The History of Forgetting
Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORIES OF FORGETTING

Just west of downtown Los Angeles, over fifty thousand housing units were torn down in the period 1933 to 1980, leaving an empty zone as noticeable as a meteor's impact. Only some of the lots have since been filled. Many look the same as the day the buildings went down, twenty or thirty years ago. High-rises stand directly beside barren hills, near weedy patches of old foundations. Along Sunset Boulevard, the stone staircases of former Victorian houses now lead to nothing at all.

Virtually no ethnic community downtown was allowed to keep its original location: Chinatown, the Mexican Sonora, Little Italy. In 1930, 20,000 people resided in the four blocks around Olvera Street. Now only a few hundred live there. The overall population downtown is lower than it was in 1890, unless the homeless are included. New plans for revitalization have failed to revive much. Business streets immediately west of Olvera Street remain as dead as a violated graveyard — a warning that downtown will be forgettable even while it continues to be built.1

And yet the clues are still there. Two tunnels exit from downtown, but there is no hill above them, as if a large bird has flown away with it. Numerous lots west along Sunset Boulevard have steps on to what clearly used to be a house. Creaky Victorian cottages are stranded along streets just south of Sunset, cut short by a roaring freeway.

Most of this book centers on neighborhoods just west of downtown, on interviews with residents from 1979 to 1994. This is their imaginary map of community life under fire, while the world around them is being systematically erased.
The need to chronicle their responses is very pressing in Los Angeles, particularly since the impact of Mike Davis’s *City of Quartz* has staked new ground in the history of how communities are destroyed by failed policies.

But their responses are very changeable, similar to memoirs after a political shock: new information drops in, old details disappear. And to add even more complication, in city hall, the myths that propel urban planners to demolish neighborhoods can be utterly phantasmagorical. And finally, there is the inattention from the public at large. Every morning for over thirty years, over 200,000 cars passed the bulldozing of these neighborhoods. Despite a few organizations that tried to rally support against these urban plans, there is virtually no record of complaint on a mass level. Most Angelinos I interview, even those who live immediately in the areas affected, have barely a dim memory that these neighborhoods stood at all. The overall effect resembles what psychologists call “distraction,” where one false memory allows another memory to be removed in plain view, without complaint – forgotten.

In 1974, when I first moved to the neighborhoods west of downtown Los Angeles, I was soured by the omens I sensed there. One vacant store had been a kosher butcher shop in the fifties, now with a rusted sign, but very similar to the dismal store my father had run in Brooklyn for thirty years. In an utter reversal of Proust sipping tea, I remembered the smell of raw meat in the sawdust on the floors, the armies of cockroaches under the display cases, the look of chicken guts stuck to the sides of garbage pails out back.

I learned that across the street from my apartment, on Glendale Boulevard, Tom Mix used to ride a horse to work from his ranch in Mixville (now a Hughes market shopping center). But no recognition could be found anywhere that the entire film industry had once been centered there (1912–20). It was clear that the city of Los Angeles would never announce formally that the movie business had started in what was now, forgettably, a “Mexican” neighborhood. At first, the sheer neglect left me dreary, reminding me of family repression during my own childhood. It took at least a year for me to realize how much vitality existed west of downtown.
In 1979, I bought what had formerly been a gang house in Angelino Heights, with no plumbing that worked, leaking drains flooding the basement, dank old carpets everywhere, graffiti carved into some of the wood trim, and practically no working electricity. It took twelve years to restore. During that time, I gradually made peace with the absurdity of my Brooklyn memories, and discovered I had a lifelong fascination with high urban decay, and with the gradual uncovering of urban ruins. By 1986, I was running a series of lectures about the level of public neglect and bad faith in Los Angeles, entitled “Beneath the Myths.” I started taking students on what I called “anti-tours.” I would stop at locations where no buildings existed any longer, tell them what had been there once: a movie studio, a whorehouse, whatever. We would get out, look around, and agree that it was gone all right. I showed them as many interiors as I could find, but only if they were inhabited; no museum artifacts allowed.

Clearly, those anti-tours and lectures were the origins of this book. I was learning about contractors, ordinances, old and new tenants, shifting demographics — the chain of production that generates the image of a city street. At the same time, while researching on animation for ten years, I noticed that the drawings and pencil tests made before a cartoon was finished often betrayed more about the real intentions than what finally showed on the movie screen, even though the earlier versions usually were just thrown in the trash. “As film, pencil tests can look very unsteady and not always flattering, though I find them exciting and vulnerable to watch. They are a record of how a scene is built, virtually from the first line.”

The sheer numbers of erased versions, and the many animation crafts people I interviewed utterly changed my understanding of what takes place when mass culture is produced: that a pecking order had to be studied — who came first, who finished up, who controlled the budget. The same clearly was true of Los Angeles’ history: the final version was the whitewash, or the conciliation, the ad that went public.

I realized how utterly inefficient this chain of production was, no matter how much greed and corporate ideology lay behind it. Throwing out mistakes, or even successes (but from the “wrong” people) was another source of erasure. Also, the sheer ineptitude very often generated worse problems. The direction of a “rumor made solid” resembled a labyrinth of missteps more than a demonic process, even when the results were demonic indeed.

In the minds of consumers, the source of these erasures resembled what psychologists call an *imago*, an idealized face left over from childhood
– a photograph, the color of mother’s dress on the day she took ill (the photological trace). For example, we see in our mind’s eye the war in Vietnam primarily as two photographs: a general shooting a man in the head; a naked girl running toward the camera after being napalm.

These imagos are preserved inside a mental cameo frame (itself a fiction: who knows what is inside?). If we concentrate, the imago seems to be waiting for us intact: a photo, a document, a table of statistics, an interview. It remains where we put it, but the details around it get lost, as if they were haunted, somewhat contaminated, but empty. Imagos are the sculpture that stands in the foreground next to negative space. Imagos are the false light that defines chiaroscuro. They are the rumor that seems haunted with memory, so satisfying that it keeps us from looking beyond it. The imago contains, as Kristeva describes so vividly, “once upon blotted-out time,” when “forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning.” However, when the flash is over, much of what remains as urban history is picturesque, in itself a form of erasure.

Therefore, very soon into this project I realized that imagos – or phantom limbs, or whatever one called them – are extremely deceptive. They make poor evidence, even when one finds the “imago” photo or video, as I will show when I try to follow the perverse journey that the George Holliday video of the Rodney King beating has taken. The shock value obscures entire stages in the political history of collective memory. And the traces from one reception to the next are too faint in themselves to build much of a case. The mystery therefore is not how to find clues to an “abject” crime. It is about perception itself – as a political context. Why do people fail to see “the obvious?” Why is imaginary identification so difficult for things so clearly in one’s best interest? Like Poe’s famous “purloined letter,” the clues sit openly on the mantelpiece, but are utterly unfindable. Something in the obviousness of them makes them instantly forgettable.

In the chapters to follow in this book, the “phantom limb” is often an empty lot where a building once stood, perhaps on Sunset Boulevard. Scraps of lathe and façade mix in piles with broken brick. The foundation is momentarily a ruin, like a photo of someone’s toothless mouth held wide open. The grading left by the bulldozers form ridges along the dust. It seems that if you could simply rest your ear close enough to the point where the blades have sheared away the joists, there might be the faint echo of a scream, or a couple talking at breakfast. Your imagination tries to see those people, based on the evidence, but doesn’t find enough at
empirical form of history that did justice to the fictional side of booster-isn, to stories about urban myths that are built. Fiction became "history's handmaid," like novels of the 1830s, Balzac's and Scott's in particular, where chapters of historical narration would be inserted whole. Also, in histories by Carlyle, Guizot Michelet or Macauley, the ear of the novelist was unmistakable. While sorting out this project, I often wondered if the rash of novels by historians in the 1990s represented a return to that crossed identity, to make the scholar both reader and character within the same text.

Also, I found that the structure of chapters often required inserts of fiction, to document the chain of popular memory. To keep each layer properly and honestly in place, I decided to use my evidence at an earlier state of production, before it is synthesized into a single chronicle, fictional or scholarly. In many ways, the materials I have assembled look like research gathered by a novelist before the novel is written, before the writer turns the contradictions into a character-driven story. Like blending notes with a diary, I plan to leave the chronicle often, to break off into essays on the social history of media, and of Los Angeles. That way I can describe the rumors and hearsay more as I received them, in the literary spirit in which they were delivered, as fictions. At the same time, I can take my leave of the fictive regularly, and write as an urban mass-culture historian.

Obviously, this enters the divide of postmodern writing. And that generally requires a full medley of critical citations. However, what interests me most about postmodern debates is their permissions for new writing – new literary experiments possible as a result of decades of ground-breaking work. There are clear signs that both critical theory and cultural studies have generated what amounts to a new category of literature (as yet unnamed). What names there are sound a bit early in the cycle right now, clearly not what this "genre" (?) might be called ten years from now: docu-novels, "mockumentaries," false autobiographies, public autobiography; "faction;" phonebooks or chat lines as variations of personal essay; public autobiography; "witnessing" as Dick Hebdige describes his new work of the nineties (the structure of his books, along with his advice, were an influence on this project); historiographic metafiction.

I would rather not add more labels. Instead, I'll stick to the term "history." That is problematical and fictive enough already. More specifically, I am interested in the history of mass culture as an alternate form of literature, how popular memory makes for a very uneasy form of
research. In this book, my primary sources are urban planning reports, local interviews, the detritus of neighborhood conversations, urban legends, movie locations, and so on. Primary or otherwise, sources of this type, even when they look more empirical inside scholarly articles, are unstable and fundamentally fictional. Therefore, to be honest, the text I produce must be partly autobiographical. What else can a history of collective memory be but a rigorous diary about unreliable documents?

The documents are a mix of history, fiction and urban anthropology: more a form of historicized ethnography, always cooked, certainly never raw. Like the ethnographer, the historian of urban mass culture is the outsider who takes a reflexive journey into the vagaries of diary, of the destabilized text. The people who are interviewed sense the researcher studying from outside. They change their memory to be helpful, like an uncertainty principle, which becomes doubly uncertain once the historian writes their story down. The page in print becomes a contagion of fictions, a form of literature.

This trope that compares memory to contagion resembles a diasporic journey, where the “past” is “reinscribed and relocated.” It can be identified as the axis between colonization and decolonization. Or the tension between objectivity and objectification. Most of all, the structure of chapters resembles the dialogues within a city street, continuously in a state of interference and restatement. They cannot be recorded as a fixed object, only as traffic through intersections, invaded by noises, interrupted by other conversations. These are studies on how memory is “contaminated” by imagery.

Critics as sources: In a project of this sort, little is accomplished by simply itemizing talmudically the dozens of authors and art makers whose work fits into the broad category of “forgetting.” The writers who have been the most valuable to me while working on this project were Virginia Woolf, Foucault, Barthes, Baudelaire and Benjamin, more a cosmology than a bibliography.

Perhaps no historian of mass culture has detailed the trope of memory/contamination more thoroughly than Foucault, even down to his continual use of phrases that suggest binaries erasing each other, a “perpetual state of decomposition and recomposition.” One false memory “is present, while the other has ceased, perhaps a long time ago,” inside the web of “impressions, reminiscence, imagination, memory — all that involuntary background which is, as it were, the mechanics of the image in time.” That sense of binaries breaking down is crucial to this project.
Another source for me has been a colleague, Sande Cohen, anti-historiographer and Nietzschean anarchist, in statements like the following: “I am involved in the production of anti-production, to prove there is nothing there to be lost.” What is received has already dissolved, or never was, except as text. The fiction of memory is incontrovertible and unprovable.

Also, after over twenty years teaching in art schools, I have begun to see historical writing, at least about mass culture, as an installation piece harking back to synthetic Cubism. By installation I mean history as decomposition, about the anxiety of representation, about excisions. Evidence is a remnant left over by chance. Very often, historical documents survive because they were not important enough to destroy at the time. They are what was not consumed by the rhythm of events. To follow this analogy, the historian’s writing should include an open-ended diagram of what information cannot be found: the document that was tossed away; the cracks in the sidewalk where the roots of trees, now gone, lifted the street. For example, when I research mainstream cinema, I look for ruptures more than coherence. I don’t mind if the scenes fail to match, or the effects are uneven; and not because that is a Brechtian device, but because I like to sense the scars, perhaps where a cut was made – objects removed during the chain of production, at different stages of participation. The final version for me is only the survivor. It is the last step in a coping mechanism.

USING PRIMARY SOURCES ABOUT POPULAR MEMORY

In the first section, I employ the term social imaginary, 23 but not in the Lacanian, or in the post-Hegelian sense, which seemed too elusive for research on urban planning or neighborhood politics in Los Angeles. Instead, I preferred a version of social imaginary specifically about the built environment, particularly sites that were destroyed or severely altered: office towers where houses once stood; abandoned tunnels like the famous Belmont entrance to the vanished twenties subway in Los Angeles; 24 consumer simulations of neighborhoods, like Citywalk, near the Universal Tours. Documents sorted out by this model make the fictions of erasure easier to describe.

That is not to say that a social imaginary uncovers the “true” collective memory, as if it were a Dead Sea Scroll. There is no empirical way to
beam up the “actual” picture in one person’s mind, much less in a group; it is a disappearing phosphene. So what does a construct about popular memory accomplish? It maps erasures mostly, what in memory is lost when language intervenes – the sensation left by the unfindable. Castoriadis calls that place “the night of the world, the power of drawing images out of this night or of letting them slip away.” It is always fundamentally visual, and yet not visual at all, a “specular” site that escapes any category, and can be found only by the trail it leaves, by its evacuation.

The social imaginary, therefore, is a built environment that also contains an evacuation. It is charming, because in part it erases. That missing part induces suspense. In lectures to students I always summarize the social imaginary in a phrase: “A collective memory of an event or place that never occurred, but is built anyway.” Then, to warm up discussion, I give examples that are as tangible as the built environment, often not simply from Los Angeles. After all, L.A. is merely one paradigm for crises in mass culture throughout the world. The example that seems to spark the most focused response is the vampire.

Vampires are a Victorian social imaginary (c. 1840–1900). That is, in British novels and plays, vampire stories come out of a Victorian memory of a medieval folklore that never existed. Many of the details in the vampire’s dress, manner and power belong more to Victorian superstitions than Hungarian ones. When I guess which superstition that might be, I compare Dracula rising from the undead to Victorian male phobias about sexual performance. For Stoker at least, Dracula was very likely the incarnation of syphilis. In the Murnau film Nosferatu, he is the plague of cholera stalking victims in their sleep. Dracula’s powers, to gain sperm after sex, probably refer more obviously to myths about sperm and scarcity – what one historian has called “the spermatic economy.” But I have no space here to examine what went through the fevered brain of Stoker, or Sheridan Le Fanu, or their readers. Suffice it to say that Eastern Europeans certainly had next to nothing to do with the fiction itself. And yet, each year, thousands of tourists visit a castle in Romania that happens to bear the name Dracula – a title that Bram Stoker essentially pulled out of a reference book at the British Museum, perhaps because the syllables had marquee value. Popular memory has reinscribed the name with a historical space it never inhabited, not unlike the myths surrounding the potboiler novel Ramona that brought millions to Southern California after 1885, looking for a fictional mestiza, Ramona herself, and the imaginary mission where she lived.
From *Ramona*, I shift toward examples much closer to myths about cities like Los Angeles: policies toward slums often operate as a social imaginary. Consider who writes these policies. Often, they are responding to fears of upscale professionals afraid to enter a seemingly dangerous street. The professional middle class generally avoids slums like the plague, or escapes from them to greener suburbs, or mystifies them in crime films. Slums are a vital part of noir imagination, but rarely visited. Even their popular history – how they declined – tends to be very apocryphal, littered with half-baked theories that say more about white male panic, or fears of the Great Depression, than life in neighborhoods. Generally in films, and often in public documents, the “causes” of urban decay that are presented will amount to little more than rumor. And yet, freeways based on many of these rumors have been built, as I will show.

Nearly all forms of urban planning involve a social imaginary, and certainly those I describe in Part 1. That point can be extended infinitely, it seems, to include nostalgia in architecture, whether the buildings are homages in the sixteenth century to classical Rome, or citywalks in the 1990s – homages to imaginary L.A. neighborhoods. Nostalgia convinces the viewer *because* the actual events of the past have been forgotten. In fact, the past is not the issue at all; it serves merely as a “rosy” container for the anxieties of the present. Political ideology uses nostalgia in much the same way as architecture, ironically enough. It builds the unremembered. For example, trickle-down theories in conservative Republican politics are built on paramnesiac fantasies about fifties economics. These imply that business during the fifties boom was utterly unregulated (though taxes were in fact higher, and business was very much on a tight leash, pressured by much larger unions, asked to pay for vast government programs, from freeways to hospitals to public housing). However, since 1982 myths about an age when government was “off our backs” have been written into tax laws, shifting hundreds of billions of dollars from public infrastructure to corporate investment portfolios.

Social imaginaries can be extremely cruel. And it is very pleasant to attack them. But that will easily miss the mark. It is important to see social imaginaries as very practical as well. Venomous or not, they are clinical tools. Academic and medical disciplines will build social imaginaries that doctors and scientists use in surgery, in space programs. Any scientific map of the unseen that leads to treatment can be called a social imaginary: Freud’s imagined maps of the unconscious; maps of the atom; maps of the birth of the universe; maps for the faithful. However, if a prayer
consistently, even when they seem to look so different on first viewing. In the end, with grave reluctance, the passages that point out how binaries erase each other are cautionary, in the form of a warning, often not much more than a paragraph long, saved for somewhere near the end of a lengthy analysis.

BRIEF INTERRUPTION

This subject utterly absorbs me, but the details over centuries do not take us directly into Parts I and II. Also, to split hairs surgically, to point out how distraction is not quite what Webster's dictionary says it is — about confusion merging into entertainment — would take a lengthy review. The only solution for this introduction is a kind of hypertext (click to page 301). For the reader who is also interested in memory theory — tropes (clinical maps) about how the individual forgets — I have included an Appendix, entitled “Where is Forgetting Located?” Read it now or later, whenever it suits you. In it, I review how the “rhetoric of memory” has operated as a social imaginary, at least in the West, in systems of mnemonics, in theories of the unconscious, in cultural theory. I have centered the debate on this principle of simultaneous distraction; philosophers, clinicians and critics have observed the same binary paradox for millennia — how remembering scars. When one recalls a memory, one is also simultaneously forgetting to some degree, or effacing another memory, or simply watching the clarity decay. But to stay on track — how the collective forgets — let me merely summarize what is in the Appendix.

THE LOCATION OF FORGETTING

Even the topologies and tropes used to describe the “place” where memory is stored in the brain imply erasure. Over the centuries, this “place” has been imagined as a waxen tablet, an electrical trace, a cluster sparking on a network, a library made of eroding fabric, a mental theater with painted doors. In practically every version, the site is “built” from a highly malleable substance, or moves along a very slippery trail. Memories tend to efface easily, or lose track.

Most of all, they distract: if one memory happens to resemble another, one of these will be inhibited; in other words, distorted or simply “mis-
placed." When a memory is recalled like a car part from storage, there is no scientific certainty as to how it is put back, probably not as it was. Certainly the packing is disturbed. Therefore short-term memory means just that. Over 70 per cent decays within the hour generally. Long-term memory – events and ideas – vanish even more elaborately, inside yet another practical but imaginary construct, the unconscious, where forgetting and dream theory apparently meet, as parallel systems of displacement and condensation, or as language evaporating as it speaks.

These tropes make for marvelous fictions (even literally in the Surrealist sense of “the marvelous”). They conjure up images of leaky batteries misfiring, organic radio towers sending up bent signals. And among these fictions, displacement is the most ironic, most sardonic of them all, a system of flaking and growing, dead cells and new cells surfacing at the same metabolic instant.

According to the ancients and many of the moderns, the only hope for retaining short-term memory in particular (numbers, names, dates, nonsense syllables) – to protect against distraction – is through mnemonic systems, where cues like place, sound, or contiguity are assembled mentally in order to bring the picture back (“Where did I park that car again?”). But even here, memory is a distracted imaginary, essentially a filing system where information disappears or reforms itself whenever you touch it. Episodic and semantic memory are even less stable. They mutate simply as a result of what is present around them, like plants of different species making friends when you’re not looking.

Test: can you remember the five examples of short-term memory in parenthesis above? If for some perverse reason you can, how long before it will disappear, unless you package it in some way? Like this test, most work on memory theory in the West is fundamentally empiricist, primarily linked to salvaging memory. That has been the pattern since the Romans essentially. Save as much as possible. Keep the mental bookkeeping accurate. Civilization seemed to depend on immense recall. However, that attitude represents only a small portion of the literature on “forgetting.” In our century most of all, for reasons all too brutally obvious, at least as many writers have taken an anti-empirical position, that mnemonics was futile, even dangerous. The short story by Borges, “Funes the Memorious,” may be the classic position: a man afflicted by complete recall, who eventually is driven mad by his gift. In place of obsessive retention, Borges advises selective forgetting; and that essential argument has re-emerged in contemporary theory. Barthes summarized the
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argument best with a quote from Kafka: "We photograph things in order to drive them out of our minds." 33

What Barthes is warning us is that the Borgesian/Kafkaesque strand of criticism, above all, is a form of literature. "Selective forgetting" is a literary method more than a scholarly one. It is "distractive" history, where "presence and absence" 34 infect each other inside the same object – like a Joseph Cornell installation or a Jan Svankmejer film.

In terms of this book, selective forgetting is a literary tool for describing a social imaginary: how fictions are built into facts, while in turn erasing facts into fictions. I call this literary device "distraction," to remind myself that no matter how fancy my urban research, this is merely a story about how one person decides to forget – voluntarily or involuntarily. 35

When this technique – distraction – dominates a "story" utterly, when the contradictory impact of a social imaginary is the sole object, the "factive" result is what I call a docufable, for lack of a better term (it seemed the most innocent label that I could find, but there is not much music to it). A docufable is generally short, often ethnographic, a passage no longer than 5,000 words surely. I’ll provide a few examples of docufable in Part III, but will use distractive techniques throughout, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the subject.

DOCUFABLE

To narrow further: Docufable is a brief essay in a fictive voice that captures, through distraction, the instant when a memory is being erased. Visually, I'd compare it to special effects, a morphing program in slo-mo, when the simulation is naked, when the tiger obviously is three frames away from turning human. Or a documentary on a historical subject that ignores the historical photographs, and instead simply uses digital simulations that morph into photos, because the film is about an imaginary about to be built (for example, a casino, a theme mall, a movie set, a new expressway, plastic surgery on a body).

The term is merely another literary conceit that sharpens some of the issues for me. The word itself sounds passive, like a soft landing after a steep fall. I remember hearing someone’s dying message on an answering machine – before he took his life. It sounded stricken, but amazingly polite. So, too, my mother said goodbye to me on the phone right before she died. The theater of possibilities disappear. A frenzy and shadow take
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over. The tone of voice is distracted, as in many of the interviews for this book. The speaker is reminded of a personal shock, a grave loss from war or immigration; and speaks gently, as if trying not to move a bandage. The writer takes this information, adds social context and theory; but what results will read more like a novel about collective paramnesia than empirical history.

I will provide examples in Part III; however, the technique of simultaneous distraction reappears throughout, so the reader is officially “put on alert.” The writing style has to be more changeable than is usual in scholarship; it shifts to match the tone of the evidence. As Huck Finn said of Mark Twain: “There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.”

OUTLINE

In the chapters that follow (Part I), I will examine the map of what is left out in downtown Los Angeles, how urban myths (social imaginaries) have been used as public policy. In the second part, I present a docu­novel (or novella) based on Vietnamese immigrants who live in areas affected by these policies. In the third part, I present docufables from other residents in these communities, particularly about how their memories are affected by public traumas: drive-by shootings, racist neglect, policies toward immigrants, the Uprising of 1992, and so on. And in the final parts, I examine how literature and now media use techniques of the “unreliable narrator,” and how the corporate uses of “unreliable” memory are transforming the cultures in Los Angeles.

IDENTITY / COMMUNITY

I should add a paragraph on my own “unreliability,” my tendencies. Much of this book is about the uneven decay of Anglo identity in Los Angeles, how the instability of white hegemonic culture leads to bizarre over­reactions in urban planning, in policing, and how these are mystified in mass culture. However, I do not want to exoticize the pain that this violent uncertainty causes. I would rather honor the nobility I see in those who are left to deal with what remains afterward. Admittedly, I am sentimental about the virtues of community cohesion, particularly in poor neighborhoods. I admire whatever survives in the face of utter neglect.
That includes even a blunt, empty city lot. As I write this, however, I notice what a weepy side of my nature this suggests. If I painted myself as a parody, I probably would be staring at a construction site in a Caspar David Friedrich painting.

My garage office even suggests the fetishes of a Romanticist, despite my obsession with ruthless compression in writing and research. I store everything that looks like a pile of dirt left on the side of a hole. On one shelf, I keep a piece of the Berlin Wall next to a fossil of a Pleistocene bug, and beside that a pint whiskey bottle that was buried by a doctor during Prohibition, to keep his neighbors from knowing how much he drank. Next to that I have an eroded coke bottle dropped seventy years ago into Echo Park Lake, by a teenage girl forced to spoon with her oafish boyfriend, while wishing she could toss him into the lake instead. They don’t make much of a community, nor an identity — more like a collection of string; but they are satisfactorily in a state of absence. They remind me that most crimes are nearly not committed, and that only a fraction of crimes are ever discovered, or even considered worth remembering.

NOTES

1. Beyond the secondary sources on downtown’s removal since the thirties — e.g. Mike Davis, City of Quartz (London and New York: Verso, 1990); Klein and Schiesl, eds, Twentieth Century Los Angeles — infinitely more is available through primary sources in various collections, from articles to pamphlets to ephemera: Los Angeles Regional History Collection at USC, Special Collections at UCLA, various archival sources under Los Angeles history at the central branch of the Los Angeles Public Library, the morgues for the Los Angeles Times, the Los Angeles Herald, the Los Angeles Examiner, and through the key photo collections in each of these sources, as well as the William Reagh collection. The most extensive bibliography for the earlier twentieth century is Los Angeles and Its Environs in the Twentieth Century: A Bibliography of a Metropolis, edited by Dooye Nunis (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1973).

2. “Phantom limb” is another term that clarifies the issues for me. While it fits into this section of the text, it is also utterly phallocentric, but that can be useful, a reminder that much of this study is about men in power. From boosterism to noir, the sources are filled with phrases that sound priapic, comically omnipotent, and frequently destructive, simple as that. So the reader is invited to let all the double entendres “fly.” For example, why did “phantom limb,” a term commonly used in “polite” society during the period I discuss, not suggest the hidden penis? In the Victorian era, close to where I begin my diegesis, limb was considered a more polite word than leg. Roaches did not have cocks. Pianos had “limbs.”

3. Norman M. Klein, Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated


19. Clearly, I am interpellating here from Bakhtin’s theories of the dialogical. It is also important, within this category, to include Certeau’s work on the street, the many variations of Benjamin on flâneur, interpellated from Baudelaire’s essays and diaries: the scholar as empathic tourist, observing the simultaneities of urban street life. And Simmel’s essays on “adventure,” and on the street.

20. From Woolf’s 1931 novel The Waves (Bernard speaking):

Is it Paris, is it London where we sit or some southern city of pink-washed houses lying under cypresses, under high mountains, where eagles soar? I do not at this moment feel certain.

I begin now to forget; I begin to doubt the fixity of tables, the reality of here and now, to tap my knuckles smartly upon the edges of apparently solid objects and say, “Are you hard?” I have seen so many different things, have made so many different sentences. I have lost in the process of eating and drinking and rubbing my eyes along surfaces that thin, hard shell which cases the soul, which, in youth, shuts one in, — hence the fierceness, the tap, tap, tap of the remorseless beaks of the young.


The day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed before us by forgetting... Our purposive remembering each day unravels the ornaments of forgetting.


23. References to social imaginary appeared in French criticism during the seventies, as an amalgam of Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary Order and Althusser on ideology. They are central to critiques by the philosopher psychiatrist Cornelius Castoriadis.
Hegel may well be the "originating" source in this chain of theory, as when Castoriadis calls the imaginary "the night of the world, the power of drawing images out of this night or of letting them slip away," and then quotes directly from Hegel on the "night" of the self, "the empty nothingness which contains everything in its simplicity: a wealth of representations, images, infinite in number, none of which emerges precisely in his mind, or which are not always present" (p. 263). The imaginary is resemblance in reverse, like anti-matter or anti-memory: "the capacity to see in a thing what it is not, to see it other than it is," because "reality is that in which the do-able and the undo-able reside" (ibid., p. 263).

Another application of social imaginary has been applied from Foucault's theories on popular memory. Stephen Heath, in the conclusion to his book Questions of Cinema ([Bloomingtom: Indiana University Press, 1981], pp. 236–8), describes Foucault's interview on popular memory in Cahiers du Cinema in 1970, and its influence on debates in French film theory about the role of memory in cinema, and its role in what was identified as the "Cinema and History fetish". Other writers he cites are Pascal Bonitzer, J. Jourdeheul, Jacques Rancière.

In an interview with Foucault entitled "Film and Popular Memory," in the collection Foucault Live (Interviews 1966–84), edited by S. Lotringer, trans. J. Johnston (New York: Semiotexte, 1989), Foucault describes what sounds to me like a variant of "distraction:” that in the nineteenth century, historical memory was "obstructed" successfully by popular literature (pp. 91–9); and now is obstructed even more effectively through television and cinema. However (in response to a question about Ophuls' The Sorrow and the Pity): "it's vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, to administer it, tell it what it must contain" (p. 93). Since 1968, however, the efforts to stifle popular memory have increased considerably, until at last "popular struggles have become for our society, not part of the actual, but part of the possible" (p. 102).


25. A term used occasionally by Bergson: phosphene is merely the after-image left by bright light, seeing with one's eyes closed, when a deformed specular shock changes colors, then vanishes. See also the Appendix, "Where is Forgetting Located?"


27. Norman M. Klein, "Unearthing the Vampire," Sulfur, no. 5. The superstition I refer to is what the American historian Barker-Benfield calls the "spermatic economy," the myth that blood and sperm are produced in the body by the same organs. Therefore excessive sexual ejaculation causes anemia. The vampire's victim is anemic, caught in the sin of excess. The vampire gains blood during the sexual act, defying the laws of mortal sexuality.

28. Not only does Mike Davis mention this tunnel in City of Quartz, along with a photo of it looking nasty — graffitied, overgrown, isolated behind a chain link fence — he also uses it often in tours for students interested in research on Los Angeles (also scholars: see note 24). But even more curious to me, the tunnel is undoubtedly the one site that young people whom I interview have seen or visited personally, as the icon of lost downtown. They agree that it looks more cyberpunk than any of the other "lost" sites, like a burial chamber for a lost thought.

29. Martin Farquhar Tupper (1810–1915), a rather unremarkable philosopher to us today, a moralist who wrote in blank verse.
30. Again, for more detail on this argument, read the Appendix, “Where is Forgetting Located?”

31. Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings, trans. D. Yates and J. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1962). Also, in the same volume, Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis Terris, where the following appears: “All things tend to become effaced and lose their details when they are forgotten,” as quoted in David Lowenthal’s The Past is a Foreign Country. Lowenthal provides a breadth of sources on the role of memory in historical narrative. He narrows to the issue of forgetting specifically on pp. 204–6, by citing Funes the Memorious, and writing: “Memories must continually be discarded and conflated; only forgetting enables us to classify and bring chaos into order.” My point of view is a bit different: that chaos is a protection against the ideological dishonesty of order; and that chaos is in itself a structural, narrative form in many of the arts, for example in animation (see Klein, Seven Minutes).


35. Voluntary and involuntary memory, as in Proust’s distinctions; a pun referring back to the vast debate on memory during the Symbolist era, mentioned in the Appendix.

36. The opening page of Huckleberry Finn.
PART I

BUILDING THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY: 1885–1997
In 1888, following the collapse of a feverish real estate boom, L.A. was losing about a thousand people a month, from a high of about 65,000. By 1890, the population had fallen by a third. Land values had declined by over $14 million (in current dollars, that would be more like $14 billion!). And yet something substantial remained. There were still about 50,000 people left in the city. In only five years, the population had multiplied by 400 per cent. Unfortunately, the business infrastructure had not changed enough to provide jobs for that many people. The economy of L.A. was too primitive for a city of fifty thousand.

In a race against time, the new chamber of commerce turned toward the only industry that promised immediate returns – tourism mixed with real-estate speculation. Other doors were tried in the 1890s: attempts to invite industry into L.A., or to enlarge the citrus market (there was major advertising for both after 1897). But even as late as 1900, tourism still accounted for over a quarter of all business revenues – more than all manufacturing combined, and second only to agriculture.

To keep tourism healthy, as the foundation for economic growth, leading businessmen in Los Angeles personally financed a war chest for large promotional campaigns that went nationwide (a much grander version of what the old Board of Trade had done for L.A.). Exhibitions about exotic and fertile Los Angeles were featured in Chicago, in Iowa, at state fairs and world fairs. Hundreds of brochures reached millions of people, attracting the desired Protestant newcomers from small towns in the midwest, and also attracting movie producers with capital from “back East,” and cheap labor from all corners of America. The brochures promised a sunny, “green-acre” city free of urban stress and class warfare – in short, a farm town without unions, and without dark industrial tenements to interfere in the conduct of business.

To maintain the imaginary as the real and make it pay off, some problems were acceptable risks, others were demonized. Business miscues were acceptable. From Venice in 1905 to Mount Olympus in the sixties, there is a long history of failed real-estate projects going gray in the rain like the bones of mammoths. These were understood by civic leaders as the Darwinism of free enterprise. The less fit lose their mortgage. Los Angeles always has a great tolerance for the mess left by speculators. The hype of tourist advertising also brought the hucksters so much associated with the hard edge of Los Angeles: store-front dreamers, white-collar swindlers, and gambling rings. But these sins were also forgiven as a rule, not legislated away. They were
essentially bad eggs (white, but a little too hard-boiled), not serious enough to turn off investors.

What presented a far greater risk, it was felt, was the location of slums, where the less white and less middle class lived. Some of these slums emerged out of boosterism itself, as necessary for growth. Agribusiness, oil and the trolley industry campaigned by flyer to bring in Mexicans, Japanese, landless farm workers from the midwest – the cheap labor required to assemble this leviathan. Slums represented the highest negatives for well-heeled tourists who came to stay, and had to be zoned out of sight in some way. But they never disappeared entirely, not when so much activity was bursting at once. As a result, the grand booster campaign built two social imaginaries, not only the Protestant Jerusalem, but also the sinful tourist Babylon. The way these two contraries merged and distracted, from 1890 to the present, may be the easiest way to understand how downtown was erased in plain view.

By 1900, boosterism in Los Angeles had developed virtually into a public-service corporation, centered around three industries: tourism, real estate, and transportation. As those industries changed, the promotional rhetoric shifted considerably. The shifts were most evident during the late 1930s and the Second World War, when much of the background to the freeway city (or industriopolis) was set up; that is, the planning that altered downtown – from a rural to an industrial imaginary. I will present these as promotional “myths” that were designed by chambers of commerce, city planning, the motor club, and so on; then discussed as self-evident in city council meetings, usually with gusto and active contradiction – half fact, half cloaking device, a collective imaginary shared by those who ran policy. Finally, each myth becomes dated when it no longer fits the market. Then it mutates erratically into other schemes: the myth of the climate (1880s to 1930s); the myth of a freeway metropolis (1936–49); the myths of downtown renewal (1936–49); the myth of the pacific Byzantium (1980s, with the impact of massive immigration, and the internationalization of urban and suburban space).

And then there is anti-tourism, the collective “myths” of sleazy Los Angeles created by crime writers, screenwriters, filmmakers, mostly in reaction to the city that these consumerist policies deliver. First I consider the noir impulse (1930–90): apocalyptic myths emerging out of the underside of tourism and consumerism, including the extraordinary importance of the film Blade Runner as a collective imaginary, even for architects.
Then I look at noir after 1992: the crime capital of America, though statistically Los Angeles is barely among the twenty most dangerous cities in the country. Then I enter the local myths in and around downtown, particularly after 1980: the fictions being built under the shocks of urban erasure, massive immigration, the Uprising of 1992, the new, panicked media coverage of Los Angeles.

It is noteworthy that research on boosterism plays havoc with the chronology of postmodernism. L.A. appears more “postmodern” in 1900 than in 1920; that is, “post” before modernism arrives, decades before heavy manufacturing – a peculiar twist to Los Angeles studies.4

“Post” as in mass advertising, and a service economy, with exports and tourism integrated through promotion. As of 1900, the elite in L.A. depend on advertising as firmly as Rockefeller depended on railroad cars to freight and burn oil. Even manufacturing was subsumed beneath the ad campaign, in their eyes. Bankers from “back east” had to be promoted to come here, the same as tourists. In 1897, free passage was tendered to industrialists, if they were ready to invest.5 At the same time, in one more schizoid twist, these same investors could not fail to notice how anti-industrial boosterism tried to sound, promising that L.A. would never turn into another Chicago – no smokestacks, no skyscrapers, no pandering to big rail interests. Climate came first, the “smokeless city.”

By the twenties, that ambivalence toward heavy industry had all but disappeared. “Smokeless city” was part of a campaign to sell water power, electric power and big oil, as crucial to booster campaigns as sunshine and citrus.6 If this equality between machines and the climate sounds schizoid in yet another way, that is because the boosters always changed their pitch when new businesses required different tourists, in this case oil workers. Selling the imaginary was L.A.’s Weberian modernity, the totalizing device that explains how space has been built and perceived.

Therefore boosterism was rarely stable, though on the outside it promised to be. The ads looked deceptively harmonious, the tours as white as kid gloves. Indeed, publicly, the elite could agree on basic principles, to fight unions for example. But in private sessions, there could be grave acrimony and extreme panic. Once dollar investments or city ordinances were at stake, the infighting grew fierce.7

Even in boom times, when there seemed enough to go around, behind closed doors investors might go into a feeding frenzy, a free-for-all. For example, every ten years the infrastructure would seem to have become obsolete: roads, water, electric. Businesses would go to war to maximize
these improvements profitably, to get breaks at City Hall, to control zoning, city bonds, local ordinances. At the same time, politicians negotiated for pet schemes. Wealthy districts, yet another system of rival power blocs, fought each other over where to put which new road. The result was anything but monolithic: policies were stricken by massive duplication, made worse by contradictory, panicked reversals, and odd “myths.”

MYTH OF THE CLIMATE: WHOLESOME HEDONISM (1880s TO 1930s)

Lucky Baldwin was one of many entrepreneurs who arrived in L.A. during the boom of the 1880s. He came with a considerable fortune to invest, bought the land that later became the townships of Baldwin Hills and Santa Anita, juggled bank investments with horse breeding, lived with an opulent disregard for Victorian conventions, and got himself into various financial and moral scrapes (he was shot by a young woman who claimed he forced his attentions on her, was married four times, preferred much younger wives). Often, he stretched his real-estate investments to the edge of bankruptcy, but he died a very wealthy man in 1909. His biographer, a specialist in books about gilded-age plutocrats, wrote:

In real-estate promotion, Lucky Baldwin unquestionably was ahead of his time; and equally without question he knew his stuff. In reply to one prospect who protested that $200 an acre for some unimproved ground was too much, he answered indignantly: “Hell! We’re giving away the land. We’re selling the climate.”

Sales pitches about “the climate” repeat more often than any other in early brochures about Los Angeles. The boosterism continues in articles into the forties and fifties, and is well remembered in novels, films, critical essays into the present. As Aldous Huxley writes in 1939, the sunshine in Los Angeles worked on tourists like a spotlight, “as though on purpose to show the new arrival all the sights.”

The fantasy seems as light as the air itself, deceptively innocent. It is hardly a secret that the climate in Southern California is very moderate, a liberation from winter coats. Of course, the campaign far exceeded that patent observation. First, brochures from the 1890s repeated the claims made famous in travel books on Southern California written during the 1870s and 1880s, particularly by an Eastern journalist named Charles...
Nordhoff. To Nordhoff, Los Angeles was a Protestant Eldorado in old Mexico, a magical lotus-land of sleepy adobes and Mediterranean, semi-arid grandeur, but a potential mother lode for someone with Yankee ingenuity.

Then, the brochures promised health miracles. By removing oppressive humidity of all types (particularly industrial humidity), the air could cure tuberculosis, rheumatism, asthma, sleeplessness, even impotence. Indeed, the climate did clear the lungs for many (including Harry Chandler, who slept in an orange grove, and was cured). For a time, L.A. was called "the city for those with one lung." In the winters, as many as 20,000 tubercular and rheumatic patients would take the air, or the hot springs in the Los Angeles area, often within a mile of downtown itself. Health foods and sanatoriums were already a major industry.

Late-Victorians were obsessed about fresh air. What passed through an open window had to be invigorating, but not "emasculating." It had to be fresh enough to keep men "vim and fit." In the very popular medical handbook *The Physical Life of Woman*, the well-known Boston physician George Napheys advised that married couples should not sleep together without an open window, and even then, at least "twenty cubic feet of fresh air a minute are required for every healthy adult." The air space had to be larger than 2,400 square feet, to replace old air once an hour. "Rebreathed air," Dr Napheys warned, "is poisonous."

With such hazards facing even the moral couple at rest, consider how fresh the air had to be if one showed the slightest tendency toward illness, or degeneracy? Late-Victorians suffered from lung diseases much more often than we do. Dry air was considered one of the only cures. With Americans feeling invaded rather suddenly by urban expansion after 1870, by poor sanitation growing worse in expanding cities, by thickening traffic jams fetid with horse-driven carriages, by a plague of syphilis that seemed untreatable, medical texts of the day often described the body as a frail temple threatened by tormenting vapors. Germ theory was understood awkwardly, or not at all. To many, the air itself was a holistic science (like theories about body fluids in the seventeenth century, and medical cures by bleeding, practiced as late as the Civil War).

No wonder, then, that doctors' offices in Los Angeles often were built with porches on all sides, to ventilate the air for patients. What is more, it was air that made the soil curative as well. The air in Los Angeles was not only fresh, it was fragrant, very intense with the smells of what grew
During the Depression, the marketing of the climate seemed to backfire. Promotion about weather was cut back, particularly during the war years, when rationing made tourism impractical anyway, even unpatriotic. Also, the sunshine, lotus-land image was hardly appropriate for selling the new industrial Los Angeles so evident during the Second World War. When the Chamber of Commerce was interviewed by Life Magazine in 1943, a shift was apparent. In the modified puff piece based heavily on the interview, the reporter clearly was taking a slant very much in line with the new aggressive strategy of business leaders in Los Angeles. The subheading, provided by editors in New York, read: “The city that started with nothing but sunshine now expects to become the biggest in the world.”

There was blight evident downtown, a large Mexican presence throughout the city and many new factories; together, these added a new dimension to the selling of Los Angeles – a city of airplanes, shipping, oil and steel. Through the guidance of the interviews by the Chamber of Commerce, the article is peppered with references to L.A. aggressively promoting heavy industry, particularly Douglas Aircraft, to make the city “the aviation capital of the world.” The president of Lockheed was quoted as saying: “In any logical scheme the aviation industry should be back in the manufacturing center of the country and not out in a beautiful resort like this.” The city had outgrown its farm-town image.

It also began to outgrow its trolleys, radiating out in lineal fashion from downtown. Public transportation in Los Angeles has been held hostage to real-estate promotion virtually from the beginning. A vast inter-urban and streetcar system was built from the 1880s on, and it was promoted as the largest and most efficient in the world, approximately 1,200 miles of track altogether. However, the leaven that kept the system growing was not public need but land speculation. Most of the profits for Henry Huntington’s Pacific Electric empire came from real estate, not the fare box. And Huntington was not the only player. Land syndicates would invest in new streetcar franchises, buy up real estate near the proposed stations, then, after completion of the line, sell off quickly for considerable profit.

The premier builder of streetcars, General Moses Sherman, often formed a land syndicate with realtor/contractor Hobart J. Whitley and L.A. Times publisher, Harry Chandler. For example, an inter-urban line to Hollywood (pop. 500) opened in 1903, with considerable fanfare. Up to that time, it was known mostly for cattle ranching, pea farming, lemon groves and tourism (a few inns and the Stritchley Ostrich Farm). Now,
THE HISTORY OF FORGETTING

however, it was in the path of development. That year, Sunset Boulevard was opened west, past the Edendale area (Echo Park); Sunset was the first predecessor of freeway boulevard attached to downtown, and a signal of what was about to begin. Hollywood was formally incorporated as a city. At the Hollywood Hotel, the only location in the area that cabbies at the Alexandria downtown seemed to know, three real-estate agents established residence, waiting for a land rush into the Ocean View Tract, at the western end of town, north of Hollywood Boulevard between LaBrea and Cahuenga.

A brass band played for the first riders, at the downtown station at Hill and Fourth. Lemonade was dispensed. Then, along the way, riders were invited to meet local celebrities. At Cahuenga Boulevard, they visited the home of French painter Paul de Longpre, who specialized in Impressionist landscapes mixed with the sunshine of Los Angeles; visitors could also study his collection of rare hanging rugs. At the Outpost, the oldest building in Hollywood, General Otis, co-founder of the Times, originator of the Chamber of Commerce, leader of the anti-union movement, gave a lecture on the future of the area. Meanwhile, getting down to business, at the Ocean View Tract itself, “promoters piled bricks and lumber on alternative lots, which they marked SOLD.” Mounds of earth were added strategically, as if houses were about to blossom like sunflowers.

The showpiece of the streetcar system was the Balloon Route, so-called because it made a balloon-shaped circuit from downtown to the beach towns, then back again. In the teens, when the streetcar network reached its maximum efficiency, Balloon Route brochures were quite fancy, with three-color photo-lithos under vellum paper, the sunshine of a watercolor for free. They were pitched at the Sunday workman and his family, riding in imperial splendor to the ocean, where inexpensive property was listed for sale (land along the beach was cheaper than downtown, at that time). Venice was described as “the Coney Island of the West.” Redondo Beach was “the happy medium for the masses and attractions.” Huntington Beach was “the rendez-vous for the little families.”

By the twenties, however, the use of streetcars for weekend leisure diminished. With the quick speculative fortunes already made, the lines at their maximum, both the Pacific Electric (Red Cars) and the Los Angeles Railway (yellow Cars) began to show losses. They asked the city to buy them out, or to allow a penny fare hike, and fund improvements through city bonds. As a privately held trust, the transit system had lost its promo-
tional usefulness, even for its owners. Now it needed public revenues to stay efficient. The city's answer was to back off but keep promising. As a result, little more than commission reports on mass transit were funded for the next fifty years.

The history of how these streetcars were finally destroyed has been rehashed constantly, even in film parodies like *Who Framed Roger Rabbit.* In brief, the trolley system was eclipsed by the automobile. From the twenties on, routes endangered by auto traffic were allowed to go fallow. Attempts to expand the system, add subways, push for elevated lines were blocked, stalled, or deemed too costly – and not in the spirit of the sunshine expansion of Los Angeles. Much of the crisis also involved the three lanes that a trolley line needs on busy streets, so riders could mount the platform without getting swiped by a car. Rivalries between residential and commercial real estate produced a standstill, particularly when plans involved years of noisy construction to widen a key street, like Wilshire Boulevard, or drilling a subway. The result was a steady erasure of the routes, particularly during the Second World War, despite massive decentralization of a growing population into new areas.

In the sixties, finally, the truncated remains of the system were torn up – and with it went much of downtown. The interest groups who lobbied to destroy it after World War II included the auto and industries, railroads, urban planning commissions, suburban chambers of commerce, and, quite frankly, the majority of the voters in Los Angeles, whom it was believed would never support a city bond that helped the traction companies. There is also evidence that streetcars were linked in the public mind to corrupt, grasping railroads, the octopi from San Francisco or back East. During the first decade of the twentieth century, when L.A. leaders were fighting San Francisco railway empires, the Southern Pacific pressured to haul freight along streetcar routes. Streetcar companies were accused of milking city money to get land at brokers' rates. Help the traction companies? The resentment ran very deep, as part of daily conversation. Consider this anecdote: in 1906, oil patriarch Edward Doheny appeared in court to fight a $15 speeding ticket given to his chauffeur. This was the sixth ticket issued to a Doheny driver, and each time the millionaire Doheny, with a touch of the "shanty" Irish, would refuse to pay without first complaining to the judge. "Street car companies are constant violators of the speed laws," Doheny told Judge Austin. "Why don't you arrest them and haul them into these courts?" Judge Austin agreed: "That is ground well taken, Mr Doheny. I suggest that you have warrants issued in a few cases and cause
arrests yourself.” “I’ll do that, your honor,” Doheny replied, and paid the fine.  

Streetcars were run by the rich, above the law. Even plutocrats who were above the law felt so. Vestiges of this progressivist resentment remained. Even in the thirties, after the streetcars became hostage to bank loans, and hardly a threat to the great leviathan of Los Angeles, headlines still suggested that the traction plutocrats deserved their comeuppance. 

The car, on the other hand, was the great liberator, for cruising in the open air, at 40 miles an hour, along wider roads. The car became heir to the sunshine strategy, and the Balloon Route took on a grimmer aspect. Key streets were expanded as parkways: Olympic Boulevard, then by the thirties Wilshire Boulevard, after a decade of resistance by homeowners against commercial investors — the signal victory of the car over residential real estate, the spidery extension of downtown to the zone around the Bullocks Wilshire department store, and then the emergence of rival commercial zones along the Miracle Mile farther west. At the same time, the image of the trolleys continued to sink. By the late thirties, as noted often in virtually every newspaper, the streetcars, without unguarded rights of way, ran much more slowly than before. They were described increasingly as symbols of urban blight, too primitive for the new image of Los Angeles. 

What indeed this new image looked like becomes the next focus in this chapter. The next stage of the sunshine strategy, beginning with the late thirties, centered around the automobile, but also involved fantasies about the causes of urban blight, about the end of rustic innocence, about how to replace it with suburban innocence; and finally with no innocence at all. It is a Balloon Route of another sort, from downtown west, and back downtown again, over a period of fifty years. 

THE MYTH OF A FREEWAY METROPOLIS: 
THE IMPACT OF DECENTRALIZATION (1936–49) 

In 1937, just as the Depression seemed to be worsening again, plans for building the first freeways were released to the public. Schemes about what were called “elevated and crossingless motorways” had been in the news before, as early as 1906. Seriously in the mid twenties, and occasionally afterward. But now the campaign began in earnest, after a new traffic survey, followed by long articles in the Times, brochures from the
Auto Club, meetings of think-tanks and speeches in the City Council. The first freeway, the Arroyo Secco, was funded as part of an elaborate scenario for a new city, even including photo-sketches of an orderly cityscape that bore no resemblance to what actually stood at the time. Then, during the war years, the rest of the Babylonian fantasy was laid out on paper, and the expenses calculated.

Ed Ainsworth,\textsuperscript{32} writing for the \textit{Times} in 1937, stated the problem very succinctly: Los Angeles was “ideally situated … for this first great experiment in loosening the stranglehold of traffic.” The plan would rehabilitate business, and become “a national model upon which to mold the city of the years to come,” clearly a city dedicated to auto-mobility.\textsuperscript{33} Roads left over from “the dim days of the pedestrian, the horseman and the horse-drawn vehicle” would be modernized.

It took longer to cross ten blocks downtown by car (14 minutes) than by horse and buggy fifty years earlier. The traffic problem caused quite a furor, so awesome that it became a metaphor for a much deeper anxiety about the future of Los Angeles. The city seemed to be spiralling backwards.

Planning documents from the war years repeat very much the same message – an utter contradiction of the sunshine image of the city. Neighborhoods cannot “just grow, like topsy.” Business and housing standards were being damaged by natural forces. In fact, Nature’s bounty added stress. Stores and filling stations came too close to residential housing. Office buildings went up where they were not needed. Vacancy rates increased – as did crime. The natural, or unplanned, city was beginning to look more like Chicago than a rustic arcadia.

Like nature gone awry, the language describing these slums used bizarre medical metaphors: Los Angeles was afflicted by urban diseases, like a herd of livestock attacked by mosquitoes or an orchard threatened by the Japanese beetle. Planner Mel Scott writes (1942, in a report widely circulated throughout the forties, then expanded into a book in 1949): circulation is “afflicted by traffic fever,” with “sick boulevards,” and “high-speed arteries … ruined by straggling roadside businesses.”\textsuperscript{34} Even more unfortunately, Los Angeles was “blighted,” as shown on a map where 20 square miles of urban blight were darkened, like an x-ray of spots on the lung. Actually, blight is more a botanical than a mammalian disease – spots on leaves. In planning jargon, blight was defined as the first step toward slum, or terminal decay.

Despite the rude oversimplifications, many of these models were designed to address the problems of poorer, struggling neighborhoods;
Then Bauer explained how this "state of flux" was "changing cities." "Five or six million people have moved from open country to metropolitan districts since 1940," much faster than earlier. The number of farmers had declined, meaning that "urbanization is still roughly equivalent to economic progress." But what sort of urbanization? While the industrial labor force kept growing, it was not necessarily moving into the old metropolitan centers:

During the war, twenty billion dollars of streamlined modern war plants have been built, almost doubling the value of industrial plants in the country...

Where are they? Not in old city centers nor yet in isolated small towns, but for the most part on the outskirts of metropolitan areas.⁴³

Wartime industrialization and decentralization were crippling cities. The concern for these two problems transformed the image of Los Angeles very markedly, with the period after 1936 as the dividing line. From the 1890s on, the number who came from farm areas continued to decline in L.A., until by the forties they became almost insignificant.⁴⁴ Then, with the Depression, rural tourists, who had been rich and desirable in the 1890s, when farm prices had zoomed, now became associated with the dispossessed that Steinbeck would describe in *Grapes of Wrath*. From 1936 on, police at the state borders sent back thousands who came to L.A. from the Dust Bowl in particular, the beginning of a rude shift in image and policy, as declining services failed to keep up with the continual immigration from other parts of America. This policy, called the "bum blockade,"⁴⁵ was undertaken with active support from the L.A. Chamber of Commerce. In 1936, for example, the Chamber was invited to send a speaker to the small town of Blythe, about three miles from the state line, where eight LAPD officers were stationed at every highway entrance to the state. After the visitor's lecture, the Chamber at Blythe agreed to send a letter supporting the border checks to L.A. police chief Davis.⁴⁶

Clearly, the L.A. farm-city image had begun to backfire, and became a problem. Promotional imagery, for a time, was tilted away from descriptions of L.A. as a sunshine cornucopia toward L.A. as a home for those with industrial skills. Migration from the Dust Bowl was discouraged, even though that area of the country had once been considered crucial for tourism. Competition to attract government defense money was fierce during the war. L.A. became the center for military industries serving the Pacific, and many of these remained afterward, as part of the huge postwar defense industry here.
By the late thirties, and increasingly in the forties, the promotional image of the city was very much divided. There were two opposites that needed to be blended somehow: first, the sunshine city (1885–1929); second, the Depression, wartime, industrial city (1929–45). Somehow, these two economic strategies would have to be organized into a bivalve organism that was easy to advertise – a new urban model for planning and investment. Stated another way: how were profits made through decentralization going to coordinate with profits needed to save downtown? Suburban real estate was a plum, no doubt, or would be after the war. But most of the investment capital, and investment leaders, were still centered in downtown, along with the financial life blood of the city itself.

Catherine Bauer offered the following solution:

It's too late, if indeed it ever was possible, to think of “saving” the old city centers in their congested nineteenth century form. A regional organism is striving for birth, with centers and sub-centers and open areas permanently differentiated for varied functions, much more complex and refined than the amoeba-like nineteenth century city and hence requiring more discipline and conscious purpose.47

What these biological similes amount to is a plan for orbit cities, to be designed from scratch or enlarged around the knots where freeways would meet. The freeways would radiate from downtown, liberating the center from traffic congestion, while allowing for experiments in ideal city life without the baggage left over from old neighborhoods, with their shabby houses and what Bauer called “the dreary inefficiency of present cities,” meaning the roads, the blight and the irrational architecture.48 In terms of this essay, one image – decentralized suburbs – would be made to coexist with another: a revived downtown center. (The term Bauer used, by the way, was “decentrist.”49)

For lack of a better term, I have decided to call this social imaginary an “Industri-opolis”, essentially an industrial blueprint laid over a rapidly decentralizing city, like blending the City Efficient or Corbusier’s Radiant City with a sunny fantasy of the suburbs. In early L.A. planning (1908 on), downtown was still envisioned as rustic enough to absorb more industry. Industrial districts could be integrated with the landscaped inner city. The focus was still sunshine tourism, to camouflage factories beneath the picturesque, to please the eye of the tourist. Broad “Parisian” boulevards were to be added, along with agricultural parks, for “pleasure
drives," by coach more than automobile, and radiating out of downtown along wide, luxuriant streets. Much of this “city beautiful” model survived into the twenties, and the hopes for “garden cities” around downtown.50

The hatred of skyscrapers was profound. They caused slums. As one downtown realtor declared in 1910, skyscrapers were “damp dark dreary, dismal, drafty defiles of dim depths with denizens dying of dread disease.”51 Another developer added: “The vital thing in Los Angeles is sunshine and [not tall buildings]. Physicians [should] advise their patients to take the sunny side of the street because of the important difference in temperature between light and shadow.”52

Slowly the debate shifted. The industrial became more fundamental to the booster message, particularly after 1923. At city planning, directed very forcefully by C. Gordon Whitnall, schemes to industrialize roads were drawn. L.A. would be linked “scientifically” by widened parkways, later called highways, a grandiose transformation to be funded by gas taxes, based on a survey completed and ready to go in 1934 — and very much like the final plan years later. The federal pressure to think industrially was fierce as well. The Bureau of Public Roads was determined to finance a national interstate highway system.53 By 1937–38, the classic modernist adjective appears, to “rebuild [cities] along functional lines.”54 In L.A., “functional” also suited the new reform Mayor Fletcher Bowron, a “clean sweep” of downtown. Functional was honest, disinfecting.

During the war years, I detect a shift, unmistakably: the promise of highways cleansing cities took on the urgency of new defense plants in a war. Not much remained of the sunshine image of downtown anyway. With soldiers away, residential real estate was considered a losing proposition. Councilmen were warned by city planners that shopping and services would keep decentralizing — as indeed city managers were warned throughout the country.55 Therefore “a gradual change in the character of downtown Los Angeles was inevitable.”56 Better to make downtown “the home of big executive centers of business.”

On the surface, this suggested great optimism, but only on the surface. Like the war itself, the slums downtown reminded developers anxiously of the Great Depression, and of wartime shortages and rationing — a world on the edge. Housing shortages were severe. Poverty seemed to be bursting at the seams. Whites were frightened by the rapidly growing black population, 84 per cent larger by 1945 — 60,000 more blacks, with only 3,000 “new units for [Negro] occupancy.”57 Powerful interests pushed for isolating low-income housing in areas like Watts. Others held their
breath as whites left much too quickly when many blacks bought into West Adams after 1940. Less than two miles south of downtown, West Adams had been the premier neighborhood in the twenties.

Most of all, the Mexican presence was worrisome, more than ten times what it had been in 1910. From Boyle Heights all the way across northern and western downtown, Mexicans seemed to cast a racially dark shadow across the future of the entire region. Ironically enough, many of these so-called “pachuco” districts were very mixed as a rule, not even predominantly Mexican, but the malaise had become unshakable.

Nor did the end of the war quieten this foreboding all that much. Many downtown leaders remained convinced that the boom had merely been a fluke. The sudden growth of heavy industry might never repeat. Public-works programs would be needed to handle unemployment and housing shortages. By the early fifties the “Eisenhower era” confidence in business finally overcame the morbidity left by the Depression. But even then, there remained in the politics here as elsewhere a brooding anguish. Like the early Nixon campaigns for the Congress and the Senate, it was filled with hysteria about all forms of mass treachery.

Tear down or else: L.A. was by no means alone in this anxiety to rebuild massively. Hundreds of other cities had similar plans; what architect Richard Neutra called “Design for Survival.” However, the total commitment in Los Angeles was rather unique: “the L.A. penchant for large-scale planning.” In 1941, an imaginary – to-scale – Bunker Hill was put on display, at a public exhibition sponsored by the Regional Planning Commission. It promised a geometric wave of entirely new buildings, replacing virtually everything standing downtown. Time magazine called it a “Lewis Mumford dreamworld,” and added: “If the city planners could burn Los Angeles down they would rebuild it differently.” Planning reports described blight as more virulent here than elsewhere (it certainly was not, of course). Neutra asked: “Was this metropolis a paradise, or did there exist here a type of blight which fitted none of the classical descriptions?”

The first projects opened by 1940: Union Station; Arroyo Seco Freeway. But most of the finite details were hatched after 1940, during the Second World War: where to build freeways, what to tear down. The emphasis was on how to strengthen downtown by reducing traffic congestion. These documents do not presume a dying downtown. That is what threw me at first. Beneath all the jargon about suburbs, there remained an unshakable belief in centripetal urbanism. Suburbs tend to
strengthen downtown – eventually. Even during the fifties, downtown is treated more as injured than dying. Weed out the bad buildings; put freeways in place to get the traffic flowing. Not much beyond freeways seemed imminent anyway. Who expected these tall buildings in less than thirty years? Even the futuristic models of L.A. that were printed in newspapers looked unborn: blank models, faceless wooden blocks without windows or color – and too extreme to believe entirely. The general public apparently regarded them mostly as intangible. And indeed, for another fifteen years, very little actually was built. Many people I have interviewed told me that it seemed nothing ever would be done on Bunker Hill.

Nor had the appeal of downtown disappeared. The population downtown grew between 1939 and 1948, increasing the occupancy rate. The stores showed record profits, up 126 per cent between 1939 and 1948. Broadway and Spring were still lively into the fifties, home to first-run movie theaters, the major department stores, the large legal firms, the corporate headquarters. If you lived in Altadena, ten miles north, your doctor might still be downtown. Throughout the fifties, residents dressed a bit fancier to go “downtown.” And, visually speaking, the streets were no more worn than downtowns throughout America.

L.A. actually had outperformed most downtowns after 1930 – higher population growth, less deterioration. Every urban center had been languishing unimproved for twenty years, due to the Depression, the war, and the postwar recession. Midtown Manhattan also looked grievously stricken. I remember that well enough from my childhood. Even gentrifying areas in Chicago during the late sixties felt as slummy to me as much of inner-city Los Angeles. In seventies New Town Chicago, I would see nervous “urban pioneers” mowing new lawns, while only across the street drug addicts waved hello, and at the corner, weary alcoholics emerged from packaged liquor stores, and shoved brown bags under their overcoats when they passed the fancy remodeled Treasure Island supermarket.

We should not imagine throngs of hostile suburbanites running policy in 1950 Los Angeles. That is our reality today perhaps, but not as clearly back then. Downtowns were still seen as the heart that would eventually give life. That is partly why Robert Moses in New York felt comfortable ramming the Bronx Expressway through solid neighborhoods. Urban neighborhoods could survive. They were near all those people downtown. Of course, after a while, there were not enough of these people left in L.A. The hemorrhaging went too far.
anxiety about guarding against crime – crime being a code word very often for non-white slums too close by. Much of that anxiety centered, at first, around fears about Mexican neighborhoods close in, then later about African Americans. Soon it became an architectural necessity. Cars moved along guarded freeways. Civic buildings needed security against too many winding alleys or hidden public places. The so-called “International School” found its widely accepted mission after World War II, particularly after 1960, during moments of high urban decay, when cities seemed to need a quarantine. Crime-proof plazas became rather popular, probably not always for the reasons architects envisioned. These plazas removed street-level shopping, made the path up steps very visible, into heavily lit, flat areas, and made unplanned congregations of people far less likely (as we know from the complaints by critic Jane Jacobs and others during the fifties).

By the mid seventies, after the first decade of the Growth Coalition, this passion for safety became essential to the way downtown was promoted (on television, in posters). From a safe height, one saw the glass curtain maze, an overhead helicopter shot of a vertical Oz that was virtually unpopulated at night. From the helicopter, the chalk-white hives of condominiums resembled feudal walls for the great freeway cloverleaf, which became a sculptural medallion in the middle of downtown.

The shocks of the Watts Rebellion (1965) only aggravated the demand for more greater security, as if preparing for a siege, which I suppose finally arrived in 1992. As Davis explains in his chapter on “Fortress L.A.”, the rich districts were walled off very clearly against the poor. This was particularly true of areas west of downtown. During the eighties, with considerable investments left unprotected in real estate between Hancock Park and Fairfax, a wall of safety emerged along the Wilshire Corridor. Continuing into the nineties, plans for a “West Bank” beyond the Harbor Freeway will eventually extend this clear barrier between north and south all the way to downtown. The boundary is supposed to follow the arc of the Metro Rail, from the Wilshire Corridor up Vermont, with a lifeline extended south down Figueroa, past the expanded Convention Center, into South Park, and ultimately, if plans continue, toward the University of Southern California. Again, the shocks of 1992 have stalled that for now.

But the crucial turning was in the late sixties: the industri-opolis seemed at its point of highest efficiency, or at least the freeways were. L.A. was praised worldwide as a city that functioned extremely well. In
possibly the most famous homage to industriopolis, art historian Reyner Banham described the freeway system as a unique ecology. He compared it to a man-made climate, superior to nature, an “autopia.” He also meant that playfully: autopia, like the ride in Disneyland.

By contrast, Banham added a tiny “note on downtown, because that is all downtown Los Angeles deserves.” He saw no viable architecture there. A few office towers added near the Civic Center only revealed how hopeless the situation had become. Old pedestrian sites like Pershing Square and the pueblo area were corroded, proof that the residents of L.A. no longer cared about downtown at all. Downtown was “a badly planned and badly run suburban shopping center for those who cannot afford cars to get to the ‘real’ suburbs.” In the first illustration of the book, to show how badly planned the old downtown was, Banham included a photo of Echo Park Avenue, near the neon parking display of the Pioneer Market. The nest of store signs looked discombobulated beyond hope. Even today, that part of Sunset Boulevard is, indeed, quite a jumble. However, the neighborhood around it is one of the most stable in the city, and rather unique in its mixture of classes and ethnicities. In Banham’s eyes, except for an overhead photo of the freeway cloverleaf, downtown did not qualify as a modernist architectural superspace, much less an autopia.

As of the early seventies, the industriopolis presumably had achieved its goal, to fashion L.A. into a national model for the modernist city: efficient, sensually liberating, strangely free of an urban center, like a cognate of abstraction in art, a Rothko painting where the center floats in an existential absence. But it had fundamentally failed in the effect it had on visitors. The French critic Roland Barthes compared downtown Los Angeles to Tokyo: two urban giants evacuated at their center, as a strange liberation from classical codes of urban experience. But, in fact, downtown was not a blank cipher at all, far from it. It was more the scene of the crime, a crisis to ignore, the un-touristed non-image. One might say it was the tree that was designed to fall without anyone watching in the forest. It was a blank because the hotels had turned into flop houses, and they had been removed from the promotion of the city altogether, except in fantasy, as part of a nether world that one found in L.A. literature and film; and also in urban planning documents, as the downtown of no hope, a precursor of the “blade runner” city. It became the polyglot nightmare in people’s imagination, as famous in its way as the Sunkist orange.
THE MYTHS OF DOWNTOWN RENEWAL (1936-49)

First Myth: Bunker Hill and Forties Noir –
“Old Town, Lost Town, Shabby Town, Crook Town.”

These words, frequently quoted in descriptions of downtown L.A., come from Raymond Chandler’s novel The High Window (1942). It lays out a romance of urban blight that matches very closely what urban planners during the Second World War saw as beyond redemption. The passage describes the Bunker Hill area downtown:

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… They are all rooming houses now… The wide sweeping staircases are dark with time and with cheap varnish laid on over generations of dirt.

Chandler’s version of Bunker Hill is peopled with the hopeless and the criminal: “Landladies bicker with shifty tenants.” Old men wearing cracked shoes have “faces like lost battles.” It is an old neighborhood, with evil lurking beneath the quaintness, “little candy stores where you can buy even nastier things than their candy.” At “ratty hotels … nobody signs the register except people named Smith and Jones … The night clerk is half watchdog and half pander…” “Out of the apartment houses come women who should be young but have faces like stale beer.” Among the derelict types are “men with pulled-down hats and quick eyes; … fly cops with granite faces; … cokies and coke peddlars; people who look like nothing in particular and know it.”

Chandler’s description of the Florence Apartments, at the northern end of Bunker Hill, is suitably gothic: “dark brick in front, three stories, the lower windows at sidewalk level and masked by rusted screens and dingy net curtains.” At the entrance door, only “enough of the names” could be read. Out toward the alley, instead of sunshine fantasy, there were “four tall battered garbage pails in a line, with a dance of flies in the sunlit air above them.”

Chandler had lived in Bunker Hill himself, for a short time in 1913, before his career as an oil executive had transformed his finances — also before he was fired (in 1933). Afterward, he plunged into a new career writing detective fiction, living in cheaper districts west of the old metropolis, and also in Pacific Palisades. After 1946, with income from screenwriting, and a growing disenchantment with Los Angeles — in
his words, “that old whore” 79 – he moved to La Jolla. It is unlikely that Chandler had any direct connection with Bunker Hill after 1913, or even with downtown very much, but only with its reputation.

Bunker Hill had become the emblem of urban blight in Los Angeles, the primary target for redevelopment downtown from the late twenties on. A steep hill, rising from Fourth Street to Temple, from Hill Street west, past Figueroa, it represented 200 acres of impasse. 80 The hill stifled traffic. It offered little opportunity for commercial development, though it had supported a number of elegant hotels for decades. It seemed suitable only for residential housing, despite the Bradbury Mansion, the Melrose Mansion, the Armour House (also called the Castle). 81 By the late twenties, that housing also looked rundown. Its median year of construction was 1895. 82 Some 98 per cent of the homes had been built before 1920. Bunker Hill was the oldest cityscape in Los Angeles, with more showboat Victorians than anywhere else in Southern California, but virtually all of them were being converted into rooming houses.

After 1910, the social elite who had dominated the hill and downtown life started to move away, mostly to the new Adams district near USC. And Mexican immigrants began to take their place. As early as 1912, 83 the first proposals to remove it were made, but were easily resisted by the wealthy residents there. In 1915, rather than add a third tunnel under the hill, City Council offered to make two giant cuts at First and Second Streets, at a cost of $5 million, to prevent what was perceived as the isolation of new housing west of downtown. Again, organized protests by residents, including downtown businessmen, stopped the bond issue. A tunnel at Second Street was started instead, and finished in 1924 – the last formal improvement of Bunker Hill.

In 1928, in the spirit of quick fixes during the oil boom, a man named C.C. Bigelow offered to wash down the entire hill with the same hydraulic equipment used in mining, at a cost of $50 million. The city council took him seriously, and hired a consulting engineer, William H. Babcock, to check out the plan. Finally, in 1931, after an elaborate survey, Babcock suggested removing only the crown of the hill, at a cost of $24 million. Then no more cuts would be needed. The plan was to keep most of the residents out of the crown, and make it an “acropolis,” a term that reappears often in the thirties, 84 meaning “a citadel of local government:” courthouses, museums, and so on.

But residents living on the hill, particularly the few remaining wealthy families, fought and killed the bond issue in committee. Bigelow
announced that "the human equation must be overcome." In 1938, the City Council said: "We'll let the natural force of economics do the job." Depression prices would make the hill cheap enough to remove eventually. It already had been designated a fire hazard since the teens. Strict fire codes allowed very little new housing until the twenties, when a few Mission Revival stucco buildings were permitted.

After 1930, nothing new was built up there. Between 1930 and 1940, the population on the hill increased by 19 per cent to a density above 63 per acre, rivaling eastern cities. As of 1940, over 75 per cent of the residents had less than eight years of schooling. Most were immigrants, predominantly from Mexico, but also from Italy, Canada, Russia, Germany and England. Even more damaging, however, Bunker Hill housed a very large number of elderly retired people. This became the crux of the debate: where to relocate the aged – who claimed that the community was intact, and quite charming still – isolated above downtown. By 1957, the Department of Building and Safety identified 60 per cent of the buildings as hazardous, meaning worse than simply sub-standard. Police reports indicated high crime, and also considerable trade in narcotics, particularly just north of the old funicular cable car, Angel's Flight.

In the novel Ask the Dust (1939), John Fante remembered Bunker Hill as it had looked ten years earlier:

I went up to my room, up the dusty stairs of Bunker Hill, past the soot-covered frame buildings along that dark street, sand and oil and grease choking the futile palm trees standing like dying prisoners, chained to a little plot of ground with black pavement hiding their feet. Dust and old buildings and old people sitting at windows, old people tottering out of doors, old people moving painfully along the dark street.

In another novel of the Depression, Fast One (1932), by Paul Cain (the first major hard-boiled crime novel set in L.A.), Bunker Hill is the first neighborhood the criminal outsider visits, a world of molls, gangster dialogue, and professional crooks. Scheming losers live there. In Paul Cain's description of buildings downtown, mixed use and blight take on the Gothic spirit of Dickensian byways:

Ansel's turned out to be a dark, three-story business block set flush with the sidewalk. There were big For Rent signs in the plate-glass windows and there was a dark stairway at one side.
detectives like Chandler's Marlowe meet decadent rich women slumming with gangsters on gambling ships, or doing drugs in seedy back alleys (Farewell My Lovely is the obvious example). One might call these fantasy stories urban primitivism, like the classic image of young English women getting a tan among brown-skinned races, then committing crimes unimaginable in the Protestant normalcy of the Anglo-Saxon family.

After 1948, with the newly authorized Community Redevelopment Agency, and the support of powerful downtown interests, plans for Bunker Hill began again in earnest. The 1949 federal Housing Act strengthened the power of eminent domain. Forced sale of housing was given the strength of law; the seller could be forced to accept terms or have the building condemned, if the site was required for civic redevelopment, or for freeway construction. A battle of nerves began. Local residents resisted redevelopment through law suits, letter campaigns, and handbills.92

A related battle took place at the same time. During the housing shortage after World War II, there was a brief flurry of interest in adding low-income apartments downtown. Promises were made by civic leaders to reserve Bunker Hill and Chavez Ravine for public housing. These commitments had to be washed away, through a red-baiting campaign where public housing was labeled as communist. Once that succeeded at the polls in 1953, a much more corporate, upscale program for Bunker Hill was approved by City Council.

The newspapers covered the story mostly as a matter of nostalgia – the old timers versus the modernizers. In 1954, news of the upcoming Fourth Street “cut” sparked a few nostalgia pieces, about how “ghosts walk on Bunker Hill.”93 To make room for “a graceful 687 foot viaduct to soar eastward from the harbor Freeway … the old 4th St. neighborhood, with its stately homes and mansions of the gaslight era will be no more.”94 There was already a gaping hole on First Street, awaiting a new County Courthouse.95 Only the elderly are left to remember who lived there. Of course, memory in the aged is often symbolized by ghosts – old houses as white-bearded men. Art Hewett, reporter for the Herald, wrote:

Bunker Hill is a land that Los Angeles forgot. A strange place the city moved around, chipped at, went under and through, but hardly ever over.96

I am leafing through xeroxes from the CRA campaigns of the fifties against keeping Bunker Hill. One has a pie chart showing only 66 owner occupied houses left there, out of 7,244 units. Even more telling (and
highly exaggerated), a graph has the arrest rate as almost ten times the city average. Presumably there was nothing left to save. If there are only low-income renters, a neighborhood must be dead already, a crook town.

After eight months of hearings in 1959, the City Council voted for the Bunker Hill Renewal project, “the largest and most dramatic in the United States.” It would “keep our city from slipping backward, like San Francisco and New York in the population race.” And, more pointedly, it would reverse the “drift” to the suburbs. The opposition was led by Councilman Edward Roybal, who claimed that the hearings had failed to reveal a dangerous level of urban “blight” there, nor an inordinate amount of crime or disease. I am also struck by the tone of many newspaper descriptions of Bunker Hill in the fifties: “a tranquil island of faded elegance in the heart of this bustling city;” “the other quiet streets of Bunker Hill” — hardly the angle I’d expect for a cesspool of crime and tuberculosis.

By the mid sixties, Bunker Hill had been stripped entirely of houses. The planners decided to level the hill but to keep two tunnels, which remain to this day, as monuments to urban erasure. They also seal access for pedestrians going in or out. There is no comfortable way to walk east/west inside the Second or the Third Street Tunnels, except perhaps as a ceremonial dance of death. A few of the old Victorian mansions from Bunker Hill were moved to a site along the Pasadena Freeway, a fitting place: the building of that freeway had initiated the planning that made residential life in the old downtown practically extinct.

During the nineties, in an attempt to develop “communities” downtown, another quixotic master plan has been devised. These maps utterly ignore neighborhoods damaged around downtown, and concentrate more on stop-gap measures to control the problems of homelessness. But neighborhoods are like necklaces. When the clasp is removed (Bunker Hill as the key access from all directions), the necklace is as good as lost. It will take many years for a balance to be restored, if ever.

Also in the 1980s, another Bunker Hill was torn down: at least 850 units, with thousands more to follow, in an old area that is being called Center City West (west of the Harbor Freeway downtown). Clearly, some efforts are being made to avoid another Bunker Hill syndrome. The architects’ plans for this new imaginary downtown adjunct are glamorous, calling for a mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented district, with rich and poor reasonably close together, with high-rise hotels, medium-sized office buildings, apartments and even possibly small parks, with a small trolley over
the Harbor Freeway. It is a fantasy community, as early plans for Bunker Hill were, but beneath the elegant prospects there is also the death of a neighborhood, and the struggle to split up the financial pie (between developers, council people, the school board, Cal-Trans and slumlords). Twenty thousand people had once lived in this general area, now growing bald, and so erratically that wildcat oil wells have opened in some of the empty lots where houses used to be. Later in this book, I will examine its history, another version of the scorched-earth policy of the industriopolis.

Struggles to force developers to add low-income housing stalled the bargaining for five years, while tenants, understandably exasperated, even formed alliances with slum landlords to stay in their apartments. Meanwhile, the same landlords cut deals with developers to sell out, because for a while a full city lot sold for as much as $500,000. The sadness, the good intentions, the brokering for power and profit continued, until the final plan was approved in 1991, just in time for the recession, guaranteeing that the area will stay unbuilt, simply forgotten, for another ten years, or perhaps never be built.

Second Myth: Chinatown, 1887–1973 —
The Social History of a Tourist and Movie Metaphor

According to legend, there was once a Chinese underground city beneath downtown Los Angeles — a nest of catacombs where inscrutable sins were committed. Presumably it was located underneath the Garnier Building, south of the old Plaza, but the basement there was used mostly for storage, from bins of rice to live chickens, for the restaurants above. Rumors described secret entrances and “hatchetmen high binders” dressed in purple silks, who killed to win “slave” women, like the famous Helen of Chinatown.102 However, the myth of a Chinese underground came primarily out of white civic policies, as tourism, like the continual references in guidebooks to “whispering” streets with “all the wickedness of its old civilization.”103 From 1887 to 1909, the streets assigned for legalized prostitution were situated officially in Chinatown — and very much above ground, without any approval from residents there.104 The same was true for the opium trade (where dealers who signed the “poison book” for police could operate, free from arrest). It was felt that Chinese were used to opium and whores, so the sezier aspects of tourism could be isolated there, away from the other areas of downtown. Meanwhile,
the cribs for whores and the dens for drugs were run, and frequented, mostly by whites.\textsuperscript{105} As a result, white gangs, and addicts, would mug Chinese regularly on the street. In 1887, the center of Chinatown was burnt down, probably by arson, while the Fire Department nearby refused to answer the call.\textsuperscript{106} Chinese businesses complained constantly, but had little recourse. For generations, particularly following the Alien Exclusion Act (1883), Chinese were not permitted to give testimony in court. News articles with titles like “Trace Plot to Chink Student” warned of “coolie smuggling” through an underground railway, clearly exaggerated, as if immigration there were run by deviant subterranean abolitionists.\textsuperscript{107}

By the thirties, the image of a vice-ridden downtown had been linked clearly with Chinatown, particularly in reports about Fan Tan clubs by the vice cops who worked in the Chinese district: “The Chinese employ intricate ways of hiding their gambling ... cunning ways of stationing lookouts... To the average caucasian, all Chinese look alike... Officers sent to Chinatown are completely out of their element.”\textsuperscript{108}

Chinatown was also identified with the Mexican barrio nearby, known as the Sonora or “Dogtown,” and with the old vaudeville district on Main Street, which John Fante remembered as “neon tubes and a light fog [at midnight], honky tonks and all night picture houses ... secondhand stores and Filipino dance hall, cocktails 15c, continuous entertainment.”\textsuperscript{109} With Chinatown at its heart, this was indeed a blighted place, still popular for tourists, but also the home to a very stable Chinese community that had been there for over fifty years. The novelist and critic Louis Adamic described the Mexican part of the Plaza in 1928:

[Even] as it is, the Plaza district is the most interesting part of Los Angeles. It consists, for the most part, of cheap wooden tenements occupied by Mexicans and Chinks [Chinese], of various camouflaged bawdy houses, dance halls, forlorn-looking bootleg dives, hop joints, movie shows, tamale stands, peep shows, shooting galleries, and stores selling rosaries and holy pictures. Main Street North, the principal thoroughfare of the district is a moron stream, muddy, filthy, unpleasant to the nose ... an awful stew of human life...

But just as I write this, the doom of the Plaza is sounding. A few millionaire realtors had got together with the railroads running into Los Angeles and cooked up a scheme to build a Union Station on the Plaza, which would give a tremendous boost to the land values in that vicinity.\textsuperscript{110}

Adamic goes on to describe the Mexican church of Our Lady at the Plaza. He watches an old toothless woman praying there, then a few
blocks away visits a cheap dance hall with a “crowd of young Mexicans, frail-bodied, foppish, decadent-looking boys and girls, the sweat of their bodies mingling with the scents of cheap perfumes and talc; their deep-sunk black eyes aglow with a desperate passion for joy; humming American ragtime.”

The news was already on the street about $1.4 million of state funds and much private donation, from the likes of Harry Chandler and the powerful O’Melveny law firm downtown, designated to redesign the plaza area into a pueblo for tourists. Chief of Police Ed Davis even promised prison labor for free. To clean up the area, Chinese were evacuated from the Plaza, perhaps 3,000 residents gone within twenty years. In the thirties, the eastern end of Chinatown was torn down, to make way at last for the Union Station, while the site of the old cribs was allowed to burn down (for fear of contamination by bubonic plague; a new central post office was built there a few years later). Still, in the forties, around the Union Station, picturesque blight dominated, with some of old Chinatown left, much of Main Street, the Sonora, and farther northwest, up hills, along dirt roads, part of Chavez Ravine looked to some like a failing chicken farm. And presiding over the entire area, what some called the “acropolis,” Bunker Hill. By 1949, all that was slated to go, as Times columnist Lee Shippey explained:

The one hundred million dollar grant for slum clearance which the city has secured from the federal government should turn Chavez Ravine and other breeding places for delinquency and disease into pleasant, sanitary and well-serviced areas for low-income families. [Finally, of course, Chavez Ravine was turned over to the Dodgers for a baseball stadium] ... The thirty-five million dollar additions to the freeway system are resulting in the clearing away of ugliness which used to face the Union Station, and whatever new structures arise there will give persons arriving by train a wholly new first glimpse of the city.

Within fifteen years, every eyesore visible from the train station would be gone entirely. Of course, by then the Union Station itself had begun to look blighted, the victim of freeway expansion and the decline of rail travel. Nevertheless, the cleanup campaign persisted into the eighties.

Today, the L.A. subway has begun to establish itself at the Union Station, overlooking a new Chinatown, essentially where the old Sonora used to be, beside the great freeway cloverleaf, where the old Chinatown used to be, in what has come to be called Downtown North. Southwest
710, or whether it would significantly liberate traffic for more than five years, at a cost of $1.4 billion and very likely much more.\textsuperscript{120} There are numerous alternative “low impact” plans; the most recent, paid for by South Pasadena, would cost 92 per cent less. By widening and rerouting existing roads, it would have much the same effect – achieve over 90 per cent of what the freeway would do – but save 700 houses (some say over 1,000), and at least 3,000 very mature trees.\textsuperscript{121} The head of planning at Cal Trans dismissed it as the work of “beautifiers,” not transportation “engineers.”\textsuperscript{122} Mile for mile, the 710 promises to be the most expensive freeway ever built, averaging $500 for every licensed driver in the entire county.

Yet, as of New Year in 1995, Cal Trans and the federal authorities were still determined to persevere no matter what. On 28 December, they released the map of yet another route, to avoid another designated historic district; this is the twenty-first new plan, each conceived at a staggering cost.\textsuperscript{123} Tens of millions of dollars have been spent already. Cal Trans owns over six hundred houses bought since 1960, generally craftsman cottages over eighty years old, in neighborhoods that have also been historically designated. Many cottages have been allowed to rot, for fear that if they were maintained properly, with their long setbacks and large trees, the freeway might seem less “friendly.” In the new route, eighty-eight more structures will be purchased under eminent domain.

Recently, a transportation historian asked one of the executives at Cal Trans whether she had ever heard of Captain Ahab. The term “culture of denial” is used to describe their pursuit of this great whale. But, most likely, before 2010, the leviathan will be finished, come what may. The dehumanization that comes with industriopolis takes on a Kremlinesque rigidity.\textsuperscript{124} It simply goes forward, even if that means backward. The logic of rational investment will be forgotten. Like an office buried inside the CIA even after the Cold War is over, the campaign to fund the 710 knows its mission, and does not need to keep track of time, incidental losses – houses, neighborhoods, trees, historic continuities – or money.

\textbf{NOTES}

3. These highly ephemeral brochures can be found in libraries and private collections throughout the city. The L.A. Museum of Natural History and UCLA Special Collections have an enormous number of them.
7. For studying the linkage between social imaginaries and urban power blocs, Ernesto Laclau seems applicable: New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time (London: Verso, 1990). See also Michael Keith and Steve Pile, eds, Place and the Politics of Identity (London: Routledge, 1993), particularly the essay by Doreen Massey, "Politics and Space/Time." Massey's review of the debate between spatiality and historicity (Lefebvre, Laclau, Soja, etc.) certainly fits this evidence as well—that the politics of space is very much linked to the politics of identity, is just as fluid.
10. Nordhoff was published by Harpers, the most powerful press of the day (1870s) (Willard, A History, p. 30). Also, he is frequently cited in Carey McWilliams's classic study: Southern California: An Island on the Land (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1973; orig. 1946). Nordhoff started out as a reader for Fletcher Harper, founder of the press, and remained an extremely influential force in editorial policy there, as well as one of its most popular writers on politics and travel. Also, he was the father of Charles Nordhoff who co-wrote the Bounty trilogy. Eugene Exman, The House of Harper, 150 Years of Publishing (New York: Harper & Row), pp. 77, 99, 132.
13. Some details were taken from talks with William Mason (in 1986 and 1989), the very informative curator of history at the Museum of Natural History in L.A.
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21. This becomes the bane of downtown planning for generations — the continual references to Mexicans downtown, even in very upbeat articles on Los Angeles. More on this issue, its links to riots and anti-Mexican hysteria, as well as to planning, will be found in Chapter 6.
27. Often cited is the 1907 plan for elevated subways, on to the struggles about the trolleys in the twenties, when the system clearly was in need of new investment. Also, various reroutings, cutbacks, the shift toward buses, were evident as early as the twenties.
28. An autophilic summary of many of the key documents on this matter: Scott L. Bottles, *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), chs 2, 4, 5, 6. Summaries that defend the streetcars, while reviewing the old animosity toward the traction companies, include: *The Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA) Newsletter*, particularly numbers 1–19, 1959–63, following the public debates after a report hinted at in 1959, then released in 1960; preliminary reports by the Assembly Fact-Finding Committee on Highways, Streets and Bridges (1949), by Assembly-Interim Committee on Public Utilities and Corporations (1950, one of the members was then assemblyman Sam Yorty); records of public hearings in 1963; news stories in 1938, on the debt problems of the traction companies. In short, plans for new transit were delivered regularly, even while the existing system was being dismantled. Elements of old Progressive resentment continued long after the traction companies had begun to collapse. A useful summary is *Runaway Train*, special issue of *L.A. Weekly*, 26 July–3 August, 1995, e.g. Mike Davis, “The Subway That’s Eating Los Angeles.” Also, for charming anecdotes on the twenties resentment of traction companies, see Bruce Henstell, *Sunshine and Wealth: Los Angeles in the Twenties and Thirties* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1984), pp. 25–6.
30. Interview with transportation specialist Mathew Roth, 1995.
31. Among various news items on subway and elevated plans is *L.A. Railways*, 27 January 1907, suggesting elevated trams along L.A. Street north from 6th (essentially the same route as the subway that will be completed in the 1990s). As early as 1904, plans for subways in L.A. were presented to civic leaders.
32. Ainsworth went on to become one of the littérates on Los Angeles. After his
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publishing retirement from the Times a decade later, he published personal histories of L.A. (e.g. California, 1951).

33. Ed Ainsworth, Out of the Noose (Los Angeles: Automobile Club of Southern California, 1937), opening page. This brochure was reprinted from a series in the L.A. Times, 12–18 June 1937.

34. Mel Scott, Cities are for People: The Los Angeles Region Plans for Living (Los Angeles, Pacific Southwest Academy, 1942), pp. 71, 73. This study accompanied a show (1941) sponsored by the Regional Planning Commission, and by architects from the L.A. branch of Telesis. The later edition of the study, revised and much expanded, is entitled Metropolitan Los Angeles: One Community (Los Angeles: The Haynes Foundation, 1949). Consider what seven years had wrought. The earlier version (1942) has much more material (with photos) on urban blight, to reinforce the plans for a new city in the exhibition of 1941. The rewritten edition (1949) has considerably more on the outreach of freeways, much less on the threat of blight; it indicates, in fact, that blight has begun to be removed.

35. Scott, Metropolitan Los Angeles, p. 98.

36. Planning Is With You (New York: Architectural Forum, 1943), which was reprinted and apparently delivered free to various planning organizations in Los Angeles.

37. Planning Is With You.


41. I was given these statistics by older residents, but they match other figures I have seen. Retail sales downtown dropped from 29.6% of the county in 1929 to 17% in 1939, a much larger economy than the city alone. Sales at downtown department stores dropped from $47.4 of the county total to $74.8 in 1941. Richard Longstreth, Markets in the Meadow: Los Angeles, the Automobile and the Transformation of the Modern Retail Development, 1920–1950 (manuscript, 1994, p. 639, publication forthcoming).


44. Singleton, “Religion in the City of Angels.”

45. Term mentioned by Herstell, Sunshine and Wealth, p. 21.

46. Letter to the Editor, Nation, 4 March 1936, p. 295: “Los Angeles Border Patrol,” by Rose Marie Packard, traveling back to Pasadena. Mrs Packard and her husband “interviewed” a policeman at the blockade, who specified that he was “only finger-printing the ones who looked like criminals.” When reminded that this might be unconstitutional, he answered: “What do you mean? We are down here at the orders of the chief of police of Los Angeles.”
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47. Bauer, "Cities in Flux," p. 78.
48. Ibid., p. 82.
49. Bauer coined the term "decentrist," defined in Charles Abrams' *Language of Cities* (New York: Viking, 1971: p. 82) as follows: "A group of urban theorists who believe in thinning out the dense cities and dispersing businesses and people to smaller places." Other decentrists were Lewis Mumford, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. Mumford used the term "poly-nucleation:" satellite cities around a central city. The key problem for decentrists was urban density (ibid., p. 85), as in the phrase from Sir Raymond Unwin: "nothing gained by overpopulating."

52. Ibid.
54. Ibid., p. 107.
55. For a thorough review of the fearsome impact of decentralization on the mood of urban planners throughout the USA, see Robert A. Bearegerd, *Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of U.S. Cities* (London: Blackwell, 1993).
60. See note 49.
61. Gebhard and Van Breton, *L.A. in the Thirties*, pp. 34, 35. In the early forties, sketches of this imaginary downtown were widely disseminated, to builders and civic organizations alike. For example, *Plans for Downtown Los Angeles' Four Pressing Needs* appeared in *Southwest Builder and Contractor*, 7 January 1944; then was reprinted as a promotional brochure. Sketches show virtually all of downtown north from Pershing Square gone and replaced, particularly Bunker Hill, already drawn as leveled, located west of an imaginary cloverleaf.
63. For a look at downtown as of 1940-41, see *Los Angeles*, compiled by Writers of Work Projects Administration (New York: Hastings House, 1941).
65. Chapters 5 and 6 of Bearegerd's *Voices of Decline*.
the early forties, Neutra also used the term “acropolis” to describe his plan for Bunker Hill, which was never adapted. Many plans were part of the mix in the final redevelopment, though that of course was fundamentally corporate and residential.


86. That meant a population ranging from a high of 14,000 to a low of 6,500, depending on how many buildings had been torn down; and whether that included the lower hills nearby.

87. John Fante, Ask the Dust (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984; orig. 1939), p. 45. Fante revisited the same settings, with a much gentler memory of the dynamic of the downtown community, and more nostalgic obviously (with very little reference to blight at all, ironically enough), in the novel Dreams From Bunker Hill (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1988; orig. 1982); for example, from Bunker Hill, “the city was in a tumult of radiant sunset colors” (p. 132); “From the trolley, [the hotel on Bunker Hill] was magic, like a castle in a book of fairy tales” (p. 145). After the resurrection of his work in the seventies (not long before his death), Fante became one of the most admired and influential L.A. novelists.

88. Paul Cain, Fast One (Berkeley: Black Lizard, 1987; orig. 1932), p. 62. Cain’s real name was George Sims (he also wrote for movies as Eric Rurik), 1902–1966.


90. Fante, Ask the Dust, p. 45.


98. Ibid. One statistic of the sort that Roybal was answering: on Bunker Hill, the rate of active tuberculosis was twice the average in the rest of the city (Art Hewett, “Story of Bunker Hill: Bigger Tax Take Told in Death Knell of Famed Area,” Los Angeles Herald, 9 December 1954).

99. Ray Parker, “Faded Elegance.” Also, the various film records of neighborhood
life on Bunker Hill in the fifties (in the USC collection) indicate pockets at least of great stability.

100. The film The Exiles (1961) does exactly that. I discuss the film briefly in Part IV. A number of crime films use these tunnels for chases or moody criminal monologues, with their soft-filtered light, in an arc of cracked white tile.

101. Maps of the plan were on display for a show at the Museum of Contemporary Art in 1993, directly on the site of what used to be Bunker Hill. I mention some of these in the discussion of the Temple-Beaudry district in Chapter 6.


103. Travelers Handbook to Southern California (Pasadena: n.p., 1904), p. 150. The term “whispering” streets also appears in Carr’s descriptions, to suggest the density of residential housing. It was also said that the Chinese required less oxygen than Caucasians.


106. Special Collections, El Pueblo Museum, L.A.


109. Fante, Ask the Dust, p. 22.

110. Louis Adamic, The Truth About Los Angeles (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1927), pp. 10–11. Adamic is a much neglected literary figure. For more material on his attitudes toward L.A., see Carey McWilliams, Louis Adamic and Shadow America (Los Angeles: Arthur Whipple, 1935), p. 79 and passim. Adamic is discussed at length by Mike Davis in City of Quartz.

111. John Anson Ford, Forty Explosive Years, p. 103.

112. Christina Sterling, Olvera Street: Its History and Restoration (Los Angeles: n.p., 1937), p. 16. Sterling was the society activist who fought to save Olvera Street, went on to play the duenna for many of the shopkeepers there, and even tried to initiate a Sino-fantasy plan for a China City after World War II.

113. The precise location of old Chinatown is directly east of the Plaza, from Sunset Boulevard down to Aliso Street. There was also a Chinese Market district from East Ninth to Eleventh Street, between Wall and San Pedro, with Chinese restaurants and residences due east. See Garding Lui, Inside Los Angeles Chinatown (Los Angeles: n.p., 1948).

114. The photo entitled “Inconvenience” in Scott’s Cities Are for People (p. 55) is of Chavez Ravine, though it looks a bit like rural West Virginia; see also the photo by Max Yavno in Lee Shippey, The Los Angeles Book (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1950), p. 64.
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116. By 1946, there were two new Chinatowns actually. The first, China City, was set up by Christina Sterling as a tourist twin to Olvera Street, on a site that was already used by Hollywood studios and had a coterie of Chinese actors, as well as exhibits with props from MGM's *The Good Earth*. The other version, far more successful for the Chinese themselves, was located further north and called New Chinatown, set up by Chinese businessmen. See Garding Lui, *Inside Los Angeles Chinatown*, chs II, IV and V.


119. South Pasadena has a long history of fighting legal battles. Even at its founding in 1887, it incorporated mostly to force Pasadena to stop building saloons there, to make “them” stop messing with their town. In 1912, they were pressured to join the city of Los Angeles, or lose their water. Once again they refused, and waited six years for a stable water supply rather than accommodate. They have also bucked the superwealthy San Marino just to the east, and are notorious for fussy permitting, if a business seems too noisy or otherwise inappropriate.

120. Traditionally, the overruns in projects like this can double the cost. In a lucky season, expenses will grow only 10 or 20 per cent.

121. There are rumors, however, that the low impact plan would force one-way traffic down key streets, inhibiting business.


CHAPTER TWO

L.A. NOIR AND FORGETTING

Downtown is Nighttown, where memory is haunted continually by its own erasure. In 1981, William Gibson’s Johnny Mnemonic explains:

I’d never spent much time in Nighttown. Nobody there had anything to pay me to remember, and most of all they paid regularly to forget. Generations of sharpshooters had chipped away at the neon until the maintenance crews gave up. Even at noon the arcs were soot-black against the faintest pearl.¹

Neon, of course, is a double signifier: first, the sour nightlife in crime movies from the forties, the insomnia of urban decay; and second, the act of shopping as insomnia, as a frisson. What results when the two are combined is a noir vision of Los Angeles. Consumer memory is set at night, when the uneasy loner strikes out violently inside poor districts where no community is left at all. The result is a social imaginary about the city vanishing. Consumer promotion no longer merely erases slums; it afflicts the consumer as well.

According to noir novels and films since 1930, L.A. is supposed to die by fire, earthquake, suffocation, amnesia, in the dark, in a movie theater, or in some way seen from a distance, perhaps through the window of a car. The distance often suggests a kind of tourism rather than social realism. That distancing is a vital clue, about voyeurism turning toward self-destruction. Long before the bladerunner nightmares, L.A. seemed to inspire stories about enraged tourists taking their revenge, the most famous being Nathanael West’s novel The Day of the Locust (1939).

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Above all, the nightmare is compared to the experience of wandering through consumer-driven spaces, a tourist's guide to hell, in a world built by promotion and set loose like a gyro. Tourism promises righteousness with a taste of sin not far away. First, it promotes a self-contained, sunny Protestant Jerusalem, and second, an amoral yearning, a tantalizing, prurient Babylon. The first generates investment, the other a fast weekend. From the late nineteenth century on, both had to be easy to find, right off the train, in plain view, often literally through the same window. Boosters hoped that new housing tracts would distract attention away from the prurient Babylon many came to find, but it never did entirely. Babylon and the real-estate Jerusalem could be found so close to each other, a commodification of the same desire — to escape into a sunny Arcadia.

Imagine the midwestern tourist arriving by rail to Los Angeles at the turn of the century. The train makes a slow, wide turn at Alameda. From across the street, out of “cribs” in a red-light district, prostitutes wave to make eye contact with prospective customers (not unlike illustrations of whores in New York waving from tenement windows at men in subways).

The tourist consumer is supposed to be well armed against such blasphemies. Even on the train, brochures have been handed out. They were paid for by the L.A. Chamber of Commerce, the Santa Fe Railroad, the Pacific Electric streetcar company, even by realtors. From Chicago to Saint Louis and points west, ads in newspapers and magazines have directed tourists toward the Protestant Eden. Even on the fancy P.E. streetcar maps, there are addresses of realtors to visit immediately after disembarking at the downtown station. But not far from the realtors is the gamblers' Tenderloin, on Spring Street. And, while riding the streetcars, one could see Mexican hod carriers at work on new trunk lines — the inhabitants of the lower rings, living out of sight. In 1903, Mexican track workers became a particular nuisance, walking out during La Fiesta, just when the city leaders wanted to show off the Balloon Route to the visiting President Roosevelt. A struggle that eventually broke their union continued below eye level. As the Times insisted for decades, L.A. was a city of racial harmony, “with a minimum of social complexities.”

Similarly, in 1904, voters nearly passed Prohibition, even while First and Main downtown was lined with saloons shuttling drunks out into the street. In 1917, a referendum against hard liquor was approved, but whiskey remained easy to buy just north of downtown. During Prohibition, the Times claimed that L.A. was only 30 per cent “wet,” while
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One imagines how Nathanael West might have described such events. Like so many of the critics, he liked to set the transients of Los Angeles against a background of consumer images - Todd's life among movie sets compared to life at the San Berdoo Apartments (Day of the Locust). It has become a standard observation that L.A. noir was written by novelists who also worked as screenwriters, who felt the contrast most vividly between the information tycoons (real estate, film glamour, newspaper promotion, advertising) and what Louis Adamic called "Shadow America (1929)"

Los Angeles is America. A jungle. Los Angeles grew up suddenly, planlessly, under the stimuli of the adventurous spirit of millions of people and the profit motive. It is still growing. Here everything has a chance to thrive - for a while - as a rule only a brief while. Inferior as well as superior plants and trees flourish for a time, then both succumb to chaos and decay. They must give way to new plants pushing up from below and so on. This is freedom under democracy. Jungle Democracy. Adamic is referring to the hopefuls who were getting lost inside the boom cycle of the twenties. Beyond their vast numbers (over 300 arriving every day), they were treated as ghosts by the newspapers and movie moguls who worked closely with boosters. 1923 was the premium year, with more than 100,000 tourists "pouring in" every month. In the novel condemning L.A. Babbitry, The Boosters (1923) by Mark Lee Luther, this tourism generates architectural amnesia, like a hangover from a Forty-Niner Gold Rush.

The "rootlessness" of roadside bricolage was criticized often: the storefront psychics and evangelists, the shoestring fast-food joints, the canary farms and quirky hobby shops. Carey McWilliams called it an "improvised economy" due to the slower growth of manufacturing compared to population, even in the twenties. As a result, "in no city in America has there been such a proliferation of wasteful and meaningless service occupations." "The thing simply won't add up,' complained James Cain in 1933. 'Life takes on a dreadful vacuity here. I don't know what I miss.'

Standardly in noir literature, that vacuity (the overhyped but evacuated promise) is precisely what induces the nightmare. In Angel's Flight (1927), probably the first L.A. novel that could be called "noir," Don Ryan writes what is now the customary two-page garble about blowing into town - a hymn to quick money and suckers. At first, the hero (a writer from Brooklyn) resists the lies at the newspaper, the fix at court, then decides
to hell with it. "March to the cult of the Booster." Skin the peasants. L.A., he declares, is "the Jazz Baby of the Golden West," a city stuffing its windpipe to bursting. Join the swamis, bunco artists and Nazarenes hawking postcards — the "religious farago" preying on tourists lured by Boom and Bloom.

In the twenties, L.A. was the Saudi Arabia for American oil. Its population doubled to 2.2 million, filling in many of the vacant boundaries between townships that once were simply lined with pepper trees, or with summer flowers rising up into the hills unchecked. But many who came found high prices, and severe competition for jobs, at low wages. Workers from the midwest felt in direct competition with Mexican immigrants — tensions that led, in part, to the Zoot Suit Riots during World War II. The white Protestant leadership feared they might "lose" downtown — a familiar theme, repeated by planners in the forties, and onward to the panic of the nineties among Anglos. In the twenties, this rampant growth required vast numbers of cheap labor, which in turn nourished the racist underside of the L.A. dream.

Finally by 1930, the visible contradictions were remarked upon almost standardly. While L.A. was being hyped as "the playground of the world," the "all-year-round city," it also was described by preachers like Sister Aimee as the city of transience, of the last chance.

In print, increasingly, the first wave of anti-tourist literature appeared, in articles about beauty queens getting their hopes undone in the film industry. And then came novels about tourists turning into corrupt screenwriters: first, Harry Leon Wilson's whimsical Merton of the Movies (1922), followed by the somewhat darker Carl Van Vechten's Spider Boy (1927), the same year as Angel's Flight, and finally the bestseller Queer People by Carroll and Garrett Graham (1930). Queer People is a particularly pivotal novel, an influence on Budd Schulberg and Nathanael West, about the "Hollywood G's — girls, gin and gynecology;" a garden of unearthly delights peopled also by "confidence men, coon shouters, pimps, press agents, song writers, sadists, bootleggers, bandits, Babbits, remittance men, radio announcers, realtors."

During the Depression, anti-tourist novels get more viciously exotic, more about consumers involved in murder or suicide. For example, the Hollywood premiere leads to murder in Day of the Locust; the dance marathon becomes a danse macabre in McCoy's They Shoot Horses, Don't They?; the movie mogul is spun into reductive hopelessness, a victim of consumer planning, in Fitzgerald's The Last Tycoon, and in Schulberg's What
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Makes Sammy Run? Restaurants become sites for murder in Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *Mildred Pierce*.

The formulas often involved victims with amnesia brought on by the consumer-driven experience. Their numbing lapses of memory were induced by the extremes that tourism hype produce here, as in this passage from Eric Knight's *You Play the Black and Red Comes Up* (1938):

The minute you crossed into California you went crazy... I could remember everything about California, but I couldn't feel it. I tried to get my mind to remember something that it could feel, too, but it was no use. It was all gone. All of it. The pink stucco houses and the palm trees and the stores built like cats and dogs and frogs and ice cream freezers and the neon lights round everything...

I thought about coming over the Santa Monica mountains and seeing Hollywood all lighted up like a fairy city; and the way the men in yellow smocks stood on Sunset Boulevard waving bags of Krispy-Korn and trying to sell movie guides to the homes of the stars and how I never saw anyone ever stop to buy one.20

In Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One* (1948), Forest Lawn cemetery is allegorized into a dropsy about mortuary salesmen driving their workers insane. By the time Jim Thompson presents his grifter's whorehouse vision of the Sunset Strip in the late sixties, the dens of noir iniquity may have shifted neighborhoods, but they remain linked to that central theme: how consumer hype erases the sense of place, and invades the self.

The theme is buried inside *The Woman Chaser* by Charles Willeford (1960). Richard Hudson, a sleazoid used-car dealer, lives literally in "the mythical boundary between Los Angeles and Hollywood,"21 in a continual state of adolescent unease. He watches his overripe, mildly incestuous mother (a retired actress) display her youngish breasts for him. He sleeps near her, in "Lumpy Grits," a Craftsman mansion that reminds him of the quick-cash twenties, but is only a block away from the local shopping center.

My point here is obvious but essential. As much as I love noir, and find it exotically compelling, it is nevertheless often utterly false in its visions of the poor, of the non-white in particular. It is essentially a mythos about white male panic – the white knight in a cesspool of urban decay; about desire turned into a slot machine. Despite its origins as social realism in Hammett, the hard-boiled story cannot help but operate, very fundamentally, as white males building a social imaginary. The booster myths
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(sunshine, climate, Protestant Eden) generate an emptiness that leads to violence and despair, in the form of urban fables. The crime on dark streets stands in for the fears about foreigners, jobs, speculation, and cheap hype. It pits the white, usually Protestant, shamus against a world that is utterly transient, as if no poor communities exist except as a hangout for crooks and addicts. What results is a pose really; it distracts the memory away from community life as it existed inside the city. It is the dark side of tourism, a roller-coaster ride through “mean” streets (often poor neighborhoods).

In noir pseudo-reality, it is difficult not to imagine entire neighborhoods surviving merely as hangouts for crooks. A good case in point is a lecture Robert Towne gave on what he left out about L.A in writing the screenplay for Chinatown. Every question in the packed auditorium came from fans who presumed that his film images of evil in Chinatown were truth incarnate, that it all happened as in a Raymond Chandler novel. Noir is that exotically compelling. Its phantasms consume our own memory of the crises of the city. As Davis writes: “Noir was like the transformational grammar turning each charming ingredient of the boosters’ arcadia into a sinister equivalent.”

HEARING VOICES: IMAGINARY DEATH KNELLS

This transformational grammar also operates directly in the mind of the resident here. L.A. is whimsically gothic because the “secured” spaces are designed so often to emphasize the spirit of buyer’s impulse, you alone in the shopping mode – in a state of distraction, feeling coddled and swindled at the same time, overstimulated and desensitized, gated in, but under surveillance. Behind all the violence and fury in the fiction, noir refers to inaction, to spaces haunted mostly by consumer passivity – about being lost in the wrong neighborhood without change for a phone call, a mindless unease; or walking through the drab Seven-Eleven after twelve hours of straight television watching. I remember being stuck once for days at a package holiday in La Paz, where it was so ferociously cold that no one could get served food. Meanwhile, sour mariachis sang American Christmas carols that funneled up the building for hours. Then, on the last day, teams of heavily armed soldiers appeared in paper party hats. They were taking over the hotel for the general’s birthday. Sometimes, noir consumerism is so embalmed that it exceeds the ridiculous. I remember thinking: this could make a murder story. Remember the tourist spot
There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles by night. A sort of luminous, geometric, incandescent immensity, stretching as far as the eye can see, bursting out from the cracks in the clouds. Only Hieronymous Bosch's hell can match this inferno effect. The muted fluorescence of all the diagonals: Wilshire, Sunset, Santa Monica. Already, flying over San Fernando Valley, you come upon the horizontal infinite in every direction. But, once you are beyond the mountain, a city ten times larger hits you. You will never have encountered anything that stretches as far as this before. Even the sea cannot match it, since it is not divided up geometrically. The irregular, scattered flickering of European cities does not produce the same parallel lines, the same vanishing points, the same aerial perspectives either. They are medieval cities. This one condenses by night the entire future geometry of the networks of human relations, gleaming in their abstraction, luminous in their extension, astral in their reproduction to infinity.  

NOTES

1. Thomas Frank, “A Machine for Forgetting: Kansas City and the Declining Significance of Place,” The Baffler, no. 7, 1995, p. 115. Also: “Like other cities [Kansas City] has experienced the trauma of the conventional variety of civic forgetting: its old downtown is a study in vacant lots; the river banks from which it initially sprang are now inaccessible to civilians” (p. 114).

I would interpret "machine" in three ways: first as "machinic," Deleuze and Guattari's term -- a language-based abstract machine that "conjugates" an assemblage, a process of deterritorialization (A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. B. Massumi [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987; orig. 1980], pp. 140); second, "machine" suggests the industrial nature of this tourist imaginary, the fact that it was linked to the railroad lines, to mass publishing; and third, the ironic use of "machine" as in "machine politics," to suggest the chronism always involved in building a social imaginary, and the bizarre ideology about place that emerges.


3. The banking district shifted to Spring Street from Main in 1901, when First National Bank moved. Despite a few scandals, like the All Night and Day Bank that was closed in 1910 due to unrestricted hours, more "skyscrapers" were added (none was allowed legally to go higher than twelve stories): the Hellman Building; Citizens National Trust; the new Stock Market in 1921; the Title Exchange in 1928.


7. Cost $4 million (1928), at the height of confidence in Spring Street as the "Wall Street of the West."
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NOTES

1. During my childhood, my parents decided not to allow me to understand their native languages – Hungarian and Yiddish – so that I would grow up an American. Today, I can identify Hungarian by tone and inflection, but have not the faintest idea what is being said. That experience is comparable to these interviews – absence as presence – a synesthetic effect (to hear a touch, and so on). Similarly, English terms about forgetting seemed tonal/synesthetic (i.e. asterism: a constellation of objects that belong together but fail to invoke a meaning; almost like a tonal scale about unrecognition – to hear the familiar, but not remember its meaning). A note I left while editing the novella reads:

   Memory lapses are either short or long, loose or vague, opaque or seemingly transparent. The event that is forgotten could be blocked, inhibited, repressed, sublimated; or in theatrical terms, masked, or even masqued (like a courtly dance in honor of erasure, their elegant, but changing memories of Vietnam itself).
   The space evacuated by forgetting might be described as a gap, a slip-up, a slip of the tongue; or simply having the narrator slipping out of time in the text, just lose a few months, perhaps lie about it, perhaps not, perhaps not knowing where the time went, or caring.

2. Though I never structured this specifically as an ethnographic study – I borrowed more from the European novel – in final edits I reread work on diasporic and Holocaust studies, as well as essays by James Clifford and studies on the spatial migration of memory in immigrant communities – e.g. the anthology edited by Michael Keith and Steve Pile, The Place and the Politics of Identity (London: Routledge, 1993). The essay by George Revill on “Reading Rosehill” struck me as close to the spirit of the problem in this project, as did Geertz’s famous essay on Balinese cockfights. Another defense of fictive erasure that seemed comforting was Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the novella, in chapter 8 of A Thousand Plateaus: “The novella has little to do with a memory of the past or an act of reflection; quite the contrary, it plays upon a fundamental forgetting” (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987; orig. 1980), p. 103.

Ben Turpin, Laurel and Hardy (though much was shot in Culver City). Roach even had a studio lot up in Bunker Hill.


23. Ibid., p. 181.


25. Interview with Janice Tanaka, November 1996.

26. Among Jem Cohen’s videos: This is a History of New York (1987); Buried in Light (1994)

27. The critical debate on melodrama, particularly in feminist theory, is a bit broader than the way I mean the term here. I take it literally at its “word”:” melody-drama in England, and its application from the 1820s onward, a variation of opera and gothic story that rapidly is accommodated to the moralistic ideology of mid-nineteenth-century England. In Seven Minutes, I trace how this cautionary poetics mutates into Hollywood cinema by the thirties, and is translated into Disney animation by 1935–37, or as “anti-melodrama” in Warners’ chase cartoons. I also feel that noir fiction of the mid-thirties, particularly by James M. Cain, was specifically anti-melodrama, and understood that way by mass readership. Therefore noir is an inversion of poetic justice; in noir the hero is “maudit” (cursed), and so is poetic justice; “the law is just, but it just ain’t fair.” As a further irony, this anti-melodrama resembles Aristotelian poetics and Greek theater in its fatalism.

28. Clearly, I was discovering first-hand what Adorno and Horkheimer identified as the “mummification” by mass culture, in essays from the thirties onward, particularly in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944), completed during their stay in Los Angeles. For an overview, see Miriam Hansen, “Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Krakauer,” New German Critique 56, Spring/Summer 1992, an issue devoted to Adorno.

29. The expression used by John Jerde, its architect, for yet another documentary where I was a “talking head,” for the BBC, on the History Of Shopping (1995).
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Reddin, in reference to events about 1982, gathered by Joe Dominick (To Protect and Serve, p. 298): "Hand-to-hand combat is a lot simpler than having to deal with verbal judo."

32. Ibid., p. 8.
33. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
43. By 1996, over fifty volumes had appeared, and up to a thousand articles and government documents. Among the most useful sources are: the ACLU report, Civil Liberties in Crisis (based on conference, 23 June 1992); Understanding the Riots (a record of many articles from the L.A. Times, useful for hour-by-hour summaries); Beyond the Ashes (the Los Angeles Business Journal, some demographics, and eighties history); Samuel Pastor, Latinos and the Los Angeles Uprising: The Economic Context (the Tomas Rivera Center, a scrupulous job); Inside the L.A. Riots (Institute for Alternative Journalism, essentially the L.A. Weekly coverage, see footnote 26); New Initiatives for Los Angeles (Senate Task Report, provides a sense of what information made its way to Washington); To Rebuild Is Not Enough (California State Assembly Report, 28 September 1992, in the spirit of policy alternatives, while that spirit lasted); Joel Kotkin and David Friedman, "The Los Angeles Riots: Causes, Myths and Solutions" (Commentary, February 1993); James H. Johnson et al., "The Los Angeles Rebellion: A Retrospective View," Economic Development Quarterly, November 1992; Allen J. Scott and E. Richard Brown, "South-Central Los Angeles: Anatomy of a Crisis (Working Paper, Lewis Center for Regional Policy, June 1993); Kathi George and Jennifer Joseph, The Verdict is In (San Francisco, Manic D Press, a Bay Area point of view, including poetry and personal essays). Many of these sources and others are cited in the anthology edited by Mark Baldassare, The Los Angeles Riots: Lessons for the Urban Future (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994). See also Sue Hamilton, The Los Angeles Riots, 1992; Erna Smith Transmitting Race: The L.A. Riot in Television News, 1994; Mychal Wynn, Enough is Enough: The Explosion in Los Angeles, 1993.

I also would recommend the articles written by Mike Davis during this period (1991-94), in pamphlets, various anthologies, the Nation, L.A. Times, L.A. Weekly, and New Left Review. See also Lynnell George's collection of essays, No Crystal Stair (London: Verso, 1992), and Anna Devere Smith's interviews, as the text of her one-person show Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992; On the Road: A Search for American Character (New York: Bantam/Doubleday, 1994; based on performances from 1993). Raphael Sonenshein, Martin Schiesl and Joe Dominick are cited elsewhere in this chapter. Finally, see the anthology City in Turmoil edited by Norman M. Klein and Martin J. Schiesl (forth-
Beginning with crime writers like Ross Macdonald in the late forties, the suburb became a new zone of noir ruination. After all, the suburbs immediately after the Second World War were also decayed: “By daylight, the long, treeless street of identical houses looked cheap and rundown. It was part of the miles of suburban slums that the war had scattered all over southern California.” Finally, in the seventies, The Rockford Files became the first television series about L.A. suburban noir, about con men and sleazy boosters in the San Fernando Valley or Malibu. The show was also about the ruins of the left, so essential to the inspiration for noir. The producer of the Rockford Files, Roy Huggins, had been identified as a hostile witness during the McCarthy hearings, but always felt he had not been hostile enough, that he had still played it safe. In the casting of this show, many former blacklisted actors and writers were hired, as if the erasure left by McCarthyism and the Cold War guilt still remaining were a hidden motif on the set, hidden irony in the production. The character Rockford, played by James Garner, had been jailed unfairly and was trying to rebuild his life. In many of the scripts, as in Ross Macdonald’s stories, a crime forgotten for twenty years is resurrected; new murders reveal the path back to forgotten murders.

Suburban noir is more directly about consumerism and deviance than simply anti-tourism. And this translates into cyber-noir as well: Larry Niven’s “Dream Park” novels show an Anaheim of the future where Disneyland has become ringed with brothels, drug dealers – a Gehenna literally quarantined from the rest of California, to sell pleasure in much
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prevent distraction. Schoolchildren were taught the methods for millennia, based on an architectural imaginary. Two hundred guests are announced. The master remembers each by where they stand in the hall. Even after the hall burns down, he can recite the names of charred bodies by where they fell.

A hermeneutics of memory and forgetting evolved, particularly after mnemonics was restructured during the Renaissance, and then much more drastically after the seventeenth century, and again after 1870. In all examples I found, the paradox of distraction is central, either as a symptom, a sensation, a sign of madness, or "proof" of where the unconscious is located. Here is a gloss on some of these, a genealogy of forgetting, but also a social imaginary.

The first Western writing on the paradox of distraction is usually credited to the Greeks, and afterward to Roman systems for building memory (mnemonics). Both Plato and Aristotle imagined memory as a waxen substance inside the soul, easily inscribed but just as easily effaced, particularly if the wax were thick or muddy. Some degree of effacement (forgetting) was, as many systems repeat thereafter, inescapable. For example, aporia, the inability to know how or where to begin, was considered a symptom of effacement (oblivion), to be resisted through mnemonic discipline. "Artificial memory" protected against this sort of loss, but not easily. Remembering was arduous. It required imaginaries as solid as an aqueduct. From the Romans through the Renaissance, students were trained to fight aporia through "memory theaters," a spatial imaginary that kept knowledge from drifting into oblivion.

To a well-trained Roman rhetorician, the order of hundreds of names— or of thousands of lines from Virgil— could be stored in loci, inside warehouses imagined like walls of facts, standing firm while oblivion lay all around. Similarly, as described in Yates's classic study on the "art of memory," the Renaissance scholar Giulio Camillo actually wanted to build a memory theater out of wooden boxes (each holding files). It was to be similar in design to the seven gangways of the Roman stage, but with inscriptions on each pillar, and sub-headings that connected the mind with the planets. Camillo was blending Roman theory with the Renaissance interest in occult redefinitions of Christianity, by way of the cabbala and Hermetic philosophy. In England, the scholar Robert Fludd designed what he hoped would be a memory room, like a gentleman's waiting area inside a larger space that may have been modeled on Shake-
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essentially agree that memory is afflicted *simultaneously* by forgetting. It does not disappear merely through disuse, but through interference, either retroactive or proactive; through distraction.¹⁴ Treatments for forgetting still rely on encoding within different cognitive contexts, back to memory theaters, but using nonsense words. Except under surgery, the instant of loss remains indistinct. No memory is released, or stored, without some degree of erasure. This is particularly true of episodic memory of past events. The record is always filled with omissions, encoded after a period of "secondary indifference."¹⁵ Two of the dominant models that explain why we forget our early childhood are "blockade" and "selective reconstruction."¹⁶ Therefore a memory "trace" may satisfy the urge to remember, but not the urge to remember the "facts." In a text from 1978, psychologists write:

It is an oversimplification to envision images [in the mind] as enduring fixedly, as if preserved in amber. In fact, imagery may undergo myriad evolutionary transformations before it is utilized, and people's style of coding may shift drastically as task requirements alter, even if the same external stimuli are presented.¹⁷

Most of all, as in centuries past, despite all the scientific models about forgetting that doctors in turn apply as a social imaginary, no one has yet located precisely where in the brain the complete chain of a single memory is lost — or even what a memory looks like physiologically. The term most frequently used is "engram," but that soon acquired an occult meaning — very much a social imaginary — once it entered mass culture. In Scientology, the engram is a mystic godhead, located through the E meter like secrets from the pyramids. The myth of engram takes on the powers of a tonic sold by mail order, or in the case of Scientology a corporate marketing of positive thinking — science as the fiction of the iron-clad ego.

The German biologist Richard Semon coined the term "engram" in 1904, to identify a structure in the cerebral cortex where memory must be stored.¹⁸ To Semon, this was primarily a "location," a surface excited by stimuli, and stamped. The neural tissue was "engrammed," or "engraphed," inscribed as if by an engraving tool. However, the engramming left only a trace, not a complete record. There was no way to retrieve it whole. Semon insisted that memory components, whatever they were, easily split apart, and could be delivered only as fragments.
Memory is elusive...

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- Journal of American History

Norman Klein is a critic and historian of mass culture, the author of Seven Minutes: The Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon, published by Verso, and the editor of Fragile Moments: A History of Media-Induced Experience. He is a professor at the California Institute of the Arts.