid no attention.

...People get killed on freeways all the time. (IX)

Yamashita's use of this quote echoes in the saturation of the freeway system she describes in her narrative. The road is central in the text. The freeway in particular offers a connection to the outside of Los Angeles but at the same time is the location of accidents, traffic jams, and abandoned cars taken over by the homeless population. In Butler's narrative the roads are almost only populated by pedestrians; people cannot afford to own cars or buy gas anymore. Yamashita creates different maps to reflect the different perspectives of the characters, while for Butler maps are almost irrelevant because they are conceived for drivers, but in her dystopia people don't drive anymore and the roads are now subjected to different rules; however, the protagonist finds a way to repurpose old atlases, converting them into pedestrian references. Los Angeles is now "a carcass covered with too many maggots"(9) and in order to protect themselves, people have to live in enclosed communities, fenced in by walls that offer shelter from the brutality of thieves, murderers, and pyromaniacs. The novel gravitates around Los Angeles but the narrator-protagonist avoids the city at all costs, reminding her friend that "In L.A. some walled communities bigger and stronger than this one just aren't there any more. Nothing left but ruins, rats, and squatters"(55). The place is also mentioned in relation to Lauren's brother, who after stealing and escaping his home community ventures out toward the dying metropolis but gets killed on the way. In a future where cities are no longer occupied by residents but are filled with squatters and delinquents, spatial organization is centered around the creation of different settlement-communities. The narrative, however, suggests that enclosed communities offer only a temporary sense of security. In this chapter I argue that the paradigm used by the protagonist to overcome hardship and instability is by crossing borders and by constantly redefining structural space. The narration presents a number of structurally stable communities that during the course of the narration will be deconstructed and reinvented by the protagonist and her group of friends.

Underlined by a tension between inside and outside, the narrative challenges boundaries between both physical and metaphorical realms seeking ways to cope with social injustice and ecological disaster.

The protagonist carries greater authority for generating new social spaces and for remapping existing locations in the novel; yet, it is through sharing and reciprocity that the community can function.⁶⁵ The concept is summarized by Lauren's hyperempathy, a condition she inherited from her biological mother as a consequence of her dependence on the drug Parateco. Her affliction consists in experiencing the pain of those who surround her as well as their pleasurable sensations. As Patricia Melzer suggests:

[Hyperempathy] represents the painful and pleasurable process of crossing differences and of actually experiencing the other's world beyond a mere willingness to understand it. Sharing blurs and shifts boundaries and discloses a stable, autonomous identity to be a myth-sharing becomes a symbol against the binary construction of self and other and thus constitutes a crucial metaphor for re-defining social relations. (45)

The anti-binary logic responds to the need of creating a new system that can oppose the governmental failures and the environmental adversities socially and structurally.

The major form of spatial binary presented in the novel is the opposition between inside and outside. Enclosed communities are what hold people inside and distinguish the middle

⁶⁵ There is a didactic purpose behind the protagonist's self-proclaimed authority. As it appears in a number of Butler's interviews (see the one with Joshunda Sanders and CH Rowell), for the author writing is an educational tool. The heroines of Butler's novels have more power than the rest of the characters because they are enlightened by education. These figures often overlap with the author herself; as she states in a New York Times interview: "I wrote myself in, since I'm me and I'm here and I'm writing. I can write my own stories and I can write myself in" (Visions: Identity; "We Tend to Do the Right Thing When We Get Scared").

classes from the hordes of poor and beggars that live in the streets. As Mike Davis explains in *City of Quartz*, the privatization of space created by gated communities gives way to an “architectural policing of social boundaries”(223), what he defines as “a master narrative in the emerging built environment of the 1990s”(223). He connects the existence of walled communities with a restriction of space and movement, that instead of protecting, amplifies public concerns about safety and insinuate violence and conjures “imaginary dangers”(226). The creation of these private areas is, according to Davis, related to “The Second Civil War” that started in the 1960s and was “institutionalized into the very structure of urban space”(224). The system promotes a militarized surveillance that enforces divisions between social groups. Davis also suggests that “architectural critics are usually oblivious to how the built environment contributes to segregation, pariah groups—whether poor Latino families, young black men, or elderly homeless white females—read the meaning immediately” (226). Butler’s vision of enclosed communities and privatized space matches the one presented by the urban theorist. In her novel, she reflects on different types of walled communities, underlining how the promised protection of private areas not only is not completely attainable, but it also promotes segregation.

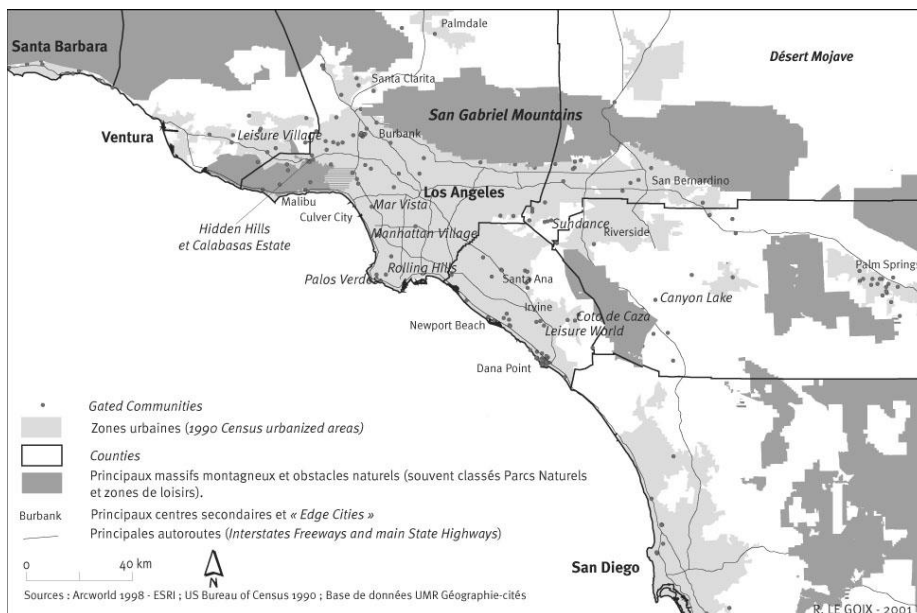


Figure 7 Gated Communities in Southern California

The map that I selected for this chapter, released by the US Bureau of Census in 1990, was published in Renaud Le Goix in the article “Les gated communities à Los Angeles, place et enjeux d’un produit immobilier pas tout à fait comme les autres.” It represents the concentration of gated communities in Southern California. By the time Butler was writing *Parable* the number of gated community in the Los Angeles area amounted to circa 100. In addition to the localization of private communities, the map reports urbanized areas, counties, main natural obstacles, edge cities, and freeways. The map provides a visual reference of the territory taken into consideration by Butler. All the elements reported are crucial in the protagonist’s attempt to cross physical borders in the different stages of the narrative. To these obstacles and circumscriptions, Butler adds other types of borders to cross pertaining to gender, sexuality, and race. The metaphorical borders are no less important than the physical ones in the representation of the territory. As McKittrick explains in her book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women And the Cartographies of Struggle*, “racism and sexism produce attendant geographies that are bound up

in human disempowerment and dispossession”(McKittrick 3). The conceptualization of geographic spaces and the consequent adaptation of urban areas have led to ghettoization of non-white communities and in some cases attempted at the concealment of these spaces. A similar reflection that emerged in the previous chapter in Buzzworm’s description of his neighborhood of South Central, purposefully removed from the freeway and concealed from the public eye. According to McKittick, black subjects and their communities have not gained any relevant form of recognition in academic geography. In narratives such as *Parable*, the black female perspective affects the interpretation and the production of space. The novel is important for two different reasons: because it represents black, woman, and queer spaces, and because it is a black woman who is involved in the production of mapping, the leading of exploration and conquest, which are traditionally patriarchal and imperialist endeavors.

The aim of *Mapping Los Angeles* is to provide an overview of the changes that took place in Los Angeles literature over the course of the twentieth century. In the previous chapters I indicated how the narrative spatial understanding of the city mirrors the shift between modernism, postmodernism, global literature, and literary globalism. The transitions are stressed by the characters’ mobility, use of transportation, and the description of roads and the freeway. If *Tropic* signed the beginning of literary globalism, *Parable* poses some questions of classification. The novel at hand could not be categorized as a global narrative as it solely focuses on California. Throughout the narrative, the only foreign nation that is mentioned is Canada, place that migrants from the south try to reach by foot because of its known job possibilities and welfare. The world is not represented as a connected entity; the people described in the narrative are almost completely cut off from any source of information. Lauren’s father has a desk computer that the protagonist rarely uses and radios are precious tools most

people cannot afford. There are a few references to advanced technology that will be recuperated and expanded in *Parable of the Talents*, the sequel to *Parable of the Sower*. In the narrative studied in this chapter, the most peculiar account of technological devices comes from Lauren's brother Keith, who gets to experience virtual reality inside an abandoned building in the outskirts of Los Angeles:

“TV windows you go through instead of just sitting and looking at. Headsets, belts, and touchrings... you see and feel everything, do anything. Anything! There's places and things you can get into with that equipment that are insane! You don't ever have to go into the street except to get food” (105).

The spatial experience generated by these machines is revolutionary. In a nation afflicted by famine and disaster, individuals take solace by immersing themselves in a parallel reality of their creation. Technology is in the hands of a few wealthy people, or people like Keith's friends, who get it through stealing. In *Parable*, however, Butler does not seem too interested in elaborating on the progress of technology; rather, she focuses on concrete resources such as food and books, primary needs that seem scarce in her communities.

Butler's intention to depict the aftermaths of an unsustainable system, which are affecting both the economy and the environment, is delineated through glimpses of an unrecoverable past and descriptions of the communities' status quo. This is why, more than marking the beginning of globalism, this novel marks the end of capitalism. Lauren's stepmother waxes nostalgic about the nightlights of Los Angeles. In 2024 California, people are forced to use only natural light to save energy and resources and in order to eat they have to grow their own food. These types of considerations led critics such as Mathias Nilges to define Butler's novel as a post-Fordist work.

For the scholar, the idea of change that is enforced by the narrator as the key of survival is a reflection of the collapse of the capitalistic model:

Change no longer functions as the ideal that promises liberation from repressive traditional structures. Instead, change has become the very logic of the post-Fordist present, the period in which the liberatory demands of postmodern culture and theory have been fulfilled, yet with a different outcome than previously imagined. (1336)

While critics such as David Harvey and Robert T. Tally interpret the overcoming of the Fordist model as a stage of late capitalism which is related to both globalization and postmodernism, in his interpretation of *Parable*, Nilges opposes the idea of the novel as a postmodern work. His post-Fordist elaboration spurs from the coexistence of capital and its social dimension, which understands history as “a heterogeneous process of perpetual change with only moments of relative stability that correspond to moments of structural dominance” (1333). His interpretation is cultural, focused on intellectual production. If we apply this interpretation to the spatial logic of the novel some interesting revelations arise.

In Butler’s dystopia, the economic crash and environmental degradation affect the characters’ production of cognitive mapping. They interpret the surrounding environment not according to any type of federal civic agreement and they don’t abide to traditional road rules, they establish their own based on survival and necessity. Moreover, Lauren’s engagement in crossing boundaries is developed differently according to the community she occupies. As Melanie A. Marotta observes, there are three main communities in *Parable*: her family’s gated community in Robledo, the community she forms on the road on her way north, and lastly, the community of Acorn that she establishes in her fiancé’s land in Northern California. At the same time, critic Madhu Dubey argues: “The novel forcefully rejects localist and organic notions of

community, reaching instead for more complex ways of representing communities that are not coextensive with places or with discrete cultural traditions”(105). The narrative repeatedly insists on the ambivalence between non-locality, focusing on the theological and the social experience, and concrete spaces that the community can occupy. In the following pages, I will analyze how the protagonist establishes and engages with the different spaces in these realms, what types of borders are described as challenges for the inhabitants and how Lauren comes to terms with these obstacles. The paradigm explained in the notes of her diary titled “Earthseed,” consists in adaptability and change. Lauren founds her religion on the principle of change. Through constant transformation and crossing of borders she is able to survive and create a space for her community. As McKittick writes: “If space and place *appear* to be safely secure and unwavering, then what the space and place make possible, outside and beyond tangible stabilities, and from the perspective of struggle, can potentially fade away” (xi). The scholar insists on the active production of geography, as Lefebvre insists on the production of space. This consideration is particularly important in both historical and social terms. First of all, because taking geography for granted can lead to historical fallacies and normalize domination, fact that is connected to the social value of geography and the organization of different communities.⁶⁶ When the geographer David Harvey speaks about “the right to the city,” he makes a similar argument. Cities are neither passively created nor matter-of-factly existent; they are produced by active subjects in a social process. These considerations are particularly relevant in the analysis of *Parable*, as Lauren’s definition of community depends on logics of creation and transformation.

⁶⁶ As history is taken for granted, space is also taken for granted.

5.1 Robledo

The first community to appear in the novel is Lauren's gated home neighborhood in Robledo, about 20 miles from Los Angeles. Lauren lives with her stepmother, her father, and brothers. The protagonist's stepmother, Cory, is an elementary school teacher who serves the children in the neighborhood. Her father is the community pastor and a university professor, who in order to teach, has to venture outside the community at dawn and come home at the same time the next day to avoid being robbed or murdered. From the very first pages, the narrative establishes a clear dichotomy between inside and outside. The dichotomy guarantees a form of equilibrium for the community. The people within the walls contribute to the welfare of the neighborhood trading food and offering services to each other. However, Robledo is described like "an island surrounded by sharks"(50). The wall enclosing the community is but a meager protection against the outside. After Lauren befriends Amy, a little girl born after a neighbor rapes her mother, it is clear that the wall does not protect from all adversities but encloses problems related to the greater Los Angeles area, such as rape and violence, within the fenced neighborhood. The fire mania, spread with the introduction of the drug Pyro, leads young people to shave their heads, paint their faces in bright colors and get pleasure burning houses and people. Not because of the drug but out of neglect, Amy ends up burning the garage of her family unconsciously recreating the effects of the pyros within the community. Amy ends up dying a few days later, shot through the wall by an unidentified person:

Someone shot Amy right through the metal gate. It had to be an accidental hit because you can't see through our gate from the outside. The shooter either fired at someone who was in front of the gate or fired at the gate itself, at the neighborhood, at us and our

supposed wealth and privilege. Most bullets wouldn't have gotten through the gate. It's supposed to be bulletproof. But it's been penetrated a couple of times before. (50)

Amy's death works as a premonition to Lauren of what will happen—the destruction of the community. These types of premonitions are common for the woman. In the first pages of her diary she remembers a dream in which the wall is described in a noteworthy way: “The neighborhood wall is a massive, looming presence nearby. I see it as a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than protective. But my stepmother is there, and she isn't afraid. I stay close to her. I'm seven years old”(5). Lauren senses the wall as an obstacle; from her point of view the separation does not serve its purpose. Her recurring preoccupations are confirmed when a gang of robbers manage to get inside and rob a neighbor's house: “Three men climbed over the neighborhood wall, cutting through the strands of barbed wire and Lazor wire on top. Lazor wire is terrible stuff... People, though, can always find a way over, under, or through” (21). The precarious equilibrium is finally disrupted by an invasion from the streets that will put an end to the life of the community. Following the intrusion, the few surviving inhabitants of Robledo are forced to leave the settlement.

The alternative to the gated communities such as Robledo is a place called Olivar. A few families, including Lauren's best friend's family, decide to move to this town facing the ocean. Olivar is more protected than Robledo. In her diary Lauren explains that “Olivar, incorporated in the 1980s, is just one more beach/bedroom suburb of Los Angeles, small and well to-do” (118). Olivar is richer than Olamina's community, “but since it's a costal city, its taxes are higher, and since some of its land is unstable, it has extra problems” (118). The effects of global warming keep increasing the sea level, condition worsened by occasional earthquakes. To speculate on the labor and the resources of the town, a company called KSF buys the community. “They have

long-term plans, and the people of Olivar have decided to become part of them—to accept smaller salaries than their socio-economic group is used to in exchange for security, a guaranteed food supply, jobs, and help in their battle with the Pacific” (119). Cory tries to convince her family to give up their freedom and move to Olivar where better protection is in place. Lauren, however, opposes her plans and instead prepares herself for her journey north. No community is safe for the protagonist, whose aim is to overturn the political and social infrastructure and the new forms of colonialism represented by places such as Olivar.

Lauren seems to be the only person who is prepared and equipped for an evacuation. In the pages of her journal, she writes how the study of books on how to recognize and use native plants will help her in the future outside of the walls:

I’m trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there. I think we should all study books like these. I think we should bury money and other necessities in the ground where thieves won’t find them. I think we should make emergency packs—grab and run packs—in case we have to get out of here in a hurry. Money, food, clothing, matches, a blanket... I think we should fix places outside where we can meet in case we get separated. (54)

The rest of the community does not share the spatial awareness that emerges in her personal writing. People do not question what it is like beyond the neighborhood’s fence. The only spatial awareness they gain of the outside is through target shooting in the canyon. The group who follow the practice mostly consists of young adults recruited by Lauren’s father. The description of the canyon is relevant in opposition to the one of the community. The organization of space in the neighborhood of Robledo is somewhat traditional. Each family lives in their own house but the community comes together for services and trades, the canyon is complete wilderness, a

place at the mercy of wild dog packs and gangs, where dead bodies are scattered and no sense of security is provided: “There are a few groups of homeless people and packs of feral dogs living out beyond the last hillside shacks. People and dogs hunt rabbits, possums, squirrels, and each other. Both scavenge whatever dies” (40). The target shooters also move like a pack on their bicycles, holding their guns and protecting each other. Both within the community and outside of it police are not a reliable support and people have to fend for themselves. In some rare occasions, however, the community is forced to alert the law enforcement. When Amy dies, for example, the community needs to report the crime. Besides being expensive, involving the police is also dangerous. Officers are described as members of another gang who will take advantage of the community. Moreover, turning the police on the outsiders can have other consequences:

The street poor will be back, and they won't love us for sicking [sic] the cops on them.

It's illegal to camp out on the streets the way they do—the way they must—so the cops knock them around, rob them if they have anything worth stealing, then order them away or jail them. (51)

The distrust of law enforcement is a reflection of the time and space in which Butler was writing. At the wake of the Rodney King beating by the LAPD and the consequent trial (1992), people of color in Los Angeles were revolting against decades of mistreatment and brutality. The novel reflects the historical situation, the distrust in governmental institutions, as well as the instability and fear created by the climate of revolt and riots that were spreading across the city.

Pyros in particular, the young clan addicted to the drug that make them want to burn everything on their sight, mirror some of the concerns arising from a situation of chaos and instability. Lauren returns to her house the morning after her community was burned to the ground and finds a dead woman in her front yard, probably the one who set fire to the habitation.

When she stops to look at the body, another girl approaches her and says “She died for us,” (163) implying that the death of the young pyro is a reflection of social justice. At this consideration Lauren asks herself: “Did our community die so that addicts could make a help-the-poor political statement?” (163). Lauren’s idea of justice clearly differs from the one of the pyros. Hers is more farsighted and based on a combination of practice and religion. It is on these bases that she establishes Earthseed: “All that you touch/You Change./ All that you Change/Changes you./The only lasting truth/Is Change./God/Is Change” (3). Growing up in a very Christian environment, Lauren begins to develop her own form of spirituality that is based on the concept of change. The passage reported above is the opening of her diary which she calls “Earthseed: The Book of the Living.” The ideas forming her spirituality start to develop within the community of Robledo. Despite the deep esteem she shows in regards to her father, a patriarchal figure that she seems to emulate throughout her journey north, her ideas of god strongly differ from his:

A lot of people seem to believe in a big-daddy-God or a big-cop- God or a big-king-God. They believe in a kind of superperson. A few believe God is another word for nature. And nature turns out to mean just about anything they happen not to understand or feel in control. . . So what is God? Just another name for whatever makes you feel special and protected. (15)

Her religion slowly takes shape in Robledo; yet, she is not able to share it with anybody there, fearing rejection. When her father disappears, Lauren decides to speak at mass, replacing the pastor. In this occasion, she shows her leadership skills and her ability to guide and comfort the community. Earthseed is not mentioned in her sermon:

We have God and we have each other. We have our island community, fragile, and yet a fortress. Sometimes it seems too small and too weak to survive. And like the window in Christ's parable, its enemies fear neither God nor man. But also like the widow, it persists. We persist. This is our place, no matter what. (135)

Lauren does not fully believe in her sermon but she knows that she needs to deliver it to put her neighbors at ease. At the end of mass, Kayla Talcott, a member of the community, starts singing the hymn "We Shall not be Moved" at which Lauren mentally responds with "We'll be moved, all right. It's just a matter of when, by whom, and in how many pieces"(136). The protagonist displays an awareness that will concretize in the second half of the book.

Nonetheless, it is in this episode that the woman begins turning into an evangelical figure. She understands that religion controls and protects and she uses this knowledge to provide structure in the community. After the mass the community resumes its weekly activities and functions.

The community of Robledo is described as an ethnically diverse group of residents. Butler's narration heavily focuses on matters of race and ethnicity. Lauren values and encourages racial diversity in her communities; however, the cultural norms of her time make it hard for people to mix with other ethnicities and races. In a passage in which the narrator recalls an episode that happened within the community walls reveals the racism present in her neighborhood: "Last year when Craig Dunn who's white and one of the saner members of the Dunn family was caught making love to Situ Moss who's black and Richard Moss's oldest daughter to boot, I thought someone was going to get killed. (87) Even when Lauren and her friends go target shooting in the canyon, race diversity is an issue she takes into consideration: "The Garfields and the Balters are white, and the rest of us are black. That can be dangerous these days" (36). According to the narrator, a group that is racially mixed attracts more attention

and therefore puts the people in it in danger. Despite this fact, Lauren keeps encouraging the coming together of different races, an idea that is further developed in the road community and in Acorn.

Lauren is as preoccupied about racial issues as she is about gender roles. In this case too, she challenges norms by crossing cultural biases. When her neighbor tells her: “it’s the men’s job to protect us anyway,” adding that “women shouldn’t have to practice with guns” (88) Olamina becomes even more determined to become a better shooter and recruit the women in her neighborhood. Gender roles are also explored in relation to her brother Keith, who insists on going target shooting and getting a gun in order “to be a real man” (92). Keith is only thirteen years old and not yet permitted to join the canyon group. The narrator elaborates on her brother’s resentment toward her. As Clara Esconda Augusti explains in her article “The Relationship Between Community and Subjectivity” Keith reduces his need to acquire a gun to the binary opposition between male and female which projects an exclusion of the “female.” In the same way, he rejects and makes fun of Lauren’s hyperempathy, viewing it as a weakness typically female. On the topic Augusti argues:

Woman is produced in social signification as the "other" on which the very existence of man depends, as much as other asymmetrical relations: that of exploitation, privilege, and patriarchy. If manhood is defined in terms of privilege and the ability to rule over others, it should not surprise us that Olamina's brother has a strong power rivalry with his father in relation to the female. (254)

When Keith starts venturing outside the community and comes back a couple of times to bring money to her mother, Lauren notes in her journal: “Dad was home so he wouldn't come in.

I thanked him for the money and told him I would give it to Cory” (99) reinforcing the idea of rivalry between father and son that implicitly excludes the female figure from decision-making.

Augusti defines Lauren being black and female as “a double marginality” (254) which in the book is complicated by socioeconomic hardship and climate change. “We live on the edge as it is” (71) Lauren declares. Yet, the protagonist turns “marginality in a sight of resistance” (Brooks) and focuses her resources on adaptability and crossing borders. This *modus operandi* is applied to all the realms that affect the life of her communities.

Reflecting with her friend on the natural catastrophes happening across the United States the two agree that they “can’t make the climate change back, no matter why it changed in the first place”(Brooks 341). Lauren uses her theological mission to seek ways to reconstruct a livable environment adapting to the changes in place. In an environment that resists both urban and suburban forms of existence, the narrative questions the sustainability of modern cities. David Harvey, considering the work of Henry Lefebvre in relation to “the Right to the City” advances similar considerations pertaining to the need of changing the city model. According to the critic the right was simultaneously a cry and a demand:

The cry was a response to the existential pain of a withering crisis of everyday life in the city. The demand was really a command to look that crisis clearly in the eye and to create an alternative urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty. (X)

The end of Lauren’s traditional community disrupts the characters’ sense of place. Without a settlement they have to adhere “to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty” and adapt to communities that are in constant motion. Both Lefebvre and Harvey speculate on the

end of the city, where the pursuit of the right to the latter seems to become a chimera (Harvey XVI). Harvey argues that the political struggle arising from the lack of an inclusive city structure, for black and LGBT people for instance, leads to the creation of small communities that redefine the sense of urban organization. In the dystopia envisioned by Butler, where just a restricted elite benefits at the expenses of the labor class and working people, metropolitan areas are populated by “poor squatters, winos, junkies, and homeless people in general”(10). Lauren redefines the sense of community and therefore of space, adapting her group of people to different environments, displacing and replacing them in different locales, ultimately seeking to establish her community among the stars.

5.2 The Road to the North

Once Lauren is out of her home community she becomes self-reliant. Even after she meets Harry and Zahra, two survivors from Robledo, who will become her travel companions, she retains the authority that was somewhat anticipated in the entries of her journal. While the three Robledo survivors proceed on their way north, they encounter different people who will try to join their community. In these random encounters, the opposition between inside and outside manifests strongly. The characters are travelling in the outside, in a wasteland populated by other migrants and homeless people; yet, the separation between their group and the rest of the population is marked distinctly. Most of the times Lauren rejects the people who approach the group: “It’s crazy to live this way, suspecting helpless old people. Insane. But we need our paranoia to keep us alive...we are stupid out here. We want to trust people. I fight against the impulse,” (181-82) she declares. The decision of keeping people away from the group is in the hands of Lauren. Harry resents her for her behavior but eventually adapts to her predicaments. Lauren establishes herself as the leader determining the configuration of the community and the

roles of its members. During the course of the pilgrimage, the three survivors will meet other individuals that will eventually join the group; Lauren is always the one who decides who is allowed to enter the trusted circle, with one exception: after Lauren meets Bankole, who will become her fiancé, he gains some of her decisional power. For instance, Bankole decides to rescue a baby who loses his mother in the aftermaths of a gunfight and he is the only community member, besides Olamina, that is able to take such decision. Toward the end of the narrative, the group will count thirteen people between children and adults. While the group walks north together, Lauren introduces her companions to her theological standpoint. In order to join the pilgrims, the newcomers have to accept the logic of Earthseed and eventually she will convert them all to her religion of change. The creation of Earthseed is interesting in terms of spatiality. Lauren recalls in her diary: “Earthseed is being born right here on Highway 101—on that portion of 101 that was once was Camino Real, the royal highway of California’s Spanish past. Now it’s a highway, a river of the poor. A river flooding north” (223). The spatial creation of the community is somewhat accidental; the group makes the road their church, adapting to the circumstances and accepting the non-locality of their religion.

Lefebvre’s concept of heterotopia, which is different from the one theorized by Foucault, matches the urgency of *Parable* of adapting to different places⁶⁷. His interpretation centers

⁶⁷ Foucault’s elaboration of heterotopia is a combination of different places developed historically and continually changing toward a “space of extension.” These heterotopic spaces are the combination of two opposites, the imagined utopia and the contrary of such space. In his words: “The space in which we live, which draws us out to ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely no superimposable on one another...the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (23,25). In a way, even this definition of heterotopia matches the spaces in

around the idea of social space as “something different.” In *Rebel Cities*, Harvey explains that what Lefebvre defines as “something different” does not always “arise out of a conscious plan, but more simply out of what people do, feel, sense, and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their daily lives”. It is from these practices that heterotopic spaces emerge (xvii). Lauren’s road community is constantly in the process of creating heterotopic spaces. Moving through California, the group establishes itself in a different place every night. The camps they choose as their settlement have to abide by safety rules to guarantee protection: they have to be secluded, they have to offer a place to build a fire, and at the same time they must be somewhat elevated so that the group can see when outsiders attempt to enter or invade the camp. Even though the organization of the space changes every night according to the new location, there are certain conventions that the group maintains. This consideration goes to show that despite the fact that cities and villages are no longer a sustainable alternative in the narrative, the characters of the book maintain a structure that reflects traditional forms of social placement, where each member has a different role, and in turn, engages with the surrounding environment in ways that are determined by their position within the community. Decision-making, food distribution, and weapon handling are some of the privileges that are distributed differently among the group and that manifest in the physical positions of the characters. The people holding the guns, for example, occupy a specific place in the settlement, and so do families with children. This form of organization creates stability for the community and defines familiar, homely spaces. The narrative insists on the characters’ need to seek a safe, personal space, even within the rules of sharing determined by *Earthseed*. This need appears to be almost universal in *Parable*. When Lauren is still in Robledo and her brother Keith visits her from the outside, he explains to her

Parable, especially considering how the characters mold lawless spaces, governed by climate change and human violence.

that the first nights outside he would sleep in the same box. “I don’t know why I kept going back to that box. Could have slept in any old corner,” (108) Keith tells her sister. The characters demonstrate a need to belong to a definite space that they associate with their home.

For most of the second half of the narrative, the road becomes the home of the Earthseed community. The migrants move north trying to avoid big cities, as they are the most dangerous. When they need to resupply they are forced to stop in urban centers, but their visit are always short:

Sacramento was all right to resupply in and hurry through. Water and food were cheap there compared to what you could buy along the roadside, of course. Cities were always a relief as far as prices went. But cities were also dangerous. More gangs, more cops, more suspicious, nervous people with guns. You tiptoe through cities. You keep up a steady pace, keep your eyes open, and try to look both too intimidating to bother and invisible. Neat trick. Bankole says cities have been like that for a long time. (272)

Bankole’s remark is another reference to the state of Los Angeles in the 1990s.

Throughout the narrative, there is a tension between the urban dimension and the rural one. Lauren and her friends seek to establish their community away from urbanized areas. The loss in faith in the function of cities highly depends on the complete privatization of resources. An example is offered in the description of the stores where the migrants stop to resupply which reinforces the division between inside and outside that is stressed in the overall narrative: “The security guards in the stores were as well-armed as the cops—shot-guns and automatic rifles, a couple of machine guns in tripods in cubicles above us... Some of the guards either weren’t very well trained—or they were almost as power-drunk as the scavengers” (241). All the stores and the water stations that the travellers encounter are protected by armed forces. In order for the

group to begin their Earthseed community they have to be as self reliant as possible. Lauren's plan is to found a community based on reciprocity, diametrically different from the logics enforced in the urban areas. Before she will be able to materialize her plan, the group must rely on the road supplies and slowly move toward their destination.

Instead of following the masses of migrants moving north, the travel companions rely on an earpiece radio Lauren finds on a dead body and most of all on the maps she saved from her house. The protagonist recalls:

My grandparents once traveled a lot by car. They left us old road maps of just about every county in the state plus several of other parts of the country. The newest of them is 40 years old, but that doesn't matter. The roads will still be there. They'll just be in worse shape than they were back when my grandparents drove a gas-fueled car over them (124).

Lauren finds a way to repurpose the maps that become the main reference for her group.

It is through them she is able to locate a beach in Santa Barbara:

I found it because I had maps—in particular, a street map of much of Santa Barbara County. My grandparents' maps helped us explore away from the highway even though many street signs were fallen or gone. There were enough left for us to find beaches when we were near them. (215)

The episode coincides with the first time the travellers see the ocean. The water represents an invaluable resource in her narrative. Through the knowledge Lauren learns from her father's books she is able to dig holes on the beach deep enough to find fresh water and provide enough for her group. With the aid of her grandparents' maps she is also able to locate the San Luis Reservoir in Merced County: "There is still a little water in the San Luis Reservoir. It's more fresh water than I've ever seen in one place, but by the vast size of the reservoir, I can see that

it's only a little compared to what should be there—what used to be there” (258). Climate change has affected the landscape in irreversible ways. Nonetheless, the group adapts to the new circumstances and uses the resources available at their own advantage:

We moved when he came back. He had found a new campsite, near the freeway and yet private. One of the huge freeway signs had fallen or been knocked down, and now lay on the ground, propped up by a pair of dead sycamore trees. With the trees, it formed a massive lean-to. (199)

Lauren and her companions make use of road signs as shelter for their campsite. Not only are the freeway indications repurposed, the freeway itself, thanks to its elevation, becomes a strategic location to monitor the spreading of arson: “I want to be higher, closer to the level of the freeway or above it. I want to be able to see the fire if it jumps the freeway and spreads toward us. I want to see it before it gets too close. Fire moves fast”(198).⁶⁸ The community puts the mantra of adaptability used by Lauren in her writing into practice. In order to survive, the group must conform to the rules of the surrounding environment: “out here you adapt to your surroundings or you get killed”(182) Lauren says. Overturning boundaries is part of using the available resources to survive. For the protagonist, one way to adapt to her surroundings is passing for a man on the road. After Lauren encounters Harry and Zahara, she decides that two women and a man are too vulnerable as a group. Thanks to her size and body shape, Olamina is able to pass as a man. Butler’s decision to recur to gender passing is an example of border

⁶⁸ The elevation of the freeway echoes some considerations made in chapter II, in reference to Maria Wyeth’s need to drive in the freeway and stay above the city of Los Angeles to have a complete picture of it. Architect Reyner Banham reflects on the position of the driver in the freeway in a similar way in his works *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* and *Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles*. In this chapter, the protagonist is not a driver but a pedestrian. The role of the freeway is different, yet the privilege acquired by the position of the subject is similar.

crossing and her praxis of change. Sexual fluidity challenges gender norms and help redefine traditional roles within the community. When Lauren imposes her leader role ON her group, Harry remarks: “you damn sure talk macho enough to be a guy” (182). Lauren rejects his statement, but at the same time she displays some of the paternalistic attributes that are described in relation to her father, the pastor who leads the community of Robledo. For Lauren, crossing borders means adapting to difference. According to Mathias Nilges, making use of the idea of “difference” to articulate “progressive utopian narratives” is the key to adapt and shape the environment:

One of Butler’s contributions to this discourse is her concept of change that lies at the basis of every political interaction. Instead of “freezing” the manifestations of difference within the theoretical conceptualizations (i.e. “gender,” “race,” “class”), she emphasizes the fluid and transforming aspect behind the term.

At the same time, she makes these manifestations concrete and rams them into a moment of agency by claiming that they can be “shaped.” Change and its implications inject a transformative element into the conceptualizations of difference that enables not only a new perception of difference...but that demands a constant redefinition of its categories.

It is especially in this respect that Butler’s utopian desire contributes to the feminist discourse on difference. (36)

The narrative articulates the body as a contested site. In relation to her hyperempathy, when Lauren reveals her symptoms to her travel companions, Harry remarks: “So... you faked everyone out. You must be a hell of an actor.” To which Lauren responds: “I *had* to learn to pretend to be normal. My father kept trying to convince me that I was normal. He was wrong about that, but I’m glad he taught me the way he did” (194). The corporeal experience and the different types of

passing associated with it are a means through which Butler defines critical locations in relation to marginal positions and how to overcome misconceptions in spatial interpretations. bell hooks declares that “to be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (I). For the critic, reversing the dominant logic and bringing marginality in the main body coincides with the movement from one place to another and the transgression of socially accepted boundaries. These practices can reshape cultural spaces and envision new social practices that include those who have been marginalized and ignored. In the narrative at hand, functional stability is challenged through body depictions. Extra-corporeal experiences in particular are crucial in Butler’s writing, especially to come to terms with notions such as gender, race, and social functions. The corporeal experience is also a way for the author to provide an historical perspective that connects past and future. In her novel *Kindred*, Butler investigates the relation between past and present through the use of time travel. The protagonist, Dana, a young African American woman from California, is brought back to a southern plantation during slavery. The time-space compression that specifically elaborates on generational trauma, the weight of memory in African-American communities, while also targeting the history of interracial relations in the United States, is predominantly corporeal. The novel begins with when Dana wakes up in the hospital with her arm amputated and proceeds with the description of sensorial experiences such as childbirth, rape, and physical pain. Like in *Parable* and in many other Butler’s novels, the narrative begins with the awakening of a female protagonist, who bears the weight of knowledge to impart to her community.

The lessons that the protagonist imparts to her community in *Parable* are multiple. From practical matters, such as to learn how to survive and be self-reliant, to more intellectual practices, Lauren is the reference figure for the group. The title of the novel specifically refers to

the union between physical practice and an intellectual one. The action of seeding referred in the Christian parable has a very distinct spatial connotation. The interaction with nature, planting seeds for self-sustenance mix with the parable message that not all the seeds that are planted will be sowed. Depending on where the seed falls, the soil will produce plants or not. The seeds falling on fertile soil refer to the people that are attentive to the predicaments and eager to understand and learn. The narrative makes use of this double approach (physical practice and intellectual one) to impart a lesson on how to occupy and take advantage of the land in moments of peril. Self-determination and religion are crucial aspects in the narrative, they are elaborated by Lauren with both an ecological awareness and a social sensibility.

Her social concerns manifest in reflections on topics such as gender, as illustrated above, and race. A few critics have noticed how the matter of race is embedded in movement. Lauren's desire to go north in particular parallels slave narratives accounts and references contemporary slave travel narratives and slave narratives in general. The narration's insistence on the connection between African American slavery and contemporary slavery underlines the importance of memory in relation to the territory. Beth A. McCoy explains that,

common to many African American texts is an extraordinary critical ambivalence about the concrete and abstract terrain that black people must travel...topography can shelter—and betray—even as political discourse and history transform that land into property, violence, mystical experience, or slate upon which to inscribe meaning. (223)

Butler's narrative engages with the tradition described by McCoy, displaying both ecological and social urgencies, entwining human survival with considerations pertaining to black American communities and their relationship with the land, while also describing a universal human condition, the necessity to move to a better environment, readapting, migrating

to a new territory. Under this interpretation, the parallel between Lauren's journal and use of maps and Jim Crow travel book, *The Negro Motorist Green-Book*, becomes apparent. As the book provided tips for traveling African Americans to avoid places that discriminated against them, Lauren's notes and references offer methods to survive hardship and the new wave of danger for non-white travellers. In the apocalyptic future described by Butler, slavery is still a reality. When Emery, for example, joins the migrant community of Earthseed and shares some information about her past with the community, the group discovers that the woman and her daughter are two ex-slaves: "Emery worked and endured until one day, without warning, her sons were taken away. They were one and two years younger than her daughter...She decided then to run away, to take her daughter and brave the roads with their thieves, rapists, and cannibals" (289). Emery is not the only character that suffered a past of slavery; other travel companions join the group to escape the abuse of their owners. Some members of the group are not able to read and write, while some others learned the skill secretly. When the travellers discuss the topic of alphabetization, Lauren makes a parallel with nineteenth century slavery and briefly refers to the evolution of slavery in the 1990s. According to the narrator, the 1990s were the moment that set the basis of the new form of slavery referencing privatization and underpaid fieldwork. Focusing on California in particular, Butler reflects on the condition of African Americans and Latino immigrants, imagining a form of slavery based on contemporary forms of exploitation and segregation. As noticed in the previous section, Butler is particularly interested in the topic of multi-racial mix and segregation. The idea of enclosed communities is a way for the author to speculate on the advantages of protection and the risks of segregation. A way to overcome this paradox is for Lauren to embrace a post racial vision and encourage racial mixing. This is why Butler advances her vision of mixed racial coexistence. Yet, on the road, as in her

home community of Robledo, racial mixing can pose a danger. When Lauren finds out that Zahara, who is black, and Harry, who is white, are having an affair, she tells her friend: “mixed couples catch hell whether people think they’re gay or straight. Harry’ll piss off all the blacks and you’ll piss off all the whites. Good luck” (171-72). This warning, however, is disregarded by the community and by Lauren herself, who realize the importance of unity:

Unite—
 Or be divided,
 robbed,
 ruled,
 killed
 By those who see you as prey.
 Embrace diversity
 Or be destroyed. (196)

These are the verses of Earthseed that Lauren writes in her journal and shares with her group. Diversity is at the basis of the Earthseed community. For Lauren, diversity means both adapting and changing, challenging social rules to adjust to the environment. These predicaments will set the basis of Acorn, the land owned by Bankole where, at the end of their journey, the community decides to establish itself.

5.3 Acorn

When the group arrives on Bankole’s land, they expect to find a few houses and the man’s family. They discover that the land was burned and that Bankole’s sister, her husband, and their children were all killed in the arson. This detail underlines the fact that the land is not a utopia, but a place that the community needs to transform and protect. This community, further

developed in the sequel *Parable of the Talents*, is introduced in the last pages of the book.

Lauren describes the land location in her diary:

Somehow, we've reached our new home—Bankole's land in the coastal hills of Humboldt County. The highway—U.S. 101—is to the east and north of us, and Cape Mendocino and the sea are to the west. A few miles south are state parks filled with huge redwood trees and hoards of squatters. (313)

Even if secluded, external invasion is still a possibility for the community. On the other hand, Lauren states in her journal: “the land surrounding us ... is as empty and wild as I've seen it. It's covered with dry brush, trees, and tree stumps, all far removed from any city, and a long, hilly walk from the little towns that line the highway” (313). The location, “far removed from any city,” guarantees a little protection. The potential new prosperity the community is seeking opposes the urban dimension. The locus in which Lauren and her group frame their aspirations for change and transformation is rural in nature. The community, however, will shape the territory. When Lauren asks her companion whether they want to stay or proceed north toward Canada, Ally, one of the latest additions to the group of travelers, responds: “I'll stay. I want to build something, too. I never had a chance to build anything before.”(322) The community, therefore, shows a need to affect the environment through building and structuring the landscape. Yet, their vision is not that of recreating the capitalistic model that failed in the 1990s, but to establish a form of social-environmental coexistence to create an alternative to urban perspectives. Lured north by the vague promise of finding housing and work, the community soon discovers that the seclusion of Bankole's land does not provide a secure income. “But there's no work here!” Harry protests. “There's nothing but work here, boy. Work, and a lot of cheap land” (322) Bankole rebukes. If the group is to reimagine a future that offers an alternative

dimension to the failed capitalistic model, they have to begin by opposing the system of oppression, creating a personal method of sustenance.

In order for the community to put their plan into action, they need to decide how to make use of the land, how to spatially organize the territory and take advantage of the natural resources available. As implied in the narrative, the land of Acorn is not an idyllic location but the community works to make it sustainable and habitable. In addition to the risks of invasion, manifested in the killing of Bankole's family and the destruction of local resources (the solar powered well, for example), the community has to face the consequences and continual challenges of climate change. Not discouraged by the scenario, the group decides to bury the dead and start working on the land. Lauren, who saved some seeds from her home community in Los Angeles, begins envisioning how to maximize the profit from the land, what seeds to plant and how to save the plants that are left from the previous inhabitants: "Bankole owns the land, free and clear. There's a huge, half ruined garden plus citrus trees full of unripe fruit. We've already been pulling carrots and digging potatoes here. There are plenty of other fruit and nut trees plus wild pines, redwoods, and Douglas firs" (318). Despite the promise of sustainability represented by Acorn, the book closes with some looming remarks regarding the overall condition outside of the community. Bankole states:

Some...countries will survive. Maybe they'll absorb what's left of us. Or maybe we'll just break up into a lot of little states quarreling and fighting with each other over whatever crumbs are left. That's almost happened now with states shutting themselves off from one another, treating state lines as national borders. (327)

The notion of borders mentioned by Bankole reflects the concern of the overall narrative. On the one hand, the characters of the story take advantage of barriers and borders to protect themselves

from the dangers of the outside; on the other, borders seclude and segregate. The notion that is explored at the local level through the description of gated communities (in *Talents* Acorn will also become a gated community) and defended campsites, is here elaborated in a nation-wide perspective. Bankole continues:

You know, as bad as things are, we haven't even hit bottom yet. Starvation, disease, drug damage, and mob rule have only begun. Federal, state, and local governments still exist—in name at least—and sometimes they manage to do something more than collect taxes and send in the military... However much more you need of it to buy anything these days, it is still accepted. That may be a hopeful sign—or perhaps it's only more evidence of what I said: We haven't hit bottom yet. (328)

These types of considerations placed at the end of the narrative suggest that recovery from the corrupted federal situation and failed environmental system are not resolvable with the creation of small state-communities. In her diary, Lauren insists on the need to create local infrastructure to build the means to eventually abandon Planet Earth and move to the stars. Her spatial imagination is thus expanded, projected toward the universe. What she envisions is a form of cognitive mapping that sets the grounds for future developments in *Parable of the Talents*.

In the sequel, the growing community successfully establishes itself in Acorn and creates an effective even though short-lived method of subsistence. Instead of by walls, the property is marked by rows of prickly cacti. The necessity for delimitation points at the necessity to recur to traditional forms of protection, the very forms that Lauren rejects in the pages of her diary. This controversy is reinforced with the assault of the community by religious fanatics belonging to a

Christian crusade. Their arrival marks the defeat of Acorn, and thus the collapse of a structural alternative to the failure of the American government.

5.4 Conclusion

Parable addresses what Madhu Dubey defines as a “crisis of urban literary representation,” (105) in his 1999 article “Folk and Urban Communities in African-American Women's Fiction,” depicting a dystopian reality that reflects the concerns related to a failed urban model. The interpretation of the novel should be contextualized not only within the science fiction realm, but also taking into account its historical references, especially in relation to the African American perspective. Butler connects the past, the present, and the future of the United States and California through parallels between slavery and contemporary labor exploitation. Cities are represented as the center of corruption and decay. The urban environment is envisioned as the “dark mirror” (Williams 229) of the capitalistic system. Raymond Williams’ words are particularly fitting as in his book, *The Country and the City*, the critic elaborates the distinction between the two environments, explaining how literary works define the relationship between the urban and the rural. Despite the clear distinctions that historically consolidated popular assumptions (the country is peaceful, the city is fast-paced; the people in the country are uneducated, while the ones in the city have access to good schools; etc.), the author reinforces the idea that the two spaces are interdependent. Williams specifically argues that field labor is attached to a capitalistic model. The system is not estranged from the one employed in urban factories. Toward the end of the novel here analyzed, Emery, one of the Earthseed travel companions established in Acorn, introduces the concept of “slave driver” (323) as a possible employment for the white people of the community. The comment implies that even in the apparent peace of Acorn, the risk of falling into the very system the community is escaping from

is high. The contradictory predicament that the narration establishes is elaborated in the complex relation of private and public, inside spaces and the outside.

Butler begins her narration reflecting on the role of gated communities, which protect from the outside, but gates also enclose and segregate communities and divide people based on differences such as wealth and race. Her insistence on the problem of suburban enclosure is related to the history of Los Angeles and the time in which she was writing. Looking at a Los Angeles burdened by social and racial injustice, devastated by urban riots, and threatened by ecological catastrophes, *Parable* grapples with notions of resistance and survival, while also questioning possible alternatives to the status quo. In his book, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Edward Soja elaborates a vision that is in line with the one displayed by Butler in *Parable*:

The reactionary postmodern politics...must be directly confronted with an informed postmodern politics of resistance and demystification, one that can pull away the deceptive ideological veils that are today reifying and obscuring, in new and different ways, the restructured instrumentalities of class exploitation, gender and racial domination, cultural and personal disempowerment, and environmental degradation. (5)

Written in Los Angeles and published in 1989, *Postmodern Geographies* offers valuable resources to interpret the way the environment is elaborated by Butler. Soja and Butler use two different types of narration to account for the complication of their city. Their local perspectives, however, are not confined to Los Angeles, but provide questions and models that are easily applicable to other urban regions both inside and outside the United States. Reflecting on the “spatiality of social life,” Soja describes “how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology”(6). The narrative spaces of *Parable* are as much ideological and political as the

physical spaces described by the geographer. Every structured and improvised community described in the text reflect a specific social order that both tries to contrast the ideology of a failed system and submit to social logics of hierarchical placement. Reflecting on the geographies of different communities within the context of California. Butler inscribes “the ways we make practical and political sense of the present, the past, and the potential future (a postmodern geography of critical social consciousness)”(Soja 12). The protagonist challenges the functional and structural stability represented by enclosure both ideologically and physically to define her “critical social consciousness”. Crossing borders and constantly redefining the space of her community are the means through which the character displays her awareness and combats social and environmental injustice. The notion of change and spatial redefinition in the novel creates a sense of diasporic displacement that is further elaborated in the pages of *Talents*, through the narrative’s projection into the universe. In conclusion, the literary representation of the environment offered in *Parable* provides a key to grappling with the urban and suburban realities of Southern California, the urge to establish alternatives for marginal communities, and the existence of viable forms of social and environmental resistance.

6 CODA

In *Invisible Cities*, all the places visited by Marco Polo contain bits of Venice making the traveller's observations simultaneously local and global. When Polo reflects on the cities he visited and describes them to Kublai Khan, visions of the streets and canals of Venice emerge. The process I used in *Mapping Los Angeles* reverses Polo's point of view: instead of seeing the local in the global, the literary interpretations of Los Angeles analyzed in this dissertation foster important notions related to the urban environment and the conceptualization of space in the broad literary realm. Abstracting specific considerations of space through the mapping process allows us to grapple with shared, global questions and concerns. Looking at the elaboration of the urban space articulated by Fante, Didion, Yamashita, and Butler in their respective novels, I cannot help but think about how their disparate visions that converge in Los Angeles reflect larger interests that hold historical value and speak to a universal "right to the city" that can be summarized into a shared need of protection, infrastructure, and community. As David Harvey argues,

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies, and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right, since the transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization. (*Social Justice and the City* 315)

In a similar way, *Mapping Los Angeles* moves from individualistic notions to a complex network of national and international relations, pointing at the social interactions that shape the built environment. These types of considerations that in this study are grounded in the twentieth

century spur connections with the present situation. The transition from “rural city” to metropolis, the evolution of roadways and means of transportation point us to a global trend seen in cities such as London, Tokyo, and Shanghai, while the lack of infrastructure considered in the closing pages of this dissertation inevitably direct us to the contemporary devastation of cities, to the rubbles of Aleppo and the blockade of Gaza. In the pages of *Parable of the Sower*, the narrator speculates on dystopic scenarios, on economic, social, and environmental catastrophes. The other three narratives, in more or less subtle ways, also consider the possibility of destruction in the urban realm. War, hunger, and ecological disaster are terms that come to define these urban spaces, from territorialization to deterritorialization. The city of Los Angeles portrayed in the four narratives analyzed here demonstrates how the understanding of the city is a process balanced between a constant evolution and de-evolution. In viewing the process of spatialization as one that is constantly challenged and reimagined, the novels reveal how these fragments of Los Angeles’ literary history interrogate notions of functional stability.

The spatial approach provides a valuable insight on the relationship between geography and cultural studies and literature in particular. What geocentrism offers readers of non-conformative urban literature is a new way to approach the text, one that values marginality as an integral part of the whole and that is essential in the definition of the cityspace. In the past few years, this field of study has seen a surge of interest that manifested in new publications, conferences dedicated to the spatial turn, and pedagogical applications. The reference texts in the field, however, rarely apply the spatial model to non-conformative texts, despite the fact that geographers such as Edward Soja, David Harvey, and Jane Jacobs have long been advocating for the necessity to include the margins in city planning and conceptualization. The works of scholars such as Franco Moretti, Bernard Westphal, and Robert T. Tally that have contributed

majorly in the field are, for the great part, still anchored to classic and canonical literary production. With the publication of *Continental Divides*, Rachel Adams has introduced a new way to look at spatiality in the American literary realm, one that is aware of the importance of border definitions, migrations, and cultural traffic. Her newfound interest in the area of disability studies, which tackles urgent concerns on the relationship between disability and cultural studies has, however, left a gap in the area of geocentric literary analysis. *Mapping Los Angeles* calls for the need to build on the foundations left by Adams, to set new models for the interpretation of spatiality in the literary text. Mapping the terrain of geocentric marginal literature offers the chance to reflect on concepts such as place, location, landscape, architecture, environment, home, city, region, territory, and geography. These notions affect the way we understand literary analysis, shifting the approach from merely historical to spatial-historical. For this project does not seek to abandon historical interpretations but to integrate them with a spatial understanding. With the postmodern turn and the spatial turn, scholars such as Fredric Jameson and Bertrand Westphal came to associate the postmodern condition with a loss of interest in the historical perspective. According to Jameson, the distance from history establishes a schizophrenic relationship with temporality in which “the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time” (*Postmodernism* 27). As noted in the introduction to this dissertation, Westphal’s interpretation is even more radical, in that he does not only view postmodernity as the time in which space has replaced history, but he personally and actively dismisses history to focus primarily on space. Through the combination of the temporal approach with the spatial one, my dissertation seeks to reconcile these two approaches that in the last twenty years have been at odds with each other.

Mapping Los Angeles's chronological progression does not reject temporality but depends on the historical approach. As noted in the introductory essay, the process of writing is bound to chronology. The process of mapping, however, does not restrict the reader-user to a particular order. It is through the act of mapping that different threads of organization emerge in my dissertation. Just like a map, these threads can be approached from different angles. Roads and freeways constitute an obvious line of connection between the chapters, the first one that took shape in the conceptualization of this project. The way Arturo Bandini, the main character of *Ask the Dust*, moves around the city, how his relationship with mobility changes at the end of the novel naturally aligned with the reconceptualization of ambulation in *Play It as It Lays*. *Tropic of Orange* and *Parable of the Sower* pose a series of questions on traffic and the freeway that are respectively related to the first half of my dissertation. In particular, the two texts interrogate the sustainability of the car system, the cost of it for humans and the environment. When we approach a literary work from a geocentric perspective, we are not only talking about abstract geographies; this field of study produces multiple socio-environmental intersections, including ecocentrism. As a few scholars in the realm of geocentrism have argued, the creation of a city model must take into consideration the relation between humans and nature.⁶⁹ The four novels analyzed in my dissertation provide valuable insight, in dialogue with an ecocritical sensibility, independently elaborating on the landscape of Los Angeles and the implications of human activity on the environment.

Among the natural elements explored by the authors in *Mapping Los Angeles*, water emerges as another thread. The relationship between the city of Los Angeles and water constitutes one of the paradoxes about the city, in particular between the scarcity of the potable

⁶⁹ See earlier references to the work of Edward Soja and David Harvey.

resource and the greatness of the Pacific Ocean. As far as sustainability is concerned, the water supply, especially in the dry season, is the matter of some controversial resolutions and negotiations. Map collectors and urbanists such as Glen Creason, Edward Soja and Robert Bolin have used different maps of the Los Angeles aqueduct to trace some of the issues pertaining to hydric distribution and reflect on the infrastructure's evolution and historical impact on the city. As the narratives explored have shown, despite the distinct scenarios, water appears in all four texts. In the first chapter, I analyze how the image of water coincides for the protagonist with the outskirts of town. In a distinctive scene, toward the end of *Ask the Dust*, Arturo imagines the drowning of his girlfriend, Camilla, the embodiment of marginality, and connects it with the narrative process. The relationship between the subject and water is condensed in the representation of the body and its negotiations with the environment. The image of the body appears as a contested and symbolic site in *Play It as It Lays* as well, through descriptions of the protagonist, Maria Wyeth. In this case, water is both elaborated as a metaphor of femininity, especially in the author concentration on body fluids, and an outside reference to the alienated condition of women, with references to the Ocean, to rivers, swimming pools, and city sewage. In the third chapter, water becomes the entity that both connects and divides the world. The Pacific Rim, in particular, assumes a narrative weight in *Tropic of Orange* in relation to migration and ethnic definitions. In the fourth chapter, water constitutes a division, marking the edges of California. *Parable of the Sower* also speculates on water as a scarce resource, hinting at the alterations of the water ecosystem and the repercussions on the environment and on humans.

The four different novels explored in *Mapping Los Angeles* insist on the relationship between nature and humans, questioning how and how far nature can be manipulated. One

common device used to elaborate on this paradigm is technology.⁷⁰ In *Ask the Dust*, the protagonist, an aspirant writer, eagerly awaits for a letter to come from his editor in New York. Information travels slowly and so does the protagonist, who is confined within the boundaries of Downtown. When he finally takes a trip to Long Beach, he feels isolated from the rest of the city and longs for his home in Bunker Hill. For Maria, in *Play It as It Lays*, Long Beach is a daily destination of her driving routine. In the book communication is replaced by the figure of the phone that recurs as an obsession for the protagonist, in private houses, hotels, and gas stations. With *Tropic of Orange*, the idea of technology is complicated by a sudden digitalization of knowledge that extends to city planning and city mapping. In the last text, *Parable of the Sower*, technology is only partially explored. The narrative presents a stalling or de-evolution, to focus on the stagnation of the economic and social system, on the possibility of a national disaster.

Looking at the projections generated by twentieth century anxieties, one is forced to notice the missing opportunities of the narratives. From a 2018 standpoint, one is aware of the advent of smart technology and the impact this had on social relations and global interactions. Yet, there is a crucial element that the two closing novels rightly predict: the growing obsolescence of maps that, as we know, have now being replaced almost entirely by GPS technology.⁷¹ California remains a location of interest in the discussion on space and technology, in an era in which Silicon Valley is redefining the way we move in space—considering self-driving cars in particular. Movement remains an important feature in the consideration of spatiality, but as hinted

⁷⁰ The technological sequence presented in the dissertation points again at the chronological development (or de-evolution).

⁷¹ Through conversations with colleagues and faculty, I began to think about how GPSs re-center our perspective. While, usually, the user of a map has to find themselves in it, the GPS automatically places you at the center, creating a shift from plurality to singularity. This shift also alters our perception of subjectivity, for when we are at the center, we experience the world in a very different way. The transition from paper maps to digital ones is an ally worth pursuing in literary interpretation, one that would constitute an interesting segue to the project at hand.

in *Tropic of Orange*, mobility is not always necessarily physical. So, as the project allows avenues to explore new possibilities, I reflect on spatial interpretations that move from physicality to more abstract concepts of spatiality. If this dissertation were to be extended, it would probably include the three following texts: Maria Semple's *Where 'd you go Bernadette*, Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*, and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*.

Published in 2012, *Where 'd you go Bernadette*, is the story of Bee, a teenage girl, who embarks on a journey to Antarctica with her father to look for her disappeared mother. The novel is narrated by the girl with the addition of a substantial presence of e-mails and memos. The implications with space are numerous. Bernadette, Bee's mother is an architect married to a Microsoft engineer, pairing that clearly references the relationship between physical and digital space. In the novel, the digital space becomes a narrator itself, as emails are reported without the obvious mediation of a physical persona. Yet, the built and the natural environments occupy an important role in the story, especially considering the descriptions of the trip to Antarctica, the house where the family lives and the projects built by Bernadette, as well as the descriptions of the urban environment, the presence of both Los Angeles and Seattle.

In *A Tale for the Time Being* the relationship between a Japanese-American girl, named Nao, and Ruth, an American writer living in British Columbia, is also based on the discovery and organization of correspondence. When Ruth finds the girl's journal washed up on the beach, she embarks on a quest to locate her and make sure she survived the Tsunami that hit Japan in 2011. The novel puts into relation two different forms of writing, the traditional one, exemplified by the girl's journal, and the digital one, represented by emails and traces of Nao's family the novelist finds online. The novel interrogates the meaning of existence in non-physical forms, the presence online for example. The characters of the narration are not able to escape the digital

dimension: videos, emails, and reports about themselves they find online cannot be erased, creating an alternative space that they occupy, one that has tangible repercussions as the physical one. Like in *Where'd you go Bernadette*, the digital space is juxtaposed to very lucid descriptions of domestic spaces, and other built institutions such as schools and temples. Nature also plays an important role in the narration, water, for instance, appears as the connection between the two continents.

Nelson's *The Argonauts* presents a different set of considerations on the relationship between the subject and space. The text, published in 2015, it is not a novel but a poetry memoir with a structured narrative thread. Highly charged with theoretical references from Deleuze-Guattari to Judith Butler, the writing questions how different bodies occupy space. Nelson, pregnant while writing and assisting her partner in their gender transformation, reflects on contemporary forms of physical migration and change.

While I envision different ramifications of this dissertation and I reflect on what literature teaches us about spatiality, I think of the problems in geographical negotiation that the novels raise and of the disparate set of issues related to the territory, from colonialism to climate change, simultaneously indicate a defeat and lay the foundations for resistance and rebirth. According to what Marco Polo says in *Invisible Cities*, there are two ways to escape the inferno that social structuring creates. One is to accept it and adjust to it so you don't see it anymore, while the other, which requires more effort is to "seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space" (*Invisible Cities* 165). My wish for the readers that are willing to embrace a non-conformative spatial perspective is that they recognize how literature teaches us to identify the inferno, providing inclusive ways to resist it.

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