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Introduction: landmarks

A good deal about California does not, on its own preferred terms, add up.

Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (2003)

Defining the geographic extent of Los Angeles is the first challenge for anyone who would study its literature. Concentration defines New York, where even Brooklynites refer to Manhattan as “the city.” Los Angeles is defined by sprawl. Much of iconic Los Angeles, from the beaches of *Baywatch* to the streets of *Beverly Hills, 90210*, lies beyond the city limits. The larger Los Angeles County still fails to encompass Disneyland, Fontana (Mike Davis’s “Junkyard of Dreams”), and Huntington Beach, whose pier is “one of the constituent monuments of the surfing life.”¹ As a literary subject, however, Los Angeles is less a city, county, or “metropolitan statistical area” than a state of being (of grace, fear, emergency, or exception, depending on whom one reads) anchored in the area south of the Tehachapi Mountains, north of San Diego, west of the desert, and squarely in the collective imagination of utopia, dystopia, and, more recently, the urban future. A tour of some of mythic Los Angeles’ landmark features will introduce our subject.

More than any other American city, Los Angeles is a city made of words. It “did not so much grow as sell itself into existence,” William Alexander McClung observes. This marketing effort was not limited to the Chamber of Commerce and developers. The visual and verbal artistry of painters, photographers, and writers like the coterie around Charles Fletcher Lummis at the magazine *Land of Sunshine*, and even the logos on crates of produce shipped back east, helped to transform climate into a “palpable ... commodity that [could] be labeled, priced, and marketed.”² The story of one possible Los Angeles begins with the boosters – the School of Sunshine we might call them – who celebrated Los Angeles as paradise found, and spun Arcadian myths from the world of the Californios, or early Spanish settlers. This myth quickly enough spawned its counter-myth. The School of Noir depicted the rot in Eden, from political corruption and financial chicanery to the ersatz culture and kitsch spewing from Hollywood. Mythic Los Angeles thus condensed into a generation the transit from “fresh, green breast of the new world” to land of “foul dust float[ing] in the wake of ... dreams” that F. Scott Fitzgerald charted for the United States over three centuries in *The Great Gatsby* (1925).³

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It was also possible to imagine Los Angeles as an extension of the film industry soon after the studios were established early in the second decade of the twentieth century. The city's actual streets featured back-lot hodgepodes of "half-timbered English peasant cottages, French provincial and 'mission-bell' type adobes, Arabian minarets, [and] Georgian mansions on 50 by 120 foot lots with 'Mexican Ranchos' adjoining them."⁴ Local gentry reenacted the Spanish past as Arcadian fantasy in Days of the Dons celebrations, *Ramona* pageants (which rewrote Helen Hunt Jackson's 1884 Indian-rights novel into a love story), and annual performances of John Steven McGroarty's *Mission Play* (1911), a three-hour panorama of California history from the founding of the missions through their 1834 disestablishment to the end of Mexican rule. Protestantism itself became theatrical, with twelve-part Christmas pageants performed by a cast of professionals and ordinary citizens in the Hollywood Hills, and later in the Hollywood Bowl, which also hosted Easter sunrise services. Evangelism's leading lady, Canadian-born Aimee Semple McPherson, started a radio station along with her Foursquare Gospel Church; she became tabloid fodder with rumors of a faked kidnapping and a seaside love nest.

The most idiosyncratic expression of this Los Angeles was concocted by Missouri transplant Hubert Eaton, who made his fortune selling immortality at Forest Lawn Memorial Park (or cemetery). Banishing all reminders of death, including deciduous trees, and stocking the landscape with "immortal" works of art (in reproduction) and religious architecture (in scaled-down, scrubbed-up models) that provided the city a cultural inheritance, Eaton launched Forest Lawn as a destination not only for departed "loved ones," but also for schoolchildren, artists, and over 65,000 people who had married on the grounds by the mid-1990s. Evelyn Waugh made Forest Lawn a target in his 1948 LA satire, *The Loved One*, which finds no difference between Eaton's handiwork and Hollywood's. Both industries, the novel suggests, are dedicated to the production of illusion, the negation of culture and tradition, and the repression of the human fact of tragedy.

Hoping to discover what Los Angeles had become by the 1960s, another Briton, architectural historian Reyner Banham, took his cue from *The Beach Boys* and turned to the surfers. With none of the irony that marks Jean Baudrillard's later account of "the *only remaining primitive society*" in *America* (1988), Banham described an Angeleno innocence

[d]eeply imbued with standard myths of the Natural Man and the Noble Savage ... [that] flourishes as an assumed right in the Southern California sun, an ingenious and technically proficient cult of private and harmless gratifications that is symbolized by the surfer's secret smile of intense concentration and

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the immensely sophisticated and highly decorated plastic surf-board he needs to conduct his private communion with the sea.⁵

Its open roads cruised in customized T-birds and deuce coupes, its standardized apartment blocks covered with facades that make “statement[s] about the culture of individualism,” Los Angeles, west of the West, figures for Banham as the last stand of the American Romance. The Watts Towers – “tapering tracteries of coloured pottery shards bedded in cement on frames of scrap steel and baling wire” erected over thirty-three years by Sabato (“Simon”) Rodia, a self-taught, Italian-immigrant construction worker – are Angeleno culture’s “perfected” emblem. The Watts Rebellion of 1965 does not figure in Banham’s account beyond an epigraph, “Burn, Baby, burn!” under the heading, “Views of Los Angeles.”⁶

Nor does Joan Didion, the quintessential LA essayist, discuss Watts, except to note that “the city burning is Los Angeles’s deepest image of itself ... and at the time of the 1965 Watts riots what struck the imagination most indelibly were the fires.” At least as striking as the two authors’ shared oversight is the fact that even as Banham was crafting his paeon to sunny Southern Cal, Didion was creating a much darker profile of a city to which “the narrative on which many of us grew up no longer applies.” Infidelities turn homicidal in Didion’s Los Angeles, while Jaycees buffeted by events feel “not merely shocked but personally betrayed by recent history.” Biker movies portray “the extent to which the toleration of small irritations is no longer a trait much admired in America, the extent to which a nonexistent frustration threshold is seen not as psychopathic but as a ‘right’” by people “whose whole lives are an obscure grudge against a world they think they never made.”⁷

It fell to Thomas Pynchon to begin connecting Los Angeles’ “two very different cultures: one white and one black” in his 1966 diptych, *The Crying of Lot 49* and “A Journey into the Mind of Watts.” Oedipa Maas, *Lot 49*’s Young Republican heroine, is an ingenue to Didion’s ironist. Arriving in “San Narciso,” a postwar defense-industry suburb developed by her deceased ex-lover, she finds herself in something “less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts – census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei” – outfitted with imported ruins (explicitly recalling Forest Lawn) and vaguely Mediterranean names.⁸ The self-referential self-containment signaled by the town’s name, its master-planned regularity, and the constant buzz of media throughout the novel, strongly imply that Southern Californian individualism is not the ideal that Banham took it for, but an illusion or simulacrum maintained by powerful institutions and interests. The shadowy mass of the discontented and disinherited (suggestive of what Michael Harrington called *The Other America* in his 1962 exposé of American poverty and

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stunted opportunity) flit at the edge of Oedipa's consciousness until the novel's end, when they emerge with visionary clarity as emissaries of an alternative American experience.

While Oedipa's quest for the meaning of the "revelation in progress all around her" does not lead her to Watts, Pynchon made the journey to this neighborhood, just off the Harbor Freeway yet "psychologically, uncounted miles further than most whites seem ... willing to travel," the year after the Watts Rebellion. When he described disinherited black Angelenos as experiencing during the rebellion "whatever it is that jazz musicians feel on certain nights: everybody knowing what to do and when to do it without needing a word or a signal," he invoked the scene in *Lot 49* where Jesús Arrabal defines an "anarchist miracle" as a moment "[w]here revolutions break out leaderless, and the soul's talent for consensus allows the masses to work together without effort, automatic as the body itself."⁹ The Watts Rebellion of 1965, Pynchon suggested, was a utopian *moment* counterpoised to the endless monotony of white, suburban Los Angeles.

Watts and the rebellion are amply chronicled in the poetry and fiction of Wanda Coleman, Walter Mosley, the Watts Prophets, and other writers, as well as memoirs of the postwar jazz scene. But Watts soon faded from the consciousness of most white Angelenos. It was replaced by other anxieties both sensational (the Manson Family murders) and routine. Gasoline shortages, factory closings, and immigration from Asia and Latin America soon changed the County's racial and economic make-up; Anglos (the local term for whites, regardless of ethnicity) declined from 70 percent in 1970 to 40 percent in 1990, and undocumented immigrants supported a sweatshop economy that thrived in the shadow of the downtown high-rises. The "retro-fitted" Bradbury Building in *Blade Runner* (1982) brilliantly figures Anglo Angelenos' contemporaneous anxieties about the future. Inspired by Edward Bellamy's description of a department store in his utopian tract, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), as "a vast hall full of light, received not alone from the windows on all sides, but from the dome, the point of which was a hundred feet above," George H. Wyman's 1893 gem is remade in the film as the dank and decayed site of Rick Deckard's climactic pursuit of replicant leader Roy Baty.¹⁰ Its delicate ironwork is a frail skeleton; the skylighted roof leaks rain.

The nine years between *Blade Runner* and the Justice (or Rodney King) Riots were marked in the popular imagination of Los Angeles by road rage, drive-by shootings, and "crack wars." The city had become "Third World"; a night out required "dodging bullets," said Tom Gilmore, and swarms of homeless people thrusting their "Will work for food" signs at passers-by, added Lawrence Spungin, when, two months before the Justice Riots, they

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announced CityWalk, a pedestrian mall lined with shops and restaurants ensconced on the 415-acre complex of Universal Studios.¹¹ Taking design cues from Venice Beach's surf aesthetic, Hollywood, Los Angeles' art-deco icons, and the trendy shops and restaurants along Melrose Boulevard, CityWalk's facades celebrate the "screw you" sentiments that Richard Orne, CityWalk's project director, says built the city.¹² Yet its adolescent insouciance is a calculated effect. The ensemble does for the 1960s what Disneyland does for the 1950s, and it is readable only against the backdrop of white Angeleno anxiety at a time when the region's newest migrant laborers were the predominantly Anglo tech workers who inspected semi-conductors and lived in motels, having been priced out of even the rental market.¹³ It makes most sense as a monument to their own innocence built by Banham's surfers, who are older and fear that they will soon be numbered among the disinherited of a now majority-minority city.

Didion performed her own analysis of the state of the LA myth at this time. She focused on the "Spur Posse," a gang of high school boys devoted to competitive (and likely forcible) sex, who became a local and, later, a national scandal. Their activity was centered in Lakewood, a 1950s-vintage subdivision for blue-collar aerospace and shipyard workers that is also the setting of D. J. Waldie's *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (1996). A lifetime resident and a city official, Waldie writes of Lakewood as a community of people clinging to the belief that they are middle class, "even though 1,100 square-foot tract houses on streets meeting at right angles are not middle class at all... In a suburb that is not exactly middle class," he observes, "the necessary illusion is predictability."¹⁴ The predictability of the landscape, the path from high school to factory job and family, and the neighbors like oneself, all once upon a time added up to the illusion of having arrived in postwar Eden.

By 1993, when the region had lost "six to eight hundred thousand jobs" and losses of "four to five hundred thousand more jobs" statewide were forecast over the ensuing two years, Lakewood was an appropriate site at which to ponder what comes after the Southern California dream. As Didion put the question, "what happens when [an artificial ownership] class stops being useful?" Her answer in part confirms her earlier speculation that biker movies were "ideograms of the future."¹⁵ As the story broke, the Posse turned from forcible sex to physical threats, beatings, guns, and even a pipe bomb, all the while pursuing their moment of disaffected fame on local news and national talk shows. Parents blamed the media for sensationalizing the story and the state for teaching sex education, or they blamed the girls.

Denial was not confined to the threatened enclave of Lakewood. Didion recalls being assured by realtors that layoffs in Lakewood would not affect life in "Bel Air, where the people lived who held the paper on the people who held

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the mortgages” in the affected cities. Instead, Didion recalls, as the local economy soured, “virtually everyone to whom [she] spoke” said

how much the riot had “changed” the city... After the riot, I was told, it was impossible to sell a house in Los Angeles. The notion it might have been impossible to sell a house in Los Angeles that year for a simpler reason, the reason being that the money had gone away, was still in 1992 so against the grain of the place as to be largely rejected.

Nevertheless, Didion concludes, loss of faith in the future is “what people in Los Angeles were talking about when they talked about the 1992 riot,” even if they could not acknowledge it because, on their terms – the terms of the LA myth – it did not add up.¹⁶

If the Justice Riots were neither the cause of the 1990s real-estate crunch nor the commencement of the apocalypse prophesied in paint by Tod Hackett in Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939), neither were they the catalyst of “a new metropolitan idea” in which a city “famous as a collection of separate suburbs” finally recognized itself as an interdependent whole, as Richard Rodriguez speculated it might be.¹⁷ It may be, however, that the riots hastened the end of Californian exceptionalism – except, perhaps, in “the contemporary white Southern imagination,” which seems to need Los Angeles to be an illusory promise of “opportunity at its extreme, eroticized limit” whose superficiality redeems the burden of the American South’s own myth-saturated history.¹⁸

The city once advertised as a haven from waves of immigrants flooding into the established cities of the United States is now a new Northeast: north from Latin America, east from Asia, and entwined with these histories and geographies. The protagonist of Héctor Tobar’s novel, *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), flees Guatemala after his wife and son are murdered by the army. He pursues his “electric idea” of Los Angeles only to find himself homeless in a city of Latino and Asian immigrants. Rodney King means nothing to him until he discovers the soldier who killed his family, now retired and pursuing his own dream of peace and order, and exacts retribution during the Justice Riots, which he imagines as “the municipal day of vendettas.”¹⁹

This globalized Los Angeles is a prime site, Waldie notes, of “*mestizaje* – the promiscuous amalgamation of Hispanic, African, Asian and Native American peoples ... emerging from this landscape supposedly tamed by white, middle-class suburbanization,” and perhaps of a post-European American culture.²⁰ Whether or not this forecast proves to be one more version of the exceptionalist myth is a question for future historians of Los Angeles. Our interest is not the region’s history, but its mythology, which is a record of desires and anxieties about the American, the Western, or even the

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global future in which Los Angeles is by turns a hope and a symptom. Mythic Los Angeles is a construct that writers inevitably engage as they create their own versions of the city.

The first half of this *Companion* presents a broadly chronological examination of LA literature; the second half studies particular genres. We begin with the Californios. Too frequently overlooked, their writings are important both as part of the region's literature and as records of life in early Southern California, points that Rosaura Sánchez and Beatrice Pita have done much to establish. Moreover, they are important to this *Companion's* subsequent chapters because we can fully understand the work of the makers of LA myth only if we are familiar with the history out of which they invented Arcadia.

William Alexander McClung addresses the creation of paradise in his study of the first seventy or so years of the region's English-language literary output. His chapter reveals how influential these early writers were to establishing the idea of Southern California country as a land with distinctive climate, topography, and cultural inheritance and marketing that idea to potential settlers from the eastern United States.

David Wyatt picks up the story with the boom years before World War II, when the city's population swelled from just over 300,000 in 1910 to more than 1.5 million in 1940. Wyatt finds a city defined in its literature less by place, history, and adopted or invented traditions than by motion, speed, and futurity: "the fantasy of having a plan." A frenzy of speculation that accelerates bodies and capital, and that extends the city ever farther outward, is coded into the very rhythms of many LA novels of the period. When the motion stops in the noir fictions of West, Horace McCoy, John Fante, and, after the war, Charles Bukowski and John Rechy, the various drifters, grifters, and idle dreamers awaken to an existential void. But just occasionally, Wyatt notes, an LA novel yields a story of hard work and some satisfactions, a "real world" within the fantasy of plans and planning.

Russell Berman considers the British and German writers who expatriated to find Hollywood work or sought refuge from Nazism and formed European cultural outposts on the Pacific. These writers produced not only splendid satire and often acute, frequently withering criticism of the Southland as an index of cultural decline, but even, on occasion, warm appreciations of Los Angeles. And the Jewish refugee Frederick Kohner created the iconic California surfer girl Gidget, whom he modeled on his LA-born daughter, Kathy.

Master-planned Eden is the most potent myth of Los Angeles, particularly the Cold War-era city of suburbs. Patrick O'Donnell's examination of five novels limns the social distinctions that structure paradise and the forms of disaffection that it induces. Didion's *Play It As It Lays* (1970) and Bret Easton

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Ellis's *Less Than Zero* (1985) survey an LA wasteland through the eyes of affectless, alienated, but socially privileged narrators. T. C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995) follows the disillusionment of a canyon-dwelling couple that imagine themselves eco-friendly and politically liberal but become increasingly resentful of "incursions" of actual nature and living Hispanics into their idyll. Accommodations are possible, however. Katherine Cattleman changes coasts with her husband, Paul; she discovers – or reinvents – herself in Los Angeles while Paul flees east in Alison Lurie's *Nowhere City* (1965), while optimistic survivors of an apocalypse reestablish the vision of the Golden Dreamers in Carolyn See's *Golden Days* (1987).

Charles Scruggs turns our attention to the "invisible" city, the centrifugal African-American community within "centripetal" Los Angeles that was centered in Watts for most of the twentieth century. His chapter focuses first on the efforts to carry westward a usable past and to build a sense of community in a place where the golden dream is always visible but ever beyond reach, particularly in the work of Arna Bontemps, Chester Himes, Walter Mosley, and Wanda Coleman. Scruggs then turns to recent writing that explores the opportunities and costs of integrating into the larger city in the post-Civil Rights era, notably Bebe Moore Campbell's *Brothers and Sisters* (1994) and Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996).

Both Asians and Latino/as are long established in Los Angeles, but their numbers have grown markedly over the past few decades. James Kyung-Jin Lee opens his comparative reading of Los Angeles' Latino/a and Asian literatures at the Pacific Fish Center before moving to the factory farms and the city's multicultural neighborhoods. Focusing on literary representations of labor and rights struggles, Lee shows us that the groups' histories do more than share significant parallels: they are marked by repeated instances of "horizontal assimilation" to each other and intergroup coalitions formed around common interests and objectives.

The historical section concludes, and the study of LA genres begins, with a chapter on the literature of urban uprisings. The threat of mass violence has been a constituent of dystopian LA visions at least since *Day of the Locust*. The 1943 Pachuco Riots, the 1965 Watts Rebellion, and the 1992 Justice Riots drew literary responses from without and particularly from within the affected communities that are Julian Murphet's subject in his chapter on a distinctive genre of LA writing.

The remaining chapters consider more widely recognized genres of LA writing. William Marling surveys the development of the LA detective story, which reached an early pinnacle in Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe novels. Chandler created a compelling social geography of LA communities distinguished by class, ethnicity, dates of arrival, and degrees

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of corruption. That geography – which often was determined by the Southland topography – has been expanded and updated by subsequent authors, notably Ross Macdonald, Joseph Wambaugh, and James Ellroy, and enriched with the new histories and new perspectives on old histories and conflicts offered by black and Chicano/a crime writers.

David Seed then surveys versions of the Southland's catastrophic fate in his chapter on Los Angeles' science fiction futures, a set of novels no doubt motivated in part by a desire to serve paradise its comeuppance by exploiting the tension between Arcadian myth and the facts of earthquakes, brush fires, mudslides, congestion, and pollution, as well as the region's economic reliance on the development and production of technologies of mass destruction.

Crime novels and science fiction have long, distinguished histories in Los Angeles, and both genres lend themselves to the transfer from page to screen. The movie colony also spawned its own genre of fiction. The Hollywood novel's depictions of the culture of the industry frequently serve as vehicles for writers' anxieties about a medium that threatens to supplant literary narrative (although Gen-X writers are considerably more at home with film and use it creatively). Chip Rhodes's analysis of the genre shows us how changes over time in the Hollywood novel track parallel shifts in the broader literary and popular culture, as well as the changing structure of film production.

Mark Shiel then turns to Hollywood itself, and given the ongoing cross-pollination between film and literature, this *Companion* would be incomplete without his chapter. The region's omnipresence on the silver screen for the past century and more has done much to shape the popular idea of Los Angeles, although it also frequently reflects popular perception back to audiences. Examining several of Los Angeles' starring and supporting roles in various film genres, Shiel shows us how the image of Los Angeles has changed in response to forces as diverse as audiences' genre preferences, historical events, and changes in the structure of film production.

Bill Mohr draws from his vast resources as a participant in, and more recently a historian of, Los Angeles' postwar poetry scene to fill the most conspicuous gap in the region's existing literary history. The Bay Area is virtually synonymous with West Coast poetry, he notes; however, his chapter establishes the distinctiveness of Los Angeles' poetry scene from the 1950s onward as it guides us through the region's coteries, movements, and venues for performance and publication.

Explaining the perceptions and roles of nature in a land portrayed by turns as Arcadian and poised on the edge of disaster – and increasingly as an unbroken slab of asphalt – is J. Scott Bryson's task in his examination of the natural world as fact and metaphor in the work of LA novelists, poets, and essayists. Bryson shows us how Southern California challenges ideas of

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nature imported from elsewhere in the United States, and he challenges us to rethink what we mean when we say “nature.”

Finally Eric Avila turns our attention to four of Los Angeles’ most prominent and comprehensive interpreters, Carey McWilliams, Reyner Banham, Joan Didion, and Mike Davis. His chapter is a fitting conclusion to a study of LA literature because it addresses principal versions of the LA myth through the writings of their most influential explicators: Carey McWilliams’s “weirdly inflated village” in which the scribe enjoys “a ringside seat at the circus” of “the American people ... erupting like lava from a volcano”; Reyner Banham’s new urban model that heralds a Golden Land of freedom and fulfillment; Joan Didion’s bipolar city of placid beauty and random, senseless violence – Arcadia *and* the maelstrom; and Mike Davis’s city that “only Darth Vader could love,”²¹ its built environment the architectural expression of the American history of class war. None of them is Los Angeles either, but all contribute to the continuing American and global fascination with the Southland.

NOTES

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1. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1990), p. 373; Reyner Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1971), p. 53.
2. William A. McClung, *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 33; Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land*, American Folkways (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946), p. 6.
3. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York, Scribner, 1995), pp. 189, 6.
4. Richard Neutra, quoted in McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, p. 344.
5. Jean Baudrillard, *America*, tr. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 1988), p. 7; Banham, *Los Angeles*, p. 129.
6. Banham, *Los Angeles*, pp. 175, 129, 17, 16.
7. Joan Didion, “Los Angeles Notebook,” in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), p. 220; Didion, “On the Morning after the Sixties,” in *The White Album* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), p. 205; Didion, “Good Citizens,” in *White Album* p. 95; Didion, “Notes toward a Dreampolitik,” in *White Album*, p. 101.
8. Thomas Pynchon, “A Journey into the Mind of Watts,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 12, 1966, 35; Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 24.
9. Pynchon, *Crying of Lot 49*, p. 44; Pynchon, “A Journey,” pp. 78, 84; Pynchon, *Crying of Lot 49*, p. 120.
10. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887* (New York: Signet, 2000), p. 66.