

## INTRODUCTION

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In every age there is a capital city, an absolute theater of ambition. Paris was “the capital of the nineteenth century.” After 1945 New York City became indisputably “the supreme metropolis of the present.” In the strange new postmodern imperium we live in, Los Angeles, at the very least, has become the American city the world watches for signs and portents. The night flight over Southern California country replaces the skyline of Manhattan as the up-to-date epiphany of limitless urban power and sweep; soaring vertical vista is exchanged for measureless sprawl, Faustian stone and steel for a vast shimmering electronic labyrinth. “There is nothing to match flying over Los Angeles by night,” according to the airborne French oracle, Jean Baudrillard.

Greater Los Angeles, as Alexander Cockburn writes in these pages, is “the only megalopolis of the First World growing at a rate comparable to those of the supercities—São Paulo, Cairo, and Canton—of the Third World.” These cities are, respectively, 450, 1,000, and 2,000 years old. At 210, Los Angeles is young for such a vast and terrible town. By 2001, only four of the world’s twenty-three biggest cities, each claiming a population upwards of 10 million, will be in the so-called developed nations: Greater New York, Tokyo-Yokohama, Moscow, and the Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area of Los Angeles-Anaheim-Riverside. The population of this last city-state, whose passions and illusions are the subject of this book, is already in the neighborhood

of 14.5 million. Compare these multitudes to the 1,610 souls discovered in the frowzy and isolated Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula, the Town of Our Lady the Queen of the Angels, by the United States census in 1850, two years after the Yankee leviathan embraced Manifest Destiny and plundered Upper California from Mexico.

This formerly remote coast lies at the cusp of a half-dozen world cultures, among them Asian, Pacific, Ibero-American, Anglo-American. Historically, the place to look for mixed multitudes in California was San Francisco. During the decades of white immigration from the Midwest, from 1880 to 1930, indeed almost to the mid-1960s, it was not the diversity of Los Angeles's population that struck observers, rather its uniformity.

"Though Spanish in name, and Spanish in the name of hundreds of its streets," Oliver Carlson's *A Mirror for Californians* reassured readers in 1941, "Los Angeles is an American city—perhaps the most American of all our great cities." As Carey McWilliams wrote only a few years later in his classic *Southern California Country* (1946), Los Angeles had always been an "archipelago" of races and ethnic groups—but the substantial African-American, Mexican, and Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Filipino) islands were reduced to peonage. As recently as 1960, 85 percent of the population of Greater Los Angeles—Orange, Ventura, Riverside, San Bernardino, L.A., and Imperial counties—was still "Anglo," as non-Hispanic European-Americans are taxonomized in Southern California. Today, after a congeries of demographic happenings mostly unexpected by the futurists at RAND or anywhere else, including fallout from the lost crusade in South Asia, the figure for Anglos hovers at about 50 percent; by 2010 the *Los Angeles Times* projects it will be about 42 percent, almost the same figure as for Latinos. African-Americans and slightly more numerous

Asian-Americans will account for most of the remainder. The *Times*, having shed its reactionary ways and become, on some days of the week, the best big-city daily in the country, now invokes diversity as religiously as it used to hymn the virtues of the Open Shop and the Criminal Syndicalism Act.

A recent anatomy of the Forty-Sixth Assembly District, described as “the Ellis Island of California,” was eloquent on this shift in editorial sensibility, and as interesting for that as for any of the facts and figures it adduced about the “human laboratory of racial, ethnic and cultural diversity that stretches from the Downtown skyscrapers to the teeming apartments of Mid-Wilshire; from the drug and gang turf of Pico and Vermont on the south to million-dollar hillside homes abutting Griffith Park on the north. Into the district’s melting pot come daily arrivals from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, the Philippines, Korea, Thailand, Vietnam, Soviet Armenia, and elsewhere.” If the Forty-sixth, with its alarming death rate and other social ills, is not exactly the promised land—only its anteroom—the diligent and the lucky can aspire to Eagle Rock and West Covina.

In *Postmodern Geographies*, one of the best books about the city, Edward W. Soja evokes the multitudinous “metro-sea” of Los Angeles in terms of the “Aleph,” the magical object in the story by Jorge Luis Borges that reflects the images of, literally, everything in the world. “One finds in Los Angeles not only the high technology complexes of the Silicon Valley and the erratic sunbelt economy of Houston, but also the far-reaching industrial decline and bankrupt urban neighborhoods of rust-belted Detroit or Cleveland . . .,” he writes. “There is a Boston in Los Angeles, a Lower Manhattan and a South Bronx, a São Paulo and a Singapore.” There are factories “producing parts which are stamped ‘Made in Brazil’ and clothing marked ‘Made in Hong Kong.’” Signs in Old English lettering lead into West-

minster's Little Saigon. Like the Aleph, the city has become as compendious as a studio back lot in the old days when Tod Hackett, in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, could wonder at the juxtaposition of a Dutch windmill with the bones of a dinosaur.

"The film industry has never portrayed California," David Hockney said to me several years ago at his house on the top of a Hollywood hill. "For good reason, probably. Even today I don't think there's one building you could show in a backdrop and instantly know it's L.A., as you could with New York. The city itself is not that well known. Certainly not in paintings," he added modestly. Yet, in terms of a standard repertoire of icons and auratic images, what city in the world does the world think it knows better than the City of Angels?

A frieze of coppery bodies posed against white volumes, like Camus's description of Algiers; the calligraphic purity of elements in the print advertisements of *L.A. Story*: amphibious palm tree, ocean, childlike Californian (Steve Martin) doing a cartwheel; young Proteus rising from the sea in a wet suit on the predictable jacket of *A Day in the Life of California*; the what-now-seem overdressed golden-age movie stars in Jean Howard's photographs, and the godlike grease monkeys in those of Herb Ritts; the HOLLYWOOD, originally HOLLYWOODLAND, sign which, in common with so many of California's beloved monuments, was never intended to last and merely languished into permanence; Hockney's own painted palms and pools, enveloped in stillness, seeming always to have been painted in a spell of "earthquake weather." In John Updike's novel *Bech Is Back*, Jerusalem reminds Henry Bech of Southern California. "Here were the same low houses and palm fronds, the same impression of staged lighting, exclusively frontal, as if the backs of these buildings dissolved into unpainted slats and rotting canvas, into weeds and warm air—that stagnant, balmy, expectant air of Hollywood when the sun goes

down.” Pauline Kael, praising Sarah Jessica Parker’s portrayal of a “bouncy nymph”: “She’s the spirit of L.A.: she keeps saying yes.”

Peter Conrad, disrespecting L.A. in *Imagining America*, delivers what is intended to be a knockdown verdict: “Physique, in this bronzed paradise, has taken over from character as the source of identity.” Other philosophical tourists are more taken with this society of spectacles that concentrates the pleasures and perplexities we have agreed to call “postmodern”: Fredric Jameson luxuriating in the “hyper-spaces” of the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, Jean-François Lyotard rhapsodizing about the campus of the University of California at San Diego and its handsome students (“infinite languor of green-blond hair”), Umberto Eco enthusiastically discovering one kitschy display after another, Baudrillard coming down for a landing on Mulholland Drive. But then, the “unreality” (lately, “hyperreality”) of American life (and is not California America’s America?) has been an article of faith for European intellectuals since existentialism was in flower. Christopher Isherwood put a long complaint about this credo in his novel *A Single Man* almost thirty years ago: “My God, you sound like some dreary French intellectual who’s just set foot in New York for the first time! That’s exactly the way they talk! *Unreal!* . . . The truth is, our way of life is too austere for them.”

The countermyth to the bronzed paradise, cold current to its warm current, is *noir* L.A., as in the canonical novels by James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler and their movie adaptations: Los Angeles as a sleepless city of night, where neon glows like radium and three o’clock in the morning comes sooner than you think. Jack Kerouac, though he worked a very different vein of Americana, recognized the place when he saw it in 1947 (the year *film noir* was named by the French critic Nino Frank). “What brutal, hot, siren-whining nights there are! LA is the loneliest and most brutal

of American cities. . . . The beatest characters in the country swarmed on the sidewalks—all of it under those soft Southern California stars that are lost in the brown halo of the huge desert encampment LA really is.”

Roman Polanski’s film of Robert Towne’s script for *Chinatown* showed how satisfyingly *noir*’s mood of fatality answered to a detailed knowledge of Los Angeles’s conspiratorial past. The polar division of sunshine and *noir*, as Mike Davis demonstrates in *City of Quartz*, is the fault line separating all Los Angeles mythologies, and this is no parochial issue: it is Los Angeles’s complex fate to figure in the contemporary imagination of the city as both utopia and Great Wrong Place.

Long before the last drought, some uncanny spirit of place whispered that civilization on this coast is bound to be impermanent and unsustainable in the long run. The imagination of disaster has always been vivid in Southern California, and from towering infernos to marauding “super-gangs,” many of the direst forebodings are regularly fulfilled. Gore Vidal writes of an occasion when “Los Angeles had been on fire for three days. As I took a taxi from the studio I asked the driver, ‘How’s the fire doing?’ ‘You mean,’ said the Hollywoodian, ‘the holocaust.’ The style, you see, must come as easily and naturally as that.”

Such grim vistas contradict the received mythology of blithe bronzed youth, but then, the modern City of Angels was born old and has only gradually grown young. Even twenty-five years ago, Pauline Kael’s undressed vision of Los Angeles was no bouncy nymph; it was grim survivalists around the pool at the Beverly Hills Hotel, not young but “ageless like crocodiles.” It is difficult to say how much of Los Angeles’s air of fatalism and baffled expectancy lingers from the decades between 1880 and 1930 when Southern California lured mostly the unyoung and infirm, and the care and housing of invalids ranked as a leading industry.

These new argonauts were nothing like the hairy-chested 'Forty-Niners, whose lost beauty and virility Mark Twain mourned in *Roughing It*. Many of the later arrivals actually dropped dead just as their train pulled into the promised land. At the turn of the century, boosters like Charles Fletcher Lummis could only regret that the Southland had so few blond beasts to show compared with San Francisco. As regards the cult of youth in Southern California, there has always been more than a hint of the whited sepulcher to all that (and on this subject see Eve Babitz's essay in this volume).

"The California sky, so like the Egyptian, smiled on my work," Thomas Mann wrote, remembering how he had settled into his house on Amalfi Drive in Pacific Palisades to wait out the war and finish the Joseph novels. Even after Los Angeles was canopied with smog (a wartime plague that descended in 1942 and never lifted), some trick of light, air, and setting continued to put travelers in mind of ancient cities and antique lands. Evelyn Waugh was reminded of Addis Ababa, the newly arrived David Hockney of Cavafy's Alexandria. "The hot climate's near enough to Alexandria, sensual: and this downtown was sleazy, a bit dusty, very masculine . . . all tacky and everything," he wrote in *My Early Years*.

Los Angeles often brings to mind the big cities of the "crowded and cosmopolitan" centuries between Alexander and Augustus. I wonder if there is another city in history Los Angeles more resembles than Alexandria in the bright pagan world, another "self-advertising megalopolis" and for most of a thousand years the global capital of science, scholarship, mass media, mystery religions, occultism, advanced sensuality, and avant-garde schools of asceticism. Alexandria concentrated all those features of the Hellenistic world which (as the classical historian Peter Green lists them) make that lost world seem so uncannily like our own—"the same ob-

sessive pursuit of affluence, exotic religious cults, fads in astrology and magic, offbeat eroticism, gourmet food," even the same kind of military-industrial-academic complex.

"Shall I tell you what is my highest ambition?" Dr. Mulge asks in Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*. "It is to make of Tarzana the living Center of the New Civilization that is coming to blossom here in the West. The Athens [but he might as well have said the Alexandria or Pergamon] of the twentieth century is on the point of emerging here, in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area. I want Tarzana to be its Parthenon and its Art, Philosophy, Science—I want them all to find their home in Tarzana, to radiate their influence from our campus, to. . . ."

Until the end of the eighteenth century, there were no cities in the West that compared in size, population, or wealth to the giant cities of Asia or the metropolises of antiquity. As Europe entered into the age of revolution, only London counted more than 1 million inhabitants. By 1900 Paris, Berlin, and Vienna had passed the million mark, and cities were growing in North America at the fastest rate in history—but how late Los Angeles joined the procession! In 1880, when Chicago was a strapping metropolis of 1 million and threatening to overtake New York—or London—Los Angeles was a hundred-year-old town of 11,000, slightly smaller (according to Oliver Carlson) than Logansport, Indiana, and Chicopee, Massachusetts.

Not simply late to bloom, Los Angeles was the last world city to arise out of the relatively brief period (roughly corresponding to what historians call the "long nineteenth century," from 1789 to 1914) when the biggest cities were to be found in the come-lately West rather than in the ancient East. (Houston, Texas, and Sydney, Australia, are not world cities.) By the same token, Los Angeles was the last metropolis to reach such magnitude when the biggest urban centers in the New World were boasted by the United States rather



than (as in 1780 and again approaching 2000) by Mexico and South America. Not geography (Puget Sound, where Raymond Chandler once set a story, is farther west) but historical belatedness would be the key to its mythologies.

In the notes for his unfinished “Arcades” project, Walter Benjamin wrote that the secret of the immense modern cities—“their most hidden aspect”—is how “this historical object of the new metropolis with its uniform streets and incalculable rows of houses has realized the architecture dreamed of by the ancients: the labyrinth.” However baffling (a dictionary definition of a labyrinth is “a devious arrangement of linear patterns forming a design”), a proper labyrinth becomes entirely logical when seen from the proper angle (as in a night flight over Los Angeles), or whenever its principle of connectedness is found. Thus, a mid-century visitor to the Los Angeles labyrinth, the Spanish philosopher Julián Marias, was amazed by the gigantic, geometrical sea of houses. “When one is in a residential area, for miles around there is nothing other than *homes*,” he wrote with evident horror. Happily, the good European needed only to peer inside a few picture windows to see the phosphor glow that connected them. Only apparently turned in on themselves, the houses were little domestic monads linked by the “preordained harmony of television.”

This touristic epiphany, which appears in Marias’s book *America in the Fifties*, simply confirmed what the exiled scholars of the Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, had already discerned from their wartime redoubt in Pacific Palisades: that the American “culture industry,” manufacturing lowbrow dreams from coastal factories, was “a system uniform and whole in every part,” like a web, a net, a certain kind of labyrinth. In *The Pacific Wall* Jean-François Lyotard, another oracle overcome by Los Angeles, reconfigures the maze: “Los Angeles is the capital (*la capitale*) of the world because it is not a metropolis by European

or East Coast standards,” i.e., not a solid city arranged around something, but a game of chess, whose usually vacant diagonals are forty miles long and lead nowhere.

From its beginning, Los Angeles has been arranging itself into the logical grids that Oswald Spengler said are the infallible mark of late, wintry world cities. Alexandria, the prototype of Los Angeles, was laid out in a chessboard pattern approved by Alexander the Great himself, who was buried in a glass coffin at the crossroads of the city. No doubt it is a sign of Los Angeles’s postmodernity that it radiates from nothing at all. The architectural historian Reyner Banham, who rather despised Downtown, pointed out with evident satisfaction that even the site of the original plaza has been lost, “and thus leaves a mystery at the very heart of the city.”

No place has masqueraded so profitably as other places than Southern California, and no city has paraded its self-regard so remorselessly as Los Angeles: what confirms L.A.’s status as cosmopolis is how brazenly it has begun to portray itself as the place where stories end, destinies are decided, ancient quarrels are resumed and concluded. And with such good reason. How many mental maps must be rearranged to accommodate the sober fact that George Bush once lived in Compton? On screen warlocks are resurrected from the seventeenth century, and cyborgs arrive from the twenty-first. Alternative universes, corresponding to the different quarters of the city, are conjured and spun off into oblivion. Sizing up the punks in *Terminator 1* and the bikers in *Terminator 2*, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s computer brain automatically classifies them in terms of Sheldonian body-types, as efficiently as Aldous Huxley, who used to ride the escalator at Ohrbach’s department store downtown and point out to his companions here a tubby endormorph, there a hunky mesomorph. In this bronzed paradise, physique is character *and* destiny. Oscar Wilde said that everybody reported missing is sooner or later seen in San Francisco. Like so many

distinctions, this one has migrated down the coast. In a poem by Mark Strand, Gregor Samsa has been metamorphosed again. No longer an insect, merely writing to a friend, he is “an ordinary man, living in Los Angeles, trying to get by as best I can.”

One autumn day at mid-century—November 4, 1951, according to his journal—the diplomat and cold warrior George Kennan sat in a garden overlooking the leafy affluence of Pasadena and wondered why the fine prospect should fill him with so much unease. Of course he knew that beneath the foliage of the eucalyptus trees and the shrubbery the land was barren. In reality, Southern California was a remote and desert place, the water naturally available in the basin sufficient to supply a good-sized town, never the Babylonish metropolis sprawling to the west. And Hollywood itself was uneasy, disturbed by fear of communism in some quarters of the industry (Ronald Reagan, the president of the Screen Actors Guild, carried a gun), of anticommunist crusaders in others; fear of television and the fickleness of the domestic audience that had begun to desert the movie palaces even before television. Ben Hecht would remember his friend David O. Selznick raving at dawn in the deserted streets of Tinseltown: “Hollywood’s like Egypt. Full of crumpled pyramids. It’ll never come back. It’ll just keep on crumbling until finally the wind blows the last studio prop across the sands.”

Taking the long view, which the atomic age encouraged, Kennan brooded on the vulnerability of Los Angeles, of all American cities the most abjectly dependent on the automobile, its lifelines stretched taut across the desert to the turbines on the Colorado. “Here the helplessness is greatest, but also the thoughtlessness . . . ,” he wrote. “There is really a subtle but profound difference between people here and what Americans used to be, and still partly are, in other parts of the country.” Free from want and oppression, the average

Californian became childlike, “fun-loving, quick to laughter and enthusiasm, unanalytical, unintellectual, outwardly expansive, preoccupied with physical beauty and prowess, given to sudden and unthinking seizures of aggressiveness, driven constantly to protect his status in the group by an eager conformism—yet not unhappy.” When the day of reckoning comes, “values will suddenly prove to have been lost that were forged slowly and laboriously in the more rugged experience of Western political development elsewhere.”

By 1950 the most important politician to come out of Southern California had manifested himself, in fact, had been elected to the United States Senate. Two other California politicians have become president, Ronald Reagan and the Dour Engineer, Herbert Hoover; but they were not born and raised in the golden land. They had not taken the Happy Road to Heaven with Sister Aimee at Angelus Temple or sweated in the citrus groves. Richard Nixon emerged from the half-Atlantean, half-Iowan demi-metropolis of the twenties and thirties. When he first ran for Congress in 1946, the effects of the Depression were still being felt. “It was not easy,” our lost leader writes in his latest memoir, *In the Arena*. Briskly, he dismisses the calumny, circulated by “some ‘historians,’ ” that he accused his opponent, “a liberal with a socialist background,” of communism. No, “The main difficulty was that our neighbors [next to the house he rented from his barber in Whittier] raised minks for a living. Minks make beautiful coats,” he concedes judiciously, “but as animals they are repulsive because they eat their young. I can still remember working on speeches late at night and hearing the screaming of the young minks next door.” Night after night, he had to endure those terrible screams while he wrote speeches that did not accuse Jerry Voorhis of being a Communist.

The habit of reporting Southern California as the new

utopia persisted as late as the mid-sixties, when the American century turned giddy (and Richard Nixon moved to New York). The June 28, 1966 issue of *Look* magazine declared: "Now, it turns out, everybody's whole life can be led as a work of art, California shows us a wide and brilliant spectrum of possibilities. . . . It is quite safe to say that the *average* student of the year 2000 would be considered, in today's terms, a genius."

The lost war in Asia had the incidental effects of breaking the old liberal consensus that made California, on a good day, look like a laboratory for the nation, flooding its schools with Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, and other South Asian children, many of whom actually perform at "genius" levels, if they can negotiate the overcrowded, understaffed classrooms of an increasingly penurious Sunbelt state. (Opulent California spends less per student than any other industrial state, and the city of Los Angeles, which is richer than most states, spends less than that.)

If Los Angeles is no longer plausible as utopia, then perhaps it can be rehabilitated as cautionary lesson. For example, is Los Angeles, in the spring of 1991, accused of having a brutish, racist police force? "Critics of L.A.," says *Newsweek*, quoting Kevin Starr, "should know that Los Angeles is a massive experiment in what the American republic will be in in the 21st century."

In fact, no one knows what or if the American republic will be in 2076, but if the past is any guide at all, it will not be much like Southern California. The immense number of fashions and follies that it incubates, ranging in the recent decades from psychedelia to the Reagan Revolution to Michael Milken's junk bonds, does not make it any more a model for the alien continent east of the Sierras. In 1945, as the country was about to become abruptly younger, Angelinos were older than the national average. Today, as America's population ages and its families diminish in size, Los

Angeles's households are larger, its birthrate higher, and its average citizen younger than the norms for the rest of the country, and these differences are increasing. Predominantly Caucasian even thirty years ago, it is now the most racially diverse metropolis in the country, if not the world. Just as the world's fascination with California was most intense forty years ago, the "Californization" of American life, as the historian John Lukacs call it, was mostly a phenomenon of the Nixon years. Even Ronald Reagan gave the White House less of a Los Angeles coloration than Richard Nixon, whose inner circle sometimes looked to be a cabal requiring a degree from USC for admission.

That enduring myth of Southern California as Tomorrowland shows how tenacious journalistic habit can be; it is a classic locus of what Arthur Dubin in a remarkable new book calls "futurehype," or the "tyranny of prophecy." Rather than a prophecy, a laboratory, or (least of all!) a microcosm, Los Angeles is the Burgess Shale of American life, crowded with the fossilized remains of tomorrows that never arrived, but swarming with wonderful life. Edmund Wilson had it right fifty years ago when he wrote, "But California, since we took it away from the Mexicans, has always presented itself to Americans as one of the strangest and most exotic of our adventures." Only now it is no longer, if it ever was, merely one of "our" American exploits.

In this book, Alexander Cockburn, the Post-Modern-day Juvenal, looks at the new Downtown, and the historian Mike Davis ventures into the postindustrial "empty quarter."

Carolyn See, whose novel, *Golden Days*, boldly went one day beyond apocalypse, explores an interracial world. Another remarkable Los Angeles novelist, Eve Babitz, writes about the erotics of asceticism. Two extraordinary young writers for *L.A. Weekly*, one of the nation's liveliest weeklies, contribute essays combining reportage with personal witness, Lynell George writing about death at an early age,

Rubén Martínez about holy politics. My own essay describes how every faith from “Theosophy to Christian Sirens” came to flourish in Southern California.

David Thomson, whose novels *Suspects* and *Silver Light* make up one of the great secret histories, muses on the topography of a celebrated street. Jeremy Lerner, an Academy Award winner for his original screenplay, *The Candidate*, numbers the rules of the game in movieland.

Thomas S. Hines, the biographer of Richard Neutra, analyzes modernism (and Post-Modernism, since it has come to that) in Los Angeles architecture from Irving Gill to Frank O. Gehry.

Here is how they threaded the labyrinth that lies at the end of the American road.