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INTIMATE FRACTIONS OF AMERICAN EARTH

EXCAVATING THE FRONTIER IN FICTIONAL LOS ANGELES

1929–1953

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis proposes that fictions depicting Los Angeles between the onset of the Great Depression and the early 1950s reconstitute and interrogate historical notions of 'the frontier' as a conceptual framework with which to figure labour, masculinity, and race within spaces of urban modernity. Key texts explored include works by James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, John Fante, Frank Fenton, Chester Himes, Dorothy B. Hughes, and Hisaye Yamamoto. This thesis' methodology engages with the frontier's historiography, the material conditions of mid-century Los Angeles, theorisations of space drawn primarily from the works of Henri Lefebvre, and critical whiteness studies.

Established criticism typically claims that the defining paradigm of LA fiction in the 1930s and '40s is one of tragic continental finality, reflecting its era's fears that the 'closure' of America's western frontier had divested the nation of its ambitious and energetic character. My research challenges this orthodoxy by suggesting that circumscribed social horizons in these texts result not from any inability to perpetuate the frontier but from a collective failure to *stop* perpetuating it. This thesis thus fundamentally re-evaluates the contribution of LA's fiction to a post-Depression profusion of public discourses about the frontier's social legacies.

I locate the frontier within urban modernity by illustrating that dynamics of conflict within mid-century LA texts repeatedly invoke contemporary theorisations of the frontier's socio-spatial characteristics. Time and again in these fictions, intersecting conflicts of race, gender, and class difference are spatialised in ways that deploy the logics of the frontier. In illustrating these 'frontier dynamics', I also depart from the way in which much LA-focused cultural criticism reflects the city's vast scale by approaching its social contestations in terms of inter-neighbourhood difference, instead tracing the frontier's conceptual presence at a micro-level, within the subtlest gradations of fictional space.

For Los Angeles, with love

The American artist [...] took Nature as his only instructor, and things as his principal study. A bias toward the empirical, toward the evidential object in the numinous fullness of its being, leads to a certain lininess, as the artist intently maps the visible in a New World that feels surrounded by chaos and emptiness.

— John Updike, 'The Clarity of Things'

This was a city of heretics. A themeless city with every theme. [...] It had an air of not belonging to America, though all its motley ways were American. It was a city of refugees from America; it was purely itself in a banishment partly dreamed and partly real. It rested on a crust of earth at the edge of a sea that ended a world.

— Frank Fenton, *A Place in the Sun*

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NOTE ON PRESENTATION STYLE

This thesis is presented in accordance with the *Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS)*, 17th edition. Some exceptions to, caveats upon, and authorial interpretations of the *CMOS* provisions have, however, been rendered necessary by the particular demands of the material. These are detailed as follows.

Initialisms and acronyms present in quotations from and titles of sources have been standardised without note to accord with the forms recommended by *CMOS* and used elsewhere in the text. This is principally to spare the reader the grating inconsistency that would otherwise occur between the instances of the initialism ‘Los Angeles’ that inevitably and frequently appear throughout this thesis, as some quoted texts accord with *CMOS* and my own writing in using ‘LA’, while ‘L.A.’ is preferred by others.

There is also much inconsistency in sources regarding the capitalisation of frequently-occurring terms denoting geographic direction—especially ‘the West’ and its adjectival and adverbial correlatives. I have not, however, endeavoured to standardise capitalisation of such geographic terms as to do so might erase particular meaning or emphasis invited by the author’s decision to use a particular capitalisation. Quotations featuring such terms may thus present inconsistencies with *CMOS* and my own writing.

Quotations are made, with regard to placement of punctuation, usage of single vs. double quotation marks etc., in ‘British’ style. Likewise, British English spelling is used throughout. Where American variant spellings are employed by sources either primary or secondary, these are preserved without note. ‘Sic’ is not used to indicate American variant spellings as the frequency with which this would be required would compromise the legibility of quotations, raise questions of consistency in cases where a quoted spelling differs from the form used elsewhere in the thesis but is also admissible in British English, and result in confusion with instances where ‘sic’ is used to note a genuine aberrance in a quoted text. The reader may thus assume in all cases that an

American variant spelling in a quotation reflects an American variant spelling in the original. Unless otherwise noted, emphasis in quotations is preserved from the original.

As *CMOS* directs, where titles of works or journals, names of publishing houses etc. contain ampersands, these have been rendered as ‘and’ to aid presentational consistency and document searching.

The full title of a work is always used for the first reference to it within a chapter, but *CMOS* affords authors two means by which to abbreviate titles of works on subsequent references where appropriate—shortened forms or initialisms. I have chosen the former method for clarity’s sake and there is, accordingly, no glossary of abbreviations for titles of works provided.

This thesis uses *CMOS* full notes-and-bibliography referencing style with minor adaptations to suit the demands of the material and the exercise. Where a work has been published in multiple iterations, dates of publication given in footnote references are, per *CMOS*, always for the edition consulted, while reference may be made in-text to its original date of publication (or creation, in the case of unpublished works) in order to establish historical context. As permitted by *CMOS* and in the interests of thoroughness and clarity, bibliographical entries include both the date of the edition cited and the date of original publication—including, where applicable, original dates for individual works published within later collected editions. Original publication dates in the bibliography occur within square brackets immediately prior to the date of the edition cited. Any works referred to only indirectly and in passing, and thus not incurring a footnote reference, are still given a full bibliographical entry.

CMOS recommends against full citations for epigraphs, preferring only the author and title of work accompanying the epigraph directly, with no footnote. This guidance has been followed. In the interests of academic completeness, however, full citation details are provided in a separate note on epigraph sources, which immediately precedes the bibliography.

INTRODUCTION: ‘METAPHOR THAT BECOMES EPICAL’

BEGINNING BEYOND THE HILL

You can't write a story about LA that doesn't turn around in the middle or get lost. [...] Art is supposed to uphold standards of organization and structure, but you can't have those things in Southern California—people have tried.

— Eve Babitz, ‘Slow Days’

This project's first inspiration was a curious claim that Raymond Chandler made in a letter to Hamish Hamilton. Chandler proposed that plays were inferior to novels because only the latter could induce the ‘feeling of the country beyond the hill’.¹ It seemed a peculiar definition of fiction's aims to arise in the mind of someone who wrote of and at the western limit of the American landmass, and whose works are so suffused with a sense of that place. When a national mytho-history equates forward movement, American movement, with westward movement, I wondered what it meant to ascribe to fiction an imperative to disclose the ‘country beyond the hill’ in a place where—unless one turns around, turns east, turns *back*—there are no more hills for a country to be beyond. Chandler's spatial metaphor for fiction's purposes prompted me to consider how fictional representations of Los Angeles respond to the city's unique sociogeographic location. If fiction seeks the country beyond the hill, I began to ask, how are LA fiction's attempts to do so inflected by its subject's lack of the same? This thesis constitutes an attempt to answer that question.

¹ Raymond Chandler to Hamish Hamilton, 4 December 1949, in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997), 84.

It does so through the prism of the central concept within that American mytho-history of westward advancement: the frontier. I argue that fictions depicting Los Angeles between the onset of the Great Depression and the early 1950s reconstitute and interrogate popular notions of the frontier to form a conceptual framework within which to figure multi-ethnic spaces of urban modernity. I do so via close analysis of certain spaces that recur throughout those fictions—dancehalls, offices, industrial facilities, and homes.² By parsing the ways in which characters of varying social positions occupy and move through these spaces, I show how sociocultural recuperations and revisions of the frontier suffuse the literature of this place and period. What I term ‘frontier dynamics’ can thereby be understood as one of the major ideological discourses underpinning the mid-century fiction of a city that stands in its location and urban mass as the symbolic endpoint of America’s westward expansion, providing a new interpretation of such fiction’s contributions to its era’s discourses on the American post-frontier condition. Against prevailing critical narratives, I propose that mid-century LA fiction figures violent criminality, brutal ethnic divisions, and rampant social inequalities not as evidence of the tragic consequences of America’s inability to function without a frontier, but of the consequences (often no less tragic) of the frontier’s persistence.

This introduction accordingly describes my synthesis of two linked contexts—the frontier and its representations, and Los Angeles and its representations. I first explain my use of the frontier as a conceptual framework, establishing a historicist rationale for deploying it as a way to read texts of this place and period, engaging with frontier history and historiography to define the concepts of ‘frontier’ and ‘frontiersman’ that I deploy throughout the thesis. I then focus on Los Angeles, outlining why my frontierist methodology has specific pertinence to this city and its

² As a note on terminology, whilst scholars often use ‘mid-twentieth century’ to refer to a slightly later period than the one on which I focus, I deploy it throughout this thesis for the sake of ease and elegance, in the absence of an obviously more precise terminological descriptor of the period in question, as repeatedly redescribing it would make for some unwieldy and monotonous prose. The reader may therefore assume that when I use the term ‘mid-twentieth century’ or ‘mid-century’, I do so unless otherwise stated as shorthand for the 1929–1953 period within which this thesis is framed.

fictional representations, explaining how that methodology challenges orthodoxies of LA literary and cultural criticism, and to that end justifying my organisational structure and corpus selection.

Context I: The Frontier

Frederick Jackson Turner and his Cultural Afterlife

From the 1890s to the 1920s, Frederick Jackson Turner promulgated a theory of American history that conceptualised the nation's western frontier, articulated the processes by which it advanced across the continent, and claimed that those processes 'explain[ed] American development'.³ I will subsequently define in greater depth the characteristics of Turner's frontier, but in summary he held that it propagated and demanded individualism, willingness to exert oneself physically in hazardous conditions, belief in democratic ideals flecked with a suspicion of intrusive institutional authority, and above all an insatiable urge for perpetual movement.

Narratives about American identity had ascribed central roles to the frontier long before Turner, from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's belief that the particularities of America's environment informed its society's creation of a 'new man', to the folk legends that surrounded Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, to James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales.⁴ Turner himself acknowledged debts to Francis Grund, who had theorised half a century earlier that Americans were driven by an inherent 'expansive power' to conquer successive wildernesses in

³ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', in *The Frontier in American History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 1. *The Frontier in American History* collects Turner's writings on the frontier and thus constitutes the most complete available articulation of Turnerism in its various historical, political, theoretical, and philosophical dimensions.

⁴ J. Hector St John de Crèvecoeur, 'Letter III: What Is an American?', in *Letters from an American Farmer and Other Essays*, ed. Dennis D. Moore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 29–32 and throughout.

restless westward motion.⁵ *The Winning of the West* (1889–1896), Theodore Roosevelt's four-volume frontier history, also partially predated Turner's, although Roosevelt would be influenced by and champion Turner.⁶ Even as the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition hosted the American Historical Association meeting at which Turner first advanced his frontier thesis, just beyond its boundaries spectators flocked to 'Buffalo' Bill Cody's Wild West Show, which had already been a successful travelling attraction for twenty years, suggesting a nation already convinced that its story was that of the frontier.⁷

Nevertheless, I bring specifically Turnerian theorisations of the frontier to bear upon mid-twentieth-century fictions because Turner's influence engendered and defined the prominent role of the frontier in that era's sociocultural discourse, a discourse in which I read those texts as participating. 'Within half a decade' of its initial 1893 expression 'Turner's thesis had gained wide national attention and was being promoted by a number of leading intellectuals'.⁸ The 1910 award of the chairmanship of the AHA attested to Turner's status as his era's professional narrator of nationhood, as did near-universal acclaim for the Pulitzer Prize-winning 1921 collection *The Frontier in American History*.⁹ In 1951, Walter Prescott Webb described Turner as the frontier's 'philosopher, the thinker who could view the whole scene and the whole dramatic experience and

⁵ Francis Joseph Grund, *The Americans, in Their Moral, Social, and Political Relations* (Boston, MA: Marsh, Capen and Lyon, 1837), 206.

⁶ Richard Slotkin, 'Nostalgia and Progress: Theodore Roosevelt's Myth of the Frontier', *American Quarterly* 33, no. 5 (Winter 1981): 608, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712805>. Roosevelt 'wrote much of *The Winning of the West* 'before publication of Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1893 speech' in which the frontier thesis was first outlined. Michael Allen, review of *The Winning of the West*, by Theodore Roosevelt, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (1996): 88. Turner himself reviewed the first volumes of *The Winning of the West* favourably. George B. Utley, 'Theodore Roosevelt's *The Winning of the West*: Some Unpublished Letters', *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 30, no. 4 (March 1944): 496, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1916697>.

⁷ Michael C. Steiner, 'From Frontier to Region: Frederick Jackson Turner and the New Western History', *Pacific Historical Review* 64, no. 4 (November 1995): 479–80.

⁸ William Cronon, 'Turner's First Stand: The Significance of Significance in American History', in *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 87.

⁹ Richard W. Etulain, 'The Rise of Western Historiography', in *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 12.

tell what was its meaning'.¹⁰ Webb was, along with Frederick Paxson, one of the most prominent of the post-Turner scholars whose embrace of frontierism lent it disciplinary dominance in academia in the period on which this thesis focuses.¹¹ Turnerism's rapid acceptance as academic orthodoxy in turn helped to entrench the significance of the frontier in popular conceptions of history and national identity. As I will show, Turnerian thought 'penetrated modern US [...] consciousness' from the nation's intellectual elites to its middle classes, from the rhetoric of politicians to the themes of cinema—and to the fiction of mid-century Los Angeles.¹² In Kerwin Lee Klein's words, 'by 1930 [Turner's] narrative dominated American history as no other tale ever has'.¹³

Turner's narrative proved to be so compelling because in declaring the frontier to have defined American socioeconomic, political, and psychological development he also declared it closed, and drew contradictory conclusions as to what that closure signified. Turner cites an 1891 Census Office bulletin, which declared that 'isolated bodies of settlement' had 'broken into' all of the nation's hitherto unsettled territory, on which basis 'there could hardly be said to be a frontier

¹⁰ Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Frontier: An Interpretation of World History Since Columbus* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), 5. Webb's mature academic career is conterminous with and emblematic of my period of investigation as one in which Turnerian frontier history flourished: *The Great Frontier's* 1951 American publication came exactly twenty years after Webb's first major work, *The Great Plains* (Boston, MA: Ginn and Company, 1931).

¹¹ Paxson's major contributions are *The Last American Frontier* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1910); *The New Nation* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1915); *History of the American Frontier, 1763–1893* (Dunwoody, GA: Norman S. Berg, 1924).

¹² John Pettegrew, *Brutes in Suits: Male Sensibility in America, 1890–1920* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 22. Its prevalence notwithstanding, Turnerism did have academic dissenters in this period. Turner's former student Herbert Bolton challenged the frontier's theoretical primacy with a proto-transnationalist call for a 'history of the Americas'. Nevertheless, he maintained Turner's framing of the American West as a 'nationalizing force'. Russell M. Magnaghi, *Herbert E. Bolton and the Historiography of the Americas* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 121. Bolton's contributions include *Colonization of North America, 1492–1783* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1920); *The Spanish Borderlands: A Chronicle of Old Florida and the Southwest* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1921); *Wider Horizons of American History* (New York; London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1939). George Pierson would more directly interrogate Turnerism. See *The Frontier and Frontiersmen of Turner's Essays: A Scrutiny of the Foundations of the Middle Western Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1940); 'The Frontier and American Institutions: A Criticism of the Turner Theory', *New England Quarterly: A Historical Review of New England Life and Letters* 15, no. 2 (June 1942): 224–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/360525>.

¹³ Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890–1990* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 8.

line' in America.¹⁴ That casual declaration of the frontier's disappearance, Turner writes, 'closed the first period in American history'.¹⁵ Situating a case for the frontier's significance within an announcement of its closure 'framed [Turner's] argument prophetically', rendering it a statement about the future as well as the past.¹⁶ The precise meaning of Turner's 'prophecy', however, remained stubbornly ambiguous within his own work, inviting a contest over what the post-frontier era portended.

At times, Turner's predictions for the post-frontier era were pessimistic. The frontier had ingrained 'energies of expansion' in Americans, and the loss of a 'field for [the] exercise' of those energies had created conditions of ominous social unrest.¹⁷

In the remoter West, the restless, rushing wave of settlement has broken with a shock against the arid plains. The free lands are gone, the continent is crossed, and all this push and energy is turning into channels of agitation. Failures in one area can no longer be made good by taking up land on a new frontier; the conditions of a settled society are being reached with suddenness and with confusion.¹⁸

Even as he asserted the finality of the frontier's demise and made grim forecasts on that basis, however, Turner also held that it left 'traces': thus 'frontier characteristics' could be found in places that had long been settled.¹⁹ Even the West itself, the now-exhausted space of the frontier's expression, was fundamentally 'a form of society, rather than area'.²⁰ As John Pettegrew notes,

¹⁴ Robert P. Porter, *Extra Census Bulletin: Distribution of Population According to Density: 1890* (Washington, DC: Census Office, Department of the Interior, 1891), 4. Cited by Turner in 'Significance of the Frontier', 1.

¹⁵ Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 36.

¹⁶ Cronon, 'Turner's First Stand', 86.

¹⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The Problem of the West', in *The Frontier in American History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 219; Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 37.

¹⁸ Turner, 'Problem of the West', 219–20.

¹⁹ Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 4.

²⁰ Turner, 'Problem of the West', 205.

Turner's writings in fact locate 'many examples of the pioneer spirit in modern urban culture'.²¹ Turner never resolved whether his 'suggestion that Americans inherited the acquired characteristic[s]' of frontier existence augured the possibility of maintaining 'the expansive character of American life' in the frontier's absence, or a grim vision of social, cultural, and economic entropy as formerly nation-defining traits became inexpressible in a frontierless world.²²

By locating this essential inconclusiveness within a seemingly authoritative declaration of the frontier's death, Turner drew what Philip Fisher terms the intellectual 'lines in the sand' that would define the terms of frontier discourse in the twentieth century.²³ Some of Turner's respondents affirmed his belief in the frontier as the source of American greatness; others claimed that the frontier condition had in fact inhibited America's societal maturity. The former group, like Turner himself, expressed both fears that the frontier was terrifyingly lost forever, and belief in the possibility of 'new frontiers'—that frontier character could be preserved in other spheres of American life, translated from geographic to metaphorical spaces (of industry and commerce, of science and invention, of art and culture, of social progress). Equally, those who framed the frontier as having been a negative influence on American life wondered if it was now thankfully confined to history or would continue residually hobbling national character.

It is in this post-Turner debate about the endurance of frontier characteristics, about the possibility, desirability, and location of 'new frontiers', that I locate my selected primary texts. The poles of this debate are succinctly illustrated by a comparison between statements made at opposite ends of the historical period on which I focus by Walter Prescott Webb and another Turnerian historian, E. Douglas Branch. In 1930, Branch wrote that "'Westward" is not accurate as a direction' but rather 'finds its greater meaning as a transitional phase in American life', echoing

²¹ Pettegrew, *Brutes in Suits*, 42.

²² Pettegrew, 44; Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 37.

²³ Philip Fisher, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Creative Destruction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 3.

Turner's conception of the West as a 'form of society, rather than an area'.²⁴ If the frontier is understood as a 'transitional phase', it is repeatable, perhaps inevitably so.²⁵ Webb, by contrast, averred in 1951 that the frontier's role in American development resided in its very singularity as a set of social and physical circumstances; no 'new frontier' could reproduce the effects of something of which there is, definitionally 'no plural'.²⁶ As a result, American society had become irretrievably 'homesick' for and thus paralysed by its pioneer past.²⁷ Mid-century Los Angeles fictions exhibit, I will suggest, the simultaneous valence of Branchian and Webbian impulses. They make frontiers through characters who live in perpetual states of transition, manifesting the possibilities of what it might mean to 'live westwardly' in modern urban America, but in doing so they reflect the frontier past's stubborn discursive persistence as a way of structuring American life.

Crucially, as Webb himself would note, the frontier's enduring impact on American life in the first half of the twentieth century derived not merely from its historical existence but from its packaging into a potent cultural narrative. Historians like himself had 'made [Americans] conscious of the frontier': thus, if the frontier persisted in the minds of Americans it was impossible to tell if it did so because of the persistence of a genuine 'frontier character' in the American psyche or simply because it was simply 'a slogan with good sales quality'.²⁸ That is, Turner's thesis about the frontier's significance became self-fulfilling. Even if the frontier had not defined the American past to the extent that Turner had claimed, by the 1930s the sheer weight of intellectual, political,

²⁴ E. Douglas Branch, *Westward: The Romance of the American Frontier* (New York, NY: Appleton, 1930), vii.

²⁵ We may detect in a review of one of Branch's previous works a sense of the post-Turnerian prominence of the frontier as a methodological device, an inescapable mode of thought, within American historical scholarship during this period. The reviewer betrays a hint of weariness as a 'story of hunting big game on the western plains' ultimately reveals itself to be 'another history of the American frontier'. John D. Hicks, review of *The Hunting of the Buffalo*, by E. Douglas Branch, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 16, no. 2 (September 1929): 266.

²⁶ Webb, *Great Frontier*, 284.

²⁷ Webb, 281.

²⁸ Webb, 281, 283.

economic, literary, and popular cultural discourse about the frontier that appeared in Turner's wake ensured that the *idea* that it had defined the American past in turn defined the American present. In 1931 Carey McWilliams, beginning to establish himself as one of Southern California's leading public intellectuals, wrote a weary essay about how 'the final extension of the frontier to the Pacific' had not quelled but boosted the intellectual industry of frontier 'myth-making' (as McWilliams categorised all discourse that assented to Turner's belief in the frontier's singular nation-defining power).²⁹ The 'dolorous mood' of Turner's declaration of frontier closure, McWilliams wrote, had engendered 'an inordinate modern day enthusiasm for the frontier and frontiersman' throughout American culture.³⁰

McWilliams omitted to note that the frontier's enshrinement at the heart of American culture in the decades following its demise was the work not only of 'enthusiasts' but also of frontier sceptics. In the very act of critiquing either the Turnerian conception of the frontier's historical role, the desirability or viability of replacing it with 'new frontiers', and/or the cultural 'enthusiasm' for the frontier maintained in other quarters, voices like McWilliams' own contributed to frontier's overwhelming presence in the thought of early to mid-twentieth-century America. In such a role I often find the literary texts on which this thesis focuses. Their visions of a culture that continues to structure itself upon frontier logic, constantly privileging social values that vouchsafe the possibility of 'new frontiers' in modern urban space, are often critical, but in offering such criticism they themselves become locations of the frontier's reconstitution. In order to contextualise my chosen texts' frontier-perpetuating acts of frontier critique, I will now identify some of the key strains of thought that defined the 'new frontiers' debates of the first half of the twentieth century.

²⁹ Carey McWilliams, 'Myths of the West', *North American Review*, November 1931, 425.

³⁰ McWilliams, 429.

Frank Norris assented to a Turnerian belief in the frontier's cultural significance but saw cause for optimism in its closure. He wrote in 1902 that American frontier expansion had emblematised a period in global history in which nations had defined themselves by territorial supremacy. Perhaps, Norris mused, if the passing of the frontier heralded an age bereft of space over which to compete, nationalist ideologies of spatial and commercial conquest could be supplanted with a 'new patriotism' of brotherhood that transcended boundaries of national identity.³¹ Exploring the contested multi-ethnic spaces of fictional Los Angeles in chapters 1 and 3, however, I find few equivalent possibilities. Indeed, in my primary texts I often find frontier ideology's connections between ethnicity, American nationalism, and spatial conquest to be its most persistent and insidious legacies.

Norris was at odds with many Americans, who had the previous year signalled their desire to preserve frontier values by sending a performative frontiersman to the White House. In Theodore Roosevelt, America elected an embodiment of widespread contemporary antimodernist calls for the preservation of the nation's remaining wilderness and a return to the values that had supposedly been inculcated there. The antimodernists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries echoed Turner's fears about the condition of 'settled society' in a belief that, absent the frontier's nation-defining call to heroic, masculinist individualism, America was becoming 'overcivilized', denuded of virility and vitality. Such beliefs underscore my readings of visions of white masculinity in chapters 2 and 4.³²

Waldo Frank was more confident than the Rooseveltian antimodernists that frontier values would continue to define modern America despite passing out of geographic existence, but shared

³¹ Frank Norris, 'The Frontier Gone at Last', *The World's Work*, February 1902, 1731.

³² The fullest discussion of the turn-of-the-century antimodernist movement and fears of 'overcivilization' remains T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994). Although dated, Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967) is still an essential account of changing American attitudes to wilderness, including post-frontier trends towards conservation and the 'wilderness cult'. Both Nash and Lears are further discussed in chapter 2.

with Norris a diagnosis of their influence as malign. In *Our America* (1919), Frank attributed a litany of ills in the American character to the nation's frontier youth. Locating the most sinister implication of the Turnerian frontiersman's compulsion to place 'himself under influences destructive to many of the gains of civilization', Frank averred that 'the pioneer must do violence to himself'.³³ For Frank, battle with the wilderness had been an act of psychological self-harm on the part of early American society. The precarity of the frontier engendered a rigid, survival-oriented pragmatism, resulting in an atrophying of the imaginative faculties, a privileging of the material over the intellectual, and a suspicion of the alien.³⁴ As 'the legs of the pioneer [became] the brains of the philosopher', America's cultural growth was stunted.³⁵ Moreover, Frank feared, because the defining quality of the frontier-derived American mind was its conservatism, it would endure far beyond the now-extinct conditions in which it developed.³⁶ A Frankian notion that the danger of the post-frontier era was not in the dissipation of frontier values but in their insidious endurance, and in the damaging limitations placed upon a society unable to escape the totalising rigidity of a frontierist worldview, is one I identify in many of the fictional texts discussed throughout this thesis.

The onset of the Great Depression appeared to corroborate Turner's fears for the socioeconomic fate of a nation divested of spaces in which to expend its 'energies of expansion', adding fresh urgency to debates about America's post-frontier condition. The Depression's role in intensifying 'new frontiers' discourse is indeed one rationale for commencing this thesis' period

³³ Turner, 'Problem of the West', 209; Waldo Frank, *Our America* (New York, NY: Ams Press, 1972), 19.

³⁴ The notion that rough-and-ready frontier life had precluded the refinement of national character predates Frank. Turner himself notes and refutes disparagingly a popular 'denunciation of dishonesty, ignorance, and boorishness as fundamental Western traits'. Turner, 'Problem of the West', 210.

³⁵ Frank, *Our America*, 29.

³⁶ Such themes recur in Frank's later work. The title of *The Re-Discovery of America: An Introduction to a Philosophy of American Life* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929) is powerfully suggestive of the extent to which Frank urgently believed that an America had devoted too many resources to spatial exploration of itself and now demanded an equivalent intellectual self-exploration in redress. I return briefly in my conclusion to Frank's belief that the frontier retained a dangerous grip on the American mind long after its own passing.

of investigation in 1929. There is no clearer indication of the prominence of such discourse in this period than the fact that Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover debated the possibility of ‘new frontiers’ in society, science, and industry while campaigning for the presidency in 1932.³⁷ The intellectual context for their debate had been established in 1930 by John Dewey’s ‘faithful application of the frontier thesis’ to the social challenges of the day in *Individualism: Old and New*.³⁸ Dewey accorded with Frank in critiquing the frontiersman’s anti-intellectual lack of ‘ideas beyond [...] the immediate tasks in which he was engaged’, but retained Turnerian praise for the frontier’s inculcation of an individualist ‘character that [...] was strong and hardy, often picturesque, [...] sometimes heroic’, and had on the whole served the nation well.³⁹

Dewey was preoccupied with determining how the best frontier traits could be adapted for a new era, and the worst surmounted. At a time of socioeconomic crisis, Dewey remarked: ‘it is no longer a physical wilderness that has to be wrestled with. Our problems grow out of social conditions: they concern human relations rather than [...] physical nature’.⁴⁰ This ‘unsubdued social frontier’, unlike its geographic predecessor, could not be conquered by lone individuals. It could only be mastered, suggested Dewey, by directing the pioneering instinct, through ‘controlled use of all the resources of the science and technology’, into ‘scientific frontiers’.⁴¹ The ‘new individualism’ had to reconcile itself more fully to collective enterprises. Such a tension between the rugged individual and the collective imperatives of post-frontier modernity, wherein the latter ironically becomes a social frontier to be subdued, is present in many of the fictional texts this thesis explores. Dewey, Roosevelt, and Hoover, moreover, all addressed what Webb termed the tension between ‘the closing frontier and the expanding production of the machine’, asking

³⁷ I return to Hoover and Roosevelt’s frontier debates in chapter 3.

³⁸ Pettegrew, *Brutes in Suits*, 47.

³⁹ John Dewey, *Individualism: Old and New* (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1931), 87.

⁴⁰ Dewey, 88.

⁴¹ Dewey, 88.

whether modern capitalism was dangerously incompatible with America's now-frustrated frontier spirit, or could in fact become its new vehicle.⁴² That question acquires particular pertinence in chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis.

Dewey's *Individualism: Old and New* appeared a year after the first English edition of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber's theories are broader in world-historical scope than Turner's, but have much in common with them. A labouring culture of 'struggle against one's environment—the kind of practical, here and now struggle that paid off in material rewards', as William H. Whyte describes Weber's ethic, also defines Turner's frontier.⁴³ (Webb almost synthesises the two in describing frontier existence as 'The Religion of Work'.⁴⁴) Both the frontier and the Protestant ethic, likewise, occupy the position of having fuelled capitalistic growth only to be threatened by what they have created, as forces of industrial modernity foreclose upon a 'dream of individual success'.⁴⁵ Weber never mentions Turner or the frontier by name. Nevertheless, the American publication of *The Protestant Ethic* represents another suggestion of and contribution to a culture grappling in the '30s to resolve its veneration of idealised individualistic labour with the demise of the conditions by which such labour was engendered.⁴⁶ Turnerian questions were prominent in the public mind, even if not necessarily expressed through explicit engagement with Turner.

⁴² Turner likewise claimed (pre-Depression), in one of his statements of advocacy for the frontier's endurance, that 'masters of industry and capital' like Carnegie and Rockefeller emerged from a frontier society and thus could continue to 'profess its principles' even as they represented its depredation. Frederick Jackson Turner, 'Contributions of the West to American Democracy', in *The Frontier in American History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 264.

⁴³ William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York, NY: Simon and Shuster, 1956), 15.

⁴⁴ Webb, *Great Frontier*, 48.

⁴⁵ Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 16.

⁴⁶ Weber suggests the conceptual proximity between his ethic and Turnerian claims about the frontier's environmental influence on character and society when he writes that 'the simple fact of working in quite different surroundings from those to which one is accustomed breaks through the tradition and is the educative force. It is hardly necessary to remark how much of American economic development is the result of such factors'. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 137.

Popular culture likewise contested the fate of post-frontier America in the decades of Turnerism's greatest influence. Peter Stanfield notes that the minor studio B-Westerns of the 1930s constructed themselves on narrative grounds 'wholly inapplicable' to the 'frontier myth'—often set in 'a geographical West in which the frontier ha[d] long since gone' and dealing less with 'historical imperatives of the winning of the West' than with 'intrigue between labour and capital'.⁴⁷ (Again, Depression-era anxieties about industrial modernity are palpable.) Robert Sklar meanwhile holds that the 1930s decline of the Western as an A-picture genre represented the cultural completion of Turner's frontier foreclosure.⁴⁸ Thus the frontier could be powerfully present even in its absences: both the Western's fall from favour with major studios and its reconfiguration in B-films as a way of mediating a 'tension between old and new worlds' constituted a social reckoning with Turner's declaration.⁴⁹ In music, Jimmie Rodgers responded similarly to the negotiation between old and new demanded by the frontier's end. His 'railroad bum' travels not west but east, from 'Frisco' to 'Dixie': if his journey across the 'wide open spaces' of the southwestern US enacts a yearning for the past, when one's ability to move through the West was not circumscribed by an officious brakeman, it also feels the limits of Dewey's old individualism—the bleak absence of a 'helping hand'.⁵⁰ Later came Hank Williams, the name of whose backing band—the 'Drifting Cowboys'—declared his own debts to frontier iconography.

When McWilliams acknowledged the early '30s proliferation of notional 'new frontiers', he looked askance at such popular romantic fascination with Old West iconography—whether in the idea that the frontier survived 'in the movie daring of Tom Mix or Douglas Fairbanks' or his comic supposition that Americans found the frontier psychologically reborn 'whenever we see a pair of chaps'. McWilliams was mockingly sceptical of what he saw as quasi-superstitious

⁴⁷ Peter Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s: The Lost Trail* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001), 10.

⁴⁸ Robert L. Sklar, *City Boys: Cagney, Bogart, Garfield* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 8.

⁴⁹ Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s*, 10.

⁵⁰ Jimmie Rodgers, 'Waiting for a Train' (Victor, 1928).

contemporary beliefs in the frontier's conceptual persistence, 'hover[ing] above and around us like a disembodied spirit': he essentially suggested that American culture after Turner found it impossible not to see the frontier everywhere it looked.⁵¹ He was correct, but his observation provides precisely the rationale for seeking the frontier in fictional texts written in the period of Turnerism's greatest influence, a period when diverse cultural spheres, from the highbrow to the popular, the frontier-recuperating to the frontier-rejecting, gave enduring conceptual life to times and spaces that Turner had declared gone for good.

What I locate in Los Angeles' mid-century fiction is precisely that which McWilliams derides, a sense that the frontier has 'seeped inward and survives today as a subjective force', persistent in these texts, their worlds, and their characters' lives precisely because of Turnerian thought's dominance in their era's discourse.⁵² I read these texts simultaneously as reflections of, contributions to, and interrogations of the frontier thesis as the defining American cultural narrative of the first half of the twentieth century, texts that intervene in an insistent national conversation about 'the single most important historical idea ever proposed by an American intellectual'.⁵³

Turnerism's legacies of course reach beyond the period of this thesis' investigation, but I depart at a point when frontierism's thoroughgoing acceptance as empirical historical reality became subject to increasing modulation. Webb's 1951 *The Great Frontier*, though arguably the last significant work of emphatically Turnerian history, also commented self-reflexively on historians' own role in rendering the frontier central to American consciousness. The previous year, Henry Nash Smith had already begun more comprehensively emphasising the notion that the frontier's

⁵¹ McWilliams, 'Myths of the West', 432.

⁵² McWilliams, 432.

⁵³ Fisher, *Still the New World*, 7.

greatest historical significance was as a *myth*—work continued by Richard Slotkin.⁵⁴ In the 1980s, the New Western Historians ‘moved decisively to confront the frontier myth and [...] suggest the possibility of imagining a West that operates autonomously’ from it.⁵⁵ As William Cronon writes, their revisionist critique that Turnerian history is ‘geographically inaccurate, culturally biased, and potentially racist, leaving too little room for non-white ethnic minorities’ (and women) is largely justified.⁵⁶ I myself make no claims about the facticity or validity of Turner's model; I am alive to its flaws and lacunae. I deploy Turnerian ideas about the frontier and the American West from a critically historicist perspective, in order to engage with their pertinence to the cultural context of the fictional settings that this thesis explores.⁵⁷

Defining Terms: Frontier and Frontiersman

Immediately after establishing his central argument with the Census Office's straightforwardly statistical definition of a frontier, Turner contradicts himself. ‘The term is an elastic one, and [...]

⁵⁴ See Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950). Slotkin's magisterial contribution comprises *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1985); *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998). The most enthusiastic and thoroughgoing Turnerian of the post-'50s period was Ray Allen Billington. Yet even his oeuvre is less Turnerian history per se than an apologetic historiography of Turnerism, suggesting a period in which a Turner-accommodating view remained defensible but *required defending*. See *The American Frontier Thesis: Attack and Defense* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 1971); *The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1971).

⁵⁵ Stanfield, *Hollywood, Westerns, and the 1930s*, 10. The two totemic texts of the New Western History are Patricia Nelson Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987) and Richard White's *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ Cronon, ‘Turner's First Stand’, 91.

⁵⁷ Similarly, Turnerian and post-Turnerian discourse lightly invokes monolithic notions of ‘American identity’ or ‘American character’ that would make any 21st-century historian wary. When I employ such terms, as I do particularly within this introduction, I am referring to them within their proper context of historiographical discourses that believed such things existed and could be defined, rather than to argue *for* such beliefs. It is on the same critical basis that I engage with the central Turnerian dichotomy of ‘savagery’ versus ‘civilization’. This dichotomy and its phraseology are, of course, loaded with an especially problematic set of accrued cultural meanings—even by the standards of nineteenth-century frontier history and whether encountered in their original Turnerian context or in the twentieth-century literary contexts to which I apply them. Throughout this thesis, therefore, I always frame instances of ‘savagery’ and ‘civilization’ in quotation marks, to emphasise that they are invoked with reference to Turner and in order to interrogate their problematic legacies and implications rather than to endorse or reproduce them. Thus ‘civilization’ also maintains Turner's American variant spelling throughout this thesis.

does not need sharp definition'.⁵⁸ I, however, require a more precise sense of what a frontier actually *is* if I am to assert that its conditions can be apprehended in fictional texts with ostensibly non-frontier settings. Despite Turner's airy dismissal of definitions, it is possible to build one by parsing his works. Turner's frontier is defined by a relationship between spatiotemporal conditions and social conditions, described as follows.

Spatiotemporal Conditions

The frontier lies at the 'hither edge of free land', which hardy individuals—'frontiersmen' or 'pioneers'—drive into 'continuous recession' through the westward advance of American settlement.⁵⁹ It is a liminality, existing in both its location and the conditions it manifests between opposed states of wilderness and settlement, or 'savagery and civilization'.⁶⁰ In describing it as both 'a continually advancing frontier *line*, and a new development for that *area*', Turner defines the spatial essence of his frontier.⁶¹ It *is* a dividing line between settled and unsettled, but it is also a discrete-but-permeable area of intermediate space between the two. In this sense the frontier's spatial liminality is also temporal: because its existence as the space between settled and unsettled is transitory, part of a process of moving itself forward through progressive geographic conquest, the frontier only exists as a momentary present. This spatiotemporal axis is an 'article of American faith', Klein writes: 'history runs from East to West'.⁶²

Turner's description of the frontier as 'the outer edge of the wave' apprehends this.

As the successive waves of an incoming tide wash higher up a shore, what had was once

⁵⁸ Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 3.

⁵⁹ Turner, 3, 8, 21, 1.

⁶⁰ Turner, 3.

⁶¹ Turner, 2 (emphasis mine).

⁶² Kerwin Lee Klein, *Apocalypse Noir: Carey McWilliams and Posthistorical California* (Berkeley, CA: Doe Library, University of California, 1997), 6.

the furthest limit of a previous wave's advance is absorbed into the main body of water. Thus, as the frontier moves westward, former 'outer edges' are successively absorbed into settled American 'civilization': Michael Steiner describes this as the frontier's 'self-destroying process'.⁶³ The frontier's progression is therefore simultaneously cyclical and linear. The tide as an integral whole represents the linear progression of westerly expansion over time, but that overarching process is in fact made up of countless smaller cycles (waves) by which successive unsettled spaces gradually become settled. Such a space is only a frontier while its social qualities manifest both 'savagery' (yet-to-be-fully-conquered) and 'civilization' (yet-to-fully-conquer) before being occluded by the eventual triumph of the latter—occluded into the future and into the West, 'beginning over again' in 'perennial rebirth'.⁶⁴ Thus Turner's wave illustrates how the frontier's liminality is multiply (if unidirectionally) mobile: its spatial, temporal, and social axes operate in concert. The macro-process of 'crossing a continent, [...] winning a wilderness' and the micro-process of 'developing at each area of this progress out of the primitive [...] conditions of the frontier [...] the complexity of city life' are mutually propelling and inextricable.

These are the spatial and temporal characteristics by which I will define frontierlike conditions in my primary texts. A frontier must exist as a liminality between areas or states figured as settled or 'civilized' and those where social regulation breaks down entirely. Moreover, it must be not an inert buffer but a mobile space of constant negotiation between the two. This transitive quality may thus render the frontiers I seek temporally liminal—fleeting states, moments that cannot hold. By the same token, however, because the temporal dimension of Turner's frontiers is cyclical, the frontiers I find may be fleeting

⁶³ Michael C. Steiner, 'Frederick Jackson Turner and Western Regionalism', in *Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians*, ed. Richard W. Etulain (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2002), 103.

⁶⁴ Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 2.

but repeating: momentary liminalities rendered a constant (even inescapable) state through recursion.⁶⁵

Social Conditions

Turner's 'free land' is always in some way hostile and does not yield itself up readily—it must be fought for. Turner figures the westward movement as 'conquest'; land is 'won' or 'wrested' from its wilderness state, from itself.⁶⁶ The frontier demands that its ingressors express themselves in 'aggressive courage, in domination, in directness of action, in destructiveness'.⁶⁷ The frontier condition is therefore defined by conflict: only after it has been won through physical and mental battle by individuals representing 'civilization' can the frontier progress further west.

Historiographers have debated Turner's conception of the form this conflict takes. As Cronon states, there is a widespread belief that in framing the frontier as a battle between man and 'free land' Turner 'ignored [the] Indians' whom Americans encountered there.⁶⁸ On this basis Slotkin asserts that Turner 'marginalizes the role of violence in the development of the Frontier', in contrast to Roosevelt, for whom 'the history of the Indian wars (which are, for him, fundamentally wars of racial superiority) *is* the history of the West'.⁶⁹ To Slotkin, Turner '[rejects] the mystique of privileged violence', while Roosevelt glorifies it: between them exists a 'hunter/farmer dichotomy', with Roosevelt winning the West by 'deeds of the sword', Turner through agrarian triumph over a hostile natural

⁶⁵ Indeed, because the frontiers I identify depart from Turner's in *not* being constructed on the inevitably finite possibilities of westward advance into free land (an aspect of my model I discuss further in subsequent sections of this introduction), the fiction texts I investigate in fact prove, for good or ill, to possess a greater facility for cyclical repetition than their geographic forebears.

⁶⁶ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'The West and American Ideals', in *The Frontier in American History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 294.

⁶⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, 'Pioneer Ideals and the State University', in *The Frontier in American History* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 270.

⁶⁸ Cronon, 'Turner's First Stand', 90.

⁶⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 59.

environment.⁷⁰ Klein writes similarly that Turner 'deflected attention from interethnic conflict by imagining the defining American moment as an encounter with pristine nature rather than a collision of cultural worlds'.⁷¹ In doing so, he 'conflat[ed] Indian and Hispano peoples with wilderness and free lands', and therein 'legitimated Euro-American imperialism'.⁷² For Pettegrew, likewise, Turner both 'downplayed violent frontier traits' by framing them as positive, and 'concealed frontier warfare by portraying Native America as a built-in part of the environment', and thereby 'conflate[d] Native Americans with the wilderness'.⁷³

This criticism of Turner, however, itself conceals the extent to which Turner *does* centre human violence. When Turner identifies Andrew Jackson as a frontier archetype he does so partly on the basis of Jackson's role in the Indian Wars.⁷⁴ He names 'hostile Indians and the stubborn wilderness' as equal factors obstructing those who pushed the frontier westward.⁷⁵ Above all, he states explicitly that each phase in the frontier's advance 'was won by a series of Indian wars'.⁷⁶ Slotkin is undeniably correct that Turner devotes more attention to the 'yeoman farmer' than to the 'wilderness hunter or Indian fighter', but Turner is incontrovertibly clear that the efforts of the former depended on those of the latter.⁷⁷

As Cronon notes, the Turnerian claim that land unsettled by Americans was 'free' was never a claim that the land was 'free of *inhabitants*'—only that it had yet to be

⁷⁰ Slotkin, 59; Slotkin, 'Nostalgia and Progress', 612.

⁷¹ Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination*, 9.

⁷² Klein, 19.

⁷³ Pettegrew, *Brutes in Suits*, 39.

⁷⁴ Turner, 'Contributions of the West', 253.

⁷⁵ Turner, 'Problem of the West', 213.

⁷⁶ Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 9.

⁷⁷ Slotkin, 'Nostalgia and Progress', 611.

circumscribed by any property right recognised in American law.⁷⁸ Turner does not, in fact, 'obscure the historical role of violence' (as Slotkin claims) when he elides conflict with Native Americans and conflict with wilderness.⁷⁹ Violent encounters with Native Americans do not contradict Turner's sense of the frontier experience as an encounter with 'free land' because, as Klein and Pettegrew themselves suggest, the supposed wildness of indigenous peoples is, for Turner, merely a symptomatic constituent element of the frontier's defining environmental hostility. Indeed, racial violence is embedded fundamentally in Turner's model precisely *because* he does not regard Native Americans as distinct from the wilderness conditions whose conquest frontier expansion effects.

This distinction is essential for my model of how Turnerian frontier characteristics might manifest themselves in the spaces of modern, urban fiction, because it obviates any suggestion that frontier conflict must be between human beings and the natural environment, or that a frontiersmanlike figure must be the only human presence in a space (which would of course preclude any identification of frontier conditions in depictions of urban modernity). On either the Rooseveltian *or* Turnerian frontier, the type of conflict with an inhospitable 'environment' that an ingressor finds is often human conflict, conducted usually on racial lines. On this basis I justify attributing frontier characteristics to spaces where characters compete with each other through various forms of aggression to assert their socio-spatial supremacy, especially where those conflicts are defined by race, ethnicity, or similar power dynamics that frame one party as the representative of hegemonic power (the 'civilized') and the other as marginal ('savage'). The spaces I will examine need not manifest explicit violence between humans in order to suggest frontierist

⁷⁸ Cronon, 'Turner's First Stand', 82–83.

⁷⁹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 59.

qualities of conflict and contestation, however. As Slotkin suggests, Turner *does* often figure the frontier as a conquest of surroundings rather than of people.

Indeed, as Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge suggest, the 'backbreaking labor' of farmers was among the ultimate frontier conquests.⁸⁰ Thus, whilst every space I identify as frontierlike must manifest some quality of spatial contest, that contest is as likely to be with the space's own material or social qualities as with a directly hostile human presence. Indeed, my framing of spaces as fictional frontiers frequently deploys the notion present in Turner's emphasis on the agrarian frontier that labour itself may in its physical and psychological challenges constitute the perpetually-mobile conflict between environment and individual by which the frontier is defined.⁸¹ As Webb writes:

All the high words the frontier man used to describe himself and to express his egoistic ideal, meant *work* of one sort or another. Courage, initiative, aggressiveness, and industry, can be best expressed in action, movement; that is, in work.⁸²

Any act of advancing through and subduing the wilderness is always, for Turner and his successors in frontier discourse, an expression of individualism. The frontier both demands and makes individualists, who exist in something of a paradox. In quelling the frontier they act *for* 'civilization' but are never entirely *of* it, setting themselves apart

⁸⁰ Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 6th ed. (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico, 2001), 5. The 5th and 6th editions of Billington's *Westward Expansion* (one of the most comprehensive elaborations on the Turner thesis, originally published in 1949), constitute a particularly intriguing example of the revisionism to which Turnerism has been subject in decades. Ridge has updated and amended Billington's text, preserving its structure and argument but endeavouring to fill the gaps of perspective that are symptomatic of its time of writing. It thus becomes, in effect, a synthesis of old and new modes—a New Western Turnerism.

⁸¹ Within my fictional corpus' context of developed capitalism, moreover (as opposed to that of the individualist labours of the frontier), labour may manifest human conflict (at either interpersonal or structural, class-based levels) instead of or *as well as* an arduous physical challenge.

⁸² Webb, *Great Frontier*, 49.

physically and socially and therein demonstrating a liminal character concomitant with that of the frontiers they seek out—hence the antimodernist concern that one could become ‘overcivilized’. An individualist desire to seek out and test oneself against the wilderness was a rejection of ‘the complex political, economic, and social customs required in the stratified societies’ of the settled East.⁸³ Pushing the frontier westward is a ‘civilizing’ act but, paradoxically, one carried out in the process of escaping from the creeping restrictions of ‘civilization’.

This is not, for Turner, an anarchistic rejection of belief in exceptionalist American democracy. Quite the opposite, it is the embodiment of what he regarded as that democracy’s ‘truest’ (Jacksonian or Jeffersonian) forms:

Western democracy included individual liberty, as well as equality. The frontiersman was impatient of restraints. He knew how to preserve order, even in the absence of legal authority. [...] Society became atomic. There was a reproduction of the primitive idea of the personality of the law, a crime was more an offense against the victim than a violation of the law of the land. Substantial justice, secured in the most direct way, was the ideal of the backwoodsman. He had little patience with finely drawn distinctions or scruples of method. If the thing was one proper to be done, then the most immediate, rough and ready, effective way was the best way.⁸⁴

⁸³ Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 2.

⁸⁴ Turner, ‘Problem of the West’, 212.

The frontiersman's conception of democracy as the 'belief that those who win the vacant lands are entitled to shape their own government in their own way', a faith in 'the freedom of the individual to seek his own' without 'restriction upon his individual right to deal with the wilderness' further determines the frontier's identity as a contested space.⁸⁵ When two such individuals have competing designs on 'vacant lands', conflict is inevitable—either between the two parties as a 'rough and ready' way to determine whose will takes precedence in the absence of adjudicatory structures, or with whatever such institutional structure *does* exist.

I will thus identify frontier dynamics in the post-frontier urban settings of my fictional corpus via figures who act as frontierist individualists. This means that their individualism should be manifest in an iconoclastic desire to seek out some form of arduous conflict and/or labour, and also become a source of conflict in itself. Such figures should embody in some way the Turnerian frontiersman's paradoxical attitude to 'civilization' and, according to context, perhaps to the American state specifically. I seek characters who in some way reflect the frontier's intrinsic generative contradiction of an occupational conflict with wilderness that results from a rejection of or by normative societal structures ('civilization') but ultimately becomes a self-erasing act of service to the same.

Race and Gender on the Frontier

Frontierism is 'deeply ethnocentric' and male-centric, a '(white) national identity centred on men and in the face of an indigenous ethnic other'.⁸⁶ The centrality of whiteness to Turner's vision is clear in his acknowledgement that the story of the frontier is a story of race war against Native Americans, not to mention his choice of frontier archetypes: Turner is explicit that Jackson's

⁸⁵ Turner, 'Contributions of the West', 250; Turner, 'Problem of the West', 213; Turner, 'Pioneer Ideals', 272.

⁸⁶ Pettegrew, *Brutes in Suits*, 21; Richard Dyer, *White* (London, NY: Routledge, 1997), 35.

temperamental embodiment of 'the tenacious, vehement, personal West' in part derived from his 'Scotch-Irish' heritage.⁸⁷) As Valerie Babb writes, the figure of the frontiersman has become one of American culture's 'standard models of white identity'; he 'represents white conquest of the American frontier'.⁸⁸ In Babb's words, the foundational role of English Puritan settlement in hegemonic narratives of American nationhood renders the very idea of 'conquer[ing] a sometimes unforgiving landscape' inextricable from whiteness in American culture.⁸⁹ For Richard Dyer, the frontier was not only 'the leading edge of the white world' but also, because Native Americans were regarded by their conquerors as 'borderless people', the imposition of a white ideology of spatial conquest as well as that idea's practical enactment.⁹⁰

Turner's frontier archetypes (Jackson, Lincoln, Jefferson, Boone, Crockett) also frame the frontier as a male space, as does sheer weight of textual evidence: crudely but instructively, Turner's collected frontier writings contain nine occurrences of 'woman' or 'women', against 272 of 'man' or 'men'.⁹¹ Whilst historical social norms dictate that the very first occupants of a frontier in its wildest initial state (the hunters and fighters Roosevelt venerates) *were* typically men, Billington and Ridge write that '[t]he popular picture of a predominantly male social order [...] bears little resemblance to actuality. On virtually all frontiers that had reached the agricultural stage men outnumbered women only in slight degree'.⁹² Despite Turner's emphasis on agrarianism, however, that misleading 'popular picture' is his. Turner does not suggest that women or children were not or could not be present in the wilderness, but in his history male agency is as absolute over women and their destinies as over the landscape itself. Indeed, in the gendered imagery of the Turnerian

⁸⁷ Turner, 'Contributions of the West', 252.

⁸⁸ Valerie Babb, *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1998), 91.

⁸⁹ Babb, 169.

⁹⁰ Dyer, *White*, 33.

⁹¹ These figures are derived from my own corpus analysis of *The Frontier in American History*.

⁹² Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, 11.

paradigm women are aligned less with the act of frontier conquest than with the conquered landscape itself—'virgin' territory to be 'tamed, plowed, or fenced in' by men, solely a resource for the nation's masculinist self-actualisation.⁹³

As Klein writes, in the era of Turnerism's cultural dominance even critical conceptions of the frontier's legacies 'imagined the story's hero as white, middle class, and male'.⁹⁴ Turner and his ilk 'left Euro-American women, Native Americans, Chicanos and Chicanas, African-Americans—all the "others"—outside of the heroic horizon'.⁹⁵ This does not mean, however, that in seeking 'frontier conditions' in my primary fictional corpus I examine only white male figures. Whilst white men and their various embodiments of and departures from frontier archetype do constitute significant portions of my analysis (particularly throughout chapters 2 and 4), I am frequently (as in chapters 1 and 3) concerned with how these fictional spaces impose the frontier's ideologies of white masculinity upon non-white characters. I examine fictional worlds that construct themselves as frontiers and thus demand that their inhabitants operate therein as frontiersmen. Simultaneously, however, I argue that where those characters are non-white they are prevented by the frontier's logic of whiteness from occupying the identity of its mythic protagonist, rendering claims to the fictional frontier claims to whiteness and vice versa.

Women occupy similarly complex and multifaceted roles throughout the reconstitutions of frontier paradigms that my chosen primary texts perform. At times, non-white male characters identify white women as the vehicle by which they hope to make their own claims to whiteness through social frontiersmanship—they exhibit a modulated form of Turner's own 'tende[nce] to cast the North American continent in feminine terms', framing white women as territory to be claimed.⁹⁶ They find, of course, that conceiving of other individuals in such terms is as perilous as

⁹³ Carla J. McDonough, *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 36.

⁹⁴ Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination*, 8–9.

⁹⁵ Klein, 12.

⁹⁶ Pettegrew, *Brutes in Suits*, 21.

any act of geographic frontier negotiation, precisely and ironically because the women they encounter resist their reduction to symbols of socio-spatial conquest. At other times, relationships between men women in the fiction of mid-century LA model the frontiersman's paradoxical relationship with 'civilization'—where women are essential to men's performances of heteromascularity but simultaneously constitute a domesticating presence hostile to masculine individualism. In other circumstances, women more actively challenge and threaten the bases of male characters' efforts to construct their own identity on frontiersmanlike lines, because they themselves manifest the kinds of frontier characteristics that those male characters believe are their exclusive inheritance.

That many of the fictional texts I explore locate socio-spatial agency in the ability to claim the identity of a rugged white male individualist is undeniable. Non-white and female characters are frequently framed in these texts as contributing to the construction of ideas of frontierist white masculinity that they themselves can never (fully) embody. Indeed, that this is the case is fundamental to my claim that these texts and their worlds both internalise and comment upon the socio-spatial logics of frontierism, but relationships in these texts between non-white and female characters and supposed 'ideals' of white male frontiersmanship repeatedly query, complexify, and problematise the latter. In demonstrating the unease and partiality with which frontierist paradigms accommodate figures who wish to make claims upon social space but sit outside an assumed ideal of white heteromascularity, those 'outsiders' demonstrate the political power of such paradigms in enforcing white male cultural hegemony, but also their limitations. As I suggest in the latter stages of this thesis, the frontier would ultimately exhaust itself as a governing logic within the textual worlds of fictive Los Angeles precisely because it demands and depends upon the social primacy of a particularly narrow vision of white masculinity, a primacy that came under persistent challenge in the later twentieth-century city. The mid-century non-white and female characters I explore throughout this thesis also challenge that primacy, even if they often find it insurmountable: in so doing they identify flaws in frontier logic's absolute equation of socio-spatial agency with the figure

of the rugged white male individualist, revealing frontierism's rigidity to be its weakness as well as its strength.

Frontiersman-as-Figure

The conceptual framework I have outlined suggests that the frontier is defined as much by the characteristics of the individuals who seek to occupy and conquer it as by its own environmental characteristics. Those individuals, frontiersmen, may have been defined by the rigid parameters of character, race, and gender that I have described—somewhat ironically, given that the most essential of those parameters is supposedly individualism—but took many forms within those parameters. I have already alluded to this in alighting on the supposed historiographical division between warlike and agrarian frontiersmen, but far more guises exist: 'hunter gatherers, trappers, traders, [...] merchants, prospectors, miners, scouts, soldiers, laborers, teamsters, drovers, [and] speculators' all occupied the role of frontiersman.⁹⁷ Frontiersmanship, as defined by a set of personal traits, is thus a practice that remains consistent regardless of an individual's actual occupation, provided that occupation is conducted on a frontier and as part of a process of winning the wilderness.

That transferability of traits across occupations is simultaneously a transferability across space and time, from the 'coon-skinned trappers and leatherclad "Mountain Men"' of older, more easterly frontiers to the 'starry-eyed prospectors and hard-riding cowboys, badmen and vigilantes' of the Far West.⁹⁸ Although Turner's focus on the Far West is limited (Webb and Billington would light out for that theoretical and geographic territory), the frontiersman, for Turner, is as visible in late-nineteenth century California as in late seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Turner writes that the frontier's role in 'keeping alive the power of resistance to aggression, and developing the stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersman' had been consistent 'from that day to this', and

⁹⁷ Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier*, x.

⁹⁸ Billington and Ridge, 12.

that the figure of the frontiersman was as apparent in the ‘gambling dens’ of the lawless Far West as in the ‘log huts’ east of the timber line.⁹⁹ Likewise, ‘the regulators of the Carolinas were the predecessors of [...] the vigilance committees of California’ and ‘the Massachusetts frontiersman’ and ‘his western successor’ were indistinguishable in the extent to which they ‘hated the Indians’.¹⁰⁰ For Turner, the frontiers of ‘the Cumberland Gap and [...] the Rockies a century later’ manifested exactly the same ‘procession of civilization’, demanding the same human traits.¹⁰¹

This sense in which the Turnerian frontiersman’s character is transferable across time, place, and specificity of individual experiences speaks to another irony in Turner’s conception of that character as being defined by individualism. As Klein writes, Turner wished to ‘broaden history to include the common man’, locating the propulsion of the frontier in the acts of individuals who were remarkable in their character, their bravery and determination, yet unremarkable in their social backgrounds, economic circumstances, or the numbers in which they existed.¹⁰² While Turner emphasises the importance of the strong-willed individual, his individuals are largely notional and anonymous rather than actual—significant because they evidence Turner’s claims of a widespread ‘frontier character’ rather than in themselves. The frontiersman’s identity as an exceptional individual resides ironically in his status as an everyman, ‘a kind of Whitmanian hero *en masse*’.¹⁰³ Even when Turner *does* associate the frontier with ‘Great Men’—Boone, Lincoln, Jackson—he vests their significance not in biographical specificity but in their narrative capacity to symbolise his broader mass of ‘common men’. ‘Lincoln represents [...] the pioneer folk’ while ‘Jackson personified [...] essential Western traits’, exemplifying the ‘ruthless energy of a

⁹⁹ Turner, ‘Significance of the Frontier’, 16; Turner, ‘Problem of the West’, 214.

¹⁰⁰ Frederick Jackson Turner, ‘The First Official Frontier of the Massachusetts Bay’, in *The Frontier in American History* (New York, N.Y.: Henry Holt and Company, 1921), 46; Turner, ‘Problem of the West’, 212.

¹⁰¹ Turner, ‘Significance of the Frontier’, 12.

¹⁰² Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination*, 12. For Klein, this is the irony of the New Western History’s critique of Turner’s supposed narrowness of perspective—that perspective is in fact, suggests Klein, the progenitor of later historiographical emphases on marginal and subaltern voices.

¹⁰³ Slotkin, ‘Nostalgia and Progress’, 612.

frontiersman'.¹⁰⁴ Such figures are primarily metonymic shorthand for the activities of the undocumented, anonymous people Turner saw as the quotidian heroes of the frontier.

I alight on this sense that the frontiersman becomes an archetypal figure, a symbolic personification of a set of ideas, rather than any single historical circumstance of frontier life, because it is fundamental to my project of identifying denizens of fictional, modern, urban LA as frontiersmen. To frame the frontier and 'frontiersmen' metaphorically, as an array of narrative effects, qualities or characteristics that are not subject to hard limitations on the times or places in which they can occur, is in fact a classically Turnerian thing to do. My claims to locate frontiersmanlike figures in modern, urban spaces derive methodological authority from Turner's persistent suggestion that cultural attitudes, not a particular geographic emplacement or historical moment, define the frontiersman. On this basis I hope to obviate any potential concern that my claims to 'frontiersmanship' in modern, urban figures and spaces are superficial, casual, or frivolous, that they are in no sense 'real' frontiersmen or frontiers. If Turner himself invokes the frontiersman primarily as a symbol of certain concepts and characteristics, then the figurative, metaphoric quality of the fictional frontiersmanship I will identify is itself a measure of the fullness of its Turnerian qualities. It affirms adherence to—or entrapment within—Turner's view of history.

In the twentieth-century urban fictions this thesis explores I will show how the frontier dynamics I have thus far identified continue to organise social space absent their original physical forms. I will illustrate how fictions of mid-century Los Angeles structure their worlds on frontierist lines, figuring relations between states of being coded as 'savage' or 'civilized', and the points of contact, transition, and contest between those states, in ways that are analogous to spatial, temporal, and social characteristics of Turner's frontier. Spatial conditions of Turner's frontier may find social analogues in mine, and vice versa. When Harold Simonson described Turner's

¹⁰⁴ Turner, 'Contributions of the West', 256, 254.

'metaphor that becomes epical' he was referring to rhetorical techniques, but could have as easily described the frontier thesis itself.¹⁰⁵ Turner's own construction of the frontier as a set of representative, transferable typologies sets a critical precedent for identifying it as a narrative device.

Context II: Los Angeles

Stakes of Space and Race at Continent's Limit

Turner's claims that the West 'is a form of society, rather than area', that a frontier's transition to 'settled' conditions is gradual, and that the traits of the frontiersman are transferable across place and moment affirm the sense that frontierlike qualities are not exclusive to one particular geography or temporality.¹⁰⁶ That 'form of society' and those traits are, however, predicated upon and defined by constant westward movement. This quality is the inevitable omission from the previous section's attempts to taxonomise the characteristics of frontiers and frontiersman that I will endeavour to locate analogously in the literature of mid-twentieth century Los Angeles, because its condition of spatial literalism is such that it cannot be analogised adequately.¹⁰⁷ While

¹⁰⁵ Harold P. Simonson, *Beyond the Frontier: Writers, Western Regionalism, and a Sense of Place* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1989), 18.

¹⁰⁶ Turner, 'Problem of the West', 205.

¹⁰⁷ My definition of 'Los Angeles' throughout this thesis is consciously broad and flexible, taking in the wider LA metropolitan area (e.g. the technically discrete cities of Santa Monica or Long Beach count as 'LA'). I occasionally even allow myself the latitude of referring to 'Southern California', as there is much precedent in cultural discourse for identifying as a unity the mythic conditions of LA and those of the immediate surrounding region it dominates so powerfully. Mike Davis, for example, in describing Los Angeles, will refer to a 'quintessentially Southern California gesture' or a 'paradox of Southern California'. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 10–11. Whilst this thesis is closely engaged with LA's complex socio-geographies, the city itself, as this section explains, is invoked because of the symbolic role it holds in American culture; that role is not cleanly determined by municipal boundaries, and thus neither is my definition. I choose to refer to Los Angeles rather than Southern California in my title as the most succinct way to reflect accurately this thesis' emphasis on the region's urban core, even if my readings occasionally take me beyond the city limits.

Turner emphasises the transferability of frontier qualities, his declaration of frontier closure circumscribes them within a definition of western expansion as singularly irreproducible.

As I outline later in this introduction, it is partly the location of the aforementioned social characteristics within frontierlike acts of movement (connecting centres with edges, journeys between settled space and unsettled) that lends my arguments their Turnerian specificity. Nevertheless, such movements cannot reproduce the essentially linear, macro-scale, unidirectional quality of Turnerian westward expansion. It is precisely the purpose of this thesis, however, to claim that the mid-century fictions I explore hold out the possibility (even the inevitability) of the frontier's perpetuation *despite* that impossibility of continued westerly motion. The extension of such a possibility would immediately constitute a radical intervention in the previously discussed 'new frontiers' debates that suffused these texts' contemporary public discourse. If these texts decouple the frontier from its conceptual dependence on the 'temporary near-emptiness of the American map', they would resolve the stark dichotomy Fisher proposes between twentieth-century American culture's insistence on 'newness itself' and the Turnerian 'party of nostalgia' it rejects, by deriving the latter from the former.¹⁰⁸ Such a potential intervention in post-frontier discourse, moreover, acquires specific urgency, deepened mythic resonances, heightened social stakes, and a greater imperative for critical investigation, by virtue of being made in the act of depicting Los Angeles, a place with a singularly dramatic and ambiguous role within narratives about frontier closure and perpetuation. The frontier characteristics I have outlined in the previous section might well be locatable in any literary text that addresses unstable, contested spaces. The significance of locating them in LA lies in that city's special position in frontier mytho-history and critical traditions engaged therewith.

In 1870, Los Angeles was still a frontier town with a population of less than 6,000. By the time of the 1890 census that provided Turner with confirmation of the frontier's demise, the city's

¹⁰⁸ Fisher, *Still the New World*, 3–4.

population had swelled ninefold to 50,395; it would double again over the next decade, and by the point that this thesis' period of investigation begins, it exceeded 1.2 million.¹⁰⁹ In the context of frontierist history, one might read this transformation in two opposing ways. The speed and scale of that transformation is certainly suggestive of the frontier's closure. The ultimate example of the rapid urbanisation of the post-frontier West and the symbolic terminus of America's westward journey, LA at the point at which this thesis commences seems to affirm Turner's belief that an era in American history and an American mode of life ceased to exist around the turn of the century. This, as I will expand upon subsequently, is the interpretation that critics of LA's mid-century fiction have emphasised.

If E. Douglas Branch was right to claim that the frontier was best understood as a way of conceptualising a 'transitional phase' in social development, however, then LA in 1930 was both the product of such a transitional phase and about to enter another one. A frontier town had in sixty years become a major modern city, fifth biggest in the nation, but was yet to experience the further explosions in population and physical area, changes in urban fabric and form, greater development as a national and international economic centre, and demographic shifts that would see it become the global urban behemoth we recognise today.¹¹⁰ Los Angeles' twentieth century growth has been described as a 'virtually continuous economic boom', but within that boom distinct phases can be identified, and my period of investigation is one—a transitional phase between metropolis and megalopolis, regional capital and world capital.¹¹¹ If frontiers are temporal liminalities between one state of social development and another, then in Los Angeles the '30s, '40s, and early '50s were a frontierlike time. Given Turner's argument that frontier characteristics

¹⁰⁹ *Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930: Population*, vol. I: Number and Distribution of Inhabitants (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1931), 128.

¹¹⁰ The LA of today perhaps began to become recognisable in the 1960s, when an increasingly sprawling, increasingly multi-ethnic, increasingly freeway-striated and car-dependent conurbation headed towards a population of three million. This later city is one to which I return in my conclusion.

¹¹¹ Edward W. Soja and Allen J. Scott, 'Introduction to Los Angeles: City and Region', in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Edward W. Soja and Allen J. Scott (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 3.

continued to be felt in an area decades after it had stopped being a 'true' frontier, the very speed of LA's transformation from frontier town to modern city implies the retention of frontier characteristics.

Indeed, the rapidity of LA's early-twentieth century development, fuelled by continuing westward migration that had not abated simply because the frontier had gone, might well suggest the possibility of maintaining in urban modernity the frontierlike state of the transitional phase, of growth, expansion, and enduring newness. By the onset of the period on which I focus, that remarkable transition had attracted national and international curiosity.¹¹² Multiple non-fiction accounts of the place and its history appeared, seeking to 'explain' LA's conditions to the world beyond. These accounts grappled with the question (still unresolved today) of whether those conditions made a LA truly exceptional city or merely the vanguard of broader modern trends, the 'harbinger of what [was] to come' elsewhere; there was always, as Mike Davis has written, a divide between 'boosters' and 'debunkers' too.¹¹³ Nevertheless, the welter of non-fiction attempts to 'explain' LA in this period all respond to and emphasise the idea that nothing like it had been seen before.

Louis Adamic's *The Truth About Los Angeles* (1927) was scathing about the socioeconomic realities beneath the city's booming image, with particular derision for its large population of midwestern retirees, while Harry Carr's *Los Angeles: City of Dreams* (1935) was as optimistic as its title suggests. Between those poles sat Morrow Mayo's *Los Angeles* (1933), in which the author's tone is a kind of enthralled distaste, and the Works Progress Administration's *Los Angeles: A Guide to the City and its Environs* (1941). John Keyes, professing studious neutrality in the latter's preface, may as well have named both Adamic and Carr in writing that LA had been both 'lashed as a city

¹¹² LA's simultaneous development into a premier producer of the world's popular entertainment during this period also, of course, helped to turn eyes towards Southern California.

¹¹³ J. Scott Bryson, 'Los Angeles Literature: Exiles, Natives, and (Mis)Representation', *American Literary History* 16, no. 4 (December 2004): 711, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ALH/AJH039>; Davis, *City of Quartz*, 24, 30. Davis deploys this dichotomy throughout *City of Quartz*, most prominently in its first section; these references denote the points at which he introduces each term.

of sin and cranks' and 'strangled' by 'unrestrained eulogy'.¹¹⁴ The booster-debunker divide in LA histories of this period itself suggests a city visible simultaneously as a place that, like the frontier, represented a future with endless possibilities (Carr's 'City of Dreams'), and as a place full of the dead past (Adamic's midwestern retirees). Mayo meanwhile suggested the ambiguous relationship between LA's rapid urban development and its frontier past when he described the proliferation of 'theoretical municipalities' where real estate boosters lit out for 'barren pastures, to launch a subdivision where the coyotes howled and tarantulas and centipedes made whoopee'.¹¹⁵ In *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (1946), the most enduringly impactful history of the area published in my period, Carey McWilliams' subtitle conveys the extent to which his account emphasises regional exceptionality, but an island-like decoupling from the American continent at its western limit might equally suggest either post-frontier finality or its evasion. LA during the period of my investigation is thus a place that manifests the ambiguity in Turner's own conclusions about whether or not 'new frontiers' were possible. It is legible as confirmation either of the frontier's total demise or of its possible perpetuation.

If frontier mytho-history is, as suggested previously, ultimately a racial mytho-history, one in which spatial conquest glorifies whiteness, then the invidious historical relationship between whiteness and LA's transformation from frontier town to modern metropolis further compounds its pertinence as a site for the investigation of the frontier's cultural legacies. Across California, groups such as the Native Sons of the Golden West had since the turn-of-the-century antimodernist moment, explicitly associated the need to maintain the region's 'last frontier' identity with a need to police its racial exclusivity. *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler infamously dubbed LA America's 'white spot' and many early to mid-twentieth-century Angelenos sought to keep it that way, 'a racially pure space [...] built for white Americans by white Americans' and

¹¹⁴ John D. Keyes, preface to *Los Angeles: A Guide to the City and Its Environs* (New York, NY: Hastings House, 1941), v.

¹¹⁵ Morrow Mayo, *Los Angeles* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1933), 80.

enthusiastically policed as such with some of the most racially restrictive housing covenants and zoning practices in the nation.¹¹⁶ Even as Abbott Kinney's Venice sought to inscribe Mediterranean characteristics upon LA space, Kinney himself 'crusaded for Anglo-Saxon racial purity through eugenics'.¹¹⁷ When Carr described the LA as the culmination of the 'epic [...] of the Aryan race', a place where the ethnically unimpeachable could finally end their 'restless encircling of the earth', he identified precisely how LA's continent's end identity as the conclusion of the frontiersman's journey was bound up in an identity of triumphal whiteness.¹¹⁸ The idea of LA as a space of whiteness as envisaged by Chandler, Kinney et al was the urban extension of the frontier's whiteness, a space that symbolised and had been earned through the white frontiersman's continent-crossing efforts and thus should be the exclusive desert of his racial descendants.

By the 1930s, however, LA's 'myth of a white city' was 'clash[ing] with [its] increasingly multicultural reality'.¹¹⁹ When Mayo sought to explain LA's social conditions in 1933, he drew upon LA's legacy as 'the most disreputable of all American frontier towns'.¹²⁰ LA became so 'disreputable' in the frontier era, Mayo explains, principally because of the frequency with which white supremacy was asserted through lynchings of non-white residents in the name of vigilante justice. That is, Mayo regarded 1930s LA as the inheritor of a legacy of a frontier of violent whiteness, which is precisely what I find frequently in its fictions. As this thesis will detail in various contexts, the very ethnic minorities excluded from LA's literal construction as a space of whiteness were essential to the city's socioeconomic and spatial transformation. Moreover, as my readings will show, the fiction of mid-century LA discloses ethnic diversity's challenge to the city's

¹¹⁶ Mark Wild, *Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 38; Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 22.

¹¹⁷ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 22.

¹¹⁸ Harry Carr, *Los Angeles: City of Dreams* (New York, NY: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1935), 5.

¹¹⁹ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 22, 25.

¹²⁰ Mayo, *Los Angeles*, 35.

frontierist whiteness as, ironically, one of the essential means by which the city maintains its frontier characteristics.

The period on which this thesis focuses is thus once again disclosed as one that invites consideration of the deep and complex ambiguities present in LA's links to frontier mytho-history. White claims to the city's spaces derived their specific local authority from its symbolic place in a frontier history that had itself mobilised an ideology of white spatial exclusivity. Just as the city's seemingly boundless growth is legible as either affirmation or termination of frontier conditions, the role within that growth of figures who challenged the city's foundational myths of whiteness likewise invites interpretation as representative of either the city's loss of its frontier inheritance or its perpetuation of the same.

Opening the Closed Frontier of Los Angeles Literary Criticism

This thesis responds not only to the ambiguities of LA's relationship with frontier mytho-history at mid-century but to the fact that those ambiguities are frequently elided in more recent discourses about LA: both observers of the city and critics of its literature have often held it to represent only the erasure and impossibility of the frontier in the twentieth century. John F. Kennedy suggested the dominance of that perception of LA in 1960 when, accepting the Democratic Party presidential nomination, he echoed Hoover's debates with Roosevelt by framing himself (per Slotkin), 'as a new kind of frontiersman confronting a different sort of wilderness'.¹²¹ Speaking in Los Angeles, Kennedy identified his surroundings' symbolic place in the frontier narrative. Alluding to Whitman, he told his audience he stood 'facing west on what was once the last frontier', and invoked the continent-crossing spirit of the pioneers as the inspiration for his own policy programme. Yet if Kennedy's speech deployed LA's location at the conclusion of the transcontinental journey to suggest frontiersmanship, it did so in explicit refutation of a belief that

¹²¹ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 2.

'that there is no longer an American frontier'.¹²² That is, Kennedy rhetorically frames his challenge to political orthodoxy as a challenge to an orthodoxy that LA represents the end of the trail. This thesis makes a consanguine gesture: I challenge orthodoxy about twentieth-century LA and its fictions by showing how those fictions likewise challenge a widespread view in cultural criticism that LA—and, indeed, California more broadly—can only invoke the frontier as its symbolic point of closure.

Criticism of Californian fiction often invokes Turner's anxieties about the impact of the frontier's closure on American life, and the Depression era-discourses of loss and limitation that retrospectively cast him as Cassandra. These 'closed-frontier' critics hold that Californian visions of the post-frontier '20s, '30s, and '40s are inevitably what Harold Simonson called 'studies in literary tragedy'.¹²³ Although California was not the literal location of Turner's last frontier, 'the western shoreline' has, in the words of James Houston, 'acquired the symbolic role of Outer Limit and Farthest Edge, where [...] dreams are put to some final test'.¹²⁴ In that test, failure is assured, as David Fine argues when he states that '[w]here the continent runs out, the dream runs out with it'.¹²⁵ Meanwhile, for Simonson, 'with the closing of the frontier came the end of the American myth'.¹²⁶ The notion advanced by this critical position, that California's location at continent's end portends tragedy, is bound up in the peculiar and cyclically 'self-destroying' mechanism upon which Turnerian frontiers depend.

The frontiersman is a logical paradox: he exists both to conquer wilderness and in the same moment to affirm the continuing presence of wilderness yet to be conquered: as reciprocally

¹²² John F. Kennedy, 'Acceptance Speech at the 1960 Democratic National Convention', (15 July 1960), <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/AS08q5oYz0SFUZg9uOi4iw.aspx>.

¹²³ Harold P. Simonson, *The Closed Frontier: Studies in American Literary Tragedy* (New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1970).

¹²⁴ James D. Houston, "'The Circle Almost Circled": Some Notes on California's Fiction', in *Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West*, ed. Michael Kowalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 238.

¹²⁵ David M. Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2004), 82.

¹²⁶ Simonson, *Beyond the Frontier*, 54.

suggested by his ambivalence to the very 'civilization' on behalf of which he notionally works, he has a divided loyalty. His purpose depends upon his ability constantly to consume the very thing upon which his purpose depends. Because frontier expansion is ostensibly a dream of wilderness conquest, it dies in the moment of its apparent realisation, and thus instead can only be sustained in the continual westward deferral of its own moment of realisation. In California such deferral becomes a geographical impossibility; the final victory of continental conquest is its own ultimate defeat. Hence why, runs the familiar critical argument, literary responses to such a place in the post-frontier decades can offer only grim visions of continental eschatology. The 'terminus of a journey', William McClung writes, reveals itself in LA as 'the rim of a void'.¹²⁷

In closed-frontier critique, Los Angeles' twentieth-century rise to 'world-historical significance' as 'a stand-in for capitalism' in its modern, industrial form is never legible as any kind of 'new frontier', only as the antithesis of the region's prior identity as the last free land.¹²⁸ LA is held to embody Californian literary tragedy more than any other locale because its sheer size and complexity as an urban structure embodies more starkly than anywhere else both the frontiersman's triumph over the wilderness and the simultaneous realisation that, having done so, his dream of wilderness-yet-to-conquer has died. Thus, in a foundational text of 'closed-frontier' criticism, Joseph Porter drew a conceptual link between images of the frontier West as 'a field of constant violence' and the 'social conditions and tensions of modern industrial society' endured in Los Angeles by Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, comparing the detective to the gunfighter heroes of the (fictive) Old West.¹²⁹ The image of detective-as-frontiersman has since been

¹²⁷ William Alexander McClung, *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 41.

¹²⁸ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 18.

¹²⁹ Joseph C. Porter, 'The End of the Trail: The American West of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler', *The Western Historical Quarterly* 6, no. 4 (October 1975): 411–12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/967777>.

developed by other critics and I reinterpret it in chapter 2, but for Porter the analogy exhausts itself because urban California connotes only frontier closure.

The hard-boiled dick has no place to go. The settlements have reached the Pacific terminus and have spilled back on themselves. The detective hero remains dissatisfied, for his rootlessness is static.¹³⁰

Meanwhile, David Wyatt implies a city literally built upon national anxieties about the passing of free land, writing that

the Anglo-American experience of the Los Angeles basin [...] began as one in which the extension of a mental grid over physical space ruled out unmediated natural encounter. The [...] land booms that tried to lure the first large populations confronted the immigrant with whole towns laid out in comforting right angles, lots that were to become nothing more than homes for tumbleweeds.¹³¹

Both natural and human forces are held up, in this school of literary readings, as embodying the essential tragedy of twentieth-century, closed-frontier California, and LA in particular. Wyatt emphasises the natural. For him, 'life in California is an ironic victimization of scale in which some abiding natural fact—the lack of water, the Santa Ana winds—chastens any extension of the will'.¹³²

¹³⁰ Porter, 424.

¹³¹ David Wyatt, *The Fall into Eden: Landscape and Imagination in California* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 158.

¹³² Wyatt, 158. As Mike Davis has noted, both boosters and debunkers of Southern California have investments in the popular but untrue notion that Los Angeles sits in what would, if not for titanic and perpetual acts of geoengineering, be a desert, completely barren and inhospitable. For the former, this discloses the triumph of the region as man-made Eden or conquered frontier where

David Fine also cites the natural forces that are ready to impinge upon and threaten the city at any moment, seizing man's hubristic construct back from the wilderness, reminding him that he has not truly conquered the land.¹³³ Fine simultaneously emphasises, however, the extent to which the natural threats that beset Los Angeles can also metaphorise the human, social catastrophe of a frontierless world. In Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Tod Hackett's painting 'The Burning of Los Angeles' appears to depict a 'natural' force overtaking the city, but it is *only* a painting, a metaphor within the novel's larger metaphor for a dashed dream of Californian possibility. The betrayer of the dream is not nature's burning but man's.¹³⁴ Houston argues similarly that *Locust* is 'a book about the underside of the American Dream, what happens when the dream turns sour, and how disappointment runs that much deeper when the place itself has seemed to promise opportunities that have somehow passed us by'.¹³⁵ Other literatures frequently cited in this type of reading include John Steinbeck's visions of dustbowl-era Californian tragedy, the cynicism of the Hollywood satire genre, and the dark visions of much Californian detective fiction. John Scaggs, for example, argues that Raymond Chandler's LA reflects frontier closure by persistently revealing any hope of renewal or reinvention to be false and hollow.¹³⁶

Reading Californian fiction as a set of closed-frontier tragedies is, however, flawed on its own terms. Its shortcomings arise from a misreading of frontier history and from the temptation to elide two related but distinct myths or dreams associated with California. As the title of Wyatt's *The Fall into Eden* indicates, California's associations with the frontier dream compete with those of a paradisiacal myth. "This is the Garden of Eden!", supposedly exclaimed the politician and land

nature has been subdued, for the latter it only reveals the superficiality and precarity of the edifice constructed there. Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (London: Picador, 2000), 10–11.

¹³³ Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 22–23.

¹³⁴ Fine, 23.

¹³⁵ Houston, "The Circle Almost Circled", 236.

¹³⁶ John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2005), 68.

developer Charles Maclay on first seeing the San Fernando Valley in the 1870s.¹³⁷ In the twentieth century, that image underscored the pamphlets of the railroad and real-estate speculators who enticed tired midwesterners to warmer and supposedly healthier climes. Morrow Mayo confidently predicted that LA would never become the 'vibrant, vital, nerve-center of the Pacific coast' precisely because its benevolent climate cossetted its inhabitants too much, making them disinclined towards '[g]o-getterism'.¹³⁸ Woody Guthrie ironised California's Edenic dream in noting its material conditions, but thereby attested to its currency, when he sang:

California is a garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see;

But believe it or not, you won't find it so hot

If you ain't got the do-re-mi.¹³⁹

At stake here is the fact that the aims of the frontiersman described by Turner and the Edenic dream appear aligned but are in fact radically different. If the frontier exists not in the moment that wilderness is conquered but in the possibility of the wilderness that remains unconquered, the Edenic myth is its antithesis: it resides in the idea that reaching continent's end *is* a moment of triumph, a point of reward, a place of blissful rest. This intractable duality has characterised the Californian imaginary ever since the place's first naming, as a fictional locale in the 16th-century Spanish romance *Las Sergas de Esplandián*, wherein it is simultaneously a land of 'great wealth', close to the terrestrial paradise (Edenic) *and* 'hard to penetrate [...] remote, rockbound' (frontierlike).¹⁴⁰ As Porter evocatively puts it, California's status as the Furthest West means that it invites a

¹³⁷ Hugh T. Hodges, 'Charles Maclay: California Missionary, San Fernando Valley Pioneer: Part III', *Southern California Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (December 1986): 357, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41171239>.

¹³⁸ Mayo, *Los Angeles*, 329.

¹³⁹ Woody Guthrie, 'Do Re Mi' (RCA Victor, 1940).

¹⁴⁰ Dora Beale Polk, *The Island of California: A History of the Myth* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 125. As Houston notes, because it draws its name from a work of fantastical fiction, there is a sense that California is a place where 'the dream came first. The place came later'. Houston, "'The Circle Almost Circled'", 231–32.

'dichotomous view of the wilderness as a howling, evil area, and also as the Golden West, a place of renewal and rejuvenation'.¹⁴¹

These two views are both subsets of a broader American myth of transcontinental manifest destiny; they are both about the social rewards that accrue from a successful fight with an unforgiving environment. Only the frontier dream, however, contains the paradox that the reward sought by the frontiersman is the revelation of yet further unforgiving environment.¹⁴² California's location as a 'place of national or even racial destiny' thus has utterly different meanings for both of these myths, yet extant criticism elides their incompatibility.¹⁴³ Wyatt first argues that the problem with John Steinbeck's California is that its inhabitants possess frontierlike restlessness but the place forces upon them the 'difficulty of settled life'. Within pages, however, he reverses the position: those inhabitants in fact have a 'will to settle' but the place forces upon them a frontierlike restlessness by sublimating their craving for settled life into an 'immaterial domain of belonging'.¹⁴⁴ The California of *The Grapes of Wrath* is, of course, no Eden; Wyatt's reading of its resistance to the Joads' attempts at entry and its refusal to permit more than 'a momentary stay against the confusion of moving on' is of course correct. Yet in Turnerian frontier terms, a land that resists attempts at conquest by man, a land across which one must keep moving, is one that reveals the frontier dream to remain alive. Wyatt's 'garden lost' is equally legible as a frontier found. Similarly, in readings of Raymond Chandler, Scaggs claims that California in general and Hollywood more specifically embody myths of both 'Promised Land' and 'new frontier', but a frontier is land that only exists *in* promise; a place cannot claim one such mythic identity without abjuring its own

¹⁴¹ Porter, 'The End of the Trail', 412.

¹⁴² Laurence Culver embodies this paradox in the title of his study *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). A land of leisure may represent the triumph (or imagined triumph) of an Edenic myth but it is in Turnerian terms, no frontier at all.

¹⁴³ Wyatt, *The Fall into Eden*, 132.

¹⁴⁴ Wyatt, 132, 148, 149.

ability to manifest the other.¹⁴⁵ The same might be said of Nathanael West's burning city, and I will make similar arguments about Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles of irrepressible crime and the racially hostile cities of John Fante, Hisaye Yamamoto, and Chester Himes.

Davis has proposed that 'Los Angeles has always been about the construction/interpretation of the "city myth"', and offers a taxonomy of competing visions thereof, the highest level of which groups claims to the city's identity into 'sunshine' and '*noir*' camps.¹⁴⁶ On one hand stand images of the 'promised land', the 'Mediterranean idyll' of sunshine and orange groves promoted by cultural, municipal, and corporate boosters, but *noir* acts as 'a transformational grammar turning each charming ingredient of the boosters' arcadia into a sinister equivalent'.¹⁴⁷ Edenic myths of LA of course sit within the 'sunshine' spectrum. The frontier, by contrast, is a model which, precisely in its own insoluble contradictions, ironically resolves Davis' model into a unified understanding of LA's mythic identities and therein suggests its potential as a structure through which to read representations of the city. Frontierism is a mythic structure in which the promise of more '*noir*'—more danger, more hostility, more contested space, more intrigue, more rough justice—is itself the 'sunshine' being sought or sold. Exactly as Aldous Huxley defined LA, the frontier is a paradox of 'Dreadful Joy'.¹⁴⁸

Curiously, although Davis flirts with the closed-frontier literary critics in briefly implying the significance of frontier closure discourse to post-Depression LA fiction, the frontier is in fact a striking absence from his catalogue of LA myths, either as a booster vision of endless progress or a *noir* debunking of the same.¹⁴⁹ The subtitle of this thesis, *Excavating the Frontier*, alludes to

¹⁴⁵ Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 68–69.

¹⁴⁶ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 23.

¹⁴⁷ Davis, 20, 38.

¹⁴⁸ Aldous Huxley, *Jesting Pilate: The Diary of a Journey* (London: Triad/Paladin Books, 1985), 192.

¹⁴⁹ Davis refers to LA's predilection for producing *noir* fiction as a response to Depression-era conditions that were felt disproportionately acutely among the middle classes in early-'30s LA as its blue-collar economy was less well developed than in Eastern cities. He suggests like the closed-frontier school that *noir* invokes ideas of LA as the 'terminus of American history', and

Excavating the Future, that of Davis' *City of Quartz*. The allusion is an admission that to produce, as I have, a hybrid of cultural critique, mythic interpretation, and LA history is to work in Davis' shadow. Simultaneously, however, it signals that this work offers a challenge and a partial attempt to move beyond Davis' critical dominance in studies of LA: in tracing the frontier in mid-century LA culture it suggests the presence of an alternative mythic structure for understanding the city's conceptions and constructions of itself, one that sits outside Davis' looming presence.

Frontiers in Fictional Microcosm: Historical and Spatial Methodologies

The notion of LA as a place defined by its own compulsive self-narrating to the point of being indistinguishable from it is a critical commonplace; Michael Sorkin makes an oft-quoted claim that 'LA is probably the most mediated town in America, unviewable save through the fictive scrim of its mythologizers'.¹⁵⁰ Julian Murphet similarly writes of LA's 'subsumption of the real by representation'.¹⁵¹ There are, however, dangers in such claims. Casey Shoop remarks that even Davis' attempts to deconstruct how narratives about LA become LA history and vice versa, how they perpetually shift 'between the representation of history and the history of representation', themselves become 'prey to the power of these representations'.¹⁵² If such a risk can never be fully obviated, I hope at least to ensure that this thesis engages actively with it by grounding each chapter's readings of LA fictions in rigorous research into the specific historical contexts they describe.

By such historicism I do not intend the kind of claim that Murphet would deride as a quest for (and presupposition of) a 'deeper and iniquitous essence'—the *real* 'real'—beneath all the

indeed briefly quotes Fine to the same effect. Davis, *City of Quartz*, 20, 38. The implications of the fact that these ideas are rooted in the frontier myth, frontier history, and the anxious 1930s discourse around frontier closure, however, go unpursued by Davis.

¹⁵⁰ 'Explaining Los Angeles', in *California Counterpoint: New West Coast Architecture 1982* (New York, NY: Rizzoli International Publications, 1982), 8. Also cited in Davis, *City of Quartz*, 20.

¹⁵¹ Julian Murphet, *Race and Literature in Los Angeles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.

¹⁵² Casey Shoop, 'Corpse and Accomplice: Fredric Jameson, Raymond Chandler, and the Representation of History in California', *Cultural Critique* 77 (Winter 2011): 236, <https://doi.org/10.5749/culturalcritique.77.2011.0205>.

'slippery signification' of LA's representations. Such a naïve effort would in fact be, as Murphet justly writes, a 'dismissal of the place', when the history of that place is itself bound up in its prominent cultures of self-representation. Attempts to construct 'the real' through historical scholarship are likewise inevitably representations themselves, never fully extricable from subjectivities of scholar and source alike.¹⁵³ I remain, however, wary of Murphet's attempt to resolve the tension between LA as historical reality and LA as fictive construct in a somewhat glib claim that the city 'is already its own best representation'.¹⁵⁴ Tensions between even a notional 'real' and its 'representation' remain inevitable and insoluble, and but they are also productive. It is often in those tensions—between the LA described by literary texts and criticism and the LA of historical record—that my primary texts ascribe frontier dynamics to the city they represent, perhaps most prominently in disjunctions I identify in chapter 4 between LA's pre-war housing stock and its depiction in fiction. Thus, whilst this is foremost a literary history of LA, I explore the city's social history concomitantly and with equal scholarly curiosity, in doing so synthesising the work of established historians, geographers, and urban theorists with my own primary research. I have, I hope, constructed a literary-historical method that neither abrogates critical responsibility to reckon with the material realities of LA's past—as does the postmodernist feint towards the 'fictive scrim', the ahistorical affectation that LA never existed *other* than as its own representations—nor naively assumes that historical LA can ever be cleanly extricated *from* its representations. Rather, the two produce each other in both the texts I analyse and in my analysis of them.

A co-production between real and representation with implications for my own methodological approach to the historical and fictive spaces of Los Angeles is apparent when Emi, a character in Karen Tei Yamashita's 1997 LA novel *Tropic of Orange*, claims to be 'doing that Joan

¹⁵³ Murphet, *Race and Literature in Los Angeles*, 8.

¹⁵⁴ Murphet, 13.

Didion freeway thang' while stuck in heavy traffic. Emi alludes ironically to the miles compulsively covered by Maria, protagonist of Didion's *Play It as It Lays* (1970), for whom an urge to stalk LA's freeways becomes simultaneously a release from and a metaphor for mental disintegration.¹⁵⁵ Emi's invocation of Didion suggests what we talk about when we talk about space in Los Angeles. Whether in fictive depictions of the city, criticism of those fictions, or critique of the city itself, it is a commonplace that LA's defining and characteristic spatial experience is a matter of scale and distance, mobility or its frustration, connection and segregation between its constituent areas and the social states they represent. Didion's Maria and Yamashita's Emi manifest the dichotomy that defines LA in much cultural discourse, one between mobility-as-escape and mobility-as-entrapment. Moreover, that Emi experiences that dichotomy *through* Didion suggests the dominance of that discourse: she experiences mobility-as-meta-entrapment, not only stuck on the freeway but stuck in an LA story about being stuck on the freeway.

In this model, ability to compass LA spatially, through automobility, becomes the only way for the city's inhabitants compass it psychologically, to make its entirety legible to each other and to itself. For Maria, the freeway is the sole source of 'the day's rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum'.¹⁵⁶ Didion herself averred that the common experience of the 'rhythm' of the freeway rendered it the 'only secular communion Los Angeles has'.¹⁵⁷ Ed Dimendberg writes of similar notions in Reyner Banham's thought that

[m]obility, be it swift spatial passage across the freeway network, or upward social mobility, is the great collective fantasy that Banham discerns in Los Angeles. It promises a world in which geographical

¹⁵⁵ Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (Minneapolis, MN: Coffee House Press, 2017), 53.

¹⁵⁶ Joan Didion, *Play It as It Lays* (London: Fourth Estate, 2011), 15.

¹⁵⁷ Joan Didion, 'Bureaucrats', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 238.

or social distance can be obliterated and unfettered access to different social classes and milieux becomes possible.¹⁵⁸

Such a spatial model of the sprawling auto-metropolis can thus be a utopian one, yet for all Banham's LA enthusiasm, Dimendberg notes, his vision is also invested in 'showing the limits of [...] mobility'.¹⁵⁹ Per Davis' model, dystopian or *noir*-ish visions always invert their sunny counterpart, reconfiguring the endless blacktop as a symbol of inertia, of a city atomised by asphalt where the road's ability to collapse space and time between Compton and Brentwood is only an ironic reminder of the social distance it does not bridge but rather passes (and glosses) over. Both as a material reality and a way of thinking about LA space, Dean Franco writes, the freeway 'connects and divides, simultaneously'.¹⁶⁰

Figurations of LA as (negatively) a fragmented no-place or (positively) a kaleidoscopic communality are by no means restricted to post-'50s visions of sprawl and freeways, they also dominate my period of investigation. For Robert Fogelson, as early as 1850 the signature characteristic in the 'growth of Los Angeles' was its conterminously social and spatial qualities of 'fragmented community'.¹⁶¹ The adage that LA is some number of suburbs in search of a city has murky origins but seemingly predates World War II.¹⁶² In 1935, Harry Carr hailed the 'cataclysmic decentralization' of a place where 'the distances are enormous' as a kind of experimental anti-city.¹⁶³ In John Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939), the vision of LA as a city of car-powered connectivity and possibility is already present: 'I prowled the city with my Ford [...] pausing only long enough

¹⁵⁸ Edward Dimendberg, 'The Kinetic Icon: Reyner Banham on Los Angeles as Mobile Metropolis', *Urban History* 33, no. 1 (May 2006): 113, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926806003543>.

¹⁵⁹ Dimendberg, 120.

¹⁶⁰ Dean Franco, *The Border and the Line: Race and Literature in Los Angeles* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 6.

¹⁶¹ Robert M. Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis: Los Angeles 1850–1930* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 185.

¹⁶² LA commentators are fond of invoking this witticism and giving it various attributions, less fond of citing sources. W. W. Robinson suggests it dates to the 1920s. W. W. Robinson, *Los Angeles: A Profile* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 27.

¹⁶³ Carr, *City of Dreams*, 6, 257.

to order a hamburger and a cup of coffee. This was the life [...], ever following the white line'.¹⁶⁴ So is the twisted contrary: 'We were jammed between two cars. She banged into one, and then into the other, her way of letting me know what a fool I had been'.¹⁶⁵ In 1946 McWilliams wrote of the 'Los Angeles archipelago', a place arranged in 'horizontal clusters'.¹⁶⁶

Recent criticism continues to rehearse such paradigms as the default way to think about space in LA and its representations. In *The Border and the Line* (2019), Dean Franco maintains the dominant vision of an LA that exists as a lattice of 'journey[s] to and from somewhere else'.¹⁶⁷ Opening with a disquisition on shifting diversities along the length of Wilshire Boulevard, Franco perpetuates the narrative that the way to understand socio-spatial division in Los Angeles is to 'compare the identities of specific neighbourhoods', therein to understand the disjunctive borders and connective lines between them.¹⁶⁸ Other recent studies of Los Angeles' cultures that manifest similar impulses include Alex Pavey's PhD thesis *Crime, Space and Disorientation in the Literature and Cinema of Los Angeles* (2018) and Genevieve Carpio's *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (2019). In short, this is a city that, conventionally, considers and demands consideration of space on a macro-scale. The frequency with which this macro model of LA space recurs in criticism suggests its enduring value, but whilst this thesis follows Franco, Pavey, Carpio et al in engaging with LA's spatial structures of social division, it employs a very different methodology in doing so. I choose to examine LA space on a micro-scale, in four spaces—the dancehall, the office, the industrial workplace, and the home (with an emphasis on forms of temporary, multi-occupancy housing)—that recur throughout my primary texts. There are multiple rationales for this approach.

¹⁶⁴ John Fante, *Ask the Dust*, in *The Bandini Quartet* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2004), 588.

¹⁶⁵ Fante, 556.

¹⁶⁶ Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Layton, UT: Gibbs-Smith, 2010), 314.

¹⁶⁷ Franco, *The Border and the Line*, 1.

¹⁶⁸ Franco, 4.

The first is a straightforward desire to offer something original, not to dismiss but to offer an alternative to the familiar critical approach.

Secondly, this method reflects my frontierist context. To assert that fictions of mid-century LA depict the frontier as an actively enduring conceptual force organising the city's spaces *despite* the foreclosure of American westerly movement, my frontiers must not be vested in the idea of physical journeys from one location to another. To claim that frontiers can obviate Turner's condition of linearity, I must reject that condition in choosing how and where I identify them. Moreover, as noted, a frontier simultaneously exists between spaces, within spaces, and as a space in itself. At a small scale, I can trace these complex dynamics more precisely and in more detail within texts than would be possible when working with a broader brush. Furthermore, in identifying the existence of frontier traits at the most micro level, I strengthen the claim that the frontier entirely suffuses the mood of this period's LA fiction, detectable in even the tiniest spatial gesture—returning Turner's grand continental mytho-history to the scale of its constituent driver: the individual. This claim directs me to draw my title from a John Fante story in which a character claims LA's shabby Bunker Hill as his 'most intimate fraction of American earth'.¹⁶⁹ That line suggests how an act of reinterpreting or revisioning space can relocate and reinvest myths of continental grandeur within the demotic and quotidian by recognising that the part contains the whole. This thesis aims to vindicate exactly such a belief. I do not ignore larger-scale divisions, questions of what it means to move from one area to another, and references to such movements recur throughout my arguments. They remain, however, secondary to each chapter's exploration of its key space.

Moreover, this micro-spatial scheme better enables me to historicise LA's development across the period on which I focus: closely examining a single institutional construct in each

¹⁶⁹ John Fante, 'Mary Osaka, I Love You', in *The Big Hunger: Stories 1932–1959*, ed. Cooper, Stephen (New York, NY: Ecco, 2000), 193.

chapter I am able to alight on elements of the mid-century LA experience that relate something pertinent of both LA's specific sociocultural conditions during that period and their reflection of broader American social trends. There is an attempt here to walk the line between competing conceptions of LA as an exceptional city and as a paradigmatic one. Rather than exploring aspects of LA that announce themselves as overtly exceptional (e.g. Hollywood), I alight on types of space also readily found in other urban locations in the US in this historical moment but which developed in unique ways under LA's particular historical circumstances. Those specific local social contexts are typically essential to my frontierist readings of these spaces: again, these spaces (an office, a dancehall, a factory, a hotel room) might exhibit the same spatial characteristics anywhere, but those characteristics take on frontierist resonances when they acquire the social, historical, and mythic contexts of mid-century Los Angeles, the transitional city at continent's end.

My choice of spaces also gestures towards representativity of the experiential breadth of daily life. In choosing a space of leisure (the dancehall), of domesticity (the apartment), of white-collar work (the office) and of blue-collar work (industrial facilities), I demonstrate that the frontier can be apprehended *throughout* the experience of urban modernity. By 'representativity' I do not claim that the fictional experiences of the spaces I choose can encompass the entirety of experiences of a historical place and moment; quite the opposite, these spaces derive frontierlike qualities largely from imposing socio-spatial restrictions on how and by whom they can be entered and experienced. Rather I mean that by choosing spaces that signify 'work, rest, and play', I can show that frontier dynamics are ever-present in the life of this fictional city.

Throughout these readings, I draw on the theories of Henri Lefebvre as a ready framework with which to articulate how the characteristics of space are produced in these texts. Aside from Turner, Lefebvre represents the most consistent critical/theoretical presence in the thesis. He is invoked at greatest length in the early chapters, to establish how my conceptions of space operate. Having established the terms by which I understand space as being produced, I allow Lefebvre to

fade into the background somewhat, but he remains an implicit presence, continuing to inform my understanding of how space is constructed by my primary texts.

Anxieties of Exclusion: Rationalising a Corpus

As suggested, this thesis' periodisation locates fictional texts in a historical moment when the 'transitional phase' in which Los Angeles found itself gave the city an increasingly prominent role in the national cultural consciousness, a role with ambiguous implications for the post-Turner debates about 'new frontiers' that were contemporaneously suffusing American discourse. I commence in 1929, the year the Great Depression began and imbued the hunt for 'new frontiers' with urgency, and the year in which Hisaye Yamamoto's 'Life Among the Oil Fields', discussed in chapter 3, is set. My end point is looser, but 1953 marks the publication of Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, a regular presence in this thesis. By that point, as I explain in chapter 4 and my conclusion, the frontier-recuperating energies of the '30s and '40s are becoming exhausted.

My periodisation also reflects the fact that Los Angeles came into its own as site and subject of a distinct literary culture in the 1930s: prior to this point there are simply few substantial fictional depictions of Los Angeles with which to work. (Mark Lee Luther's *The Boosters* (1924) and Don Ryan's *Angel's Flight* (1927) are notable exceptions.) Edmund Wilson remained wary in 1941 of art produced in such an 'anti-cultural amusement-producing center'. Nevertheless, his appraisal of contemporary Californian fiction, however sceptical, was an acknowledgement of and response to the rapid emergence of a vibrant LA literary scene over the preceding decade, taking its title, 'Boys in the Back Room', from the writers who congregated in Stanley Rose's Hollywood Boulevard bookstore.¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ Edmund Wilson, *Boys in the Back Room: Notes on California Novelists* (San Francisco, CA: The Colt Press, 1941), 59. Kevin Starr identifies the key members of the literary circle that formed around Rose's store and the adjacent Musso and Frank Grill at the turn of the '30s as James M. Cain, Erskine Caldwell, John Fante, A. I. Bezzerides, Frank Fenton, Jo Pagano, Raymond Chandler, Louis Adamic, Budd Schulberg, William Saroyan, William Faulkner, and Nathanael West. Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 348.

If I aim to assert that 'frontier dynamics' were a paradigmatic presence in the literature of mid-century Los Angeles, and that the frontier's textual afterlives were reflections and manifestations of broader social currents suffusing the place and period, then those claims derive strength from being evidenced *across* the fiction of the place and period. This necessitates an attempt to construct a corpus that in some way represents the breadth of Los Angeles' literary culture in the '30s and '40s. I make that attempt through significant expositions of works by Horace McCoy, John Fante, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Frank Fenton, Dorothy B. Hughes, Chester Himes, and Hisaye Yamamoto. The more broadly inclusive of multiple voices one endeavours to be, however, the greater anxieties of exclusion become.

On one hand, such an attempt at representativity cannot succeed without the inclusion of works that are paradigmatic or canonical of their period, style, or genre. On the other, the representative impulse creates an imperative to acknowledge that Los Angeles literature of this period was more than its best-known examples. I have attempted to balance this tension through a heterogenous corpus in which some authors or texts are included because they are well-known as representatives of the place and period, others precisely because they are not. Frank Fenton, who was hailed by McWilliams as one of only four novelists to 'suggest what Southern California is really like' but whose work has been out of print since its initial 1940s printings and has never previously received academic attention, sits alongside titans of the LA canon like James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler.¹⁷¹

John Fante's place within that canon, following his 1980s 'rediscovery', remains ambiguous. *Ask the Dust* has become since the 1990s a subject of increasing critical attention, but the most recent serious attempt to construct an authoritative scholarly history of California literature, a capacious 2015 volume edited by Blake Allmendinger, mentions Fante only to

¹⁷¹ McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*, 364. McWilliams' other candidates are Fante, West, and Luther.

acknowledge his otherwise-total omission.¹⁷² Both of these positions inform my treatment of Fante, whom I discuss at length throughout this thesis—principally in chapter 1 and chapter 3, but in passing throughout. I purposely omit any substantial reading of the critically well-trodden *Ask the Dust* while in fact making larger and more original claims for Fante's potential centrality within the LA canon by offering extended readings of portions of his oeuvre that remain almost entirely untouched by criticism. These include multiple unpublished works that I have been fortunate enough to access in Fante's papers at UCLA. Similarly, West's *Locust* has been critically overworked: it thus features in this thesis largely only in the response I offer to criticism that base large claims about LA fiction upon it. In other cases, however, notably Himes's *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945) and Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1943), I have referred primarily to a given author's best- or better-known output, to the exclusion of other works.¹⁷³ Again, the hope is that a heterogeneity of rationale results in a heterogeneity of corpus that can aspire to some degree of representativity, collocating the canonical with the largely unknown to create a picture of mid-century LA literature, and therein a picture of mid-century LA, which—while inevitably selective—is nuanced and multifaceted.

Such questions operate at the level of genre as well as individual text or author. As Davis so powerfully suggests, the idea of LA as the *noir* or hardboiled literary city is a critical commonplace. I have no wish to rehearse an erroneous narrative that *noir*/hardboiled was the *only* major current in '30s and '40s LA fiction, nor to choose a corpus that would suggest that this thesis' claims for the presence of frontierism of LA literature locate that presence as a phenomenon peculiar to and symptomatic of *noir*. I have therefore omitted some fine LA *romans noirs*, most obviously Raoul Whitfield's *Death in a Bowl* (1931), Paul Cain's *Fast One* (1933), and Eric Knight's

¹⁷² Blake Allmendinger, conclusion to *A History of California Literature*, ed. Blake Allmendinger (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 385.

¹⁷³ Prior to its first appearance in book form (within the collection *Three of a Kind*), *Double Indemnity* had been published in *Liberty* magazine in 1936.

You Play the Black and the Red Comes Up (1938).¹⁷⁴ Equally, however, the prominence of *noir*/hardboiled cannot be ignored, and it is in recognition of this that it is represented herein by canonical masters—Chandler and Cain.

In attempting to select texts that collectively represent the LA of the period in question and allow me to engage adequately with the frontier's complex dynamics of white masculinity, I have selected a corpus that suggests a diverse city with a diverse literary culture. It is nevertheless one that also acknowledges that white male figures were as dominant within that literary culture as non-white and female characters find themselves to be within the texts produced by that culture. Alongside Anglo-American authors like Chandler and Cain are the Italian-American Fante, African-American Chester Himes, and Japanese-American Hisaye Yamamoto. It will not escape the reader's attention that this list includes no Mexican-American perspectives. Indeed, no Latinx authors are discussed in the thesis. This is an unfortunate absence in a piece that frequently seeks to suggest that the frontiers that endured in urban modernity were racial/ethnic ones, when Mexican-Americans were the most populous and longest-established ethnic minority in Los Angeles in the period discussed, indeed one whose presence *predated* and was transformed by the advance of the 'American' frontier. The role of Mexican-Americans (and their oppression) in shaping the spatial-racial liminalities of mid-twentieth-century Los Angeles certainly features in thesis, but exclusively as the subject of others' viewpoints (often as an ethnic identity against which to self-define; see chapter 3's discussion of John Fante).

This is not, however, an omission on my part but a reflection of the dearth of published fiction by Mexican-Americans or members of other Latinx communities in or about Los Angeles during the period this thesis covers. Ignacio López-Calvo has rightly assailed critics (reserving particular ire for Fine) who seek to make representative statements about the character of LA's

¹⁷⁴ Prior to its 1933 novelisation, *Fast One* had appeared in serial form in *Black Mask* the previous year.

literature while ignoring or underplaying Latinx perspectives.¹⁷⁵ In the bibliography López-Calvo assembles of Latinx LA literature, however, there are no fictions whatsoever in the period explored by this thesis; a gap extends from 1929 to 1963.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, George Sanchez records the diversity of Mexican-American cultural activity in Los Angeles during the first half the twentieth century, but makes no reference to published fiction.¹⁷⁷ The absence of Latinx voices from this thesis certainly reflects a methodological limitation of treating a place's literary culture as a means of examining that place. Nevertheless, that absence speaks in its own way of precisely the kind of sociocultural narrative marginalisation of non-white figures that I find characteristic of the frontier's presence throughout this thesis.

Most texts discussed were texts were written contemporarily with their setting, identifying them as works not merely describing but produced from the particular sociocultural contexts with which this thesis engages, but there are occasional exceptions. The most prominent is Hisaye Yamamoto's 'Life Among the Oil Fields', written in 1979 but set fifty years previously. Significantly, this exception is heavily autobiographical, written by an author who was present in an LA much like the one she describes: in this sense, it is dislocated but not absent from the experiential historical moment it represents. Moreover, its complex temporal context is itself essential to my reading of the text. Similarly, John Fante's *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, referred to briefly, was published in 1982 but is to a large degree an autofictional account of an experience of '30s LA. Other fictional depictions of mid-century LA written substantially after the fact and

¹⁷⁵ Ignacio López-Calvo, *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction: The Cultural Production of Social Anxiety* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2011), 13–14, 20.

¹⁷⁶ López-Calvo, 177. López-Calvo writes that Daniel Venegas' Spanish-language *The Adventures of Don Chipote, or, When Parrots Breast-Feed* (*Las aventuras de Don Chipote, o, cuando los pericos mamen*)—set in Los Angeles and perhaps the first novel by a Mexican-American—was serialised in a local newspaper in 1928, but dates it to 1929 in his bibliography. López-Calvo, 15.

¹⁷⁷ George J. Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

without a sense of the experiential, by James Ellroy and Walter Mosley, are also mentioned but only in passing and as thematic adjuncts to readings of period-written works.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter 1, I discuss the role of the dancehall in LA fiction of the 1930s and early '40s, principally through readings of Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They* (1935) and three short stories by John Fante. Having established the social significance and role of the dancehall within LA's leisure culture (and that of the United States more broadly) in this period, I present McCoy as a central text of the 'closed-frontier' school of Californian literary criticism, before offering a counter-reading that illustrates how the terms of that critical school misapprehend the essential characteristics of a frontier space. In subsequently discussing the Fante texts, I parse in fine detail how movement through and occupation of the highly codified and multiply divided space of the dancehall manifests frontier dynamics that are heavily inflected by each story's protagonist's class status and/or ethnicity.

Chapter 2 situates a discussion of the office as a space of canonical LA hardboiled fiction within the context of a century-long culture war over the office as a definitive space of modernity. Reflecting post-frontier concerns about overcivilization, I suggest that Walter Huff, protagonist of Cain's *Double Indemnity*, embodies the frontiersman's identification with the wilderness he notionally exists to conquer, and ultimately sacrifices himself to assert the persistence of its presence. In approaching Chandler's Philip Marlowe, I suggest that although he shares with Huff the frontiersman's subsistence upon the socially 'savage' in his professional life, he more fully enacts the frontiersman's paradox of acting on behalf of 'civilization' in order to subdue that 'savagery'. Accordingly, his engagements with the space of the office are conflicted in character, treating it simultaneously as an anti-frontier space of deracinated modernity *and* as a space that manifests resistive, treacherous frontierlike conditions in itself.

In chapter 3 I turn from the knowledge economy to the industrial economy and from white collar work to blue. In doing so I also move from the whiteness in which Marlowe and Huff partially vest their claims of frontiersmanlike identity to figures whose relationship with their worlds' frontier logic is defined by their non-whiteness. The principal texts analysed are Yamamoto's 'Life Among the Oil Fields', Fante's 1936 novel *The Road to Los Angeles*, and Himes' *If He Hollers*. Here, close analyses of space continue alongside an interrogation of the role of non-white figures in a culture that continues to organise itself along the lines of the frontier, with an argument that these texts demand their protagonists seek social acceptance through frontiersmanlike labours only to be rejected for their ethnic inability to manifest the figure of the frontiersman. This chapter occupies the historical context of the rapid industrial growth and concomitant social transformation that Los Angeles underwent in this period, first in the aftermath of the 1920s oil boom, and then as World War II transformed the manufacturing economy. I draw on critical whiteness studies to theorise and historicise the specific stakes of ethnic difference experienced in these texts' depictions of Japanese-American, Italian-American, and African-American figures.

In chapter 4 I return to white masculinity to consider my frontier model in the immediate aftermath of World War II, via the figure of the returning veteran as depicted in Dorothy B. Hughes' *In a Lonely Place* (1947) and Fenton's *What Way My Journey Lies* (1946). I do so in the context of LA's changing pre- and post-war identities of residential space and urban form, querying conventional narratives thereof through extensive primary research using contemporary municipal strategy documents. The argument here resides in how certain types of accommodation are figured as spaces of lone masculinity and others as spaces of feminised domesticity. For two war veterans whose identities have been constructed on frontiersmanlike lines, anxieties of peacetime reintegration are made manifest in their attitudes to the spaces of different modes of living. Their fates differ, but both suggest the exhaustion of frontierlike masculinity as a model for mastering LA.

In my conclusion, I cast this frontier exhaustion forward to the 1960s and '70s, positing whilst the frontier may have survived its own closure to continue structuring LA fiction into the '40s, it finally met its moment of continent's-end finality in the later decades of the twentieth century. It proved inadequate as an organising strategy with which to represent a diversifying city that demanded to be read on its own diverse terms, a demand that was reflected in an explosion of perspectives in its literary culture.

1. DANCING ON THE EDGE OF AMERICA: MAPPING MARGINALITY ON THE BALLROOM FRONTIERS OF HORACE MCCOY AND JOHN FANTE

“If you are looking for your brother,” said the proprietor to me,
“go to the dance hall. That is where you always find them.”

— Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart*

This chapter locates frontier dynamics in literary representations of spaces where social dancing took place in 1930s and ‘40s Los Angeles. The texts explored are three lesser-known works by John Fante—the short stories ‘To Be a Monstrous Clever Fellow’ (c. 1935) and ‘Helen, Thy Beauty is to Me—’ (1941), and the film treatment *A Letter from the President* (c. 1950), which I set alongside a more familiar LA dancehall fiction, Horace McCoy’s *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?* (1935). *Horses*, ‘Helen’, and ‘Clever Fellow’ are all temporally located in the period between 1920 and 1940 when, according to Russel Nye, ‘public dancing in America reached its highest peak of both popularity and profit, and the dancehall became one of the nation’s most influential social institutions’; *President* is set shortly after World War II.¹

In these texts, the spatial particularities of the dancehall and dancefloor operate to replicate or recall a frontier model of American expansionist progress, and compel disadvantaged or marginalised individuals to participate performatively in this model via the allure of social, romantic, or financial rewards. Any such dancehall-derived rewards, however, ultimately accrue

¹ Russel B. Nye, ‘Saturday Night at the Paradise Ballroom: Or, Dance Halls in the Twenties’, *Journal of Popular Culture* 7, no. 1 (Summer 1973): 15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1973.00014.x>.

only to the dance establishment in question and/or society at large, never to the participants. These processes (re)produce and revivify the now-unviable space of the geographic frontier in symbolic internal spaces by means of complex socio-spatial codes, and in so doing demonstrate a societal outsourcing of the hazards of frontier labour, even in leisure activities, to the ‘others’ of an undesirable social underclass. In siting such claims in the ballroom, I pursue a 1932 assertion by the sociologist Paul Cressey that no American recreational institution ‘reveals with as much clarity as many of the perplexing problems which make difficult the wholesome expression of human nature in the urban setting as does the public dance hall’. For Cressey, the dancehall embodies ‘the impersonality of the city, the absence of restraints, the loneliness and the individual maladjustment and distraction characteristic of [...] the urban environment’.² Paralleling Cressey’s conception of the dancehall as a hostile landscape that at once liberates and assaults the individual, all four of these texts conceive of its social space as operating on frontier logic.

Although the establishments at the heart of these texts are all ‘dancehalls’, they differ from each other in their social function and the methods by which they commodify dance. Nye acknowledges that by 1920 there were ‘at least five types of places for dancing open to the public’.³ These were

- dances for adolescents sponsored and supervised by charitable or municipal agencies;
- club, charity and society balls;
- hotels, restaurants and nightclubs that provided spaces for dancing in addition to their principal offerings;

² Paul Goalby Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1932), xvii.

³ Nye, ‘Saturday Night at the Paradise Ballroom’, 16.

- taxi-dancehalls, patronised almost exclusively by men, who were charged for each dance with a ‘hostess’, and
- vast, grand ‘dance palaces’, which attracted a large and socially diverse male and female clientele, and were the most popular type of public dancing space in this period.⁴

During the 1920s a sixth type of public dance institution came into being. This was the ‘dance marathon’, which differed from the forms identified by Nye in that whilst it invited the public to pay for dance-based entertainment, the paying public were not themselves the dancers. ‘Helen’ and *President* feature downtown Los Angeles taxi-dancehalls; the dancing of ‘Monstrous Clever Fellow’ occurs in a ‘regular’ dance palace in Wilmington or Long Beach; *Horses* is set in a dance marathon held at the end of a pier in Santa Monica.

As all four texts describe commodified dancing entertainment in the same city and at similar times, but diverge in the forms of commercial dance they describe, they depict a set of related-yet-distinct social practices. The result of those distinctions, to adopt Henri Lefebvre’s terminology, is the ‘production’ of diverse types of space. In Lefebvre’s triadic model of how space is produced, such distinctions of social form are expressed partly in ‘representations of space’ (i.e. in the materiality of the spaces in which the dancing occurs), and partly in ‘spatial practice’ (the social codes that govern access to and usage of those spaces). The dancehall as a social space is only produced, however, when it also acquires what Lefebvre terms the condition of ‘representational space’: that is, when human beings occupy it either in accordance with or resistance to its representations of space (the physical form) and spatial practice (the non-physical form).⁵ I am largely concerned with how McCoy’s and Fante’s texts make meaning through their

⁴ Nye, 16–17.

⁵ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 38–40. Lefebvre respectively glosses ‘representations of space’, ‘spatial practice’, and ‘representational space’ as the ‘conceived’, the ‘perceived’, and the ‘lived’. Lefebvre, 39.

characters' dancehall experiences—that is, through their iterations of representational space. In order, therefore, to apprehend the distinctive representational spaces that each of these texts inscribe, and therein the nature of their participation in a frontierist discourse, it is necessary to locate the distinctive formal contexts of their respective dancehalls.

Perpetual Motion: Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*

A careful parsing of the space of McCoy's dancehall problematises accepted readings of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* as a post- or anti-frontier text, in which it is upheld by closed-frontier critics as central to their thesis that post-Depression Californian fictions are inevitably tragic studies in the frustration of continental motion. David Fine writes that in McCoy's novel 'the void of the Pacific' beneath the pilings of the pier where the dance marathon takes place 'becomes the commanding metaphor for dream's end'.⁶ In *Horses*,

Dance, traditionally a celebration of life, becomes a rite of death, a *danse macabre*. There are no celebrants and no winners, only an abrupt and crashing halt after 897 hours of futile movement, underscored by the insistent presence of the ocean pounding against the pilings. [...] The image is claustrophobic, reflecting their constant sense of entrapment, the entrapment of the dream itself.⁷

Elsewhere Fine describes the novel as one in which arriving at 'the last place on the land' causes 'beautiful dreams [to] become violent nightmares'.⁸ Similarly, Philip Melling writes that McCoy's

⁶ Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, 92.

⁷ Fine, 104–5.

⁸ David M. Fine, 'The Emergence of Los Angeles as a Literary Territory', *California History* 79, no. 1 (April 2000): 7, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25591571>.

Gloria has been lured to Los Angeles by a misguided belief that the West still possesses ‘regenerative properties’. Melling joins Fine in grouping *Horses* with Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* as Los Angeles novels about the ‘capacity for self-delusion and the worship of false fictions’—the greatest of all such fictions being the notion that ‘the frontier was still open’.⁹ Jan Goggans is less explicit in framing the novel as a tragic response to continental finality, but implies as much by linking a setting ‘over the Pacific’ with Gloria’s revelation that ‘the golden dream’ of California (located for McCoy’s narrator-protagonist Robert Syverten in Hollywood’s promise of wealth and fame) is ‘destined for death from the start’.¹⁰ Likewise William Hare echoes closed-frontier pessimists in asserting that a sense of entrapped motion—McCoy’s marathon’s ‘exhausting relentlessness’—betokens the ‘hopeless plight of civilization’.¹¹

Dance marathons were, in fact, imbued from their inception with echoes of the Turnerian frontiersman’s determination to express ‘the freedom [...] to seek his own’, his resistance to governmental strictures, and his characteristically paradoxical quality of everyman individualism.¹² The marathon’s 1920s beginnings were part of what Carol Martin terms ‘a larger cultural discourse [...] about breaking records’, of a piece with such esoteric entertainments as ‘endurance kissing competitions, marathon hand-holding contests, and milk-drinking, egg-eating, and gum-chewing races’.¹³ Increasingly improbable marathon dancing world records were set, rising from nine to 217 hours within the first six months of 1923.¹⁴ These early marathons were contests of genuinely life-endangering endurance: Martin sees them as both an anti-puritanical reaction to the restrictions

⁹ Philip E. Melling, ‘The West in Fiction’, in *Nothing Else to Fear: New Perspectives on America in the Thirties*, ed. Stephen W. Baskerville and Ralph Willett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), 121–22.

¹⁰ Jan Goggans, ‘Dreams, Denial, and Depression-Era Fiction’, in *A History of California Literature*, ed. Blake Allmendinger (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 175.

¹¹ William Hare, *Pulp Fiction to Film Noir: The Great Depression and the Development of a Genre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 73–74.

¹² Turner, ‘Problem of the West’, 213.

¹³ Carol J. Martin, *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture of the 1920s and 1930s* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 5.

¹⁴ Martin, 15–21.

on personal freedom imposed by prohibition, and a way for unexceptional, ordinary Americans without particular talents or training to join the ranks of such famed 1920s record-setters as Amelia Earhart and Charles Lindbergh.¹⁵

Over the course of the 1920s such contests changed markedly, not least in response to moralising anti-marathon legislation.¹⁶ Competitions remained fantastically gruelling, but became increasingly orchestrated, theatrical spectacles; participation became for some a professional occupation. In these new-style marathons

contestants' health and grooming had become part of the spectacle of the event. Time was broken into discrete hourly units of rest and dancing. Actual dancing was not required, just continual motion and some semblance of the dance position.¹⁷

Although contestants would on command perform set-piece rehearsed dances, Martin emphasises the extent to which non-dance entertainments came to dominate.¹⁸ These included vaudeville-style comedy routines, wrestling matches, elimination races, weddings between contestants (some real, some confected), presentations by sponsors, and regular interjections from the voluble promoters.¹⁹ Thus, whilst conventions of dance—music either live or recorded, the boundaries of the dancefloor as competition arena, male-female pairings as 'teams'—persisted as the vestigial exoskeleton of the marathon's form, its spatial language (the acts of formally planning space and socially perceiving space that sit across Lefebvre's categories of representations of space and spatial

¹⁵ Martin, 7.

¹⁶ Ralph G. Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, vol. 2 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007), 79–80.

¹⁷ Martin, *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture of the 1920s and 1930s*, 33–34. Ralph Giordano suggests that the typical format comprised 45–50-minute periods of motion followed by 10-minute rest breaks, but in McCoy's novel the 10-minute break is only granted every two hours. Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:61; Horace McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995), 16.

¹⁸ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:61.

¹⁹ Martin, *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture of the 1920s and 1930s*, 43.

practice) differed from that of other forms of commercial dance. There was need for a larger audience space, rest areas for participants, and a dancefloor of a shape and size that suited elimination races and afforded the audience good sight-lines. Nevertheless, the fact that many marathon venues were converted from conventional dancehalls (often the result of the economic exigencies of the Depression) suggests the closeness of dialogue between the two types of space.²⁰

The unnamed Santa Monica location of the dance marathon in *Horses* is described by Syverten as an ‘enormous old building’ that had previously been a ‘public dance hall’.²¹ Its size suggests that its prior existence was as one of the dance palaces that first began to dominate the social dancing scene in the 1910s: their vast capacities were their principal innovation—they rendered obsolete ‘the smaller neighbourhood saloon dance halls’ of the late nineteenth century. Around 1930 Santa Monica’s Chamber of Commerce boasted of ‘[f]ive piers with every resort attraction [...] available’, dancehalls included.²² The grandest of these, the La Monica, was not constructed until 1924, while the oldest, on Pickering (formerly Fraser) Pier, was constructed in 1913 and enlarged in 1920.²³ Thus, whilst McCoy’s setting is fictionalised, frustrating any attempt to map his pier to an exact historical analogue, there was *no* pier-end dancehall in Santa Monica during the Depression to match Syverten’s description of the dancehall as ‘old’.²⁴

Syverten describes a hippodrome-like arrangement of space within the hall.

²⁰ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:76.

²¹ McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?*, 14.

²² *Santa Monica: Southern California’s Home City of Culture and Recreation* (Santa Monica, CA: Santa Monica-Ocean Park Chamber of Commerce, 1930), 14.

²³ Philip L. Fradkin and Alex L. Fradkin, *The Left Coast: California on the Edge* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 49; Jeffrey Stanton, *Venice of America: ‘Coney Island of the Pacific’* (Los Angeles, CA: Donahue Publishing, 1987), 55, 76.

²⁴ Sydney Pollack’s 1969 film adaptation of *Horses* identified the dancehall as the Aragon Ballroom on Lick Pier. Hare, *Pulp Fiction to Film Noir: The Great Depression and the Development of a Genre*, 67. The Lick Pier straddled the Santa Monica-Venice municipal boundary and opened in 1924, following the destruction of a previous pier in a fire. During the time in which McCoy’s novel is set, however, the ballroom on Lick Pier was not in fact the Aragon but the Bon Ton. Stanton, *Venice of America: ‘Coney Island of the Pacific’*, 94. Months after the release of Pollack’s film, the Aragon itself would itself burn down. ‘Pier Fire Destroys Aragon Ballroom’, *Los Angeles Times*, 27 May 1970, 1.

Inside was a dance space for the contestants, thirty feet wide and two hundred feet long, and around this on three sides were loge seats, behind these were the circus seats, the general admission. At the end of the dance space was a raised platform for the orchestra.²⁵

Although not stated explicitly, it is unlikely that the long, very narrow dancefloor represents the building's original configuration as a 'public dance hall'; rather, it seems that floorspace has been cannibalised to accommodate increased seating for the crowd. This is broadly consistent with Philip Evergood's painting of a marathon scene (figure 1), which shows several tiers of bleacher-style seating more common to sporting venues than to ballrooms, though his dancefloor appears circular. We do not know quite how large McCoy's hall is beyond its initial description as 'enormous' but the Rendezvous

Ballroom, which was operating in Los Angeles at the same time as McCoy's fictional ballroom, had a 12,000 square foot dance floor, permitting 1,500 simultaneous dancing couples; Santa Monica's La Monica ballroom was even larger, with a 15,000 square foot floor and the capacity to host 5,000 patrons.²⁶ Even taxi-dancehalls, which were typically smaller, still accommodated 200–600 people at any one time.²⁷ The large fictional marathon Syverten recalls commences with only 144 couples: we can infer that in the process of conversion from a 'public dance hall' to a marathon venue the revision of the building's internal spatial organisation has been a fairly radical one.

McCoy's marathon does superficially appear to support a Finean 'tragic frontier closure' reading. Syverten repeatedly remarks on feeling the waves beneath his feet, pounding against the

²⁵ McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, 14.

²⁶ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:103; Paula A. Scott, *Santa Monica: A History on the Edge* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2004), 66.

²⁷ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:69.

pilings of the pier: he is constantly aware that he is past the point of the continent's end, prompting his dance partner Gloria to scoff that he is 'hipped on the subject of waves'.²⁸

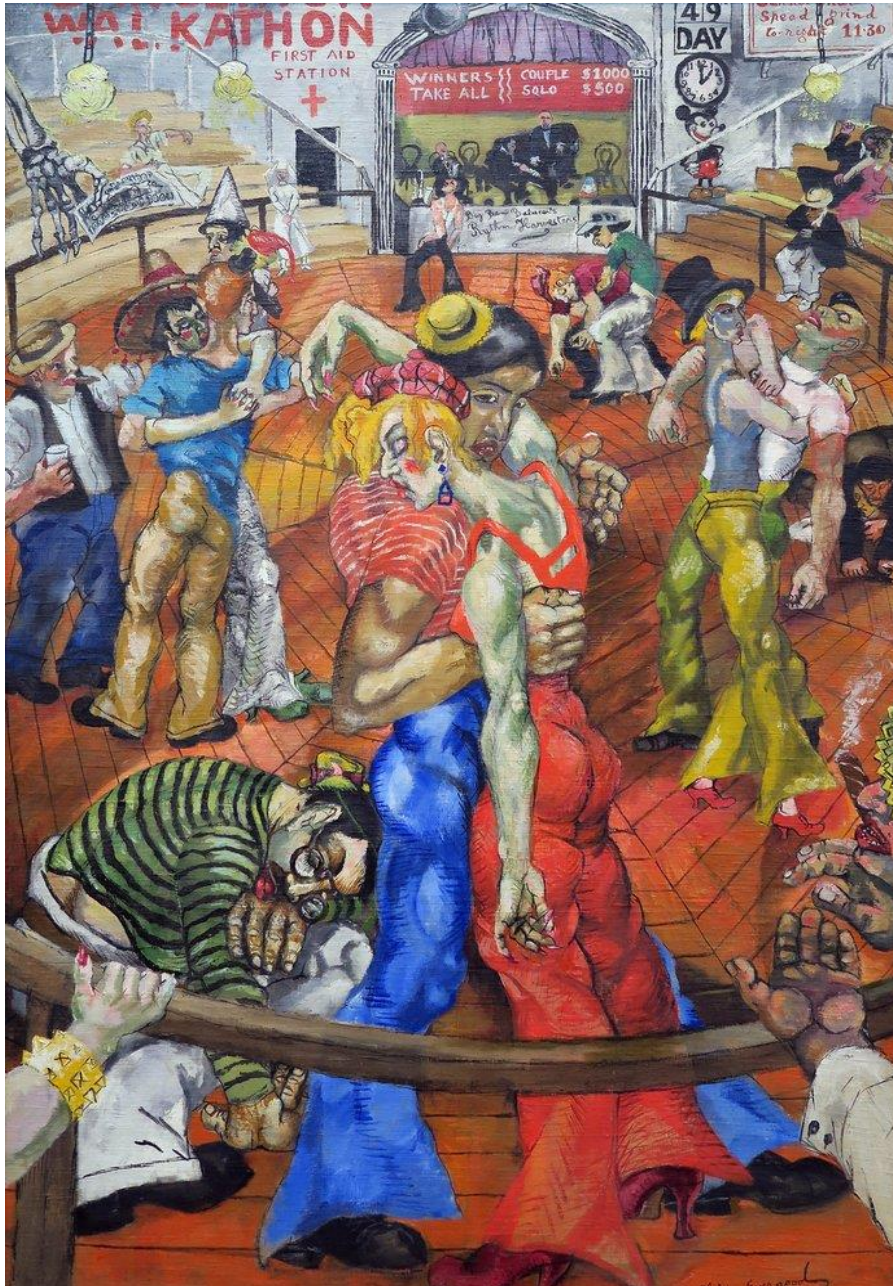


Figure 1: Philip Evergood, *Dance Marathon*, 1934, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX.

Evergood depicts a dance marathon scene similar to that described by McCoy.

²⁸ McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, 116.

The dancehall is, for Robert, a space of utter entrapment; the rickety pier's attempt to eke out just a little more 'free land' from an apparently vain one. A closer assessment of this dancehall's peculiar spatiality, however, discloses another picture. A space rendered 'old' after no more than twenty years suggests the conception of the urban realm as ever-provisional and the fixation upon relentlessly supplanting the old with the new that have long been identified as characteristic of Los Angeles' culture.²⁹ That desire for constant forward motion, moreover, an impulse to reject the stably established in favour of the newly created, is the governing principle of frontierism. Unlike the conquered continent, however, the 'oldness' of the dancehall does not render its space exhausted, irrevocably de-frontierised. The hall's proprietors, alive to the growth of a new social form (the marathon), have reconceived an old space *as* new, proving not the inevitability of spatial exhaustion in post-frontier America but rather the inexhaustible resourcefulness of a frontier mindset to make new space even where none appears to exist—indeed, where the space seems to be an old, occupied one.

The application of a Lefebvrian model explicates this counterintuitive application of frontier dynamics. A change in social form, from ordinary public dancing to the marathon, has wrought a change in the *spatial practice* of the venue—the codes and expectations governing its perception and usage. This change in spatial practice inevitably and simultaneously produces alterations in the other aspects of the Lefebvrian spatial scheme. The physical fabric of the building itself, its *representation of space*, remains broadly recognisable from its 'public dance hall' days, but has undergone significant alterations. These covalent changes in spatial practice and representation of space effect a change in *representational space*: the hall's experiential reality has changed markedly in the transition from couples dancing for their own entertainment to pairs of partners vying for

²⁹ Morrow Mayo remarked on this tendency as early as 1933. It recurs throughout cultural critiques of Los Angeles - prominent examples include Norman Klein's conception of a city defined by wilful 'forgetting', or Mike Davis' analysis of the power dynamics of boosterism. Davis, *City of Quartz*; Mayo, *Los Angeles*; Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997).

prize money and the crowd's attention. Indeed, the competitive dynamic of endurance and exhaustion that governs the marathon is such that the marathon hall's *representational space* changes constantly throughout the event's duration. That sense of perpetual flux illustrates Lefebvre's contention that space is not produced statically or with instantaneous stability but rather should be understood as an illimitably contingent productive process.³⁰ Not merely in the conversion of public hall to marathon hall but in the dynamics of the marathon itself, a process of spatial production is continually enacted in the triadic contingency of spatial practice, representation of space, and representational space. From that process a new space is constantly emerging, informed by its former condition but distinct from it: such a spatial dynamic is precisely that by which Turner defines the advancing frontier.

A Lefebvrian analysis of the changes in McCoy's converted dancehall extends a possibility that individuals possessed of Turner's 'frontier spirit' (the enterprising marathon entrepreneurs and their intrepid, record-seeking contestants) can re-open space once thought closed in a socio-spatial act of frontierist recycling. That marathons did indeed reach their popular peak during (and were perceived to offer a psychodrama of) the Depression, while mainstream halls suffered, renders such a reading historically compelling.³¹ It is thus possible to read the spatiality of McCoy's novel as suggesting not that the Depression corroborated the contemporary impossibility of America's former frontier ambitions, but quite the opposite—that it actively revived them: only in a return to a climate of privation, adversity, and hardship not seen since the pioneer days were the social conditions created in which the 'new space' of the dance marathon was produced. The dangerous lengths to which McCoy's contestants push themselves, and the eagerness of the crowds to watch the grisly spectacle, suggest the extent to which the space of the dance marathon endeavours to reproduce the frontier's former function as a societal 'safety valve'. Where the

³⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 21.

³¹ Martin, *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture of the 1920s and 1930s*, 41.

existence of a frontier had once promised a solution to straitened socioeconomic circumstances in settled areas, here audience and contestants conspire to construct out of their own climate of scarcity and precarity a social form built upon the frontierlike principles of perpetual motion and re-making of space.

The suicidal Gloria mocks Robert's belief that 'the big break is always tomorrow', but such a belief represents a profoundly frontierist mode of thought.³² Because the dream of frontier conquest exists only inasmuch as it can be deferred, while in its achievement it extinguishes itself, to live constantly in a state of chasing his dreams, never quite grasping them, is to render oneself a frontiersman of sorts. This cast of desperate young people are kept in a liminality of privation and precarity wherein they do not die but cannot live comfortably, instead fending off daily challenges from the promoters and each other to survive in the contest. The relationship between dancers and marathon is closely analogous to that of frontiersman and frontier. The contestants depend both materially and spiritually upon the marathon (it is their source of food, shelter, and hope of a final prize that never arrives) but are continually on the verge of being destroyed by its conditions: the 'non-stop movement' by which they are sustained is also a 'punishment' to be endured.³³ Robert's entrapment in the frustrated present of the dancehall performs the emotional labour of frontier struggle on behalf of, and for the recreational privilege of, his fellow Americans. Gloria's death wish, which becomes Robert's by extension, comes to seem less a response to the lack of frontier space than a response to the economic trap of the dancehall's performative frontier. The only way not to continue living in this seemingly interminable staging of a frontier between life and death is to choose the latter.

In its specificity as a social moment, there are limits to the dance marathon as a model of a perpetually self-renewing frontier: marathons themselves may have seemed endlessly cyclical, but

³² McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*, 116.

³³ Goggans, 'Dreams, Denial, and Depression-Era Fiction', 175.

Giordano notes that before McCoy's novel was even published the marathon craze itself had already passed, subdued by legislative restrictions and a renewed interest in other forms of social dance.³⁴ Nevertheless, in examining John Fante's depictions of those other, more persistent forms of dance, we find that they retain (and perhaps even amplify) the marathon's inherent staging of liminality and its imposition of exploitative 'frontier labour' upon disadvantaged protagonists.

Dancing with Class: John Fante's 'To Be a Monstrous Clever Fellow'

The dancehall is a recurring setting for Fante.³⁵ For him, it is a space where socially marginal male protagonists acquire and/or expend social capital by participating performatively in a societal mainstream from which they are otherwise excluded. Such participation is always provisional, temporary, and conditional, yet for that it is no less keenly sought. The protagonists' attempts to access the dancehall, traverse its socio-spatial boundaries, and claim the right to its spaces revivify Los Angeles as a space possessed of the potential to maintain a 'frontier' identity by inverting and therein rendering reproducible the kind of frontier experience Turner had declared no longer tenable. The Turnerian frontiersman moved from spaces of 'civilization' into those of 'savagery', with the frontier a liminal zone between the two. Fante's protagonists continually attempt to move in what appears to be the opposite direction—away from spaces designated both physically and socially as 'wilderness', towards a dominant cultural 'centre' that simultaneously resists the entrance of incomers, demands their submission to its norms, and is policed as such on lines of race and class.

³⁴ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:80.

³⁵ In addition to the three fictions discussed in this chapter, a dancehall also appears fleetingly in Fante's 1939 novel *Ask the Dust*.

These attempts are manifest in navigations of the socio-spatial codes of the dancehall, which is accordingly produced as a model frontier, the liminal, contested zone Fante's protagonists negotiate to claim participation in a certain vision of American cultural life. It serves as a space of cultural contact between the parts of society coded 'savage' and 'civilized' by the occupants of the latter, extending to denizens of the former the hope of claiming a new, more socially normative identity. Because that possibility proves at best partial and at worst illusory, however, the inverted frontier dynamics of the dancehall are capable of endless recuperation and repetition. Whereas the original pioneer 'conquered' each successive frontier until 'free land' was exhausted, Fante's characters never 'win' the dancehall; its apparent entrée to the social mainstream is always withdrawn or rendered untenable; 'civilized' space stubbornly resists the ingress it seems to invite. The dancehall as it appears in these fictions, therefore, offers as it does in McCoy's *Horses* a striking but troubling rejoinder to notions that mid-twentieth-century fictive Californian space must betoken the tragic closure of the frontier. Here the frontier has not disappeared but has merely been transmuted, the cultural labour it demands dislocated from physical space into and across liminalities of race and class.

This process operates most simply in 'To Be a Monstrous Clever Fellow', the story of a socioeconomically marginalised young longshoreman's attempt to find romance among the more privileged female college students at the local dancehall. The story is undated and its protagonist unnamed, but the performatively intellectual, near-manic voice of its first-person narration strongly 'prefigures the Arturo Bandini of *The Road to Los Angeles*', which Fante completed in 1936.³⁶ The story is likely set between 1930 and 1932.³⁷ Like the Bandini of *The Road*, the

³⁶ Cooper, Stephen, editor's notes to *The Big Hunger: Stories 1932–1959*, by John Fante, ed. Stephen Cooper (New York, NY: Ecco, 2000), 310; Stephen Cooper, *Full of Life: A Biography of John Fante* (New York, NY: North Point Press, 2000), 133.

³⁷ References in the text to the presence at San Pedro of two aircraft carriers, the *Lexington* and *Saratoga*, exclude any date prior to April 1928, when both ships came to be moored at the port. The protagonist is young, but old enough that he can manage the work of a longshoreman and momentarily convince a woman that he is a professor. (Moreover, there is evidence that most dancehalls were relatively diligent in ensuring minors were not permitted. See Ella Gardner, *Public Dance Halls: Their Regulation and*

protagonist of ‘Clever Fellow’ repeatedly quotes and muses on Nietzsche and James Branch Cabell.³⁸ ‘Clever Fellow’, however, departs from *The Road* and the vast majority of Fante’s other early work in that the protagonist’s ethnicity is not among the sources of the social difficulties he faces. Anxieties engendered by Italian-American identity do not appear here as they so commonly do in Fante’s quasi-autobiographical fictions.³⁹ The protagonist’s family are Catholic, but nothing Italianate is confirmed.⁴⁰ The protagonist’s mother’s dialogue contains none of the accented or broken English with which Fante often identifies characters of Italian origin.⁴¹ Moreover, none of the women whom the protagonist and his friend Eddie meet within the dancehall comment on the protagonist’s ethnicity, whereas elsewhere in Fante’s corpus it is a perpetual bone of contention in his Italian-American characters’ attempts to build relationships with women.⁴² Indeed, without knowledge of Fante’s usual fictional concerns, there would be no reason to assume the protagonist of ‘Clever Fellow’ is anything other than accepted as Anglo-American. The very absence of ethnic identifiers implies whiteness as an American social default—a ‘kind of absence’ that functions as

Place in the Recreation of Adolescents (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1929), <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.music/musdi.205>.) We may thus infer that this protagonist is in his early twenties. If, like most of Fante’s protagonists, he shares Fante’s age (Fante was born in 1909 but often claimed 1911), we can therefore assume that ‘Clever Fellow’ is set between 1930 and 1932. The frequency with which Fante’s fiction contains autobiographical elements supports such a conclusion: 1930–32 was the period in which he himself lived and worked odd jobs in LA’s southernmost maritime fringe. Cooper, *Full of Life*, 73.

³⁸ ‘Clever Fellow’ takes its title from Cabell’s *Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice* (New York, NY: Robert M. McBride and Company, 1919), 20.

³⁹ The prevalence of crises of Italian-American identity as a theme within Fante’s fiction, typically manifest as a tension between ethnic pride and assimilative aspirations, is reflected in the extent to which it has defined the still-minimal field of Fante criticism. Key treatments include Catherine J. Kordich, ‘John Fante’s *Ask the Dust*: A Border Reading’, *MELUS* 20, no. 4 (December 1995): 17–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/467887>; Stefano Luconi, ‘The Protean Ethnic Identities of John Fante’s Italian-American Characters’, in *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*, ed. David M. Fine and Stephen Cooper (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 54–64; Rocco Marinaccio, ‘“Tea and Cookies, Diavolo!”: Italian American Masculinity in John Fante’s *Wait until Spring, Bandini?*’, *MELUS* 34, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 43–69, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mel.0.0040>. In Chapter Three of this thesis, I offer my own analysis of Fante texts that address this theme, applying a frontierist dialectic to the uncertain ethnic liminality occupied by Fante’s Italian-Americans.

⁴⁰ John Fante, ‘To Be a Monstrous Clever Fellow’, in *The Big Hunger: Stories 1932–1959*, ed. Stephen Cooper (New York, NY: Ecco, 2000), 108–9.

⁴¹ For example: “*Mamma mia!*” he blubbered. “Tummy Murray, he calla me Wopa”. John Fante, ‘The Odyssey of a Wop’, in *The Wine of Youth* (New York, NY: Ecco, 2002), 133.

⁴² Fante’s fullest treatment of this theme is perhaps Bandini’s abusive romantic relationship with the Mexican-American Camilla Lopez *Ask the Dust*.

a ‘dominant and normative space against which difference is measured’—an idea to which I return throughout this thesis.⁴³

Fante frames the dancehall in terms of socio-spatial demarcation. ‘A white wicker fence two feet high surrounded the marble floor’, and Eddie and the protagonist must ‘bore’ their way through crowds to reach that fence, physically asserting their right to the dancefloor through an act of spatial penetration.⁴⁴ The space presents an immediate social challenge to that ingress because, the protagonist feels, dancehalls are ‘places where women managed to be the suaver’, placing the men at a social disadvantage in their attempts to secure a dance partner. Ultimately, however it is the protagonist’s small physical size that renders him reluctant to ask for a dance even from a girl he deems beneath his station.⁴⁵ The physical capacity to occupy space, with its implications of masculinity and virility, is at stake. In the dancehall as on the frontier, physical weakness places an individual at a direct disadvantage in a process that tests one’s powers as a spatial occupier; here, as there, physical fitness is in direct proportion to the ability to occupy the hostile environment. To his dismay, the protagonist is rejected by the ‘ugly’ girl.

Soon he identifies a new prospect, a woman named Nina Gregg. She accepts his request to dance with a rhetorical ‘why not?’, on the basis that the number commencing is a ‘keen tune’ rather than because of any qualities in her prospective dance partner.⁴⁶ In this hall, dancers buy tickets which enable them to access the floor on a per-dance basis rather than via a cover charge on entry to the building. That purchased right to access the floor for a period of time is also, it seems, a right to indulge in fantasy: as the protagonist of ‘Clever Fellow’ steps onto the floor with Nina, he acquires temporary, illusory ascendance in a social hierarchy. Nina feels the protagonist looks familiar and wonders if she has seen him previously on the Stanford University campus.

⁴³ Steve Garner, *Whiteness: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 34.

⁴⁴ Fante, ‘Clever Fellow’, 87–88.

⁴⁵ Fante, 89.

⁴⁶ Fante, 94.

Anxious to succeed in his romantic endeavours, to avoid another rejection, and to make conspicuous use of his autodidactic erudition, the protagonist weaves claims that not only is he ‘a Stanford man’, but one Professor Cabell, a teacher of communism, no less.⁴⁷ The deceit succeeds, and the pair share five dances before retiring for malted milks in a ‘darkened corner of the hall’. As his growing confidence rapidly inverts his prior anxieties of inferiority—he ‘soon grew tired of her stupidity’—the protagonist makes increasingly forward sexual advances to Nina. If he is to be believed, she is similarly passionate, but will not consent to a walk along the beach as, it is implied, she understands what the protagonist intends by such a request. ‘I won’t leave this hall’, she insists, expressing her rejection of greater intimacy by invoking the dancehall’s spatial bounding of normative social practice.⁴⁸

Despite rebuking him for impropriety, Nina continues to hold the protagonist’s hand, until she eventually notices that its physical condition does not suggest an academic’s book-bound existence.

Her fingertips moved gently over the calluses, and her hand became tight, as though recoiling from something disgusting. That morning before work I had split the broken blisters open and applied iodine to keep the inner skin from blistering. I could not work with gloves. The splitting left the mounds sharp and jagged, like an animal’s paw, so that rubbing my hand across my forearm left white scratch marks.⁴⁹

The deceit is revealed. The protagonist’s hand reveals him to be a manual labourer, not a professor, and Nina is disgusted, loudly branding him a liar and ‘nothing but a ditch digger, or a truck driver,

⁴⁷ Fante, 95.

⁴⁸ Fante, 96.

⁴⁹ Fante, 97.

or something'.⁵⁰ She slaps him about the face and disappears into the crowd. A series of navigations within the codified space of the dancehall have been the key to the protagonist's attempt to move himself closer to a desirable 'centre' of society, but also ultimately his undoing.

Descriptions of the male dancers have thus far been curiously ambiguous. Superficially, their description as 'stags' merely denotes in slang the fact that they have arrived unaccompanied, but it also assigns to them the position of a hunted game animal—an identity cognate with the protagonist's sense that he is socially and physically vulnerable to the dancehall's women. Simultaneously, however, the men are described as circling the room waiting to entrap any unescorted woman who should come near.⁵¹ The dancehall's ticket-taker is a 'keeper', but the identity of the game he keeps is uncertain: the men are either prey or predator depending on one's social vantage point.⁵² This insolubly subjective mutability in the text's application of 'savage' and 'civilized' images to its protagonists indicates the dancehall's capacity to model the frontier's mediation between the two. In his being revealed as a manual labourer, however, the protagonist's place in that bifurcated structure of bestial/human imagery is finally fixed: his hand is 'an animal's paw'. In proclaiming himself a Stanford professor and regaling his dance partner with his most erudite phrases, the protagonist has attempted to claim a position as the very epitome of 'civilization'. When the physical manifestations of his class position align him with the animal, however, he is confronted with the awful truth that the society in which he has attempted to inculcate himself through his dancefloor deception in fact aligns him unavoidably with 'savagery'. An attempt to cross and conquer a social frontier (achieving romantic success above his station) has collapsed in the humiliating realisation that such a journey involves the admission that the poles of frontier exchange are, for him, reversed.

⁵⁰ Fante, 97.

⁵¹ Fante, 88.

⁵² Fante, 94.

The spatial politics of the dancehall and their capacity to generate social illusions articulate this failed frontier crossing. It is Nina who erroneously imagines she has seen the protagonist at Stanford, and on the dancefloor she believes his lies, despite his obviously young age and ludicrous attempts at erudition—‘we sons of Leland are proficient with the nether limbs’.⁵³ If the protagonist’s physical struggle through the crowd to reach the dancefloor in the centre of the room spatialises his attempts to enter rarefied academic (and romantic) society through social deceptions, it also affirms that any access he can gain to such spheres is as illusory as the lies he tells to achieve such access. This is because his lies have a hard spatial limit: beyond the floor they begin to fall apart. The spatial practice of the dancefloor appears to be one of extreme possibility, imbued with scope for illusion. In dancing with the protagonist over the course of five songs, Nina has presumably had ample time to become acquainted with his tell-tale, calloused, animal-paw hands, yet whilst on the floor she does not notice. Upon leaving the floor, however, even a darkened corner of the room cannot hide the protagonist’s true identity.

The dancefloor, then, is produced as a social space that manifests conditions of illusion, fantasy, and rarefaction. Its physical position in the hall and its psychological position as the locus of the protagonist’s social aspirations, moreover, suggest that this state of spatially- and temporally-limited illusion also models an American society into whose core working-class individuals cannot penetrate deeply or for long. In this respect it reconstitutes the dynamics of the frontier because it calls upon such individuals to bridge a gap between perceived ‘savagery’ and perceived ‘civilization’ located within itself. The inconsistent application of the hunting imagery and the protagonist’s ultimate rejection, furthermore, indicate the dancehall’s frontier-like treachery. When such individuals are compelled to participate in its paradigm they are invited to consider themselves representative of the ‘civilized’, only to confront a subsequent disclosure that dancehall spatial practice in fact accords them a ‘savage’ role.

⁵³ Fante, 94.

Taxi-Dancehall I: John Fante and Floyd Davis' 'Helen, Thy Beauty is to Me—'

The short story 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is To Me—', first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1941.⁵⁴ In it, Fante develops and complicates the dancehall-frontier paradigm established by 'Clever Fellow' by introducing additional economic and ethnic stakes to the dancehall's spaces. Here we find a taxi-dancehall and a Filipino migrant labourer protagonist named Julio Sal. Although 'Helen' and 'Clever Fellow' were written only approximately five years apart, they are divided in their settings by nearly a full decade.⁵⁵ Geographically, however, they are almost counterposed upon each other. Julio Sal lives in the same neighbourhood and does much the same exhausting dock work as the narrator of 'Clever Fellow'. Their living circumstances are to some extent comparable, too: the Clever Fellow shares his home with family, Julio with friends, but their home lives are similarly cheek-by-jowl and lacking in privacy. There was already a significant Filipino community in Los Angeles by the early 1930s, when 'Clever Fellow' is set, yet in that story labours (both on the docks and in the dancehall) which are in 'Helen' performed by an immigrant of racially-liminal status are performed—in the same space—by a young American man.⁵⁶ Like McCoy's dancehall impresarios, Fante re-inscribes near identical physical parameters with different representations of space, a creative act itself suggestive of a pragmatic post-frontier urge to produce new space *in* old space, in lieu of free land.

The social and commercial characteristics specific to the taxi-dancehall (as distinct from 'regular' halls of the kind depicted in 'Clever Fellow') are intrinsic to how Fante develops his dancefloor-frontierist discourse of space, place, race, and capital. The practice of taxi-dancing

⁵⁴ John Fante, 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', *Saturday Evening Post*, 1 March 1941.

⁵⁵ 'Helen' must be set near-contemporaneously with its 1941 publication; Julio's consideration of his countrymen's preference for Betty Grable among young American actresses makes it impossible that 'Helen' could be set any earlier than October 1940, when Grable had her first leading film role in *Down Argentine Way*. John Fante, 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', in *The Wine of Youth* (New York, NY: Ecco, 2002), 259.

⁵⁶ Linda España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s-1950s* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), 4–5.

began in gold rush San Francisco and persisted for around a century thereafter (with, apparently, a brief revival in 1970s Los Angeles), but experienced its peak of popularity in the 1920s and '30s when, in the words of Lawrence Hong and Robert Duff, it became 'one of the most common forms of masculine recreation'.⁵⁷ A taxi-dancer around this time might undertake 70–80 dances per night, charging each customer ten cents per dance, of which the house would take a fifty percent cut.⁵⁸

This pursuit captured the public imagination, evinced by its representation in prominent cultural artefacts of the day such as the 1930 short film *Roseland* (named after the New York ballroom on which it focuses), and three artworks all entitled *Ten Cents a Dance*: a hit 1930 Rodgers and Hart song, a 1931 film starring Barbara Stanwyck, and a 1933 painting by Reginald Marsh. As Ernest Burgess suggested in his introduction to Cressey's study of taxi-dancing, the general public's image of the taxi-dancehall was largely informed by (often sensationalist) media portrayals rather than by first-hand familiarity.⁵⁹ The taxi-dancehall or 'closed hall' was certainly popular, but largely within a limited clientele of minority or marginalised men. As Gregory Mason wrote in 1924, 'the chief *raison d'être* [sic] of the closed hall is to provide amusement for worthy but unattractive men who are unable to compete against the perfumed haberdashers and bank clerks of the palaces'.⁶⁰ As Giordano confirms, this meant 'working class whites, Filipinos, Chinese, Mexicans, Polish, Italians, Greeks, Jews, and college and high-school boys, as well as patrons with physical handicaps'—all those 'shunned by society' except African-Americans, who remained excluded even from taxi-halls.⁶¹ Indeed, taxi-dancehalls had often been converted from older, smaller

⁵⁷ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:69; Lawrence K. Hong and Robert W. Duff, 'Becoming a Taxi-Dancer: The Significance of Neutralization in a Semi-Deviant Occupation', *Sociology of Work and Occupations* 4, no. 3 (1 August 1977): 327, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003803857700400305>.

⁵⁸ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:69.

⁵⁹ Ernest Burgess, introduction to *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*, by Paul Goalby Cressey (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1932), xi.

⁶⁰ Gregory Mason, 'Satan in the Dance-Hall', *The American Mercury*, June 1924, 178.

⁶¹ Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:70.

examples of the ‘conventional’ dancehall (and in so doing accepted a less desirable clientele of societal fringe-dwellers) as a direct result of their inability to compete with a newer generation of grand dance palaces.⁶²

If, however, the public fascination with taxi-dancing was disproportionate to actual participation therein, then the moral panic it engendered was equally outsized. Certainly, all forms of public dance attracted scrutiny from moralisers and religious groups throughout its period of greatest popularity, but the taxi-dancehall was singled out for particular indignation, especially with regard to links with vice.⁶³ In 1933 Jesse Steiner averred in a report for President Hoover’s Research Committee on Social Trends that taxi-dancing presented ‘problems of control and supervision that have not yet been successfully met’. Indeed, repeated attempts were made across the country to ban taxi-dancehalls outright: in Chicago the halls were shut down as part of efforts to ‘clean up’ the city ahead of the 1933 World’s Fair.⁶⁴ Gregory Mason, describing the case made by ‘moral crusaders’ against dancehalls, describes taxi-halls as ‘more frankly commercial, primitive and sordid than either the club or the palace’.⁶⁵ Indeed, it is this quality of being ‘more frankly commercial’, more brazen in its laying-bare of the transactional mechanics underpinning its entertainments than other forms of dancehall, that seems to have aroused particular moral concern. Both Steiner and Ella Gardner, in her 1929 report on dancehall regulations, refer

⁶² Jesse Frederick Steiner, *Americans at Play: Recent Trends in Recreation and Leisure Time Activities*. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1933), 113.

⁶³ Illustrative of moral criticism directed at dance more generally is a pamphlet produced by the Los Angeles-based dance teacher turned anti-dance preacher T.A. Faulkner in 1916. Through the course of such unambiguously titled chapters as ‘The Whispering of Demon Temptation to the Poor Girl’, Faulkner details dance’s inextricable links with Satan and the inevitability of its slippery slope towards prostitution for women and dissolution for men. Thomas A. Faulkner, *The Lure of the Dance* (Los Angeles, CA: T. A. Faulkner, 1916), 26.

⁶⁴ Steiner, *Americans at Play*, 113.

⁶⁵ Mason, ‘Satan in the Dance-Hall’, 177–78.

disapprovingly and in near-identical language to the taxi-halls' 'extreme commercialisation' of dance.⁶⁶ (Cressey found reports of immorality in the taxi-halls to have been exaggerated.⁶⁷)

If the taxi-dancehall's place in the public imagination in this period initially seems incommensurate with its minority clientele, then the pejorative terms within which it was held disclose that its disproportionate prominence in contemporary cultural discourse arose not in spite but because of the socio-ethnic marginality of the taxi-dancing's patrons. In a 1947 PhD thesis, Clyde Vedder noted that '[t]he first taxi-dance hall of Los Angeles, the "Red Mill" (1919) was closed because church people opposed the idea of "our blondes" dancing with Filipinos and Orientals'.⁶⁸ While Los Angeles' anti-dance legislation remained minimal, Vedder confirms that local police developed an informal code for dancehall management and Linda España-Maram notes that police in this period frequently raided the taxi-dancehalls popular with the city's Filipinos and Mexicans.⁶⁹ Although typically this was ostensibly to break up scuffles between patrons rather than directly on morality or vice grounds, it seems that the association of large immigrant populations with the taxi-halls was a major source of the social concern they aroused. We might therefore speculate that anxieties about the taxi-halls' commercial frankness in fact coded a deeper anxiety about ethnic others purchasing access (even in an illusory or temporary form) to a particular social institution and therein to American women, where before the advent of taxi-dancing that access had been more strictly policed along lines of class, ethnicity, and social standing. This is precisely the kind of access that the immigrant itinerant labouring protagonists of Fante's taxi-dancehall texts attempt to purchase.

⁶⁶ Steiner, *Americans at Play*, 113.

⁶⁷ Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*, 49.

⁶⁸ Clyde Bennett Vedder, 'An Analysis of the Taxi-Dance Hall as a Social Institution with Special Reference to Los Angeles and Detroit' (PhD dissertation, University of Southern California, 1947), 252.

⁶⁹ Vedder, 308–9; España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 116. LA's only dedicated dancehall-regulation ordinance as of 1929 was a ban on under-18s. Gardner, *Public Dance Halls: Their Regulation and Place in the Recreation of Adolescents*, 14.

Of all the immigrant groups peopling California's taxi-dancehalls, it was the state's Filipino community that made the taxi-dancehall a particular centre of its cultural life. Linda España-Maram asserts that taxi-dancing was 'the leisure activity arguably most closely associated with Filipino immigrants of the 1920s and 1930s'.⁷⁰ In Los Angeles, the Filipino community was made up in 1930 of around 4,000 year-round residents, but swelled considerably on a seasonal basis as workers migrated from job to job.⁷¹ 94% of the Filipino immigrant population in Los Angeles was made up of young men, and part of the taxi-dancehall's success was indeed that its provision of commoditised female companionship ameliorated the social effects of that gender disparity.⁷² España-Maram, however, accords far greater social significance to the taxi-dancehall as a feature of California Filipino life, identifying it as a 'dynamic alternative subculture', with a richer and broader role within a community defined by the patterns of migratory labour than merely providing a simulacrum of female intimacy.⁷³

Earning meagre wages for tedious, hard work often in closely supervised positions, Filipinos [...] create[d] meaning in their lives by developing cultural practices that spoke to the connections between rural and urban experiences. The taxi dance halls [...] became significant rendezvous points for calling the community into being [...] along the migration circuit. [...]

In their search for places that afforded them some sense of dignity and relative freedom of expression, Filipino workers flocked

⁷⁰ España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 106.

⁷¹ España-Maram, 109.

⁷² España-Maram, 4, 8; Giordano, *Social Dancing in America*, 2:70.

⁷³ España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 111.

to taxi dance halls to tout young brown bodies not as exploited workers but as agents of enjoyment, style, and sensuality.⁷⁴

Fante conveys little of España-Maram's sense of the taxi-dancehall as part of a distinct, proudly Filipino form of social expression. Whilst it is clear in 'Helen' that taxi-dancing is a huge part of Filipino social life, Fante's account frames this in terms of variably-successful attempts to participate in and assimilate to American culture rather than to generate a new form.

For precisely that reason, assessments of Fante's clutch of Filipino-centred stories by Filipino and Filipino-American critics have not been flattering; in 1948 Manuel Buaken wrote that 'Fante has virtually no understanding of the subterranean spiritual life' and dismissed Julio Sal as offensively 'stupid, ignorant, and helpless'.⁷⁵ In 1976 Marcellino Foronda offered similar criticisms, but was more generous in attributing to Fante noble but misguided aims.⁷⁶ More recently, Augusto Espiritu has likewise conceded that Fante, along with Carey McWilliams and William Saroyan, 'championed the 'Filipino' in various ways', but that 'their portrayals nonetheless evinced a mixture of caricature, condescension, and sometimes hostility, unable to escape the colonial and racialised image of the Filipino as "little brown brother"'.⁷⁷ Even those who defend Fante's Filipino writings risk replicating the very shortcomings that demand defence, as when Richard Collins argues that

⁷⁴ España-Maram, 110.

⁷⁵ Manuel Buaken, *I Have Lived with the American People*. (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Printers, 1948), 181, 179.

⁷⁶ Marcellino A Foronda, 'America Is in the Heart: Ilokano Immigration to the United States, 1906–1930', (De La Salle University Occasional Paper no. 3, August 1976), 39.

⁷⁷ Augusto Espiritu, review of *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s-1950s*, by Linda España-Maram, *Philippine Studies* 56, no. 1 (March 2008): 105. *The Little Brown Brothers* was the unfortunate working title of Fante's planned novel about Filipino migrant labour, which was to have re-used 'Helen' as its first chapter and which he abandoned after scathing assessments of a partial draft from his publisher's readers. The use of the term 'little brown brothers' to refer to Filipinos originated in the vision of supposedly benevolent colonialism advocated by William Howard Taft as the first U.S. civil governor-general of the Philippines, and also provided the title of a short story by Fante's friend Saroyan. Gideon Lasco, "'Little Brown Brothers': Height and the Philippine–American Colonial Encounter (1898–1946)', *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 66, no. 3 (September 2018): 376, 381, <https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2018.0029>; William Saroyan, 'Our Little Brown Brothers the Filipinos', *Fiction Parade and Golden Book*, April 1936.

these stories almost match Fante's Italian-focused material because they share its 'ethnic flavor and passion'.⁷⁸

Yet as Pasquale Verdicchio writes, Fante 'wants his writing to [...] shake readers out of any comfortable and illusory distance we might assume'.⁷⁹ He may be incapable of inhabiting Filipino voice or experience, but he succeeds precisely in impressing upon an audience implicitly more economically and spatially privileged than his protagonist that distance itself is so often illusory. In 'Helen' it is revealed that constant and immutable physical parameters are inadequate tools with which to measure and map spaces. Rather, Julio Sal's experiential mapping affirms that spaces continually flex to produce new dimensions and meanings that depend upon and change according to the relative social, racial, and financial positions of the individual intending to occupy them. In these unstable occupations of space, as in those of McCoy's marathon contestants, frontier dynamics are an incipient presence. The dancehall is the theatre in which Fante stages those dynamics, the dancefloor the surface upon which he re-litigates the problematic logics of the frontier. Such efforts are instructively, if not comprehensively, suggested by the Floyd Davis illustrations that accompanied 'Helen' in its original magazine publication.⁸⁰ In its original print appearance, it was impossible to read 'Helen' without also reading Davis' images, and thus I read them in concert here. In one image, which in the magazine occupies almost the entirety of the recto of a double page spread (figure 2), we see Julio Sal dancing with Helen, the taxi-dancer of his dreams. In the background, Davis depicts Sal's compatriots, whom Fante describes as watching the dance with envy.

⁷⁸ Richard Collins, 'Fante, Family, and the Fiction of Confession', in *John Fante: A Critical Gathering*, ed. David M. Fine and Stephen Cooper (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 109.

⁷⁹ Pasquale Verdicchio, *Devils in Paradise: Writings on Post-Emigrant Culture* (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1997), 57–58.

⁸⁰ Davis was a pre-eminent figure in mass-market American magazine illustration at the time; indeed the accolade of '#1 illustrator in America' was bestowed upon him (albeit by another of his employers, in a feature on the work of his wife, the artist Gladys Rockmore Davis) in 1943. 'Gladys Rockmore Davis', *LIFE*, 19 April 1943.

Ten of them strained against the railing, each clutching a fat roll of tickets, ready to rush upon the golden girl the moment Julio's last ticket disappeared inside the glass box.⁸¹



Figure 2: Floyd Davis, illustration for 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', *Saturday Evening Post*, 1 March 1941, 14–15 (p. 15).

Julio Sal dances with Helen at the taxi-danceball.

⁸¹ Fante, 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', 2002, 252. I have elected to use page references from the printing of 'Helen' in *The Wine of Youth* as this is more helpfully paginated for ease of reference than the *Saturday Evening Post* printing. I have confirmed that the two texts are identical.

The Filipinos outside the barrier are drawn as crude racial stereotypes: with their identical attire and ‘oriental’ features they are almost indistinguishable from each other. The same is true of two other Filipinos inside the barrier, whose partners are unseen. Curiously, however, Julio Sal, seen in profile, bears scant resemblance to his countrymen. Where their hair is loose, Julio’s appears slicked-back. His dignified, thoughtful expression contrasts starkly with his counterparts’ scowls, laughs, and vacant stares. Unique among the Filipinos depicted by Davis, Julio’s nose is defined and prominent, his cheekbones sharp, and he seems to have a supratarsal epicanthic fold (the upper eyelid crease absent in much of the East Asian population).

Thus, while his fellow Filipinos are presented as an unindividuated mass of East Asian grotesques in accordance with the physiognomic conventions of ethnic caricature, Julio Sal appears at least quasi-‘European’. His complexion is no lighter than that of the other Filipinos, but the radical difference between Julio’s features and those of his countrymen recontextualises the racial connotations of the skin tone he shares with them: on the dancefloor, Julio’s overall appearance is more readily parsed as Latino than as Filipino. Indeed, if this image invokes any racially inflected stereotype of the day, it is that of the ‘Latin lover’ popularised on film two decades earlier by Ramon Novarro and Rudolph Valentino (figure 3). According to Cressey, this is indeed how Filipinos were sometimes perceived in taxi-dancehalls. He quotes a dancer who ‘didn’t even know what a Filipino was. I thought they were movie actors or something’, due to their good manners and expensive tastes.



Figure 3: Rudolph Valentino, 'How Do You Dance?', *Screenland*, April 1922, 36–37 (p. 36); Floyd Davis, illustration for 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', *Saturday Evening Post*, 1 March 1941, 14–15 (p. 15).

Compare Floyd Davis' rendering of Julio Sal (right) with Rudolph Valentino's expression, posture and features as he appeared with Gloria Swanson in a (supposedly self-penned) guide to tango dancing. The photographs for this article were taken by Paramount Pictures' in-house still photographer, Donald Keyes.

The acceptability of the Filipino, in preference to other Oriental groups, is explained by such factors as his Occidental culture, represented in the Spanish influence in the Philippine Islands; his suave manners, dapper dressing, and politeness; and the romantic Spanish-lover role which it is possible for him to play.⁸²

Julio Sal's appearance, however, is inconsistent in Davis' illustrations. At one point in the narrative, Julio purchases a nine-dollar bottle of champagne at the ballroom's bar, at Helen's request. She has taken Julio into her confidence, counter-intuitively, by breaking the dance hall's thin illusion of intimacy, frankly laying bare for him the transactional mechanics that underpin its facsimile of a 'real' date by informing him that her preference for expensive drinks is a mercenary one—she receives a percentage commission on what her partners order. As soon as the champagne is poured, however, Helen induces Julio to return to the dancefloor with her, as her 'favorite number' has just begun. When they take their seats again, after the dance, the champagne has already been cleared away. Despite (or perhaps because of) Helen's earlier openness with him regarding her financially incentivised motivations, Julio suspects that he has now been the victim of a calculated manipulation, that Helen has 'tricked him'. He protests to the 'tall, Kansas-like', implicitly white waiter but receives only a humiliating reminder of the persistent social disadvantages at which he is placed by his ethnicity, and is forced to buy a second bottle to save face.

“No. You cheat me. Nine dollars, not one drink.”

The waiter leaned across the table and the waiter's thick hand clutched the throat of Julio Sal, pushed back his head.⁸³

In depicting Julio's humiliation by the waiter (figure 4), Davis renders the story's protagonist almost simian, with a flat nose and large upper lip; his arms are contorted and his

⁸² Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*, 51.

⁸³ Fante, 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', 2002, 264.

previously slick hair unkempt as the imposing waiter makes his supposed racial superiority manifest in bluntly physical fashion. Of course, neither the Filipino population at large nor its 1930s Californian diaspora are or were ethnically homogenous, not least given the legacy of centuries of Spanish colonial influence. It is accordingly not merely plausible but factual that some Filipinos could (like Davis' dancefloor Julio Sal) be said to 'look more Hispanic' than others. The fact, however, that the racial coding of Julio's appearance changes from one illustration to another, while the Filipino bystanders *are* depicted as a homogenous group (and one whose homogeneity is racially pejorative), precludes the attribution of Julio's changing appearance to an appreciation of Filipino ethnic diversity on Davis' part.

Meanwhile, Fante's reference to Julio's 'Malay brain' carries uncomfortable implications of racial psycho-anthropology and eugenicist thought, but in the context of the period's Anglo parlance does little to suggest any real particularity of ethnic heritage that might offer a clue as to Julio's relative physiognomic proximity to whiteness. Contemporary legal wrangles over Filipino legal status, particularly those around interracial marriage (most famously the case of Roldan vs. Los Angeles County), hinged on the question of whether Filipinos were members of 'the Mongolian race' or 'the Malay race', illustrating that 'Malay' was in this period deployed as a broad racial category to which all Filipino ethnic groupings could be assigned.⁸⁴ As Peggy Pascoe suggests, contemporary anti-miscegenation law essentially used 'Malay' as a synonym for 'Filipino'.⁸⁵ In 1945, ethnologist Herbert Krieger lamented the popular prevalence of 'Malay' as an umbrella term for an inaccurate and arbitrary grouping of distinct ethnic groups invented by white colonial powers—the 'erroneously so-called Malay race'.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Fante, 251; Rick Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898–1946* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2011), 89–100.

⁸⁵ Peggy Pascoe, 'Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of "Race" in Twentieth-Century America', *Journal of American History* 83, no. 1 (June 1996): 49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2945474>.

⁸⁶ Herbert W. Krieger, 'Races and Peoples in the Philippines', *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (February 1945): 96–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2048958>.



Figure 4: Floyd Davis, illustration for 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —!', *Saturday Evening Post*, 1 March 1941, 14–15 (p. 14).

The waiter humiliates Julio Sal.

The reference to a ‘Malay brain’ does, then, suggest that Julio is intended to be presented as ‘indigenously’ Filipino, as opposed to as an individual with largely Spanish ancestry.⁸⁷ Later, however, Fante refers to Julio’s ‘Spanish-Malay passion for bright leather’, another problematic association between racial background and character traits, but one which imputes to Julio a more mixed heritage than the initial reference to a ‘Malay brain’ implies, the inconsistency further clouding the question of ethnicity and by extension appearance.⁸⁸ We know merely that Julio is of peasant stock from Luzon, the largest Philippine island, and has some mixture of ‘Malay’ and ‘Spanish’ in his ancestry. Fante does not in fact provide *any* truly distinguishing information about Julio’s ethnic identity or its possible implications for his appearance. Julio is essentially offered (problematically) as a generic everyman ‘California Filipino’.

Thus, whilst one cannot reliably attribute Julio’s changing appearance in Davis’ images directly to specific cues from Fante’s text, both text and images reflect a conception of Filipino ethnicity and appearance as something mutable or indeterminate. Davis allows Julio’s appearance to differ from that of his fellows and to shift dramatically from image to image, while Fante subtly modulates a ‘Malay brain’ into a ‘Spanish-Malay’ passion. These details suggest the extent to which Filipinos living in the United States at this time occupied a socially liminal space—ill-understood and difficult to categorise, an uncomfortable anomaly within the totalising structures of race and rights that existed in America prior to their arrival. Just as the ‘Malay race’ controversy placed Filipinos in a uniquely ‘curious and equivocal’ socio-legal position, so did the Philippines’ complex constitutional relationship with the United States.⁸⁹ Filipinos were ‘neither citizens nor ordinary

⁸⁷ Notions of Filipino indigeneity are themselves hard to define. Krieger’s piece represents an early ethnological attempt to appreciate the full complexity of ethnic groupings within the Philippines, but his frustration at erroneous popular ideas of the ‘Malay race’ suggests how poorly even Americans who ‘observed Filipinos going about their daily business’ understood such complexity in the 1940s. Fante appears no exception. Krieger, 94.

⁸⁸ Fante, ‘Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —’, 2002, 260.

⁸⁹ Grayson Kirk, ‘The Filipinos’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 223 (September 1942): 45. Kirk’s comment is applicable to Filipinos who had entered the United States before 1934, who had ‘had not been granted United States citizenship’ but ‘were not to be classed as aliens’ either. Kirk, 45. The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, prompted by nativist

aliens', occupying in law a near-literal frontier between citizenship's full participation in American 'civilization' and the dangerous otherness of alien status.⁹⁰ Filipinos' status as a 'mobile labor force'—repeatedly relocating from state to state or region to region for seasonal work—placed the Filipinos likewise in a socio-spatial liminality.⁹¹ They did build communities in cities like Los Angeles, in this respect adhering to expectations of assimilative ethnic incomers, yet these communities were often small, impermanent, and 'portable', sharing space with those of other ethnicities, expanding and contracting with the labouring seasons.⁹² The ambiguous and shifting approaches taken by Fante and Davis to Julio's ethnic appearance speak to the strange social marginality, motility, and mutability of California Filipinos in the 1930s, even if their vagueness about how Julio looks and where he comes from is simply symptomatic of the same.

Intentionally or not, the apparently protean ethnicity suggested by text and drawings alike interrogates Julio's motility within an ethno-social spectrum that is mapped closely to financial exchanges and designations of space. The ethno-visual language of Davis' illustrations can be understood, in concert with Fante's text, as serving to represent the way in which the dancehall's hierarchies of race and capital intersect both with each other and with the precisely demarcated divisions of space that structure the ballroom itself and codify its social forms. Despite all its illusions—of which Julio Sal is at times entirely aware, at others wholly possessed—the dancefloor *is* a socially and even physically transformative space. Fante notes that '[f]ive feet, four inches was the height of Julio Sal, but when that Helen's golden head lay on his shoulder, strength and

sentiment especially within the agriculture industry, changed this status; 'future Filipino immigrants were declared to be deportable as ordinary aliens'. Kirk, 46; Rick Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2000), 41. This change of status was not, however, applied retroactively to Filipinos already in the country, such as Julio, who arrived in America in the late '20s. Fante, 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', 2002, 254.

⁹⁰ Kirk, 'The Filipinos', 46.

⁹¹ Kirk, 45.

⁹² España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 37; John H. Burma, 'The Background of the Current Situation of Filipino-Americans', *Social Forces* 30, no. 1 (October 1951): 42–43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2571739>.

grandeur filled his body'.⁹³ Superficially, it is Helen who confers this transformation upon Julio; she makes him feel in every sense a bigger man. Helen, however, is only accessible via the dancefloor, and by the continual purchase of the ten-cent tickets that promise the bearer another minute with his chosen woman. Indeed, the entire story centres around Julio's misguided belief that Helen is a genuine romantic prospect, a belief that will ultimately reveal itself as unsustainable outside the space of the dancefloor: it is access to this space itself that grants Julio's transformation.

The dancefloor is a space mapped in five dimensions. The first three are those of space: a 'wicker fence' with a railing separates the dance-space from the rest of the dance hall; the sole point of ingress and egress is a small gate that opens only between dances. Those who have run out of tickets are ejected from the space at this point (not by force but by convention), while men with tickets rush in to replace them. This marks the point at which the spatial dimensions of the dancefloor intersect with its fourth dimension, time. Dances last for one minute, and a bell clangs between each, drawing an easily-navigable but unbreakable temporal grid across the space. Time, however, parcelled out metonymically into dances, must be paid for: this financial structuring of the space is its fifth dimension. One-minute, one-dance tickets control access to the space; nobody can dance without the wherewithal to keep buying time/dances. It might be argued that a sixth dimension is a code of mutually understood conventions and expectations, the 'rules' determining where one dances, who one dances with, how one obtains a dance and how long it lasts etc. Certainly, an understanding of these social conventions is intrinsic to understanding the space, but those conventions do not constitute a separate dimension as much as they suffuse and are suffused by all five former dimensions individually and collectively. As Lefebvre reminds us, all space is produced contingently, and all space is social.

The space of the dancefloor is furthermore in all respects a transitory one, structured upon:

⁹³ Fante, 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', 2002, 251.

- a) the transitory nature of time, which when demarcated into minutes by tickets and the tolling bell is lent a scarcity value;
- b) the transitory nature of space, in that patrons move not only across the floor while dancing but to and from the floor in order to dance (another demarcation which creates a scarcity value inside the boundary fence—the dancefloor can only accommodate so many dancers);
- c) the transitory nature of money, in that its transference (from the patron to the ticket clerk or dancer) grants the patron control over (a) and (b), but only to a limited and partial extent. The patron remains subservient to the governing spatial and temporal codes of the space, as dictated by convention and the proprietors.

This state of constant transition effected on interlinked axes of temporal, spatial, and social progress (on the dancefloor manifest as the exchange of money for dances) is one the taxi-dancehall shares with the frontier as schematised in Turner's wave model.

Julio navigates the hall's monetary dimension to access the spatial dimensions of the floor via its temporal dimension, and in doing so appears to grow in stature, apparently literally, '[t]owering over' Helen's golden hair to look out at his watching countrymen. Unless Helen is remarkably short, it seems implausible that Julio, at 'five feet, four inches' really 'towers' over her. He is tall enough for her to rest her head on his shoulder, but looking again at figure 3, we note that whilst Julio is indeed taller than Helen in the image, he certainly does not 'tower'.⁹⁴ Moreover, she does not look up at him adoringly as Gloria Swanson does to Valentino, but rather down at her feet, as if trying to avoid drawing herself up to her full height. Davis' illustration perhaps gestures to the ways in which Helen, a seasoned professional used to dancing with Filipinos—'all

⁹⁴ Fante, 251.

the Filipinos loved Helen’—may be employing subtle physical tricks to support the illusion of dominant masculine stature that her clients wish to purchase along with their dance.⁹⁵

The most profound effect, however, is not physical but a psychic illusion of social transformation. Given that, in both stereotype and actuality, a shortness of stature and slightness of build relative to most American men was, in general, a defining physical characteristic of the Filipino population in Los Angeles, it is hard to read the extra height and ‘strength and grandeur’ felt by Julio when he dances with Helen as anything other than a feeling of becoming *more American*.⁹⁶ Buying time and space with an American woman on the dancefloor is an act of buying access to a fleeting, illusory experience of being an American. That illusion reveals itself as such when the ‘dismay’ of the Filipinos who have been watching Julio turns instantly to mockery upon the expenditure of his final dance ticket. ‘The wicker gate opened and he [Julio] was lost in an avalanche of little brown men fighting for the golden girl’.⁹⁷ Fante deals in the crude racist stereotypes of the day—depersonalisation (‘avalanche’), animalisation (‘fighting’, seeming pack behaviour), the description ‘little brown men’ itself. Those pejoratives do, however, affirm that the transformational effect of a move between the space within and without the dancefloor is a racial/ethnic one. Julio may be ‘lost’ among the ‘avalanche’ of his compatriots, but paradoxically he remains distinct enough for his ‘lostness’ to be visible. A dance with Helen renders Julio distinct from ‘the little brown men’.

This illusion of ethnic distinction enables Julio to sustain, for as long (and only as long) as he remains on the dancefloor, an elaborate reverie of marriage to Helen, in which she ‘fr[ies] his bacon and eggs in a blue-tinted kitchen like in the movie pitch’.⁹⁸ The reality, that (quite apart from

⁹⁵ Fante, 252.

⁹⁶ The average height of early twentieth-century Filipino men has been estimated at around 160cm and has not appreciably changed over the ensuing century. John E. Murray, ‘Height and Weight of Early 20th Century Filipino Men’, *Annals of Human Biology* 29, no. 3 (June 2002): 326, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03014460110086826>.

⁹⁷ Fante, ‘Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —’, 2002, 252.

⁹⁸ Fante, 253.

Helen's feelings on the matter, which go unconsidered in Julio's thinking) any possibility of such a 'blissful future' had been foreclosed upon in California by the definitive extension anti-miscegenation law to Filipinos in 1933, only occurs to Julio after he leaves the hall.⁹⁹ The 'movie pitch' suburban domestic fantasia of the dancehall reverie suggests that Julio's dream of love and marriage with Helen is a dream of claiming or at least approximating American whiteness. That suggestion is affirmed in Julio's regret that he cannot write to Helen in English. He must instead ask his university-educated friend Antonio Repollo to write to Helen on his behalf: tearfully, Julio acknowledges that his failure to attend 'American school' when younger was a 'big mistake'.¹⁰⁰ Obvious symbolism is apparent when Julio first attempts to write the letter himself, only to sit for half an hour, sweat breaking upon his brow, before the 'white and untouched' paper. As his lack of linguistic proficiency in 'American' prevents him from touching the pristine whiteness, his inability to *be* American precludes any intimacy with the 'small white doll' that is Helen beyond the paid-for, illusory realm of the dancehall.

It thus becomes clear that Floyd Davis's rendering of Julio Sal as dramatically less 'East Asian' in appearance than his watching compatriots reflects the transformation that occurs when he steps through the gate and onto the dancefloor. Here, for ten cents a minute, via the company of a blonde, white American woman, he can buy momentary access to an American identity. Even here he cannot quite ascend the racial hierarchy to the 'full whiteness' of Anglo-American personhood, hence his perhaps Hispanic appearance. Nevertheless, as long as one's dance tickets last the possibility is maintained that one can buy a fuller participation in American society,

⁹⁹ Fante, 253; Constantine Panunzio, 'Intermarriage in Los Angeles, 1924–33', *American Journal of Sociology* 47, no. 5 (March 1942): 691, <https://doi.org/10.1086/219000>.

¹⁰⁰ With 'The Dreamer', first published in *Woman's Home Companion* in 1947, Fante would reuse the theme of an LA-dwelling Filipino who, infatuated with a glamorous American woman, must implore a more literate friend to write love letters on his behalf. In 'The Dreamer', however, the unattainable object of desire is a cabaret artiste rather than a taxi-dancer, and the letter-writer an Anglo-American rather than a fellow Filipino. An inevitable rejection by the dream girl of course makes Cristo Serra realise that true beauty comes from within; he runs to the open arms of his unprepossessing but devoted Mexican-American landlady. John Fante, 'The Dreamer', in *The Wine of Youth* (New York, NY: Ecco, 2002), 237–50.

becoming American through a monetary exchange that grants access to a rarefied area of space and time. With his fluent English and University of Washington degree, Repollo appears to have purchased with cultural capital a fuller access to American identity. Yet he too is apparently still working in the canneries with his fellow Filipinos, sleeping in the same cramped, malodorous bunkhouse. Repollo's attempts to access the advantages of American society through education may appear more substantial than Julio Sal's facsimile imitation of American courtship at the dance hall, but have in fact been scarcely more successful. Indeed, while Julio's misguided courtship of Helen fails, in actual pre-war Los Angeles the dance hall *did* provide Filipinos with social opportunities ordinarily only accessible to Anglo-Americans, such as quasi-romantic interactions with white women and the opportunity to be 'served' by white staff (in contrast to the typical racial orientation of their socioeconomic roles).¹⁰¹ Problematic and limited though Fante's presentation of California Filipino culture is, he apprehends España-Maram's sense of the taxi-dancehall as a space that was sought by Filipinos because it 'afforded them some sense of dignity and relative freedom of expression', while identifying its simultaneous restriction of such dignity and freedom within spatial, monetary, temporal, and social limits.¹⁰²

In both Fante's text and Davis' drawings, the scene wherein Julio argues with the waiter illustrates precisely these limits. Despite writing to Helen for three months with no reply, Julio's hopes of marriage have remained strong. He has doubts, but reassures himself, spending \$125 of his carefully-saved \$350 in wages on clothes in order to boost his confidence and impress his

¹⁰¹ In her analysis of race and gender relations in the taxi-dancehalls of the '20s and '30s, Rhacel Salazar Parreñas affirms this sense of a genuinely transformative sense of social liberation. Even if the opportunities the taxi-dancehall afforded 'Filipino men to interact socially with [white] women' were strictly limited and always fundamentally transactional, that they extended such opportunities at all was rare and precious to their patrons in an era of strict 'racial segregation and stringent anti-miscegenation'. Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, "'White Trash' Meets the 'Little Brown Monkeys': The Taxi Dance Hall as a Site of Interracial and Gender Alliances between White Working Class Women and Filipino Immigrant Men in the 1920s and 30s', *Amerasia Journal* 24, no. 2 (January 1998): 115, <https://doi.org/10.17953/amer.24.2.760h5w08630ql643>.

¹⁰² España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 110.

beloved, and a further \$75 on an engagement ring.¹⁰³ On returning at last to the dance hall with the intention of proposing to Helen, he is troubled to see that she ‘had changed in three months’, then realises ‘she did not remember him’. This lack of recognition does not directly crush Julio’s resolve but acts upon him with a subtler horror. ‘Some peculiarity’ about Helen’s smile ‘made him suddenly conscious of his race, and he was glad she did not remember Julio Sal’.¹⁰⁴ Fante hints that Julio is beginning to realise not only the foolishness and implausibility of his plan but the fact that the ultimate barrier to any relationship between him and Helen is not the fact that her prior interest in him has been exclusively professional, but their racial difference. He thus adopts the pseudonym ‘Tony Garcia’ (alluding, a la *Cyrano de Bergerac*, to his friend Antonio, the real letter-writer), when Helen asks his name, for fear that she may remember him. It is shortly after this that the pair order champagne and the argument with the waiter ensues, bringing to Julio a fuller realisation of the impossibility of transcending the social boundaries of his racial position.

The waiter’s response to Julio’s protest at the removal of the bottle is not merely the physical intimidation demonstrated in Davis’ illustration, but to state that he doesn’t ‘have to take that kind of talk from a Filipino’. This fills Julio with ‘shame and helplessness’; he feels nauseous and wants to cry.¹⁰⁵ Helen seems alive to Julio’s distress and begrudgingly offers to forgo a replacement bottle of champagne, but in the moment of the waiter’s humiliation all Sal’s illusions have been shattered irreparably. After this he drinks five bottles of champagne he can ill afford and ultimately gives Helen the ring he had bought for her, lying that he had intended it for another girl who had died.¹⁰⁶ Helen stops tearing the tickets as the bell continues to clang, thus now dancing

¹⁰³ Although Buaken criticises Fante for depicting Filipino men as ‘suckers’, obsessed with appearance, libidinous, and endlessly tempted by another roll of dance tickets, España-Maram confirms that this kind of performative, conspicuous consumerism, centred around the dance hall and its opportunities to be seen as a ‘sporting man’ with women, was indeed widespread in the Los Angeles Filipino community at this time. Buaken, *I Have Lived with the American People*, 179–81; España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles’s Little Manila*, 112–15.

¹⁰⁴ Fante, ‘Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —’, 2002, 262.

¹⁰⁵ Fante, 264.

¹⁰⁶ Fante, 265.

with Julio without charge, and ultimately informs him that he can take her home if he wishes. Her body language, and the fact that she implores him to cease buying champagne as it's 'for suckers', breaking the commercial code of the dance hall, suggest that these changes in her behaviour are motivated not solely by the gift of the ring but by some real feeling, although whether this is more than pity remains uncertain. Regardless, Julio's response is striking: he assents to taking Helen home, tells her he will wait for her downstairs, but then simply leaves, heading straight to the bus station and buying a one-way ticket to Santa Rosa, presumably to join the grape harvest.

Despite Helen's apparent belated receptiveness to Julio (or, rather, to 'Tony'), he knows from the instant that the waiter threatens him that his original plan is hopeless. The bar, like the dancefloor, appears to offer a space where he can buy a further simulacrum of a date with an American woman, and also pay for the privilege of being served by a white American man. Liquor is the commodity sold, but the value purchased is a brief illusion that his race does not place him at a social disadvantage. It becomes immediately clear, however, that he is only permitted this illusion provided he obeys the rules of the establishment which, because his race *does* place him at a social disadvantage, are stacked against him. The white waiter may be professionally subservient to Julio, but his supposed racial superiority immediately supersedes this when Julio dares to question the codes by which the space operates (i.e. the champagne scam). It thus becomes clear that the dance hall is effectively an operation that exploits Filipino men's social inferiority within a racist society in order to sell them an illusion that such inferiority does not exist, while paradoxically maintaining the proximity of reminders of that inferiority precisely to encourage the patrons to continue purchasing the illusion.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Describing the then-recent history of Filipino-Americans in 1951, John Burma remarked that '[t]he crux of the most active and bitter [anti-Filipino] discrimination and dislike seems to be the Filipino's refusal to accept his "place" as an inferior', ignoring that being made to accept such a place was surely a *symptom* of 'discrimination and dislike'. Burma, 'The Background of the Current Situation of Filipino-Americans', 47. Julio Sal's experience with the waiter illustrates the flaws in Burma's logic: Julio's momentary act of resistance to his 'inferiority' may cause discrimination to redound upon him, but in doing so proves that the discrimination already existed.

The mocking face of the cigar-chomping barman in the background of Davis' illustration (figure 4) emphasises this: fat and bald, he himself is a grotesque, far from a paragon of physical perfection, and his employment—serving others in an establishment patronised mostly by Filipinos—places him well down the social ladder. Yet his whiteness surmounts these factors. Whatever his own personal shortcomings, he can laugh at his customer, a 'sucker' whose apparent control over the space (as patron) has been removed by a reminder that such control is in fact subject to strict rules and in the gift of the (white) staff. Those staff punish any breach of the racial rules with a humiliating reminder of the customer's insurmountable non-whiteness. Just as the only solution to being ejected from the dancefloor and its promise of glamorous white femininity is to buy more tickets, the only solution to the waiter's reminder that he doesn't have to 'take that kind of talk from a Filipino' is to buy another bottle of champagne. As the waiter himself says, Julio's only options are to 'take it or leave it'.¹⁰⁸

Thus Davis' two drawings of Julio Sal show the character's changing self-perception; or rather his perception of how others perceive him, in two proximate but markedly different moments and spaces. One indicates the temporary, illusory access to racial privilege granted by the dancefloor, as Julio purchases the momentary belief that he could be a racially suitable partner for Helen, while the other shows how fleeting and fragile that belief is: under the waiter's threat, Julio morphs suddenly back into the racial grotesque he fears he may be in Helen's blue eyes. Wittingly or not, Davis' drawings schematise precisely Julio's own anxieties and conflicted feelings about his race, its impact on his social opportunities, his hopes for overcoming those, and the way those hopes are contingent upon and restricted by his ability to successfully occupy different spaces within the dance hall.

As the evening ends, 'Tony' dares to tell Helen that she may know his friend, one Julio Sal. Helen reveals that she has indeed received Julio's letters, declaring him 'nuts'. 'Tony' agrees, almost

¹⁰⁸ Fante, 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', 2002, 264.

crying as he does so. What was nuts, it appears, was a belief that the illusory enjoyments sold by the dance hall could be extrapolated beyond its tight spatial, temporal, and monetary dimensions. This is affirmed as Julio looks at the clock above the bar and acknowledges that the dance hall's rigid temporal limits mark the limits of the space in which his hopes can be lived: 'It was twelve-thirty. The dream was dead'.¹⁰⁹ Julio's ultimate realisation is that his race renders even Helen's newfound fondness insufficient to carry his hopes into the 'real' space beyond the dancehall's illusory one.

Knowledge of the social reality of taxi-dancehalls in this period makes this all the more affecting. Cressey affirms that it was in fact not uncommon for white American taxi-dancers to enter into romantic relationships with their Filipino patrons.¹¹⁰ A 1942 study records that prior to the 1933 intermarriage ban Filipinos were markedly more likely than LA's other ethnic minorities to marry 'native-born whites', and that most such brides were taxi-dancers, midwesterners who, like McCoy's protagonists, had arrived in LA seeking Hollywood but had found only dancehall stardom.¹¹¹ Cressey writes that dancers typically 'first regard[ed] the Filipino as an object of exploitation', but 'many before long [came] to take an entirely different attitude'.¹¹² Fante does not make clear if Helen truly undergoes such a transformation regarding Julio over the course of the evening, but she does at least invite him to take her home—kissing his 'calloused palm', accepting the same physical quality as that which caused the Clever Fellow's rejection. Marriage is a legal impossibility for Helen and Julio in 1941; a relationship of some kind, as Helen implies at the last, is not. Indeed, Parreñas has argued that Filipino men and white taxi-dancers formed what constituted a powerfully expedient intersectional alliance against their mutual social

¹⁰⁹ Fante, 266.

¹¹⁰ Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*, 52–53. Published in 1932 and containing research that commenced in 1925, Cressey's study largely predates the legal contestation of Filipinos' racial status in respect of anti-miscegenation legislation and certainly California's outright ban on Filipino-Caucasian intermarriage. Cressey, xvii.

¹¹¹ Panunzio, 'Intermarriage in Los Angeles, 1924–33', 695–96.

¹¹² Cressey, *The Taxi-Dance Hall: A Sociological Study in Commercialized Recreation and City Life*, 52–53.

marginalisation.¹¹³ Such knowledge creates a discomfiting sense that the frontierist socio-spatial codes of Fante's dancehall, and in particular Julio's attempt to violate them when confronting the waiter, have not merely extended a vision of fuller participation in American life that ultimately proves unsustainable, but that it has been rendered unsustainable because of Julio's prejudice, not Helen's. Her change of heart comes too late because the logic of the dancehall works, as suggested by Julio's changing appearance in Davis' illustrations, to internalise anti-Filipino sentiment within Julio himself.

The activities that take place in both the taxi-dancehall and the dance marathon ultimately cease to be much about dance at all. In the taxi-dance hall, one does not really pay for the act of dancing, one pays to occupy a rarefied space with a white woman; space, time and social prestige are the true commodities. In the marathon phenomenon, as McCoy's novel accurately describes, there was very little actual dancing; these events took place in dancehalls, were often called dance marathons, and occasionally required their competitors to engage in brief periods of either staged or improvised dance, but the only requirement to remain in the contest (and thus remain eligible for financial reward) was simply to keep moving—conservation rather than expenditure of movement was rewarded. Furthermore, both phenomena attracted participants from the margins of society. Dance marathons drew the young, the poor, the desperate, the glory-hungry and the literally hungry. The vast majority of taxi-dancehall patrons, in Los Angeles, certainly, were Filipino or Mexican—Anglos only 'occasionally attended'.¹¹⁴ The dancers were Anglos, of course, but were themselves socioeconomically marginal, stigmatised as 'white trash' by social reformers and nativist groups alike on the basis of their occupation (and in many cases their background as 'daughters of poor southwestern migrants').¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Parreñas, "White Trash" Meets the "Little Brown Monkeys", 130–31.

¹¹⁴ España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 116.

¹¹⁵ España-Maram, 120.

Both 'Helen' and *Horses* present spaces that embody the socioeconomic limitations to which their protagonists are subject. The main characters of *Horses*, Robert and Gloria, are both white, but in the midst of the Depression they have been forced to divert their Hollywood dreams (his of directorship, hers of stardom) into a marathon dance contest. That this is their best hope of being picked out for film industry success seems as forlorn a hope as the belief held by Fante's protagonist that his ten-cent dances with Helen hold out a genuine route towards marrying her. In both texts, there is a moment just prior to the conclusion where such improbable dreams seem to unfold at least the tantalising possibility of coming true. As Helen at last seems to develop some kind of real affection for Julio, in the closing stages of *Horses* Robert has an encounter with Mr Maxwell, a representative of a company that has (at the behest of Mrs Layden, a dance marathon connoisseur) sponsored his and Gloria's efforts in the contest. Maxwell seems, on Layden's recommendation, to have an opportunity in the offing for Robert; we do not discover what it is, but Robert certainly interprets the encounter as carrying the possibility of a route into the film world. As Julio recognises that Helen's end-of-evening affections do not truly offer to extend the dimensions of the dance hall fantasy to the wider world, Gloria's death ensures that Robert's fleeting glimpse of his dream is likewise only that.

The taxi-dance, then, like the marathon, is marked by a structure that is not in fact about dancing at all but about encouraging participants who exist on the edges of 'civilized' society to occupy a given territory for a period of time, time that is structured in cyclical repetitions, in order to gain either a social or an economic reward dangled tantalisingly just beyond reach. In this respect, both offer conditions for modelling a frontierist vision of American history, one of people either spurning or spurned by more comfortable society who invest themselves instead in making new social forms by occupying and asserting themselves within a particular type of space. Where Turner envisages a cycle of frontier conquest that moves geographically from East-West, occupying successive spaces, the cyclical mechanics of the dancehall enable this symbolic frontiersmanship to be conducted repeatedly upon the same space.

The linear limitations of the progress of the marathon, however, do not apply in the taxi-dance hall. One can occupy the privileged space of the dancefloor as many times as one has tickets; closing time will come, but the hall will open again the next night. The crowds vary, even the dancers seem to vary, as Julio's brief uncertainty at Helen's changing appearance suggests; that is, the space can be revisited near-endlessly. The dance hall is essentially constructed in Fante's story from a series of obstacles or perils negotiating the establishment's tricks and scams, fighting one's compatriots for space on the floor and one's chosen dancer, indeed in Julio's case trying to avoid falling in love with one's chosen dancer. So, this dance hall is not some kind of Edenic space of pure pleasure; it offers the briefest moments of ecstatic socio-spatial conquest, but these must be fought for through battle with the environment, and indeed are only fleeting, grasped for a minute before being deferred to the next dance and another frontierist cycle of hazards.

Where Fante departs from a frontier model is in suggesting that an incomer like Julio Sal, an ethnic 'other', challenges and reorients some of the goals of frontier conquest, even as his dancehall fixation emblematises the extent to which he maintains their mechanics. As a Filipino, Julio challenges Turnerian notions that conquest of American space is a) achieved by white Americans and therefore b) essentially a matter of *internal* migration, and that c) the progress of such spatial conquest moves from East to West. Julio responds to the post-Turnerian conundrum about where to go when one can no longer travel west, by travelling from the opposite direction, from an 'East' that is, in contravention of Turnerian geography, further west than the West. Moreover, he offers that response in a place so often conceived of as 'looking west toward the sea and not back toward the rest of the West'.¹¹⁶ Julio upends the Fine-McCoy notion that Los Angeles is the western end of the American continent, a place of dreams forestalled by geography, instead

¹¹⁶ David M. Fine, 'California: Part of-or West of-the West?', *Western American Literature* 34, no. 2 (1999): 211. It was Theodore Roosevelt who first remarked that when he was in California he felt that he was not in the West but somewhere 'west of the West'. Fine, 210. The phrase has proved irresistible for scholars grappling with notions of Californian exceptionalism; see Leonard Michaels, David Reid, and Raquel Scherr, eds., *West of the West: Imagining California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Mark Arax, *West of the West: Dreamers, Believers, Builders, and Killers in the Golden State* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2009).

presaging late twentieth century revisions of Los Angeles as the furthest reach of the ‘Far East’, a capital of the Pacific rim.¹¹⁷ As such, whilst as an immigrant with an uncertain position in society Julio does occupy a social liminality that models Turner’s frontier zone, his direction of travel is not away from the established mainstream of society but always towards it.

Fante makes this clear when he describes Julio’s bunkhouse. By the docks in Wilmington, it is literally as close as one can get to the edge of the continent; Julio has been travelling around California for some time but the impression is as if he has just made it to land. As if to emphasise this, we are informed that Julio’s nearest neighbours are ‘five Japanese families’—that is, his place of habitation has more in common with the Pacific or the East than it does with America. Fante goes to great lengths to describe the ephemera of industry and commerce that surround his protagonist: ‘the fertilizer vats, the tar, the oil, the copra, the bananas and oranges, the bilge, the old rope, the decaying anchovies, the lumber, the rubber, the salt’.¹¹⁸ The emphasis is not merely on the many strong odours among these goods, and the unpleasant combination thereof, but on the fact that Julio lives cheek by jowl with the things upon which American society subsists, not as they are packaged or processed for consumption but as they arrive on an industrial scale. As far as the society in which he lives and works is concerned, of much the same order as these goods. He is ‘stored’ in the same place, kept far away from the city’s more salubrious districts.

Every time Julio wishes to travel downtown to the dance hall from the docks where he lives and works, he walks eighteen miles. Based on this measurement and a stated location on Main Street it seems likely that Fante’s Angels Ballroom is based on either the Hippodrome Dance

¹¹⁷ Harry Carr wrote of Los Angeles as a ‘gateway into a new era of the Pacific’ as early as 1935. *City of Dreams*, 5. Nevertheless it was from ‘the late seventies and eighties’ that California began in earnest to ‘be constructed ideologically as a multicultural, new world semi-nation’ on a Pacific axis, fuelled by Japanese, Taiwanese, and South Korean capital’. In such visions LA takes the ‘central role [...] as capital of the twenty-first century, serving as a financial conduit to the Pacific [...] and enlivened by the “new immigrants”, largely from Asia (read: “good” immigrants who have money and work hard)’. Christopher L. Connery, ‘Pacific Rim Discourse: The U. S. Global Imaginary in the Late Cold War Years’, *Boundary 2* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 43, <https://doi.org/10.2307/303396>. Julio endeavours precisely to be such a ‘good’ Pacific immigrant, but is not welcomed as such.

¹¹⁸ Fante, ‘Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —’, 2002, 253.

Palace and/or Danceland, whose locations would correspond to such a description.¹¹⁹ This is an arduous journey; it results in his shoes becoming ruined and takes so long that his neighbours are already rising for work by the time he returns.¹²⁰ Thus, every time he wishes to see Helen, Julio must make a challenging journey from his home beyond the fringes of society, into its locus on Main Street (the Filipino community gravitated to this area, but it was a mixed zone in the heart of the city).

Julio therefore undertakes a more arduous and extreme (both in its physical parameters and its stakes of social difference) version of the Clever Fellow's 'reversed' frontiersman's journey: he toils in manual labour at the edges of society, then repeatedly journeys to its symbolic centre. Once there, he undertakes actions (the purchase of fine clothing and Anglo women's company) that enmesh him more fully (but only ever temporarily and superficially) within the white American societal mainstream from which he is excluded. Julio's marginalised status here problematises the very idea of frontier movement as a model for American development. This is because the very reason that Julio can continue to make his frontiersman's journeys time and again, despite the exhaustion of literal, geographic 'frontier' space, is that the social space to which he transfers the frontier dynamic remains resolutely unconquerable. He enjoys the superficial illusion of mastery over his world, only for the world to revert to its prior state with the clang of the bell or the long walk home to the bunkhouse in Wilmington. Julio cannot find a way to navigate towards a closer accommodation within American society that is more permanent than an evening with Helen or more real than the illusion that he is his smirking waiter's social equal. He thus shows that the frontier's requirement of a space that can be claimed and occupied anew can still be found in the endlessly re-iterable social space of Los Angeles, but in doing so he lays bare the consequences for

¹¹⁹ España-Maram, *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila*, 111.

¹²⁰ Fante, 'Helen, Thy Beauty Is to Me —', 2002, 253.

an individual ‘frontiersman’ (that is, an immigrant labourer) of a society that maintains frontier labour as its guiding myth.

Taxi-Dancehall II: John Fante and Jack Leonard’s *A Letter from the President*

There are striking parallels in *A Letter from the President*, a 1950 film treatment co-written by Fante and Jack Leonard, currently accessible only in the Fante papers at UCLA, where I located it in 2018. The tale’s protagonist, Chu Chu Ramirez, shares much with Julio Sal, to the extent that it seems reasonable to assume that *President* represents, in part, Fante’s attempt to recuperate some of the thematic material from his abandoned *Little Brown Brothers* project. Like Julio, Chu Chu is a migrant labourer in California; like Julio he is characterised by a certain naivety or innocence about his position within American society and the ways in which he is continually exploited by it; like Julio he lives in close quarters with a group of his fellows; like Julio he falls in love with an American taxi-dancer (though in *President* Chu Chu knows the woman *before* she enters that profession). There are key differences, however. Chu Chu is of Mexican rather than Filipino origin, and is in fact an American citizen.¹²¹ Indeed, his most prized possession is a letter from President Truman, written in grateful reply to Chu Chu’s own missive informing the White House of his pride at gaining citizenship.¹²² For the intensely patriotic Chu Chu, the letter from Truman is his undeniable documentary proof that, whatever inequality and abuse he may face in America as a

¹²¹ By the time of Vedder’s 1947 investigation, ‘the majority of taxi-dance halls no longer cater[ed] to Filipinos or the Oriental trade’. Vedder, ‘An Analysis of the Taxi-Dance Hall’, 49. The Tydings-McDuffie act had imposed an annual limit of just 50 Filipino immigrants per year in 1934; meanwhile, the 1935 Filipino Repatriation Act incentivised a return home, and the California Filipino population suffered. Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*, 41. As the dancehalls were robbed of clientele, the remaining Filipinos became still less desirable as customers; caught up as they were in increasing fears of an ‘Oriental Menace’ throughout the ‘30s. Burma, ‘The Background of the Current Situation of Filipino-Americans’, 48. That Fante’s shift from a Filipino to a Mexican-American protagonist thus seems at least in part a practical matter of contemporary verisimilitude further supports a reading of *President* as an outgrowth of the *Brown Brothers* material.

¹²² John Fante and Jack Leonard, *A Letter from the President*, c. 1950, 5, Box 14, Folder 1. John Fante Papers (Collection 1832). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

result of his ethnic origin, he retains equal status and rights within the nation's civic structures. Indeed, when his claim of citizenship is doubted by Anglo-Americans (as it frequently is), he produces the letter as a direct assertion of his status.¹²³

When Chu Chu finds the cynical, manipulative Nancy Walker in financial trouble, he not only rapidly becomes besotted with her but immediately and innocently endeavours to help her—pawning his prized letter to help Nancy pay her rent. Immediately thereafter, however, they argue over what Nancy sees as Chu Chu's hopeless naivety about the benevolence of America. She soon forgets about him, but they encounter each other some time later in Sacramento. Nancy, to Chu Chu's amazement and delight, informs him that they are immediately to go on a date together, though he is aware (echoing Julio's final visit to Helen in the dancehall) that she did not at first remember his name. Nancy is 'angry and impatient'.¹²⁴ They visit several clubs, ducking in and out of each one momentarily, before they find one that suits her. It emerges that she was attempting to find a man with whom she *had* intended to spend the evening with, only for him to stand her up. Seeing him on the dancefloor with another woman, she begins to kiss Chu Chu passionately. It becomes clear that she only wanted a 'date' with him in order to make her flighty Anglo-American lover jealous. The man is disgusted at the sight of Nancy kissing 'a Mexican', and begins to argue with her. Chu Chu affirms that he does not want to cause trouble, but is ignored. When the man lays a hand on Nancy, however, Chu Chu quickly intervenes, grabbing the man's wrist with a grip so firm it sends him first to his knees and then running from the club. At this point, it seems, the cynical motivations that had first driven Nancy's apparent interest in Chu Chu are replaced with something more sincere. 'Her face was soft now, glowing with respect for this strong soft-spoken brown man', and she asks him to dance with her.¹²⁵

¹²³ Fante and Leonard, 3.

¹²⁴ Fante and Leonard, 25.

¹²⁵ Fante and Leonard, 27.

Here, then, are inversions or modulations of what occurs between Julio and Helen, but their ultimate import remains essentially the same. Chu Chu's triumph over and humiliation of an aggressive Anglo-American man mirrors precisely Julio's subjugation and humiliation by the aggressive Anglo-American waiter. Where that point of confrontation cruelly strips Julio of his illusions that Helen could ever see him as her ethnic and social equal, its reversal in *President* is what causes Nancy to be able to begin considering Chu Chu in such terms. Again, the dancehall manifests spatial demarcations that symbolises shifts in social dynamic. Whereas for Julio the illusory, temporary removal of ethnic difference and disadvantage (and equally illusory romance) is the reward for purchasing access to the dancefloor; in *President* it appears that access to the dancefloor is the reward for proving oneself equal to an American.

However sincere Nancy's feelings may be at this point, they appear fleeting: she and Chu Chu continue to see each other, but only in the confines of a café in which Nancy works, one which operates not unlike a taxi-dancehall itself. Hostesses drink with customers in exchange for being bought 'whiskey' at fifty cents an ounce, which is in fact only tea—Nancy, however, increasingly depressed, drinks the real thing.¹²⁶ It appears that Chu Chu's dancefloor-derived access to the possibility of romance, itself a proxy for the possibility of equal participation in American society, was ultimately as temporary as Julio's. Nancy informs Julio that she is moving to Los Angeles to become a taxi-dancer, sardonically referring to the occupation as a 'respectable job'.¹²⁷

Aside from Chu Chu's relationship with Nancy, the plot of *President* concerns a man named Stone and his immigrant-hating wife, who employed Chu Chu as a labourer on their farm, then paid him with a bad cheque. Chu Chu, with his naïve belief in the inviolability and benevolence of American institutions, follows all the correct avenues of civic and legal recourse to obtain his money, and indeed the system works up to a point. Stone must pay Chu Chu, and if he fails to will

¹²⁶ Fante and Leonard, 36.

¹²⁷ Fante and Leonard, 37.

go to jail.¹²⁸ Stone still refuses to pay, and thus the day before Stone is due to be arrested Chu Chu makes a final visit to the Stones' property, to plead for his money and attempt to reason with Mr Stone. Instead, Stone threatens him, demanding he withdraws his complaint, and ultimately pulls a gun on Chu Chu. In the ensuing melee, attempting to disarm Stone, Chu Chu accidentally shoots his adversary dead.¹²⁹ With the words of Mrs Stone proclaiming him a murderer ringing in his ears, Chu Chu flees. His faith in American justice remains steadfast however: he runs all the way to the sheriff's office to turn himself in, only to find Mrs Stone has preceded him and convinced the sheriff of her version of events. Chu Chu is jailed and awaits trial.¹³⁰ Terrified by this failure of the systems he had placed so much faith in, having done the right thing only to be disbelieved and punished, and now fearing that justice will not prevail in court, Chu Chu escapes and goes on the run. Ultimately he finds his way to Los Angeles via a network of accomplices who will be able to smuggle him out of the country and back into Mexico. Fante here presents a cruelly ironic reversal of the more familiar vision of migration from Mexico into the United States, indeed the one Chu Chu himself had at one time made. Here an American citizen, but one who has been failed by an American justice system that failed him precisely because it did not treat him as *truly* American, must migrate, illegally and clandestinely, to a country in which he is not a citizen.

His affection for Nancy, however, proves his undoing. Awaiting a rendezvous in Los Angeles for his trip over the border, Chu Chu comes across the taxi-dancehall where Nancy works and is unable to resist stopping to see her. Chu Chu is entirely cognisant that his decision to see Nancy will doom his attempt at escape: he would rather assert his rights and identity as a citizen by facing imperfect justice in America than have those rights and that identity taken from him by being forced to flee to Mexico by that same justice system's iniquities. He finds Nancy on the dancefloor, seizing her from the arms of a Filipino—it is tempting to imagine an intertextual cameo

¹²⁸ Fante and Leonard, 33.

¹²⁹ Fante and Leonard, 42.

¹³⁰ Fante and Leonard, 44–45.

from Julio Sal. As they dance, he explains the situation while plain clothes policemen close in on all sides.

He glanced around, and he saw them too, the little triumph of their cunning faces, and Chu Chu gave out a great sigh, as if relieved that the chase was over, that he need run no more. He guided her to the band-stand, took a ten dollar bill from his pocket, and gave it to the piano player.

“Please,” he said. “You play ‘La Golondrina’ three, four times.”

There were four tickets in his hand, and that meant four dances. The band went into La Golondrina, and Chu Chu held the girl very close, whispering, “Is like I always say, Nancy. Everything possible in America. Even for one so beautiful as you to love Chu Chu Ramirez.”¹³¹

President, then, in this scene adds the element of criminal jeopardy to augment and further what ‘Helen’ says about the dancehall as a space symbolic of ethnically- and socially-liminal figures’ attempts to gain a foothold within (and acceptance by) an Anglo-dominated American society. Again, tickets are desperately purchased and exchanged for time while others wait beyond the boundary to seize their own opportunity. In Chu Chu’s case, the meagre minutes he can purchase with Nancy on the dancefloor stand in starkly ironic contrast to the years of jail time he will face when apprehended. All the events of the plot have revolved around Chu Chu’s attempts to obtain the honest wage owed him. Now, via the space of the dancefloor, he spends his last dollars to purchase, like Julio Sal, the temporary illusion of what he had once, naïvely, believed to be true:

¹³¹ Fante and Leonard, 56–57.

namely, that he was a full participant in America. As in ‘Helen’ and ‘Clever Fellow’ the dancefloor’s quality of rarefied spatiotemporal demarcation limns the essential bounds of a marginalised protagonist’s ability to access a sense of the social centre. Here, though, the precarity of such access and the stakes attached to losing it are reified by the presence of the plainclothesmen who are ready to apprehend Chu Chu but seemingly cannot do so until the dance is over.

‘La Golondrina’ is a Mexican song of parting or farewell, written by Narcisco Serradell Sevilla upon being exiled during the Franco-Mexican war, and Chu Chu demands it just as he believes himself about to be forced into exile.¹³² The irony is that Chu Chu’s exile is to Mexico itself; his farewell is to America. He now must return to a place which had once been his homeland but in which he is no longer a citizen. To request ‘La Golondrina’ therefore in part seems to betoken Chu Chu sadly accepting that he has not been accepted by his adopted home, but is also a recognition of his new statelessness. The dancefloor again stages an immigrant experience of being forced by a host culture to live in a cruel, narrow, frontierlike liminality, neither permitted to ingress fully into the nation’s civic centrality nor able to abandon it without personal abjection.

Even though Chu Chu’s every interaction with Nancy up to and including this point has been purchased with money, proximity to her continues to represent for him, under the dancehall’s illusions, the full and equal participation in American citizenry vouchsafed to him by his letter. The police just beyond the borders of the dancefloor, by contrast, stand (like the venal Stones and byzantine legal system earlier in the text) as American reality, an unnavigable social/civic landscape that beckons attempts at ingress only to reveal itself as a wilderness, doling out (like McCoy’s marathon) punishment in gross asymmetry to its promised rewards via unreliable, deceptive, self-contradicting systems and codes. If the wilderness Chu Chu faces is more explicitly carceral in nature than that in which Julio lives, that distinction only makes explicit the truth which both men ultimately apprehend. Both are entrapped in a dynamic that enforces full participation in certain

¹³² Janet Sturman, *The Course of Mexican Music* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 154.

aspects of the American social compact (punitive ‘justice’ either legal or extra-legal—the waiter takes this role in Julio’s dancehall—a scarcely less punitive labour market, and helpless consumerism) while strictly limiting participation in other aspects thereof (restorative justice, romance, financial and spatial security, a sense of belonging). The limitation of that participation in the wider world is indicated by the fact that it only achieves fuller realisation within the illusive, elusive space of the dancefloor, which embodies the persistent liminality that is Chu Chu and Julio’s enforced social role.

In Julio and Chu Chu, then, we see a glimpse of a society whose ills result not from the tragic closure of the frontier, but quite the opposite: its invidious dynamics continue to structure American space, always to the detriment of those who exist beyond its boundaries and wish to come within. Its poles, however, are strangely reversed. Turner’s men of ‘civilization’ strode beyond their societal bounds to claim land from ‘savagery’. Julio (regarded in law, social convention, economic power and geographic location as near the ‘savage’ end of the human spectrum) and Chu Chu (whose citizenship proves that ethnicity, not nationality, is the truest guide to who is deemed ‘savage’) reproduce the frontier dynamic but invert its direction of travel. They set out hopefully to stake a claim, in the dancehall, upon a space of ‘civilization’, as they believe they have been invited to do. ‘Civilization’, however, ultimately retains complete control over the pace and the extent of their ingress, the extent to which they are permitted to model that inverted cycle of frontier journeys. The social space of the dancehall compels such inverted frontier labour while simultaneously rejecting the emotional labourers who perform it.

By labouring in frontiersmanlike roles, ethnic others like Julio and Chu Chu attest to the contemporary endurance of frontier dynamics within a host society gripped by anxieties of frontier closure. They find, however, that the supposed societal benefits of an open frontier do not accrue to them, evoking in mythic terms the one-sided bargain of Grayson Kirk’s 1942 description of Filipino legal status, as a group which ‘owe[d] allegiance to the United States but [was] not eligible

to share in [...] benefits [...] restricted to United States citizens'.¹³³ Something similar characterises the desperation of McCoy's protagonists in *Horses*; spectators flock to watch a performance of desperation and survival that produces a frontier space for a society that would otherwise lack one. As the abrupt, violent end to the novel's marathon makes clear, none of the contestants will ever 'win' this frontier; here too the benefits of dancers' labour again accrue elsewhere in the transactional model that underpins their dancing.

These 'outsourced' solutions to the cultural trauma of the end of the frontier that each of these texts propose are in all cases provisional, unsustainable, and time-limited. The tortuous feats demanded of the marathon participants proved too much for the national social conscience to accept, as both regulation and lack of patronage forced them out of existence, just as they are too much to bear for McCoy's characters. Having been revealed as bestial by his class position and thus placed in the 'savage' position of the dancehall's social frontier, the Clever Fellow eventually retreats to the notionally safer ground of his home, only for his own mother to confirm there that, yes, he is a 'dirty animal'.¹³⁴ It seems unlikely that he will perform the frontier dance again any time soon. Moreover, the thematic resonances between 'Clever Fellow' and 'Helen' suggest that Fante's working-class frontier labour has, by 1940, been dislocated another step down the social ladder, to the immigrant population. Julio too abandons his attempts at inverting the frontiersman's journey in the social field when he gives up on Helen, but is fated to persist in the other dimension of his societally-mandated frontier role in that he must continue his arduous labours beyond the edge of 'civilized' whiteness (whether on the docks or in the fields). Chu Chu is granted a happier ending, reflecting *President's* intended cinematic audience and the marketability of propagandistic endorsements of the American way in the immediate postwar years, but even he receives this only because two individuals (Nancy and Mrs Stone) have dramatic personal changes of heart. The

¹³³ Kirk, 'The Filipinos', 46.

¹³⁴ Fante, 'Clever Fellow', 108.

system that endangered Chu Chu's liberty and compelled him to manifest an American social frontier is never reformed.

Fante's reflection of a changing political climate in supplanting the legally ambiguous Julio with the citizen Chu Chu demonstrates that the former dances on even more of a societal edge than he, or Fante, could have known in 1941. Kirk noted that the efforts of Filipinos in helping American troops repel the Japanese invasion of the Philippines saw them dubbed 'undesirable heroes'. That phrase equally aptly describes Julio Sal, the rejected frontiersman, whose labours heroically offer renewed life to a mythic vision of American identity feared lost, but for which he is never offered an American identity of his own.

2. PIONEERING THE OFFICE: JAMES M. CAIN, RAYMOND CHANDLER, AND WHITE-COLLARED 'UNCIVILIZATION'

They just use your mind
And they never give you credit;
It's enough to drive you
Crazy if you let it.

— Dolly Parton, '9 to 5'

I advance in this chapter a case that James M. Cain's Walter Huff and Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe, two notably hardboiled fictional Angelenos of the 1930s and '40s, engage suspiciously, subversively, and combatively with the spatial practices of the office. In this period, the office had only relatively recently become the definitive workplace of American modernity. Moreover, the office's transformation of American cultures of work was not merely concurrent with but to a considerable extent defined Los Angeles' transformation into a metropolitan centre. Not only had 'large business development progressed more rapidly [in LA] than perhaps anywhere else in the country between 1900 and 1930', but in a city with a large service economy and little industrial base prior to the twentieth century that development was disproportionately office-based.

In Los Angeles, growth in 'clerical and white-collar positions' throughout the early twentieth century outstripped even the city's simultaneous explosion in industrial employment, profoundly 'shap[ing] the local culture'.¹ Huff and Marlowe's attitudes to and ways of navigating

¹ Clark Davis, "You Are the Company:" The Demands of Employment in the Emerging Corporate Culture, Los Angeles, 1900–1930', *The Business History Review* 70, no. 3 (Autumn 1996): 332–33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3117241>.

the offices of '30s and '40s LA identify them with a century-long American intellectual tradition that characterised such spaces as destructive to the values of wilderness life—rugged, practical, masculinist individualism. I will first summarise the history of this tradition in order to situate Huff and Marlowe within it.

Offices, Frontiers, and 'Overcivilization': Spaces of Intellectual Conflict

The American genesis of what the French academician André Siegfried would dub 'l'age administratif' was the rapid formation in the nineteenth century of a 'clerking class' of white-collar workers.² As late as 1870, there were only 91,000 clerical workers in the United States; by 1910 there were 1,770,000.³ In the largest cities, ubiquity came sooner: by 1855 clerks were the third largest occupational group in New York.⁴ No sooner had clerks 'rise[n] into the lower frequencies of the American imagination' than they became objects of simultaneous mockery and fear.⁵ Cloistered, effete, and unmasculine, these men of the new administrative professions appeared at once risible and troubling to an established vision of American masculinity that glorified robust outdoor labour.⁶ Writing in *Life Illustrated*, Walt Whitman—'bard of the masculine professions'—was among the first to 'establish that clerking was antithetical to manly American democracy'.⁷

² André Siegfried, 'L'Age Administratif', *Revue Des Deux Mondes*, May 1951, 3; Nikil Saval, *Cubed: A Secret History of the Workplace* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2014), 13–14.

³ Evelyn Nakano Glenn and Roslyn L. Feldberg, 'Degraded and Deskilled: The Proletarianization of Clerical Work', *Social Problems* 25, no. 1 (October 1977): 54, <https://doi.org/10.2307/800467>.

⁴ Saval, *Cubed*, 14.

⁵ Saval, 27.

⁶ Given that the rise of the office is often (correctly) associated with an 'extraordinary growth in women's employment', it is worth emphasising in the context of a discourse about the impact of clerking upon masculinity that the clerking class of the mid- to late nineteenth century *was* overwhelmingly male. Saval, 74. Women entered the office later: in 1870 only 2.4 percent of clerical workers were women; by 1900 the figure was 26.5 percent but women did not constitute a majority of American clerical workers until 1930. Glenn and Feldberg, 'Degraded and Deskilled', 54.

⁷ Saval, *Cubed*, 16.

Whitman reserves more derision for clerks than for any of the other social groups he sees on New York's streets, mocking them for the unmanliness of both their sensibilities and their physicality. More significantly, however, the clerks are the only city dwellers on whose work Whitman offers no exposition whatsoever. He admires the work of labourers, is less enthusiastic about shop girls, and has a deep distaste for businessmen, yet even their professional activity at least bears description, whereas that of the clerks is wholly absent. Instead, their unmanly appearance constitutes the *entirety* of Whitman's account.⁸

The absence of the clerks' labour from Whitman's text embodies a widespread contemporary suspicion of clerking as a form of work that 'did not produce anything'.⁹ To the extent that Whitman describes the clerks, they are not workers at all. Consider likewise Melville's *Bartleby*: as a figure who is unsettling precisely because he would 'prefer not to', *Bartleby* manifests the contemporary fear that clerking, which did not seem to result in 'an actual product', was a kind of non-work, prompting a 'crisis in the meaning of the meaning of industriousness' that was also a crisis in the meaning of masculinity.¹⁰ Thus nineteenth-century anti-clerk invective consistently manifests unfavourable comparisons with '*real* men who did *real* work' and the belief that office life's defining characteristic was its immutable opposition to masculine wilderness existence¹¹. Positions similar to Whitman's recur throughout this period in the pages of the *American Phrenological Journal*, *American Whig Review*, *Vermont Watchman and State Journal*, *New York Star*,

⁸ Walt Whitman, 'New York Dissected: IV.—Broadway', *Life Illustrated*, 9 August 1856, 116. In his own attempt to describe the various groups making up an urban scene, Edgar Allan Poe similarly felt that clerks' labour had a visible impact on their physical comportment, rendering them identifiable by 'a certain dapperness of carriage, which may be termed *deskism*'. Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Man of the Crowd', in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2008), 256.

⁹ Michael Zakim, 'The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary; or, a Labor History of the Nonproducing Classes', *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 571, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jer.2006.0079>.

¹⁰ Herman Melville, 'Bartleby, the Scrivener', in *The Piazza Tales* (New York, NY: Dix and Edwards, 1856), 49; Zakim, 'The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary; or, a Labor History of the Nonproducing Classes', 571, 564.

¹¹ Michael Zakim, 'Producing Capitalism: The Clerk at Work', in *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Michael Zakim and Gary J. Kornblith (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 225; "'Mother Goose" for Counter Jumpers', *Vanity Fair*, 17 March 1860, 188.

Putnam's Monthly, *Employments of Women*, and *Vanity Fair*.¹² In abandoning physical, outdoor labour for ledger and desk, the new clerking class was perceived to have committed nothing less than socioeconomic self-castration—‘selling their manhood for a wage’.¹³

In his celebrations of the individual within nature, Whitman simultaneously ‘provided the immediate literary background’ for late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century America’s scramble to re-engage with its vanishing wilderness as a means to preserve masculinity and vitality.¹⁴ As Roderick Nash writes, Whitman prefigured anxieties about ‘the American male [...] suffering from over-civilization’ under the conditions of a ‘disappearing [...] frontier way of life’.¹⁵ T. J. Jackson Lears parallels Nash in describing a turn-of-the-century moment that saw ‘concerns about overcivilization’ manifest a strong ‘antimodern impulse’ in American culture.¹⁶ For Lears and Nash alike, this moment of antimodernist panic about ‘overcivilization’ was a response to an increasingly urbanised society defined by the ‘[b]usiness values and [...] highly organized [...] economy’ that rise of the office represented.¹⁷

We thus apprehend in Whitman’s dual roles as archetypal anti-office critic and laureate of the antimodern moment’s embrace of wilderness the ideological connection between the perceived effects of a loss of the frontier life, the demasculinisation of the American man, and increasingly ubiquitous clerical work. That connection expresses itself in ‘On Being Civilized Too Much’, an 1897 essay by Henry Childs Merwin. Holding the post-frontier pessimist line that without ‘[c]loseness to nature [...] mankind could not long exist’, Merwin adopts Turnerian rhetoric to posit that man functions optimally in an intermediary condition between ‘savagery’ and

¹² Zakim, ‘Producing Capitalism: The Clerk at Work’, 225–26; Zakim, ‘The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary; or, a Labor History of the Nonproducing Classes’, 569; ‘Know Thyself’, *Vanity Fair*, 18 February 1860, 115; ‘“Mother Goose” for Counter Jumpers’, 188.

¹³ Zakim, ‘The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary; or, a Labor History of the Nonproducing Classes’, 569.

¹⁴ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 152.

¹⁵ Nash, 152.

¹⁶ Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xv.

¹⁷ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 145.

‘civilization’.¹⁸ That is, the ideal man not only descends from frontierlike conditions but must in himself embody frontierlike conditions. Some cultural refinement is societally beneficial, Merwin contends, but deleterious in excess: ‘undue prominence of the intellect’ renders individuals ‘oversophisticated and effete, [...] paralyzed or perverted’.¹⁹ Merwin identifies ‘the close air of the office’—urban, indoor, cloistered—as one of the conditions effecting this paralysing perversion of frontier-wrought American manhood.

As Graham Thompson suggests, ‘the legacy and the myth of [...] agrarian and frontier virtues’ did not merely inform the Nash/Lears turn-of-the-century antimodernist moment that Merwin embodies but suffused ‘American masculinist culture throughout the twentieth century’.²⁰ The office, moreover, continued to be an essential site in the cultural contest over that mythic frontier legacy. American men experienced their growing sense of disconnection from a ‘pre-urban, pre-civilized, pre-feminized world’—a frontier world—that ‘lingered in the cultural imagination’ precisely ‘through office work and [...] increasingly omnipresent white-collar discourse’.²¹ The long 1950s brought a particularly high tide in critiques of American corporate or ‘organisation’ culture, its prominence in national life, its signature space (the office), and the supposed effects thereof upon the individual and society at large. The culture that developed as the office became an ever-more dominant facet of American life (it was in 1957 that nonmanual workers began to outnumber their manual counterparts) was, to its mid-century critics, one of alienation, conformity, stultification, anonymity, and rigidity.²²

Such critiques of office work permeated the era’s fiction and non-fiction. Literary contributions included Sloan Wilson’s *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) and Richard Yates’

¹⁸ Henry Childs Merwin, ‘On Being Civilized Too Much’, *Atlantic Monthly*, June 1897, 838.

¹⁹ Merwin, 839.

²⁰ Graham Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance: The Office in American Literature* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2003), 47.

²¹ Thompson, 72.

²² Michel Crozier, *The World of the Office Worker*, trans. David Landau (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 1.

Revolutionary Road (1961). A Los Angeles satire of byzantine, enervating office culture likewise constitutes a subplot of Alison Lurie's *The Lonely City* (published in 1965 but set around 1960). Non-fictional counterparts included Riesman, Glazer, and Denney's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills' *White Collar* (1951), Kenneth Boulding's *The Organizational Revolution* (1953), William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* (1956), and Alan Harrington's *Life in the Crystal Palace* (1959). Meanwhile political figures enfolded what Whyte termed a culture of 'false collectivization' (group-oriented, conformist, systems-driven) in cold war rhetoric.²³ Office culture emblematised the anxieties of Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s exhortation to 'give the lonely masses a sense of individual human function' lest they become 'traitors to freedom', and Adlai Stevenson's warning of 'violent pressures [...] reducing man [...] to [...] anonymity'.²⁴

Critiques of the office from the age of the organisation man are conspicuous by their ideological proximity to the frontierist, antimodernist, anti-clerking invective of Merwin and Whitman (despite dramatic changes in political, social, and economic context and the form of the office itself over the intervening century). Whyte admonishes corporate culture's inability to accommodate a philosophy of 'survival of the fittest', 'struggle against one's environment' and "'rugged" individualism' while, like Turner, pinpointing the turn of the century as the moment at which that philosophy became 'strained by reality'.²⁵ As Saval puts it, the post-war wave of office criticism maintains its nineteenth-century antecedents' central argument that 'the office was destroying the frontier-exploring spirit in man'.²⁶ Nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century critiques provide contextual poles for the office's century-long rise to cultural omnipresence—two similar panics, one heralding the office's arrival as a social phenomenon and one marking the point at

²³ Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 51.

²⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., 'Freedom: A Fighting Faith', in *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1988), 247; Adlai Stevenson, 'A Purpose for Modern Woman', *Woman's Home Companion*, September 1955, 30.

²⁵ Whyte, *The Organization Man*, 14, 15, 18. Whyte's historical basis for these claims is drawn directly upon Weber's Protestant ethic rather than on Turner's frontier theory but in doing so only emphasises the proximity between the two men's conceptual frameworks, as discussed in my introduction.

²⁶ Saval, *Cubed*, 170.

which its saturation of the texture of American life was complete. Where Cain and Chandler emerge as distinctive anti-office critics, however, is partly in the determinedly frontier-oriented methods by which their protagonists greet the office's status as the frontier's symbolic antithesis, but also in the fact that their criticism appears, chronologically, *between* these two historical peaks of anti-office sentiment. They write at a time when the still-developing modern office was enjoying its most concerted and widespread period of boosterism.

Technological advances throughout the nineteenth century had made it easier for businesses to operate on a regional or national level, precipitating growth in the scale of companies, rendering necessary increasingly complex organisational structures and therefore an 'expansion in the range and scope of the office, in the specialization and refinement of its activities'.²⁷ The spatial conditions necessary for the fullest expression of such developments were soon made possible by steel-framed buildings: large, flexibly divisible floor plates enabled larger groupings and easier supervision of workers. Such architectural advances would be further refined, and accompanied by new technical innovations (lighting, heating, air conditioning). Consequently, by the 1930s, 'space planning and design' to optimise 'the way business used its office space' had become a 'new industry'.²⁸ This new science of office design was itself a counterpart to the work of Frederick Taylor's school of 'scientific management', which propagated from the 1910s onwards the principle that the systematised administration of the workers performing a company's nominal function should in fact itself be considered the company's most important work. Businesses became meta-companies, with swelling armies of scientifically-managed workers in ever-larger, purpose-built offices.²⁹ There thus grew an 'increasing distinction between those conceptualising

²⁷ Saval, 38–39, 43.

²⁸ Michael Saphier, *Office Planning and Design* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 1–2.

²⁹ Saval, *Cubed*, 54–60.

a task and those doing it', the former abstracted ever further from whatever the enterprise produced or sold—if, indeed, as the service economy grew, it sold anything tangible at all.³⁰

In the interwar decades, the 'Taylorist management ethic'—strict hierarchical strata, precise procedural regimentation to ensure efficiency, hyper-specialisation and close observation of employees—'transformed the office' and came to define modern corporate America.³¹ Even if the 1929 crash foreshadowed later anti-office fears about disastrous entrapment within a megastructure of purely theoretical, paper-bound business, it also suggested that if anything Wall Street had retained *too much* frontierlike 'Wild West' laissez-faire lawlessness, failing because of an insufficient (rather than overenthusiastic) embrace of Taylorist networks of regulated systems, checks, balances, and safeguards. Indeed, although office enthusiasm in the two decades preceding World War II was not universal (see, for example, King Vidor's 1928 film *The Crowd*), the period represented the high point of idealism about the new workplace's positively transformative possibilities for American life. This was the period in which it was most seriously believed that new ways of working could represent not the negation and abandonment of frontier values (per Merwin, Whitman et al) but their pragmatic renewal.³²

Even as Taylor decried as outmoded the veneration of individualism that had defined frontier ideology, with his maxim that '[i]n the past the man has been first; in the future the system

³⁰ Glenn and Feldberg, 'Degraded and Deskilled', 55.

³¹ Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance*, 71; Glenn and Feldberg, 'Degraded and Deskilled', 54.

³² Numerous contemporary reports disclose the optimism with which the office building was hailed in the 1910s, '20s, and '30s. See, for example, the *Los Angeles Times* on the luxuriant modernity of a new proposal in 1915, or Walter Kaempffert on the new national Patent Office building in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1932. 'Classic Grace to Adorn City', *Los Angeles Times*, 30 March 1915, sec. II, 1, 5; Waldemar Kaempffert, 'A New Patent Office for a New Age', *New York Times Magazine*, 10 April 1932. William Boring hoped in 1924 that 'the vast experimental laboratory the building industry affords'—embodied nowhere more so than in 'the skyscraping office building'—would create a 'beautiful, logical, modern American style of architecture'. William A. Boring, 'America Groping in Architecture', *New York Times*, 3 August 1924, 19. In the same year, even Turner saw the skyscraper, ultimate architectural embodiment of frontier closure in both its urban modernity and its vertical reach for space, as in fact the 'best expression' of 'American artistic genius' in the modern age, a new space to vest the frontierist exploratory spirit. Frederick Jackson Turner, 'Since the Foundation [of Clark University 1889]', in *The Significance of Sections in American History* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1959), 225.

must be first', he argued that technological and economic frontiers accessed through his methods could replace the old geographic ones.³³ In lieu of free land and limitless physical resources America could sustain a spirit of unhindered growth upon incremental but theoretically perpetual scientific advances in production methods, space planning, communication technologies, and management techniques. Simply preserving dwindling natural resources as a solution to post-frontier anxieties was, Taylor suggested, a solution fatally limited by physical finitude, whereas the world of systemic refinements and productivity gains was new each day.³⁴ Simultaneously, as ever more of the population shifted from manual to nonmanual work—physically undemanding and systematised to maximal, labour-saving efficiency, with clean, well-lit environments and sociable hours—more individuals would theoretically have time and energy to pursue personal goals outside work. The office economy might thereby not rob Americans of their frontier-wrought vital individualism but restore and expand it—releasing, to borrow Herbert Marcuse's sceptical gloss on all such beliefs in the liberating powers of technologised control of labour, 'individual energy into a yet uncharted realm of freedom'.³⁵ Even Turner hailed technological advancement in office work as a new socioeconomic frontier, providing renewed opportunity and possibility to an America divested of wilderness. It is instructive, however, in the context of discourses that locate the office's anti-frontier qualities in its attenuation of masculinity, that the sense of possibility Turner found in the office resided in its role in 'the rise of women [...] in the business world'.³⁶

Into this interwar window of office optimism step Chandler's Marlowe and Cain's Huff.³⁷ Both characters irritate the systems of this world, sceptical of their supposed advantages. They are

³³ Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York, NY: Harper and Brothers, 1911), 8.

³⁴ Taylor, 7.

³⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1991), 2.

³⁶ Turner, 'Since the Foundation [of Clark University 1889]', 212.

³⁷ Huff and Marlowe also enter the office at a particularly significant point in the 'rise of women in the business world' that Turner hailed: the 1930s were the decade when women first outnumbered men in the United States' clerical workforce, having represented

antagonistic mirror images of both the organisation man and his ancestor, Taylor's 'trained man'.³⁸ Their navigations and negotiations of various types office space disclose a scepticism and suspicion of corporate cultures of surveillance, hierarchy, division, and regimentation. They challenge and subvert the structures and rules governing these spaces to their own individual ends, repurposing the offices' intended meanings to redesignate them as frontier zones, contested between occupier and aggressor. In thus wilding the tame they assert the ability and, indeed, necessity of the individual to retain agency when presented with the dehumanising power of the office. They thereby renew antimodernist scepticisms of earlier decades and anticipate post-war critiques of office-bound regimentation—not least that of Chandler's own *The Long Goodbye* (1953) which, as Sean McCann notes, contains a modish swipe at organisation culture in the form of a corporatised detective agency.³⁹

Double Indemnity, or 'The Plot Against Office America'

In 1942, the psychoanalyst Franz Alexander identified in the criminality of young American men a transmutation of the spirit of 'individualism and adventure' that had defined their 'pioneer forefathers' but which, without a frontier for its 'realization', had become 'pathological'.⁴⁰ Walter

only 2.4 percent of clerical workers 60 years earlier. Glenn and Feldberg, 'Degraded and Deskilled', 54. The implications of that demographic shift for any masculinist, frontierist, anti-office discourse are, however, ambiguous. The office becoming a space populated mostly by women might appear to confirm (and even increase) earlier fears that the office was a space with feminine and feminising qualities. Equally, however, it might seem that men had been fortuitously spared the feminising effects of the office by the delegation to women of almost all its 'detail work' and the tacit demarcation therein of white-collar *management* as a distinctly male realm, conceptually secured against the demasculinising effects of mere clerking. Glenn and Feldberg, 54–55. Accordingly, it is difficult to make any claim that any anti-office discourse manifested by Huff and Marlowe represents a direct or specific response to women's contemporaneous achievement of (numerical) superiority in the office workforce, and I do not do so here.

³⁸ Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, 7.

³⁹ Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 175.

⁴⁰ Franz Alexander, *Our Age of Unreason: A Study of the Irrational Forces in Social Life* (New York, NY: J. B. Lippincott, 1942), 302–3. Also cited in Webb, *Great Frontier*, 124.

Prescott Webb quoted Alexander approvingly, suggesting that criminality was a means by which modern Americans sought to retrieve a time and a place in which ‘each man was [...] his own law’.⁴¹ For Webb and Alexander, modern criminality denoted simultaneously the ‘frustration of frontier ideals’ and a ‘retreat’ to them: crime’s violent mourning of frontier conditions paradoxically revealed their darkly triumphant persistence, even renewal.⁴² Cain’s Walter Huff offers fictive vindication of Alexander and Webb’s theory. Huff’s turn to criminality expresses itself not only as a desire to recuperate frontier values of ‘initiative, bravado, and individual accomplishment’, but also as a direct assault upon the anti-frontierist values of the modern white-collar business world and its office-based culture.⁴³

There is longstanding critical agreement that James M. Cain’s fictions and characters are motivated near-exclusively by some combination of sex and money.⁴⁴ Nowhere does this seem more apparent than in *Double Indemnity* (1943), wherein Huff is incited to murder by the erotic promise of Phyllis Nirdlinger and the financial promise of her husband’s life insurance policy. Without dismissing the narrative centrality of those imperatives, however, we can locate Huff’s suspicious, confrontational engagement with the office as a third essential dynamic undergirding the text. John Irwin acknowledges that *Double Indemnity* is legible as an anticorporate novel—about ‘the resentment of having a boss—of not being one’s own man and thus not being fully a man’—yet the more specific stakes of Cain’s engagement with the cultural, social, and historical particularities of the office remain unexamined.⁴⁵

A cursory reading of the opening scenes of Billy Wilder’s Chandler-scripted 1944 film version of Cain’s novel (in which the protagonist is renamed ‘Neff’) suggests the scale and

⁴¹ Webb, *Great Frontier*, 123.

⁴² Webb, 124, 123.

⁴³ Alexander, *Our Age of Unreason: A Study of the Irrational Forces in Social Life*, 302.

⁴⁴ David Madden and Kristopher Mecholsky, *James M. Cain: Hard-Boiled Mythmaker* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 38; Frank MacShane, *The Life of Raymond Chandler* (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1976), 101.

⁴⁵ John T. Irwin, ‘Beating the Boss: Cain’s Double Indemnity’, *American Literary History* 14, no. 2 (1 April 2002): 264.

significance of this critical lacuna. Here the disclosure of the novel's narrative-framing conceit—that it is its protagonist's confession—is shifted to the start of the narrative, which is then related in flashback. Moreover, the film transforms the confession from a hospital bed dictation into an audio recording made in the offices of General Fidelity, Huff/Neff's insurance firm employer. These directorial decisions make immediately explicit what is latent in the novel: the office is the locus of the protagonist's crisis. Neff's motivations remain opaque in the film's initial, brief, wordless shots of his car speeding erratically through Los Angeles at an unsociable hour. The first hint that Walter is an agent of misdeed is that he must rap on the glass door of his office building to be admitted by the nightwatchman, who notes that he is 'working pretty late'.⁴⁶ *Double Indemnity* first signifies that its world is out of joint by showing a while-collar worker break the spatial practice of his office workplace. To seek ingress long after closing time, even as an employee, is to disobey one of the space's basic rules and thus immediately to attract suspicion.

One of the parameters by which the space of the office is produced has been corrupted. Lefebvre writes that, although the physical, mental, and social aspects of space—the triad of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived—are 'interconnected', they may not always 'constitute a coherent whole'.⁴⁷ Because the constituent parts of the triad are 'not only things but also things but also relations', producing space contingently, to destabilise any one of the three inevitably and immediately renders the whole incoherent, throwing into doubt any and all of a space's commonly accepted meanings and significations.⁴⁸ Although Neff's transgression is itself minor, the social codes of office life are so clear, commonplace, and rigid that his out-of-hours arrival is conspicuously aberrant to viewer and nightwatchman alike. Indeed, that it so readily serves as a proxy for greater unease is itself an indicator of how widespread understanding of and conformity to the socio-spatial terms of the office had become by the 1940s, when almost 23 percent of

⁴⁶ Billy Wilder, *Double Indemnity* (Paramount Pictures, 1944).

⁴⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 39–40.

⁴⁸ Lefebvre, 77.

American urban workers were employed in clerical and related fields.⁴⁹ The film exploits the office's cultural ubiquity to render a seemingly harmless act ominously suggestive of greater social disruption.



Figure 5: Still from Billy Wilder, *Double Indemnity* (Paramount Pictures, 1944).

Walter Neff enters the mezzanine above the main office space. A door to a private office is visible upper right; the janitorial staff can be seen among the desks below.

⁴⁹ Census sample statistics estimated that, in 1940, 6.3 million urban-dwelling Americans were employed in clerical and 'kindred' occupations, of a total of 27.7 million urban workers. *1940 Census of Population: The Labour Force (Sample Statistics)* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 134. Glenn and Feldberg give a lower figure of 4.8 million clerical workers in the total population, a figure which appears to strip out the 'kindred' jobs from the census tables. 'Degraded and Deskilled', 54. I cite the census' broader definition here because it in itself suggests the conceptual creep of 'clericalisation' into other forms of work and because it gives a sense of how many Americans were not strictly clerical workers but worked in proximity to those who were. By 1940, you may not have been an office worker but there was a good chance that you knew somebody who was and/or recognised elements of the clerical life in your own employment (certainly, if you were white—the same census statistics suggest that less than 4 percent of non-white urban workers occupied clerical and kindred positions).

Neff enters an up-to-the-minute office space of the day, confronting a balcony/mezzanine giving access to the individual offices of senior staff members and running the perimeter of a large, unbroken space below—precisely the kind of space that advances in steel-framed building technology had made structurally possible (figure 5). Ranks of desks for administrative and secretarial staff can be surveilled from above. The space is defined by boundaries, segregation, and hierarchy, with the size, position, and individuation of one's space denoting relative primacy within the corporate structure. Occupying Walter's perspective, we peer over the balcony at caretakers emptying wastepaper baskets. The cleaners disposing of 'evidence' of the previous day's work echo (for Neff) and foreshadow (for the viewer) the two signature elements of his crime—a deception that is both paper-based (hinging on an insurance policy) and dependent upon a late-night 'disposal' (that of Herbert Nirdlinger's body from a train). Although Neff's deed remains to be revealed, his reluctance to enter the office, the shot of the caretakers, his out-of-hours entry, and the film's relocation of his confession to the office itself conspire to suggest one thing: to return to the office in *Double Indemnity* is to return to the real scene of the crime.

Walter Huff/Neff embodies a frontierist enmity towards corporate cultures of surveillance, hierarchy, division, and regimentation in his interactions with his employer, General Fidelity, an insurer.⁵⁰ Insurance is a notional product, existing entirely in the abstract, in the act of being agreed upon by two parties; even its sole physical manifestation on paper merely signifies that act. Produced by calculations, probabilities, systems, and statistics, insurance is 'knowledge work', intrinsically a post-Taylor meta-business. General Fidelity has field agents (if we are to place Huff in a frontiersmanlike role it is telling that he is one), salesmen who must be present in the world in order to sell the product, but that product is 'made' in the office; salesmen merely gather the one necessary raw material (customers) that cannot be conjured from a ledger. In insurance, administration *is* manufacturing. Wilder's shot of Neff watching the office caretakers at night

⁵⁰ James M. Cain, *Double Indemnity* (London: Orion, 2005), 3.

suggests this suspicious abstract emptiness—in which both product and waste effluent are paper, the means of production the office itself. Insurance is thus the apotheosis of the kind of nothing-making business against which Whitman and Merwin had counselled, and a prototypical manifestation of the alienatingly abstract ‘organisation’ that would trouble post-war office critics. Chandler comments to that effect in *The Big Sleep* (1939). Grifter Harry Jones works for crooked bookie Puss Walgreen, whose front is an insurance business but who would only ‘sell you insurance [...] if you tramped on him’. The idea that insurance is an empty, purely notional construct is taken to its literal extreme, it exists only as ‘what it says on the door’.⁵¹ Behind that door is but a blankness where a company should be, the intrinsically abstract characteristics of insurance providing the ultimate corporate opacity into which Walgreen can sublimate his real business.

Besides the feint from the physical that its nothing-making quality as a business suggests, insurance as a product further embodies anti-frontierist qualities because it manifests a belief that risk is manageable, predictable, and can be mitigated against. (Harry Jones’ fate is ironic in this regard—he fails to calculate accurately the risks of his schemes and as a result is poisoned in the very offices where Walgreen supposedly sells the idea that risk *can* be calculated.) Insurance and the frontiersman both venerate risk, but the former does so only to the extent that it profits from danger that does *not* materialise. The development of the insurance industry and the fall of the frontier in fact occupy the very same moment: only by the late 1800s had a ‘formal insurance market’ evolved.⁵² Franco Moretti writes that the defining feature of bourgeois society’s expansion in the nineteenth century was a ‘new regularity of existence’, which he finds embodied in contemporary art and fiction.⁵³ We may likewise find it in the contemporary rise of the insurance industry, which insists both that risk is not what it used to be and that the tools of its diminishment

⁵¹ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, in *The Big Sleep and Other Novels* (London: Penguin, 2000), 118.

⁵² Robert Whaples and David Buffum, ‘Fraternalism, Paternalism, the Family, and the Market: Insurance a Century Ago’, *Social Science History* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1171484>.

⁵³ Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013), 4, 81.

lie no longer in the frontiersman's physical subordination of a threatening world but in the new knowledge economy's powers of predictive regularisation.

'Regularity' is the frontiersman's nemesis. He demands conditions of unpredictable, intractable hazard against which to test himself, conditions which insurance obviates with a claim that, while risk may still exist, it is minimal enough to be profitably insurable and moreover need no longer fall upon lone individuals but can instead be pooled in collective safety. Indeed, by the time Cain wrote *Double Indemnity* there had developed an active discourse around 'the erosion of personal agency threatened by the large-scale industrialization of insurance'.⁵⁴ Insurance's regularisation of risk, its diminution of individual agency, its increasingly industrial scale, its abstraction, and its deskbound culture, then, all evoke post-frontier anxieties. Huff's criminal plot aims to exploit (and reveal as mistaken) the idea that the world in its current state is predictable, capable of being rationalised into probabilities and premiums, filing cabinets and ledgers. As an institution in which probability ensures that the house always wins Walter compares insurance to gambling—suggesting that the writing on Puss Walgreen's door may be accurate after all, that insurance is less a front for bookmaking than a euphemism for it. Walter intends to reveal just such a truth with a brutal act of murder that shatters the social boundaries upon which General Fidelity calculates the odds of the world, disrupting the structures on which the insurance business subsists, via a powerful re-injection of unpredictable frontier risk.

Herbert Nirdlinger is thus less the target of a crime than collateral damage in a strike against the anti-frontier values of 'regularity' embodied in a culture of contemporary white-collar business. As Walter remarks, 'the business I'm in'—the stultifyingly regulated and risk-managed worldview of his employer—is what has driven him 'nuts', and it is therefore the business upon which he seeks revenge.⁵⁵ Cain derived his novel's central conceit—an insurance agent who uses his

⁵⁴ Frederick Whiting, 'Playing Against Type: Statistical Personhood, Depth Narrative, and the Business of Genre in James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*', *Journal of Narrative Theory* 36, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 198, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jnt.2007.0006>.

⁵⁵ Cain, *Double Indemnity*, 26.

expertise in detecting fraudulent claims to carry one out—from a tale he had heard about a printer whose decades spent removing profane typographical errors from newsprint left him unable to resist ‘watching for chances’ to insert one: in Roy Hoopes’ words, ‘dynamite was lurking there in the printer’s compulsion’.⁵⁶ In the insurance office, Huff retains from the ‘printer’s compulsion’ a desire to lay dynamite in a seemingly anodyne world of paper.

When Phyllis Nirdlinger suggests to Walter the idea of murdering her husband in a phoney swimming pool mishap, he dismisses the plan as flawed.⁵⁷ Instead, he proposes staging a railroad ‘accident’, which will maximise the ensuing life insurance payout—the eponymous ‘double indemnity’. Walter’s plot ultimately exploits a mistaken institutional assumption that a corporatised, office-bound America occupies an irretrievably post-frontier condition. He explains that insurers

found out pretty quick, when they began to write accident insurance, that [...] the spots that people think are danger spots, aren’t danger spots at all. I mean, people always think a railroad train is a pretty dangerous place to be, or they did anyway, before the novelty wore off, but the figures show not many people get killed, or even hurt, on railroad trains. So on accident policies, they put in a feature that sounds pretty good [...] but it doesn’t cost the company much, because it knows he’s pretty sure to get there safely.⁵⁸

The early days of rail to which Walter refers have longstanding cultural associations with the latter, trans-Mississippi days of the frontier era. The compassing of the continent by rail brought larger

⁵⁶ Roy Hoopes, *Cain: The Biography of James M. Cain*, 2nd ed. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 258.

⁵⁷ Cain, *Double Indemnity*, 21–22.

⁵⁸ Cain, 24.

waves of immigration to the far West and was thus both a phase in frontier history *and* a harbinger of the frontier's end.⁵⁹ The railroad made possible the population growth and concomitant economic, industrial, and agricultural development that closed the frontier, but was itself initially defined by frontier conditions.

The train itself, moreover, was deemed, as Huff says, a 'dangerous place'. In the period when the frontier remained unarguably open and the American railroad network embryonic, however, trains had in fact been relatively safe. It was only in the 1850s, 'as trains speeded up and services became more frequent', that railroad safety became a *cause célèbre*.⁶⁰ The very technological developments that enabled the railroad to destroy the frontier (i.e. by webbing the continent with greater efficacy and completeness) were those that lent it the frontier's essential quality of being not merely novel, liminal and westwardly mobile but also mortally dangerous. Thus, early rail travellers journeyed through frontier lands while embodying the de-frontierising of those lands, while their means of transport embodied both the frontier's conquest *and* frontier conditions. In leveraging popular memory of the risky days of early rail travel, then, Huff's plot resonates paradoxically with both pre- and post-frontier worlds.

Accordingly, the most tantalising aspect of Huff's history of double indemnity policies is the suggestion that the man on street has an unarticulated, instinctual—and empirically illogical—belief in the present-day persistence of frontier-era risk dynamics. This belief is sufficient to convince the insurance purchaser that a double payout for rail accidents is worth an increased premium. The 'novelty' of frontier-era rail may have worn off, but its supposed concomitant

⁵⁹ On rail's significance specifically in Southern California's development from frontier to major centre of population and commerce, see Paul R. Spitzzeri, 'The Road to Independence: The Los Angeles and Independence Railroad and the Conception of a City', *Southern California Quarterly* 83, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 23–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41172051>; Edna Monch Parker, 'The Southern Pacific Railroad and Settlement in Southern California', *Pacific Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (1937): 103–19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3633158>. A succinct account of the railroad's broader role in the West's (and America's) nineteenth-century socioeconomic transformation can be found in H. W. Brands, *American Colossus: The Triumph of Capitalism, 1865–1900* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2010), 43–69.

⁶⁰ Christian Wolmar, *The Great Railway Revolution* (London: Atlantic Books, 2012), 203–4, 206.

dangers have left vestigial traces in prospective insurance purchasers' mental calculations. Insurers, occupying the regulated and regulating post-frontier world of the office, operate on no such illogical, instinctual basis. Their calculations are made solely on the dispassionately Taylorised basis of 'the figures', which show that modern trains are safe: the intention of the double indemnity policy is actively to exploit customers' supposedly erroneous superstition that the risk profile of rail travel has changed far less since its frontier incarnation than it has. The genius of Huff's plan, therefore, is in effectively reconstructing the risk profile of frontier rail, artificially inflating (to 100 percent) the probability that Herbert Nirdlinger will *seem to* suffer death on the rails (the murder actually happens in a car). Walter and Phyllis do not prove that the insurers were wrong in their assessment of modern rail travel's safety, but they create the appearance of corroborating the insurance consumer's frontier-legacy superstition that trains are fraught with danger.

Through this plan, the conspirators make themselves antimodern, anticorporate agents of the frontier. In murdering Herbert to secure their own futures (or so Walter believes), they corroborate Joan Didion's suggestion that 'wagon-train morality'—the frontier-birthing belief that it may be morally admissible to harm or even kill another person to ensure one's own survival—continued to define social relations in the modern American West.⁶¹ This, though, this is a recursive iteration of frontier morality, because it is deployed in securing a future for the frontier itself. The plotters vindicate a societal hunch that the hazards of the frontier have not been suppressed as effectively as the insurers' figures suggest. Walter and Phyllis keep the violent, unpredictable frontier alive by reinvesting with apparent danger the great mechanical symbol of America's western expansion, but their human unpredictability is the true source of frontier-era danger against which the aligned forces of post-frontier anti-individualism, insurance, and the office cannot mitigate.

⁶¹ Joan Didion, 'The Insidious Ethic of Conscience', *The American Scholar* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1965): 626.

Walter's frontiersmanlike allegiances are further revealed in persistent suggestions that the murder plan is not merely a defiance of the odds his employer exists to calculate, but that such defiance is, for him, the act's greatest reward. He yearns to disabuse General Fidelity of its belief that it 'know[s] every crooked trick'.⁶² In order to beat the odds, Walter tells Phyllis, they must 'be bold. It's the only way'.⁶³ This approach—individualist to the point of foolhardiness, high-risk, high-reward, deliberately *inflating* hazard to make a subsequent triumph more heroic and thrilling—is both cognate with the frontiersman's credo and entirely antithetical to the values of his employer. As Turner defines it, the frontier must be 'at first too strong for the man', who must 'accept those conditions or perish': a frontier is not a frontier unless there is a genuine possibility of it conquering—rather than being conquered by—its ingressor.⁶⁴ Walter seeks to create for himself an analogous paradigm. Unlike Phyllis, who has a death wish, he *does* wish to triumph over his situation—to complete the plan successfully, escaping alive and enriched—but it is no triumph at all unless achieved from a position of seemingly overwhelming unlikelihood.

Trying to explain the need to 'be bold' Walter draws an analogy with gangsters gunning down an enemy in full view of a crowd, suggesting that a seemingly high-risk crime, if committed perfectly, is in fact the one most likely to evade suspicion.⁶⁵ His explicatory efforts, though, are conspicuously inadequate, marked by lacunae in their logic: ultimately there is no convincing practical reason given as to why a plan with less 'audacity' could not be pursued more safely.⁶⁶ Justification for 'hitting it for the limit', raising the stakes to extremes, is entirely circular—'that's what I go for. It's all I go for'.⁶⁷ That such boldness defies rational explanation is precisely its point: the irrational act is the one that defies his employers' conception of a predictable, regularised

⁶² Cain, *Double Indemnity*, 26–27.

⁶³ Cain, 26.

⁶⁴ Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 4.

⁶⁵ Cain, *Double Indemnity*, 23–24.

⁶⁶ Cain, 22.

⁶⁷ Cain, 42.

world. Walter must place himself in the situation of greatest possible danger because its compensation is not only double indemnity but also self-actualising individuation, distinction from both the predictability embodied by his employer and the equally predictable wrongdoings of lesser crooks—‘punk[s] up in San Francisco’ pulling ‘piker job[s]’.⁶⁸ In a compulsion to assert an exceptional, odds-defying capacity for survival within self-imposed conditions of hazard, which is simultaneously to defy both his employer’s probability-based vision of the world and the anti-wilderness values of the workplace where those probabilities are calculated, Walter is wholly frontiersmanlike.

That Walter’s murderous project is a frontierist one carried out against the modern corporate edifice and its values is further demonstrated by the identity of his adversary throughout the narrative: Barton Keyes, the company’s chief claims administrator. Although Walter’s greatest crime is ostensibly murder, the professionalised forces of law enforcement or criminal inquiry are conspicuous by the fact that they are *not* positioned as the main investigators of his misdemeanours. In *Double Indemnity* the police and private detective, the twin loci of justice and crime-solving in hardboiled convention, are both relegated to background roles. The police are seldom mentioned, their investigation largely undisclosed. Inasmuch as it is, it does not appear particularly thorough or effective; if murder were the only crime here, and the police the only investigators, it seems that Walter and Phyllis may have evaded justice. They do not because within the narrative’s logic Walter’s crime is one committed less against Herbert Nirdlinger than against his own employer. Even when he is not *in* the office, Walter spends much of the novel being surveilled *by* his office (the only private eyes in the novel are agents—synecdoches—of the insurance company). The text’s narrative-framing confession is made not to an arresting officer, nor to a judge, but to Keyes. It is the sin against the employer, the breach of trust between staff member and corporate institution, that must be admitted.

⁶⁸ Cain, 24, 42.

In *Double Indemnity*, conventional criminal investigation is to all narrative purposes replaced by General Fidelity's claims assessment process. The internal practices and procedures of an insurance firm are in effect the 'crimefighter' in this hardboiled plot. Cain takes the investigatory mechanics of the crime novel away from the offices of the District Attorneys and private eye, relocating them in the office of the claims administrator. This corroborates the sense that Huff is motivated to murder not only by money or sex but at least as substantially by a desire to challenge the professional arbiters of risk who believe that the world can be organised by predictive systems. That General Fidelity is the entity within the novel most urgently concerned with subduing Walter reflects the fact that it is the entity whose values and integrity he has most assailed.

Thompson writes extensively about the steady development in modern America of a 'surveillance culture' centred around the office⁶⁹. Such surveillance could take many forms, from the direct supervision of a manager (facilitated by space planning strategies) to the remote contact successively easier and more intimate by telegram, telephone, and computer, to increasingly intricate and precisely-maintained records of work done and not done. Barton Keyes deploys such tools in his role (employee records, claim records, recording devices, the employment of private investigators), but more importantly he himself embodies the office-world in which a surveillance culture predominates, the very world that has driven Huff 'nuts'. Keyes, as his name suggests, unlocks secrets on behalf of the company by simultaneously guarding its own institutional memory. As 'a holdover from the old regime' of General Fidelity's founder, he seems embedded in the organisation's corporate history, but his name likewise indicates a figure representative of the modern organisation's self-conception as a scientised machine in which employees operate in an integrated series of mechanism-like processes. We are told that Keyes approaches his job as 'a

⁶⁹ Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance*, xiv, 5, 7, 12.

theorist', whose intricate thinking 'make[s] your head ache to be around him', evoking the contemporary Taylorist drive to systematise every aspect of work.⁷⁰

Keyes lives entirely in the world of paperwork: when memos and telegrams flood in following Nirdlinger's death, they all come directly to Keyes, piling up to the point that he is forced to secure them under a weight.⁷¹ When Keyes voices suspicions to Huff about the Nirdlinger case, he claims that '[w]hen you've handled a million of them, you know, and you don't even know how you know'.⁷² This investigator pretends no incredible deductive powers or insights; he does not even understand the fuller depths of his own knowledge. He is in this sense the triumph of the modern, systematised business that so maddens Huff because he is its internalisation. Keyes knows what he knows not through native genius but through endless repetition, not by individual ingenuity but by its obviation—via immersion in procedure so complete that aberrations become obvious without thought.

He is exactly Taylor's idea of a 'trained man' and thus Walter's psychic as well as procedural nemesis, a figure who embodies the culture of the modern white-collar workplace exactly as Walter embodies a re-frontierising disruptor thereof. Indeed, Keyes' investigation into Walter is impeded by his faith in the system of corporate bureaucracy and record-keeping: when he is first advised to place Huff under the watch of a private investigator, Keyes responds that, in effect, it is not necessary to do so because Huff is effectively already surveilled by other means, surrounded by a network of data and information that enable risk to be assessed without further human intervention:

All his statements check closely with the facts and with our records,
as well as with the dead man's records. I have even checked, without

⁷⁰ Cain, *Double Indemnity*, 66.

⁷¹ Cain, 67.

⁷² Cain, 78.

his knowledge, his whereabouts the night of the crime, and find he was at home all night. [...] I point out to you further, his record which has been exceptional in cases of fraud.⁷³

Revealingly, given Keyes' refusal to deploy an investigator, it is unclear how he comes by Huff's whereabouts on the night of the crime—the one non-record-based piece of information in his surveillance mosaic. This is an office somehow eerily able simply to *know* the movements of its employees, even outside work. Temporarily, though, Huff is able to prove fallible these structures of regiment and control: the picture of Huff's trustworthiness that Keyes' systems present is wildly inaccurate. Moreover, Keyes' confidence in his ability to manifest the modern office's panopticon eye is shown to be misplaced precisely through a spatially-transgressive subversion of its culture: Huff learns that there will be no investigator appointed to tail him by violating the sanctity of Keyes' office after-hours and accessing memo recordings. Huff simultaneously assails and evades the logic of the office by chaotically ignoring its spatial practice and inverting the purposes of its systems.

Keyes embodies the characteristics about which prophets of the office's deleterious effect on frontierist masculinity had warned. 'Big and fat and peevish', a profuse sweater, his form has become a gross reflection of his hypertrophied intellectual existence, evoking anti-clerking invective's fears that deskbound life would ruin the constitution of rugged American manhood.⁷⁴ Huff's adversary, then, represents anti-frontierism both because he embodies his employer's risk-managed, rule-based culture of systems and safeguards (and has sacrificed individuality to the collective in doing so), and because he attests physically and in his investigatory activities to the office world's deleterious effects on frontier qualities in a man. (Indeed, his investigation only succeeds when he eventually does admit instinct and permit it to trump the empirical systems that

⁷³ Cain, 91–92.

⁷⁴ Cain, 66, 68.

would otherwise place Walter above suspicion.) *Double Indemnity* thus foreshadows the disquiet over increasingly paranoid working culture and its effect on the individual psyche that would become so prominent in 1950s anti-organisation discourse.

Walter believes that Keyes and the office culture he embodies understand the darker vicissitudes of existence and the irrationalities of the human mind far less well than they claim to. He therefore sets out to prove, by his own hand, that unpredictable chaos can still exist in the world, untameable by loss adjusters and claims investigators. He evokes the frontierist/wilderness ethic of what the American (masculine) individual should be, because he believes himself possessed of preternatural ability to enter a situation of danger, risk, and chaos and navigate it successfully by his own ingenuity alone. Unlike his symbolic predecessor, however, he is also the agent, the mobile space, within which those forces of unpredictability are vested: his identity is thus cognate not only with the frontiersman but with the frontier *itself*. Mistakenly, Walter believes that the dangers he unleashes are unpredictable only to others, but not to him. The ‘savage’ forces he unleashes upon the world of the office are, like those of the Turnerian frontier, beyond individual control: Walter is ultimately overwhelmed not by the juggernaut logic of the organisation but by the literally and figuratively unmanageable consequences of his own his social boundary-crossing.

Those consequences are manifest in the figure of Phyllis Nirdlinger, whose role in the murder plot and Walter’s eventual undoing demonstrates that its sexual and frontierist/anticorporate contexts are not contradictory or, ultimately, even separate. Phyllis’ willingness not merely to cuckold but to murder her stuffy businessman husband in order, seemingly, to secure a future with Walter, appears to him to affirm the power of his rugged, rule-breaking masculinity. In Phyllis, Walter seems to find not just a co-conspirator in murder but an ally in his attack on office culture—because she affirms the danger-loving, risk-taking vision of frontierist manhood that he seeks to embody and to which the office and insurance are antithetical. Phyllis’ flattery of Walter’s masculinity aligns her with his frontier values. Walter apparently does

not realise, however, that if Phyllis shares with him an adherence to the creed of the frontier, she must be as dangerously unpredictable as he is. Perhaps Walter fails to see this precisely because the association of frontierism with maleness, which Phyllis herself affirms in Walter by flattering his self-perception as an irrepressible force of unregulated, violent instability, makes it impossible for him to consider that a woman might manifest those very values.

In Walter's own destruction, his frontier-reviving project succeeds: if he truly had mastery over the uncertainties he (re)introduces to a world built upon a logic of 'orderly expectations', he would experience no *genuine* risk, only the illusion thereof, in fact validating and remaining complicit in the ideology he attempts to subvert. If *he* could predict events, thereby anticipating Phyllis' caprices and thus escaping his fate, he would only prove the triumph of a systematised, predictable world. Walter's death is ultimately the result of a failure to anticipate Phyllis' own manifestation of the kind of risk, hazard, and unpredictability he himself embodied and seeks to reintroduce to the world. Only in dying, therefore, can Walter prove (contrary to the prevailing currents of his age and the fears of a century of anti-office discourse) of his own claim that humankind's volatile, irrational individualism cannot be managed out of existence.

The Detective-Frontiersman: Philip Marlowe's Spatial Interrogations

Raymond Chandler once wrote in a letter to a fan that Philip Marlowe had been a claims investigator for an insurance firm prior to establishing himself as a private detective—he flirted with becoming Barton Keyes. Chandler tantalisingly suggests, albeit in a source of dubious canonicity, that Marlowe once endeavoured to work within insurance's culture of corporate systematisation, but couldn't stick at it, turning ultimately to the private eye's altogether more

solitary and self-directed existence.⁷⁵ Like Huff, Marlowe expresses antagonism to the spatial practices of the office by means of (and to sustain) frontier values. Chandler's letter invites the curious conclusion that Marlowe's frontier-oriented antipathy towards the office is also like Huff's in that it is a rejection of a culture that was once his own. (A trace of that culture, persists, perhaps, in the subconscious of a man who believes he 'need[s] a lot of life insurance' despite having no dependents who would benefit by it.⁷⁶)

John Scaggs rightly notes that 'the identification of the frontier hero as the archetype of the private eye is well established'.⁷⁷ When critics add 'frontiersman' to the detective's catalogue of symbolic identities, however, they typically do so only in broad terms, often within larger typologies of white masculine heroism, as when Philip Durham counted 'the American frontier hero' among the detective's mythic masks but focused instead on the detective-as-knight.⁷⁸ Scaggs and McCann both typify the near-exclusive focus in existing detective-as-frontiersman models upon shared cultural values or character traits—rugged individualism, white masculine heroism, the desire to pursue and subdue conflict, the power to bring order through rough justice. McCann identifies 'the fading virtues of the open frontier' as an object of Marlovian quest; Scaggs emphasises comparability in physical strength, moral fortitude, and capacities for violence.⁷⁹ Such readings fail to consider fully that the frontier is defined not merely by values but by those values' mobilisation within and articulation of highly codified spatial dynamics. Thus Megan Abbott observes that the detective has 'forerunners in like-minded navigators of Western space or

⁷⁵ Raymond Chandler to D. J. Ibberson, 19 April 1951, in *Raymond Chandler: Later Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Frank MacShane (New York, NY: Library of America, 1995), 1043–44. As the novels make clear, Marlowe has also had a spell working for the District Attorney. When Marlowe visits former colleague Bernie Ohls in *The Big Sleep* there are conspicuous references to the confinements of Ohls' office, suggesting that the Hall of Justice was also too spatially and systemically restricted a life for Marlowe. Ohls ruefully refers to his own working environment as his 'hutch', while Marlowe notes that the offices are 'small', and that Ohls' is 'no larger' than those of his juniors 'but he had it to himself'. Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 31–32.

⁷⁶ Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, in *The Big Sleep and Other Novels* (London: Penguin, 2000), 330.

⁷⁷ Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 64.

⁷⁸ Philip Durham, *Down These Mean Streets: Raymond Chandler's Knight* (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press, 1963), 147.

⁷⁹ Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, 64.

wilderness’ but stops short of exploring precisely how his navigations of space invoke the frontier.⁸⁰ Richard Lehan proposes Marlowe as a ‘frontiersman [...] transformed by the city’ without considering the correlative possibilities that such a figure’s presence might transform the city’s spaces into frontiers.⁸¹

Lee Horsley exemplifies critical failures to bring a true consideration of the frontier’s essential spatiality into the detective-frontiersman analogy when he frames the two figures as both ‘patrolling the border between civilization and savagery’.⁸² Here Horsley betrays a misunderstanding of frontier spatial dynamics. Although the detective’s mediation between ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’ is indeed, as I will discuss, essential to his frontiersmanship, frontiersmanship is avowedly *not* ‘border patrol’, an act that maintains and secures an existing ‘civilizational’ boundary. Quite the opposite, the frontiersman renders that boundary unstably mobile through his perpetual acts of spatial incursion. Ross Macdonald came closest to apprehending this when he identified the detective as embodying the ‘restless man of American democracy’.⁸³ To fully test Philip Marlowe’s capacities as a model frontiersman, we must analyse how he performs the fundamental action of frontiersmanship—his ‘restless’ movement through space. Here, therefore, I first suggest how detective work spatially reproduces frontiersmanship, before articulating why the office constitutes particularly rich territory for such work.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Megan E. Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2.

⁸¹ Richard Lehan, *The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 252.

⁸² Lee Horsley, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 74.

⁸³ Ross Macdonald, ‘The Writer as Detective Hero’, in *On Crime Writing* (Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1973), 15 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁴ Like the critics quoted here, I am principally interested in how the detective inherits aspects of the frontiersman’s identity as a mythic archetype. That inheritance was, however, compounded by and reflected in more prosaic relationships between the two figures. As protagonists of fiction, both ‘detectives [...] and western outlaws [...] proliferated’ alongside each other in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dime novels and pulp magazines. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1998), 242. See also Marcus Klein, *Easterns, Westerns, and Private Eyes: American Matters, 1870–1900* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). Indeed, the detective to some extent developed from and supplanted figures of the pre-urban west in such literature—the popular late nineteenth century character Deadwood

The frontiersman and detective are both roles that guarantee unpredictable adventures in uncomfortable environments amidst volatile and dangerous people. The private investigator is licenced, he has an honorary sheriff's badge, but operates independently, in trouble with the cops as often as he is in league with them. In the Marlowe novels law does not necessarily equal justice and vice versa. In this, Marlowe represents justice cut loose from institutional and bureaucratic ties, resituated instead in the principles and instincts of a pragmatic individual. Such characteristics do not simply resonate with the legacy of Turnerian frontier justice (in which 'the personality of law' took precedence over any 'organized machinery of justice', privileging '[t]he duel and the blood-feud'), they lend the detective a quality of frontierlike liminality, between regulated institutional order and lawless expediency.⁸⁵ Chandler exploits this aspect of the detective's professional identity to have Marlowe perform socio-spatial negotiations that are themselves strongly redolent of frontierism.

Narratively as well as professionally, Marlowe's typical investigative task is to pioneer an investigative passage between spaces separated by money, by law, by class, by race—the canyonside mansion and the tumbledown apartment house, the exclusive club and the dank barroom. This gymnastic sociogeographic mobility is suggested in Macdonald's essential observation that the detective's role is as a social 'mask' worn by the text in order to 'face the dangers of society high and low'.⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson expands on that theme:

[T]he various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in its own geographical compartment. [...] Since there is

Dick started life as a stage driver, but as time passed and the West changed was 'transformed into a detective'. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, 119. As Blake Allmendinger notes, such fictional elision between the detective and cowboy in turn reflected the historical reality of 'livestock detectives', cowboys who took to working for ranches or even detective agencies to catch cattle rustlers. Blake Allmendinger, *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), 115–18.

⁸⁵ Turner, 'Contributions of the West', 253–54.

⁸⁶ Macdonald, 'The Writer as Detective Hero', 20.

no longer any privileged experience in which the whole of the social structure can be grasped, a figure must be [...] superimposed on the society as a whole, whose routine and life-pattern serve somehow to tie its separate and isolated parts together. [...] Through him we are able to see, to know, the society as a whole, but he does not really stand for any genuine experience of it.⁸⁷

Such ability to manoeuvre between ‘society high and low’ places Marlowe in a doubly frontiersmanlike role. Not only does it suggest the frontiersman’s ironic quality of becoming exceptional precisely because he is an everyman (Chandler wrote that a detective must be ‘a common man and yet an unusual man’), it also places Marlowe in a position of negotiating between ‘civilized’ and ‘savage’.⁸⁸ Marlowe’s navigations between the ‘civilized’ societal surface and its ‘savage’ underbelly, however, in fact serve to reveal that the two exist in threatening proximity to each other—or are in fact manifest in *the same* place or person. In Chandler, high-society Anglo-Americans provide the locus of masked personal ‘savagery’ at least as frequently as the small-time hoods and crooks whose socioeconomic position or ethnic identity would appear to place them further from (and under suspicion by) the mainstream of American life.

As Liahna Babener notes, ‘[v]irtually every one of Chandler’s seven novels pivots on [...] mistaken, disguised, or altered identity’.⁸⁹ *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) charts the failure of Helen Grayle to maintain the suppression of her former identity as low-rent lounge singer Velma Valento. Grayle believes that she has consigned to history every trace of her old life, but it returns in the form of Moose Malloy. His animal name and overwhelming strength (he throws a man against ‘clear across the room’ with a crash that could be ‘heard in Denver’) connoting uncontrollable

⁸⁷ Fredric Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality* (London: Verso, 2016), 7.

⁸⁸ Raymond Chandler, ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, in *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1988), 18.

⁸⁹ Liahna K. Babener, ‘Raymond Chandler’s City of Lies’, in *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Original Essays*, ed. David M. Fine (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 110.

bestiality, Malloy's symbolic import is clear: however 'civilized' you believe yourself to have become, a Turnerian 'hither edge' of untameable atavism remains closer than you think.⁹⁰ In *The Big Sleep*, Arthur Geiger disguises his identity as pornographer, blackmailer, and ephebophile behind his respectable professional status as a bookseller. The camera, that archetypally contemporary instrument with which Geiger produces the pornography that defines his hidden, scandalous identity, is itself hidden inside a totem pole, an object that evokes America prior to its conquest, urbanisation and de-frontierising by white, western men. A connection between resurgent social wildness and the original 'wild' frontier is manifested by their superposition in a single object.

This location of the 'savage' *within* the 'civilized' only affirms Marlowe's allegiance to frontier values. For Turner, although the frontiersman produced a 'civilizing' effect upon wilderness, a suspicion and rejection of 'civilization' was what drove him westward. Likewise, the Merwinite antimoderns who mourned the frontier's loss feared that society was as vulnerable to an overdevelopment of 'civilization' as to 'savagery'—indeed that the decadence of 'overcivilization' could enact its own form of 'savagery' upon individual character. Marlowe makes a cognate claim when he reveals that lawlessness, duplicity, and vice are equally present in spaces of apparent refinement and less salubrious environs; his investigative ability to navigate between the two collapses the socio-spatial distance by which the former affects moral distinction from the latter. In Marlowe's world, as in the frontiersman's, too much 'civilization' and too much 'savagery' ultimately have the same deleterious impact on the bodily and moral integrity of the individual, hence the continual failure of the former to mask the latter. By revealing not only that acts of depravity are locatable in both Beverley Hills and Bunker Hill but that those acts of depravity are often extensions of each other, ultimately one and the same, Marlowe discloses the frontiersmanlike worldview of someone whose suspicions of 'savagery' and excessive 'civilization'

⁹⁰ Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 171.

are held in perfect tension. Indeed, it is precisely because he holds that worldview that such connections become possible.

The importance of this connective role to Marlowe's actions runs counter to Stanley Orr's suggestion that the hardboiled detective is 'heroically isolated from a world of compromised borders', both 'inured to and polarized against the dark places of the metropolis'.⁹¹ Quite the opposite, in performing his Jamesonian social role as the locator of and conduit for contiguities between the 'civilized' world and the 'dark places' from which it pretends a *cordon sanitaire*, Marlowe is both a compromised border and a compromiser of borders, a frontier and a frontiersman. As the figure whose detections of social threats reveal spaces possessed of both insufficiency and excess of 'civilization' to be equally likely as sources of such threats, Marlowe is frontiersmanlike. As the vehicle for the detections by which those spaces are connected, however, however, Marlowe himself becomes the space of their connection, and thus also like a frontier—a mobile liminality where a contest between 'savage' and 'civilized' ultimately reveals both forces to be equally inimical to the individual. Not merely Tzvetan Todorov's 'vulnerable detective', who becomes 'integrated into the universe' when he 'loses his immunity', Marlowe is the permeable detective, penetrated by the spaces he penetrates, permitting the universe to become integrated in himself.⁹²

Although Marlowe's apprehensions of 'savagery' do not map with sociogeographic predictability to where he finds himself in the city, the performance of such acts *is*, however, mapped to the way he *moves through* spaces, to the repeated, codified formula by which Chandler organises space and Marlowe's navigation of it. The frontiersman advances the limit of navigable space, he interrogates prior understandings of the notional divide between space that is safe, mapped and stable, and space whose properties are not yet known. He claims a right to scope the

⁹¹ Stanley Orr, *Darkly Perfect World: Colonial Adventure, Postmodernism, and American Noir* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), 52.

⁹² Tzvetan Todorov, 'Typology of Detective Fiction', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge and Nigel Wood, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014), 231.

latter despite having no formal title to it, even though in many cases it may already be claimed by other occupants. The frontier advances because when the frontiersman moves from known space to unknown, he brings the latter under the control of the knowledge he carries with him from known space. Frontiersmanship, therefore, is not merely a demand to enter certain resistive spaces, it is the ability to contest and change their meaning upon entering. In these respects, Marlowe is the frontiersman's double.

In Geiger's store, for example, architecture mimetically informs moral character: only a partition door withholds access to a world of murder, treachery and sexual degeneracy.⁹³ This membrane appears thin and permeable, but the detective is alone among those who reside on the 'civilized' side of the partition in comprehending that the two spaces are in fact one. He demonstrates a frontiersman's refusal to accept the conceptual division. Likewise, in *The Lady in the Lake* (1943) bodies lie behind shower curtains and beneath sunken piers, and at the most minute level a crucial tiny gold heart hides in a box of sugar.⁹⁴ Even when not physically present, it is Marlowe's ability to interrogate the construction of space in an account of a Mexican hotel room in *The Long Goodbye* that enables him to apprehend Cisco Maioranos' true identity as Terry Lennox.⁹⁵ This mapping of revelations about people to discovery and redefinition of space on a micro-scale suffuses the Marlowe novels. Marlowe's ability to reconnoitre a physical space, and therein identify and navigate through some flaw in a barrier or boundary, is necessary to reveal all.

Turner creates a vision of exceptionalist American identity built not upon notions of unassailability or impregnability but rather on vulnerability, on the constant presence of existential threats to itself. The frontiersman's existence depends simultaneously (and paradoxically) on the endurance of hazards to which he is subject and on the possibility of conquering those hazards.

⁹³ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 20.

⁹⁴ Raymond Chandler, *The Lady in the Lake* (London: Penguin, 2011), 122, 52, 94.

⁹⁵ Raymond Chandler, *The Long Goodbye*, in *The Big Sleep and Other Novels* (London: Penguin, 2000), 654–55.

Cain's Walter Huff falls foul of this truth by failing to recognise that his personal revivification of 'savagery' renders his own conquering inevitable. Marlowe by contrast operates at a remove, closer to the original frontiersman in that he does not attempt to invert personally the 'savage'/'civilized' dichotomy but only to prove its ongoing existence. Where Huff assumes that the office's culture of regimented, bloodless 'civilization' has achieved social supremacy and works to subvert and disrupt it, Marlowe's belief that 'savagery' is always latent in 'civilization' means his project of is one of *revealing* frontierist subversion of rigorous corporate rectitude already present within the office's regulated culture. (Once again, Walgreen's insurance company front is instructive here.) Marlowe accordingly shares, on the level of professional identity, the frontiersman's quality of existing to root out and subdue danger whilst his existence is itself dependent on the ongoing presence of such danger.

He is the means by which Los Angeles' social 'savagery' is exposed and, in individual cases at least, quelled, but in fact, Marlowe depends upon social transgressors; he needs crime. If no crimes were committed, he would have no crimes to solve. He would no longer subsist as a professional detective or exist as a narrative construct. Jameson apprehends some of this paradox in noting Marlowe's 'peculiar' fondness for his gangster foes and describing him as 'an *involuntary* explorer of the society'.⁹⁶ Orr's Todorov-indebted reading of the hardboiled detective as a figure who "takes blows" in pursuit of boundary maintenance' is thus undeniable, but incomplete. Because the detective inherits a frontiersman's complicity with or dependence upon the very danger he assails, his acts of boundary maintenance (expunging criminality, minimising danger within society) are simultaneously acts of boundary breakage (excavating criminality, disabusing society of its illusions about its own gentility).⁹⁷ Like the frontiersman, Marlowe assails the edges

⁹⁶ Jameson, *Raymond Chandler*, 46, 7 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁷ Orr, *Darkly Perfect World*, 42.

of space and societal structure whilst depending in existential paradox on the presence of those edges.

Where Marlowe departs from his spiritual forebear to offer a dark dream of inexhaustible frontierism is that his *conceptual* division of space within and without the frontier is not restricted by geographical finitude. Marlowe's ability to find frontiers is determined not by a rigid geographical equation but by what a given space and his ability to occupy it signifies at a given moment. His spatial frontier negotiations therefore become endlessly iterable. On the mytho-geographic frontier, space was contested between pioneer and environment, cowboy and Native American. Marlowe's spatial battle is between the other parties to each case and, therein, between different potential epistemic and narrative meanings located in each newly-navigated space. The application of the navigational instruments of logic, deduction, and legal principle to successive spaces of criminality partially regulates and 'civilizes' such spaces, but simultaneously iterates further contests over the multiplying possibilities of how, why, where and whodunnit.

Such navigations also invoke a Gothic tradition in which spatial, psychic, and narrative processes of revelation-through-permeation are closely mapped to each other, and indeed in which the protagonist's acts of boundary-crossing are internalised and mediated within the self. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick codifies this Gothic 'spatial model' as having 'three elements (what's inside, what's outside, and what separates them)' and a 'self massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access'.⁹⁸ Marlowe's spatial navigations both echo and complicate this spatial paradigm. Certainly, his movements through space manifest a similar tripartite structure of inside, outside, and a separation that must somehow be permeated. Moreover, the detective's own occupation of a socio-legal boundary is precisely why he can permeate spatial boundaries and discover in that process new meanings (both the in-fiction narrative discoveries obtained by spatial conquest, the investiture therein of frontier qualities). In this respect, he further occupies

⁹⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1980), 13.

Sedgwick's sense of Gothic consciousness as not only a breaking and crossing of boundaries (often from literal prisons) but itself an impossible puzzle of liminality—a 'prison which has neither inside nor outside' and therefore 'from which there can be no escape'.⁹⁹ Marlowe's frontierist excavation of 'savage' characteristics hiding in superficially 'civilized' space, his dredging up of an unsettling, atavistic past, thought buried for good, also recalls Gothic convention's subsistence upon the stubborn refusal of the past to stay imprisoned. Marlowe's concordance with the Gothic thereby comes to stand as in itself further evidence of communion with Los Angeles' own 'Gothic' prisoner: the suppressed frontier. In Chandler, in Sedgwick's gothic, and on the frontier alike, the 'worst violence' and 'most potent magic' both reside in 'the breach of the imprisoning wall'.¹⁰⁰

The breaches by which Marlowe is called upon to apprehend violence (and in so doing effect a magical restitution of the frontier), however, typically take the form of incursion into rather than (as in Sedgwick's Gothic) escape from a sanctum. Even when the evidence of misdeed sought is not material, when Marlowe merely is speaking to clients, witnesses or suspects, it is striking how frequently Chandler's scenes conform to a default spatial format in which Marlowe is mobile, and enters a home or workplace occupied by a subject who remains essentially—and defensively—static. Marlowe does not merely move through space; like the frontiersman he moves, continually, into spaces that are perilous, and which immediately become interrogatively contested. When Marlowe meets General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*, for example, the latter's greenhouse is figured explicitly as a jungle; Marlowe can scarcely breathe, so inhospitable is the physical space he must occupy in order to begin his case.¹⁰¹ Again, Marlowe's project of uncovering the wild, like the frontiersman's, is bound up in his ability to hold his own in certain kinds of hostile space. Thus

⁹⁹ Although working from markedly different traditions and for divergent ends, there is contiguity between Sedgwick's sense of the simultaneous, inextricable inside/outside and the fundamental notion underpinning Lefebvre's thought—that space is always-already an inseparable, co-dependent, total contingency of its constituent elements. That contingency, Lefebvre's 'production of space', may find something conceptually analogical in what Sedgwick more lyrically terms the 'weight of space'. Sedgwick, 29–30.

¹⁰⁰ Sedgwick, 13.

¹⁰¹ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 6.

Orr concurs that ‘the Sternwood mansion becomes a synecdoche for Chandler’s California’, and recognises the significance of the westward frontier journey in birthing that ‘world of breached borders’.¹⁰²

For Orr, the Sternwood mansion’s literal ‘urban jungle’ is evidence that Chandler’s essential context is the political and narrative legacy of high colonial adventure. Chandler, writes Orr, ‘inherited from Conrad the agonism of the western sojourner striving to retain his “civilization” in a “savage” wilderness’.¹⁰³ On that basis, Orr claims, ‘Chandler’s response to the triumphalist spirit of Manifest Destiny, which perhaps found its highest expression in the “California adventure”—that is to say, the transcontinental frontier quest—is to recast the Californian booster myth of ‘the Anglo-American colony as the savage colonial periphery of late-Victorian adventure’.¹⁰⁴ Orr is right that Chandler recasts the apparently urban, modern, California as ‘savage periphery’, but his model fails to capture the ambivalence of Marlowe’s place (and the complexity of his direction(s) of travel) within the ‘savage’/‘civilized’ dichotomy. The frontiersman provides a more comprehensively effective model for understanding Marlowe’s socio-spatial negotiations than Orr’s colonial adventurer, and this can be illustrated by examining how Marlowe uses the office.

Though the colonial adventurer’s identity as a figure of rugged outdoor masculinity corresponds strongly with ideals of manhood that Merwin et al feared were being lost in offices, he is also a figure who represents (much less ambiguously than the frontiersman) the *usbering in* and indeed enforcement of modernity upon the ‘uncivilized’ rather than a turning away from it. Marlowe’s office engagements, by contrast, reveal in my reading a determination less to bring ‘civilization’ to the wilderness than to preserve wilderness in the face of apparent ‘civilization’. The

¹⁰² Orr, *Darkly Perfect World*, 54.

¹⁰³ Orr, 56.

¹⁰⁴ Orr, 56.

way Marlowe ‘re-wilds’ space in the ‘civilized’ office will therefore, I believe, demonstrate that he descends more directly from the frontiersman—who nominally represents ‘civilization’ yet exists in co-dependent complicity with the wilderness he endeavours to conquer, modernity’s own antimodernist—than from the less fraught and self-contradicting colonial adventurer.

Further, the office proves one of the most rewarding territories for Marlowe’s frontiersmanship in part because of the sheer density of its spatial production: it is so clearly drawn, demarcated, and codified along conceptual, social, and physical lines (the same highly determined and well-understood array of meanings that announces Walter Neff’s late-night call to his workplace as a harbinger of ill-doing). In the office, power relations between unwanted guest, invited or authorised visitor, employees of different standings, and owners/proprietors are mapped upon and made manifest in the system of desks, doors, and partitions, that can, depending on their context, denote defensiveness or receptivity, intimidation or invitation. That is to say, the spatial practice of the office expresses itself in an architectural and systemic language by which it is rendered a zone of contested borders.

A near-schematic indicator of Marlowe’s power to re-iterate frontier conditions by the re-designation of space occurs in *The High Window* (1942). Two key locations in the story, the office of the coin dealer Morningstar, and that of the dental technician Teager, occupy ‘the same relative position’ on identical floors of an archetypally modern space of identikit commercial cubicles. Their rooms are ‘cut up differently’, but only slightly; they are essentially twins.¹⁰⁵ Both offices are divided by a partition, and in both cases Marlowe, as so often, must pass from one side of the divide to the other by covert means and without regard to the existing ownership of the space. Crucially, however, these otherwise identical incidents involve opposite directions of travel. Marlowe’s progress through the frontiers of Teager’s space is as one might expect: he enters the outer office with a key obtained from the elevator operator, then proceeds into the back office to

¹⁰⁵ Raymond Chandler, *The High Window* (London: Penguin, 2011), 196.

make his discovery. In a perfect model of frontier dynamics, as he navigates through successive spaces the jeopardy of his position increases because his claim on the space is increasingly weak. Earlier in the book, however, with Morningstar, Marlowe enters both public-facing outer office and private sanctum freely, by invitation of the occupant. He is in no peril. He in fact only makes a frontierist navigation when he returns to the outer office, pretends to have left, but in fact hides behind the partition to hear an incriminating phone call before actually exiting. At the moment when he chooses to occupy the previously 'neutral' space of the outer office, it is no longer a space in which his position is secure; it has been re-invested with jeopardy—refrontierised—by Marlowe's navigational gesture.

The mirroring of Marlowe's movements in his navigations of the twin spaces of Teager and Morningstar, then, evinces his flexibility in navigating, even generating frontiers: his frontiers do not depend on any single and thus finite construction of spatial movement. Further testimony is provided by the particular formal repetitions of the office block, which draw the two movements into structural dialogue with each other: that is, evidence of Marlowe's ability to locate inexhaustible frontiers is not only found within but generated by an archetypally modern, urban structure that would ostensibly appear to stand as evidence of a post-frontier condition. In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe claims that whether Los Angeles appears 'rich and vigorous and full of pride' or 'lost and beaten and full of emptiness [...] all depends on where you sit': the meaning of a space is determined by one's position within it. He therein positions himself as a figure empowered through mobility to see both cities at will.¹⁰⁶ In both the offices of Teager and Morningstar, Marlowe proves precisely that creative ability to redesignate meanings of space by changing his position within it. Such redesignatory spatial power allows Marlowe to claim that the frontier never disappeared: it was merely transmuted into different types of space, which the detective both explores and manifests in himself.

¹⁰⁶ Chandler, *The Long Goodbye*, 578.

In the office, the abstractly frontierist quality of Marlowe's usual exploratory, revelatory movement into 'savage' spaces is lent the power of specificity, by the fact that in the office such movement is occurring in spaces that are in theory the ideological antithesis of frontier values. The very socio-spatial formality of the office, the structures of division and regularisation that render Marlowe's frontierist navigations there visible with a peculiar clarity, as in the Teager and Morningstar episodes, simultaneously denotes the office's anti-frontierist culture. Thus the office is unique among Marlowe's recurring investigatory environments because while its culture stands in direct opposition to frontier values, the socio-spatial practice of its internal construction invites interpretation as a frontierist topography. In the office, Marlowe's movements do not merely serve to uncover frontier qualities through his marshalling of space, they generate a specific conflict with the directly anti-frontierist values of that space itself. In *The High Window*, moreover, Marlowe's ability to reconceptualise an anti-frontierist space as a landscape of frontierist hazard is precisely the means by which he locates lawless social 'savagery' hiding in 'civilized' spaces to which it is supposedly antithetical—the offices of a respectable business culture that harbour a criminal (Teager) and a criminal's victim (Morningstar).

Although Jameson admits that 'the shabby office building, in general, is a fundamental component of the Chandler cityscape', he obscures the specific symbolic implications of Marlowe's territorial conquests over office spaces by arguing that Chandler's 'thematics of private and public' enact a 'co-ordination of home and office'.¹⁰⁷ For Jameson, that 'co-ordination' becomes conflation, as when he argues that because Chandler's gangsters are typically confronted in their nominal workplaces (clubs, casinos) these places should be regarded as their homes.¹⁰⁸ In the imprecision of Jameson's spatial categorisations, the crucial frontierist specificity of Marlowe's engagement with offices is lost. Jameson's refusal to acknowledge the particularity of *literal* offices

¹⁰⁷ Jameson, *Raymond Chandler*, 47.

¹⁰⁸ Jameson, 46.

in Chandler occludes the special ideological significance of Chandler's exploratory and revelatory activities therein.

The specific historical and cultural stakes attached to the office as a symbol of systematised, 'overcivilized', post-frontier modernity are such that they do more than any of Chandler's other typical environments in demonstrating that Marlowe's interpretations of space are intrinsically frontierist. Those historical and cultural meanings accrue to the office in a way that they simply do not to Eddie Mars' casino, or Sonderborg's hospital. Invoking the Lefebvrian spatial triad we can say that offices are understood as offices on the basis of the type of space they produce: there is a common cultural understanding of the physical, social, and conceptual characteristics that conspire to the definition 'office'. There are variations within this, of course, e.g. between the Morningstar-style sole trader in a block of individual office suites and the corporation occupying an entire floor (which I will address in the following section), but both are recognisable via their socio-spatial practice as varieties of the same thing, with a common accrued set of (anti-frontierist) cultural meanings. Marlowe's navigations exploit and respond to exactly this sense of the office as predictable, formulaic space and cultural symbol, defined and recognisable by its socio-spatial codification. The office thus becomes the clearest indicator in the novels' spatial typology that Marlowe's movements are to be understood as a process of revealing frontier qualities in a seemingly post-frontier culture.

Marlowe, of course, is an office dweller himself— puncturing the detective's *noir* glamour, Mike Davis describes him unarguably as a 'small businessman'—but a reluctant one.¹⁰⁹ The characteristics of his 'official' workplace are redolent of the frontierist work he carries out in those of other people. In the same letter that reveals Marlowe's past in the insurance industry, Chandler describes Marlowe's office, noting that he 'could very easily subscribe to a telephone answering service' but chooses not to: if office culture embodies an anti-frontierist embrace of the

¹⁰⁹ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 38.

technologised systems of modernity, Marlowe refuses that embrace where possible.¹¹⁰ Whilst Marlowe cannot entirely escape the theoretically anti-frontierist strictures of office life, his is an ironised office, one which, in reflection of its proprietor, comments self-consciously on the antagonistic relationship between crime and the modern workplace in Chandler's texts. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe's office contains 'five green filing cases'. Three are empty, but Marlowe does not describe them thus. Instead, he says they are 'full of California climate'.¹¹¹ This is on one hand a way to say they have nothing in them, not even California air, which while still an absence of files and documents would at least in some sense tangible, if invisible, substance. 'Climate', by contrast, can only denote the conceptual—the mere generalised *idea* of what the atmospheric conditions are like, rather than any specific physical attributes. By the same token, however, this is a way to say that the office drawers contain a whole world beyond themselves. California's climate, such a dominant facet of popular images of the place, is so pervasive that it has found its way into Marlowe's drawers, a micro-scale spatial division within a spatial division (the inner office), within a spatial division (Marlowe's suite as a whole), within a further spatial division (the building). That in turn denotes that his office holds things that should not, by rights, be held in an office, nor, by synecdoche, any of the structures of the tamed urban modernity that the office represents. Even when Marlowe is operating entirely within the hermetically-sealed, sterile structures of the urban realm, the image says, the natural characteristics of California will assert themselves: here is a rejoinder to Merwin's earlier concern that the office represents a world 'civilized too much'.¹¹²

Marlowe's is a world in which too much of the fierce and capricious strength of California's natural temperament has become locked up inside drawers and offices: he will spend several books

¹¹⁰ Chandler to Ibberson, 19 April 1951, 1047.

¹¹¹ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 40.

¹¹² In offering this reading of filing cases 'full of California climate', it is incumbent upon me to acknowledge that in a description of Marlowe's office in *The High Window*, highly consistent with that found in *The Big Sleep*, three of the five filing cases are simply 'full of nothing'. Chandler, *The High Window*, 23. This variability between two otherwise near-identical descriptions, however, attests in itself to the notion that one may never be entirely certain as to what one will find when one enters Marlowe's world.

discovering that nature where it is secreted and letting it spring dangerously but vivifyingly free from its drawers, before locking it provisionally away again. (The frontiersmanlike formal lot of the serial detective is that danger will spring free again for every time he is able to contain it.) The climate of California has a notoriously double-edged role in the state's history, folklore and imagery. On one hand, the 'pleasant climate' of a 'Land of Sunshine' had long defined Southern Californian boosterism and continued to fuel an economy of agriculture, tourism and property boosting at the time Chandler was writing.¹¹³ Yet California climate is also a climate of mortal danger and uncontrollability, of wildfires and the Santa Ana winds.¹¹⁴ That duality is at the root of why California incubates the superficially similar but ultimately contradictory myths of the frontier and the new Eden: its climate can present both conditions near-simultaneously. Walter Huff also suggests that contradiction when he says that 'in California February looks like any other month'.¹¹⁵ This ostensibly seems a remark on California's identity as an Edenic land of perpetual summer, but the notion of California as a place where the year never ages, in which winter never comes, simultaneously suggests a place in which the present may sustain conditions that ought to have slid into the past. Walter finds in the seasonless environment a sense of temporal anomaly and disjunction that reflects his own scheme—one in which the atavism of a bygone frontier is relocated to modern institutions. Walter and the California weather, like the wild climate in Marlowe's filing cases and the wild criminals in his adventures, occupy a common consciousness.

Marlowe's conspicuously colourful office continues to suggest its occupant's preoccupation with the environment's deceptive qualities: the verdant green filing cases sit beneath

¹¹³ John H. M. Laslett, *Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880–2010* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 116.

¹¹⁴ Morrow Mayo captured the equally benevolent and destructive qualities of Southern California's environment and climate in 1933, writing that '[w]ashed artificially (or naturally when there is a good season of rain), bathed in the sunshine that sends things leaping from the soil, this country has a vital power of come-back from every blighting caprice of Nature. Time and again it is inundated or burned up; but always it booms again. It may be bare one year, if there is a drought, and washed out the next year, if there is a flood, but the following year wheat and corn grow in the fields, fat cattle and sheep graze in the pasture-lands'. Mayo, *Los Angeles*, 67.

¹¹⁵ Cain, *Double Indemnity*, 39.

a blue sky—the ‘sky-blue floor’ in the picture on Marlowe’s calendar. That picture is of the then-famous Dionne quintuplets, whose eyes are described as being ‘as large as mammoth prunes’, again suggesting the supposed mellow fruitfulness of Southern California. Their eyes, however, are ‘sea-brown’, not an image of the Pacific that would please the proprietors of the Los Angeles area’s many piers and seaside funfairs, nor those of boat trips to Catalina Island. Meanwhile the ‘rust-red’ carpet evokes the recalcitrant desert upon which the city has been boldly imposed, while the ersatz artificiality of that imposition is attested to by chairs that are not real walnut but rather ‘near-walnut’.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, if California climate is what Marlowe has in his office drawers instead of case files, then the nature of the work he conducts from that office implies which of the capricious climate’s two faces is the dominant one. In containing California climate the drawers *do* in a sense contain Marlowe’s case files because the worst and wildest that (human) nature has to offer is precisely what he seeks out beneath superficially sunny exteriors. Just as the seeming land of balmy sunshine betrays its occupants with the savage return of wind, fire, storms and earthquake, so do the most genteel Californians so often turn out to be the state’s most depraved residents. In that respect, Marlowe’s drawer full of nothing proves to be nothing but. What initially seems an image denoting placid emptiness is revealed as a suggestion that these drawers could contain absolutely anything.

Marlowe’s drawers thus attain the condition of ‘figural stealth’ that Julian Murphet identifies as the defining quality of *noir* fictions’ assault on ‘city boosters’ image of LA as utopia’.¹¹⁷ In suggesting through their own deceptive meaning the unpredictable and often inhospitable climate of Marlowe’s business, the office drawers likewise contain (and in another sense fail to contain) Californian booster anxieties. The Edenic myth of sunshine and orange groves may not,

¹¹⁶ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 40.

¹¹⁷ Murphet, *Race and Literature in Los Angeles*, 37.

after all, have achieved supremacy over its counter-myth; nature-as-aggressor, red in tooth and claw on the perpetual frontier of the American imagination, remains threateningly pregnant in Marlowe's drawers. Chandler locates in a synecdoche for the office (the filing case) a clear opposition to (and moreover a literal attempt to constrain spatially) the frontierist forces of danger, risk, and individualism embodied in the 'California climate'—and its metonymic companions, Marlowe's criminal foes. This scene thereby underscores the office as a site which, time and again in Chandler's fiction, proves fertile ground for the reiteration of frontierist contests.

Derace to the Top: A Marlovian Case Study

When Marlowe attempts to visit a prospective client in *The Lady in the Lake*, however, the spatial practice of the corporate world resists Marlowe's frontiersmanlike approach, affirming the Turnerian maxim that sometimes the frontier must, by definition, defeat the pioneer.¹¹⁸ Derace Kingsley is a senior executive at the Gillerlain Perfume Company, which has its offices in a building that is named the Treloar by Chandler, but is analogous in its location and physical characteristics to the James Oviatt Building, which opened in 1928 at 617 S. Olive Street.¹¹⁹ When James Oviatt wanted to cement the status of his company (a luxury gentleman's haberdasher) he did so literally, with a built monument in the then-most fashionable area of downtown, rising to the maximum height permitted by local zoning laws (twelve stories—a limit informed in large part by concerns

¹¹⁸ Turner, 'Significance of the Frontier', 4.

¹¹⁹ Tanja M. Laden, 'Best Art Deco (1928)', *LA Weekly*, 6 October 2010, <https://www.laweekly.com/best-art-deco-1928/>; Tyler Dilts, 'Chandler's Shadow', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 1 January 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/chandlers-shadow/#!>

about seismic activity). Oviatt was determined that the building bearing his name should be an up-to-the-minute monument to the new Art Deco style in its most luxurious form.¹²⁰

Thirty tons of René Lalique glasswork accompanied an illuminated glass ceiling and awnings by Ferdinand Chanut and Gaetan Jeannin. Fixtures and fittings were shipped from France at vast expense via the Panama Canal. Bronze statues were studded about the premises and an artificial, outdoor palm grove allowed customers to try on their new apparel in natural light.¹²¹ The building was a spectacle, its opening a major regional news event; the *Los Angeles Times* marvelled that it been ‘dreamed true’ by Oviatt.¹²² The lowest three floors and basement were occupied by Oviatt’s firm, the building was an opulent penthouse for Oviatt himself, and the intervening floors were rented to other businesses as offices.¹²³ Although the building did not approach the scale of the skyscrapers of New York and Chicago, it was nonetheless its skyward wonder that fixed it in a local cultural imagination wherein it was dubbed ‘the castle in the air’.¹²⁴ Oviatt’s dream thus serves as instructive reminder that Los Angeles’ status as a spreading, horizontal, rather than a concentrated, vertical city—centrifugal rather than centripetal, in Edward Dimendberg’s dichotomy—was not yet a foregone conclusion as the city greeted the 1930s.¹²⁵ Although the scale may have been modest, Los Angeles could still fetishise vertical modernity with all the fervour of eastern cities.¹²⁶

¹²⁰ Hadley Meares, ‘The James Oviatt Building: The Bespoke Brilliance and Pretension Behind an Art Deco Masterpiece’, KCET.org, 6 September 2013, <https://www.kcet.org/history-society/the-james-oviatt-building-the-bespoke-brilliance-and-pretension-behind-an-art-deco>.

¹²¹ Laden, ‘Best Art Deco (1928)’; Meares, ‘The James Oviatt Building: The Bespoke Brilliance and Pretension Behind an Art Deco Masterpiece’.

¹²² Olive Gray, ‘Doors Open at New Men’s Shop’, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 May 1928, sec. A.

¹²³ Meares, ‘The James Oviatt Building: The Bespoke Brilliance and Pretension Behind an Art Deco Masterpiece’.

¹²⁴ Gray, ‘Doors Open at New Men’s Shop’, 7; Ray Hebert, ‘There’s Lots of Room at the Top of This Building’, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 June 1928, sec. H, 1.

¹²⁵ Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 18.

¹²⁶ I return in greater detail in chapter four to competing visions of verticality and horizontality in pre- and post-war Los Angeles, finding that widespread conceptions of a pre-war city that maintained concentrated verticality versus a post-war city defined by horizontal forms are at least partially complicated by historical reality.

Much of Jameson's argument as to why Los Angeles requires Marlowe as a socio-spatial explorer resides in his belief that Los Angeles' horizontal sprawl does not support anything like the 'Parisian apartment house' that could, as in Zola's novels, encompass in vertical microcosm every stratum of society.¹²⁷ Marlowe's presence within a fictionalised Oviatt Building is a strong rejoinder to this Jamesonian maxim; the multi-use tower stratifies society both vertically (from ground-floor shops to penthouse) and, as Marlowe will discover, on an internal horizontal axis through the spatial demarcations governing access within an individual company's offices. Similarly, the physical prominence and plot pertinence in *The Lady in the Lake* of the Oviatt/Treloar building is something McCann omits in his reading of the novel, wherein he contrasts the verticality of the extra-urban dam, where the plot climaxes, with the 'confusing horizontality of urban Los Angeles'. This is a novel that commences with its protagonist's incursion into perhaps the second-most famous tall building in the Los Angeles of its day (after City Hall). That runs counter to McCann's claim that the dam's verticality stands in opposition to a supposedly horizontal Los Angeles and is thereby an 'architectural rendering of the way [Chandler's] novel works to contain dangerous movement'.¹²⁸ Not does the Treloar building, the dam's mirror image in the book's structure, indicate that verticality is possible in Los Angeles, its role in Marlowe's investigation as a site of urban frontierist spatial practice provides further evidence that Chandler's world is at least as much about the practice of 'dangerous movement' as its containment.

Entering the building, Marlowe summarily walks past an arcade of shops; he is characteristically uninterested in public-facing façades other than as concealers of his true target. The 'castle in the air' that Marlowe seeks is not a residential fantasia but a corporate one: he proceeds into 'a vast black and gold lobby' and then takes the elevator to the seventh of the building's twelve floors, where he enters Gillerlain's offices.¹²⁹ Marlowe's object is, as ever,

¹²⁷ Jameson, *Raymond Chandler*, 7.

¹²⁸ McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 142.

¹²⁹ Chandler, *The Lady in the Lake*, 1.

something behind closed doors, spatially distanced and concealed; he must thus penetrate to the very centre of the building on both horizontal and vertical axes. The premises of Teager and Morningstar participated in modern office culture by being located in a modern office building and thus manifesting its spatial characteristics (the architectural reproductions exploited by Marlowe). As the workplaces of sole traders, though, they also displayed clear connection to older cultural and architectural traditions. The small-scale business in a suite of partitioned rooms, the inner and outer office, appears in Chandler in its latest guise, with the technological conveniences and characteristic spatial repetition of modernity, but is ultimately in the lineage of ‘Bartleby’. When Marlowe visits Gillerlain, however, he confronts the office of the new corporate America, something closer to the systematised apparatus of deracinated knowledge work that so enervates Walter Huff. If the Teager and Morningstar offices recall Melville and Whitman’s suspicion of clerks, Gillerlain foreshadows Wilson and Whyte’s fear of the organisation. If Dennis Porter is correct that the connection between the private eye and the frontiersman is that they share a ‘non-organization man’s eye’, then we might expect to find that connection disclosed in the eye that Marlowe casts across the Gillerlain premises.¹³⁰

There is nothing clandestine or illicit about Marlowe’s visit to Gillerlain; he is not hunting for evidence or surveilling a witness—he is, in theory, there to meet somebody who wishes to meet with him. Curiously, though, he has more difficulty in navigating this space than he does in many of those that he enters by less legitimate means. What frustrates Marlowe’s spatial progress here are the physical and social structures of the early to mid-twentieth-century, post-Taylor American office—its cultures of suspicion, surveillance, technology, record keeping, and hierarchy, and the architectural devices that enact the spatial enforcement of those cultures. Having made his way to the seventh floor, Marlowe must first pass through imposing ‘swinging double plate-glass

¹³⁰ Dennis Porter, ‘The Private Eye’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 95.

doors bound in platinum'.¹³¹ This unlocked door in a semi-public area is no real physical barrier, but the entrance to this office has been conspicuously designed to have an imposing effect upon the ingressor, whether visitor or employee. It embodies what Thompson terms 'codes of visibility incorporated into the architecture of office spaces'.¹³²

Marlowe then enters a reception room, the description of which seems to bespeak contemporary anxieties about self-propagating, self-multiplying office work's abstraction from any physical evidence of a company's actual 'production'. Although the room features a showcase of examples of Gillerlain's wares, it is at sea in surroundings characterised by an eclectic, even proto-postmodern melange of 'Chinese rugs', 'angular but elaborate furniture' and 'sharp shiny bits of abstract sculpture'. The company's actual products are alienated from the viewer/reader, overwhelmed and decontextualised by an array of other objects that have no logical relationship either to the products themselves or even to each other. This is borne out in the 'abstract' nature of the sculptures: they exist only as themselves, denying external formal referents and thus refusing to claim and relate to the context of their environment.¹³³ Conversely, the perfume showcase and the perfume itself, the only things in the room that actually represent the Gillerlain company's purpose, are incapable of being described in terms of themselves; they only exist by being metonymised into other things. The showcase becomes an image of a geographical feature, made up of 'islands and promontories', while the firm's premier product bears the slogan '*The Champagne of Perfumes*': it can be described only as something else.¹³⁴ Even the supposed physical entity that is Gillerlain's product is itself merely an ephemeral mist that disappears visually in an instant and olfactorily within hours. The office's entire physical appearance manifests the abstract and the arbitrary, the decontextualised and anti-referential, while the only verifiably sensate and tangible

¹³¹ Chandler, *The Lady in the Lake*, 1.

¹³² Thompson, *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance*, 87.

¹³³ Chandler, *The Lady in the Lake*, 1.

¹³⁴ Chandler, 1–2.

output of the company's workings must instead latch onto a descriptive context from outside themselves in order to achieve describable form. One can scarcely imagine a more complete metaphor for a mid-century concern that not only was office work becoming increasingly divorced from the tangible production of companies, but that the former had in some sense supplanted the latter. This is an abstract, oblique company, producing only the scent of something 'real'.

Gatekeepers of this abstract world that Marlowe must navigate in order to reach his goal are the company's secretarial staff. A 'neat little blonde' guards the PBX (internal telephone exchange) which in turn forms a technological barrier between the executive in his private office and any assailants who penetrate the sealed corporate world's first lines of defence either physically (via the great platinum doors), or remotely via an outside line. Even the PBX operator herself is physically protected by the spatial organisation of the room, sitting in the 'far corner [...] behind a railing and well out of harm's way'.¹³⁵ What real harm she could come to is unclear; it seems Marlowe is mocking the office's culture of physical demarcations and, as Huff did, its hyper-dogmatism about adherence to operational rules and procedures, which are the reasons he cannot progress through its space. Once again, the office discloses itself as a critical location of Marlowe's frontiersmanlike identity because whilst the seeming rigidity and overprescription of its physical and social structures denote culture in complete opposition to frontier values, those same structures present themselves to Marlowe *as* a frontier—a hostile landscape of barriers and hazards.

Accordingly, when Marlowe revisits the office later in the book, he signals to the 'fluffy little blonde' his ability to refrontierise the meanings of space by acting out some literal frontiersmanship. Giving her 'the gunman's salute, a stiff forefinger pointing at her, the three lower fingers tucked back under it, and the thumb wiggling up and down like a western gun-fighter fanning his hammer', he alludes to the extent to which his frontierist values diverge from those of

¹³⁵ Chandler, 2.

her workplace.¹³⁶ The gesture is of course unmistakably erotic, penetrative, but the frontier context from which it derives renders its penetrative implications primarily spatial rather than sexual. The gesture is, moreover, suffused with irony, because it is an acknowledgment to the secretary of mutual recognition from Marlowe's previous visit, and on that visit his usual frontiersmanlike skills in penetrating and subduing hostile space were sorely lacking. Marlowe's gunfighter's salute admits that, when he last visited the office, the integrity of the space was impervious to any of the investigatory ammunition he typically uses (e.g. persuasion, subterfuge, dissembling, brute force). If the gunman's salute does contain a sexual implication, it is one of impotence rather than Marlowe's usual penetrative power. Emphasising its own bathetic failure to be a *real* gun, the salute tells the secretary that Marlowe knows he has been firing blanks. Indeed, on that first occasion Marlowe does not even get as far as persuading the PBX operator to put a call through to Kingsley, because he is first blocked, physically and interrogatively, by another secretary, Adrienne Fromsett.

In his interaction with her we see how clearly the spatial practice of the office is entwined with its social practice: Marlowe's goal is to pass through a certain door, behind which is Derace Kingsley. Kingsley is a busy and apparently short-tempered man; he is in conference and has no time for visitors especially those with no appointment. Marlowe admits this is not 'anything I could argue about'.¹³⁷ There is nothing intrinsically spatial stopping him from seeing Kingsley; he could barge past the secretary's desk and through the presumably unlocked door to Kingsley's private office, but the disruption and offence this would cause would defeat the object of his call. The situation is compounded by the fact that the nature of his business is delicate and personal to Kingsley. Marlowe cannot, in the semi-public space of the reception room, tell a secretary the nature of his visit or even his occupation, making his passage through the space even more difficult. Executives are unlikely to wish to see a man they have never heard of, with no

¹³⁶ Chandler, 135.

¹³⁷ Chandler, 2.

appointment, who can only tell the secretary that they have been sent by a ‘Lieutenant M’Gee’.¹³⁸ Marlowe is bound not merely by the space’s physical characteristics but by the social rules that dictate how those physical characteristics should be used, because his goal is not merely to enter Kingsley’s private space but to gain a positive commercial outcome from his entry. As frustrated as Marlowe is by these barriers to his ingress (the hostile environment upon which he is testing his frontiersmanship) he knows that to overcome them he must work within the rules of the system by which they were constructed.

Marlowe, it transpires, carries two sets of business cards. One gives no indication that he is private detective—the ‘plain card, the one without the tommy gun in the corner’—while the other has ‘the business on it’.¹³⁹ When introducing himself to Fromsett and requesting to see Kingsley, he presents the former. The latter, presumably, would speed his ingress; it would make clear to Miss Fromsett the private nature and urgency of his visit. The former meanwhile constitutes a refusal to disclose the nature of his work or his potential engagement with Kingsley, and thus relegates him to a long wait in the reception room. Marlowe does not know at this stage that Fromsett is well aware of the matter on which Kingsley wishes to engage a detective; he cannot therefore risk the indiscretion of making a secretary aware that her boss requires the services of such a clandestine operative. To do so would be to compromise his relationship with his client before that relationship has even been established. Again, Marlowe weighs his frustration at reaching a spatial and temporal impasse with the goal he ultimately wishes to achieve through his spatial progress. To show the tommy gun card would have the same effect as barging through the door: it might speed progress in the short term, but it would see his long term-aims founder. This is characteristically Marlovian and likewise typically frontiersmanlike: unless otherwise forced by another party, he moves always with the intention of gaining an advantage, performing a spatial

¹³⁸ Chandler, 2.

¹³⁹ Chandler, 2, 4.

conquest. That he struggles do so in the Gillerlain offices is because something about the space of a modern corporate operation is unreadable: because it conducts its operations largely in a carefully guarded, abstract, conceptual space that does not map easily to its physical one, Marlowe cannot interpret it in order to deconstruct it as he can on Teager and Morningstar's premises. 'You can't tell anything about an outfit like that', he remarks as he waits. 'They might be making millions, and they might have the sheriff in the back room'.¹⁴⁰

Used to operating in a socio-legal liminality where decisions must often be taken on hunches, trust, the testimonies of others, and personal knowledge, Marlowe's frontier ethics founder in the regimented, procedurally-defined space of the office. Not only does he have no appointment, but it transpires that Kingsley has never heard of 'Lieutenant M'Gee', the individual who has referred Marlowe. Kingsley knows a Sheriff Petersen, who knows McGee, who knows Marlowe, but such informal, uncodified networks are inadequate in the world of the office. Marlowe is eventually able to explain these connections to Kingsley, but only *after* Marlowe finally gains access to the private office for a one-to-one audience.¹⁴¹ Prior to this, with only a referral from somebody nobody has heard of, and no appointment, plus a line of business that he cannot disclose in the semi-public space of the reception room, Marlowe has no way to prove he has any business being there at all. Thus the Gillerlain office is not only a space that refuses to yield up its meanings to Marlowe, it demands that he yield up his. In this combination of inscrutability and paranoia—the institutionalised secrecy and suspicion that Thompson asserts is the office's defining condition—the Gillerlain company proves itself an environment capable of arresting the progress of the ever-mobile detective-frontiersman. If Marlowe usually succeeds because he has a capacity to divine navigable structure within impenetrable Sedgwickian spaces that appear to lack

¹⁴⁰ Chandler, 3.

¹⁴¹ Chandler, 7.

either inside or outside, here he encounters the opposite problem of a space that refuses to dissolve.

Marlowe, however, understands the social-spatial practices of the office well enough that he also understands the points at which he can slightly break or at least bend them. When Kingsley, heading out for a haircut having steadfastly refused to entertain his visitor, sees Marlowe waiting and addresses him curtly, Marlowe seizes his momentary window of opportunity. He gets to his feet and gives Kingsley the tommy gun card, silently stating the nature of his business so as not to break the rules of the semi-public space, but pushing their limits by even revealing this symbol of private matters.¹⁴² Having caught Kingsley's attention with the card, Marlowe, whether out of sheer annoyance at being kept waiting or on a hunch that a man of Kingsley's status will have his interest piqued by someone prepared to talk back to him in a manner to which he is unaccustomed, responds to Derace's interrogations with some cute wisecracks.¹⁴³ Somehow this approach succeeds, and the detective is finally admitted.

There is, however, something wholly unsatisfying here; even Kingsley muses that 'God knows why' he is prepared to give the stranger three minutes of his time in private. Chandler spends several pages enumerating the socio-spatial barriers that prevent Marlowe from entering a space which, given that its occupier is a potential client who has requested the services of someone such as Marlowe, he should have a 'right' to access (that is, his entry into the space is not in any way contrary to the interests of the person who owns it). In the Teager and Morningstar episodes, Marlowe *is* able to navigate through the heavily regulated and demarcated space of an office world *because* he is doing so illicitly or clandestinely—that is, he can navigate the space because he is able and willing to ignore the social codes that govern its normal usage. Here, by contrast, being forced to obey the office's spatial practice stumps him.

¹⁴² Chandler, 4.

¹⁴³ Chandler, 5.

He is, in effect, not allowed to make use of his full set of frontiersman's navigational tools here, as their impropriety in this 'overcivilized' space would preclude his larger purpose. It is less through Marlowe's skills as a socio-spatial trailfinder and much more through Kingsley's never-explained whim, his sudden decision to address and then invite into his private office the man he has been ignoring for much of the afternoon, that Marlowe progresses. This is a space he cannot subvert, he can access it only through the whim of its accepted owner, his social superior in the circumstances, the dictator of local spatial practice. This is emphasised explicitly when, after finally inviting him into the private office, Kingsley lets the door swing to in Marlowe's face before he can enter. The detective has won no free passage through this space or triumph over the environment; he is in most senses still barred from it, save by dint of Kingsley's whim for this brief moment; he remains excluded even as he is included.

The frontiersmanlike mechanics of Marlowe's office navigations are more complex and contradictory than those of Huff, who seeks merely to tear the organisation's values down through a violent injection of 'savagery'. Precisely because Marlowe shares with the frontiersman an existential dependence on the social 'savagery' he supposedly exists to conquer, his frontierist explorations come under a certain tension: working to uncover 'savagery' in the notionally 'civilized' spaces of modern corporate America runs the risk of placing him in the devil's party, not a pro-'civilization' frontiersman but an agent of wilderness itself. In this vein Marcus Klein has noted that '[t]o know crime and criminals so well as to be a detective was to be suspect', on the presumption that '[i]t takes a thief to catch a thief'.¹⁴⁴ As his frustrations in the Gillerlain lobby indicate, Marlowe is indeed opposed to the restrictive, anti-individualist values of post-frontier corporate culture. Ultimately, however, Marlowe (unlike Walter Huff) does not seek to turn over the edifices of 'civilization' to lawlessness, rather he sets out to prove that those edifices are not quite as hegemonic as they appear, to reveal that the 'savage' and the 'civilized' continue to occupy,

¹⁴⁴ Klein, *Easterns, Westerns, and Private Eyes*, 155.

as in his own filing cases, as in Teager and Morningstar's offices, and, as *The Lady in the Lake's* plot will reveal, in Derace Kingsley himself, the same spaces—thereby manifesting the endurance of frontier conditions.

In the office Philip Marlowe makes disclosures of individual agency to combat that space's conformist, systematising effects on society while simultaneously protecting society from a malignant excess of the very same agency. In uncovering personal and social wildness there, Marlowe appears to strike a regulatory blow on behalf anti-frontierist forces, but in the same act proves that the regimenting socio-spatial forces of modern corporate culture have *not* asserted their superiority over the individual (both himself and the 'savage' element he finds lurking beneath the office's regulated surface). In this way he can preserve in the modern city the state of liminality or transition between the two that was sought by the frontiersman. The most overtly anti-frontierist space Marlowe encounters becomes the perfect venue for his re-staging of frontier contest, because any latent 'savagery' he is able to uncover there presents a direct ideological opposition to the institutional values of the host space. Megan Abbott suggests that Marlowe models a frontier identity via a 'deep connection to a possibly imagined past', rendering him 'increasingly anachronistic' in a 'compulsively changing city'.¹⁴⁵ Marlowe's use of space in fact reveals that his frontier inheritances are the source of his contemporary relevance, not its undoing. By using frontier principles to negotiate post-frontier spaces he makes a case that those principles remain relevant and necessary precisely as a means of surviving the dominant conditions of 'overcivilized' modernity while simultaneously querying the extent of that dominance.

Marlowe's eventual, never-fully-explicable ingress against the odds, however, remains discomfiting within this paradigm, not least because stands in marked contrast to another attempt at socio-spatial navigation of office space made a few years later and on the opposite coast in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Expelled from university, the protagonist repeatedly seeks audiences with

¹⁴⁵ Abbott, *The Street Was Mine: White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir*, 6.

the executives to whom he has been given what he believes to be letters of introduction. Time and again, though, he is summarily rebuffed. The invisible man is never, unlike Marlowe, granted a window of opportunity by the spatial practice of the office. Tellingly, at his most discouraged, he visits the cinema, where he watches ‘a picture of frontier life with heroic Indian fighting and struggles against flood, storm, and forest fire, with the outnumbered settlers winning each engagement; an epic of wagon trains rolling ever westward’.¹⁴⁶ For the invisible man as for Marlowe, there is an association drawn between frontiersmanship and attempts to move through the modern corporate landscape, but the two men have opposite fates.

Given that racialisation of frontier conquest in both history and myth has rendered the frontiersman’s image irrevocably one of whiteness, the invisible man’s association of his *failed* office ingress with frontier imagery functions as a salutary reminder that Marlowe’s mere whiteness is one of the essential navigational tools by which he is able to perform frontiersmanship—both in the sense of his ability to manifest the frontiersman’s image, and in the social license he has to enter and occupy space. One wonders how much more difficult Marlowe’s attempt to enter Kingsley’s office might be had he not the calling card of whiteness to accompany the one with the tommy gun. I have already paid some attention in chapter 1 to the difficulties faced by non-white characters who attempt to claim social ascendancy by adopting frontiersmanlike identities. In the next chapter I address that theme more fully, analysing texts in which non-white characters whose labours, like those of Huff and Marlowe, are conducted in spaces structured as frontiers. Unlike Marlowe and Huff, however, these characters will find their social ingresses rejected on racial grounds and made manifest in structures of spatial resistance that are simultaneously the cause and effect of their self-transformation into frontiersmanlike figures.

¹⁴⁶ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2014), 170.

3. WILDERNESS WORK: CHESTER HIMES, JOHN FANTE, HISAYE YAMAMOTO, AND LABOURS OF RACE IN THE INDUSTRIAL CITY

Industry brings the tyranny of the clock, the pace-setting machine, and the complex and carefully-timed interaction of processes: the measurement of life [...] in minutes, and above all a mechanized *regularity* of work which conflicts [...] with all the inclinations of a humanity as yet unconditioned into it.

Eric Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire*

In this chapter I consider some frontierist implications of Los Angeles' development into a major industrial centre, principally through readings of fictions by Hisaye Yamamoto, John Fante, and Chester Himes, in which spaces of industry are figured as sites of racial contest. In each case, I read the industries depicted (oil extraction, fish canning, and shipbuilding respectively) as existing to 'produce' tensions or anxieties about racial difference alongside their ostensible physical outputs. In doing so, they disclose that the culture they serve is one which demands the constant reproduction of structures of racial division. These texts, moreover, reveal how closely aligned those structures are with the logics of the frontier. The ongoing industrial manufacture of racial animus proves a strategy for the continual recuperation of frontier dynamics by and within urban modernity, and vice versa.

The workplace protagonists of the previous chapter were white-collared and white-skinned, and those (linked) characteristics were intrinsic to their adoption of the frontiersman's mantle. If they complicated that paradigm by complicity with the socially 'savage', they did so by

unhindered choice. Here I address locations of blue-collar labour and find them to be spaces that compel non-white protagonists to perform, in ways that develop the dynamics into which Julio Sal was co-opted in and by the leisure economy, a frontiersmanship that is inverted. Non-white characters labour towards the positions of social primacy occupied by whiteness through participation in the industrial economy, but find themselves trapped in socio-spatial zones of hazardous liminality. As the frontierlike logic I locate in industrial spaces simultaneously demands and rejects performances of whiteness by non-white figures, those figures fulfil their era's socially urgent demand to recover the nation's frontier energies but find that the benefits of such frontiersmanship do not accrue to them. The presence of the frontier's legacy in these spaces thereby becomes a way of approaching how artworks have asked not just 'why and how whites reach the conclusion that their whiteness is meaningful', in David Roediger's phrase, but the implied correlative question of how that conclusion becomes meaningful to non-white individuals and groups.¹

Frontiers of Industry

The texts examined herein suggest distinct moments in LA's industrial coming of age. Fante's *The Road to Los Angeles* is set in the early 1930s, by which point LA was the largest manufacturing economy on the West Coast.² The '30s were the decade in which '[l]arge scale farming [and] food processing', as evoked by Fante's text, developed alongside the manufacture of clothing, automobiles, small machinery, airframes, and ships to transform California's economic makeup.³ Los Angeles' 'fulsome industrial job machine [...] had begun rolling' in the 1920s, but it

¹ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Revised ed (London: Verso, 2007), 6.

² Ruth Wallach et al., *Los Angeles in World War II* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2011), 7.

³ Michael Kazin, 'The Great Exception Revisited: Organized Labor and Politics in San Francisco and Los Angeles, 1870–1940', *Pacific Historical Review* 55, no. 3 (August 1986): 374, 373, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3639704>.

was in the '30s that it acquired national prominence, as California rose to eighth place in national rankings of overall manufacturing output by the onset of World War II.⁴ LA's industrial base would then be further transformed as \$11 billion in government contracts saw the city take on a tenth of the nation's war production.⁵ Between 1939 and 1945 the number of industrial workers in LA rose by 280 percent, as internal migrants flocked to the city to take advantage of labour shortages.⁶ Many of those new arrivals were African-Americans, initially optimistic about the emancipatory potential of LA's new industrial opportunities.⁷ Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* represents, in the form of the navy-contracted Atlas Shipyard and its uneasy partial integration, this phase in the region's industrial and demographic development.

Yamamoto's 'Life Among the Oil Fields: A Memoir', meanwhile, occupies a more complex temporality, written after both the Himes and Fante texts (in 1979) but set prior to them (constituting its narrator's childhood memories of 1929). It also implies a longer view of LA's industrial history, one that reaches back to the last days of the frontier, oil extraction having been the enterprise in which LA first experienced industrialisation in the late nineteenth century.⁸ Simultaneously, however, the story's spatial and thematic deployment of oil and its extractive apparatus anticipates the racial fractures of World War II and the ways in which these drew upon and revived a frontier dynamic. A reading of these texts in concert traces the transformation of a state that in 1870 was 'still a frontier boasting only one true city' (not Los Angeles but San

⁴ Soja and Scott, 'Introduction to Los Angeles: City and Region', 8; Gerald D. Nash, *The American West Transformed: The Impact of the Second World War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 7.

⁵ Becky M. Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 187.

⁶ Nicolaides, 187.

⁷ Josh Sides, *LA City Limits: African American Los Angeles from the Great Depression to the Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 55.

⁸ Prior to the 1920s, when several major fields were discovered in quick succession in the Los Angeles basin, the San Joaquin valley was California's biggest oil producing region. Los Angeles had, however, experienced its first, smaller, oil boom in the 1890s. Nancy Quam-Wickham, "'Cities Sacrificed on the Altar of Oil': Popular Opposition to Oil Development in 1920s Los Angeles', *Environmental History* 3, no. 2 (April 1998): 191, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3985379>.

Francisco) into one which by 1945 was an essential economic engine for the nation, but illustrates that its frontier character remained—perturbingly—undimmed in the process.⁹

California's industrial transformation invited those confronting the question of America's post-frontier socioeconomic identity in an 'era of limited expectations' to assert that a ready answer had been found.¹⁰ If the development of a modern industrial economy on the West Coast embodied the foreclosure of a United States defined by geographic frontiers, it simultaneously extended the possibility that metaphorical frontiers—of industry, of commerce, of science—could fulfil more sustainably the same role both in the nation's psyche. This narrative undergirds exchanges between Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover on the 1932 presidential campaign trail. In San Francisco on September 23rd, Roosevelt acknowledged that, in the words of Arthur Schlesinger Jr, 'the age of expansion had come to an end', capturing Depression-era 'intellectual moods' that took economic collapse as corroboration of Turnerian fears about a frontierless nation.¹¹ A nation that had reached its 'last frontier', Roosevelt argued, must seek further economic development not in the 'discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods' but in more effectively 'administering the resources and plants already in hand'.¹²

Roosevelt admitted that such an ambition was 'soberer, less dramatic' than 'climbing into a covered wagon and moving west'.¹³ Simultaneously, however, he justified the value and intrinsic Americanness of his programme by couching it in frontierist language and principles. Arguing for increased governmental intervention in the economy, he anticipates criticism that this would 'qualify the freedom' of business by framing his aim as an *enshrinement* of liberty.¹⁴ Restraints must

⁹ Kazin, 'The Great Exception Revisited', 373.

¹⁰ Nash, *The American West Transformed*, 3.

¹¹ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003), 425.

¹² Franklin D. Roosevelt, 'New Conditions Impose New Requirements Upon Government and Those Who Conduct Government', in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Genesis of the New Deal, 1928–1932*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Random House, 1938), 750–52.

¹³ Roosevelt, 751, 746.

¹⁴ Roosevelt, 753.

be placed on the ‘financial Titans’ of the industrial-age economy, Roosevelt argues, to protect the ‘place’ and ‘power’ of ‘every individual’, and prevent those individuals from ‘running a losing race’ against oligarchic modernity.¹⁵ A speech which Schlesinger characterises as an ‘acceptance of a transformed American destiny’ in fact contains a frontier-revanchist rallying cry for the contemporary viability of the essential economic unit of Turner’s America—the unfettered individual.¹⁶ Moreover, Roosevelt even moderates his acceptance of American material finitude by asserting the persistence of the frontier-mythic identity of ‘the great West, and of this coast, and of California’, as the apotheosis of America’s ‘potentialities of youth, [...] change and development’. Roosevelt suggests that in an era of global (and particularly trans-Pacific) trade, the rapidly industrialising West Coast might not merely retain its special role in the frontier mythos but develop it further, as the place where ‘currents of [...] commerce of the whole world meet’.¹⁷

Hoover claimed that his opponent was a defeatist, abandoning the pioneering ‘spirit which has made this country’, but Roosevelt’s speech is ultimately a nuanced attempt to reconcile frontier values to the modern world while preserving them against its assaults. Hoover’s counter-proposition, certainly, was more alluringly straightforward: he advocated transmuting the frontier from literal spaces into figurative ones, ‘frontiers of [...] science and of invention’.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the two candidates’ speeches in fact dispense only divergent prescriptions for a common diagnosis. Both Hoover and Roosevelt acknowledge the frontier’s geographic demise while maintaining that its principles could, in fact, be preserved to sustain American development. Both, moreover, suggest that those values could be located *within* industry, technology, and global commerce. Even if Hoover is straightforwardly bullish about a ‘road of countless progress’ while Roosevelt is wary of obstacles to the individual in that road, both locate ‘the symbol of the machine’ not in the

¹⁵ Roosevelt, 747, 755, 751.

¹⁶ Schlesinger Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919–1933*, 425–26.

¹⁷ Roosevelt, ‘New Conditions’, 743.

¹⁸ Herbert Hoover, ‘Speech at Madison Square Garden’, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Herbert Hoover* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1977), 674.

foreclosure of American ambition but within what Leo Marx described as a ‘rhetoric of progress’ as old as the republic itself.¹⁹

Roosevelt and Hoover attest to the Depression’s role in catalysing a national conversation about conceiving the new spaces of industrial modernity as receptacles into which the frontier could be decanted, extricating the US from malaise in the process. If the fictional representations of Los Angeles industry offered by Yamamoto, Fante, and Himes manifest the frontier characteristics so keenly sought in their era’s public discourse, however, they simultaneously problematise the bases of that very discourse. In these texts, the new ‘frontier of industry’ embodied in Los Angeles’ transformation into an industrial centre *does* partially reconstitute the principles of its geographic forebear. The frontierist dynamic it recuperates, however, is not that of unlimited individualist possibility but that of ethnonationalist spatial contest in a hostile environment. The experience of that contest is manifested in the attempts of three racially-marginalised protagonists (Japanese-American, Italian-American, and African-American) to navigate industrial spaces.

Petrofictional Frontiers: Hisaye Yamamoto and Upton Sinclair

As the twentieth century dawned, anti-Japanese groups in Los Angeles saw themselves as ‘racial frontiersmen’, and feared that Japanese immigrants would reconstitute California as a ‘racial frontier state’.²⁰ Their racial animus was not disgust at any notion of Japanese inferiority but quite the opposite. These ‘California chauvinists’ feared the possibility that the Japanese might be (and

¹⁹ Hoover, 674; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 193, 153.

²⁰ John Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation: The Japanese of Los Angeles, 1900–1942* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 7.

might consider themselves) the equals or even superiors of white Americans, and that their arrival on America's West Coast would thus render it a site of 'civilizational' contest where the white hegemony of the United States' continental conquest might be overturned.²¹ Meanwhile, Japanese-Americans on the West Coast, conscious that they shared with their continent-ending environs a special place in America's history of migratory pioneering, also saw themselves as frontiersmen. As Eiichiro Azuma writes, they embarked on a 'transnational [...] intellectual endeavour' to effect the 'racialized reinvention of a collective self—as concomitantly American frontiersman and Japanese colonists/colonialists—acceptable to both their adopted country and their homeland'.²² The qualities by which Japanese-Americans in California pursued this frontiersmanlike identity and by which they were stereotyped—'efficiency, reliability, eagerness, and hard work'—were the same qualities that prompted the racial agitators' 'fear that the Japanese were not merely as good as white Americans, they were better'.²³ Much of the region's white population, however, initially received those qualities more warmly, lauding reputed Japanese skill in agriculture and horticulture.²⁴

Thus two competing-but-overlapping images of the Japanese-American-as-frontiersman existed simultaneously in the early twentieth century: self-perception as dogged self-starters in the pioneer mould, and racial agitators' image of a threat to white America's conquest of the continent. In either reading, to be ethnically Japanese in California did indeed continue to mean occupying a social frontier—'situated between a clearly dominant group and its clear inferiors'.²⁵ In Claire Jean

²¹ Modell, 7. Harry Carr's frothy 1935 booster tract speculates that Los Angeles may be the place where the 'Aryan race' must 'yield the torch' to 'some younger and fresher race' upon 'the shores of the Pacific'. Neither the Japanese nor the Chinese are mentioned by name, but Carr's text suggests that the extent to which ideas of LA as a place where American destiny was challenged by proximity to the Pacific world suffused even the region's most unalloyedly bullish discourses. Carr, *City of Dreams*, 5.

²² Eiichiro Azuma, 'The Politics of Transnational History Making: Japanese Immigrants on the Western "Frontier", 1927–1941', *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 4 (March 2003): 1403, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3092548>.

²³ Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 5, 8.

²⁴ Modell, 8.

²⁵ Modell, 9.

Kim's phrase, Japanese-Americans were 'racially triangulated vis-à-vis blacks and whites'—'valorized' relative to the former but still 'ostracized' by the latter.²⁶ Despite broad appreciation of the Japanese work ethic and perceived skills, Japanese Californians found themselves generally in positions of socioeconomic subservience to white Americans, but there remained 'a color line separating them from black and brown people'.²⁷ As long as that line remained, the *Issei* (first generation) largely accepted their situation.²⁸ Consolidating its 'middle position' in the social-racial hierarchy, the *Issei* cultivated a rich network of community institutions, but these were predicated on promoting 'self-censorship' and assimilation—'making oneself acceptable to white opinion'.²⁹ The American-born *Nisei* generation expressed Japanese identity more confidently. Tellingly, however, they found their precedents for doing so in the celebrations of ethnicity presented by such local literary lights as the Italian-American John Fante and the Armenian-American William Saroyan, conspicuously identifying themselves with cultural figures who claimed at least adjacency to whiteness.³⁰

Particularly in agriculture, Japanese-Americans carved an increasingly significant economic niche in the Los Angeles area.³¹ They could only do so, however, 'by exploiting the fringes of Caucasian economic enterprise, where initiative, hard work, and the willingness to put up with [...] discomfort can make a great deal of difference'—an economic frontier.³² They were compelled towards such positions because, despite appreciation of Japanese work ethic and civic pride, and broad acceptance by white society of Japanese racial 'superiority' to African-Americans or

²⁶ Claire Jean Kim, 'The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans', *Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1999): 107, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329299027001005>.

²⁷ Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 14–15.

²⁸ Modell, 10.

²⁹ Modell, 10, 12.

³⁰ Valerie Matsumoto, 'Desperately Seeking "Deirdre": Gender Roles, Multicultural Relations, and Nisei Women Writers of the 1930s', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12, no. 1 (1991): 29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3346573>.

³¹ Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 8–9.

³² Modell, 27.

Mexican-Americans, anti-Japanese sentiment in Los Angeles grew in proportion with the city's Japanese population and its socioeconomic development. Efforts to assimilate did not quell the strange and toxic mixture of contempt and fear in which, increasingly, the Japanese were held—Philip Marlowe's paranoia about the duplicitous 'Jap' whose betrays his 'nice-mannered' subservience by 'hiss[ing] at you' in the very moment of ingratiating.³³ By 1910 'the racial frontier idea' was already 'clearly impressed upon the minds of defenders and opponents of the Japanese' alike; battle lines were drawn.³⁴ A welter of anti-Japanese legislation followed, commencing with the Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920, the latter of which hit the California Japanese agricultural economy particularly hard.³⁵ Where Japanese immigration had initially taken advantage of a labour shortfall created by Chinese exclusion, by the mid-1920s, the California Japanese community in turn found itself 'engulfed by the politics of racial exclusion led by organized labor, the press, and nativist groups'. Japanese-Americans became subject to increasingly 'rigid white control', denied access to landownership, naturalisation, and the political process; any further Japanese immigration was prevented by the 1924 Immigration Act.³⁶

Los Angeles' Japanese-American community had thus come to occupy, by the 1929 setting of Yamamoto's story, a social, economic, and legal frontier state that itself derived from two clashing visions of the Japanese-American-as-pioneer. If the community's industrious ability to carve for itself a proud and prosperous niche in the area's economic, civic, and cultural landscape affirmed a growing perception of itself as a group of latter-day frontiersmen, it also seemed to confirm racist agitators' worst fears that a thriving Japanese community would endanger white hegemony by restoring to California powerful frontier energies of ethnonational conquest. If fears

³³ Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 234.

³⁴ Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 37.

³⁵ Dudley O. McGovney, 'The Anti-Japanese Land Laws of California and Ten Other States', *California Law Review* 35, no. 1 (March 1947): 7, 14–18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3477374>; Masao Suzuki, 'Important or Impotent? Taking Another Look at the 1920 California Alien Land Law', *The Journal of Economic History* 64, no. 1 (March 2004): 139–40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050704002621>.

³⁶ Azuma, 'The Politics of Transnational History Making', 1402. This legislation would remain in place until 1952.

of Japanese superiority compelled discriminatory measures and sentiments that enforced distance between Japanese racial identity and whiteness, they also elevated Japanese-Americans from the social categories of ‘inferior’ races. If Japanese commerce was welcomed by the local economy, it also compelled efforts to limit its ability to compete with and potentially damage white enterprises.

‘Life Among the Oil Fields’ produces spatially these multiple frontierlike characteristics of the pre-war California Japanese experience. Although the narrator’s family’s farming operation seems successful (groceries are plentiful, they have a car, they take English-language newspapers), it is conducted, and the family lives, upon marginal land in the undesirable industrial environs of the oilfield, immediately ‘adjoining a derrick’.³⁷ The presence of this and other infrastructure belonging to the oil company implies leased land, reflecting the severe contemporary restrictions on Japanese landownership, while the family have relocated several times during the narrator’s childhood.³⁸ Like many California Japanese of the period, they occupy an economic liminality—at once prosperous and precarious. Their occupation of a racial liminality between two colour lines is also suggested: on one neighbouring tract is another Japanese family, while another is occupied first by Mexicans, then by Italians. The one immediately proximate white household is conspicuous by its exceptionality, but the children do also have white schoolfriends. The family thereby claims literal adjacency to whiteness, but also maintains (and cannot escape) proximity to ethnic groups that the California Japanese deemed their inferiors.³⁹ The racial composition of the neighbourhood produces spatially Kim’s ‘triangulated’ racial position.

Moreover, whilst Yamamoto’s narrator describes her family as living in Redondo Beach, that municipality, seeking to maintain its ‘resort-like quality’, banned oil drilling within the city in

³⁷ Hisaye Yamamoto, ‘Life Among the Oil Fields, A Memoir’, in *Seventeen Syllables* (New Brunswick, NJ; London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 91, 90, 88.

³⁸ Due to the effect of the Alien Land Laws, as late as 1940 three-quarters of Japanese-American farmers in California were tenants. Suzuki, ‘Important or Impotent?’, 140.

³⁹ Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 10.

1922, seven years before the story is set.⁴⁰ Thus the narrator's family must in fact live in a zone beyond the city's limits—like frontiersmen, they are found beyond the 'hither edge' of civic structures. Working these legally nebulous and physically hazardous margins around the oil wells, they exemplify both Modell's description of Japanese-Americans 'exploiting the fringes of Caucasian economic enterprises' and Azuma's identification of a hardy pioneer spirit in Japanese-American self-perception during this period.⁴¹

Stephanie LeMenager notes that as '[d]errick[s] blocked ocean views and made surrounding communities ugly', the arrival of the oil economy in Southern California presented 'a huge problem for regional planners', necessitating 'generous plantings and carefully constructed views' to hide 'the sights and sounds of industry'.⁴² Yamamoto's Japanese-American children, however, live in a place where planners have no such anxieties. No attempt has been made to insulate these individuals from extraction's impacts. Yamamoto's narrator notes that '[d]errick[s] then were not disguised by environmental designers to be the relatively unobtrusive, sometimes pastel-coloured pumps that one comes across nowadays'.⁴³ LeMenager, however, makes clear that in the period described by Yamamoto's story 'environmental designers' were already hard at work elsewhere. Their absence from this setting does not, in fact, reflect its chronological moment but rather the

⁴⁰ Quam-Wickham, 'Cities Sacrificed on the Altar of Oil', 198.

⁴¹ Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 27. Oil certainly was a 'Caucasian enterprise'. As Jonathan Greenberg notes in his biography of Jake Simmons, Jr., 'the most successful African-American in the history of the oil industry', who began his career in Oklahoma in the '20s, oil was 'one of the most conservative businesses in the United States'. As Simmons illustrates, exceptions to the industry's ethnic homogeneity did exist, but he was a remarkable figure precisely because his non-whiteness in a position of authority and ownership in the oil industry was so rare. Jonathan D. Greenberg, *Staking a Claim: Jake Simmons and the Making of an African-American Oil Dynasty* (New York, NY: Atheneum, 1990), 4. References to Japanese-American involvement in the oil industry are conspicuous by their absence from the previously-referenced accounts of Japanese-American economic activity in California offered by Modell, Azuma, Suzuki, and likewise from such further scholarly inquiries into the development of California's oil industry and/or Japanese. See Richard A. Walker, 'California's Golden Road to Riches: Natural Resources and Regional Capitalism, 1848–1940', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 91, no. 1 (March 2001): 167–99, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0004-5608.00238>; Jason Cooke, 'Energy Landscape: Los Angeles Harbor and the Establishment of Oil-Based Capitalism in Southern California, 1871–1930', *Planning Perspectives* 32, no. 1 (January 2017): 67–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02665433.2016.1179126>; Roger Daniels, 'Chinese and Japanese as Urban Americans, 1850–1940', *The History Teacher* 25, no. 4 (August 1992): 427–41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/494351>.

⁴² Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 79.

⁴³ Yamamoto, 'Life Among the Oil Fields', 88.

social status of its inhabitants. In Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, by contrast, the wealthy, white Sternwoods also live among oilfields—their own—but their domestic proximity to oil is freely chosen. Indeed, Marlowe wonders why 'they would want to' look out at 'what had made them rich', yet they do: the Sternwoods' apparent desire to maintain contact with their oilfields (when they could easily insulate themselves from their visual impacts) is a marker of perversity.⁴⁴

Japanese-Americans were known in this period, to the point of stereotype, as gardeners—figures responsible for beautifying and regulating the immediate environments of well-to-do white communities, maintaining a spatial practice of 'civilized' domestication by suppressing any hint of natural disorder emerging from below ground. Marlowe derides a 'Jap gardener' he finds 'pulling a piece of weed out of the vast velvet expanse' of a lawn 'and sneering at it the way Jap gardeners do'.⁴⁵ In this community of wealthy whiteness, a miniature act of extraction from the soil, performed by an ethnic other, serves to defrontierise the landscape. In Yamamoto's story, extractive acts have precisely the opposite effect, refrontierising a landscape in which ethnic others have been compelled to live: as an industrial contest with a hazardous, unstable geography, oil extraction suggests an especially literal manifestation of Hoover's belief that technological advancement could reconstitute the frontier. The invidious conditions in which Yamamoto's characters must live are thus both the consequence of the racial frontier they occupy and a physical analogue of its characteristics. Yamamoto, however, complexifies her text's discourse on the means and effects of racial marginalisation by suggesting that oil's obtrusive presence in the landscape of her characters' lives is simultaneously an elusive absence:

We must have lived day and night to the thumping pulse of the black oil being sucked out from deep within the earth. Our ambiance must have been permeated with that pungency, which we

⁴⁴ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 16.

⁴⁵ Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 248.

must have inhaled at every breath. Yet the skies of our years there
come back to me blue and limpid and filled with sunlight.⁴⁶

The narrator persistently suggests how curious it is that, despite growing up in this dirty, noisy, dangerous environment, where the apparatus of heavy industry was ubiquitously proximate, she does not remember that presence substantially shaping the patterns, habits, and consciousness of her young life. In offering such vivid and detailed descriptions of her youth's industrial surroundings, however, the narrator belies her own insistence that whilst she 'must have' experienced the effects of oilfield living they have not coloured her childhood memories. The sense of supposition or inference implied by 'must have' is at odds with the richness of sensory, experiential immediacy in descriptions of the oil's 'pungency' and 'thumping pulse' as it is 'sucked' upwards. Similarly, whilst acknowledging that she and her peers could not 'ignore' the derricks and sump holes, the narrator claims that they 'played around them', making 'respectful allowances' for the wells' 'considerable presence'. Immediately, though, she revises this memory, conceding that she 'might venture' onto the platforms in play but maintaining that such 'investigations were conducted gingerly'.⁴⁷

Then follows a further sleight of revision—that contact with the pistons and pulleys was avoided 'except that we sometimes tried to ride the long steel bars'. This seems a large, striking, and dangerous exception to 'avoid[ing] contact', and certainly throws into doubt the notion that play upon the platforms was 'conducted gingerly'—let alone the idea that the children 'worked and played around' the wells or that their presence 'did not interfere' with their routines.⁴⁸ Rather, Yamamoto's narrator progressively concedes that the derricks and sump holes *were* her peer group's daily routine. It is as if they are so powerfully present that they dominate or occlude the

⁴⁶ Yamamoto, 'Life Among the Oil Fields', 89.

⁴⁷ Yamamoto, 93.

⁴⁸ Yamamoto, 93.

environment to the point of no longer seeming like obstacles or features within it—filling the field of vision so fully that they are no longer identifiable. When Amitav Ghosh coined the genre classifier ‘petrofiction’ to describe oil-centric narratives, he also introduced ‘Oil Encounter’ as a term to describe the experience of human interaction with oil, but it is an inadequate one for Yamamoto’s story.⁴⁹ Here, the means of oil’s industrial extraction are at once completely dominant and unavoidable in their heady, multisensory all-pervasiveness, and yet somehow elusive: oil is a constant presence, but one so integral to the texture of life that it becomes paradoxically indistinct. There is nothing as straightforward or discrete as an ‘encounter’ here.

When describing the uncanny, Freud cites F. W. J. Schelling’s definition of the *unheimlich* as that which ‘ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light’, but also suggests that uncanniness occurs when the hidden thing ‘coincides with its opposite’.⁵⁰ As the act of extracting oil from beneath the earth makes an invisible thing visible, but is performed by machinery which, in the experience of Yamamoto’s narrator, is somehow so visible as to become invisible, there is thus a compound or meta-uncanniness to Yamamoto’s oil and its apparatus. That which would naturally be hidden is brought ‘unnaturally’ to the surface, but the obtrusive, blatant visibility of the extractive machinery by which that uncanny effect is created simultaneously coincides uncannily with its own opposite state of hiddenness. Uncanniness itself is rendered uncanny.

Such uncannily elusive omnipresence is strongly suggestive of the Japanese-American experience as an oppressed non-white group in an insoluble atmosphere of racial foment, because it precisely anticipates how multiple theorists have described whiteness itself as operating in American culture. Like Yamamoto’s oil, whiteness is for Valerie Babb at once ‘everywhere and

⁴⁹ Amitav Ghosh, ‘Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel’, *New Republic*, 2 March 1992, 29.

⁵⁰ Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, vol. XVII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 225–26.

nowhere’, a state that reflects the ‘synonymity [of whiteness] with American identity’.⁵¹ There is similarly an intimation of Coco Fusco’s observation that ‘[t]o ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it’.⁵² Fusco suggests that whiteness derives its othering power precisely from being ignored or treated as a mere default state; failure to identify it as a distinct construction grants it its oppressive omnipresence, but that oppressive omnipresence (inherent in its synonymity with Americanness) is exactly what makes it so hard to grasp distinctly. As Richard Dyer writes, ‘whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen’.⁵³ Such conditions of whiteness thus replicate Yamamoto’s paradoxical description of the children’s experience with the apparatus of oil. This renders the text’s account of the effects of the geography and economy of oil legible as a reflection on the characters’ encounter with white America—and not merely in the historical moment described, but in foreshadowing greater racial traumas to come.

Yamamoto’s setting antedates by just over a decade the internment of Japanese nationals and Japanese-Americans alike as ‘potentially dangerous aliens’.⁵⁴ With Executive Order 9066 of February 19th, 1942, President Roosevelt granted General John DeWitt, head of the Western Defense Command, absolute control over the presence of ‘any or all persons’ in his area of authority.⁵⁵ DeWitt designated a 100-mile-wide strip running the length of the Pacific Coast as ‘Military Area No. 1’, from which ‘all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien’ were then ‘evacuated’ almost immediately by supplementary localised orders.⁵⁶ With Roosevelt’s edict,

⁵¹ Babb, *Whiteness Visible*, 168, 119.

⁵² Coco Fusco, ‘Fantasies of Oppositionality: Reflections on Recent Conferences in Boston and New York’, *Screen* 29, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 91.

⁵³ Dyer, *White*, 45.

⁵⁴ ‘Action on Japs [b]’, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 1942, A4.

⁵⁵ Franklin D. Roosevelt, ‘Executive Order 9066, in Which President Franklin D. Roosevelt Authorizes the Secretary of War to Prescribe Military Areas’ (Washington, DC: The White House, 19 February 1942), 1, General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11, National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5730250>.

⁵⁶ John L. DeWitt, ‘Public Proclamation No. 1’ (San Francisco, CA: Western Defense Command and Fourth Army, 2 March 1942), 3–4, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries, <https://cdm16786.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/pioneerlife/id/15329/rec/5>; ‘Civilian Exclusion Order No. 33’ (San

the entire West Coast became once more a frontier—only now one that had, like earlier figuring of Japanese-Americans as frontiersmanlike figures, two countervailing inflections. Japanese-Americans found their settled home re-designated as a hostile environment, their ability to move within and claim its space as their own challenged and ultimately extinguished. For supporters of internment, an area hitherto claimed by and emplaced firmly within the purview of American ‘civilization’ had been contested afresh by a dangerous other and required re-securing. Such a contest further implied frontier conditions because, as DeWitt stated, it was a direct consequence of the region’s extreme westness: the geographical position by which the Far West had in the nineteenth century resisted the embraces of population, government, and infrastructure now rendered it vulnerable to attack from America’s Pacific foe.⁵⁷ A space of settled sociopolitical meaning had been re-engineered as a precarious civic liminality, rendering as law the turn-of-the-century anti-Japanese agitators’ fantasia of a West Coast racial frontier.

By July 1942, 110,000 Japanese-Americans were interned, where before the war they had numbered 80,000 in Los Angeles alone—a majority of all Japanese-Americans in the US.⁵⁸ There was thus a particularity to internment as a *Los Angeles* experience. Moreover, as suggested by a *Los Angeles Times*’ editorial headlined ‘Action on Japs’ and published on the same day as Executive Order 9066, racial panic about Japanese-Americans was indivisible from panic about the security of America’s industrial spaces. The editorial names ‘oil refineries’ and ‘airplane factories’ in the same category of vulnerability and importance as military facilities.⁵⁹ Two days later, a follow-up editorial bearing the same headline and praising the Executive Order appeared immediately adjacent to one condemning ‘Southern California factories’ for a war-jeopardising and ‘unpatriotic’

Francisco, CA: Western Defense Command and Fourth Army, 3 May 1942), Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, <https://cdm16786.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/pioneerlife/id/15329/rec/5>.

⁵⁷ DeWitt, ‘Public Proclamation No. 1’, 2.

⁵⁸ Kevin Starr, *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 94; Nash, *The American West Transformed*, 12.

⁵⁹ ‘Action on Japs [a]’, *Los Angeles Times*, 19 February 1942, A4.

failure to increase productivity.⁶⁰ Panic about Japanese-Americans must be understood as inextricable from California's wartime transformation into an industrial hub of national strategic importance, because that transformation and the belief that it would be crucial to winning the war provided the object against which Japanese-Americans could be suspected 'potential saboteurs and fifth columnists'.⁶¹ Ironically, having been compelled by racial discrimination to live in undesirable industrial locations, families like those in Yamamoto's story found that their conspicuous presence there intensified the racist suspicions to which they were subject in wartime.

On such a basis Kevin Starr observes that Japanese-American protest against internment was muted because 'California had already betrayed [Japanese-Americans]—had already devalued the worth of their citizenship through fifty years of suspicion and hostility'.⁶² Any shock of internment was attenuated by the prejudiced and liminal social position in which Japanese-Americans had always been held. The peculiar compound uncanniness of Yamamoto's petrolandscape anticipates precisely such a sense. Yamamoto's narrator experiences oil's extractive machinery as an everywhere-and-nowhere omnipresent invisibility, while oil itself—its pressurised secretion beneath the ground containing a potential to gush forth if disturbed—is simultaneously threateningly present in its very hiddenness. The narrator's strange sense of being somehow both aware and unaware of her proximity to latent combustibility thus suggests the conditions under which she retrospectively can be seen to have lived—conditions where the explosive racial contest of wartime had yet to occur but was already present in potentiality, growing ever closer to the social surface.

As Kim writes, 'racial triangulation (defining the other)' was what made 'internment (rounding up the alien within) possible, the latter not an 'aberration from' but an 'extension of' the

⁶⁰ 'Action on Japs [b]', A4; 'Production Our Main Job—and Right Now!', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 1942, A4.

⁶¹ 'Action on Japs [a]', A4.

⁶² Starr, *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940–1950*, 94.

former.⁶³ Just as an industrial catastrophe on the socio-spatial edge zone Yamamoto's Japanese-American protagonists occupy could be no surprise given the latent dangers of omnipresent-yet-unnoticed oil, the conditions to which they are subjected by American society's ideologies of whiteness (one of which is itself the fact that they must live on an oilfield) are such that internment would seem not an anomaly but an inevitability. That Yamamoto's characters live in a place characterised by its *lack* of protective separation from the ugliness and danger of oil extraction ironically undergirds the logic of separation from society that Japanese-Americans would experience in wartime: the former becomes legible as a pre-existing means of effecting the latter. Internment is disclosed as merely an intensification of *de facto* racial segregations that had already been actuated socioeconomically.

If oil stands in for something like the tangible feeling of being othered by an everywhere-and-nowhere whiteness, then because oil extraction is a process that effects the productive harnessing of oil's explosive potentialities, racial othering is revealed to be the very fuel on which America runs. To represent whiteness' seen-unseenness as an industrial presence in the lives of an ethnic group whose social marginalisation increased in proportion with their contributions to California's economy suggests that the exploitation of such groups' labour *through* ideologies of whiteness is itself the dirty open secret of the modern American economy. In an oil experience that somehow hides its own apparent revelation of the hidden through a compound uncanniness of coinciding opposites, American modernity reveals its dependence on whiteness as political and economic fuel *only* to the extent of revealing that dependence to possess the same hiding-in-plain-sight quality as whiteness itself.

Indeed, to represent racial othering as extractive machinery with untrammelled power over the narrator's geography is to imply precisely the capability (and anticipates the wartime efforts) of the racist machinery of the white American state to 'extract' an ethnic population from that

⁶³ Kim, 'The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans', 115.

geography and others like it. Delia Byrnes has suggested that cultural representations of the ‘geography of oil’ are inevitably records of ‘the long relationship between the pleasures of petromodernity and the material violence of its extractive regime’.⁶⁴ Yamamoto’s oil geography derives its most terrible uncanniness from making the same individuals subject to both very literal pleasures of petromodernity (childhood oilfield play) *and* the violence of an extractive regime (the foreshadowed trauma of internment), the latter simultaneously hidden and revealed in the former.

If, however, the dangerous, extractive apparatus of industry that become the children’s default landscape are legible as representing the present effects and future horrors of the everywhere-and-nowhere whiteness under which those children live, then the racial implications of oil’s literal blackness are also impossible to ignore. Of course, Japanese-Americans, however prejudiced against in pre-war California, were not ‘black’ in any literal legal or social sense. Both Modell’s ‘middle position’ and Kim’s ‘triangulated position’ articulate the existence of an understanding shared between the Japanese-American community and white Americans of mutual superiority to other racial groups, with African-Americans at the foot of the racial hierarchy.⁶⁵ If the Japanese could never be ‘quite like the whites’, through assimilation they sought to emphasise their differences from other ethnic communities.⁶⁶

Masao Suzuki notes, however, that the California Japanese—especially those engaged, like Yamamoto’s narrator’s family, in agriculture—had more in common economically with African-Americans than social self-perception and racial pride permitted them to admit.⁶⁷ Further, Jeannie Shinozuka notes the frequent insidious association from the 1910s onwards between Japanese immigration and the contemporary arrival of the invasive, destructive *popillia Japonica*—the

⁶⁴ Byrnes, “‘I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here’: Oil’s Intimate Ecologies in HBO’s *True Detective*,” *The Global South* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 87, <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.9.1.07>.

⁶⁵ Modell, *The Economics and Politics of Racial Accommodation*, 5, 10, 14.

⁶⁶ Modell, 13–14.

⁶⁷ Suzuki, ‘Important or Impotent?’, 141.

Japanese beetle.⁶⁸ Whilst it was as a ‘yellow’ peril that the growing Japanese-American population was held in suspicion, the Japanese beetle is identifiable by its prominently iridescent body.⁶⁹ As oil shares that conspicuous iridescence, its presence in Yamamoto’s story visually recalls the pestilential insect with which Japanese immigrants were dehumanisingly identified, and therein suggests an ontological connection in contemporary racist discourse between blackness and ‘yellowness’. Moreover, as Dyer notes, in cultures and discourses wherein whiteness is dominant or default, ‘white is virtually unthinkable except in opposition to black’: thus blackness exists as an *anti-whiteness*.⁷⁰ By that token, the blackness of the oil constantly being extracted from the earth as the children play throughout Yamamoto’s story, a blackness that characterises their personal geographies, that flows just beneath the surface of and always has the potential to erupt into their lives, is a perpetual reminder of the children’s immutable separation from a dominant whiteness.

Yamamoto’s mobilisation of oil as a discomfortingly proximate blackness anticipates a suggestion made in Chester Himes’ *If He Hollers* that white panic and paranoia during wartime would collapse into an absolute binary of white and non-white any racial positions previously triangulated between white and black. Reflecting Himes’ own belief in the ‘linked fates’ of Japanese- and African-Americans, his protagonist Bob Jones realises amid post-Pearl Harbor anti-Japanese hysteria that he is now ‘the same colour as the Japanese’.⁷¹ Correlatively, Japanese-Americans are no longer any closer to whiteness than he is; not only can white Americans not ‘tell the difference’, neither can he.⁷² Jones’ identification (and internalisation) of white society’s loss of

⁶⁸ Jeannie N. Shinozuka, ‘Deadly Perils: Japanese Beetles and the Pestilential Immigrant, 1920s-1930s’, *American Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (December 2013): 838–39, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2013.0056>.

⁶⁹ ‘Japanese Beetle Trap Intrigues Local Golfer’, *Los Angeles Times*, 16 July 1945, 12.

⁷⁰ Dyer, *White*, 51.

⁷¹ Lawrence P. Jackson, *Chester P. Himes* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2017), 157; Chester Himes, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2010), 4.

⁷² Jones may of course be referring on a literal level to his status as a lighter-skinned African-American, but in the same passage also describes himself as ‘Mrs Jones’s dark son’, thus only furthering the suggestion that the passage describes conditions in which distinctions between *non-white* skin colours will be erased by their political amalgamation into a brutally binary anti-whiteness. Himes, *If He Hollers*, 4.

its ability (or willingness) to distinguish between an African-American and a ‘yeller-bellied Jap’ is his testament to having seen white racial thinking exposed in its barest rudiments. This is a society revealed by the exigencies of wartime to run, ultimately, on the old, unreconstructed, frontierist binary of ‘civilization’ versus ‘savagery’.⁷³ White society’s prior self-interested promulgation of divisions and distinctions between minority groups, Jones suggests, dissolves in crisis, revealing that the only racial differentiation white Americans ultimately care about is that between white and non-white.

In Yamamoto’s text we can thus divine a relationship between how the everywhere-and-nowhere quality of the oil experience represents whiteness and how the blackness of oil itself co-opts Japanese-American characters into a generalised non-whiteness. Distinctions between non-white ethnic groups are themselves both everywhere and nowhere, because whiteness’ power to enforce them simultaneously threatens their removal. Kim implies as much in suggesting that the ‘valorization’ by which racial triangulation elevates one ethnic group above another always already contains its own potential rescindment.⁷⁴ The breaking, through triangulation, of a ‘civilized’ versus ‘savage’ racial binary presupposes the existence of such a binary and thus the possibility of its restoration. As an ‘exercise of [white] racial power’, triangulation’s very enforcement of social distinctions between non-white groups is simultaneously a declaration of white society’s power to erase such distinctions at will.

Such a paradigm is illustrated in James Ellroy’s *Perfidia* (2014) when, at the height of post-Pearl Harbor ‘yellow peril’ paranoia, Dudley Smith proposes that Japanese Angelenos might escape persecution by undergoing plastic surgery to appear Chinese. White society’s enduring power of racial triangulation (i.e. the fact that the Chinese now occupy a less ostracised position than the Japanese) provides the very means by which a white figure (Smith) can propose Japanese racial

⁷³ Himes, 4.

⁷⁴ Kim, ‘The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans’, 115.

distinction's erasure. Smith's scheme reflects in gruesomely literal fashion Kim's implication that white America was capable of effecting 'racial differentiation' between Chinese and Japanese during World War II while *simultaneously* maintaining the 'elision [...] between Chinese and Japanese immigrants' that had characterised earlier white conceptions of Asian-Americans—at once triangulating two groups to the same place and to different places.⁷⁵ Smith's plan ultimately proves purposeless because Ellroy's novel affirms Kim's conclusion that logics of elision were more persistent than those of differentiation—Ellroy's white Angelenos are so ignorant of 'the differentiating aspects of Oriental physiognomy' that the proposed surgeries are redundant.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, by simultaneously mobilising apparently contradictory logics of differentiation and elision, Smith's scheme indicates that the latter inhabits the former and vice versa.

Bob Jones fears in World War II the violent potential of whiteness' ability to elide and enforce racial distinctions simultaneously; Yamamoto anticipates that ability in the oily blackness that seeps through her Japanese-American characters' lives on the fringes of a white world. Thus the oil geography illustrates that the racial position Yamamoto's characters occupy is not merely frontierlike in its socially intermediate quality, triangulated between white and black, but in the insoluble precarity and instability of that position. The proximity to Yamamoto's characters of oil's blackness becomes an indicator that their relative proximity to the 'civilization' of whiteness is ultimately the gift *of* whiteness, and thus constantly threatens the collapse of the triangulated position into a racial wilderness of absolute and total *non*-whiteness. Tellingly, the only time the children in Yamamoto's story come 'face-to-face with oil field danger' is when the narrator's younger brother, Jemo, falls into a sump hole, becoming a 'tar baby'.⁷⁷ He is rescued, but the greatest 'danger' possible in the socially and physically precarious space of the oilfield is to be immersed and covered in the blackness that has otherwise merely been in close and constant

⁷⁵ Kim, 214.

⁷⁶ James Ellroy, *Perfidia* (London: Windmill Books, 2015), 108.

⁷⁷ Yamamoto, 'Life Among the Oil Fields', 93–94.

proximity. The phrase ‘face-to-face’ indicates that the danger here is less the possibility of Jemo’s death than that of looking at one’s brother and seeing, uncannily, a black face—a previously secret double whose revelation is the revelation that non-whiteness is inescapable and ultimately binary.

Jemo is a child even more doggedly marked by oil than are his siblings: gasoline siphoned from the family car is used to clean the oil from him, then later in childhood he is run over and seriously injured by a white couple in an automobile, the great symbol of the oil economy.⁷⁸ When the couple refuse to assist with Jemo’s medical costs or even apologise for their actions, it prompts the narrator’s parents to wonder if ‘we Japanese [were] in a category with animals [...] to be left beside the road to die’.⁷⁹ In Jemo there is thus a notion that oil as a symbol of racial difference grants mobility to some and entraps others. J. Arnold Ross, the tycoon at the heart of Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!*, glories in the same oil-enabled pleasures of automobility by which white drivers immobilise Jemo.⁸⁰ For Sinclair as for Yamamoto, the symbolic racial overtones of the novel’s titular substance are inescapable: Sinclair’s last line characterises its titular substance as a ‘black and cruel demon’ that must be ‘chain[ed]’.⁸¹ As in Yamamoto, too, connections are apparent between the oilfield and the frontier. The nature of those connections, however, is markedly different precisely because their stakes of race and power are so divergent. Where the locus of Yamamoto’s text is a group of non-white children for whom oil is an inescapable reality in which they live but

⁷⁸ Yamamoto, 94.

⁷⁹ Yamamoto, 95.

⁸⁰ *Oil!* was published and is set slightly before the chronological period I primarily address throughout this thesis (its action begins in 1912). However, its status as a fiction that is both imbued with the recollection of frontier values and about the industrialisation of California, and indeed as the archetypal American petrofiction, make it impossible to ignore for the purposes of comparison with Yamamoto’s story. The capacity of the landscapes of oil extraction to invoke or evoke frontier characteristics did not, I would suggest, change substantively between 1912 and 1929—the materiality of the process and its apparatus remained largely the same. It is the existence of *Oil!* that prompted Peter Hitchcock to dismiss Ghosh’s claim that ‘there isn’t a Great American Oil Novel’ as ‘simply wrong’. Ghosh, ‘Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel’, 30; Peter Hitchcock, ‘Oil in an American Imaginary’, *New Formations*, no. 69 (Winter 2009): 90, <https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.69.04.2010>.

⁸¹ Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* (London: Penguin, 2008), 548.

over which they have no agency, Sinclair's is a white man who controls oil's means of production and therefore is not spatially tied to them.

Sinclair suggests that the values of the frontier can be recuperated by reawakening a conflict between humankind and the land via the oil encounter. In this he participates in a longstanding American petrocultural discourse. Frederick Buell notes how Ida Tarbell, writing on America's first nineteenth century oil rush, saw 'oil extraction as signalling a resurgence of the old epic-heroic ideology of democratic, self-reliant, community- and nation- building individualism'.⁸² Sinclair's image of Prospect Hill (standing in for the Long Beach/Signal Hill oilfield) is of a similar refrontierising process.⁸³ The neighbourhood is initially an image of sleepy domestication and small-scale agriculture until oil is struck. When the black gold begins to gush, 'men had to run for their lives'.⁸⁴ Nature that seemed to have been pacified suddenly regains both its terrifying potency and the 'mysteriously thrilling' quality of frontier flux.⁸⁵ The old geographic liminality is replicated by a new one—the westward impulse redirected downwards. The surface of the earth may yield up no more conquerable space, but the frontier's challenge to 'the ingenuity by which men overc[o]me Nature's obstacles' re-emerges below ground.⁸⁶ As Buell notes, what fascinates Sinclair about the business of oil extraction is 'how an American experience of space as freedom cuts against the necessity for enclosure in its exploration', and this is exactly the conundrum of frontierism, which expresses a desire for 'space as freedom' in acts that render space no longer free.⁸⁷

⁸² Frederick Buell, 'A Short History of Oil Cultures; or, The Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance', in *Oil Culture*, ed. Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 75.

⁸³ Stephanie LeMenager, 'The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after *Oil!*', *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (January 2012): 69, <https://doi.org/10.1093/alh/ajr057>.

⁸⁴ Sinclair, *Oil!*, 25.

⁸⁵ Sinclair, 78.

⁸⁶ Sinclair, 76–77.

⁸⁷ Buell, 'A Short History of Oil Cultures', 79.

Joshua Schuster writes that, ‘there is something too easy in the celebration of the “great” and the “American” that Sinclair buys into, [...] a particularly boosterish national fantasy about the impact of oil on state power and the dirty but heroic work of extraction’.⁸⁸ It is the linkage of oil speculation and frontier values that at once enables and demands this ‘too easy’ celebration of ‘dirty heroism’: Ross’ status as a corrupt agent of the machinations of modern capitalism, interrogated so doggedly elsewhere in Sinclair’s oeuvre, becomes secondary to his simpler symbolic value as a latter-day frontiersman, ‘an ‘epic individualist and adventurer’.⁸⁹ Buell characterises *Oil!* as being about ‘American exceptionalism leav[ing] the frontier and invest[ing] itself in the modernity of the United States’, but it is more accurate to say that oil is the vehicle by which the exceptionalism *of* the frontier invests itself in modernity, as Hoover would claim it could: the garden enters the machine.

Comparison between the oilfield frontiers of Yamamoto and Sinclair suggests the ways in which a relationship to the legacies and potential endurance of the frontier is always bound up in a relationship with and access to whiteness. Ross makes a straightforward claim to inherit the frontiersman’s mantle as an individualist man of action who subdues nature to the benefit of ‘civilization’. That this claim resides in his ability to ‘chain’ oil’s ‘black and cruel demon’ (and the fact that he uses conspicuously non-white—Mexican—crews to actually perform such work) emphasises the pertinence of his own whiteness in claiming a pioneer identity. Yamamoto’s characters by contrast, are ineluctably associated *with* the very blackness that Ross acts upon in order to claim a frontiersmanlike role. Yamamoto’s description of the pre-war social position of the California Japanese, and its foreshadowed wartime deterioration, position that community as participating in multiple forms of frontier dynamic—spatial, social, racial, economic. Some of these manifestations of a pioneer identity were actively claimed by Japanese-Americans, but always

⁸⁸ Joshua Schuster, ‘Where Is the Oil in Modernism?’, in *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture*, ed. Sheena Wilson, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 204.

⁸⁹ Buell, ‘A Short History of Oil Cultures’, 78.

within a context that placed whiteness in the position of the ‘civilization’ into which non-white immigrants struggled to ingress and against whose values they were tested.

In that context, Yamamoto’s characters’ frontierism can only be read as an inverted one, one in which they reimagine, contest, and expand the margins of settled American society by moving towards them from an othered beyond (whereas Sinclair’s Ross employs the privilege of a conventional frontiersmanlike move from settlement *to* wilderness). The inextricability of Yamamoto’s children from the apparatus of oil suggests the ambivalent relationship that pre-war California had with its growing Japanese population—at once a valued contributor to the rapidly developing economy and an object of increasing paranoia and racial distaste. That ambivalence in turn indicates the role such a community played in reviving the frontier on its new nation’s behalf. The presence of Japanese-Americans reinvested the spaces they occupied with frontier qualities, but such proof of the frontier’s persistence demanded (and indeed was partially manifest in) the reopening of American soil to contest with a suspicious alien force. If Yamamoto’s use of oil suggests a society fuelled by frontierlike forces of racial separation and contest, Sinclair corroborates that notion with the persistent image of a frontier brought into being by and perpetuated as a pioneering white individual’s exploitation of a pressurised non-whiteness.

Sinclair’s petrofrontier speaks to Hoover’s conception of the role of the pioneer spirit in the new industrial economy, Yamamoto’s to Roosevelt’s. Sinclair, though sharing Roosevelt’s fears of untrammelled corporate titans, largely exhibits a Hooverian blend of frontier spirit and technocratic optimism. In Yamamoto’s story, by contrast, oil’s constant-yet-elusive presence persistently suggests the relationship between racial othering and Japanese-Americans’ emplacement in Los Angeles’ spatial and economic margins—they live in the literal shadows of larger forces of industrial capital and the figurative shadow of future internment. Yamamoto thereby echoes Roosevelt’s intuition that the most significant way in which the industrial economy could constitute a twentieth century frontier would be as a site of perpetual social struggle for

more equitable distribution of its gains, while foreshadowing that the same president would impose upon Japanese-Americans the most invidious and inequitable social restrictions imaginable.

Processing Race: John Fante's Canneries

Los Angeles' fish processing industry is a recurring setting in John Fante's fiction. For Fante, the malodorous oiliness of fish takes on a role akin to that to which Yamamoto puts petroleum—a persistent environmental texture that serves as an inescapable sensory reminder of the vicissitudes of racial division.⁹⁰ A cannery adjoins Julio Sal's bunkhouse in 'Helen, Thy Beauty is to Me—' and joins a litany of unedifying workplaces in *A Letter from the President*, signifying an immigrant protagonist's misplaced belief in the benevolence of his adopted home's socioeconomic promise. Hoover's vision of industry's limitless possibilities for frontierlike progress does not extend to the immigrant labourers who power it: Chu Chu Ramirez believes he is 'going places', but the migratory labour cycle will always bring him back to the 'stinking fish cannery'.⁹¹

In unpublished synopses detailing how the story of the unfinished novella *1933 Was a Bad Year* was to be completed, Italian-American schoolboy Dom Molise makes his way from Colorado to California to pursue a dream of baseball stardom, but finds his hopes dashed and is forced to take a cannery job. Dom's westward journey has broken him. 'The world is a huge place, too large, too brutal for his hopes'; Los Angeles itself is 'bewildering' and takes three days to traverse.⁹² The

⁹⁰ Fante's longstanding fascination with and use of the cannery as a setting reflects his own traumatic employment in such a business prior to his literary career. Cooper, *Full of Life*, 59.

⁹¹ Fante and Leonard, *A Letter from the President*, 17. *President* was ultimately filmed, in substantially altered form and with Ricardo Montalban as Chu Chu, as *My Man and I* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1952).

⁹² John Fante, 'Synopsis of *The Left-Handed Virgin/1933 Was a Bad Year*, Version C' (c. 1960), 4, Box 4, Folder 3, John Fante Papers (Collection 1832). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles; John Fante, 'Synopsis of *The Left-Handed Virgin/1933 Was a Bad Year*, Version B' (c. 1960), 3, Box 4, Folder 3, John Fante Papers (Collection 1832). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

cannery as the end Dom's journey is representative of his dream's failure, but that failure proves that conditions of danger, treachery, disappointment and struggle persist: an enduring capacity to defeat the individual attests to Los Angeles' retention of recalcitrant frontier characteristics. Moreover, cannery labour is collocated with Dom's awareness of his occupation of a racial frontier not unlike that of Yamamoto's Japanese-American children: while working at the cannery he must bunk with Filipinos who strongly resemble Julio Sal's compatriots, in a discomfiting disclosure that his own whiteness is only partial and conditional.⁹³

Fante completed his most significant treatment of cannery labour, *The Road to Los Angeles*, in 1936, although it remained unpublished until 1985. A still-unpublished short story entitled simply 'Fish Cannery', bears much commonality with the cannery scenes in *The Road* and likely dates from the same period.⁹⁴ Fante's recurring protagonist Arturo Bandini is in *The Road* a teenage would-be intellectual alienated from both white America and his own selfhood by geography and his Italianate ethnicity. Dismissive of his immigrant family and other immigrant populations, he is a flâneur of Los Angeles Harbor and the surrounding shabby neighbourhoods in the city's southern hinterland where he lives and works. The novel recounts Bandini's frustrated attempts to make the world around him accept and respect what he sees as his true identity of race and class: a complete (i.e. fully white) American—and 'no ordinary American' at that (as his close analogue in 'Fish Cannery' puts it), but a great novelist, a Menckonian member of the nation's cultural elite.⁹⁵ Turner's sense that frontiersman was an exceptional everyman is present. Ultimately Arturo will conclude that to achieve this self-actualisation he must leave his home in the city's

⁹³ Another unpublished text, a film or TV treatment from 1955, hinges on the fate of a fishing and canning business in a small city in the greater Los Angeles area, but is slight, offering little suggestion of the politics of either race or the frontier in its depictions of industry. It warrants mention, though, as further evidence of Fante's recurrent preoccupation with the business of fish and fishing as a spur to and site for drama. John Fante, 'Untitled Manuscript' (1955), Box 24, Folder 4, John Fante Papers (Collection 1832). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁹⁴ Cooper, *Full of Life*, 133.

⁹⁵ John Fante, 'Fish Cannery' (n.d.), 1, Box 1, Folder 4, John Fante Papers (Collection 1832). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

physical and social margins and make for LA proper, a physical city centre that promises greater social opportunities.

In this respect, Bandini reveals an inverse-frontierist kinship with Julio Sal (as well as the California Japanese of Yamamoto's fiction).⁹⁶ Like Julio on his long trudges to the downtown dancehall, Bandini concludes that the kind of social journey he wishes to make (from America's working-class ethnic fringes into its suspicious, resistant establishment) depends upon the enactment of concomitant spatial journeys—from an edge to a centre. Like Julio, by reconceiving of the physical-and-social centre, rather than its edge, as the recalcitrant, hazardous space to be claimed and conquered, he reimbues the space where Los Angeles lies with the frontierist quality that the city's very presence appears to deny. To realise that possibility, however, Bandini must first test his social ambitions against the spatial limits of Wilmington. He does by rejecting a series of menial, manual jobs which are, he believes, beneath his ambitions, unsuited to his intellectual temperament, and fundamentally deleterious to his desire to transcend his ethnicity and class. Like the narrator of 'To Be a Monstrous Clever Fellow', Bandini yearns for a rarefied intellectual life and performs its mannerisms while unwillingly enduring employment in manual labour.

Bandini's rejection of physical labour is essential to his imbrication in frontier discourse because it positions him as a figure who believes himself to have transcended the kind of muscular masculinity associated with America's wilderness past. Bandini is certainly an individualist, but in no sense a rugged one. He seems a walking manifestation of the belief that the nation had moved past its frontier state and the values that state had privileged, that the post-wilderness century would be less dependent on and worshipful of ideals of virtuously toiling manhood. That Bandini is nevertheless compelled to engage in physical labour but is repeatedly humiliated when he attempts to do so suggests that this belief may be premature. His experiences suggest that a man's

⁹⁶ If we entertain the possibility of an intertextual geography of Fantean Los Angeles, Arturo may even live next-door to Julio: unlike Dom Molise, Arturo may not have to bunk with Filipinos, but his family's apartment house lodgings are adjacent to 'a place where a lot of Filipinos lived'. John Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles*, in *The Bandini Quartet* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2004), 226.

success, even survival, at least in the city's precarious, working-class fringe *does* remain dependent on his ability to embody something of frontier masculinity. This is affirmed when Bandini takes another job, this time in the canning plant of the Soyo Fish Company, the ironic location of many of his efforts to locate himself within America's socio-ethnic elite.⁹⁷

Meeting the cannery manager, Shorty Naylor, Bandini preposterously claims that he is only taking the job because he is a writer gathering material for a 'book on California fisheries'.⁹⁸ Naylor is indifferent to Bandini's bluster, but expresses concern about hiring an 'American' because, in his experience, 'Americans can's [sic] stand the pace', quitting '[s]oon as they get a bellyful'.⁹⁹ For Shorty, Americans have, as the likes of Henry Childs Merwin had feared, become soft and cosseted. Unlike their frontier-bred forebears, they shun hazardous, unpleasant, physically demanding work. Shorty has thus (like Sinclair's Ross) turned to ethnic minorities, Mexicans and Filipinos, for such labour. If the sphere of industry *was* to be America's new frontier, Shorty suggests that the new frontierspeople (many of the cannery's staff are female) were not to be Americans.

This has consequences for Bandini's conception of the cannery as a frontier of racial contest. Italian ethnic status was itself, as Thomas Guglielmo writes, 'highly problematical' in this era.¹⁰⁰ Anti-Italianism was 'fierce, powerful, and pervasive', but

perceived racial inadequacies aside, [Italians] were still largely
accepted as white by the widest variety of people and institutions—

⁹⁷ 'Soyo' is clearly a thinly-veiled analogue for Wilmington's actual Toyo Fisheries—which is referred to by its true name in the 1933 *Was a Bad Year/The Left-Handed Virgin* synopses. Richard Symonds Croker, *The California Mackerel Fishery* (Sacramento, CA: California State Printing Office, 1933), 26, Special Collections and Archives, University of California, San Diego; Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles*, 273.

⁹⁸ Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles*, 275.

⁹⁹ Fante, 276.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

naturalization laws and courts, the U.S. census, race science, anti-immigrant racialisms, newspapers, unions, employers, neighbors, realtors, settlement houses, politicians, and political parties.¹⁰¹

Guglielmo argues, however, that even if Italians were perceived as ‘white on arrival’, they nonetheless suffered ‘extensive *racial* discrimination’ as distinct from ‘simply “ethnic” discrimination’: ‘Italian’ was a racial identity with both physical and cultural characteristics.¹⁰² Nevertheless, as Italians arrived in Los Angeles in significant numbers around the turn of the twentieth century, they ‘did not experience the discrimination commonly encountered in eastern communities’ because ‘Mexicans, Asians, and Native Americans’ bore the brunt of Anglo-American ire, bearing out Guglielmo’s claim that, whatever their ‘racial inadequacies’, Italians benefited ‘in resources and rewards’ from ‘their privileged *color* status as whites’.¹⁰³

This places Italian-Americans in a subtly different position from Yamamoto’s contemporary Japanese-Americans: considered white but inferior to other groups of whites (those with greater social privilege and a more longstanding presence in America, e.g. ‘Anglo-Saxons’), versus non-white but with the troubling potential to be the racial equal or even superior to established white groups.¹⁰⁴ Roediger, however, contradicts Guglielmo, categorising Italians among ‘not-yet-white ethnics’—capable of ascending to whiteness through social and cultural

¹⁰¹ Guglielmo, 5–6.

¹⁰² Guglielmo, 6, 7.

¹⁰³ Gloria Ricci Lothrop, ‘Italians of Los Angeles: An Historical Overview’, *Southern California Quarterly* 85, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 262, <https://doi.org/10.2307/41172173>; Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945*, 9.

¹⁰⁴ Some sense of what this distinction meant practically can be gleaned from the low numbers of Italians interned in World War II. Of 3,567 Italian nationals arrested in World War II, only 367 were interned, against 1,532 internments made from 5,428 arrests of Japanese nationals; Italians were perceived as the ‘least threatening’ of enemy groups. Mary Elizabeth Basile Chopas, *Searching for Subversives: The Story of Italian Internment in Wartime America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 2. Moreover, of course, whilst US citizens of Japanese ancestry were interned *en masse*, the same approach was never taken with the far larger population of US citizens who had Italian ancestry. (A small number of ‘suspicious’ naturalised Italian-Americans were interned under ‘individual exclusion’ measures. Chopas, 138.) Of course, the West Coast’s proximity to and potential as a military target for Japan was a major factor in this difference, and indeed 10,000 Italians on the West Coast who resided in prohibited zones were forced to relocate, but an equivalent fear of Italians as potential racial superiors, and a consequent panic about their presence, simply did not exist. Chopas, 67.

development but *not* necessarily white on arrival as Guglielmo argues. Roediger writes that one could be Italian ‘without being white’, and indeed that Italians were among the groups ‘historically regarded as non-white, or of debatable racial heritage, by the host American citizenry’.¹⁰⁵ The disparity between the analyses offered by Roediger and Guglielmo only serves to further affirm the messy mutability of Italianate racial identity in pre-war America. In any reading, being Italian was, like being Japanese, to occupy a racial frontier, a liminal zone between multiple inferior racial groups and ever-superior Anglo-whiteness, *close* to the settled social space of racial normativity’s privilege but never able to possess it—triangulated to a position far from the ‘savage’ end of the racial hierarchy, but also removed from its peak of ‘civilization’. These ambiguities in the Italian racial position are reflected in the attitudes that Bandini demonstrates towards his own ethnicity prior to entering the cannery.

Bandini curses a shopkeeper as a ‘Dago fraud’, yet also condemns his own Uncle Frank as an ‘American boor’ for his lack of culture.¹⁰⁶ The novel thereby affirms early on that Bandini recognises not merely a difference and separation between Italian and American identity, but sees the composition and division of such identities within an individual as unstable and context-dependent: an Italian-American can occupy the role of either an Italian or an American in a particular given moment. This, however, does not equate to a capacity for Italian-Americans to code-switch at will: modulating ethnic identifiers for Italian-Americans are deployed exclusively by an external actor (Bandini) and in a pejorative context. There is thus a suggestion that hyphenate ethnic identity flexes not in accordance with its subject’s self-perception but rather in whichever way enables a hostile force to place the subject at the position of greatest disadvantage—forcing them into a contest over ethnic identity. The Italian reputation for dishonesty (‘Dago fraud’) is contextually appropriate to an accusation Bandini levels at the shopkeeper; Frank is castigated for

¹⁰⁵ David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London: Verso, 1994), 184.

¹⁰⁶ Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles*, 221, 254.

his lack of culture, so the Menckonian ‘Boobus Americanus’ is the most appropriate avenue of insult. An Italian-American is an Italian up until the moment that it inflicts a greater humiliation to call them an American. Bandini, himself an Italian-American, is able and willing to mete out judgement to his fellows as to whether, in a given context, it is their Italianness or their Americanness that renders them most risible. From this ambivalence arises the question of whether or not Bandini does indeed crave thoroughgoing Americanisation—indeed, he tells Naylor that ‘patriotism is universal’, that he ‘swear[s] allegiance to no flag’. Bandini’s actions in the cannery, however, reveal the truth, because they force him to examine and defend his own position in the American racial hierarchy.¹⁰⁷

Multiple immigrant groups navigate the hazards of the factory floor in vicious competition with each other, possessed by the vain hope of conquering their own socio-ethnic liminalities. Transporting boxes of canned mackerel, Bandini is determined not to be outdone by the Mexican Manuel, ‘a mere peon’ who totes ten boxes on his hand truck and whose name suggests a figure defined by the nature of his labour. Despite his inexperience and physical weakness, Bandini attempts twelve boxes; predictably, they (and the cans within them) soon go flying across the factory floor. Embarrassed, Bandini drops to his knees to retrieve the escaped cans while the other truckers, whose progress has been impeded by his accident, gather around. ‘It was disgusting’, Bandini recounts, ‘with me, a white man, on my knees, picking up cans of fish, while all around me, standing on their feet, were these foreigners’.¹⁰⁸

The dual meaning of ‘disgusting’ is transparent. Syntactically as well as semantically it denotes both the revolting nature of the task’s physical qualities—scrabbling on one’s hands and knees to gather cans on a grubby, ‘wet’ and ‘slippery’ factory floor—and Bandini’s sense that its

¹⁰⁷ Fante, 275.

¹⁰⁸ Fante, 329.

dynamics of racial humiliation are equally ‘disgusting’.¹⁰⁹ For Bandini the two ‘disgusting’ aspects of the scene (the physical qualities of the cannery as a space and the psychological injury of his humiliation by others whom he considers his racial inferiors) are inextricably linked. Bandini’s nauseous revulsion over the unpleasant odours and textures of cannery are both literal and a proxy for his horror at being held economically and spatially captive by and in subordination to people he considers his racial inferiors. Notably, though, he contrasts his whiteness not with their colour but with their foreignness, suggesting Guglielmo’s conception of the Italian position in the racial hierarchy as a site of contest and uncertainty: as an ‘inferior’ form of whiteness, Arturo’s racial status is unstable and open to challenge; his citizenship (as American-born) is not.

Roediger writes that immigrants from ‘white ethnic’ groups have historically ‘equate[d] whiteness with Americanism in order to turn arguments over immigration from the question of who was foreign to the question of who was white’.¹¹⁰ Second-generation Arturo, because he is confident in his citizenship (‘I was born [...] under the stars and stripes’) but not in his whiteness, is compelled to do the opposite.¹¹¹ The same sense inheres in ‘Fish Cannery’: the narrator worries that ‘a stranger is liable’ to think him a Mexican, causing him to perform his ‘ecstatic pride in [his] Americanism’ in response.¹¹² He fears that his questionable whiteness will compromise his legally unimpeachable nationality. Similarly, Cora Papadikis in James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) fears that mere proximity to an imperfect Mediterranean whiteness imperils her own whiteness and Americanness by coding her as ‘Mex’. She has ‘nice white skin’ and protests that she is from Iowa, but being married to a Greek ‘made her feel she wasn’t white’.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Fante, 331.

¹¹⁰ Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, 189.

¹¹¹ Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles*, 287.

¹¹² Fante, ‘Fish Cannery’, 7.

¹¹³ James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (London: Orion, 2005), 4–5.

A tableau of Mexicans not only surrounding but towering over Bandini, erect while he is prone, stages Bandini's fears that in the cannery his notional racial superiority is overturned. The moment can, however, be read another way: Bandini may be entrapped, dominated, but he is also physically *central*. Mapping the scene's racial politics to these twin contradictory ways in which its spatiality can be read discloses that both readings are equally and simultaneously valid. Although Italian-American rather than the non-hyphenate American *sine qua non* he repeatedly and loudly claims to be by invoking his birthright, Bandini *is* by virtue of his whiteness (however 'inferior'), notionally 'superior' to the Mexicans and Filipinos among whom he works. Within the confines of the canning plant, however, he becomes the non-normative minority, and an inferior in his ability to carry out the work that the environment demands. Thus the image of Bandini surrounded by his Mexican co-workers discloses his broader status as an Italian-American: he occupies a liminality between dominant and dominated, normative and subaltern, centre and edge—another of Kim's 'triangulated' positions. Further attesting to the frontierist quality of an Italian-American identity, Bandini is rendered marginal to both those within *and* without the American socio-ethnic establishment.

The factory is filled with those he considers 'uncivilized', and his interactions with them therein indicate that he hopes to prove by, contrast with them, that he is a genuine American—that is, to show himself as the emblem of 'civilization' in a space of 'savagery'. He finds instead, however, that he is less a frontiersman than a frontier unto himself, unable to exist as anything other than an uneasy contact point *between* the 'savage' and 'civilized'. Simultaneously, however, the fact that this scene of racial abjection results from Bandini's inability to match the Mexicans *physically* suggests that even as he himself embodies frontier-like qualities of precarious liminality, he is unable to claim the masculine robustness upon which survival in this environment depends. The spectre of the frontier is multiply present, but Bandini's possession of one set of frontier associations (a location in America's ethnic hierarchy that models the frontier's location at the 'hither edge' of wilderness) does not render him able to engage with another (the cannery's demand

for a brutal constitutional toughness). He embodies one element of the frontier while being alienated from another.

Despite the cannery's ability to map in physical space the racial centres and edges that structure Bandini's consciousness, however, Bandini's attempts to assert clear racial distance between himself and his fellow employees are compromised by encounters where physical indicators of race in fact prove (as in Floyd Davis' illustrations of Julio Sal) mutable, deceptive, and easy to misread. After an incident in which he is humiliated by his co-workers, Bandini repairs to the employee restroom, where he is joined by one of his Filipino colleagues. Bandini is certain that the Filipino is there to mock him further: he claims that the Filipino watches him 'on purpose, [...] in such a way that I would know he was watching me and nothing else', that when the Filipino smiles at him it is purely 'to let me know he didn't think much of me', and that this smile quickly turns into a sneer. The Filipino's reported speech, however, is nothing but courteous; he asks Bandini how he is feeling and refuses to rise to the increasing racial abuse that Bandini hurls his way. It is in that abuse that Bandini unwittingly dismantles his own attempts to schematise the world as one of stark and immutable racial hierarchies.

Bandini first describes his bathroom adversary as a 'dark Filipino', but later clarifies that he only noticed the darkness of the man's 'nut brown' skin because of its contrast with his white teeth.¹¹⁴ Bandini tacitly admits that, as Dyer argues and as Himes' Jones felt in realising that wartime had rendered him visually indistinct from a Japanese-American, perception of skin colour, of darkness or lightness, is always socially contingent. Bandini 'suddenly [knows] what to say' to the Filipino upon recognising the darkness of his skin, and addresses him as 'nigger'. Bandini is delighted by the word's effect. 'That hit him. Ah, but he felt that baby. Instantly there was a change, a shift of feelings'.¹¹⁵ Curiously, however, Bandini then modifies the trajectory of his insult. 'You're

¹¹⁴ Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles*, 284–85.

¹¹⁵ Fante, 286.

not a nigger at all', he says, 'You're a damn Filipino'. This apparent correction, a recognition of the man's actual ethnic identity, is a rhetorical sucker punch, followed instantly by the stinging rejoinder that to be a Filipino is in fact 'worse' than being 'a nigger'. Bandini then modulates the insult further, calling the man a 'yellow Filipino. A damn oriental foreigner', and asking the man why his ethnicity doesn't make him 'uncomfortable [...] around white people' (asserting himself, Bandini, as one such white person). The man he had identified as notably dark moments before, is now 'yellow as a canary'.¹¹⁶ Bandini remarks on this mutability:

'Boy!' I said. 'You came close to fooling me. All the time I thought you were a nigger. And here you turn out to be yellow.'¹¹⁷

Bandini's attempt at a compound humiliation relies upon the knowledge that both men involved are held in a battle to ascend the ladder of America's socio-ethnic hierarchy. He first inflicts the blow of 'mistaking' the Filipino man for an African-American; that is, relegating him from his triangulated racial position as an Asian-American. He then changes the stakes with the implication that, in fact, to be 'oriental' is *worse* than to be a 'nigger'. This in itself is a doubled insult, because it robs the Filipino man of what little sense of precedence and security in the racial hierarchy he believed himself to have while simultaneously erasing the specificity of his ethnicity by placing him, as was common at the time, in a generic 'oriental' group. As the encounter ends, Bandini rejects a 'Filipino cigarette' he is offered as a reconciliatory gesture, but once alone desperately gathers up the Filipino's discarded butt and smokes it until it burns his fingertips, then grinds it to 'a brown spot' beneath his heel.¹¹⁸ The reference to the butt's colour and the need to grind it out of existence is an ashamed and self-disgusted admission of racial complicity.

¹¹⁶ Fante, 286–87.

¹¹⁷ Fante, 287.

¹¹⁸ Fante, 288.

Bandini tries the same trick when he knowingly calls three female Mexican cannery workers ‘pretty Filipino girls’ (the humiliation of Bandini’s masculinity is repeatedly compounded throughout the cannery chapters by the fact that he is bested in his ability to withstand the physical conditions of the cannery not only by the male heavy labourers but by the women on the gutting and canning lines).¹¹⁹ They, however, realise their ability to inflict the same humiliation of racial misrecognition upon Bandini: ‘We’re *not* Filipinos!’ she screamed. ‘*You’re* the Filipino! Filipino! Filipino!’¹²⁰ Bandini’s response is, as it was in the restroom encounter, to invert his original insult, shifting from an insulting misidentification of the women’s ethnicity to an attempt to characterise their *actual* ethnicity as being worse than his original suggestion:

‘I beg your pardon!’ I yelled. ‘Excuse me for making a mistake! I’m awfully sorry! I thought you were Filipinos. But you’re not. You’re a lot worse! You’re Mexicans! You’re Greasers! You’re Spick sluts! Spick sluts! Spick sluts!’¹²¹

Bandini takes a manic glee in inflicting the humiliation, just as he had with his Filipino colleague in the employee restroom. In both cases he is explicit that the motivation for his racism is the memory of his own repeated humiliation as a ‘dago’: Arturo’s attempts to racially denigrate others are always about shoring up his own ethnic status by asserting his difference from his supposed inferiors, claiming a relative whiteness.¹²²

Bandini’s actions reflect the strange racial frontier zone that Guglielmo describes individuals of Italian ancestry occupying at this time—accepted as white but perhaps not fully accepted as American, uncertain and insecure as to what kind of place in the racial hierarchy an

¹¹⁹ Fante, 289.

¹²⁰ Fante, 290.

¹²¹ Fante, 291.

¹²² Fante, 286, 291.

‘inferior’ whiteness grants and what kind of challenge it might face from non-whiteness. Bandini’s analogue in ‘Fish Cannery’ suggests something similar when he admits of Mexican co-workers that he is ‘jealous because they speak smoother than my father, who was once an Italian peasant’: the sense again is of profound fear that the relationship between whiteness and Americanness might not be directly proportionate, that the limited privilege of inferior whiteness is vulnerable to usurpation by members of non-white races.¹²³

The way in which Fante’s text repeatedly draws attention to the arbitrary, mutable quality of physiognomic signifiers emphasizes the extent to which Bandini’s ethnic self-conception places him in a state that embodies the paradoxical dynamics of the frontier. This is because it foregrounds the degree to which the ethnic hierarchy Bandini inhabits seems to be flimsy, in a state of constant flux (the frontier’s ever-moving, constantly-conquered quality), and yet, because he nevertheless cannot overcome or escape its oppression, simultaneously unsurpassably rigid (the frontier’s enduringly hostile state). In a later depiction of racial strife on the grubby fringes of mid-century Los Angeles, Walter Mosley’s *Easy Rawlins* will alight on a similar sense that hierarchies of race are unarguable precisely because they lack a consistent internal logic. He notes of his erstwhile boss Benny Giacomo (another ethnically-liminal Italian-American), that even though ‘his skin colour was darker than many mulattos I’d known [...] Benny was white and I was a Negro’.¹²⁴ As Yamamoto’s oil geography implies and Himes’ Jones fears, the privilege of Giacomo’s whiteness is the ability to erase all subtleties and distinctions of racial identity (including those of his own) into a brutal white/non-white binary.

That Giacomo can claim this privilege despite his Italian-American status but Bandini cannot is suggestive of how race and class intersect to entrench the latter’s frontiersmanlike role. Giacomo is Rawlins’ manager as well as his racial ‘superior’, but Bandini attempts to distinguish

¹²³ Fante, ‘Fish Cannery’, 1.

¹²⁴ Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2017), 71.

himself racially from individuals whose position within the company hierarchy he shares. Bandini eventually abandons his physical and verbal attempts to assert superiority and seeks refuge in ostentatiously displaying his intellect: he abandons work and sits down to write. This, however, only results in further humiliation: another mimics Bandini's writing pose, then produces for all to see a drawing of Bandini as a freckled cow, with the word 'writer' scrawled beneath. In this moment, twin frontierist characteristics of Bandini's cannery experience are revealed as intimately interrelated. In one respect the cannery produces a frontier because it engages Bandini in a project of contesting and attempting to quell an unstable, perilous liminality. This exists between the co-workers whose non-white ethnicity from which he wishes to distance himself and the fully 'American' quality he claims to have (and which Naylor attributes to him) but which his 'dago' insecurities reveal to be something he cannot securely grasp. Part of that project, however, subsists in his claim to *intellectual* superiority over his co-workers (and even over his American boss). Roediger charts how white working-class racism has historically precluded the 'doubly liberating potential' of solidarity between struggles for class and racial liberation.¹²⁵

Bandini finds himself defeated by the cannery precisely because he wishes to decouple himself from *both* of those struggles, which disclose themselves as socially inseparable from each other. He can seek no ethnic solidarity with his co-workers because this would be to admit to the precarity of his whiteness, nor can he conceive of any solidarity with them on the basis of their shared class position, because, in his intellectual pretensions, he does not wish to see himself as working-class. In an immediate local context where ethnic others *are* the working class, moreover, an admission of one status would be an admission of the other. When the Mexicans whom Bandini hoped to humiliate on racial grounds in fact manage to humiliate him for his intellectualism, however, they also emphasise the cannery's second frontierist aspect, namely that it is a space in which survival is determined by the individual's physical strength, constitutional toughness, and

¹²⁵ Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, 66 and throughout. Likewise throughout *The Wages of Whiteness*.

ability to withstand trial and hazard. In his related projects of seeking to prove himself unsuited to the drudgery of cannery work on both racial and class grounds, then, Bandini reveals his workplace to be doubly imbued with frontier characteristics. He does so in the former case, however, because he fails (he cannot escape his ethnic liminality), but in the latter because, although humiliated, he succeeds (his physical inaptitude for the work is, for Arturo, proof that he is not meant for such menial pursuits).

This inescapability of the cannery's geography is intensified in the knowledge it that becomes vested *in* Bandini. His association with the cannery as an unsavoury and insalubrious place marks him as a social pariah precisely because he cannot leave the cannery behind at the end of each working day; rather it is something he carries around with him. Whereas Chester Himes' Bob Jones will experience the dangerous stigma of his racial difference as a palpable, physical sensation, 'as thick in the street as gas fumes', that experience is rendered literal for Bandini. Cannery work not only denotes the shame of poverty, but also an implicit racial shame, because of the ethnic makeup of Soyo's other employees. That sense of shame and degradation acquires a sensory dimension, detectable on his person as an odour.¹²⁶

Asleep or awake, it did not matter, I hate the cannery, and I always smelled like a basket of mackerel. It never left me, that stench of a dead horse at the edge of the road. It followed me in the streets. It went with me into buildings. When I crawled into bed at night, there it was, like a blanket.¹²⁷

Bandini is not merely shunned for the unpleasantness of this smell but 'recognized instantly [...] as one of those cannery kids'.¹²⁸ His smell is instantly noticeable to others when he enters a cinema,

¹²⁶ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 4.

¹²⁷ Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles*, 309.

¹²⁸ Fante, 310.

a physical presence attached to him ‘like something dead fastened to a rubber band’, but in Bandini’s conception it is not the smell itself, displeasing as it may be, that renders him so objectionable to his fellow moviegoers. Rather it is that the smell is synecdochic of the cannery itself. It lets others know that a ‘cannery worker was in the vicinity’.¹²⁹ The cannery smell operates similarly to Yamamoto’s oil: it is a product of the industrial economy’s oppressive presence in daily life that simultaneously functions as an ineffable but inescapable sensory representation of difference. The cannery is, via its tell-tale smell, a *mobile* geography. The walls in which Bandini is spatially sequestered during his working hours, and the social/racial sequestration they connote, are able to relocate themselves constantly to wherever Bandini finds himself at a given moment. If a frontier was immediately redesignated as such from its previous state as ‘unclaimed’ wilderness the instant a frontiersman entered it, any space Bandini should enter is instantly claimed by smell as an extension of the cannery, the hazardous edge-zone of socioeconomic marginality and racial shame from which he cannot escape.

Tellingly, only one figure in the cannery embodies the elusive frontierist combination of the full American whiteness to which Bandini cannot escape *and* the physical constitution that the environment demands: Shorty Naylor, the manager. In this respect a degenerate version of Sinclair’s Ross, Naylor on some level represents the cannery itself: ‘he seemed a part of the strange, vast loneliness of the cannery, he belonged to it, like a girder across the roof’.¹³⁰ Thus the cannery’s imposition of a geography of racial and social marginality upon Bandini is in fact figured as a superstructure of Naylor’s unintellectual, rough-and-ready Anglo-masculinity, itself a collation of frontierist traits. Naylor is a miserable specimen of humanity both intellectually and physically—he attains perfection *only* in his whiteness (as opposed to Bandini’s inferior Italian strain). Dynamics similar to those of Julio Sal’s dancehall are at play here. This new industrial frontier may require

¹²⁹ Fante, 310.

¹³⁰ Fante, 333.

the labour of ethnic incomers to play out frontier dynamics, but those dynamics remain—as on the Turnerian prairie—determined by, embodied in, and placed in the service of a figure of whiteness.

LA's Italian population had reached 36,000 by 1934 but was overwhelmingly concentrated in central areas of the city.¹³¹ The position Bandini occupies in the industrial edgelands twenty miles to the south of downtown not only distances him socially from the racial and class positions he wishes to claim but also serves as another, literal, claim of distance from his own ethnic community (his family and the 'Dago' shopkeeper notwithstanding). In leaving Wilmington at the end of the novel, therefore, Bandini certainly seeks a social centre in the lights and bustle of downtown, but it is not a centre of whiteness—rather, he attempts to find home in the city's most ethnically diverse area and a place where his specific ethnicity would not mark him as an outlier. It may be that Bandini hopes to enter that area as a white racial frontiersman, testing himself against a hostile landscape of ethnic others. Given the failures of his attempts to claim such an identity in the cannery, however it seems more likely that, in making for downtown at the end of the novel, Bandini moves closer to an accommodation with his own ethnicity, to abandoning the rigged game of ascent to whiteness through frontiersmanlike labour. I will suggest in the next chapter, however, that the racialisations of frontier logic continue to be felt as profoundly in the boarding houses of downtown as they do in the cannery.

¹³¹ Wild, *Street Meeting*, 28–29.

Racial Engineering: Chester Himes' Atlas Yard

World War II's 'impact on Los Angeles proved to be nothing short of a social and industrial revolution', as California became America's arsenal.¹³² Gerald D. Nash claims that this wartime revolution in the industrial makeup the West was overwhelmingly a net positive for minority communities, 'acting as a catalyst to break down various barriers in the way of racial equality'.¹³³ Josh Sides agrees that wartime integration of the industrial workforce (hard-won through intensive campaigning against segregationist trade unions) was the catalyst for a twenty year period in which Los Angeles' African-Americans enjoyed the 'the greatest economic advances they had ever experienced'. There remained, however, 'many barriers' to African-American socioeconomic progress, as 'disheartening and capricious restrictions' continued to reveal themselves in the politics of labour.¹³⁴ As '1.6 million black migrants streamed into urban centers in search of war work' they found that their socioeconomic progress only increased white animosity towards them.¹³⁵ Chester Himes was himself one of thousands of African-Americans who came to Los Angeles 'initially optimistic' about the social boons of wartime industry but soon found that 'migration had not freed [them] from hurt'.¹³⁶ The protagonist of Himes *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Bob Jones, likewise finds his workplace, the Atlas Shipyard, a space composed of literal barriers that model a restrictive and punitive socio-geography of race—a set of frontiers that prove cruelly impassable. The exigencies of wartime open opportunities to him, but in doing so they only bring racial tensions closer to the social surface.

¹³² Arthur C Verge, 'The Impact of the Second World War on Los Angeles', *Pacific Historical Review* 63, no. 3 (August 1994): 290, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3640968>.

¹³³ Nash, *The American West Transformed*, 152.

¹³⁴ Sides, *LA City Limits*, 57.

¹³⁵ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 105.

¹³⁶ Sides, *LA City Limits*, 54–55.

When LA's wartime mayor Fletcher Bowron 'call[ed] for unity, either in the face of Axis resistance or against the many eastern urban competitors for military wealth', he elided global democratic and local capitalistic goals.¹³⁷ In World War II, black intellectuals including Himes saw precisely such elision as the means by which and the reason why 'white capitalist power, in the triad of government, Army and Business' co-opted African-American labour to 'destroy external fascism while allowing the brute processes of domestic racism [...] to pass unchecked'.¹³⁸ In making his protagonist an African-American shipyard employee, and locating much of the novel spatially within the belly of a ship built for a wartime government contract, Himes reifies the tension between a domestic racist capitalism and a global antifascist struggle that is latent in Bowron's elision.

As Nikhil Pal Singh writes, 'a discourse of antifascism, freedom, and democracy' appeared to coincide with 'black aspirations for justice' at home, but ultimately the global freedom struggle only extended the 'promise of American universalism' to African-Americans as a demand for their labour rather than as its reward. The barriers that Jones encounters in his supposedly 'open' workplace thus further constitute a rejoinder to the ways in which that admission of black labour to previously restricted trades was figured by union chiefs, politicians, company bosses, and some African-Americans alike as a generous emancipatory benison. Himes in this period remarked that such acts and attitudes, precisely because they attested to white America's magnanimous 'tolerance' of non-white groups, in fact continued to undermine the democratic ideal that 'all men are created equal': a genuine opening simultaneously enforced a barrier.¹³⁹ In such ways workplace integration's signification of racial progress was only ever partial: Jones' navigations of his

¹³⁷ Roger W. Lotchin, *Fortress California 1910–1961: From Warfare to Welfare* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 131.

¹³⁸ A. Robert Lee, 'Violence Real and Imagined: The Novels of Chester Himes', in *The Critical Response to Chester Himes*, ed. Charles L. P. Silet (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 68.

¹³⁹ Chester Himes, 'If You're Scared, Go Home!', in *Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings* (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), 229.

industrial workplace are a spatial staging of the hard limits to the supposed wartime social advancement of African-Americans, of the difference between tolerance and equality.

The particular material characteristics of the ship (at once industrial workplace and the product of that work) distinguish Jones' acts of social boundary transgression from those of many of the characters discussed thus far. For Julio Sal on the dancefloor, or Walter Huff subversively negotiating the office, many of the boundaries and barriers that either impede or indicate the progress of their frontierist labours are primarily metaphorical: physically, Julio could easily breach the wicker gate that separates the dancing area from its surrounds; there is no physical difficulty for Walter in accessing his office after dark. The physical boundaries they cross merely reify the social frontiers through which they pass. It is a condition of maritime architecture and engineering, however, that the boundaries that stratify and striate the ship on which Jones works have a physical literality. The ship is a 'maze of shapes', a lattice of treacherous ladders, narrow gangways and impenetrable bulkheads that seem transparently to suggest the hazards Jones faces in attempting to navigate America's racial landscape as a black man.¹⁴⁰ The Atlas yard is both a world unto itself and a scale model of racially-riven contemporary America at large.

Bob Jones' apprehension of an intrinsic link between capacities for spatial and social power is first indicated by his description of his arrival in Los Angeles in 1941. Despite being fully aware that '[r]ace was a handicap, sure', Jones 'felt fine about everything' and 'knew [he'd] get along' in LA.¹⁴¹ The source of his confidence is his knowledge that he is '[t]aller than the average man, six feet two, broad-shouldered'. That is, he is confident that sheer physical presence—the ability to occupy more space than most men and to defend it more effectively—will serve to offset sufficiently the social disadvantages at which his race places him. Suggesting a LeFebvrian worldview in which the triadic elements that constitute space are perpetually unstable because they

¹⁴⁰ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 20.

¹⁴¹ Himes, 3.

are always contingent upon and modified by each other, Jones prior to the novel's events believes that the greater *physical* space his body claims can compensate for the reduced *social* space he can access.¹⁴²

In this economy a surfeit of one type of space is exchangeable to fill a shortfall in another. When Jones claims that he would have 'hit a paddy [...] without any thought', the act is figured in language redolent of spatial discovery and ingress: 'I'd have busted him wide open' remarks Jones.¹⁴³ The assertion of racial parity represented by the act of punching an Irishman is not only made possible by Jones' own spatial characteristics (his size) but is furthermore rendered analogous to finding a way (by force) into 'wide open' new territory—even if the Irish-American community's own complex historical relationship with whiteness attenuates the ambition of Jones' attempted claim to racial parity.¹⁴⁴ There is a continuity of purpose here with Arturo Bandini who, in his own assertions of racial agency, characterises one of his verbal assaults on a Filipino colleague in explicitly spatial terms: it leaves the man 'open to the whole world' (i.e. it redefines his relationship to the space around him).¹⁴⁵ Their methods are different, but these acts of aggression confirm that both characters perceive race in spatial or geographic terms, as a restricted, liminal space from which one can (attempt to) fight one's way out.

There is, however, a cruel irony here that is indicative of the relationship *If He Hollers* cultivates between space and race. Jones discovers that at the Atlas Shipyard his large size is in

¹⁴² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 41–52, 116.

¹⁴³ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 3.

¹⁴⁴ The Irish had historically been regarded in Roediger's category of the 'not-yet-white', what whiteness they had regarded as being of an inferior strain not unlike of the Italians. Indeed, Roediger notes not only the familiar nineteenth-century association of simian traits and 'savagery' with the Irish, but close popular associations between Irish- and African-Americans—'smoked Irish'—in racist slang 'well into the twentieth century'. Himes' challenge to whiteness in his willingness to punch an Irishman is limited because it is directed at a member of a people who had themselves 'only gradually fought [...] their ways into the white race'. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness*, 184.

¹⁴⁵ Fante, *The Road to Los Angeles*, 286.

fact, on a literal, spatial level, a *disadvantage*, a hindrance to his ability to move through the cramped spaces of the half-built ship:

I had to pick every step to find a foot-size clearance of deck space, and at the same time to keep looking up so I wouldn't tear off an ear or knock out an eye against some overhanging shape.¹⁴⁶

Dyer writes that a fear of 'white bodily inferiority', the suspicion (and stereotype) that 'non-whites have better bodies, [...] bigger muscles', has prompted white culture to assign 'connotations of whiteness' to images of 'heightened muscularity' (in film, in sculpture, in bodybuilding culture), making an ideal of the 'hard, visibly bounded body [that] can resist being submerged into the horror of [...] non-whiteness'.¹⁴⁷ This ideal—a white maleness that could preserve its integrity in hostile space (and assert superiority over that space's non-white inhabitants) by dint of physical robustness—is of course the paradigm of frontier masculinity and indeed acquires perhaps its most prominent and enduring cultural mobilisation in frontier myth. Jones repurposes that paradigm, trusting to the strength and size of his black body to prevent him from being submerged into the horror of whiteness, but is punished for doing so by the ship's hostile internal geography. That punishment is anticipated in the name of Jones' workplace, which invokes both the mythical Atlas and his latter-day namesake Charles, both archetypes of the whiteness-as-muscularity culture Dyer identifies.¹⁴⁸ 'It put me on my muscle', says Jones of donning his work clothes. This 'muscle' is figurative, but nevertheless make him 'bigger, [...] stronger than the average citizen, stronger than a white-collar worker – stronger even than an executive' (all implicitly white figures).¹⁴⁹ In its spatial

¹⁴⁶ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 19.

¹⁴⁷ Dyer, *White*, 147, 148, 153.

¹⁴⁸ As an Italian-American (and a Southern Italian at that), the status of Angelo Siciliano's whiteness is not, as discussions in the previous section indicate, entirely clear-cut. In changing his identity to that of Charles Atlas and his physique to one of idealised muscularity, however, he only affirmed the whiteness-as-muscularity paradigm. Atlas became white by becoming muscular and vice versa, but the possibility of such an act demanded sufficient prior proximity to 'full' whiteness, which Jones of course does not have.

¹⁴⁹ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 10.

constrictions, ‘Atlas’ checks not only Jones’ mobility but the temerity of his attempts to subvert a cultural figuration of muscularity as protection *for* rather than *from* whiteness, his frontiersmanlike effort to claim space in the world through physical ruggedness.

At Atlas Jones will realise that he cannot escape or surmount, through physical power or otherwise, the social disadvantages at which his racial status places him. Thus, the spatial characteristics of the yard and the limitations they place on Jones’ bodily agency can be read as metonymic of the novel’s racial concerns. Restricted spatial movement in the vessel’s superstructure (the *inability* to fight one’s way out—frequently literally in Jones’ case) maps restricted social movement in society more broadly. True enough, Jones and his colleagues leave mocking notes imploring their white co-workers to run afoul of the ship’s compressed spaces—‘Don’t duck, Okie, you’re rough’—but this in itself rather suggests the disadvantage at which the ship’s black workers find themselves. To leave such notes, the function of which is jokingly to hope that the white employees find their (spatial) freedom of movement bluntly curtailed, is to acknowledge that the white employees enjoy a greater degree of (social) freedom of movement. If the Okies ran into barriers (social or spatial) of their own accord, there would be no need to exhort them to do so.¹⁵⁰

Jones’ initial confidence on arriving in Los Angeles turns to an all-encompassing fear that leaves him ‘shrivelled, paralysed’ when war breaks out—despite the fact that it is the outbreak of war that enables him to land a job at the shipyard where he had previously been rejected on racial grounds.¹⁵¹ As noted, seeing Japanese-Americans being interned prompts Robert’s realisation that white American society would have no qualms about doing the same to any non-white group. War brings about an epiphany that his own racial foothold in the American societal mainstream is even less firm than he imagined it—the ‘handicap’ is greater than he had realised. Himes’ wartime

¹⁵⁰ Himes, 22.

¹⁵¹ Himes, 4, 3.

writings disclose a similar epiphany in slow motion. He wrote in 1942 that war's 'leveling influences of common peril and common objectives' heralded unique opportunities to defeat racism at home, but by the following year was so disillusioned by the Zoot Suit Riots as to remark that 'the South [had] won Los Angeles'.¹⁵² By 1944 Himes held that white Americans were in fact 'getting 'farther away from the ideology of democracy' that war, he had thought two years earlier, ought to have retrenched.¹⁵³

In the novel, such disquieting epiphanies about race are conceived in spatial terms: Pearl Harbour caused racial hatred to be 'let loose in a flood': this is when Jones detects the 'tight, crazy feeling of race as thick in the street as gas fumes'.¹⁵⁴ Framed in quick succession as alternately a liquid or a gas, overwhelming in both cases, 'race' (by which he means not merely the ethnic identity of individuals but the state of social relations *between* races) is for Jones a tangible entity unto itself, possessed of physical, spatial properties. Moreover, the fear leaves him feeling 'walled in, locked up', again drawing a direct link between racial security and the ability to occupy and manoeuvre through space: the direct correlative of Jones' feeling of increased racial precarity is a feeling that he has been spatially constricted.¹⁵⁵

It is all the more curious, then, that although this fear began with the onset of war, it is only upon being made a leaderman, and receiving a draft deferment, that it begins 'really getting' to Jones.¹⁵⁶ If Jones' abiding fear was brought about by the feeling that the war rendered his place in society increasingly precarious, one might expect the leaderman job to reduce that fear. As James Lundquist puts it: 'Why the fear? Why the anger? Bob has a good job. He has had two years of

¹⁵² Chester Himes, 'Now Is the Time! Here Is the Place!', in *Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings* (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), 219; Chester Himes, 'Zoot Riots Are Race Riots', in *Black on Black: Baby Sister and Selected Writings* (London: Michael Joseph, 1975), 225.

¹⁵³ Himes, 'If You're Scared, Go Home!', 228.

¹⁵⁴ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 4.

¹⁵⁵ Himes, 5.

¹⁵⁶ Himes, 3.

college. He has a draft deferment'.¹⁵⁷ Answering those questions further suggests the extent to which the novel figures the physical characteristics of the Atlas yard as a geography within which to stage both the social disadvantages Jones suffers as a consequence of his race and the strategies he uses in the hope of overcoming the same.

As Jones drives his colleagues to work, the blurring of literal and racial topographies is evident. In the 'mad, fast, and furious' traffic, the drive becomes a bitter contest with white drivers and even white pedestrians: Bob deliberately drives dangerously, hoping for a collision and a pretext for injuring a white man.

The huge industrial plants flanking the ribbon of road – shipyards, refineries, oil wells, steel mills, construction companies – the thousands of rushing workers, the low hanging barrage balloons, the close hard roar of Diesel trucks and the distant drone of patrolling planes, the sharp, pungent smell of exhaust that used to send me driving clear across Ohio on a sunny summer morning, and the snow-capped mountains in the background, like picture post-cards, didn't mean a thing to me. I didn't even see them; all I wanted in the world was to push my Buick Roadmaster over some peckerwood's face.¹⁵⁸

This passage is riven with paradox. Jones describes the industrial landscape not merely at length, in detail and with vibrancy, but also in a manner that conveys the way in which these surrounds are so large in scale and so sensorily all-enveloping, oppressive even, that they occlude and dominate the other potential visions with which they compete. They cause the 'mountains in the background' to seem so removed and otherworldly that they become as 'picture post-cards', while

¹⁵⁷ James Lundquist, *Chester Himes* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar, 1976), 29.

¹⁵⁸ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 17.

‘Ohio on a sunny summer morning’ is relegated to irretrievable pastness. Thus both the richness of Jones’ description and the particular qualities it ascribes to the sights of this landscape seem to contradict his claims that he ‘didn’t even see them’ and that they ‘didn’t mean a thing’ to him due to his overriding fixation on running over a white man. Jones clearly does see his physical surroundings, in all their sense-overpowering immediacy, yet claims to be unable to see them because that sense-overpowering immediacy is precisely the same quality that characterises his racial hatred. There is once again continuity with Yamamoto’s notion that the effects of racism are so omnipresent as to become paradoxically invisible.

The dimensions of hostile race relations appear as it were to *overlay* the dimensions of physical space; the physical landscape *becomes* Jones’ psychic landscape of violent racial contest. His claim to be unable to see his actual surroundings thus derives not from a literal inability to ‘see’ the materiality of the world around him, but from the fact that, for Jones, that materiality has *become* ‘race thick in the street’ and vice versa; race permeates the tangible parameters of the ‘shipyards, refineries, oil wells, steel mills, construction companies’ to such a degree that they are no longer visible merely as themselves. The Atlas Yard will prove the same, its internal geographies inevitably racial ones. This is what Jones means when he remarks that a ‘white boy’ might enjoy the ‘scramble’ and ‘tight competition’ of the traffic but ‘to me it was racial’. The racial and the spatial are inextricable now.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of the connections between spatial and racial navigation in the Atlas Yard lie in the linguistic liminality in which it places Bob. In the social hybridity of his speech, which fluidly synthesises multiple culturally-specific registers into a new original form, whilst continuing to code-switch between its precursor elements in different contexts, Bob exhibits something of what Gloria Anzaldúa would later term a ‘border consciousness’.¹⁵⁹ Two of the components of this hybridity—the standard American English spoken by most of the novel’s

¹⁵⁹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 20.

white characters and Jones' middle-class girlfriend Alice, and the African-American vernacular English deployed in rendering the speech of Jones and his fellows—present themselves obviously. A third register is that of the shipyard's many white southern employees. Himes ironically renders the dialect of the capricious Madge, cause of Bob's downfall, in a manner scarcely distinguishable—'yo'self', 'le's'—on the page from that of his African-American characters.¹⁶⁰ The fourth main linguistic register in which the text operates is perhaps less immediately obvious than the others, signified as they are by obvious delineations of race and class, but it ultimately reveals itself to be essential to the novel's treatment of those very subjects.

By this I refer to the abiding sense throughout the novel that the Atlas Yard itself has its own language, one made up specialist technical terms and workplace-specific slang. Lundquist typifies discussion of Himes' style when he remarks on Bob Jones' 'unremittingly tough' language, but the most distinctive characteristic of Jones' navigations of his workplace is rather that the language is unremittingly *technical*.¹⁶¹ It is a place rendered in 'companionways', 'leadermen', the 'transverse bulkhead', 'the chippers, the blowers, the burners, the light lines, the wooden staging', 'the ventilation trunks and ducts, reducers, dividers, transformers', 'gants', and 'prints', the 'jack ladder' and the 'copper shop'.¹⁶² The cumulative effect is in opaque exchanges such as the following:

Willie said, 'While you're here, Bob, you can show me where to hang these stays and save me from having to go get the print.' He was crouched on the staging beneath the upper deck, trying to hang his duct.

¹⁶⁰ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 221.

¹⁶¹ Lundquist, *Chester Himes*, 46.

¹⁶² Himes, *If He Hollers*, 219, 34, 22, 19, 24, 25, 152, 42.

I knew he couldn't read blueprints, but he was drawing a mechanic's pay. I flashed my light on the job and said, 'Hang the first two by the split and the other two just back of the joint. What's your X?'

'That's what I don't know,' he said, 'I ain't seen the print yet.'

'It's three-nine off the bulkhead,' I said.¹⁶³

Jones in effect seeks to call Willie's bluff with the cryptic question 'What's your X?', forcing his underling to admit that his ignorance of the job is greater than he had initially conceded. Bob's assertion of specialist knowledge is twofold, however, because it also confounds and excludes the reader, who is unlikely to know what 'your X' is even in the sense of understanding the phrase's meaning (let alone its physical position).

This fourth linguistic register, the technical one, is the most significant for a reading of the novel that treats the ship as a racialised geography. This is because, as we see in the exchange with Willie, Bob's fluency in the technical language of his job is in effect a proxy for his knowledge of that geography. Bob's acts of naming are the ways in which he shows himself to have the level of specialist knowledge that has seen him become the first black leaderman at the yard. Those acts also model for the reader the fluency with which Bob moves around the ship by maintaining their own exclusivity, withholding the secrets of how Bob understands his work and the vessel by refusing to translate them. To read how Bob describes the activity in the yard and his movements through it is to feel disorientated and slow, alienated from and uncertain of spatial meanings. The reader, lacking Bob's technical skill, fumbles clumsily through the ship by fumbling clumsily through Bob's opaque jargon, in so doing recognising his flexibility as a navigator of space both

¹⁶³ Himes, 25.

social and spatial. (As a figure whose professional ability and knowledge grants him a frontiersmanlike spatial agency, there are parallels between Jones, Philip Marlowe, and Walter Huff.) A. Robert Lee writes that Himes' 'supporting metaphoric use of Atlas's world of heavy machines and industry' makes the shipyard 'appear predatory' as it 'mechanicalizes human vitality'.¹⁶⁴ This is undeniably true of Bob's ultimate fate and the novel's conclusion, but Lee fails to observe that the yard is described in a narrative voice that is ostensibly Bob's own. The fact that Atlas is mediated to the reader through Bob's navigations of its spaces via specialist argot suggests, at least provisionally, that he has mastered his environment rather than the reverse.

Certainly, a kind of heightened spatial fluency, the ability to reconnoitre and move through a challenging, hazardous space, as Bob frequently does, carries a certain frontiersmanlike implication of the kind proposed at various points in this and previous chapters. Given that the novel reveals the treacherous hazards of racial tension lurking behind every bulkhead, Bob's specialist leaderman's knowledge of the ship's geography is in itself indicative of a role as a pathbreaking (but precarious and liminal) navigator of social space. This role, however, is compounded by the sense that the spatial fluency Bob demonstrates in his use of a specialist register also models the way in which Bob's ability to move between *other* linguistic registers further suggests his qualities as a navigator of social space. Bob's specialist engineering language is the means by which the reader experiences his flexibility in moving through the ship as a physical space, but it is because he has mastered everyone else's language that he has moved through the ship as representative of an industrial-corporate structure. Bob constantly code-switches between his narrator's voice (incorporating some elements of African-American Vernacular English but in muted form), the voice he uses to speak to his black co-workers (where the vernacular element is more prominent), a casual English emphasising commonalities between AAVE and the speech of the white southern co-workers when talking to them, and the 'standard' English he uses when

¹⁶⁴ Lee, 'Violence Real and Imagined: The Novels of Chester Himes', 68.

talking to Alice and her family or white authority figures. (Bob even code-switches in thought: in one episode where he briefly resolves to accept quiescent middle-class black respectability with Alice, he imagines that he ‘sounded like Clarence Darrow himself’.¹⁶⁵)

The frontierist implications of Bob Jones’ ability to move between linguistic codes convincingly and confidently are reciprocal with and inextricable from those of his skill (represented in his knowledge of a further linguistic code) in compassing the ship. Jones initially appears to be on a path to social success, despite the racial prejudice he faces, in part because of his level of professional skill, and in part because of his linguistically-manifest level of social skill in managing his relationships with the varying communities who make a claim on his loyalty and identity (working class black, middle class black, working class white, middle class (and authority-holding) white). He renders himself a useful resource, as the frontier itself did, by being able to function, as his boss MacDougal, suggests, as a connective zone between disparate spaces of class and race: ‘your job was to keep down trouble between the white and coloured workers’.¹⁶⁶

Technical and social skill cannot be teased apart here: good at his job Bob may be, but he has also learnt to speak to white men in a way that has enabled him to be recognised for his skill. That is, not only does Bob’s linguistic hybridity attest to his occupation of a frontier-like liminality between racial and class identities, it also discloses that his success has come as a result of his frontiersmanlike ability to test and push successfully against the boundaries of that liminality. In being made the first black leaderman, he has been rewarded with authority beyond that available to his African-American peers for advancing in skill beyond the level his employer has formerly associated with his ethnic group. The reward is also, however, the result of his ability to *present*

¹⁶⁵ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 213.

¹⁶⁶ Himes, 35.

himself in a certain way—the fact that he has been able to persuade MacDougal that he is not merely skilled but exceptional among his race: ‘the most intelligent coloured boy I knew’.¹⁶⁷

Jones workplace, in metonymy of the wider racialised society in which he lives, demands that in order to be valued and respected he must surpass the boundaries of what its white bosses consider normative for his race. He cannot merely be valued and respected as a black man, he must prove himself an exceptional one. Jones does not choose to become a kind of spatial-racial frontiersman, he is compelled into that identity by the society in which he lives and by the institutional apparatus of Atlas in particular. Just as Julio Sal found, however, Jones quickly discovers that a white-centric society that compels its minority members to perform the frontierist role of stepping beyond the social bounds of their own ethnic marginality is also one that will quickly assert its authority in the matter of how far those bounds can be overstepped. The decision over which assertions of racial parity are praiseworthy and which are to be condemned always rest with the force representative of white societal authority, be it the dancehall management or the shipyard bosses.

Bob’s demotion from leaderman comes as a result of calling Madge a ‘cracker bitch’: Bob is socio-linguistically skilled enough to know this not how he ‘should’ speak to a white woman; rather, he chooses to demonstrate his ability to switch social codes beyond a level that is deemed acceptable. Bob is possessed of what bell hooks describes as the ‘[c]ontradictory longing to possess the reality of the Other, even though that reality is one that wounds and negates’. Periodically, those ‘wounding and negating’ effects of being compelled for socioeconomic advancement to model the ‘values, speech, habits of being’ of a culture he regards with ‘suspicion, fear, and even hatred overwhelm Bob; he responds with aggressive, difference-asserting rejections of ‘the reality of the Other’.¹⁶⁸ Mosley’s Easy Rawlins makes a similar error, losing his aircraft plant job because

¹⁶⁷ Himes, 35.

¹⁶⁸ bell hooks, ‘Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination’, in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 338–39.

he refuses to show a level of deference to authority greater than that demanded of white employees.¹⁶⁹ Both Rawlins and Jones are fluent code-switchers who fall foul of the fact that an ability to speak the white man's language is only rewarded when it is to the white man's (or woman's) edification. If their society demands that they perform as racial frontiersmen, then frontier logic dictates that their ingress into the space of whiteness must be resisted *by* whiteness in order to maintain that space's unconquerability.

In the novel's climactic meeting with Madge (the ultimate example of a white reality Bob wishes to possess despite its negating effects upon him) the nexus between the ship's spatial qualities and his role as a social navigator is again made manifest. A former member of Bob's team, seeing his erstwhile manager crestfallen finding his crew assigned to more desirable work under a white leaderman, sympathetically asks him for his expertise on the new job. When Bob goes to inspect the area, however, 'peeping into various rooms', he realises that he has no idea 'what they were all for', and can only surmise possibilities for their use. Where previously he flaunted his ability to understand the ship's complex geography unaided, now he acknowledges that he would 'have to get a print to tell anything about it'.¹⁷⁰ The frontiersman has moved into untested, uncharted territory, where his prior knowledge no longer serves him. It is precisely due to his inability to navigate this space that he finds himself unwittingly in a room alone with Madge, who first attempts to seduce him, then loudly accuses him of rape when he refuses to comply.

All Bob's various frontiersmanlike tools fail him at once. First, the navigational abilities that are his professional skillset have deserted him in a new geography (one explicitly under the white authority of the new leaderman), leading him to walk directly into a hazard. Second, the resourceful cunning and awareness of his self-protective code-switching proves useless. Upon discovering Madge he both seeks to defuse the situation and place himself above the suspicion of

¹⁶⁹ Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, 69, 73.

¹⁷⁰ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 219.

any witnesses by stating not just loudly but in formal, standard English that at once connotes respectfulness and respectability, ‘I’d like to apologize, [...] I was upset that morning and—’.¹⁷¹ Here Bob attempts to distance himself not merely from Madge but, through his deferential formality, from the suggestion of black animality that he knows will accompany any suspicion of untoward behaviour on his part. It is to no avail; Madge will not be dissuaded. Third, Bob’s most basic resource (and that of the frontiersman), that of his physical strength, upon which he believed himself able to rely even prior to arriving at Atlas, is rendered useless: he dare not use his bodily power to subdue Madge, knowing this would render the situation far worse. ‘All she had was her colour’, he knows, but that is more potent than all the traits by which he has shown himself a racial frontiersman: as in the original frontier myth, this remains a geography in service of whiteness.¹⁷²

In that instant, Jones finds with horror that his identity has been transformed from one of motility to one of entrapment, or rather that his motility was only ever illusory. Torn between remaining in the room with Madge and running from her, he no longer has any power to control the meaning of either of those spatial gestures; either will be interpreted negatively by the Atlas Yard’s ultimate (white) arbiters of spatial practice. The eventual result will be conscription, a fitting punishment for one who oversteps the bounds of the frontier-work his society has asked him to perform because it retains all of the frontier’s emphasis on mortal danger, hostile environments, and brutal physicality, but institutionally strips away every vestige of its supposed values of individual agency, creative freedom and self-determination. Being forced to join the army as his punishment for an errant navigation thus seems powerfully to affirm that Atlas is another frontier space in which the frontiersman’s labour falls to minorities but the rules by which they perform frontiersmanship remain determined by, and benefit, white society.

¹⁷¹ Himes, 220.

¹⁷² Himes, 221.

The marginalised, oppressed figure is challenged, even required, by his surrounding society to approach life, and particularly working life, from a frontierist perspective, to labour as a frontiersman, only to be struck down, as Turnerian logic dictates, should his frontiersmanship prove too successful—that is, *too* transgressive and thus at risk of erasing the frontier entirely. Indeed, if Bob periodically uses shows or fantasies of violence towards white individuals as a strategy to reject assimilative demands that he exceed white expectations of black behaviour, then even these reveal the extent of his entrapment. As Roediger notes, drawing on W. E. B. Du Bois, ‘[w]hite labor does not just receive and resist racist ideas but embraces, adopts and, at times, murderously acts upon those ideas’.¹⁷³ In adopting racist violence as a strategy to resist white demands that he perform racial frontiersmanship, therefore, Jones unwittingly continues that performance by embracing another of the logics upon which his white-run workplace operates.

The revelation that the invitation to African-Americans to perform war work (in previously restricted trades) is in fact an invitation, on a symbolic level, to perform frontier work, thus discloses that the promise of racial advancement, of admission to the socioeconomic heart of whiteness, is illusory. If the frontiersman’s ultimate task is to seem momentarily to conquer the frontier while in fact proving its viability and endurance, then it was inevitable that Bob Jones’ supposed weakening of white edifices in becoming leaderman at Atlas would only ever affirm those edifices’ power and robustness. At one point Bob describes himself as ‘a machine being run by white people’.¹⁷⁴ His experiences at Atlas, however, bring him to the realisation that the whiteness machine is in fact America at large and he only a cog within it; like Yamamoto’s oil apparatus he has struggled to see it only because it is omnipresent—the recurring sense of oppressive whiteness as ‘everywhere and nowhere’.

¹⁷³ Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 12.

¹⁷⁴ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 206.

Bob Jones' Los Angeles of 1945 was markedly changed from that of Yamamoto's pre-Depression oilfield in many respects, not least the scale and variety of its industries. The structures and nature of oppression faced by Yamamoto's children, Arturo Bandini in *The Road* and Robert Jones in *If He Hollers* are not the same. They share, however, a sense that the dominant Anglo-American society in which they live demands that they move in certain spatial and social directions, namely those that would see them transcend their ethnic identity and ascend into the higher echelons of what that dominant group deems 'civilized', only to restrict or deny the possibility (or at least the permanence) of that movement. As a result, they share a sense that race is experienced in profoundly and inescapably spatial terms. They explore and test the limits of social, spatial, and ethnic liminalities, while simultaneously embodying liminality within their own personhood. In all these respects, these experiences of industrial Los Angeles certainly affirm the endurance of frontier dynamics and principles, but in doing so they constitute an incisive critique of the same. They therefore respond to the debates within which Roosevelt and Hoover explored the possibility of perpetuating frontier spirit in an age of industry not by providing an answer but by modifying the underlying question—asking not whether a modern America *could* sustain itself upon frontier values, but whether it should.

4. EPHEMERAL ACCOMMODATIONS: DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE, MASCULINITY IN CRISIS, AND THE POST-WAR POST-FRONTIERS OF FRANK FENTON AND DOROTHY B. HUGHES

He is a queer, annoying creature. [...] I have lived in rooming houses so long that I have acquired an eye for the type.

Saul Bellow, *Dangling Man*

Kenneth T. Jackson claims that '[t]hroughout history, the treatment and arrangement of shelter have revealed more about a particular people than have any other products of the creative arts'.¹ On that basis we might ask what is revealed about the condition of Los Angeles at mid-century by the fact that, in the period's fiction, 'multi-family' housing occupies a position of prominence disproportionate to its role in the real city's contemporaneous urban form.² Here I suggest that such housing's outsize textual presences constitute another manifestation of the widespread fictional determination to claim '30s and '40s LA as a site of enduring frontier dynamics. I do so principally via two novels that depict LA at the moment of World War II's end through the traumatised visions and traumatising behaviours of returning veterans—Dorothy B. Hughes' *In a*

¹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.

² For the avoidance of doubt, in line with contemporary municipal planning documents as well as more recent studies of Los Angeles' architectural history, the terms 'multi-family housing' and 'multi-family residence' are used throughout this chapter to refer to any type of single building or lot that contains multiple dwellings—even when those dwellings themselves are discrete and self-contained. 'Multi-family housing' *can* denote accommodation where individuals/families live communally in a single dwelling, but often does not. A fuller taxonomy of the different forms multi-family housing took in mid-century Los Angeles, and takes in the fiction of the period, follows later in this chapter.

Lonely Place (1947), and *What Way My Journey Lies* (1946), the second novel by the largely forgotten Frank Fenton.

In both novels, I argue, the protagonists' personal crises articulate anxieties about the viability in a post-war world of forms of masculinity that embody and seek to maintain the values of the frontier. Those stakes are revealed spatially, through the opposition both novels draw between the politics of multi-family housing (masculinist, individualist, unstable, socially marginal, frontierist) and those of the single-family home (feminised, familial, secure, socially normative, anti-frontierist). In order to identify how these texts stage a contest between those sets of values, however, it is first necessary to apprehend how such values vest themselves in different forms of accommodation. I therefore begin by locating the context of pre- and post-war trends in LA housing, the broader representation thereof in fiction, and contemporary discourse on the sociocultural meanings of contrasting residential modes.

Los Angeles Lifestyles: Pre- and Post-War Images of Housing

'[T]he single freestanding house' has long been regarded as 'the predominant and favored item' of Los Angeles' urban landscape.³ Such an image is most readily associated with the sprawl of the city's post-World War II development, when an 'unprecedented housing boom resulted in the proliferation of suburban tracts [...] and the built-up area of the metropolis expanded ever more insistently outward' to house an estimated three million new arrivals between 1945 and 1960. 'Building sprawled across the San Fernando Valley, east into the San Gabriel Valley and south, spilling over into Orange County', as LA became less a single city than a grouping of interconnected 'lesser commercial and industrial centers which would provide jobs and services

³ David Gebhard and Harriette von Breton, *LA in the Thirties* (Layton, UT: Peregrine Smith, 1975), 26.

for neighborhoods of mostly single-family homes'.⁴ This increasingly dispersed and decentralised (sub)urban form was rendered comprehensible and logistically viable by the freeway network, which grew tenfold between the end of the war and 1960.⁵ By 1971, Reyner Banham would assert that the 'world's image of Los Angeles' was 'an endless plain endlessly gridded with endless streets, peppered endlessly with ticky-tack houses clustered in indistinguishable neighborhoods, slashed across by endless freeways that have destroyed any community'.⁶

Such post-war decentralisation is often situated in a narrative of contrast with a pre-war LA defined by greater compactness and density, organised around a central core, closer to the more 'typical' urban forms of New York or Chicago. Ed Dimendberg typifies this position in comparing pre-war and post-war 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' cities. The former manifests 'urban density and the visible—the skyline, monuments, recognisable public spaces, and inner-city neighbourhoods, the latter 'immateriality, invisibility, and speed'. The pre-war city's dense centre gives it 'focal points for collective life' that its post-war counterpart lacks.⁷ In this vision, the pre-war LA experience is typified by the Bunker Hill apartment house, the post-war city by the detached suburban tract home. Such a dichotomy, however, is inadequate and misleading as a conception of the subtleties of the changing city's form in this period. As Edward Soja notes, LA already exhibited a 'highly decentralized urban morphology' by the 1920s.⁸ Indeed, whilst ever-increasing sprawl and the hollowing-out of the central city are undeniable realities of LA's post-war history, LA's 'ability to realize the ideal of the low-density, horizontal city', an ideal embodied

⁴ Soja and Scott, 'Introduction to Los Angeles: City and Region', 8; Sam Hall Kaplan, *LA Lost and Found: An Architectural History of Los Angeles* (New York, NY: Crown, 1987), 127, 129.

⁵ Kaplan, *LA Lost and Found*, 151.

⁶ Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), 143.

⁷ Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity*, 177, 89.

⁸ Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 195.

in the single-family detached home, was in fact at its greatest *before* the war.⁹ Post-war, LA in fact became in its density and incidence of multi-family housing much more like other urban centres.

In 1930, the only other major US city to which LA's population density was comparably low was Detroit, yet whereas 79.7 percent of Detroit's housing comprised single-family residences, the figure was 93.9 percent in Los Angeles.¹⁰ Excluding two-household 'duplex' residences, only 2.4 percent of LA's dwellings in 1930 were 'multi-family'.¹¹ By way of comparison, in the same year 52.8 percent of New York's housing was single-family.¹² Municipal planning documents from 1941 reveal that in that year 39.6 percent of the urban used land in the LA metropolitan area (119.6 square miles of a total of 302), was occupied by single-family residences and a very small proportion of two-family units. Multi-family units occupied just 7.4 square miles, or 2.45 percent of the total urban used land.¹³

In 1940, 81.6 percent of LA's populace lived in single-family homes, but the figure had already fallen from its 1930 peak.¹⁴ Post-war, this shift continued. By 1950 only 65.9 percent of dwelling units in the LA metropolitan area, and 54.8 percent in the city proper, were single-family; from the 1950s onwards, 'apartments outnumbered single-family units in the city's construction statistics'.¹⁵ Proportions of single-family housing would never again reach their pre-war heights. Higher-density (i.e. multi-family) forms of housing became more prominent (and increasingly so) in LA's urban makeup post-war than they had been pre-war. This is not, however, the impression

⁹ Gebhard and von Breton, *LA in the Thirties*, 25.

¹⁰ Gebhard and von Breton, 26.

¹¹ Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 146.

¹² Fogelson, 146.

¹³ *Master Plan of Land Use, Inventory and Classification* (Los Angeles, CA: Regional Planning Commission, County of Los Angeles, 1941), 20, Box 333, John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation Library (Collection 1604), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹⁴ *1940 Census of Housing*, vol. 2: General Characteristics (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 215.

¹⁵ Howard J. Nelson and William A.V. Clark, *The Los Angeles Metropolitan Experience: Uniqueness, Generality, and the Goal of the Good Life* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976), 24.

given by fictional depictions of LA housing in the period up to and including World War II and its immediate aftermath.

This is by no means to claim that single-family dwellings are absent from key texts of the period. In Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939), Homer Simpson lives alone in a cottage, but this denotes his atypicality—a 'queer' house for a queer person.¹⁶ Tod Hackett meanwhile marvels at the garish, ersatz eclecticism of a cityscape improvised lot-by-lot by each individual 'builder's fancy'.¹⁷ Aldous Huxley's *After Many a Summer* (1939) takes the single-family home to its grotesque extreme in Jo Stoyte's 'doubly baronial' estate, but again this is a vision of exceptionality.¹⁸ Raymond Chandler's novels are peppered with single-family homes of various sizes and forms, from Arthur Geiger's bungalow to the Sternwood mansion in *The Big Sleep* (1939); from Mrs Florian's 'dried-out brown house' to Jules Amthor's hilltop retreat in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940).¹⁹ John Fante's *Dreams from Bunker Hill* (1982) looks back to the mid-'30s to find Arturo Bandini lodging for a spell in the Hollywood hills house of his screenwriter friend (and Frank Fenton analogue) Frank Edgington. What is undeniable, however, is that the domestic space of fictional Los Angeles(es) in the first half of the twentieth century exhibits a preponderance of multi-family housing disproportionate to and unrepresentative of a real city that, throughout this period, exhibited a historically and nationally unique absence thereof. Multi-family housing takes many forms in these texts. Distinctions between these forms are at times blurry, but can be identified, and some sense of their superfluity in the corpus suggested, as follows:

¹⁶ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust and Miss Lonelyhearts* (London: Vintage, 2012).

¹⁷ West, 61.

¹⁸ Aldous Huxley, *After Many a Summer* (London: Vintage, 2015), 16.

¹⁹ Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 182.

Residential Hotels

As Paul Groth writes, '[u]ntil about 1960 [...] a majority of hotel keepers not only offered travellers rooms for the night but also provided rooms or suites for permanent residents'.²⁰

The premises that offered such services ranged widely in quality and social status, from poor-quality establishments concentrated in downtown LA, to grand affairs in otherwise 'high-class single-family residence areas'.²¹ They are suggested in the fiction by Bunker Hill's Alta Loma where Bandini lives in Fante's *Ask the Dust*, the Chateau Mirabella on Hollywood's Ivar Street, briefly home to Tod Hackett in West's *Locust*, or the more respectable Rossmore Arms where Florence Almore's parents can be found in Chandler's *The Lady in the Lake* (1943).

Rooming Houses

Rooming houses also populate Fante's Bunker Hill, not only in *Ask the Dust* but in such short stories as 'Mary Osaka, I Love You' (1942), 'The Dreamer' (1947), and the unpublished, undated 'The Cat'. They likewise appear in Chandler's portrayals of the same neighbourhood—the tumbledown converted Gothic mansions of a 'lost town'.²² The rooming house provides basic rooms, sometimes shared, often has a live-in manager or landlord/lady, and typically does not provide board. Whereas the hotel is likely to be (but is not always) purpose-built, the rooming house is almost always a converted former single-family home.

²⁰ Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 1.

²¹ *Master Plan of Land Use, Inventory and Classification*, 30.

²² Chandler, *The High Window*, 70.

Boarding/Lodging Houses

The boarding or lodging house is distinguished from the rooming house in that it is first and foremost a private home in which lodgers are taken, as opposed to the rooming house's more 'professional' enterprise. The provision of board brings residents into regular— but only passing and perfunctory—contact. The worst boarding houses were regarded as 'bestial nests', not least because they were historically home to large immigrant populations.²³ When Theodore Roosevelt decried the 'divided allegiance[s]' of unassimilated ethnic minority immigrants in 1919, he feared America becoming a 'polyglot boarding-house'.²⁴ The metaphor invoked simultaneously the association of the boarding house with immigrants and its related popular image as a depthless, rootless community, a places where individuals shared space out of expedience, rather than out of mutual values or obligations. The boarding house had become unfashionable by the 1930s, but one persists in Fenton's *What Way My Journey Lies*.²⁵

Apartment Buildings

Apartments traversed a considerable breadth of the social spectrum in mid-century LA. In *The Big Sleep*, an irate building manager objects to Philip Marlowe calling his premises a 'flop' but ultimately cannot argue with the description, suggesting a form that at least pretended but could not always maintain social distinction from the stigmatised boarding and rooming house.²⁶ As well as those of many of his clients and suspects, fictional

²³ Robert F. Harney, 'Boarding and Belonging: Thoughts on Sojourner Institutions', *Urban History Review* 7, no. 2 (October 1978): 18.

²⁴ Theodore Roosevelt to Richard Melancthon Hurd, 3 January 1919, in *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Elting E. Morrison, vol. VIII (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), 1422.

²⁵ John Modell and Tamara K. Hareven, 'Urbanization and the Malleable Household: An Examination of Boarding and Lodging in American Families', *Journal of Marriage and Family* 35, no. 3 (August 1973): 476, <https://doi.org/10.2307/350582>; James C. Young, 'The Boarding House Era Goes with "Miss Mary's"', *New York Times*, 18 October 1925, sec. IV, 4.

²⁶ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 126.

examples include Marlowe's own homes in the Hobart Arms and Bristol Apartments, or the less respectable San Bernardino Arms where West's Hackett moves from the Mirabella.

Apartment and Bungalow Courts

As Polyzoides, Sherwood, and Tice point out, the apartment court and its close cousin the bungalow court, compressing multiple self-contained (but attached) dwellings into single lots with shared central spaces, are quintessentially Los Angeles forms: 'the dominant southern California multifamily dwelling type'.²⁷ Chandler deploys them frequently: Marlowe chases a client of Geiger's through one; Helen Morrison lives in one in the Chandler-scripted *The Blue Dahlia* (1946); something like one is central to 'The King in Yellow' (1938). See also the Lilac Court Apartments where Sachetti resides in Cain's *Double Indemnity* (1936), or the Virginibus Arms of Dorothy B. Hughes' *In a Lonely Place* (1947). Sam Hall Kaplan hypothesises that courts became popular in LA because 'with their common areas encouraging neighborly mingling, [they] made pleasant enclaves in a city that in the crush of growth was becoming increasingly anonymous and alienating', creating 'a sense of place and community'; I will argue that Hughes' novel identifies an opposite set of characteristics in the apartment court.²⁸

Multi-Family Accommodation: A Frontierist Reading

This preponderance of multi-family housing in the fiction of pre-war LA thus suggests an urban composition quite at odds with the city's contemporary reality of overwhelming single-family

²⁷ Stefanos Polyzoides et al., *Courtyard Housing in Los Angeles: A Typological Analysis* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982), 9.

²⁸ Kaplan, *LA Lost and Found*, 103, 105.

living. In this sense, the Dimendbergian pre-war-centripetal/post-war-centrifugal paradigm is not wrong: Dimendberg responds largely to fictional visions of the city, and in LA's case those fictions do largely present a centripetal pre-war city defined by the high-density urban centre. It is the fictions themselves that are misleading;

Multiple factors contribute to this distorted picture, the first being autobiographical. Fante, West, and Fenton all brought to their fictions personal experiences of multi-family accommodation in the city's densest areas. Fante's letters to his mother from the early '30s offer an intimate portrait of life in a 'new, little, clean hotel' downtown, 'pretty near the Mexican Quarter', and a vision of Dimendberg's centripetal city: from his window Fante watches 'the City Hall tower shooting into the air'.²⁹ LA literature of this period gives an atypical impression of what it was to live in the city partly because its authors' circumstances were atypical. Secondly, there are narrative imperatives. Although Marlowe frequently tracks criminality to the city's finest districts, trails often begin with 'poor little slum-bred hard guys', in whose lower-status neighbourhoods the incidence of multi-family accommodation was far higher than elsewhere in the city.³⁰ Thus, although Chandler himself only briefly slummed it downtown, the exigencies of detective story plots inevitably take Marlowe down streets that are as atypical of LA's residential character as they are mean.³¹ There is, however,

²⁹ John Fante to Mary Fante, 13 January 1933, Box 26, Folder 3, John Fante Papers (Collection 1832), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. The 'old address on Bunker Hill [...], at the bottom floor at the rear and corner of the hotel', from which Fante writes to his mother in late 1934, appears to have been the inspiration for *Ask the Dust's* Alta Loma hotel. John Fante to Mary Fante, 9 December 1934, Box 26, Folder 3, John Fante Papers (Collection 1832), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Correspondence between Frank Fenton and Carey McWilliams (undated, but presumably from July 1935 as it refers to recent news of the death of George Russell (*Æ*)) suggests that the boarding house in Fenton's *What Way My Journey Lies* was at least partly inspired by its author's living circumstances in the mid-'30s. Frank Fenton to Carey McWilliams, n.d., Carey McWilliams Correspondence (Collection 1356), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Meanwhile Robert Emmet Long confirms the concordance between West's period as an apartment hotel denizen on North Ivar Street and living circumstances of Tod Hackett. Robert Emmet Long, *Nathanael West* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar, 1985).

³⁰ In 1941 60% of the population of the central district lived in multi-family residences, when the citywide mean was only 18%. *Master Plan of Land Use, Inventory and Classification*, 32.

³¹ Klein, *The History of Forgetting*, 51.

a third significant reason as to why the fictional LA of the '30s and '40s contains more multi-family housing than did its real-life counterpart: a literary culture preoccupied with frontier dynamics finds those dynamics recuperated more readily in the socio-spatial characteristics of multi-family housing forms than in their single-family equivalents.

That recuperation takes many forms, the first of which is the quality of repetition or reproduction intrinsic to multi-family housing. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe tails a suspicious character to the cypress-lined doorways of a bungalow court. The repetition of those trees (Marlowe retrieves his mark's discarded pornography from behind 'the third cypress') is nested within the larger repeating pattern of the multiple bungalows themselves; that repetition subdivides the mirrored 'two rows' in which the bungalows sit, and the double rows within each court are in turn a further sub-factor of lot-level or block-level repetition (there are three adjacent bungalow courts on the street).³² The effect is fractal-like: the architectural form unfolds its own procedurally-generated maze, layering compounded series of identical images. Even the court's name, 'The La Baba', contains a redundant repetition.³³ The 'staggered row of six bungalows' of the earlier Chandler story 'The King in Yellow', although described as 'not strictly a bungalow court', has the same Escherian quality of an intersecting, hard-to-parse visual puzzle composed of duplicate structures, 'all facing the same way, but so-arranged that no two of their front entrances overlooked each other'.³⁴

This *mise-en-abyme* proliferation, created by the court's intrinsic multiplicity, produces a space of frontierlike character: an arrangement of cognitive obstacles, it challenges and resists Marlowe, it is hard to read and navigate, it lends itself to confusion and deception. Marlowe

³² Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 19.

³³ The name translates as 'The Spit' or 'The Slobber' or, to be precise, 'The The Slobber'. Chandler seemingly mocks the tendencies of LA's ever-creative real estate boosters to dress up their bland blocks in 'romantic' or 'exotic' Spanish names - sometimes to nonsensical effect.

³⁴ Raymond Chandler, 'The King in Yellow', in *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1988), 113.

encounters difficulties in navigating certain single-family dwellings too, but it is not, crucially, any specific characteristic or quirk of the La Baba as an individual *example* of the apartment court that generates its challenge to Marlowe's interrogative faculties.³⁵ Rather, the difficulties presented to the spatial progress of Marlowe's investigation inhere in the nature of the court as a building *type*. The multiplicity innate to *all* multi-family structures is what generates a frontierist obstructive landscape. Like Chandler's plots, the multi-family dwelling structure is itself a compilation of convincing aliases.

This intrinsic formal repetition more broadly suggests the frontier's (impossible) demand for inexhaustible iterability. If the form of an apartment can be generated twenty times within a single building, it implies the possibility of twenty more. Whilst those repetitions *could* be external (as in the case of three adjacent courts of the same design), they will *always* appear internally to each example of the form, as an inevitable consequence of its containing multiple units. The multi-family unit thereby makes a claim to frontier characteristics far more fundamental than those that have historically been attributed to the single-family home. The single-family dwelling, in California even more than elsewhere in the country, was held to symbolise the homesteading values of the early settlers who tamed the frontier.³⁶ It did so not only in the architectural echoes of pioneer-day structures (the ranch house, the mission revival style) that were so popular from the late-nineteenth to at least the mid-twentieth century, but in the implications of individual freedom and the agrarian ideal present in the notion of a detached home standing free on its own large plot.³⁷ Early twentieth-century suburban America sought to 'domesticate' the 'themes' of the frontier ideal, with

³⁵ Single-family homes that impede Marlowe tend to do so, by contrast, through highly particular spatial characteristics: see, for example, the suffocating greenhouse of Sternwood's mansion in *The Big Sleep* or Lagardie's house of horrors in *The Little Sister*.

³⁶ Nicolaidis, *My Blue Heaven*, 26.

³⁷ Harold Kirker, *California's Architectural Frontier: Style and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1960), 122–28; Kaplan, *LA Lost and Found*, 138.

the front lawn as a ‘middle-class embodiment’ of the ‘subjugation of nature to the rule of civilization’.³⁸

The single-family home, however, lacks multi-family residences’ frontierist suggestion of perpetual repeatability: that is precluded by the distinguishing characteristics that single-family homes inevitably possess.³⁹ This is particularly apparent in the case of LA’s pre-war residential architecture, mocked by Tod Hackett for the relentless inauthenticity of its heterogenous appropriation of alien architectural styles. Yet the capacity of the single-family house to suggest its own ongoing replication remains limited even in the post-war era of Banham’s ticky-tack flatland, when prefabrication and mass-production technologies created greater uniformity within neighbourhoods’ residential architectures. In the single-family dwelling, the occupant (especially when that occupant is the owner, as became increasingly likely following the 1949 Housing Act’s mortgage insurance provisions) retains a degree of control over the external appearance of their home.⁴⁰ A bank of ranch bungalows or tract homes, therefore, however standardised, contains the potential for variation and thus cannot imply the spatially infinite and inexhaustible as can the perfect repetition of a bungalow court or a corridor of hotel rooms.

This may appear counterintuitive. The lack of formal and visual distinctions in multi-family housing might intuitively suggest (like the repeating patterns of the office block) the regimented overdetermination of post-frontier modernity. In that vein Adorno and Horkheimer wrote, observing Los Angeles, that ‘town-planning projects, which are supposed to perpetuate individuals as autonomous units in hygienic small apartments, subjugate them only more completely to their

³⁸ Richard Weinstein, ‘The First American City’, in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 26.

³⁹ Laslett, *Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880–2010*, 16.

⁴⁰ Robert E. Lang and Rebecca R. Sohmer, ‘Legacy of the Housing Act of 1949: The Past, Present, and Future of Federal Housing and Urban Policy’, *Housing Policy Debate* 11, no. 2 (January 2000): 295, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.2000.9521369>.

adversary, the total power of capital'.⁴¹ That observation, however, is in fact truer of single-family homes, precisely because they promise the 'architectural embodiment of individual freedom' only to reveal that promise as wholly false.⁴² The single-family home's individualism is disclosed in the moment of its expression as a false veneer, because it resides in and is inextricable from its condition of singular finitude, a condition absolutely antithetical to an open frontier's essential condition of always containing the potential to be found again elsewhere. If one of the properties of a structure is uniqueness, then it cannot, by nature, imply the existence of more things like itself. Difference precludes the prediction of repetition.

Indeed, the larger the tranche of single-family homes, the more likely it is, in diametric opposition to frontier values, to suggest its own participation in spatial exhaustion and depletion—'sing[ing] the praises', per Adorno and Horkheimer, 'of technical progress while inviting their users to throw them away after short use like tin cans'.⁴³ Marlowe attests to the literal flimsiness of any claims made by California's single-family homes to embody ideals of individual sovereignty when he remarks that 'the only part of a California house you can't put your foot through is the front door'.⁴⁴ The multi-family dwelling's suggestion of its own capacity to be re-iterated endlessly, by contrast, is fundamentally frontierist precisely because it exists as *implied possibility* rather than actuality. In its existential reliance upon the persistence of future space-to-be-conquered it was *always* imaginary. The repetitions of the multiple family dwelling therefore offer an analogue to frontier spatial mechanics but, in the very fact of the theoretical infinite rooming house or apartment court's *non-existence*, its quality of being always-but-only-ever implied, evade the exhaustion of the continental frontier.

⁴¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 94.

⁴² David Gebhard and Robert Winter, *Los Angeles: An Architectural Guide*, 4th ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs-Smith, 1994), xv.

⁴³ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 94.

⁴⁴ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 24–25.

Referring to a 1931 polemic that decried apartment living as ‘a sinister trend in American life’, Dana Cuff notes that in the early to mid-twentieth century ‘[n]ot only did the house [...] denote a dedication to democracy, but apartments were [seen as] downright un-American’.⁴⁵ Again the multi-family unit at first glance appears anti-frontierist: living cheek-by-jowl with others suggested compromise not only on space but on individualism and self-determination.⁴⁶ In fact, this very intimacy proves another means by which multi-family accommodation embodies frontierist characteristics in ways unavailable to more visually immediate analogues like the ranch house or tract home, because it confers qualities of spatial conflict and contest. With communal areas, access routes, services, even in some cases bedrooms themselves shared with others, the multi-family unit takes on the character of a disputed landscape. Spaces are permeable and unstable in designation and ownership; they must be claimed and claimed again. In contrast to what McCann calls the ‘false privacy of suburbia’, in which single-family dwellers constantly surveil each other but cannot name and challenge their surveillance as such because it works to maintain distance and separation between them, active and direct contestation of personal spatial sovereignty and privacy is an inbuilt environmental condition multi-family housing.⁴⁷

Locus’s Tod Hackett’s first encounter with a furious Abe Kusich is entirely unsolicited and the direct result of an argument between Kusich and another Mirabella resident. In *Ask the Dust*, Camilla Lopez can occupy Arturo Bandini’s Bunker Hill hotel room uninvited, entering via the window. The same author’s ‘The Dreamer’ finds Cristo Serra jealously guarding his privacy from his rooming house’s intrusive proprietor and trading access to his bathroom for favours from other residents. Likewise, in the boarding house of Fenton’s *What Way My Journey Lies*, John

⁴⁵ S. James Herman, *Why Do You Live in an Apartment? A Study of a Sinister Trend in American Life* (Detroit: Michigan Housing Association, 1931). Cited in Dana Cuff, *The Provisional City: Los Angeles Stories of Architecture and Urbanism* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2002), 144–45.

⁴⁶ This is rooted, through capitalist logic, in the sense that if the frontier values of highly individualised effort, strength and willpower are sources of prosperity, then those values cannot be shared by apartment-dwellers, because a prosperous individual would be living in a discrete residence of their own

⁴⁷ McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 176.

Norman is constantly imposed and intruded upon by his eccentric neighbours Ray Bowen and Elisha Hare. Exploiting the spatial porousness of the boarding house, Bowen and Hare continually draw Norman into philosophical discourses, seeking to claim him on behalf of their respective worldviews. In occupying the space of the boarding house, each individual has his conception of the world persistently challenged; intellectual self-defence is required at all times to preserve a coherence and sovereignty in one's own sense of *Mitsein*. The walls of the men's respective bedrooms, in which their various conversations occur, model the personal interiorities that are intruded upon and challenged by the alternate consciousnesses (and physical presences) of others.

The socio-legal conditions of single-family living (especially in its 'ideal' state of owner-occupancy), on the other hand, ultimately secure and celebrate the very *lack* of spatial contest that denotes the frontier's absence. John Laslett writes that 'the frontier, its history, and the theory of property rights' conspired to an 'ideal of private property' that was 'one of complete freedom for the owner, as if, once across the property boundaries, the "law of the land" was one's own'.⁴⁸ This notion that in buying a single-family home one buys a plot of land that is sovereign through property rights, impregnable one's own and impossible for others to seize, may recall the frontier's 'aggressive legacy of taking and laying claim to land', as Cuff suggests, but is in fact entirely *counter* to the frontier's values of restless, protean instability.⁴⁹ On the frontier, there is no such thing as 'home'; if the conditions of stability, familiarity, comfort, and security have arrived, the frontier has departed. Indeed, Cuff notes that within the ideal of single-family living only 'detached, privately owned houses [...] deserved to be called "home" at all'.⁵⁰ Such a distinction reflects the extent to which the affective qualities that are popularly held to differentiate a 'home' from a mere dwelling-place, which are also qualities antithetical to the frontier, were deemed unachievable in

⁴⁸ Laslett, *Sunshine Was Never Enough: Los Angeles Workers, 1880–2010*, 75. See also Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*.

⁴⁹ Cuff, *The Provisional City*, 75.

⁵⁰ Cuff, 146.

multi-family housing. The single-family home does not embody the characteristics of those who *opened* the frontier but those who *closed* it, who sought stable, permanent claims to home and harvest.

By contrast, the close-quartered, semi-communal qualities of living in multi-family housing suggest, especially in their predominant less salubrious forms, the frontier-like qualities of social marginality, provisionality, instability, and ephemerality.⁵¹ Like the frontier, they represent a mode of living in which mobility is not only possible but necessary: the rooming house or apartment hotel, paid by the night, week, or month, is a space for a resident unable or unwilling to seek long-term commitments or a stable base. Pre-war LA boosters touted the socially ‘stabilizing’ effects of the single-family, owner-occupied home, and even the idea that the security of Southern Californian home ownership offered ‘redemption’ to internal migrants who had arrived from cities with higher rental rates.⁵² Likewise, the Goodyear Tyre Company’s 1919 plan to build a company town of affordable houses close to its Los Angeles plant was underpinned by a ‘belief in homeownership as a stabilizing social influence’ and confident association between possession of a single-family home and civic complaisance.⁵³ Multi-family housing, meanwhile, was firmly ‘associated with populations that were transigent, indigent, or transitioning to single-family

⁵¹ Those less salubrious forms dominated available accommodation stocks. By the late 1920s, such was the growth in LA’s more well-to-do population, that ‘the city was facing a shortage of high-class hotels and apartment buildings, although it had plenty of the “ordinary”—i.e. low- to mid-priced apartment lodgings’. This furthers the sense that although, as previously noted, the categories of hotel and apartment did span the full range of the city’s social spectrum, the spaces of multi-family housing in its various permutations tended to be spaces of relative socioeconomic precarity. Ruth Wallach, *Los Angeles Residential Architecture: Modernism Meets Eclecticism* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2015), 86.

⁵² Starr, *Material Dreams*, 70. Starr’s description of this ideal as an ‘Ozcot gospel of homes and happiness’ suggests the extent to which, like so many LA dreams, it had the whiff of fantasy. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that LA’s owner-occupancy rates were higher than in other major US cities—a third of LA’s homes were owner-occupied in the period between 1920 and 1940. A 1944 report (using 1940 statistics) notes that such figures were to be expected precisely because LA’s proportion of single-family dwellings was so high, further affirming that the dream of single-family living and the dream of home ownership were largely one and the same. Earl Henson and Paul Beckett, *Los Angeles: Its People and Its Homes* (Los Angeles, CA: Haynes Foundation, 1944), 13, Box 153, John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation Library (Collection 1604), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁵³ Wallach, *Los Angeles Residential Architecture: Modernism Meets Eclecticism*, 129.

accommodation?—the yet-to-be-redeemed or the irredeemable.⁵⁴ A 1950 citywide survey found only 12.8% LA's owner-occupied residences were multi-family, compared with 75.5% of the rented structures.⁵⁵ Thus multi-family residences permit, indeed demand, the kind of restless, unstable mobility that characterised the frontier, in a way that the single-family home cannot. This is evocatively suggested by a document compiled by Joyce Fante using her husband John's surviving correspondence, which discloses that he changed his address at least 29 times in his early rooming-house days in Los Angeles, the years 1932–1935—once, on average, every fifty days.⁵⁶

Multi-family units thereby have the potential to enmesh their occupants less than their single-family counterparts in the formal administrative structures of law, government, and capital—the inbuilt 'contractual nature' of such communities.⁵⁷ The owner-occupied single-family home appears to give the resident personal sovereignty but in fact grips them inextricably in a governmental-legal complex of mortgages, covenants and deeds—the very structures that frontiersmen sought to escape. The single-family home's notional manifestation of a frontierist 'ideal of autonomy' could never be 'fully achieved' because it depended paradoxically for its perpetuation on the binding anti-frontier structures of law, civic administration, and community standards.⁵⁸ The rented room, by contrast, the space of false names, short notice periods, and cash rents, grants its occupants a freedom from societal ties concomitant with its double-edged grant of enforced spatial mobility.

⁵⁴ Wallach, 84.

⁵⁵ *Housing Occupancy in the City of Los Angeles and Supplement* (Los Angeles, CA: Peacock Research Associates, 1950), 6, Box 333, John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation Library (Collection 1604), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

⁵⁶ Joyce Fante, 'List of John Fante's Addresses', n.d., Box 48, Folder 3, John Fante Papers (Collection 1832), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. The list bears no attribution but I infer Joyce Fante's authorship with confidence on the basis of consistency between the handwriting of this list and that of other documents in the Fante papers known to be written by Joyce.

⁵⁷ Joseph George, *Postmodern Suburban Spaces: Philosophy, Ethics, and Community in Post-War American Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 11.

⁵⁸ Cuff, *The Provisional City*, 75.

The sense that multi-family housing betokens a frontierlike sense of detachment from intrusive socio-legal structures takes on its most discomfiting inflection among the seedy rooming houses and hotels of neglected downtown areas, identified by city planners as semi-lawless ‘blighted’ slums that required reformation or demolition. A 1947 municipal report describes Bunker Hill and surrounding areas as ‘visibly blighted and occupied by old rooming houses, transient hotels, and single-family slum-like structures’, implying both that the presence of poor quality single-family housing is symptomatic of its proximity to multi-family housing, and that ‘blight’ is the inevitable consequence of a neighbourhood so composed.⁵⁹ The multi-family slums of ‘blighted’ downtown are figured not only in such planners’ reports but also in fiction as semi-lawless spaces of danger, uncertainty, marginality, ephemerality, and resistance to the intervening hand of paternalistic government. Consider Philip Marlowe’s comment about Bunker Hill hotels in which ‘only Smith and Jones sign the register’.⁶⁰ Similarly, Marlowe can ascertain information on Agnes Lozelle’s whereabouts from the manager of her ‘flop’ by threatening that he ‘know[s] all about Bunker Hill apartment houses’ as places where (criminal) living seeks privacy and leaves a light footprint.⁶¹ Likewise, Arturo Bandini is subject only to a perfunctory interview before being admitted to the Alta Loma—Mrs Hargreaves cares not for Bandini’s proof of income (i.e. his writing work); he must simply promise that he is neither Mexican nor Jewish.⁶²

Like Roosevelt’s invocation of the ‘polyglot boarding-house’, however, Hargreaves’ paranoia about Mexican or Jewish presences in her rooms provides a reminder that multi-family accommodation, especially the insalubrious manifestations thereof that characterised the city’s

⁵⁹ *Housing Study City of Los Angeles, Community Redevelopment, Conditions of Blight, Central Area* (Los Angeles, CA: City Planning Commission, 1947), 13, Box 333, John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation Library (Collection 1604), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. This document’s pages are not numbered; in the interest of precision of reference, I have applied numbering myself by manually counting pages.

⁶⁰ Chandler, *The High Window*, 70.

⁶¹ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 126.

⁶² This is not to suggest that these are the only minority groups Hargreaves would exclude, only that they are the ones of which Bandini might pass for a member.

‘blighted’ central areas, was disproportionately populated by ethnic minorities. A 1944 report recorded that LA’s central core was in 1940 not only the city’s only majority-minority area but also the area with the lowest proportion of single-family dwellings, the highest proportion of multi-family units, and the lowest proportion of home ownership.⁶³ The same area contained by far the city’s highest proportion of unsanitary dwellings and dwellings without running water, as well as the city’s oldest housing stock.⁶⁴ Indeed, there was a direct association between multi-family housing, age of housing, and unsanitary conditions, because much of LA’s cheap downtown multi-family units had been converted shoddily from older, single-family houses. A 1938 report assesses Bunker Hill and surrounding areas thus:

[O]ld families moved away, leaving their homes behind for transformation into boarding and rooming houses. [...] Living and sanitary conditions [...] are poor [...]. The rooming houses are practically all from forty-five to fifty years old. [...] Plumbing and sanitary equipment are of the oldest type and generally in bad repair. [...] No reasonable provision was made for light or air in the construction of these barracks.⁶⁵

As the 1947 report on ‘blighted’ conditions admits, ethnic minorities were concentrated in such areas both because of economic circumstances and because they were ‘precluded from settling [elsewhere] by restrictive covenants’.⁶⁶ The latter factor was felt particularly acutely by the city’s African-American population, who ‘had long chafed at the racial restrictions they faced in their

⁶³ Henson and Beckett, *Los Angeles: Its People and Its Homes*, 35, 51, 44. In figures: 33.6 percent of dwelling units were single-family detached homes; 33.5 percent accommodated ten households or more; only 14 percent were owner-occupied.

⁶⁴ Henson and Beckett, 58, 59, 45.

⁶⁵ William Burk, *Poor Housing in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area* (Los Angeles, CA: Works Progress Administration Delinquency Prevention Project, 1938), 2, Box 333, John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation Library (Collection 1604), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. This document’s pages are not numbered; in the interest of precision of reference, I have applied numbering myself by counting pages.

⁶⁶ *Housing Study City of Los Angeles*, 15.

search for housing’, restrictions among the nation’s most extensive.⁶⁷ Those restrictions were not substantially challenged until after World War II, and even then faced vehement white resistance.⁶⁸ Thus, to be a member of an ethnic minority in pre-war LA was to be likely to occupy the lowest quality forms of multi-family housing, in the city’s most deprived areas. It was therefore also to experience a mode of living that may have predominated in those particular areas (as it does LA fiction of the period) but which, in the broader context of a city where single-family living was the norm, matched and enforced one’s own social marginality.⁶⁹

The characters who receive extended readings later in this chapter are white and, I will argue, have at least some agency in actively choosing multi-family housing, with its qualities of transience, contest, and social detachment, as the mode of life best suited to their frontierist traits. The association between racial marginality and multi-family accommodation, however, has implications for my previous chapters’ discussions of ethnic minority characters who find themselves ‘forced’ to perform frontiersmanship without ever benefitting from it—Bob Jones, Arturo Bandini, Julio Sal, Chu Chu Ramirez. Indeed, of those four characters only Bob Jones lives in a single-family house, and even his ‘small, four-room cottage’ exhibits characteristics more commonly associated with multi-family housing. It sits ‘back in a court’ rather than on its own sovereign plot and is so perfunctory in its form as to become a contested space where one cannot avoid ‘casual intimacy’.⁷⁰ If multi-family housing evinces frontierlike characteristics, then ethnic minorities’ economic and legal compulsion to occupy it suggest once more a setting and a culture

⁶⁷ Sides, *LA City Limits*, 98.

⁶⁸ Sides, 101–3. Vast wartime increases in LA’s African-American population had ‘overtaxed the city’s already crowded black neighborhoods’, rendering a challenge to LA’s ‘legal ghetto’ newly urgent. Sides, 98. Between 1940 and 1947, the ‘colored’ population of LA’s central districts rose by over 105 percent. *Housing Study City of Los Angeles*, 15.

⁶⁹ The data of the period, such as that quoted above, is insufficiently granular to permit a statement of absolute certainty that the association between LA’s distribution of ethnic minority populations and its distribution of multi-family housing means that multi-family housing was disproportionately populated by ethnic minorities. (Indeed, Bandini’s landlady is herself indicative of the extent to which even some decidedly shabby residential hotels and apartment houses maintained ‘whites only’ policies.) Nevertheless, the correlations outlined hitherto are strong and consistent enough to seem highly persuasive.

⁷⁰ Himes, *If He Hollers*, 10.

in which frontier conditions may be sought by white figures but are imposed upon non-white figures—ironically, by the same racist logic that denies them the possibility of fully occupying the frontiersman’s (white) image.

The sense that multi-family living, whether by individual choice or structural disadvantage, enfold its occupants less fully than single-family living in the social bonds of a contractual community is paralleled by a sense that, because multi-family housing is often intended for lone individuals, it lacks the ‘linkage [with] the nuclear family’ that defines the single-family home.⁷¹ In chapter 2, we saw how the supposedly feminising effects of the office placed ‘American manhood [in] crisis as the frontier gave way to urban sprawl’; another of the ‘feminine institutions of civilization’ by which the ‘masculine frontier was [...] crowded out’ was the “‘woman’s world” of the home’.⁷² The frontier is figured in Turnerian and post-Turnerian discourse as a rejection of the social expectations, structures, and routines of domestic life, and their supposedly ‘feminising’ influence. Thus the end of the frontier presented ‘a crisis for American males’ because it forced them ‘to accept living in a *place*, in a community, in a social environment, interacting with other men doing the same’, becoming ‘fathers with children to support’.⁷³ Modern domestic life, in other words, represents the kinds of socio-spatial ties and commitments that were antithetical to frontiersmanship. Multi-family accommodation seems to offer a socio-spatial escape from a domestic world of anti-frontierist demasculinisation. As on the frontier, this is not necessarily because women were not present in multi-family accommodation. Orrin Quest in *The Little Sister* (1949), *In a Lonely Place*’s Laurel Gray, and *What Way My Journey Lies*’ Mary Carter all live in multi-family settings (the latter two challenging, as I will later show, male characters’ attempts to assert gendered control over their living environments). Contemporary reportage likewise records

⁷¹ Weinstein, ‘The First American City’, 26.

⁷² McDonough, *Staging Masculinity*, 36.

⁷³ Joe L. Dubbert, *A Man’s Place: Masculinity in Transition* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 10.

women of varying social classes living in both single- and mixed-sex multi-family accommodation.⁷⁴

Multi-family housing can nevertheless stand, for its male occupants, in opposition to the domestic ideal simply by virtue of *not* being a single-family home and because the social and physical characteristics of multi-family housing in themselves suggest the rejection of domesticity. Some families *were* forced through privation to live in multi-family accommodation, but the emphasis on single-room units in many multi-family housing forms (the hotel, the rooming house, the boarding house) conveys their ill-suitedness to family life. To this day the ‘bachelor apartment’ remains the tellingly gendered equivalent in American parlance of the British ‘studio’. To live in a single room or small apartment is to identify oneself as the man alone, free of family ties and the feminising influence of long-term attachments to women and children. A man’s decision to live in multi-family housing may be conceived as a frontierist gesture because it represents an evasion of the restrictions placed upon independent movement and action by the spaces, structures, and conventions of anti-frontierist domesticity. When Goodyear’s president Frank Seiberling stated that his company town was for ‘family men’, he opined that a lack of single-family homes in which to express familial domesticity engendered social ‘unrest’.⁷⁵ Conditions of ‘unrest’, though, are embraced, necessitated, and perpetuated by frontiersmanship: Seiberling unwittingly implied the inimicality of the single-family home to any frontierlike existence.

Paradoxically, to live in the contested spaces of multi-family housing enables the profoundly individualist and frontierist gesture of fitting one’s space to oneself, of choosing a unit of space that indulges no excess of social commitment, accommodating the needs of the individual only and thus refusing to admit the possibility of any non-individualist mode of living. It may seem contradictory to claim, as I have, that multi-family housing exhibits frontierist spatial practice both

⁷⁴ Young, ‘The Boarding House Era Goes with “Miss Mary’s”’, 23; Mary Farley, ‘Boarding-House Clubs: Are Serious Inroads Upon the Once Popular Boarding-House’, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 November 1897, 21.

⁷⁵ ‘Goodyear Home Plan Approved’, *Los Angeles Times*, 21 December 1919, V2.

because its occupiers' personal space is constantly vulnerable to contest from others' ingress *and* because it represents a redoubt of individualism uncompromised by invasive bonds of legal commitment, communitarian responsibility, or feminising domesticity. In fact, these two qualities reinforce each other, as an episode in *The Big Sleep* illustrates. Marlowe's Hobart Arms apartment is a space so pared back to the basic needs of the lone ascetic that the bed folds down from the wall; such small indulgences as it does accommodate are the solitary, 'masculine' pleasures of smoking, drinking, and chess problems. The space is both Marlowe's literal refuge from female interest and a metaphor for his aloofness from women. When Carmen Sternwood enters unauthorised, she demonstrates the apartment building's quality of spatial contestation and permeability: assuring the manager that she is expected merely by flashing Marlowe's card, she exploits the spatial practice of a place where 'mysterious' women are par for the course and nobody much cares who comes or goes.⁷⁶ The contest she instigates is premised not merely on her spatial presence in the apartment but on her femininity's threat to the apartment's values of lone masculinity.

It isn't Carmen's proximity to his person that Marlowe cannot stand, but explicitly her presence in 'that room', because this is 'the room' he 'had to live in'. In 'had to' there is a sense of existential necessity.⁷⁷ He *has to* live there, because this is the only kind of living space that can sustain a man of Marlowe's (frontiersmanlike) character. As its values have hitherto been of exclusive masculinity, 'that room' ceases to exist with the introduction of a feminine presence. A new space is produced, one which Marlowe cannot 'live in': the spatial threat is a mortal one. In rejecting Carmen's advances and ejecting her from the apartment, however, Marlowe proves the possibility of making 'that room' new through strength of male character and thereby reasserts that the space and he within it *are* defined by values of masculine individualism. The apartment

⁷⁶ Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 111.

⁷⁷ Chandler, 112.

thus replicates the paradox whereby the frontier is a space suited to the heroic individual precisely because it is hostile to him. The frontiersman cannot prove his ruggedness without conditions that threaten to overmaster his ruggedness; vulnerability occasions strength. Likewise, Marlowe is enabled to assert his apartment's values of lone masculinity precisely by the space's vulnerability to the threat of an incursive feminine presence. He thereby illustrates that the multi-family unit's identity as a space that facilitates evasion (or, for the less privileged, denies the possibility) of social entanglements does not undermine but rather compounds the frontierist identity that such accommodations simultaneously derive from their quality of continual spatial contest.

Used-Up War Machines: The Veteran Problem as Frontier (Dis)closure

Dorothy B. Hughes' *In a Lonely Place* and Frank Fenton's *What Way My Journey Lies* both stage oppositions between the respective cultural values of single- and multi-family accommodation as a contest over the contemporary viability of their protagonists' frontier-aligned masculinities. Although their chronological settings are slightly different, both novels sit in a corridor of uncertainty around the end of World War II, wherein the shape of the world to come, and within it the role of men like Hughes' Dix Steele and Fenton's John Norman, were yet to be determined.⁷⁸ The experiences of World War II and uncertainties about how to build a post-discharge life and masculine identity plunge these men into divergent forms of crisis.

⁷⁸ The main action of Hughes' novel takes place after the war has already 'crashed to a finish and dribbled to an end'. Dorothy B. Hughes, *In a Lonely Place* (London: Penguin, 2010), 1. Inference from the text suggests that *What Way My Journey Lies* takes place over a period of approximately one-and-a-half years, commencing in perhaps January or February 1944 and concluding in around September 1945.

These texts share with Chandler's *The Long Goodbye* (1953) a wider contemporary genre of narratives about traumatised veterans.⁷⁹ Such works were particularly prominent in cinema: examples include *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), the Hughes adaptation *Ride the Pink Horse* (1947), *Crossfire* (1947), *Home of the Brave* (1949), and *The Men* (1950). These narratives represented widespread concerns, voiced by 'experts in social work, the military, and the social sciences' about 'combat fatigue' or 'the veterans problem'.⁸⁰ The return of vast numbers of demobilised soldiers, it was feared, could provoke a 'social crisis', if the veterans could not 'revers[e] some of the "hard-boiled" habits which the army demands', reconcile themselves 'the normal pace of civilian life', and productively sublimate antisocial instincts arising from feelings of 'anger and isolation' engendered by combat trauma.⁸¹ In 1944, sociologist Willard Waller summarised the unique challenges presented by the veteran to society:

The veteran who comes home is [...] the major social problem of the next few years [...] because we have used him up, sacrificed him, wasted him. No man could have a better moral claim to the consideration of his fellows. And no man could have a better right to bitterness.

⁷⁹ Sarah Trott has argued that Marlowe himself occupies a form of veteran identity, and that this colours his vision of America around the years of World War II, his attitude to violence, his ethics, and his interactions with other soldiering types—most prominently *The Long Goodbye*'s Terry Lennox. Marlowe's own military identity as advanced by Trott, however, is not in itself a direct representation or expression of post-World War II veteran panic, its specifics being rooted rather in Chandler's own experiences of World War I. Sarah Trott, *War Noir: Raymond Chandler and the Hard-Boiled Detective as Veteran in American Fiction* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 114–15. In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe, Rusty Regan, General Sternwood, and the Sternwoods' Butler, Norris, are all speculated to share 'the soldier's eye'; Eddie Mars likewise persistently refers to Marlowe as 'soldier'. Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, 153.

⁸⁰ Colleen Glenn, 'The Traumatized Veteran: A New Look at Jimmy Stewart's Post-WWII *Vertigo*', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 31, no. 1 (January 2014): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2011.593957>; David A. Gerber, 'Heroes and Misfits: The Troubled Social Reintegration of Disabled Veterans in *The Best Years of Our Lives*', *American Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (December 1994): 545, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713383>.

⁸¹ Gerber, 'Heroes and Misfits', 545; Anne L. Shewring, 'We Didn't Do That Did We? Representation of the Veteran Experience', *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures* 23, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 53, 51, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1537-4726.2000.2304_51.x.

But the veteran, so justly entitled to move us to pity and to shame, can also put us in fear. Destitute he may be [...] but weak he is not. That makes him a different kind of problem. That hand that does know how to earn its owner's bread knows how to take your bread, knows very well how to kill you, if need be, in the process. [...] Unless and until he can be renaturalized into his native land, the veteran is a threat to society.⁸²

For Waller, the veteran presents a conundrum because he has undertaken actions that place 'his fellows' in moral and material debt to him but which have simultaneously rendered him incompatible with those 'fellows' and the values governing their world. Waller thereby suggests why a veteran masculinity reproduces a frontier masculinity. The soldier inherits the frontiersman's paradoxical condition of stepping beyond the bounds of society, not just spatially but in his actions and values, in order to act on behalf of that society. Indeed, the twin notions that frontier life is a martial life and that those who have taken up the warlike task of expanding and defending the boundaries of American society are, paradoxically but necessarily, those most lacking in social adjustment, are as old as the Republic itself.⁸³ Reed Bonadonna's description of the soldier—'both the least and most civilized of persons [...] walk[ing] the weird wall at the edge of civilization, [...] prepared to serve their civilization and society without stint or limit' but 'constantly in danger of forsaking that which they serve'—could be applied to the Turnerian frontiersman without

⁸² Willard Walter Waller, *The Veteran Comes Back* (New York, NY: The Dryden Press, 1944), 14.

⁸³ Crèvecoeur wrote in 1782 that '[t]he few magistrates [on the frontier] are [...] often in a perfect state of war [...]. There men appear to be no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank [...]. He who would wish to see America in its proper light, and have a true idea of its feeble beginnings and barbarous rudiments, must visit our extended line of frontiers where the last settlers dwell, [...] the most hideous parts of our society. They are a kind of forlorn hope, preceding by ten or twelve years the most respectable army of veterans which come after them'. Crèvecoeur, 'Letter III: What Is an American?', 33–34.

emendation.⁸⁴ Indeed, ‘the weird wall at the edge of civilization’ is near-synonymic of Turner’s mutable ‘hither edge’.

Wallerite anxieties about reintegrating the returning soldier into civilian life anticipate the concept of the ‘war machine’ advanced by Deleuze and Guattari, who write that the ‘military institution’ is not intrinsic to the state; the latter can only ‘appropriate’ the former.⁸⁵ This, however, will ‘continually cause [the state] problems’ because the military institution is appropriated by and to serve a set of values to which its own are antithetical. The state’s self-professed civil identity is compromised by its complicity with and dependence upon ‘another kind of justice, one of incomprehensible cruelty at times’.⁸⁶ The state requires and must internalise a war machine in order to assert itself, but cannot reconcile itself to the fact that ‘the war machine is [...] of another species, of another nature, of another origin’.⁸⁷ Just as the soldier (especially the wartime volunteer or conscript, as opposed to the career professional) is tasked with conquering military enemies and therefore becomes existentially redundant (‘use[d] up’) at the moment he succeeds in his task, so does the frontiersman abnegate himself in discharging his social purpose of frontier conquest. In the very moment of achieving the purpose assigned to him by society, the soldier/frontiersman is, per Deleuze and Guattari, ‘returned to [his] milieu of exteriority’ in relation to that society, revealed as an actor with values counter to those on behalf of which he has been acting.⁸⁸ It is thus at this moment—the end of the war, the end of the frontier—that the soldier/frontiersman, still possessed of all the traits by which he had come to define himself on the battlefield or in the

⁸⁴ Reed Robert Bonadonna, *Soldiers and Civilization: How the Profession of Arms Thought and Fought the Modern World into Existence* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017), 1.

⁸⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*, trans. Brian Massumi (Seattle, WA: Wormwood Distribution, 2010), 7.

⁸⁶ Deleuze and Guattari, 7, 4.

⁸⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

⁸⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, 7.

wilderness but suddenly shorn of the capacity to exercise them, is at his most dangerous as a socially-destabilising force.

In the process of suggesting possible manifestations of this destabilisation, Hughes' and Fenton's novels further reveal the salience of a frontiersman-veteran ideological lineage. On being invalided out of combat and returning to America, John Norman is plunged into existential crisis by the war's revelation of 'the limitless stupidity of the earth'—yet in some sense he wishes a return to the conditions of war, because the peacetime world by contrast seems 'unreal'.⁸⁹ The phrase '[w]e're dead, aren't we?' recurs frequently in his inner monologue, suggesting that to have survived war (and thus to be forced to live on into peacetime) is as much a death as those of his fallen comrades.⁹⁰ Dix Steele exhibits a striking contiguity of sentiment in his belief that war 'was so real that there wasn't any other life' afterwards.⁹¹ Neither man can self-define absent the wartime conditions that have shaped his consciousness.

Dix Steele's conception of this predicament collocates his loss of the spatial liberation he had felt as a pilot, an ironic sense that only in wartime did he feel in control of his destiny, and a belief that peacetime's expectations of 'feminising' domesticity undermine his masculinity. Replicating the thrill of war in the violent subjugation of women lends Dix not only the feeling of 'power and exhilaration and freedom' he once felt in flight, but also its 'loneness', because his murders are simultaneously acts that possess women and reject women.⁹² In spatial terms, each of Dix's crimes manifests itself as at once a drawing-close and a casting-out: he picks up women then, after raping and murdering them, discards them on beaches or in canyons. He thereby violently asserts that 'loneness' is a state he can *choose* rather than one imposed upon him by the perceived caprices of women. Frontierist concerns are implicit in a psychopathy that so closely associates

⁸⁹ Frank Fenton, *What Way My Journey Lies* (New York, NY: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1946), 101.

⁹⁰ Fenton, 73, 80, 86.

⁹¹ Hughes, *Lonely Place*, 96.

⁹² Hughes, 1.

spatial freedom with the violent assertion of masculine selfhood in supposed defence of itself. Where the frontiersman was threatened both by the ‘civilization’ he escaped and the wilderness he conquered, women for Dix appear to perform both threats: his claims to rugged, individualist masculinity reside simultaneously in proving himself able to possess them as territory *and* in cutting himself free of their feminising influence. He echoes Marlowe, who struggles to resolve heteromasculine attraction to Carmen Sternwood’s body with a revolted sense that her body’s presence in his apartment attenuates its, and his, masculinity: Dix makes explicit the violence latent in Marlowe’s crisis.

John Norman’s complexes are more prosaic and less overtly destructive but underpinned by comparable concerns. Fenton’s novel is peopled with characters trying to make sense of the change the war has wrought upon the world, but where John’s many interlocutors seem confident in their competing visions of the future and their places within it, he is gripped by uncertainty. John, the narrator ventriloquises, ‘knew nothing [...] because of the war’.⁹³ Like Terry Lennox, Chandler’s literally scarred veteran, John is struck repeatedly by ‘the uselessness of himself’ in the face of the post-war world’s unknowability.⁹⁴ For John, this results in a paradox of stasis and restlessness—something he holds in common with the mythic frontiersman, whose perpetual need for further free land is a moving-to-stay-still. Like the frontiersman, who exists in the moment of being *about* to move into always-open ‘free land’ rather than in its actual conquest and consequent (self-)erasure, John ‘live[s] on the verge of doing something’.⁹⁵ Throughout the novel he makes seemingly decisive, impulsive spatial departures, only to follow these with counteractive retreats, a repeating process that maps his characteristic combination of psychological restiveness and paralysis.

⁹³ Fenton, *Journey*, 77.

⁹⁴ Fenton, 80.

⁹⁵ Fenton, 122.

That this spatially-expressed crisis of selfhood is much about masculinity as Dix's is disclosed in the fact that these cycles of motion and retreat track the dynamics of John's romantic relationships. He shares, albeit without violence, Dix's confusion as to whether he craves or wishes to reject female companionship. John's acts of evading the overwhelming uncertainty of the post-war condition are always acts of distancing himself from, then returning to, the influence of women and their supposed domesticating effects on the male psyche. As a friend tells him, John is an 'escapist', and like those of the frontiersman John's escapes are from restrictions imposed upon his mobility and agency by social entanglements.⁹⁶ He is also like the frontiersman, though, in that he fears making his escapes final because to do so would in fact represent a termination of his motile agency (in which he vests a selfhood of masculine individualism) far more conclusive than an act of choosing *not* to escape. Where Hughes' murderous protagonist vindicates the very worst 'veterans problem' anxieties, Fenton offers something closer to a 'sentimentalized' image of 'the soldier out of step with postwar life'.⁹⁷ Both men's crises of frontierist masculinity, however, reveal themselves in their navigations of and between multi-family accommodation and the single-family home.

'A hell of a house': Frank Fenton's *What Way My Journey Lies*

Throughout Frank Fenton's *What Way My Journey Lies* the domesticity of single-family living denotes safety and comfort—but also stasis, a blunting of the senses, an atrophying of masculinity and individualism. It stands in contrast to the boarding house, populated largely by single men possessed of both their own individual spaces and the ability to make periodic incursions into each

⁹⁶ Fenton, 148.

⁹⁷ Christopher Breu, 'Radical Noir: Negativity, Misogyny, and the Critique of Privatization in Dorothy Hughes's *In a Lonely Place*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 55, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 204, <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1607>.

other's. The novel is structured around three major feints away from (and, ultimately, returns to) domesticity by John Norman. First, he abandons a cottage bequeathed to him by his fallen comrade Clark when the initially comforting presence of Clark's former girlfriend Carol ultimately proves an entrapment, and seeks out a rooming house. When its qualities of masculine self-determination become compromised by the feminine presence of schoolteacher Mary Carter, however, John withdraws again to Clark's cottage. He returns to Mary, weds and buys a home with her, but makes one final attempt at evading the life she represents before finally submitting to it.

'I used to remember how he described this place and how good it was', John tells Carol when they meet in Clark's cottage on the California coast. 'I thought I needed something like this'.⁹⁸ Like McCoy's pier-end dancehall, the San Pedro bunkhouses of Fante's Filipino labourers, or Himes' Atlas Yard, 'this place' draws attention to the California shoreline's identity as a symbolic as well as geographic point of continental termination. John recalls Clark's describing the house's end-of-the-world isolation in positive terms:

*Behind it, across the road, are the hills. The front yard is the beach, and the sea goes all the way to the South Pole. You get in there between the sea and the hills and you'll be in good shape, Johnny.*⁹⁹

John's initial reactions to the house's proximity to continent's end are likewise of wonder: a window on the sea is a 'magic casement'.¹⁰⁰ Terror, however, is latent within Clark's description of the house's geographic location. This is a place from which there is nowhere left to go: with nothing ahead but sea and only hills behind; to seek Chandler's 'country beyond the hill' here is inevitably to go backwards. John discovers this entrapment when walking the beach on foggy days,

⁹⁸ Fenton, *Journey*, 18–19.

⁹⁹ Emphasis in original. Fenton, 3.

¹⁰⁰ Fenton, 4.

‘[a]s the hills shut off the continent, the fog shut out the horizon [...], reducing his world to this long curving strip of sand’.¹⁰¹

Initially, Carol’s presence betokens a comforting return to a pre-war order. ‘For the first time in a long time [...] he had a telephone number to remember. [...] It was like old times; [...] like being home again’.¹⁰² Thoughts of Carol initially give John ‘inrushes’ of the ‘reality’ he finds so elusive elsewhere in post-war life.¹⁰³ Almost as soon as he has these fond thoughts, however, John experiences a sudden change of heart about the cottage and escapes to Los Angeles. A relationship with a woman is what makes life at the cottage ‘feel like home again’, but that is precisely the problem. ‘Home’ is immediately refigured as a feminised space, or a space produced *by* female presence, whereas previously the cottage, although a single-family home, had been for John a male preserve (representing the homosocial bond of his friendship with Clark). As soon as a house becomes a home, John must leave.

Trapped at world’s end, it is ironically only when the seasonal fog finally lifts that ‘[t]he urge to start doing something descend[s] on Norman’.¹⁰⁴ An easing of the physical or visual barriers encircling his scene prompts the realisation that they are merely visible proxies for the more significant emotional boundaries engendered by this inescapably post-frontier place. The urge to move on is subconscious; John cannot ‘account for’ this ‘impulse’, a ‘reflex action working separate from his consciousness’, yet obeys it.¹⁰⁵ This ‘reflex’ to absent himself ‘without even waiting for another night to pass’ from the comforts of secure and stable lodging, a warm fire, Clark’s copious library, and Carol’s affections, discloses a frontier psychology. John is seized by ‘irresistible restlessness’, but moreover a sense that in leaving the cottage he is fleeing ‘an unrealized peril’.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Fenton, 26.

¹⁰² Fenton, 24.

¹⁰³ Fenton, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Fenton, 34.

¹⁰⁵ Fenton, 34.

¹⁰⁶ Fenton, 34.

Because the frontierist mindset is defined by persistent movement and deliberate exposure to hazard, stability and comfort paradoxically become ‘peril’, and vice versa: so it is for John. To a frontiersman, Clark’s onetime glowing description of ‘a hell of a house’, one that could offer ‘the damnedest vacation’, revises itself as horribly literal.¹⁰⁷

John knows LA well: his arrival there is a joyous return. ‘Even the confusion of the city streets, though sometimes momentarily disconcerting, was good again’.¹⁰⁸ Fenton apprehends same feeling as Fante’s Bandini, returning to early ‘30s LA after his own self-imposed exile in *Dreams from Bunker Hill*. Arturo declares the cobblestones as ‘soft and comforting as old shoes’, but his definition of comfort is counter-intuitive: it inheres in the streets’ ‘tempting’ and ‘beckoning’ invitation to discover the yet-unknown.¹⁰⁹ Through a ritual of retreat and return, Arturo revivifies the place, making it new, and it is likewise for John Norman. He is greeted by the ‘iron rumble of the street cars’, pedestrians’ ‘sweating intent scurry’ between ‘enormous beehives of office buildings’, ‘grave façades’ of civic structures and the ‘self-absorbed and antlike’ traffic.¹¹⁰ The hymenopterik imagery has the potential to suggest the dehumanised institutionalism of the modern corporate city that Marlowe and Huff protest in their office negotiations. For Norman, though, this potentially disorienting, alienating scene is preferable to Clark’s house because ‘[i]t was not dreaming on its tail in the sand of some lonely and wasted beach’; John has sought out the city not despite its ‘devious ways’ but because of them.¹¹¹ This swarming metropolis makes a constant multisensory assault upon the individual body, offering conditions of contest and hazard unattainable in the sovereign isolation of Clark’s comfortable cottage. Although Fenton describes the city John sees as ‘the familiar pattern of civilization at work’, his enjoyment of the ‘confusion’

¹⁰⁷ Fenton, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Fenton, 33.

¹⁰⁹ John Fante, *Dreams from Bunker Hill*, in *The Bandini Quartet* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2004), 746.

¹¹⁰ It is tempting to imagine the unacclimated John Norman knocked off his feet by an obdurate Derace Kingsley as he strides into the Treloar/Oviatt Building. Fenton, *Journey*, 34–45.

¹¹¹ Fenton, 35.

of the ‘devious’, ‘disconcerting’ city suggests that its appeal lies in the potential for a surfeit of ‘civilization’ to be (as it was for Marlowe and Huff) a wilderness as challenging to individual will as the literal one it supplants.¹¹²

That John’s new environment is defined by spatial contest and conquest is affirmed as he strikes up a barroom conversation with Chester, a marine on furlough. ‘I can’t find a room’, says John. ‘It’s a crowded city’.¹¹³ Chester is a man of straightforward solutions:

“What you ought to do is easy,” Chester said. “You oughta take one of them punks and throw them out in the street. Then you got a room.”

Norman laughed.

“Nah,” Chester said seriously. “I’ll go along with you on your side. We’ll find some punk and toss him out. You done nineteen months belting out Krauts and then come home with your pratt full of steel, so the least you got coming is a soft seat in a nice room. Did a guy come up to you in a foxhole and ask for the rent?”

Norman shook his head.

“Nah, you could stay there free.”

“Chester, you come back and there’s a big change.”¹¹⁴

John and Chester’s remarks on a spatially-contested city where rooms are hard to find reflects a genuine housing crisis that afflicted LA at the end of the war, attested to by a 1945 municipal report. Demand for public war housing had already been inflated by vast wartime in-migrations of industrial workers; when the influx of demobilised veterans exacerbated that situation it caused ‘a

¹¹² Fenton, 35.

¹¹³ Fenton, 35.

¹¹⁴ Fenton, 35–36.

housing shortage unexcelled in the city's history'.¹¹⁵ 73 percent of LA's war housing comprised temporary accommodations, including dormitory beds and trailers, furthering the sense that veterans returned to a city where their defence of 'civilization' on the battlefield was rewarded only with another frontierlike landscape to navigate: a residential paradigm characterised by instability and provisionality.¹¹⁶ For Chester, men who have proved themselves patriotically and physically in combat have both the moral right to expect precedence in occupying the city's spaces and the bodily wherewithal to assert forcibly that precedence over less deserving occupants. Chester envisions precisely the kind of violent calling-in of wartime debts that Waller feared.

These undeserving occupants are termed 'punks', implying inexperience and unworldliness (set against the well-travelled, battle-scarred veterans) and of apprentice-level, petty criminality ('punk' implies pretensions to criminal violence; the likes of John and Chester are not only genuine killers but killed in pursuit of a noble national cause).¹¹⁷ Also unavoidable in this context of ejecting from their beds unsuspecting men who lack a veteran masculinity is the use of 'punk' to denote an older man's passive same-sex partner or a homosexual more generally.¹¹⁸ The term's use also deepens Chester's veteran fraternity with John by invoking a mutual understanding of additional pejorative (and emasculating) implications of 'punk' specific to military slang.¹¹⁹ For Chester, the hierarchical distinction he identifies between veterans and the imagined 'punk' is (ironically, given the geopolitical aims of the wartime service from which he draws his authority) a quasi-fascistic

¹¹⁵ *Preliminary Report on the Disposition of Public War Housing in Los Angeles* (Los Angeles, CA: Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, 1945), 3, Box 333, John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation Library (Collection 1604), UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

¹¹⁶ *Preliminary Report on the Disposition of Public War Housing in Los Angeles*, 1, 5.

¹¹⁷ Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, *Dictionary of American Slang* (New York, NY: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1960), 411.

¹¹⁸ Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of the Underworld: British and American*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), 538. We may note likewise that Arthur Geiger's young male lover in *The Big Sleep* is a 'punk kid'.

¹¹⁹ 'Punk' was at this time 'the army name for bread', and the 'punk sergeant' the mocking name for the attendant who dispensed it in the mess. Likewise, in both the US army and marine corps the company clerk (the notion of clerks as effeminate present once more) was sometimes known as the 'punk'. Elbridge Colby, *Army Talk: A Familiar Dictionary of Soldier Speech* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1942), 161.

one. It not only pits a combative, war-burnished, performatively patriotic, strong-willed masculinity against a cowardly, scapegoated effeminacy, it also depends upon its own continual violent self-assertion. In proposing such masculinist social vigilantism, Chester simultaneously recalls LA's reputation for bloody mob justice in the frontier-era and attests to the flimsiness of any sense of community, contractual or otherwise, in the rented room.¹²⁰ Even prior legal agreement between tenant and landlord, vested in the systems of the paper-based modern world, can be dismissed with brute strength.

There is thus a close communion between Chester's worldview and discourses that framed the clerking types of the new, office-bound, corporate America as lacking the rugged, nation-building manhood of the frontiersman. The kind of spatial acquisition Chester proposes envisions a restoration of a supposed 'natural' masculine order not merely for the veteran but also for the defenestrated punk. The veterans penetrate the room from the outdoor world effeminately avoided by the punk, to seize a figure who, like the clerk of antimodernist invective, luxuriates in a closeted interiority unearned by masculine toil. Moreover though, in 'throw[ing] him out on the street' Chester would demand he re-enter a competitive environment against which he would be compelled to assert and impose himself. Thus, whilst the conquest of the punk's space enforces metaphorically the image of the passive homosexual—the violation of the intimate space of his room, the non-consensual seizure of his body—it would, Chester implies, simultaneously restore to him the potential for masculine agency. For Chester, to enact quasi-sexually his and John's hetero-masculine superiority over the punk is ironically a way to 'make a man' of their effeminate inferior.

To Chester's confident belief in the enduring power of war-won masculine physicality, John responds sceptically that 'there's a big change'. Chester agrees wholeheartedly, but they are

¹²⁰ The definitive modern account of frontier-era LA's culture of violence is John Mack Faragher, *Eternity Street: Violence and Justice in Frontier Los Angeles* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 2016).

at cross purposes. For Chester, this is a time when the ‘real’ men will return and reclaim a feminised ‘punk’ world for and through hypermasculinity. In challenging Chester’s position, it is implied that John suspects an opposite change—that post-war domestic society may have no place for the conquistadorial ethics of wartime and for the men whose selves have been thus defined. Not only does Norman consider his first glorious hours back in Los Angeles ‘*a day of gold out of an age of iron*’, that thought occurs amid a conversation about killing ‘Japs’ and ‘Krauts’, and Chester’s idea of veterans’ rights. It thereby obtains the context of the war as well as the literal day itself, affirming that for men of John’s kind this is a diminished world in which the best they can hope for is a momentary last hurrah.¹²¹ Chester and John thus embody a dialectic about how war has changed the destiny of American manhood. One reading suggests a land primed by war for the revival of the dynamic individualist masculinity that had powered its advance across the continent a century before. Alternatively, the very fact that war alone could provide a contemporary theatre for the revival of those values may prove their dislocation from and obsolescence within peacetime society.

Having figured the contest to secure short-term accommodation in the ‘crowded city’ as one battle in a violent national contest *between* masculinities, however, Chester reveals that Norman’s ingress upon an intimate fraction of LA is in fact in the gift of women: Chester’s girlfriend’s mother runs a rooming house. Phoning Mrs Cramer, ‘the old lady’, Chester clears a social path for Norman by ‘giv[ing] her a little line’ about him, ‘pour[ing] it on’ to secure the entrée.¹²² Immediately after boasting about war-proven power of his and John’s masculinity and the physical agency it grants them, Chester is reduced to petitioning women to offer John a room by the rather less martial, less masculine arts of sweet talk and persuasion. Women (not punks)

¹²¹ Fenton, *Journey*, 36.

¹²² Fenton, 36–37.

prove the gatekeepers of the boarding house, and do not yield up its space without consent; it cannot be claimed by a frontiersman's or soldier's direct assault.¹²³

Whilst this is no 'free land' for frontierist men to claim as they please, however, Cramer determinedly assumes menial subservience to her (almost exclusively) male tenants—despite her status as the space's owner and gatekeeper. Cramer seldom rents John's third floor room because 'it's a long climb up there to clean it' and she deems unconscionable the idea of a male tenant cleaning it himself.¹²⁴ Upon Chester's pleading, however, '[s]he'll clean the sonafabitch herself or get some broad to do it'.¹²⁵ This is, in Cramer's view, woman's labour; she cannot countenance permitting a man to perform it, however willingly he may do so.¹²⁶ This defines the spatial practice of the boarding house room: it is for men to live in but not to work in.

This suggests that, even if Chester's dreams of frontierist forcible seizure of rooms are merely futile boasts, one characteristic of the boarding house that does align it with the socio-spatial ethics of the frontier is that of uncompromising, uncompromised masculinity. It is not merely a space in which men dominate (such a qualification would surely exclude few spaces in 1940s America). It is a space conceived as existing for the performance of normative masculinity, and one that thus rejects alternatives thereto, much as Turner and his contemporaries conceived of the frontier as an enormous proving ground for American manhood, a space which 'demanded manly exertion'.¹²⁷ Failure to yield up the necessary 'manly exertion' to the wilderness was to cede space, to fail to progress. Likewise it is unfathomable, to Cramer, that a man living in a boarding house could forgo the male 'right' *not* to perform domestic labour because this is not only a right

¹²³ Fante's protagonists must similarly deploy charm to navigate past the female hotel proprietors of Bunker Hill, in the forms of *Ask the Dust's* Mrs Hargreaves, *Dreams from Bunker Hill's* Mrs Brownell, and Mrs Flores in 'The Dreamer'.

¹²⁴ Fenton, *Journey*, 37.

¹²⁵ Fenton, 37.

¹²⁶ It should of course be noted that this account of Cramer's beliefs on the gendering of labour comes to us via Chester, whose own vision of the politics of masculinity and femininity is less than nuanced. John's later experiences in the boarding house do, however, bear out Chester's information.

¹²⁷ Turner, 'Contributions of the West', 261.

but an obligation—even if its recusal would itself express male privilege. No man willing to perform the decidedly *unmanly* exertions of housework will be granted ingress to the space Cramer guards. Paradoxically, the frontierist codes of masculine practice that govern the boarding house and its residents are themselves policed by a woman.

These peculiar roles are confirmed as Cramer interrogates her prospective new tenant:

“There’s a bathroom down the hall, with a shower. Are you
a man after girls?”

“I’m a man,” he said.

“There’ll be none up here,” she said.

“I doubt it myself.”¹²⁸

Mrs Cramer asks the question about girls with a dual purpose: she impresses upon her boarder that he will not be permitted women in his room, but a satisfactory answer is one that also assures her that he accepts the rule in forbearance of his ‘natural’ masculine urges rather than because he lacks such urges to begin with. John’s response (a successful one, achieving ingress) indicates that Cramer’s question is as much about confirming that her guest is indeed ‘a man’ as it is about reminding him of the limits to which he will be permitted to express that masculinity under her roof. John’s ‘I doubt it myself’, however, jokingly implies that even though he assuredly has the urges expected of ‘a man’, any lack of girls in his room will be the result of his own aversion to romantic attachments rather than submission to Cramer’s rules. A self-deprecating gesture immediately recodes itself as an attempt to subvert female authority, as John (like Marlowe and like Dix) expresses the conundrum of a masculinity that secures itself simultaneously in performing heterosexual desire and in insulating itself from feminine influences.

¹²⁸ Fenton, *Journey*, 40.

These exchanges extend the boarding house's implicit promise of a solitary, unfeminised way of life among men (though Mrs Cramer is a woman, the text persistently figures her as desexualised by her age, widowhood and physical appearance), but John unexpectedly finds schoolteacher Mary Carter in residence. Although the two fall in love, their relationship is defined by John's persistent attempts to maintain distance from what he perceives as Mary's embodiment of a kind of suffocating domesticity. At one point, as suddenly and impulsively as he first left Clark's cottage and Carol, he leaves Mary and the boarding house without warning to return to that very cottage (which, now free of Carol's presence, is once again a 'bachelor' residence).

Just as when he left Carol, John betrays his frontiersmanlike instincts in departing the boarding house because it is in the very moment of acquiring the comfort and stability of conjugal domesticity that elects to move, gripped by fear of stasis. Just before returning to the cottage, John witnesses the city streets once again; the scene mirrors his momentary thrill at being back in the city after leaving Clark's cottage previously. Now though, something has profoundly changed; where once he saw vivifying excitement in the city's tumult, now he can only see 'a dreary march of self-conscious dunces'. He is disgusted by these 'wonderless children' who embody, he now sees, 'hypnotized' participation in the structures of modern American capitalism: 'how little their lives had to show for all the storm of energies they poured out, [...] all rallying round the dollar bill that was their flag [...] in the murder and catastrophe of their times'.¹²⁹ John has in most regards refused such a way of living. He does not at this point have a job, and lives in the marginal space of the boarding house—a community of sorts, but a paradoxical one in that it is made up of individualist misfits. The only respect in which John has submitted to the codes of post-war American normativity is in accepting domestication through his relationship with Mary Carter. It seems clear, then, that John's newfound anxieties about the forms and structures of urban life,

¹²⁹ Fenton, 147.

which are expressed in the act of spatially dislocating himself from Mary, result from his participation in them through his relationship with her.

Ornery ex-neighbour Ray Bowen tracks down John and tells him that the ‘boarding house is ended’, less as news than as an acknowledgement that he understands why John left.¹³⁰ The house’s complement of occupants is breaking up, ostensibly, because Mrs Cramer is dying, but on a conceptual level the boarding house is ‘ended’ because John and Mary’s developing relationship has stopped it being a boarding house. As in Marlowe’s apartment, a spatial practice of lone masculinity has been compromised by the competing presence of the possibility of another mode of life, manifest in Mary’s status as a marriageable woman. The presence of a couple in this space designated for individuals who have rejected or been rejected by the norms of conjugal domesticity has caused it to wither as a form: Mrs Cramer is purposeless if John has Mary.

John returns from the cottage to Mary but the cycle of escape and return continues. They marry and buy a house, acceding to the stability of single-family living. Soon, though, John’s restlessness surfaces again. Sensing this, Mary suggests that ‘[a] man’ must ‘have a den with his own things in it’. John responds:

*What? Tackle and golf clubs? Whiskies on a shelf behind a bar? Hunting prints and a card table for rummy and poker? A closet for outdoor clothes and boots? A blowup snapshot of a string of trout? God, I never want to touch a gun again for the rest of my life. Even if I go fishing I never want to catch a fish. Let the bastards swim.*¹³¹

John identifies, and rejects, precisely the ways in which suburban single-family domesticity claims a frontier lineage but in fact only offers a superficial burlesque of pioneer life. Where once

¹³⁰ Fenton, 148.

¹³¹ Fenton, 213–14.

individualist masculinity had the entire western United States as its psychodramatic test site, it is now bathetically reduced to an adult playroom, the outdoors present only in prints and photographs. Having experienced in wartime a truly frontiersmanlike life, surviving by one's wits in a hostile environment under the constant threat of death, John is disgusted by the den's transformation of frontier violence into a set of domestic lifestyle accessories within the obligatory social performance of mid-century American suburban manhood—something he 'should' have, Mary says.¹³²

The vision of familial domesticity Mary encourages in the den suggestion, a man's life of stable leisure in a single-family home facilitated by a subservient wife, is one she repeatedly advances. Almost a parody of feminine subservience to patriarchal authority, she belittles her own achievements and value, declares her inadequacy to be John's partner, and performs all domestic duties smiling and unprompted. The height of her ambition is, she suggests, to 'marry and start a home', thereby 'becoming a kitchen-busy housewife'.¹³³ She protests that she is 'not beautiful', doesn't drink, abhors swearing, and refers to herself as 'dumb' despite an academic background.¹³⁴ She tells John that 'a man must get tired of looking at the same woman every night, even his wife'.¹³⁵ That line reflects her equanimous tolerance of John's unexplained absence when he returns to Clark's cottage. When he returns, Mary is an image of domestic servitude, 'wearing a white apron and standing by the stove'.¹³⁶ She accepts his protestations of love within moments and without a word of protest or a demand for any explanation, betraying no frustration at John's soul-searching emotional unavailability while asserting no need for her own spaces of self-discovery or loneliness. Mary appears to present herself in a way that is precisely designed not to threaten John's

¹³² Fenton, 213.

¹³³ Fenton, 103.

¹³⁴ Fenton, 105, 131, 138, 198.

¹³⁵ Fenton, 213.

¹³⁶ Fenton, 161.

masculinity: she shrinks herself to inflate his patriarchal authority, attempting to secure and steer in the direction of self-rediscovery a man who no longer knows himself. In thus seeking to please John and restore his masculine selfhood, however, she only plunges him deeper into crisis, because she does not apprehend John's frontierist consciousness—his ineluctable tendency to conceive of stability, domesticity, familial and social commitment as paralysing threats to individualist agency. By seeking to quell restlessness, she only increases it.

John's rejection of what Mary offers next manifests itself in a job in a bookshop owned by the gregarious Diedre Dodd. Diedre, though female, is masculinised to a greater extent even than Cramer—distinctly implied in her manner, appearance, and lifestyle to be a stereotyped lesbian. Evenings carousing with Diedre and her friends become, for John, another way to avoid marital domesticity. Indeed, Diedre's combination of masculine presentation and intellectual interests simulate the homosocial camaraderie of his fondly-recalled wartime drinking sessions with Clark.¹³⁷ At the end of an evening spent carousing with Diedre, John does not want to go home, and rejects Diedre's advice to phone Mary if he intends on staying out. He awakes later, downtown, in the bedroom of a pianist named Marie, who has extricated him from a barfight that he cannot recall. She assures him that nothing untoward has occurred between them, but the similarity between her name and Mary's affirms that John's mere presence here is a kind of spatial infidelity.

John's 'long walk home' across Los Angeles is an arduous westward trek, ending on the verdant greens of a golf course near his home. The tension between California's frontierist and Edenic identities is bathetically modelled: a gruelling, hard-to-navigate landscape gives way to an

¹³⁷ John's friendship with Diedre is one of a string of episodes in the book (following the intensity of John's grief for Clark and domestic occupation of his home, his recurring reluctance to commit to heterosexual relationships, and the homoerotic implications of Chester's earlier discourse on 'punks') that suggest the potential for a queer interpretation of *What Way My Journey Lies*—itself another potential avenue of comparison with *In a Lonely Place*. Such a reading would not preclude my frontierist analysis of John's actions and motivations (indeed, it would derive largely from similar claims), however, and the evidence for it is not so overwhelming as to suggest it is the only plausible one. One is mindful of Raymond Chandler's exhortation, however paranoid it may have been, when faced with Gershon Legman's claim that his prose encodes a gay Philip Marlowe, not to join 'that rather numerous class [...] which cannot conceive of a close relationship between a couple of men as other than homosexual'. Jerry Speir, *Raymond Chandler* (New York, NY: Frederick Ungar, 1981), 111. Cited in Trott, *War Noir*, 95.

artificial arcadia, signalling that John's hopes of perpetuating a frontiersmanlike existence, evading through perpetual motion the enervating effects of a life of leisure, are forlorn. Mary confirms what the golf course foreshadows. She again accepts John's return instantly and without rancour or query, but makes one stipulation: 'don't leave me any more, even for a while'.¹³⁸ This is, tellingly, not a request but an absolute command. She may, just like Helen in the reverie of Fante's Julio Sal, scramble John's eggs, but it is he who is described as behaving 'obediently' in sitting down to eat it.¹³⁹ Mary submits to the patriarchal authority of her era, but also demands (as Cramer had) that John submits to his role within that structure. She elevates, privileges, and indulges his masculinity, but on the condition that it is expressed in a particular form. Mary demands a domesticated vision of manhood defined by its place within conjugal, familial life in the single-family home. It cannot be the dangerous, volatile, unknowable masculinity of the war or the frontier, but rather must be the masculinity of the den's cosy frontier simulacrum: the space for exploring any 'wilderness' vision of manhood has been literally bound within the walls of the single-family home, tamed and domesticated.

Mary's continual pains to submit passively to John thus ultimately reveal themselves as their mutual entrapment within the stultifying domestic paradigm of the era, embodied in the shift from boarding house to suburban family home. John recognises early on that Mary is, as Bowen says, a 'status quo girl': he knows that Bowen resents her for conformism but cannot admit the extent to which he harbours a similar distrust.¹⁴⁰ John's resistance to this vision, from a refusal to believe that 'becoming a kitchen-busy housewife' could be a desirable life, to his repeated spatial feints away from domesticity, suggest that this vision of masculinity, though one that ostensibly places him in a position of centrality and power, is one he fears. A frontier masculinity 'centres' the singular (white) male in both narrative and power dynamics, but in a markedly different way:

¹³⁸ Fenton, *Journey*, 241.

¹³⁹ Fenton, 243.

¹⁴⁰ Fenton, 87.

the frontiersman must continually fight for power and space, through individual will and struggle—as in the war, as in the boarding house. The patriarchal domesticity of the single-family home offered by Mary, by contrast, presents masculinity as supreme and unchallenged by its immediate environment, but thereby blunts the socio-spatial agency of the male individualist, subjecting him to no vivifying frontierist insecurity or danger but holding him static in the bonds of family, community, and mortgage payments.

John tries to envisage his new life in frontierist terms, imagining ‘man and wife and child, cat and dog and canary, fighting the battle for survival within the picket moat of their stucco castle’. By acknowledging the bathetic form this modern ‘battle’ takes, however, he reveals the tragicomic impossibility of it ever representing a kind of frontierist life. He is now entirely subservient to and subsumed within the strictures of the contractual community: ‘Lot 47, tract 6939, in the City of Los Angeles, State of California, as per Map recorded in Book 93, page 50 of Maps in the office of the County Recorder of said county’.¹⁴¹ In finally coming home to the single-family house, John Norman admits that a frontier masculinity is no longer sustainable.

‘She was at home here’: Dorothy B. Hughes’ *In a Lonely Place*

Mary’s quiet assault-through-subservience upon John’s frontier-veteran masculinity stands in contrast to the sexually and socially confident women who threaten Dix Steele’s sense of selfhood throughout *In a Lonely Place* by being individualists themselves. The morning after murdering one such woman, Dix awakes to a ringing telephone in the courtyard apartment he occupies (having murdered its tenant, his friend Mel Terriss). When Steele opens his front door, Hughes signals that her text’s physical settings are intimately engaged with frontier logic. ‘There [is] nothing unusual

¹⁴¹ Fenton, 215–16.

on the front page' of the newspaper that Steele retrieves from the doormat, only '[t]he ways of civilization'. As 'civilization' is one of the absolute poles of the Turnerian universe, its perpetual opposite being 'savagery', we might wonder about the implications for the setting of this novel in a suggestion that the 'ways of civilization' arrive as news, that 'civilization' is something that happens elsewhere, to be consumed vicariously rather than part of the experience of this location.

The paper carries national and international news on its 'civilization'-focused front page, but 'savage' local stories within—Dix checks page two for any report of the prior night's murder. If the newspaper's arrival denotes a place characterised by 'savagery' rather than 'civilization', however, the place denoted is not merely Los Angeles in general but the specific doorstep where it lands. Dix's borrowed apartment performs the refinements of 'civilization', right down to the quality of the coffee ('Terriss had good stuff') but this of course only obscures its harbouring of the novel's singular 'savage' force, the murderous Steele.¹⁴² Dix's apartment, like the frontier, is somewhere to which 'the ways of civilization' must be delivered from without, because they are not the space's 'native' conditions. As the inhabitant of that space, Dix immediately occupies a position akin to that of *Double Indemnity*'s Walter Huff—embodying the frontiersman's paradoxical disdain for the very 'civilization' he notionally served and rendering explicit the original frontiersman's latent complicity with 'savagery' by making himself the agent of its introduction to rather than its eradication from his environment. Throughout Hughes' novel, the peculiar spatiality of the apartment court continues to model these complex ambiguities of Dix's toxic frontiersmanship.

Christopher Breu notes that *In a Lonely Place* is intimately concerned with conflicts between men and women over 'definition[s] of public and private space', but never identifies that the novel articulates such 'gendered antagonism' over spatial meanings most persistently in the peculiarly

¹⁴² Hughes, *Lonely Place*, 15.

mutable public-private dynamics that define its recurring apartment court setting.¹⁴³ Hughes' Virginibus Arms enables its residents to present a semblance of sociable community while in fact jealously guarding their privacy. As in Marlowe's apartment the frontierist sense prevails that this space is both individualist (in that these apartments are intended for single people), and contested (in that the presence of others nearby necessitates the jealous guarding and defence of one's own sovereign space). The Virginibus suggests that the apartment court's typological and social characteristics fall somewhere between those of the private dwelling and the more transient, provisional world of the rooming house or residential hotel. Residents occupy self-contained dwellings with direct access to the world outside, yet this access is not to the public realm of the street but to either the balcony or the patio—shared, semi-communal spaces. Those communal areas are prevented from becoming fully public by the court's spatial enclosure and the institutional surveillance of a building manager and janitorial staff. Despite such protection, residents keep themselves to themselves—the patio and its pool are never used. Residents have garages but these are not attached to their homes and Dix regularly plans his routes to avoid arousing suspicion when walking between the apartments and the garages. There is a productive tension here. The socio-spatial form of the building is one that both requires residents to devise strategies to remain hidden *and* one that permits and enables such strategies.

As Polyzoides et al identify, because the 'space enveloped by the court [...] becomes the primary organizing element', the apartment court represents a striking 'alternative to the illusory American dream of the freestanding house'.¹⁴⁴ External space is made *internal* to the form of the building, unsettling the familiar dichotomy of a sovereign home surrounded by an 'outside' world. Thus, the meaning of this internal-external space—shared but not public, a space occupied when outside one's home and yet *part of* one's home—becomes resistant to stable definition. Lewis

¹⁴³ Breu, 'Radical Noir', 201.

¹⁴⁴ Polyzoides et al., *Courtyard Housing in Los Angeles*, 9.

Mumford lamented that twentieth-century architecture had ‘turned from enclosure to exposure [...], all sense of intimacy and privacy [...] forfeited [...] to create a kind of exposed public space for every moment’.¹⁴⁵ The apartment court, more radically and unsettlingly, blends enclosure and enclosure imperceptibly, in the same space, to constitute an unstable liminality between the two: its spatial conditions are dangerously ambiguous. For Turner, the frontier denoted the land between the safely, stably settled world and complete wilderness: the apartment court’s inscrutable equivocation between the public and private, the communal and the discrete (and, indeed, discreet) seems to model something very similar in an urban context. All these qualities, and what they suggest about the subtle ambiguities of Dix’s frontiersmanship, are made apparent when Dix first encounters Laurel:

He was walking fast. That was why he didn’t see the girl until he almost collided with her at the arched street entrance of the patio. It shocked him that he hadn’t noticed her, that he hadn’t been aware. He stepped back quickly. ‘I beg your pardon,’ he said. It wasn’t a formality as he said it; shock made each word apology for a grave error. [...]

He didn’t move. He stood and watched her. [...] She took her time, skirting the small sky-blue oblong of the pool which lay in the center of the patio. She started up the stairway to the balcony of the second-floor apartments. He swung out of the archway fast. He wouldn’t let her reach the balcony, look over the balustrade and

¹⁴⁵ Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), 310. Mumford’s dismissal of Los Angeles as ‘an undifferentiated mass of houses’, risible on its face, seems all the more foolish in light of the potential pertinence of the unique spatial characteristics possessed by the apartment court, that most quintessentially LA residential form, to his hermeneutics of public and private urban space. Mumford, 581.

see him standing there. He'd find out about her some other way, if she lived here, or whom she visited.¹⁴⁶

Dix here is leaving the court, Laurel entering it. They collide at the very point that marks the division between the liminal public-private space of the patio and the wholly public space of the world outside—the city-as-wilderness. Dix at this point finds himself at the very furthest edge of the apartment court's spatial frontier zone, about to move into the space of greater danger and uncertainty beyond.

Laurel is figured as making an incursion from that space, representative of the unknown and unstable—that which Dix cannot control. The 'grave error' that 'shocks' him is a failure to have mastered the immediate territory surrounding him—he allows himself to be surprised, ambushed (again the physical characteristics of the court, Dix's vision blocked by a physical barrier to the street beyond, facilitate this). Dix then realises he remains subject to spatial vulnerability (being captured in the watchful eye of another's surveillance), caught in the public-private netherspace of the patio as Laurel proceeds to the relative sovereignty of her apartment. In either the courtyard or her own apartment, he cannot control her. The power dynamics here are further swayed in her direction by the elevation of her apartment: the insecure Dix is worried about quite literally being looked down upon by a woman, caught in a tactically disadvantageous position.

Dix emerges from the relative safety of his own apartment, and making a journey out into the world is assailed on its 'hither edge' by a figure from outside, like the frontiersman journeying from settled land into wilderness. Yet in that very instant the dynamics shift. As Laurel makes for her apartment, the external force threateningly penetrates the boundaries of the court, first destabilising the idea of the court as a settled space but immediately revealing itself in doing to in fact be a rightful occupant of that space (which Dix, of course, is not). In this moment, as Laurel

¹⁴⁶ Hughes, *Lonely Place*, 20–21.

heads for her balcony, Dix finds himself a vulnerable entity in the contested, outer-inner space of the patio, yet the force to whose power he is subject has been revealed not to be a ‘wild’ incursion from outside but a resident part of the court’s internal condition. Dix seems at once to travel towards and be assailed by forces emanating from the wildness of the external world *and* to represent the wildness of the external world assailed by forces that emanate from within the purview of settled, ordered space. As in his own persistent description of himself as ‘lone wolf’ (recalling the ambiguous animal imagery of Fante’s ‘To Be a Monstrous Clever Fellow’), it is uncertain if Dix is hunter or hunted, frontiersman or frontier.¹⁴⁷ Dix’s first encounter with Laurel thus suggests the complexity and mutability of frontier identity in *In a Lonely Place* and its apartment court.

The court’s spatial practice continues to be defined by ambiguous, shifting dynamics of public and private that imply a frontierist tension between the preservation of the individual and an embrace of spatial conflict. The spatial vulnerability Dix feels in his first encounter with Laurel is perpetuated in persistent intrusions upon his privacy by the building manager and maid. His powers to limit these incursions are limited partly because he is not legitimately resident (through violently physical self-assertion he has claimed living space from a man he perceived as undeserving of it, fulfilling Chester’s fantasy) and fears drawing attention to the circumstances by which he has ‘replaced’ Terriss. There is, however, no suggestion that either manager or maid ever suspect Dix of killing Mel, while Laurel too invokes their prying eyes as a means of extricating herself from Dix’s attentions. The ever-intrusive presence of staff surveillance thus seems suggestive less of Dix’s particular anxieties as murderer than the general conditions of apartment court living. Not only space itself but its meaning is contested: Dix must work continually to keep private space private.

¹⁴⁷ Hughes, 20.

Precisely because Dix is aware of his own vulnerability to surveillance in the court, however, he also knows that Laurel's spatial sovereignty can be undermined. He jokes that he could inveigle himself into her life and space 'get[ting] a job reading the light meter or delivering laundry'.¹⁴⁸ Like Carmen entering Marlowe's apartment, Dix intends to exploit the expectations of multi-family residences as permeable spaces where casual intrusions upon private space are the norm, literally part of the service. Dix proposes such possibilities, however, for the very reason that they are somehow less aberrant within the spatial practice of the court than simply engaging Laurel in open conversation, the approach he will ultimately choose. Dix retrospectively justifies the boldness of that approach as the institution of a new and overdue 'good-neighbor policy' at the *Virginibus*, acknowledging that he understands it as a breach of accepted spatial practice.¹⁴⁹ The sense of unstable bivalence in the court's simultaneous spatial identities of enclosure and exposure is thus present once more. Dix's direct approach to Laurel is aberrant because it breaks the codes of a space designed for privacy and maintained as such by its residents, where 'you don't even see' your neighbour, but the alternative methods of approach he imagines exploit the conditions of a space where residents actively *expect* to find their privacy intruded upon.¹⁵⁰

The space's combination of privacy and permeability simultaneously threatens and benefits Dix, further revealing his character as a frontierist—both a lone individualist and a spatial ingressor. The qualities that make the court challenging and obstructive to him (watchful eyes, the inability to claim a space as entirely sovereign) also provide the conditions under which he can maintain the relative anonymity and lack of a social 'footprint' that enable his criminality (a transient space of short tenancies, multiple mobile occupants, regular visitors and informal sub-lettings). Again, multi-family housing evinces frontierist characteristics in ways that appear to contradict but in fact articulate each other. It invites the presence of those who want to prevent

¹⁴⁸ Hughes, 41.

¹⁴⁹ Hughes, 82.

¹⁵⁰ Hughes, 82.

their individualism from being socio-spatially compromised but who also demand the opportunity to assert that individualism by defending their socio-spatial integrity against incursions from others and making such incursions themselves.

The Virginibus Arms' spatial mutability, the difficulty of determining whether spaces in an apartment court are public or private, enclosed or exposed, is compounded by a text that keeps its own counsel about exactly what those spaces look like. Apartment courts in this period took many forms; Polyzoides et al record single blocks, parallel blocks, 'L'-shapes, 'U'-shapes, and completed courtyards.¹⁵¹ The Virginibus appears to belong to the last category, but Hughes' description of its form is remarkably unclear. Around its square interior patio are 'Spanish bungalows boxing the court on three sides', while on an upper level are apartments 'off the Spanish-Colonial balcony'.¹⁵² It is unclear, however, how many sides of the court are covered by this balcony. Hughes at times calls Dix's ground floor home a 'bungalow', which by most definitions would imply that it has no further floor of housing above it, but at other times it receives the designation 'apartment', opening the possibility that Hughes may simply use 'bungalow' to mean 'single storey, ground floor dwelling', suggesting that a dwelling may have further stories above it and still be called a 'bungalow'. There is precedent for this in architectural literature.¹⁵³

This ambiguity in the architectural terminology Hughes applies to the ground floor of the Virginibus leaves us unclear as to whether, when the text describes a balcony above the bungalows, this runs *over* the bungalows on anything up to three sides of the court, and/or on the fourth side of the court where there are no bungalows, i.e. with a void beneath forming an entranceway to the court. The presence of an 'arched street entrance' and its implication of being set into a fourth,

¹⁵¹ Polyzoides et al., *Courtyard Housing in Los Angeles*, 32, 35, 38.

¹⁵² Hughes, *Lonely Place*, 46.

¹⁵³ Polyzoides refers to seemingly self-contradicting 'duplex or quadruplex' bungalows, 'stacked shotgun house[s] on two stories'—buildings that resemble two storey single-family dwellings but in fact contain separate dwellings on each floor, each with its own external access. Stefanos Polyzoides, 'California Bungalows, Streets, and Courts', *Old-House Journal* 30, no. 3 (June 2002): 73.

enclosing side of the court, however, does little to clarify whether the upper 'balcony' apartments run only on one side of the court with the walled entrance (thus making the ground-floor apartments 'true' bungalows), atop the ground-floor apartments, or both.

As in the bungalow court that challenged Philip Marlowe's interrogative faculties with its series of repeated forms, repetition that might seem to suggest a predictable space in fact engenders ambiguity. Where Marlowe was attempting to divine an interrogative passage into the court, however, here our protagonist is resident within its ambiguous structures, which therefore serve to suggest and deepen his own unknowability. Many of Dix's most significant actions in the novel take place in between-chapter blackouts, always withheld from the reader, and these blackouts find their spatial analogue in the court—the location that defines Dix's life in the novel resists, like his most critical actions, readerly attempts at epistemic penetration. Its spaces present themselves as fundamentally frontierlike because, like Dix's own psyche, they prove to the reader treacherously changeable and hard to navigate. The court's true dimensions and form, like the 'lonely place' of the killer's psychological isolation and like the frontier, remain elusive to all those outside the space itself. Even the frontiersman only finds the frontier 'knowable' in the sense that he embraces it as that which cannot be known: once fully compassed, it is no longer a frontier. Likewise Dix, privileged with the experiential knowledge of the court's spaces that the text denies the reader, finds that the meanings of those spaces shift from moment to moment as violently and unpredictably as does his own temperament. Thus a frontier-oriented architectural composition models a frontier-oriented psyche.

Such a mapping of spatial conditions to frontierlike psychological makeup is complicated, however, by the fact that Laurel too lives in the apartments, a complication evinced by the spatial role reversal of her first meeting with Dix. He is threatened by a woman whose association with and ability to navigate this contested, mutable, blurry space suggests that she may be as unknowable, changeable, and elusive as he intends to be. Her spatial identity implies the threat

that Walter Huff could not apprehend in Phyllis Nirdlinger—that of a woman also possessed by frontierist characteristics—and thus presents a direct challenge to Dix’s urge to control and subdue women. That Laurel lives alone suggests a woman who has rejected social convention and male control (in this case that of an ex-husband). Her gender marks her living alone in an apartment as a resistive act of *not* living with a husband in a single-family home, inverting the multi-family unit’s familiar role as a space where a man can evade the domesticating, feminising norms of a post-frontier world. This renders Laurel to Dix simultaneously alluring (in her frontier-individualist rejection of social conventions and bonds) and infuriating (because such frontier-individualism is vested ‘improperly’ in a woman).

Those domesticating, feminising norms of the single-family home, which in *What Way My Journey Lies* were represented by Mary Carter, here find their champion in Sylvia Nicolai—wife of Brub Nicolai, Dix’s former comrade-in-arms and now ostensible investigator of his crimes. As the primary residential space in the novel, the Virginibus Arms is contrasted persistently with the Nicolais’ Santa Monica home, which stands on the frontier landscape-evoking ‘Mesa Road’ but ultimately confirms for Dix that the single-family home’s claim to the imaginary of frontier living is at best superficial and at worst dangerously deceptive.¹⁵⁴ When Dix first contacts Brub, he does not know he is married, so to meet Sylvia when he visits their home is a shock. On meeting her, rather than engaging her in conversation, he turns immediately to Brub. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were married?’, Dix asks. There is no jocularitv here, only angry urgency: the answer is ‘demanded’, and the demand then repeated.¹⁵⁵ Dix had envisaged a homosocial encounter with Brub, reproducing their wartime dynamic. Sylvia, though, as emblem of Brub’s new peacetime existence, has precluded that, corrupting a purely masculine Brub-Dix relationship by enmeshing her husband in the feminised structures of domesticity.

¹⁵⁴ Hughes, *Lonely Place*, 6.

¹⁵⁵ Hughes, 7.

Even before being introduced to Sylvia, on first sight Dix knows that '[s]he was at home here; she was mistress of the house and she was beautiful in her content'.¹⁵⁶ Dix thus recognises Brub and Sylvia's home instantly as a place of female security and power: Sylvia represents the house, the house Sylvia. Even though the traditional, patriarchal family unit privileges and elevates Brub above his wife, in Dix's view it has placed Brub under undue female influence, spatially fixing him within a sphere where Sylvia is the force truly in control. She is as tall as Brub, physically manifesting the demasculinising diminution Dix believes her to have wrought upon his friend. Sylvia is for Dix a more malign version of Fenton's Mary: he perceives her as having entrapped Brub in a socio-spatial construct that precludes him from functioning as an exclusively and independently masculine individual. That Sylvia is rendered 'beautiful' precisely by this state of affairs discloses Dix's conflicted attitudes towards her: as with Laurel, or Marlowe with Carmen, Dix's perception of Sylvia's independent agency (and its threat to that of men) generates simultaneous revulsion and desire. Dix finds Sylvia's threat, as John finds Mary's, especially insidious because in a frontierist mindset where comfort is entrapment and stability is stasis, Sylvia's 'submission' to a domestic ideal of apparent male agency and female subservience is in fact the very source of her independent agency and the loss of Brub's. She becomes a dangerously individuated threat to masculinity by appearing not to be one, in so doing disclosing once more that the single-family house's superficial redolence of the pioneer homestead in fact disguises its deeper treachery to frontier values.

If the unknowability of the Virginibus Arms represents the elusive inner self Dix attempts to hide and protect, Sylvia's feminised realm of domesticated certainty enables her to 'see under the covering of a man'.¹⁵⁷ Thus she instantly sees under Dix's covering to identify his most obviously frontiersmanlike trait, calling him a 'stubborn individualist', the clarity with which his

¹⁵⁶ Hughes, 7.

¹⁵⁷ Hughes, 46.

frontiersmanship appears to her marking it as conspicuously aberrant to the space of her home and signalling her ability to challenge it.¹⁵⁸ Sylvia indeed vindicates Dix's worst fears about female agency and its capacity to diminish men through domesticity when she (aided by Laurel), not Brub, proves to be his undoing. Unlike John Norman, Dix never willingly submits to the anti-frontierist, emasculating tyranny of the single-family home, its stability, its easily identifiable boundaries, and its stultifying domestic comforts. It is, however, the novel's principal symbol of that domestic paradigm who first suspects and ultimately conquers him.

In *Double Indemnity*, Barton Keyes' pursuit of Walter Huff suggests the extent to which Huff's antagonist is the office itself. Sylvia is similarly suggestive of the extent to which Dix's ultimate enemy (and vanquisher) is not only a feminine presence but the conjugal domesticity of the family home itself. Dix's murderous attempts to resist that familial ideal, to seek a way of life more individualistic, more socially marginal, and less diluted by feminine agency, are more extreme than John Norman's cold feet but no more successful.

Homes of the Future; Men of the Past

Something happens at the end of World War II to the latter-day frontiersmen of fictional Los Angeles. A crisis of manhood and its place in the post-war world plays out between two opposed spaces—provisional, ephemeral, multi-occupancy accommodation denoting masculine individualism at society's hither edge, and the normative, bloodless, familial domesticity of the single-family home. These dynamics and their reflection of a crisis of post-frontier masculinity are

¹⁵⁸ Hughes, 7.

by no means limited to Dix Steele and John Norman. As Sarah Trott writes on Chandler's *The Little Sister*, '[t]he war became a pivotal event for [Philip] Marlowe because it heralded the advent of a new Los Angeles'.¹⁵⁹ Between *The Little Sister* in 1949 and *The Long Goodbye* in 1953, a longstanding apartment denizen who once vested his selfhood of lone maleness with existential urgency in his Hobart Arms rooms, trades that 'urban transience for a furnished house' on Yucca Avenue in Laurel Canyon.¹⁶⁰

That move seems to suggest that Marlowe, like John Norman and unlike Dix Steele, is coming with age to accept being drawn towards domesticity and conjugality. Marlowe is not living with a woman when he takes the Yucca Avenue house, but *The Long Goodbye* is also the novel in which he first meets Linda Loring, who recurs in *Playback* (1958) and has married Marlowe by the time of the unfinished, posthumously-published 'The Poodle Springs Story' (1962). Throughout *The Long Goodbye* and *Playback*, Marlowe starts to doubt the viability of the very identity he has embodied the course of the earlier novels. The phone rings at Yucca Avenue in the dead of night and the occupant is asked if he is, indeed, Marlowe: 'I guess so' comes the uncertain response.¹⁶¹ Moving to a single-family home seems to anticipate spatially a retreat to the safety and comfort of the domestic, away from the earlier novels' resolutely masculinist individualism, a retreat later corroborated by Linda's arrival. Similarly, the protagonist of John Fante's *Full of Life* (1952) has left *Ask the Dust's* grubby hotel lifestyle far behind. He and his heavily pregnant wife purchase and renovate their first house—the deliberate domestic cliché of a four-bed, picket-fenced affair, a good few miles out of downtown, not far from John Norman's place.

These shifts suggest the changing socio-spatial makeup of the city in the post-war era—the outward moves from the urban core made by Marlowe, Norman, and Fante's protagonist

¹⁵⁹ Trott, *War Noir*, 107.

¹⁶⁰ McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 176.

¹⁶¹ Raymond Chandler, *Playback* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958), 7.

anticipate the white flight to the suburbs that would define LA's demographic shifts in the 1950s and '60s. Marlowe's move may reflect perhaps that in an expanding, centrifugalised city, it is less important to have immediate access to the neon fleshpots of Hollywood and the 'decaying mansions and sinister rooming houses' of Bunker Hill.¹⁶² Indeed, much of the latter would begin to be torn down in 1960, having been condemned as irredeemably 'blighted' by 1947 and subject to 'redevelopment' plans since 1951.¹⁶³ In distancing himself further from the central city, Marlowe anticipates the imminent replacement of its 'diversity, complexity, and locality' with monumental homogeneity, and therein the loss of its 'occult power' to furnish the 'nocturnal imagination' of the crime narrative.¹⁶⁴ Fante's fictional alter ego's departure from downtown likewise reflects the fact that, whilst multi-family housing may have become, contrary to popular imagery, more common in post-war Los Angeles, the day of the downtown tumbledown flophouse was over.¹⁶⁵

By the onset of the '50s, then, Philip Marlowe is unsure if he can sustain himself as the lone, danger-braving trouble seeker of the earlier books. Fante's fictional alter ego is avowedly no longer the socio-sexual boundary-pusher and convention-breaker of *Ask the Dust* or the dancehall in 'Monstrous Clever Fellow'; indeed, in *Full of Life* he comes to fear his wife's and father's breaches of social convention will reveal their family as something other than normative. Dix Steele and John Norman cannot reconcile themselves to peacetime life after the brutal viscerality of wartime experience renders any other existence unreal and meaningless. All four men find that after the war they can no longer sustain aspects of their characters that denoted individualist masculinity, wilful self-endangerment, and various expressions of a kind of roving spatial agency. The traits

¹⁶² Mike Davis, 'Bunker Hill: Hollywood's Dark Shadow', in *Cinema and the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, ed. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 33.

¹⁶³ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 60.

¹⁶⁴ Avila, 60; Davis, 'Bunker Hill: Hollywood's Dark Shadow', 33.

¹⁶⁵ In these and many other regards Fante's *Full of Life* is nakedly autobiographical (to the point of dispensing with the 'Bandini' conceit—the protagonist is simply 'John Fante'). Fante married Joyce Smart in 1937 and their first child was born in 1942. Although the '40s were years of artistic disappointment for Fante (*Ask the Dust*'s failure to catapult him into the literary establishment, his failure to win a Guggenheim fellowship, the failure of *The Little Brown Brothers*), screenwriting work became increasingly lucrative. Never again would John Fante slum it in a Bunker Hill hotel.

that marked them out as latter-day inheritors or manipulators of the frontierist ideal are somehow no longer tenable. All respond by attempting to share life and space with women, accepting or inviting the domesticating influence of a feminine presence.

These responses are variably successful, Dix's failing in the most violent and dramatic terms. In the other cases, the act of coming to accept domesticity, conjugality and the familial is figured in acts of swapping multi-family accommodation for the single-family home. These are in turn acts that swap a form of housing which in multiple dimensions reflects the dynamics and values of the frontier for one that perhaps superficially suggests the open plain but is revealed as only a flimsy assemblage of superficial frontier images and indeed fundamentally anti-frontierist in its deeper bases. There is, further, an abiding strangeness that these men make their moves at the moment when multi-family housing was in fact becoming more rather than less popular in Los Angeles. Just as the form of housing that most effectively models or supports the values of the frontier seems about to become a more normative way to live in LA, these former frontiersmen abandon it, because as a frontier experience ceases to be marginal, it ceases to be a frontier.

In terms of the changes in LA's *domestic* urban fabric (in contrast to the changes in the industrial scene documented in the previous chapter), the war as a dividing schism is to an extent arbitrary here. As Gebhart and von Breton write, 'by the end of the '30s, LA was the only city where all of the essential ingredients of the horizontal, private-auto, oriented city were firmly established. Only the outbreak of [...] World War II prevented their full realization in 1942 and 1943'.¹⁶⁶ Something, nevertheless, causes these men to abandon to a greater or lesser extent their previous frontierist multi-family living, in favour the single-family home's anti-frontierist domestication (bar Dix, whose murderous resistance thereto is his downfall). It is perhaps as John and Dix fear: the horrors of war have rendered men like them placeless; a post-war world is wary of the frontierist values of physical force, violence, spatial incursion, individualism and

¹⁶⁶ Gebhart and von Breton, *LA in the Thirties*, 9.

unpredictability. Now it prizes regimentation and systematisation (embodied in LA's urban form by freeways and tract homes) to curtail the dangerous will of men. Indeed, on the horizon was Eisenhower's America of picket fences and patriotic procreation, and with it the fear that 'American traditions of individualism were vanishing and being buried beneath [...] prefabricated towns'.¹⁶⁷ The conformist familial fantasia of the '50s was at odds with frontierism's valorisation of singular figures on the unpredictable social margin, a conflict *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) would stage in the takeover of a suburban Southern California setting—with all the region's 'last frontier' resonances—by blank, unthinking pod people.

John Norman self-abjectingly accepts, and Dix Steele violently protests, that a certain visceral form of frontier-inherited masculinity—defined by its rejection of spatial stability, of socially-normative routine, of feminising influence, of familial domesticity—is exhausted. In leaving the apartment and the boarding house, they and their fictional peers participate in the sprawling, decentralising post-war city and thus acknowledge that Los Angeles will now be less navigable by and legible to the individual who defines himself by his powers of spatial divination. In so doing they acknowledge that masculine identity too, as the solipsistic certainties of its frontier-derived hermeneutics grow less relevant in a changing world, will itself become harder to navigate.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas C. Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 10.

CONCLUSION: 'STEAMING REMNANTS OF THE FIRE'

THE FRONTIER, GONE AT LAST?

I don't know how this story ends. I'm sort of hoping that because it's set in Los Angeles, the usual process will reverse itself in an LA double flip. An LA change.

— Eve Babitz, 'Heroine'

Making his first appearance in 1949's *The Moving Target*, Ross Macdonald's Southern California private eye Lew Archer emerges into the world of John Norman, Dix Steele, and Philip Marlowe, but he outlives them, making his final appearance in 1976's *The Blue Hammer*. Archer is not Marlowe, but in assuming the mantle of fictional LA's premier detective he can be read as a case study in what happens when a figure who embodies a '40s urban frontiersmanship finds himself extruded into the years of Nixonian malaise: Archer is a 'sensitivity through which we view' how 'California society had changed' over the course of the '50s and '60s.¹ He is therefore strategically placed to offer suggestions as to whether the claims I have made thus far for an enduring sense of the frontier in fictional depictions of Los Angeles and its environs are confined to the timeframe I have previously identified, or sustainable beyond it.

Throughout *The Underground Man* (1971), the antepenultimate Archer novel, an enormous wildfire rages in the mountains around Los Angeles. Most of the novel's action is concentrated in nearby Santa Teresa (Macdonald's analogue for Santa Barbara), closer to the blaze's epicentre. Archer, however, can already detect it as he awakes in his apartment in West LA; the usual 'cool air, smelling of fresh ocean' becomes a 'hot wind' blowing in his face within the space of the first

¹ Terry Curtis Fox, 'City Knights', *Film Comment* 20, no. 5 (October 1984): 34.

chapter.² Even miles from the blaze, the conditions are identifiable as 'fire weather'—and the fire is always identifiable closer to LA than Archer expects.³ Driving from his apartment to Santa Teresa, Archer has barely begun the descent into the San Fernando Valley when he sees a firefighting plane.⁴ On a later trip, taking the same route, the fire comes into view above the freeway 'sooner than [...] expected'.⁵ To sense imminent fire in the atmosphere of a fictional Los Angeles is inevitably to recall the city's best-known imagined conflagration—'The Burning of Los Angeles', the apocalyptic painting that is the masterwork of Tod Hackett, Nathanael West's protagonist in *The Day of the Locust*. Macdonald's echo of West is instructive in considering Los Angeles fiction's capacity to manifest the urban frontier in the period beyond that upon which I have focused in the preceding chapters.

Locust is one of the defining texts of the critical school against which I initially framed my case that fictional representations of Los Angeles in the '30s and '40s suggest the disturbing consequences of the frontier's endurance rather than the disturbing consequences of its closure. As early as 1967 George Pisk contended that West's 'fire in dreamland' should be taken for a broader 'state of decay' in the 'American spiritual life' of the 1930s.⁶ Later, Steven Weisenburger characterised *Locust* as a text intimately engaged with its own spatial entrapment, one which 'begins and ends at the western boundary of American culture' and therefore becomes characterised by 'circular' acts of '[d]estructive regress' that grimly satirise the limits of the 'westward course of empire'.⁷ David Fine calls West's novel 'the single most powerful metaphor' for an American

² Ross Macdonald, *The Underground Man* (London: Penguin, 2012), 1, 8.

³ Macdonald, 10.

⁴ Macdonald, 18.

⁵ Macdonald, 133.

⁶ George M. Pisk, 'The Graveyard of Dreams: A Study of Nathanael West's Last Novel, *The Day of the Locust*', *The South Central Bulletin* 27, no. 4 (Winter 1967): 71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3188923>.

⁷ Steven Weisenburger, 'Williams, West, and the Art of Regression', *South Atlantic Review* 47, no. 4 (November 1982): 10, 7, 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3199403>.

Dream that collapsed on contact with Southern California's coastline.⁸ He sets it alongside Cain and Chandler in defining a literary LA that poses as 'the land of the new beginning' only to reveal its true self as 'the land of the disastrous finale, the place where the American road ends and turns back on itself at the edge of the continent'.⁹

Hackett's painting, for such critics, is the book's singular statement of eschatological prophecy, not merely symbolising the plot's descent into scenes of violent chaos but signifying an America which, in the absence of a frontier, will inevitably implode beneath the pressures of entropic modernity. Such readings rely on an obvious omission, one which Fine admits seemingly without realising the consequences of doing so: it's only a painting. There is violence, horror, and catastrophe in *The Day of the Locust*, but Los Angeles does not and will not burn down. 'The Burning of Los Angeles' might in fact be viewed, through the prism of the framework I have established over the preceding chapters, as the fever dream of an East Coast boy traumatised by a Far West that still has *too much* of the frontier about it, rather than too little. The city doesn't burn down in *The Underground Man* either, but unlike in West's novel the threat that it might is a real one.

Crucially, Macdonald's possibility of a disaster that combines Southern Californian regional specificity with quasi-apocalyptic impact does *not*, as it might superficially appear to, betoken the persistence of a frontier. It may reveal the natural environment's recalcitrant danger within urban modernity, but this is no mere negotiation between a self-defined 'civilized' world and the unsettled wilderness beyond, the reopening of a liminal space between the two; rather it is the demand by the latter to reclaim the former wholesale. Frontier myth demands that the wilderness must always be present but also always conquerable by human forces; Macdonald's fire reverses that threat. The fire does recede eventually, but largely of its own natural whim. First 'a mass of air' moves in

⁸ David M. Fine, 'James M. Cain and the Los Angeles Novel', *American Studies* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 26.

⁹ David M. Fine, 'Nathanael West, Raymond Chandler, and the Los Angeles Novel', *California History* 68, no. 4 (December 1989): 201, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25158537>.

from the sea and appears to hold the fire 'back from the coastal plain and the city'.¹⁰ As a radio announcer makes clear, whatever firefighting procedures might be undertaken, the region remains entirely at the whim of the Santa Ana winds; only if they stop blowing will the fire's progress be arrested.¹¹

In this respect Macdonald's fire echoes a scene in Alison Lurie's turn-of-the-'60s LA social satire *The Nowhere City* (1965). The academic Paul Cattleman's attempt to explain to film starlet Glory Green the inevitability of natural destruction in Southern California—'due to a fault in the rock structure [...] the Santa Monica mountain range was gradually disintegrating'¹²—is taken by the latter to mean something far more immediate, 'a great slow semi-comic landslide and explosion above Sunset Boulevard, scattering trees and cars and houses and fragments of earth'.¹² Likewise, Macdonald's fire prefigures the magical-realist natural catastrophes of Karen Tei Yamashita's postmodernist LA epic, *Tropic of Orange* (1997), which defy logic and understanding. Human means are inadequate to fight Macdonald's and Lurie's catastrophes; they are inadequate even to comprehend Yamashita's.

Natural disaster has, of course, always been a threat in Southern California. As Mike Davis notes, Los Angeles had in the geographic conditions of its location from the outset 'put itself in harm's way', subjecting the dream of an American Eden to inevitable challenges—the very tension in which resides the frontier condition. The catastrophes of Macdonald, Lurie, and Yamashita, however, speak to Davis' description of how, as the century drew to a close and natural disasters began to occur in 'virtually biblical conjugation', the relationship between LA's inhabitants and their environment took on a more urgently millenarian inflection.¹³ A 'popular apprehension that the former Land of Sunshine [was] "reinventing" itself [...] as a Book of the Apocalypse theme

¹⁰ Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 133–34.

¹¹ Macdonald, 68.

¹² Alison Lurie, *The Nowhere City* (London: Abacus, 1986), 238.

¹³ Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 9.

park' took hold, in which 'the Last Days' that had for so long been confined to such 'Los Angeles disaster fiction' as West's *Locust*, suddenly seemed if not immediate then inevitable.¹⁴

Gore Vidal's cab driver sometime in the early '60s thought as much. Asking news of a fire's progress, Vidal was corrected in his nomenclature: the blaze's proper name was 'the holocaust'.¹⁵ Similarly, Joan Didion's 1989 statement that 'there is nothing unusual about fires in Los Angeles' was not a blasé dismissal of environmental danger but an acceptance of the same as a condition of life, the apocalyptic all-the-time.¹⁶ As Didion wrote of earthquakes in the previous year, Angelenos' 'apparent equanimity' about the constant threat of natural catastrophe was in fact a 'protective detachment', a 'fatalism'.¹⁷ If the earthquake is 'the Big One' or the fire a 'true big hitter', no amount of individualist human hardiness will be capable of resisting it.¹⁸ Macdonald's fire never seizes Santa Teresa or Los Angeles, Lurie's regional disintegration theoretically remains in the geological future, but in both cases it is clear that the moment of catastrophe *could* be now and could not be thwarted if it were. Indeed, the implication of Yamashita's reality-bending text is that the disasters of which she writes *are* happening to *a* Los Angeles right now: we are merely fortunate enough not to be living in that permutation of the present. In each case, only sheer dumb luck in timing and circumstance, not frontierist heroism, prevents the natural adversary from overwhelming the human edifice.

When Eric Avila writes that in 1965 a record-breaking LA heatwave 'echoed the chants of "burn, baby, burn!"' emanating from the Watts Rebellion, he suggests how the increasingly volatile

¹⁴ Davis, 6–8.

¹⁵ Gore Vidal, 'The Ashes of Hollywood I: The Bottom 4 of the Top 10', *New York Review of Books*, 17 May 1973, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1973/05/17/the-ashes-of-hollywood-i-the-bottom-4-of-the-top-1/>. Vidal does not provide a date for this encounter but does state that it occurred en route to his final meeting with Dorothy Parker, and Parker's last period of residence in LA was in the early '60s, while her previous sojourns there predate the context of Vidal's piece.

¹⁶ Joan Didion, 'Fire Season', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 656.

¹⁷ Joan Didion, 'Los Angeles Days', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 614.

¹⁸ Didion, 615; Didion, 'Fire Season', 659.

natural environment of later twentieth century LA and increasingly turbulent human dynamics in the same period's changing city became metaphors for each other.¹⁹ Throughout Macdonald's novel, likewise, the natural danger looming just beyond the city appears of a piece with a social fire threatening an older LA, and in so doing further suggests the exhaustion of the frontier revival moment proposed in prior chapters. In his late '60s novels, Macdonald had already begun engaging with Southern California's contemporary climate of generational sociocultural change—be it 'the explosive racial situation' or 'a youth culture abandoned to pleasure'—but in *The Underground Man* the foment comes to a head.²⁰ The burning hillsides are suggestive of an era in which 'Los Angeles itself seemed on the verge of a nervous breakdown'.²¹ That breakdown is experienced in *The Underground Man* by white, middle-class, 'middle-ageing men' adrift in a changing world that they no longer know how to navigate, uncertain as to either the attainability or the viability of frontierist selfhood.²²

Archer is probably in his early fifties at the time of the events of *The Underground Man*.²³ Leo Broadhurst, who disappeared in 1955 but becomes the novel's absent centre as Archer investigates Broadhurst's son Stanley's ill-fated attempts to trace his father's whereabouts, is of a similar generation, having been 'a captain of infantry in the Pacific'.²⁴ These are men of John Norman and Dix Steele's generation. Generational kinship is also implied between Archer and two other major male characters. Brian Kilpatrick, with whom Archer enjoys an 'angry brotherhood', is forty-five; Lester Crandall, euphemistically described by his wife as 'no longer young', is fifty-

¹⁹ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 226.

²⁰ Michael Kreyling, *The Novels of Ross Macdonald* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 111.

²¹ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 226.

²² Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 149.

²³ In *Black Money*, set approximately five years before *The Underground Man* (Macdonald maintains a fairly consistent chronology from book to book), Archer describes another character as being 'fifty at most' and notes that this 'wasn't much older than I was'. *Black Money* (London: Collins, 1966), 30.

²⁴ Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 22.

nine.²⁵ Other men in the novel *are* still relatively young but already find themselves enduring rather than enjoying the trappings of respectably well-heeled marital domesticity, entrenched despite their relative youth (like John Norman at the end of *What Way My Journey Lies*) in its social and material significations—the job, the house, the car, the boat. They are coded as staring at the rapid onset of 'middle-ageing' despite ostensibly still being some years from its arrival. Roger Armistead is 'youngish' but his thinning hair and status as the considerably older Kilpatrick's social peer code him as older. Stanley Broadhurst is only twenty-seven but, with a marriage in crisis and a bitter suspicion that the much older Archer may be his wife's 'playmate' and about to become 'a substitute father' to his six-year-old son, already carries the cares of midlife.²⁶

In Macdonald's 'middle-ageing' orbit of turn-of-the-'70s LA, these men of markedly different generations are united by fraught relationships with both an escaping past and an onrushing present. Such relationships find their psychological 'intersection' within the very landscape of Southern California itself, as Lee Mitchell notes is common in Macdonald's work.²⁷ The past-present 'intersection' is located literally in the soil, via the plot of long-buried and lately-discovered bodies that gives the novel its title. There is thus a structural evocation throughout of the Turnerian sense that the frontier was a temporal liminality as well as a geographic one—i.e. the frontier only exists in the present and *as* the present, a constantly-moving point along a linear progression through both time and space, because what lies behind is now ossified, impossible to revive, and what lies ahead remains unknowable wilderness. Such a conception of the frontier present parallels Van Wyck Brooks' 1918 claim that the American cultural present had become void-like because it contained a past that was always already dead: the present in *The Underground Man* is embodied by a hole where bodies are buried, a literal void in the landscape containing a

²⁵ Macdonald, 149, 112, 292.

²⁶ Macdonald, 75, 23, 4.

²⁷ Lee Clark Mitchell, 'Diversions of Furniture and Signature Styles: Hammett, Chandler, Macdonald', *The Arizona Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (Autumn 2015): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2015.0016>.

dead past.²⁸ Although Brooks saw 'pioneer instinct' in the great figures of the American literary past—Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman—the 'past without living value' he saw as deadening the nation's cultural present was unmistakably that of the frontier's already-powerful mythos, a stultifying over-regard for 'the age of pioneering' that engendered resistance to 'finer ideals' and ambivalence towards 'civilization'.²⁹

Likewise in *The Underground Man*, confrontation with a dead, buried past is for the novel's characters a confrontation with the long-delayed exhaustion of the frontier's utility as a mythic structuring device for their world, rendering void-like the culture they inhabit. Stanley Broadhurst has long been 'hipped on the subject of his father's desertion' and preoccupied with an obsessive quest to discover his whereabouts, believing that Leo left with a mistress for Hawaii in 1955.³⁰ Such an act would be an immediately frontierist gesture, a response to socio-spatial entrapment (in California, in marriage) that takes advantage of the United States' post-Turner extension of its western frontier beyond continental bounds.³¹ Moreover, Leo Broadhurst's status as a World War II veteran aligns him with a moment that, John Norman and Dix Steele's experiences suggest, gave the frontierlike masculine individualist a new, modern stage upon which to assert himself—but perhaps his final one, a rallying call for the martial pioneer that may also have been his death rattle. That the search for the lost father is also a grasping for that lost moment is further implied in the

²⁸ Van Wyck Brooks, 'On Creating a Usable Past', *The Dial*, 11 April 1918, 339.

²⁹ Brooks, 337–39.

³⁰ Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 36, 225.

³¹ In September 1898, making the case for American seizure of the Philippines in a speech reproduced by the *Indianapolis Journal*, the imperialist Senator-historian Albert Beveridge explicitly compared the previous month's annexation of Hawaii to the earlier frontier conquest of California. 'Both', he noted, demanded that American guile and hardiness test itself against 'a savage and an alien population' and had similar qualities of distance from the seat of government. When he spoke of God endowing the American people with 'gifts beyond our deserts' he may not have intended a geographic pun, but one was certainly present. The claiming of Pacific territory, a mere five years after Turner's declaration of the frontier's end, was explicitly figured as an assertion that frontierism remained possible: it was merely the latest stage in 'a history of statesmen who flung the boundaries of the Republic out into unexplored lands and savage wilderness'. 'Stirred by His Words: Mr Beveridge's Magnificent Presentation of War Issues', *Indianapolis Journal*, 17 September 1898, 4.

one image of Leo that Stanley possesses: 'a picture of him in uniform'.³² Such an implication echoes elsewhere in the text: the firefighting plane that Archer sees is in fact a converted World War II bomber. A symbol of a moment when American men were asked once more to define themselves by frontierist values is now an indicator of an unfrontiersmanlike *inability* to master nature's forces.

Leo Broadhurst's signification of a proud, martial masculinity stands in stark contrast with his son, who rages impotently at his wife and at Archer, and who works for an insurance firm. The nothing-making, deskbound entity that exemplified the overcivilized world against which Walter Huff sought to bring a frontierist assault resurfaces once more as the antithesis of the rugged wartime manhood that Stanley seeks to reclaim in seeking out his father—he has indeed threatened to quit his clerklike job in order to devote himself to the quest. Yet the man who solves the mystery of the Broadhursts, Archer, is emphatically *not* one who embodies an association between the war years and a revival of frontierist masculinity. Archer may be of Broadhurst Sr's generation, and served in World War II, but elsewhere in Macdonald's oeuvre it is revealed that, unlike Dix Steele and John Norman, he remembers his army days not as a frontierlike liberation of masculine individualism but something much more like the corporate bureaucracy against which Huff rails: 'channels, red tape, protocol, buck-passing, hurry up and wait'.³³ That such a man should, in solving the Broadhurst mysteries, foreclose upon what was never merely a son's search for a father but also a vicarious attempt to recover a romanticised memory of an older, war-forged generation's rugged masculinity, powerfully demystifies any notion that the legacies of World War II portended a viable revival of frontier values. That demystification is emphasised by the ultimate revelation that Leo Broadhurst never in fact made his neo-frontierist gesture of escape to Hawaii. He had been lying dead and buried in the California soil of his home all along, a blunt continental circumscription suggesting hard limits to any frontiersmanlike quality he may have embodied.

³² Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 22.

³³ Ross Macdonald, *The Doomsters* (London: Cassell and Company, 1958), 20.

When Leo Broadhurst's body is discovered, the autopsy reveals the murder weapon. To Archer, it initially appears to be 'an Indian arrowhead'—a relic of the frontier whose ability to bring chaos has been sustained into the present. It is, however, a trick of the eye. Archer perhaps wants to see an artefact of the pioneer-era asserting its enduring potency in the modern world, but the 'discolored triangle' proves to be only the 'tip of a butcher knife'.³⁴ Shortly after this discovery, Archer is ushered out of the mortuary because he is 'not authorized personnel'.³⁵ The contrast with Philip Marlowe two or three decades earlier is striking. As noted in chapter 2, Marlowe's investigative efforts actively benefited from his frontiersmanlike identity as a semi-outsider to official crimefighting apparatus, his ability to embody justice while remaining only quasi-judicial in his official role and thereby existing as a conductive liminality between law and lawlessness, truth and lies, visible present and hidden past. Archer, however, finds that such an ambiguity in his identity is now a hindrance to his investigation. The world is changing: the structures of officialdom have closed more firmly upon the detective's city, restricting his ability to treat it as a frontier and operate within it as a frontiersman.

If Macdonald's 'middle-ageing' men grapple continually with their dislocation from older, frontier-oriented ways of constructing masculine selfhood and navigating the world, they feel equally alienated from the 'just to get by' attitude of youth that professes to believe in neither the force that motivated frontier conquest (capital) nor the one by which it occurred (violence).³⁶ This Californian youth refuses, as Didion wrote in 1967, to 'learn the games that had held the society together'.³⁷ Everyone from the young Broadhursts to Lester Crandall, a full three decades apart in age, is suspicious of the world of the 'teenage drop-out', its casual references to 'acid in a Coke'

³⁴ Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 283.

³⁵ Macdonald, 284.

³⁶ Macdonald, 92, 82.

³⁷ Joan Didion, 'Slouching Towards Bethlehem', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 67.

and willingness to term any figure of authority a 'grungy pig'.³⁸ Traditional values are collapsing and even an only slightly older generation struggles to read its successors: nobody is entirely certain which of the middle-ageing men may or may not be involved with Lester Crandall's teenage daughter—who discomfits Jean Broadhurst less because of her assumed affair with Stanley than because it is impossible to tell if she is 'absolutely innocent' or 'absolutely cold and amoral'.³⁹ Nobody is even entirely sure if one of the married men may be involved with Brian Kilpatrick's hippie boathand son Jerry.

When Archer inquires of Brian if Jerry, who has absconded with Stanley Broadhurst's young son and Sue Crandall, is on drugs, Brian is unsure but affirms that Jerry 'acted as if he had blown his mind'. Archer notes the vain attempt to bridge a generation gap with slang: '[t]he phrase was strange on his lips, and somehow touching, like a statement of fellow-feeling with his lost son'.⁴⁰ As Archer notes, when Kilpatrick complains that '[w]e're losing a whole generation', it makes him 'sound like an old man'.⁴¹ Yet Archer himself, confronted with a beach 'littered with bodies' of guitar-playing youths lying atop each other, betrays an uncomfortable conservatism of his own. He sees 'a warning vision of the future, when every square foot of the world would be populated'. Suggesting now in human terms Davis' millenarian mode of late-twentieth century Californian fiction that the fire elsewhere embodies, Archer feels 'as if everybody but me was paired off like the animals in the ark'.⁴² This is the ultimate vision of post-frontier finitude: an apocalyptic exhaustion of space upon the California coastline.

It befits this changing world that the only survivor of the original Broadhurst family unit, and the only character in the novel who succeeds to any degree in continuing to suggest the legacies

³⁸ Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 115, 112, 125, 87.

³⁹ Macdonald, 24.

⁴⁰ Macdonald, 95.

⁴¹ Macdonald, 91.

⁴² Macdonald, 78–79.

of the pioneer generations is not a frontiersman but a frontierswoman—Elizabeth Broadhurst, Stanley's widow. She is figured as both a fearless conqueror of nature in herself and a link with the era of its initial conquest by Americans. In a clear inversion of typical gendered metaphors of frontiersmanship in which the pioneer is male and subdued nature figured as female, Elizabeth drives a truck into the heart of the fire 'as if it was a male animal resisting control'. Archer worries that, with '[t]he smell of burning growing stronger' he and Mrs Broadhurst were 'going against nature', but elects not to reveal his fears because '[s]he wasn't the sort of woman you confessed human weakness to'.⁴³ The name of the neighbourhood in which she lives bears a tension redolent of human imposition upon nature—'Canyon Estates'—and she dominates it so completely that it becomes known as 'Mrs Broadhurst's canyon'.⁴⁴ As the fire approaches, Elizabeth is urged to flee a home in which everything 'is some kind of relic' of the frontier era but refuses, stating that '[i]f the house goes, I might as well go with it', and that she would thus 'almost welcome the flames'.⁴⁵ Remarkably, though, miraculously even, the house survives, 'scorched but intact' while others around it have perished, suggesting Elizabeth's embodiment of a frontierswomanlike ability to withstand the assaults of nature.⁴⁶

Hers is a family that has been emplaced in the region since the pioneer days. She was born in the 'white stucco ranch-house', which is 'full of Victorian furniture' and 'dark Victorian portraits on the walls'—'ancestral tintypes' of men with 'mutton-chop whiskers'. Alongside are trinkets commemorating human conquest of nature—'cabinets full of stuffed native birds' and the inherited antique pistols that killed them.⁴⁷ Archer discovers writings by Elizabeth about her father and grandfather, who came to the region and acquired the land on which the house stands in the

⁴³ Macdonald, 35.

⁴⁴ Macdonald, 30–31.

⁴⁵ Macdonald, 166, 53.

⁴⁶ Macdonald, 160.

⁴⁷ Macdonald, 32, 53, 160, 53, 165.

1860s. Her notes are marked by the same obsessive reverence with which Stanley pursues his own absent father, but Elizabeth's writings seek to undermine the frontiersman myth. Her father, she is desperate to affirm, was more a 'scholar than a rancher'; he was the third of his line to attend Harvard; he was the subject of 'false rumors' that he was a 'wanton killer of songbirds' when in fact, she claims, he only killed them 'for scientific reasons' and was in fact a deeply sensitive man who loved to commune with nature.⁴⁸

In Elizabeth Broadhurst, we find a figure who doubly subverts expectations of how ideological legacies of the frontier might be inherited. First, a woman appears to be the text's lone holdout of frontierist values in a changing world that frightens and defeats men of both her husband's and her son's generations. Secondly, however, in her revisionist history of her family's arrival in the West she simultaneously challenges the myth of those frontierist values themselves. Paradoxically, although her pioneer resonances place her even further out of step with the modern world than the novel's more urban and urbane characters, the ways in which she complexifies the figure of the modern-day frontierist holdout are indicative of the inadequacy of the conventional frontiersman type to negotiate and survive that modern world's conditions. The only character in the novel who is successfully able to use a form of frontier identity to survive in the changing world is the one who in doing so issues a radical challenge to the premises of such an identity.

There are similar stakes at play in Lurie's *The Nowhere City*. The novel is full of characters who offer up precisely the popular clichés about LA that I hope this thesis has challenged—most egregiously the notion that it lacks a either a sense of place, as per the novel's title, or 'the dimension of time'.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it discloses another revelation of the frontiersman character's inadequacy in navigating this later LA. Paul Cattleman and his wife Katherine are East Coast transplants but, as a near synonym for 'cowboy', Cattleman's surname immediately suggests a

⁴⁸ Macdonald, *The Doomsters*, 163.

⁴⁹ Lurie, *The Nowhere City*, 270.

mythic birthright with which to live out fantasies of conquering the Far West. Indeed, he thinks explicitly of LA as 'the last American frontier' and arrives 'in the spirit of the explorer'; his 'dream about Los Angeles' is a dream of 'limitless freedom and opportunity [...] straight out of America [sic] history: "Go West, Young Man"'.⁵⁰

For Paul, limitless freedom is supposed to manifest itself in opportunities for financial, intellectual, social, and sexual conquest of his new surroundings, but all such opportunities prove short-lived or failures. Meanwhile, Katherine follows an exactly opposite trajectory. She begins the novel hating LA, its cars and buildings, sunshine and customs, seldom leaving the house, complaining of chronic sinus conditions, trapped in and by her loveless marriage. At the start of the novel, in effect, the Cattleman represents either side of Davis' 'sunshine' and '*noir*' dichotomy; Paul sees a land of abundance there for the taking, Katherine a dystopian 'hell' and 'a great big advertisement for *nothing*'. After Katherine begins an affair with swinging psychiatrist Iz Eisnam and a friendship with Eisnam's film star wife, however, she is liberated in her relationship both with herself and with the city. Katherine, not Paul, becomes the figure who conquers LA, and is herself transformed in the process—in mannerisms, dress, voice, physical appearance—to the point that Paul can no longer recognise her. Nor can he even conceive of the possibility that she has engaged in the kind of infidelity that had been commonplace for him. Having secured another teaching appointment on the East Coast, he begs her to return with him, but she refuses. The tables are turned. The man who sought to assail LA as a frontiersman, and saw his wife as at best a mere accessory and worse an active hindrance to that process, has been rejected, defeated by the city, while she has claimed it as her own, in so doing rejecting patriarchal repression and asserting herself as a liberated individualist.

It is not merely his assumptions about the gendered stakes of his fantasy frontiersmanship that Paul finds humiliatingly overturned, but also its racial dimensions. In conversation with

⁵⁰ Lurie, 5, 272, 232.

Chinese-American Walter Wong, Paul offers a cringing apology for a tasteless joke about Japanese internment. In response, Wong reminds him that 'we minority groups have got to stick together'. Paul is having an affair with Wong's wife, and Wong (wholly sanguine about this situation) reasons that 'Ceci wouldn't be interested' in him were he not part of 'some underprivileged order'. Paul is confused, then insulted, especially when Walter admits that initially he 'thought maybe you were a Jew'.⁵¹ Eventually Wong solves the mystery: 'I know what group you represent. You're a square'.⁵² From his assumed position of hegemonic whiteness, Paul is laughingly reduced by Walter to just one of many minorities in an act that radically decentres him from his own narrative. Not only that, but the 'minority' he is deemed to represent is one which humiliatingly undercuts his own image of himself as a bold frontiersman. Walter regards the 'Protestant ethic', which is so closely related to the frontier ideal and which he has himself rejected, indicative of a dull conformism—Paul's 'squareness'.⁵³ For Wong, the whiteness that has lost the privileged position in which the frontier myth enshrined it is precisely the whiteness that continues to believe in the frontier myth.

The crux of Paul's failure to master LA is in his failure to accept that individuals who sit further from the frontierist ideal can, in the 1960s, claim its freedoms too. 'Freedom and opportunity' still exist here, but Paul's inability to accept that they are no longer, per the frontier myth that drew him to LA, the sole desert of the individualist white male, renders him unable to seize them. Turner enshrined a vision of the frontierist mindset's axis of temporality and space as one in which 'the west looks to the future', leaving the past in the East.⁵⁴ As Didion has it, California was 'the reward for having left the past'.⁵⁵ Ironically, precisely that worldview has in

⁵¹ Lurie, 102.

⁵² Lurie, 103.

⁵³ Lurie, 101.

⁵⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner to Mae Sherwood, 5 September 1887. Cited in Michael C. Steiner, 'The Significance of Turner's Sectional Thesis', *The Western Historical Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (October 1979): 442, <https://doi.org/10.2307/968085>.

⁵⁵ Joan Didion, 'Where I Was From', in *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live: Collected Nonfiction* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 1075.

Lurie's text become outmoded, an ossified historical dogma: it is Paul's adherence to such a frontierist history that causes Ceci to remark that he is simply 'too hung up on the past'.⁵⁶

What Lurie and Macdonald reflect is the fact that as the post-war era progresses, it becomes impossible to continue to use the frontier as a device for structuring the spaces of LA. It is impossible because, as Wong's humiliation of Paul suggests, the values that defined and were represented in Turnerian ideology—values that exclusively valorised white masculinity—no longer reflect the changing city. White men in the texts I have hitherto explored, like Dix Steele, John Norman, Walter Huff, and Philip Marlowe, work to restore frontier dynamics to the city because their identities and claims to social primacy are vested in the legacy of those dynamics and must be asserted against forces antithetical to frontier myth—the urban, the modern, the female or feminising, the non-white. Meanwhile non-white characters, like Himes' Bob Jones, Yamamoto's oilfield children, Fante's Filipinos, or Fante's racially ambiguous Italian-American characters, seek to perform frontiersmanship in exchange for greater proximity to ideals of white maleness.

Adult women with prominent roles in LA fictions of the '30s and '40s largely exist either to grant physical form to the elusive whiteness that non-white male characters wish to pursue through their social frontiersmanship (Fante's Helen, Himes' Madge), or figures against which white male characters define and assert their frontier masculinity. This may be most obvious in the case of the feminising domesticity represented by Hughes' and Fenton's women, but even the *femmes fatales* of Chandler and Cain, while possessed of agency, individualism and a sense of danger that aligns them with the values of the frontier, always serve to provide the presence that is hazardous to a central male protagonist who is able to claim a frontiersmanlike identity more fully on the basis of his maleness. That is, even if women in these texts problematise the psychodrama

⁵⁶ Lurie, *The Nowhere City*, 107.

of frontier masculinity, they remain ineluctably co-opted into it, their very challenges to it providing the conditions for its expression.

By contrast, whilst white men are still central to both Lurie and Macdonald, they are so as absences or redundancies, the dying past hanging on into a void-like present. Just as the Patricia Nelson Limerick and Richard White would come to challenge the narrative primacy of whiteness, maleness, and Turnerism in new tellings of western American history, so did a changing world, and a changing LA, render itself untenable as the vehicle for a mythic structure that can only accommodate non-male, non-white voices in functions that serve further to centre whiteness and maleness. As early as the war years, human equivalents of the kind of natural conflagrations that stalk the pages of LA fiction had begun to reverberate around the city as an increasingly diverse population began to assert its right to the city. If the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 were started by white servicemen, they were in part a response to the supposed provocations of Mexican-American youths who, in the aftermath of the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, refused to 'accept the racialized norms of segregated America' and 'the privilege of whiteness'.⁵⁷ Both Watts in 1965 and the Los Angeles Uprising of 1992 were refusals to accept acts of police brutality against African-Americans.⁵⁸ Mexican-Americans fought for a decade to forestall their eviction from Chavez Ravine.⁵⁹ It was to Los Angeles that Cesar Chavez moved in 1959 in order to take up his national directorship of the Community Service Organization, anticipating and contributing to LA's future centrality to the Latinx civil rights and labour movement.⁶⁰ In 1973 the Feminist Studio Workshop

⁵⁷ Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime LA* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 7. Pagán's book is the definitive social history of the trial, the riot, and the circumstances of racial resistance that surrounded both.

⁵⁸ For a comprehensively contextualised account, see Ronald N. Jacobs, *Race, Media and the Crisis of Civil Society: From the Watts Riots to Rodney King* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁵⁹ John Laslett has thoroughly re-investigated the circumstances and consequences of the infamous mass eviction of Mexican-Americans from their homes to clear space for the Los Angeles Dodgers' new stadium in *Shameful Victory: The Los Angeles Dodgers, the Red Scare, and the Hidden History of Chavez Ravine* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2015).

⁶⁰ Miriam Pawel, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014), 63.

(later the Woman's Building) opened, making Los Angeles a radical hub for feminist art and politics.⁶¹

Such acts of minority self-assertion and resistance to marginalisation reflected broader, equally radical demographic shifts. Although, as the texts I have elucidated indicate, Los Angeles has long been a multi-ethnic city, Roger Waldinger notes that only since the 1960s 'has the immigrant presence transformed and ultimately redefined Los Angeles'.⁶² Robert Fogelson writes that Los Angeles was home to an exceptionally 'diverse [...] mixture of racial groups' by the 1920s, but the city's ethnic diversity was in the number rather than the size of those groups.⁶³ There is something instructive in the fact that in 1940 LA's population of English and Welsh émigrés (20,454) was almost the equal of its ethnically Japanese population (23,321), and almost twice the size of the total population of all other groups temporarily categorised as 'Oriental' (10,752, including Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans, and 'Hindus').⁶⁴ LA's African-American population more than doubled during the war years, from 63,774 to 133,082, then increased by a further 200,000 by 1960.⁶⁵ As late as that year, Davis notes, LA was still 'the most [demographically] WASPish of big [American] cities', but by 1970 had a countywide non-Anglo majority and by 1989 was more ethnically diverse than New York.⁶⁶

None of this, of course, should be taken to suggest that whiteness, or maleness, entirely lost their positions of social privilege in later twentieth-century Los Angeles. Many of the

⁶¹ For a contemporary account of the Woman's Building's activities, see Jan Alexander-Leitz, 'The Woman's Building: Where Woman's Culture Keeps Growing from Anger to Activism', *Newworld: The Multi-Cultural Magazine of the Arts*, November 1979. A historical perspective is provided in Laura Meyer, 'The Los Angeles Woman's Building and the Feminist Art Community, 1973–1991', in *Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in LA*, ed. David E. James (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2003), 39–62.

⁶² Roger Waldinger, 'Not the Promised City: Los Angeles and Its Immigrants', *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 2 (May 1999): 253, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3641987>.

⁶³ Fogelson, *The Fragmented Metropolis*, 83.

⁶⁴ Henson and Beckett, *Los Angeles: Its People and Its Homes*, 41, 39.

⁶⁵ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 30.

⁶⁶ Davis, *City of Quartz*, 104; Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 282.

aforementioned political conflagrations (Watts, Chavez Ravine, the Zoot Suit Riots) are in themselves stories of defeat and oppression of marginalised groups whose spatial self-assertions were challenged by white interests, and in the first two post-war decades demographic change and its spatial impacts met especially fierce resistance. Eric Avila reads the suburbanisation in which John Norman, later Marlowe, the fictionalised Fante of *Full of Life*, and the middle-ageing men of *The Underground Man* participate as a last-gasp attempt by threatened white citizens to recover an earlier era's 'racialized fantasies' of the LA as a 'southwestern outpost of white supremacy'.⁶⁷ White Angelenos sought to maintain their centrality in the city's social makeup by relocating to (and policing the racial exclusivity of) its spatial edges. Ultimately, though, attempts to forestall the demographic and cultural transformation of LA only 'flickered momentarily', unable to withstand a pace of diversification that only increased from the '60s onwards.⁶⁸ LA today of course remains a city where privileges of race and gender, spatial mobility, and socioeconomic opportunity are invidiously connected, but that it has become 'a cultural kaleidoscope of global proportions' is undeniable.⁶⁹

This cultural transformation has especially profound implications for the frontierist ethic's equation of spatial agency with racial identity because, in Julian Murphet's words, the polydiversity of late twentieth-century LA 'emerges as patterns of interference on the spatial itself'.⁷⁰ The various political acts and demographic shifts just described were all ultimately claims upon the space of Los Angeles, and thus claims of a type that the literature of an earlier era suggested demanded a frontiersman's guise. A space where 'what is dominant is precisely the becoming minor of all populations' is incompatible with a frontierist logic that so closely associates the capacity to

⁶⁷ Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight*, 20.

⁶⁸ Avila, 21.

⁶⁹ Avila, 20.

⁷⁰ Murphet, *Race and Literature in Los Angeles*, 1.

dominate space with the inviolable social dominance of single racial identity, that of whiteness.⁷¹ That incompatibility is borne out in Davis' observation that the increasing numbers of wealthy white Angelenos who 'escape[d] to the idyllic canyons above Malibu and Hollywood' in the '70s, '80s, and '90s purported to be motivated by 'love of the great outdoors or frontier rusticity' but in fact sought insulation against and privacy from 'the dense fabric of common citizenship and urban life'.⁷² That is, a frontierist ethic became, ironically, something invoked as a means to cede rather than to make white claims upon the spaces of a threateningly diverse LA, suggesting its own redundancy as a way of figuring the city.

LA became more determinedly pluralistic through the concerted resistance of marginalised groups to their own marginality, through a persistent refusal to submit to logics that socially centre whiteness and/or maleness. If, to borrow Marshall Berman's phrasing for acts of urban rebellion, those 'gigantic engines' of power were not stopped by 'passionate shouts from the street', they at least had their premises epistemically undermined.⁷³ The non-white, non-male characters of the texts I have analysed often find themselves co-opted, even to their own disadvantage, into perpetuating the dynamics of frontierism, dynamics that facilitate and are facilitated by the vision of a particular form of white masculinity as a social ideal, because they are not politically empowered to consider a future outside those dynamics, a world that does not run on frontierist myth. They can hope only for some marginal participation in the myths of the world they find. As the sociopolitical picture changes post-war, however, with the increasing 'importance of ethnicity as a mobilizing force' in politics, and comparable appeals to sex or gender as bases for 'mobilizing

⁷¹ Murphet, 1.

⁷² Davis, *Ecology of Fear*, 140–41.

⁷³ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1988), 328–29.

group interest', so must change the mythic structures underpinning the literature, if it is adequately to represent its place.⁷⁴

Los Angeles' literature of the later twentieth century reflects this in the diversification of authorial backgrounds and the range of identities present in the narrative perspectives it centres. The voices of female authors came to be heard more loudly and frequently from the '60s onwards, in the works of Eve Babitz, and Kate Braverman among others, as well as in Lurie's *Nowhere City* or, especially pertinently, in Joan Didion's deconstructions of California's frontier-mythic identity. In 1963 John Rechy made the first major statement of queer LA fiction in *City of Night*, and simultaneously participated in the early flowering of the vast and diverse Chicana literary movement—which has been embodied perhaps most prominently in the works of Helena María Viramontes and former Chavez Ravine activist Manazar Gamboa.⁷⁵ In the aftermath of the 1965 rebellion, the Watts Writers' Workshop provided a platform and an institutional culture in which to foster new African-American voices; further literary visions of Los Angeles that centred black consciousness would follow from Walter Mosley and Paul Beatty.⁷⁶ The Japanese-American author Naomi Hirahara has written that her LA detective, elderly Japanese gardener Mas Arai, is a direct rejoinder to the cruel stereotypes Chandler deployed in such figures, thereby subverting (as does Mosley's Easy Rawlins) the image of the hardboiled investigator as the frontiersman's inheritor.⁷⁷ Many such authors, moreover, including some of those above-named, have occupied the intersections of multiply diverse social perspectives. Consider Octavia Butler's Southern

⁷⁴ John F. Stack, 'The Ethnic Citizen Confronts the Future: Los Angeles and Miami at Century's Turn', *Pacific Historical Review* 68, no. 2 (May 1999): 314, 309, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3641990>.

⁷⁵ The sheer depth and breadth of Latinx literature produced in and about Los Angeles since the 1960s is well documented in López-Calvo, *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction*. Dean Franco offers a persuasive reading of the role of space in Viramontes' fiction in *The Border and the Line*, 33–70.

⁷⁶ Franco also offers a compelling and meticulously-researched account of the history of the Writers' Workshop's chequered history, again in *The Border and the Line*, 75–99.

⁷⁷ Naomi Hirahara, 'What Raymond Chandler Didn't Understand About LA', Zócalo Public Square, 6 August 2014, <https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2014/08/06/what-raymond-chandler-didnt-understand-about-la/ideas/nexus/>.

Californian visions—as uncompromising in their blackness, queerness, and feminism as they are in their belief in the region's imaginative possibilities.

Where the valorisation of the unreconstructed white male spatial crusader persists in more recent LA fiction, in the novels and indeed the public persona of James Ellroy, it does so as an explicitly reactionary conservatism, and indeed glories in its performativity as such. Because Ellroy's texts are often, as their typical historical settings immediately imply, nostalgic efforts to recover and even to hypertrophy the very kind of white masculinity that occupied a dominant position in the earlier LA fiction I have explored, they are likewise admissions that such a position, in city and fiction alike, has been lost. It is no longer possible to conceive of any single socio-narrative perspective that could, as Marlowe can for Jameson, navigate and negotiate all of LA's infinitely complex human landscapes. That knowledge is embodied in Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange*, a text that is radically *uncentred*, taking on multiple perspectives of ethnicity, gender, and generation, revelling in the sheer instability of LA's incalculable diversity, but even Ellroy values the use of multiple narrators.

As Gamboa's example illustrates most literally, LA's literary diversification has reflected and indeed participated in the activism of the city's marginalised groups in the later twentieth century because, as Ignacio López-Calvo notes, drawing on Henri Lefebvre, 'symbolic image making carries with it an impetus of taking possession of social space in both its territorial and political manifestations'.⁷⁸ In its diversity, then, later twentieth-century LA's literature represents a shift away from the enshrinement of white maleness that was intrinsic to an older literary culture beholden to frontier myth, but *within* that mythic context any reclamation of space from dominant culture of whiteness and maleness likewise represents a rebellious inversion of frontier logic's

⁷⁸ López-Calvo, *Latino Los Angeles in Film and Fiction*, 2.

'savage'/'civilized' certainties. This later literature simultaneously rejects the premises of frontierism and uses them as the instrument of their own demise.⁷⁹

In the final scene of *The Underground Man*, Lew Archer is in a car with Jean Broadhurst and her son Ronny, whose father and grandfather have both been murdered in the process of frontiersmanlike attempts to assert individualist masculinity. 'I hoped it was over', Archer recalls. 'I hoped that Ronny's life wouldn't turn back towards his father's death as his father's life had turned, in a narrowing circle. I wished the boy a benign failure of memory'.⁸⁰ For Norman Klein, who has written of LA's wilful, institutional 'history of forgetting' its past acts of violence towards the marginalised and even to itself, there is no such thing as a 'benign failure of memory', and certainly one would not wish to erase the irruptive legacies of the frontier myth, the dreams it privileges and the ones it derogates.⁸¹ Indeed, this thesis has sought precisely to chart how those legacies continued to suffuse the culture of LA long after the geographic frontier was gone.

Those myths, however, placed in 'narrowing circles' of human possibility not just non-white characters like Julio Sal and Bob Jones (in their futile attempts to possess the frontier ideal) but also white characters like Walter Huff, John Norman, even Philip Marlowe (through the suffering they endure as a consequence of their inability to perform their whiteness and masculinity outside the frontier ideal). Those lives were circumscribed not by the closing of the frontier, but by a frontier that closed upon them. As a cleansing rain falls upon the 'steaming remnants of the fire', Archer's hope for a 'benign failure of memory' is a hope that Southern California might

⁷⁹ In the same period that the fiction of Los Angeles became, in reflection of the city itself, less accommodating of frontier myth as a way of navigating the world and structuring experience, American culture more broadly began to revise its relationship with frontier myth and its representations. See the rise of the 'revisionist Western', which interrogated, subverted, and deconstructed the heroic legends of the Old West—in films from John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) to Clint Eastwood's *High Plains Drifter* (1973), or the literary works of Cormac McCarthy. Key critical treatments include Sara L. Spurgeon, *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier* (College Station, TX: Texas A and M University Press, 2005); James J. Donahue, *Failed Frontiersmen: White Men and Myth in the Post-Sixties American Historical Romance* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

⁸⁰ Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 305.

⁸¹ Klein, *The History of Forgetting*, 2–4, 12–14.

somehow move beyond such restrictive and destructive myths.⁸² Archer, Ronny, and Jean drive south, towards the LA of a later twentieth century that would indeed demand and discharge new possibilities for structuring the world.

⁸² Macdonald, *The Underground Man*, 305.

NOTE ON EPIGRAPH SOURCES

- Thesis epigraphs: John Updike, 'The Clarity of Things', in *Always Looking: Essays on Art*, ed. Christopher Carduff (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 25.
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- Introduction epigraph: Eve Babitz, 'Slow Days', in *Slow Days, Fast Company: The World, The Flesh, and LA* (New York, NY: New York Review Books, 2016), 7.
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