

Edge Gazing/Center Flash

In the late 1960s the Los Angeles painter Sam Francis produced a series of mural-size works uniformly named *Untitled (Edge Painting)*, [year of production].¹ These paintings suggest a way of observing contemporary Los Angeles cultures from the multiple perceptual centers of the edge. They also prefigure the profusion of luminous performances that first happened in the margins and remained “on edge.”²

In a typical *Edge Painting* configuration the canvas is largely painted white, with stripes of vivid colors—red, blue, yellow, green, black—delineating the edge. A palpable tension exists between the central territory of white and its colorful peripheries. Although the white and the colors are structurally segregated, there is no absolute barrier between them. In *Untitled (Edge Painting)*, 1966 (fig. 1), for example, some white color crosses over to the blue and drops into the yellow-red-blue; two blue scratches and a gray dot float somewhere in the white middle, while the bottom band of red rages into the white like waves of fire. The drama of territorial negotiations continues within the colored sphere: the yellow is covered by blue, turned green, and submerged by red, or perhaps it is the green that was there in the first place, and has subsequently been covered by yellow, blue, and red. At this point there is no telling



- 1 Sam Francis, *Untitled (Edge Painting)*, 1966, acrylic on canvas, 199 × 100 cm.
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which color actually came first, nor is it crucial, I think, for us to verify the color chronology in order to appreciate the painting's effect. We do not even know whether the color white was the original coating for the entire canvas, even though it appears at first that the color white is both encroached upon and enlivened by other colors. The being of whiteness seems to be established by its colorful frame. A closer reading, however, yields much ambiguity. The edge of colors exposes the center of white as both solid and empty, at once a homogeneous majority and a yet-to-be-discovered mystery. The main area is filled with one particular color, yet it also looks like a colorless background that wants to be painted. The painting seems both pregnant and unfinished; it signals the promise or the inertia of a frozen moment.

As it plays on the margins, *Edge Painting* paradoxically foregrounds the enigma of the center. In *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, Russell Ferguson raises the question: "When we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what? But this question is difficult to answer. The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place. When we try to pin it down, the center always seems to be somewhere else."³ Ferguson's comment addresses the ambiguity of an "invisible center," which exerts undeniable power over the ways we live, eat, think, work, exercise, play, and relate to others, but cannot be fully described. The center's power always exceeds our definitions for it. *Edge Painting* flips Ferguson's question: "When we say center, we must also ask, center to what?"

This question seems easier to answer: center to *what is marginal*. Center, then, is what is not marginal. Center is a locus circumscribed by what it is not, a region framed by its peripheries. It is a norm delimited by its deviations, its others. But the "center" or "norm" cannot be fixed, because it resides in silence. It may mutate over time and in response to strategic necessities. It may consume itself and need to be renewed. It may even overlap with the margins. The composition of *Edge Painting* implies that it is easier to recognize the margins by their specific colors than to name the void that occupies the center. The void claims an undeniable power because of its impenetrable homogeneous mass. That semblance of homogeneity is nevertheless captured in suspense: it has the potential to change. At times center may signify the status quo, which resists change and pursues hegemony; it possesses the power to co-opt and assimilate its margins. At other times it is caught in a process of modification, decomposition, compromise, and reinvention, often as a result of the pressures from the margins. As *Edge Painting* provocatively proposes, center is a blank that needs to be filled. It can be filled with a multiplicity of contents. Therein lies the possibility of subversion and contamination from the margins.⁴

Edge Painting offers us a structural model to study the complex and dy-

dynamic relations between the center and the margins. Just as the central blank needs the fringes to delimit its nebulous sphere, the fringe elements also define their places either in opposition to or by their correlation with the center. By featuring such visible interdependence, *Edge Painting* presents a model of centrality diametrically opposed to the classical one. As André Maurois has outlined, the idea of centrality appeared in the third-century text *Corpus Hermeticum*. The twelfth-century French theologian Alain de Lille developed the idea as an attribute of divinity: “God is an intelligent sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.”⁵ Giordano Bruno in 1584 revised de Lille’s metaphysical hermeneutics to fit his astronomical observation: “We can assert with certainty that the universe is all center, or that the center of the universe is everywhere and its circumference nowhere.” Blaise Pascal in the seventeenth century further reduced Bruno’s cosmic measure to a terrestrial scale: “Nature is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere, whose circumference is nowhere.” A signifier for the mystery of *infinity*, the “center” posed in these texts assumes simultaneously an infinitesimal scale (“center is everywhere”) and an infinite scale (its “circumference is nowhere”). In contrast, both the center and the circumference in *Edge Painting* are expressly present and measurable. Insofar as the circumference for the center is marked as a tangible boundary, centrality is no longer an equivalent term for infinity/divinity; it becomes instead a property intrinsic to sentient, mortal beings. The artwork thus illustrates *a paradigm of centrality for the finite being*.

Let me return to Ferguson’s comment about the power exercised by the hidden center. He describes the center and the margin as two *constitutive* entities in understanding contemporary culture. As *Edge Painting* evinces, these constitutive entities are fundamentally *structural* (relational) rather than determinedly *figural* (with fixed patterns). Further, this structure is both finite and unstable. The painting exposes the structural positioning between center and margin as fluid, porous, and subject to contingencies and temporal adjustments. Not only will the respective contents for each be altered over time, but the apparent polarity between center and margins captured in *Edge Painting* may not always hold. Thus, when we say center is *what is not marginal*, we may also say margin is *what is not yet center*. As the scale decreases in our analysis, more flexibility is available in the structural positioning between center and margin. The polarity between center and margin might become less rigid, while the mystery of center might be relatively easier to decipher. This is the paradox presented by *Edge Painting* as a paradigm of centrality: the painting needs its mural-size scale to convey the central blank’s awesome appeal.

The simultaneous complexity and blankness of *being center* manifested in *Edge Painting* point to other characteristics: center is seldom self-sufficient,

center is usually situational, center is potentially receptive, and center is always provisional.

Center is seldom self-sufficient because it can hardly be conceived, let alone defined, without resorting to its negative. On a secular and suprapersonal scale, this paradigm of centrality divulges the dynamics of codependency between the dominant class and its others. On a personal scale, this paradigm becomes a model of *subjectivity* that defines the individual subject by *intersubjective relations*. I may see myself, for example, as an individual center. But I cannot define who I am without differentiating myself from others: I am not-you, not-he, not-she, not-we, not-they. Nor can I differentiate myself from others without simultaneously positioning myself in relation to others: I am at various moments with you, with him, with her, becoming part of us, joining them. Being center is then a perception that compels me to recognize the co-existence of those who frame my margins. I must therefore admit my own lack of self-sufficiency and my interrelatedness with others. I may be excessively self-centered, even egocentric, but my constant reliance on others to know myself better exposes my solipsistic egocentrism as faulty and inadequate, even self-destructive. By making the circumference explicit, *Edge Painting* undercuts the implicit power assumed by my *centricity/subjectivity* and insists that I also keep the *limit* of my centrality in view.

To recognize that center is hardly transcendent is to regard being center as situational. I see myself as a center; therefore I realize that you also have your own center, and he his, she hers, we ours, and they theirs. When gauged from different time-space coordinates, the multiple others who frame my center are themselves their own centers. Just as I see my others as marginal to me, my others see me as marginal to them. Every individual subject is her/his own center. Sometimes, by choice, coercion, or force, the subject may identify with deviance or marginality rather than centrality. In that case, I maintain that the subject's supposed deviance/marginality actually occupies the space of her/his center. As every subject projects her/his own *norm*, every norm may be an exception, while every exception is potentially a norm, depending on where we view it. Thus, on an individual scale, there are centers and circumferences everywhere. Centrality is an effect established by context and changes with perspectives and situations.

The argument that being center is often a subjective perception variable with situations leads to the axiom that center is a potentially receptive structure. As *Edge Painting* epitomizes, center is a largely blank structure with distinct edges. From a semiotic perspective, I may read the structure as a schema for the human's cognitive system. The white area signifies the epistemic status quo, formed by a particular conglomerate of genetic, neurological, social, cultural, and political determinants. The colorful fringes are then the emer-

gent stimuli that destabilize the status quo, forcing it to alter its shape and content for better accommodation and utilization of the new. It is just as likely, however, that the epistemic status quo may suffer from inertia, entropy, exhaustion, malnutrition, or pathology, thereby losing the ability to adapt. The center as a blank structure therefore has the potential to absorb stimuli and to strive for rejuvenation. Nevertheless, it is not inherently receptive and may resist change.

If center is a potentially receptive structure, then it is also a provisional process. The blankness that occupies the center of *Edge Painting* is both foreboding and inviting. It is so not only because it eludes comprehension and definition, but also because it is filled with possibilities. To introduce any specific content into this blank means the reduction of its full potential in sacrificing all but a few of its possibilities. Still, the challenge posed by its blankness is its very appeal. The painting looks tantalizingly unfinished. Its central area seems to have emptied itself out for visitations. Perhaps it simply withholds its resistance to alterity. Its static white surface appears open to other colors. Maybe it poises to appropriate their otherness so as to disrupt its present stagnancy. It yearns to become once again a live painting—an artwork still in the making. The blankness left in the painting's center therefore poses itself as a process rather than a permanent condition. Being a voided center, it inhabits a state of becoming.

A live (nonstagnant) center is caught in constant motion; it is a vessel that changes with its particular contents. In order to maintain/reclaim its centrality, a center—whatever it signifies—may undergo a cyclical process of absorption and reinforcement, whereby it becomes customized by its contents. A center sustains its centrality not by holding on to its customized state, but by regarding all its present contents as temporary, provisional, and radically alterable. For a center's ability to survive depends on its sensitivity to contingencies and its willingness to adjust for vicissitudes. In this light, center becomes simultaneously a susceptible vessel and a vital vehicle, strengthening its established contents while absorbing other stimuli for continuous self-renewal. *Edge Painting* drives this idea home through a paradox: it reveals centrality as a mutable process by showing a blank structure with distinct margins but a dissolved center. In short, this model of centrality is simultaneously decentered⁶—*the center is there and nowhere*.

Multiple Los Angeleses

Re-scanning Edge Painting

I discover in Sam Francis's *Edge Painting* a path to Los Angeles, the site for the contemporary performances that my book studies. The painting's model

of centrality helps me foreground this particular location, which also produced *Edge Painting*.

The Los Angeles where the painting was “born” is of course another Los Angeles, which exists only in the elsewhere of memories. Francis first exhibited his *Edge Painting* series in Paris. The fact invites us to speculate about the painting’s allegorical dimension. The central white area might signify the dominant forces in the painter’s hometown that rendered his artistic expressions marginal. Francis might be critiquing *the* hegemonic center of power rather than contemplating a general theory about decentered centrality. Whatever the artist’s intent, our question is: Can *Untitled (Edge Painting), 1966* retain its efficacy as a structural paradigm for the turn-of-millennium Los Angeles? Can it account for the multicultural ecology, the complex relations among diverse ethnic groups, and the urban geography in this expansive postmodern metropolis?

To me, the artwork’s own ambiguity allows it to be read in various ways as portraying this malleable city. On a literal and diagrammatic level, we could read *Edge Painting* as a political parable. It presents a quantified mapping of ethnic competitions, where a white majority asserts its dominance over people of color, while the color contingencies agitate from the margins. Conflicts exist between the white and other colors, but there is also antagonism among different nonwhite colors. In this vein, the painting offers a haiku impression of Los Angeles during the 1992 South Central civil unrest. We could also read *Edge Painting* as a general scheme about territorial struggles and negotiations, hinting at the dilemmas of immigration confronting present-day Los Angeles.

On a metaphorical—non-color-specific—level, we could cast *Edge Painting* in cultural terms. The white area represents the amorphous *mainstream culture*, while the peripheries contain the heterogeneous *other cultures*: alternative cultures, subcultures, ethnic minority cultures, feminist cultures, queer cultures, diasporic cultures, and the self-proclaimed avant-garde culture that desires to inhabit the cutting edge. As the contrast between the white mass and the narrow spans of other colors implies, it is easier to label these marginal cultures as “other” than to pin down the “mainstream.” Is the mainstream culture synonymous with the traditional, Eurocentric high culture, the people-generated popular culture, or the money-driven, ideologically muffled mass culture? In the specific Los Angeles context, is mainstream culture identical to the Hollywood Cultural Industry, to the Disney Fantasy Factory, and to the values, standards, and signifying systems instituted by the city’s Cultural Establishment?

The answer to this last question seems readily affirmative. All three parties combined represent the critical mass for the Los Angeles cultural mainstream.

Nevertheless, except for Disney as “the happiest place on Earth,” none of the other hegemonic entities can be fully described without discrepancy. The structural nonequivalence illustrated by *Edge Painting* suggests that it is easier to perceive deviation from the mainstream norm than to define the norm. Yet, just because the “norm” is hard to pin down does not mean that it does not exist. The solidity of the elusive norm can be daunting, as attested by the wrath of the righteous experienced by its deviants. It is nonetheless a myth to assume that the norm is always homogeneous or unified. Multiplicity and contradictions exist both in the blank center and the colored margins. Actually, in cultural terms, the polarity between the mainstream center and its divergent margins captured by *Edge Painting* is rapidly becoming extinct or irrelevant. The multivalent admixture of diverse cultures in *my Los Angeles* threatens to saturate Sam Francis’s large canvas with a dripping hybridity of paints.

City of Fables

I am fascinated by the ability of *Edge Painting* to inspire speculations by posing a tantalizing emptiness front center. It is reticent yet very *there*. This quality of being vacuous yet suggestive, present yet volatile embodied by the painting inadvertently articulates why Los Angeles is a magnet not only for migrants and settlers from other states and countries, but also for imaginary and discursive investments. “Back in Los Angeles, we missed Los Angeles,” writes Randall Jarrell.⁷ Los Angeles is a void and an ideal, an impossible vacuum and a violation, a kaleidoscopic vision, a fractal formation, or, in Lars Nittve’s phrase, “a projection on the windshield.”⁸ Poets, novelists, artists, playwrights, screenwriters, cartoonists, television sit-com teams, lyricists, journalists, architects, world travelers, ethnographers, seismologists, late-capitalist economists, postmodern urban theorists, postcolonial cultural critics, media scholars, and performance historians all formulate and promulgate their versions of Los Angeles. The wide range of their interpretations can result only from a multiplication of the interpreters’ specular, verbal, temperamental, and circumstantial disparity with the city’s own diversity. Thus, ironically, extreme opinions abound. Jack Kerouac, the chronicler of the Beat Generation, wrote: “‘LA.’ I love the way she said ‘LA’; I love the way everybody says ‘LA’ on the Coast; it’s their one and only golden town when all is said and done.”⁹ And Bertolt Brecht, a European exile briefly flirting with Hollywood during World War II, found “on thinking about Hell, that it must be / Still more like Los Angeles.”¹⁰

Other cities certainly have their shares of local narratives, but Los Angeles was actively built on boosterism, on the promises made by speculative words and images. According to Gary A. Dymski and John M. Veitch, “Although

other cities grew incrementally through decades, Los Angeles emerged through riotous bouts of speculative excess.”¹¹ Such “boom/bust” development corresponds to the city’s continuous fashioning of palatable regional images: Los Angeles is malleable and equivocal precisely because it is a city of information, which includes its manufactured dreams. A specific feature here is the conjunction of interpretive wills and the will to interpret: residents not only create the city according to their own interpretations, but feel compelled to make such interpretations. The persona of the city is embedded in high-flying fancies as much as in clichés, both replicating a set of general opinions frequently cited by many. Even a tourist to the city might feel smug enough to comment on its multiplicity, eclecticism, heterogeneity, ethnic divisiveness, and dispersed urban sprawl. Los Angeles invites the proliferation of discourses about itself, in a degree comparable only to other self-conscious metropolises in the world, such as New York City, Chicago, Paris, Vienna, Venice, Berlin, London, Taipei, Tokyo, and Mexico City. The peculiar magnetism of Los Angeles lies not in its uniqueness but in its paradigmatic role as a late-capitalist geocultural urban prototype. On top of such typicality, Los Angeles happens to own the world’s biggest machine for commodified information/fantasy.

The center is there and nowhere. As a city of information—which is often nonhierarchical, even unverifiable—the *being* of Los Angeles is largely constructed upon the interpreters’ own ideological investments. It *becomes* what the interpreter wants it to *be*. What’s the end result that we enjoy today? That which can be grasped readily does not seem to untangle fully the vast and inscrutable lining of this city. The mystery of Los Angeles is, as Jean Baudrillard ventures, “precisely that of no longer being anything but a network of incessant, unreal circulation.”¹² The *center* of Los Angeles seems to have dissolved in the murmurs of information, or rather, more exactly, it has proliferated into *multiple centers*.

Heteroglossia in Heteropolis

The centers follow the split tongues: the Bakhtinian “heteroglossia”¹³ at once produced by and reproducing Los Angeles confirms one of the truisms surrounding this megalopolis—there are many Los Angeleses. Baudrillard’s theory of simulation holds that it is no longer possible to ascertain the cause-and-effect sequence between the city’s images and materiality, between its hyperreal virtuality and lived actuality. I find the claim pertinent only to an extent, for the many Los Angeleses certainly also exist outside of the stunning array of information and cultural phenomena epitomized by such European conceits as Baudrillard’s “precession of simulacra” and Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia.” Consider the remarks of another European cultural observer who latches

on the city's postmodern facility. Charles Jencks describes Los Angeles as a primary example of "heteropolis, a new form of urban agglomeration that thrives on difference." A heteropolis is, according to Jencks, "a global city of more than eight million with a high concentration of multinational corporations and having a variety of economic sectors, multiplying lifestyles, and a diversifying ethnic population heading toward full minoritization. Most important, it is a place where heterogeneity—of culture and even of flora and fauna—are enjoyed."¹⁴

I appreciate Jencks's enthusiasm, although I doubt that heterogeneity is always "enjoyed" by Angeleno/as. In any case, Jencks hits the mark in indicating heterogeneity as a physical and a historical condition of contemporary Los Angeles. The city's expansive urban geography and diverse ethnic populations encourage the dispersion and re-formation of polycentered, multi-form, ethnically and linguistically mixed enclaves. A city of cities, turn-of-millennium Los Angeles has developed into a cultural, economic, political, and demographic conglomerate of multiple centers. Heterogeneity is seen, heard, tasted, worn, carried, encountered, transacted, dwelled, and shuttled. Yet neither the city's territorial expansiveness nor its supposed tolerance for heterogeneity is preordained.

In 1781 Los Angeles consisted of a scattered collection of towns centered around the settlement of El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciúncula.¹⁵ In 1871 this violent "Hell Town" made headlines around the world for the racist massacre of about twenty Chinese workers out of a total Chinese population of two hundred. With the surge of primarily WASP migrants from small-town mid-America, separate municipalities such as Pasadena, Santa Monica, and Pomona were founded around the end of the nineteenth century, prefiguring, in Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja's terms, "the sprawling, polycentric character of [the region's] urban built environment." This unidimensional, centrifugal, and multicentric character was reinforced by the construction of freeways, which enabled a period of "mass suburbanization" and, subsequently, with the growth of outer cities, a period of "mass regional urbanization."¹⁶ The five-county region of greater Los Angeles now expands outward for sixty miles in every direction, encompassing more than 160 separate municipalities and a current population of fifteen million. Los Angeles has surpassed New York as the most ethnically diverse of all North American cities.

With the surges of multiethnic and multinational populations throughout the region's history came various purges of differences. Anti-Asian sentiment "rationalized" the confinement of more than thirty thousand Japanese Americans from Los Angeles in concentration camps in 1942. Hostility toward Mexicans worsened after the so-called Zoot Suit riots of 1943. The fear

of a Socialist/Communist takeover of the movie industry “justified” the harassment of European intellectuals, who had fled Nazism and fascism only to find themselves in the grips of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the early 1950s. Racism against African Americans, expressed through restrictive housing covenants in the 1930s, and then through financial redlining that persisted to the 1990s, reinforced housing segregation and allowed the deterioration of living conditions in the inner-city ghettos. Anti-homeless prejudice in the 1980s instigated the installation in Skid Row Park of an elaborate sprinkler system, which drenched unsuspecting sleepers at random hours during the night. Xenophobia and environmental paranoia, aggravated by the passage of California’s Proposition 187 in 1994, cloud the ongoing debates over (il/legal) immigration policies.¹⁷ These unflattering records serve to dissipate any doubt why Los Angeles has been the site for two violent urban uprisings: in Watts (1965) and in South Central (1992).¹⁸

Despite the undercurrents of racial discrimination, economic inequality, and intolerance of human differences, Los Angeles has enjoyed a century of almost continuous boom, slowed periodically only by national and global economic recession. This factor—augmented by the balmy Southern California weather; the myths of L.A.-style freedom, comfort, and glamour; and its geographic proximity to Asia, the Pacific islands, and Latin America—ensures that the city’s heterogeneity will never be in short supply. Even after the Northridge earthquake, L.A. has continued to be the mecca for “enormous population movements both from other parts of the United States and from other parts of the world.”¹⁹ Demographic reports positively support the trend of “minoritization” identified by Jencks: L.A. County’s “population shifted from 70 percent Anglo to 60 percent non-Anglo between 1970 and 1990, as what was once the most white and Protestant of American cities changed into what some commentators now call America’s leading Third World city.”²⁰ The ethnic map summarized by Jencks boasts a mosaic of Mexicans, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Filipinos, Salvadorans, Indians, Iranians, Russians, and many more—“with Latinos, Jews, and WASPS the largest minorities in this minoritized place.” The effect of such thorough minoritization, Jencks adds, is to divide Los Angeles into village-size fragments, like a set of countries forming “the crazy-quilt pattern of a simmering Europe before World War I.”²¹

Heterogeneity may give off the pleasures of abundance and inclusiveness (which Jencks celebrates), but it may also become depoliticized into a mass of interchangeable differences. L.A. is a metropolis “in love with its limitless horizontality,” maintains Baudrillard.²² As one may see in a glance behind the wheel, this extended megacity wears its own micro-diversity on surface streets like variety tattoos. I discover that such nonhierarchical and uniformly dispersed heterogeneity has produced another effect of minoritization: the su-

perfidious leveling and accumulation of all differences, which are further neutralized by the postmodern mediascape, afloat in a psychic prairie of horizontality. The best translation of this horizontality into a rhetorical device is the run-on catalog.

Consider this quick inventory of the many Los Angeleses experienced from various vantage points: the aerial view preferred by the European travelers like Baudrillard, who marvels at the city's "inferno effect" seen from above; the automobile view that inspired the logo of traffic signs for a 1998 exhibition entitled "Sunshine and Noir: Art in L.A. 1960–1997" at UCLA's Armand Hammer Museum; the sub/urban pedestrians' views that differ drastically among economically segregated neighborhoods; the surveillance camera's view rebuked by Mike Davis in his prescient *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*; the ocean surfer's view that assembles a solartopia from crests of waves, bikinis, in-line skaters, and Venice Beach performance artists; the gay bartender's view that absorbs staccato loneliness in the House of Blues; the Mickey Mouse impersonator's view that sweats over a fantasy job in some Imagineers' utopia; the homeless teenager's view that scavenges behind a donut shop; the Compton gangsta rapper's view that practices "a politics of location" via nasty rhymes for cash cows; the traffic jam victim's view that exudes impatience seasoned by a mild worry about the "Big One"; the Korean merchants' views that witnessed their grocery shops burned to the ground on *Sa-I-Gu* (April 29, 1992); the running celluloid views that dismember, multiply, beautify, cannibalize, and embalm this hyperreal heteropolis on the silver screen.²³

A sea of numbing differences translate perceptually into a desert of insignificances. The flow of "global non-meaning" flushes through Los Angeleses like automated and evanescent billboard commercials.²⁴

Other Los Angeleses

It should be clear by now that I believe neither centrality nor multicentricity guarantees a ticket to paradise—or to purgatory. As I pour the multicentric bodies of Los Angeleses into the mold of centrality held up by *Edge Painting*, the middle void becomes a collage of fragments, with independent, parallel, or intersecting centers, bubbling in varying sizes and colors, filling the canvas all the way to the edges. Does that mean that I have found a group portrait for the many Los Angeleses?

A Paradigm of Multicentricity

Let me first turn to multicentricity as a conceptual angle. Above all, the notion of multicentricity privileges different entities' right to centrality. It has

the discursive effect of allowing each center—or unit, kind, group, the “genus” in heterogeneity—to assert its autonomy, even when it simultaneously compels each center to acknowledge the copresence of its own margins and of other centers. Noting the centrality of a particular Los Angeles, for example, means recognizing its material and circumstantial specificities as well as considering its relations to power, wealth, and common well-being resulting from such constitutive specificities. While an accent on centrality sanctions this Los Angeles’s claim to cultural autonomy, a simultaneous attention to multicentricity discloses its relative positioning in the sociopolitical network shared with other Los Angeleses. Raymond A. Rocco puts this dynamic in more concrete terms, “We need to view each ‘Los Angeles’ as constituting a particular, specific, and concrete way of living in and through the city that is both bounded and linked to other sectors by its particular configuration of factors such as race, class, gender, immigrant status, political access, and economic resources.”²⁵ Rocco’s comment emphasizes the particularities pertaining to the material conditions of each Los Angeles and the interconnections among different Los Angeleses. His map of Los Angeleses is coordinated by multicentricity.

Multicentricity as a strategy for cultural intervention focuses on the conceptual level. The multicentric paradigm serves to activate a procedure of cognizance that may eventually change general perceptions about the status of minoritization. Being center connotes the existence of an independent, if not unique, sphere, within which a self-referential network of signifying systems operates. Granted that a center must always be bound by other centers in a multicentric situation, the cognizance of its own centrality exposes those outside forces that seek to marginalize it as arbitrary and unduly oppressive. Those dominating forces then seem no longer “warranted” or “naturalized” by the status quo. In this capacity, the concept of multicentricity subverts the existing power structure, which takes for granted the boundary between the “majority” and the “minority,” between “dominant” cultures and “marginal” others. The multicentric paradigm consequently has the potential to become a resistant strategy for those who are involuntarily relegated to the margins by the existing power structure.

Multicentricity is, however, far from being an activist solution to present cultural dilemmas. It does not purport to be an ethical or redressive measure, as does “multiculturalism.” Multiculturalism, at least in its idealistic phase, aspires to institute fundamental changes in the directions and definitions of “national cultures” through education, hiring principles, and media advocacy.²⁶ With “multicentricity,” my intent is to offer a more precise description for an existing phenomenon in the city I live. Being descriptive rather than prescriptive, multicentricity has no direct political stake or any imme-

diate practical consequence. I may see myself as central, for example, but my claim to centrality does not automatically promote my upward social mobility or offer me affordable health insurance. My others, who both circumscribe me and reside elsewhere, may be much more powerful than I am at this given moment. Depending on the criteria of evaluation, my Los Angeles, which is central to me, may still be placed in the margins in relation to other Los Angeleses. Conversely, I may wish to define my centrality by my marginality or to identify myself as an other. My Los Angeles, evoked in my own tongue, becomes then *another* Los Angeles, *an other's* Los Angeles, or *the other* Los Angeles—not the one Los Angeles known in clichés. My saying this, however, does not erase the clichéd Los Angeles, or even the clichés. The efficacy of multicentricity as a concept lies primarily in the power of *naming*.

Naming may facilitate revolution, but naming is not in itself a revolution. The phenomenon of multicentricity witnessed in this region clearly does not bring about equivalence, equilibrium, or equality among the many Los Angeleses. If I've found my portrait of multicentric Los Angeleses, it would stress that heterogeneity, multiplicity, and incongruity exist both within and between centers. Each Los Angeles has to deal with conflicts, differences, and incommensurabilities within itself. Likewise, it has to handle a complex ramification of relationships with other Los Angeleses, including opposition (antagonism among competing entities), coexistence (parallel subsistence among different entities), coalition (cooperation between different entities for mutual benefit), and hybridity (merging with other entities).²⁷

Multicentricity and Polarity

The discursive emphasis on multicentricity tends to blur the tenacious polarity underlying the polycentered and polyglot veneer of heterogeneity. Numerous accounts by urban theorists reveal the widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in the many Los Angeleses. Michael Dear, for one, holds a somber view: "In social terms, postmodern L.A. is a city split between extreme wealth and poverty, in which a glittering First World city sits atop a polyglot Third World substructure."²⁸ Dear's analysis echoes what Scott and Soja observe as "an intensified bifurcation of regional labor markets":

On the one hand, there has been a growing high-wage, high-skill group of workers (managers, business executives, scientists, engineers, designers, and celebrities and many others in the entertainment industry); on the other hand, there has been an even more rapidly expanding mass of marginalized, low-wage, low-

skill workers, the majority of whom are women and often undocumented Latino and Asian immigrants, who find employment throughout the service sector and in a widening pool of manufacturing sweatshops, from the garment industry to electronics assembly. Between these two strata is the traditional skilled and semiskilled blue-collar working class, which has been shrinking with such rapidity that it is now commonly referred to as the disappearing middle stratum of Southern California society.²⁹

Los Angeles's present multicentricity coexists with the persistent polarity between the current hegemony and its others. Such polarity condenses the surface of multicentricity into two opposing entities—the center and its margins. Neither the center nor its margins can be delineated without contradictions. Both recognize the inequitable power status that exists between them and both register the pressure of contradictions. On the one hand, in the polarized picture where the current hegemony still owns the large central ground, to describe a surface that allows multicentric expressions tends to gloss over the undercurrent inequality. On the other hand, multicentricity does affect the existing polarity between the established parties and their others. This contradictory scenario reflects the nature of hegemony theorized by Antonio Gramsci. As Lisa Lowe explicates, Gramsci's notion of hegemony works both ways—for the dominant class as well as the marginalized class. Gramsci maintains that any specific hegemony, though it may be for the moment dominant, is never absolute or conclusive.³⁰ Thus, I suggest, similar to multicentricity, the polarity evinced in contemporary L.A. resides in constant fluctuation. The current hegemony is always subject to the contestation, resistance, and counterhegemonic forces launched from the margins.

Observing the economic inequality, the collapse of communities, and the increasing urban fragmentation, Michael Dear concludes his essay on postmodern L.A. with a warning and a plea: “This polycentric, polarized, polyglot metropolis long ago tore up its social contract and is without even a draft of a replacement. [. . .] *This* is the insistent message of postmodern Los Angeles: all urban place-making bets are off; we are engaged, knowingly or otherwise, in the search for new ways of creating cities.”³¹ Before we find those new ways, Angeleno/as have to live in a paradox: there are many Los Angeleses, and there are two implicitly separate Los Angeleses: the multicentric and the polarized L.A.

Let's return again to *Edge Painting*. Contemporary Los Angeles has both revised the painting's structure of centrality into multicentricity and remained in agreement with its original structure, which polarizes an elusive middle with multiple entities in the margins. With the revision, we are able to name the