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Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World. Malcolm Harris. New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2023. 720 pp

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Last fall, Mike Davis (1946-2022) died—one of the most prolific, sharp, and insightful writers to take up California as a site for investigation. Davis stood out for a number of reasons: his omnivorous intellectual reach, his decades-long commitment to social movements on the left, his ability to integrate the regionally specific and the global, his pairing of rigorous research with an inclination to write for the general reader. His death is a major loss for those trying to make sense of California's history and present. Like vernal shoots, two books came out this spring that pick up aspects of Davis's mode—Malcolm Harris's *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World* and Jenny Odell's *Saving Time: Discovering a Life Beyond the Clock*. Just as Davis (2002) has written about his home town (El Cajon in San Diego County), Harris and Odell turn their attention to the Bay Area where both grew up. While their projects and arguments are distinct, I see Harris and Odell as belonging to a shared legacy of critical inquiry about California.

The two writers align along multiple axes. They are similar ages (Harris b. 1988 and Odell b. 1986), and both grew up in Santa Clara County (Harris in Palo Alto and Odell in Cupertino). Both take up critical research on the Bay Area informed by a critique of capitalism. They write research-driven books, and neither are academics in any traditional sense. Harris and Odell both worked on these texts as pandemic coping projects. The contents of the two books overlap: Odell's Chapter 1 bears the title "Whose

Time, Whose Money?” while Harris’s Chapter 1.1 is “To Whom Time is Money.” The books are published by some of the largest trade presses: Harris’s from Little, Brown and Company (a division of Hachette) and Odell’s from Random House (part of the Penguin Random House conglomerate). Harris offers an in-depth account of Stanford University’s history, and Odell discusses courses that she taught in the university’s art department. And indeed, Odell’s blurb appears on the back of Harris’s book. While aligned, Harris and Odell make categorically different arguments.

Harris offers a revisionist account of Palo Alto, eschewing capitalist narratives about the history of Silicon Valley. Bursting the glorified bubbles surrounding white male founders and inventors, Harris argues that California’s history is fundamentally about the antagonism between capital and labor. Harris frames the growth of wealth in Silicon Valley as stemming not from innovative ideas, but ultimately from the expropriation of land, racialized labor market segregation, and the conversion of public resources into private assets. Beginning with indigenous genocide and the seizure of lands from Mexico, Harris charts connections between different periods in California’s history and the economic dynamics underpinning mining, industrial agriculture, railroads, radio, electronics, defense industries, computing, and the internet. Emerging from Leland Stanford’s method for training trotting horses, Harris chronicles the Palo Alto System—a “regimen of capitalist rationality and the exclusive focus on potential and speculative value” (71). Rooted in world systems analysis, Harris’s internationalist narrative deftly illuminates the relationship between the region and the global movements of capital. Alongside, he incorporates a counter-history of labor militants, anti-colonial organizers, radical intellectuals, and disgruntled students who are also active in and around Palo Alto. Decentering the role of individuals, Harris’s book ultimately illuminates the

impersonal, material forces that shape California's history.

In *Saving Time*, Odell argues that there are multiple kinds of time. Some temporal frameworks are rooted in the “extractive mindset” (xvi) of capitalism and colonialism, which abstract and homogenize time. She offers a critique—attentive to class, race, gender, and ability—of standardizing temporalities and their imposition and internalization. Odell illuminates other conceptions of time that are heterogenous, nonstandard, and ecologically grounded. She denaturalizes systems for measuring and keeping time, illuminating the politics embedded within clocks, time zones, and hourly wages. She hopes to change ways of speaking about time in order to locate and inhabit agency. Odell responds to what she terms “declinism” (157), or the sense that the social world is inevitably doomed. Arguing against this deterministic pessimism, she writes of the fundamental uncertainty and possibility that dwells in the present.

From my vantage, these two writers belong to a shared tendency: children of Silicon Valley turning toward Marx. Odell and Harris offer critical histories to help us understand problems that are felt personally and connected to larger structural forces. Both dig where they stand, studying the immediate context that shaped their upbringings. They denaturalize what is oppressively normal. They probe the allure and the cloak of California's mythologies. Both capture the sense that the future is unwritten and up for grabs.

I see the two books as continuing a tradition of California noir. Harris and Odell are private investigators, not in the sense that they are hired to track down cheating spouses or stake out houses, but in that they are conducting their own investigations. Both books possess the gaze of the person on the case, piecing things together and trying to grasp the bigger logic. Harris opens his book with dead bodies. He describes the alarmingly

high number of teenagers in Palo Alto who have committed suicide at the railroad tracks, setting up his history as providing a context to understand these deaths. Odell's introduction juxtaposes a travel influencer sponsored by a shoe company named Tropicfeel with Javanese sulfur miners whose lives will be cut short by exposure to toxic sulfuric gases. Indicative of a noir tendency, both books give readers an ominous and discomfiting sense that things are not what they seem.

While similar, the two books have different structural approaches. Harris's book is structured by time, while Odell's is structured by space. Harris walks his readers through five sections that move chronologically forward in time from 1850 to 2020. Odell's book progresses through a day-long trip looping around the Bay Area, traversing the port in West Oakland, the 880 freeway, a South Bay mall, a park in Palo Alto, a beach near Pescadero, the coastline in Pacifica, a community library in San Francisco's SOMA neighborhood, and the Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland. Harris's book proceeds along a timeline, while also revealing the cycles, patterns, and repetitions that define California's capitalist class. Odell loops around the Bay Area while noting the stacking of rock layers, which index a temporal progression through geological time. Both books use lines and loops as interpretative frames for understanding place and history.

Reflective of divergent writing modes, Odell's book is rooted in associative thinking, weaving between personal experience, news items, scholarly writing, art, and popular culture. Her prose is expansive, as it roams and veers to a wide range of subject matter. Odell's book moves like hands on a ouija board, hovering over some of the key questions that define our period: how to respond to climate change; how to resist mass incarceration and structural racism; how to integrate the wisdom of indigenous communities; how to organize gig workers; how to relate to

social media, and so forth. The point is not that Odell is saying something distinctly new about each of these, but that she takes readers through a thought process about the politics of time. Reading her book feels like sitting next to someone at their laptop who has fifty browser tabs open and wants to explain how they all connect. Odell writes from experience: she narrates a particular experience and then follows the lines of thought that emanate from it.

While Odell integrates memoir and cultural analysis, Harris's book is grounded in narrative nonfiction. To paint a portrait of Palo Alto, he foregrounds the stories of key figures and organizations that stand in for different periods in the city's history. The book distills each period by following various *dramatis personae* through a historical trajectory. Harris relies on character and plot, tucking revisionist arguments within the flow of narrative arcs. He details the shenanigans of major Palo Alto figures such as Leland Stanford, Herbert Hoover, David Packard, and Peter Thiel, allowing readers to grasp them as the opportunistic scoundrels that they were. He introduces persona and themes, which come to resonate with elements in ensuing decades. Harris's book brims with interpretative takes about each period and topic that he touches. Reflective of Harris's skill as a raconteur, his book is full of unexpected narrative details and twists, which produce *no way!* moments for readers. Using zingy, conversational language, he connects the surprising origins of disparate things—Bank of America, the American Association of University Professors, IQ testing, Sun-Maid raisins, *Maximum Rocknroll*, Chuck E. Cheese—to fundamental political economic antagonisms. These narrative threads ultimately reveal the character and causes of Palo Alto as a place.

As contributions to critical studies of California, Harris and Odell offer correctives to the colonialist fables that many children learn about their state

in public schools. The two writers cast a critical eye on the politics of the Bay Area and help equip us to say: *no, this is some bullshit*; or in Harris's words, "the California dream was always about land speculation premised on racial exclusion and domination" (379). Ongoing race and class antagonisms fuel the gravity of the state's ecological and political economic crises. Both Harris and Odell bring our attention to cycles and repetitions. Capitalists re-package speedups and wage suppression as though it were something new and innovative. Labor organizing and anti-colonial movements also unfold in recurrent cycles of struggle. Perhaps history moves more like a loop than a line. These two books present frames that can help make sense of the current conjuncture in the Bay Area.

Harris and Odell offer excellent examples of how to write about one's place of origin. Both writers invite us to look more closely at the cities and regions around us; places we may think we already know. Odell writes, "to think you love and appreciate something or someone is, unfortunately, not a guarantee that you can assign them their own reality or that you know them at all" (158). In addition to a more observant eye toward our surroundings, Odell argues for a relational understanding of place; that one is in, of, and a part of a place. Similarly, Harris's book stimulates awareness about one's own relationship to "the grand NorCal tradition of labor-market segregation" (515). Both projects attend to regional specificity and what is particular about the Bay Area. They illuminate how place-based research can be a resource in orienting to the contemporary crises unfolding in California and the broader social world.

Both books illustrate how to research and write outside of the academy. Academic writing is fundamentally driven by institutional demands. To get or keep an academic job, scholars must publish peer-reviewed monographs and articles. As neither are writing for tenure

dossiers, Harris and Odell carve a space for research beyond the university. Their books indicate a mode of study released from the constraints of higher education at a moment when colleges steadily substitute sub-faculty labor for stable, full-time positions. As tenure track jobs are increasingly harder to find, Harris and Odell provide a model for doing research on their own terms. Harris is also frank about how he understands the broader function of institutions like Stanford University, namely providing “research and development on behalf of the capitalist class rather than any individual firm” (243). Incorporating an expansive body of interdisciplinary literatures, both writers are not tripped up about disciplinary boundaries and training. Unphased by bourgeois anxieties about disciplinary authorization, Harris and Odell authorize themselves to cover a wide range of subjects. Reading the two books leaves me with these questions: why am I writing? Who am I writing for? What aims and motives drive my research? The two books suggest that researchers can follow our own assignments, rather than complete those assigned to us by institutions embedded in the production of what Harris refers to as “achievement subjects” (564).

Reading Harris and Odell provokes reflection about formal and structural choices within book manuscripts. While research-driven and brimming of endnotes, these two books are decidedly not academic. They are doing something else besides adhering to academic writing conventions. Scholarly writing distills and front loads the argument within the introduction, which articulates its intervention within an ongoing conversation. Academic writing is argument-driven, presenting relevant evidence to support the thesis. Taking up a different mode, Harris and Odell opt for a slow unfolding of narrative and a constellating of disparate examples, respectively. Less concerned with presenting an air-tight, singular contribution, Odell walks readers through a thought process about

time, her life experience, and the contemporary moment. Harris does not give up the argumentative goods in the introduction, but instead regales readers with colorful narratives punctuated by suspenseful chapter endings. These two books open up questions about writing genres: the uses, resources, and limits of particular writerly modes.

Harris and Odell's books have some clear implications. Harris ends his far-reaching history with a simple and direct proposal: land back. He makes a case for why Stanford University should cede its land and assets to indigenous communities. He offers this as a modest step toward the wider project of overcoming the doomsday machine that is the capitalist mode of production. Odell encourages readers to become aware of a particular experience with time, one she characterizes as "an interruption, an apprehension, a glimpse both of truth and of something completely different from what we normally see" (106). For her, these experiences of non-normative time can open up a different way of seeing history, the future, and our own place within them. *Palo Alto* and *Saving Time* offer specific struggles to take up as well as particular qualities to cultivate in our daily lives.

These two books resonate for me as I come from a similar moment and place. I am not from Santa Clara County, but the adjacent San Mateo County. I grew up in Moss Beach, an unincorporated section of the coast a few miles north of Half Moon Bay. Odell drives through Moss Beach between chapters four and five in her book. I am the same age as Harris and Odell. I too have turned toward Marx. As an undergraduate, I took courses in Marxist theory with Richard Wolff who was a student of Marxist economist Paul A. Baran, a Stanford professor whose story Harris chronicles. I also have been schooled by cultural currents and social movements specific to the Bay Area. Reading the work of writers from the

peninsula helps me to understand the region and brings me into deeper relationship with the past, present, and potential futures of California. These texts allow me to feel more alive to where I come from and to interrogate my own delusions about place. They also clarify that to think about California is also to think about the broader world.

References

Davis, Mike. 2002. *Dead Cities: And Other Tales*. New York, New Press.