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978-0-521-80535-3 - Literature and Race in Los Angeles

Julian Murphet

Excerpt

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Introduction: on minoritization and domination

Is a situation conceivable in which minorities have become the majority? A space where what is dominant is precisely the becoming-minor of all populations? We shall proceed by agreeing that it is, and that one of the greatest challenges facing contemporary thought, not to mention practice, lies in coming to terms with this radical minoritization. For the possibility is surely nothing other than our own reality at its most extreme and tendential, reserved for special places into which we gaze as into crystal balls. Chief among these is Los Angeles, the first continental US city in which whites have fallen short of an outright majority; where the global has become local, and the major minor, in often striking ways.

Los Angeles' status of mostly Third World cultures is well known, but needs summarizing. It has the largest Korean metropolitan district outside Korea, Mexican metropolitan area outside Mexico, Filipino district outside the Philippines and Vietnamese district outside Vietnam, and is second in such ratios with the Chinese and the Japanese populations. Beyond this, it has major concentrations of Salvadoreans, Indians, Iranians and Russians. With Latinos, Jews and WASPs the largest minorities in this minoritised place, it is more fitting to see the area as a set of countries – like Europe – than a traditional unified city.¹

It is a shift whose nature is profoundly demographic – a quality of sheer human numbers, of heterogeneous flows, which emerges as patterns of interference on the spatial itself. One end of a street becomes 'Korean', the other 'Armenian'; in between, the 'Hispanic' offers its own intensities. Meanwhile, diverse essences such as the 'African-American', the 'Samoan' and the 'Anglo' circulate up and down the avenue and impart something of their own peculiar

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territorialities: booming car stereotypes, vividly painted automobiles, the little allegories of cellular phones. So in miniature, in minor interferences and incommensurabilities, the globalization of cultures is enacted.

Yet we want to be protected here from some fantasy scenario of an achieved democratization through minoritization. Indeed, the principal challenge may rest in squaring the conceptual circle of a minoritized space in which the dominant bloc rules ever more supreme, only from the outside, from the suburban hinterlands, tax-rich white edge cities and eerily insubstantial multinational corporations. The concept of the 'minor' only makes sense in determinate relation to what excludes it: governmentality, wealth, power, hegemony, or whatever shorthand you use for the concentration of might under late capitalism. So while it may be the case demographically that the Euro-ethnic population of Los Angeles has fallen to under 40 per cent of the total, that there has been a popular black mayor, and that various kinds of local political organization have increased the representation of other minorities, this is not to say that urban space is here free from the structures of power which elsewhere curtail popular control. Indeed, what is most startling is the ratio of minoritization to economic polarization. Edward Soja, in his treatment of the six-fold geography of the city today, carefully separates the geography of Cosmopolis or Heteropolis from that of the 'Repolarized Metropolis'. Of this latter he writes that '[t]here are more millionaires than ever before in Los Angeles', while as many as eighty thousand homeless men and women look for shelter every night and 'the most severe urban housing crisis in America' affects half a million more.² It is true that both extremes of this economic polarity reflect the range of cultures of the minoritized 'Cosmopolis', but the top 10 per cent on the ladder of wealth is disproportionately white, as are the police force, elected officialdom, and the federal policy-makers who make the largest decisions over funding and power.

Domination would appear, then, to have increased with the influx and spread of diverse ethnic cultures; the demographic revolution goes hand in hand with an intensification of inequality and injustice. To say that this is a novel development in the history of social relations, or that some contradiction is at work here which needs patient unpacking, would be to understate gravely what is at stake in a situation such as this. As this book unfolds, it will be found again and again to turn on this central problematic of the concentra-

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tion of power in a space of fragmentation and abstraction. That we will be approaching it from the discipline of literary studies has, despite its initial appearance of counterintuitive illogic (surely human geography, sociology or history would be more appropriate!), a triple advantage: that it takes as its basis the embattled interests of a minority within and across the various ethnic minorities, namely *writers*; that it approaches the central problematic from its most perplexing angle, the vexed issue of its *representation*; and that, since so much of the city's domination is bound up with visual-cultural strategies, literature has the virtue of preserving in its *verbal* textures enough by way of linguistic negativity and difference to open up critical spaces within the complex minoritization-domination, and prepare for its immanent critique.

The ensuing first chapter will tackle the second of these issues in as dialectical a fashion as seems appropriate, to introduce the historical involutions of representation and space in Los Angeles; while the rest of the book will argue through close stylistic analysis for literature's unique status in this city as a repository for the otherwise forgotten and neglected realms of inwardness, sensuousness, affect, historicity, memory and ethnic solidarity. Meanwhile, it seems reasonable to articulate some of our initial concerns through a brief resumé of a few of the difficulties faced by the writers themselves, in achieving recognition locally and at large, winning readerships and wider publication, and funding their own labours. Indeed, as a minority in Los Angeles, the fractured community of its literary writers is exemplary of the general experience of neglect, prejudice, lack of achieved solidarity and self-laceration experienced by almost all the minorities under an unremitting domination.

If there is a literary establishment in America, a pantheon of hallowed luminaries including Updike, Bellow, Wolfe, Roth, Ashbery, and DeLillo, then there is no question as to its spatial location: it is in the East and North. The two co-ordinates that are unthinkable in conjunction with it are South and West, where of course we find Los Angeles and its garish entertainment industries, now joining hands with the digital information industries in an endless loop of joyous commercial philistinism. Apart from the single, now late, exception of poet Charles Bukowski, who had fame imposed upon him at the last after a film (*Barfly* [Schroeder, 1986]) was made of his work, any moderately successful Los Angeles writer who hasn't wanted to subserve the film industry has found it virtually impossible to resist the gravitational tug of the East.

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Beginning with Joan Didion and her husband John Gregory Dunne in the late 1980s, the exodus has continued unabated: Bret Easton Ellis, James Ellroy, Walter Mosley, Paul Beatty, all have relocated in the East after literary success. And their reasons are not unsound. For to stay in Los Angeles is to relinquish many reasonable ambitions of cultural respect, guild community, grants, deals with major publishers. It is virtually to disappear. Steve Erickson, one of the city's most adventurous writers, complains in his semi-autobiographical *Amnesiascope* (1996) that the last time he 'caught a glimpse of his career as a novelist, before it disappeared altogether in the dark, was in New York City'. He suggests that 'if you're not actually from New York it becomes, every time you go there, a greater and greater monument to what you've achieved or, more to the point, failed to achieve – the urbanology of your own particular success or failure'.³ In a more political vein, Wanda Coleman berates the logic of arts funding in the country at large, which triply discriminates against her as a black Angelena poet:

Poetry is the most marginalized of all the arts, yet equally subject to the whims of regional prejudice. Approximately ninety percent of the public and private sector grant money doled out to artists and writers, in these United States, goes to New York. And that wouldn't be so bad, but in Southern California our institutions barely and rarely support the local White artists, so you know what we Blacks and 'multi-ethnic others' can expect. When I began my grantsmanship chase in the early 80s I was repeatedly advised that a New York City P.O. Box address would considerably increase the odds in my favor.⁴

Why this systematic marginalization of what would, in many other urban cultures, be considered a revered and honoured profession? Doubtless it has something to do with the historical glamorization of Los Angeles as 'tinseltown', the place of movie and television production, ephemeral visual culture and trash; the home of what Mike Davis calls the 'semi-proletarianized writer' under the thumb of entertainment capital.⁵ It is a myth which persists even in the literary community itself, as Kathleen Tynan once related in a piece for the *New York Times Book Review*:

In the City of Angels, when you ask a writer you respect 'What's happening on the literary scene?' he'll say 'There isn't one'. And after you've asked the same question of Christopher Isherwood, Gore Vidal, Brooke Hayward and Neil Simon, and have had no kind of encouragement for your quest . . . , someone says, 'Of course, the Dunnes'.

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So you go and see Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne. And John Dunne says, 'We're here because there isn't a literary scene'. To which Miss Didion adds, 'There aren't any appreciators here. No hostesses, critics, publishers or fans'.⁶

And in confirmation of the immodest estimation of 'the Dunes' as solitary upholders of literary value in this valley of shades, Bret Ellis has said, in excuse of his own departure East, 'Trumps closing and Joan Didion and John Dunne moving away. That was the end of LA for me.'⁷ At a personal level I can attest that, almost as often as I informed questioners that I was researching Los Angeles literature, I was met with the anxious incomprehension of those who could scarcely credit that such an oxymoron was any more than a feeble jest.

So it is that authors in LA themselves constitute (at least in their own self-representation) as embattled and dogged a minority as any other, scrounging money and recognition off passersby with the churlish indignation of the misunderstood, the dispossessed. It is a minority status which is ceaselessly internalized, to the point that it assumes the classic Nietzschean hallmarks of *ressentiment*: 'The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge.'⁸ The literary writer, subjugated both by the Eastern establishment and the movie industry at home, is then predisposed to glaring back at the world of established Letters and visual entertainment with all the menace of an underclass on a hot day. And this is precisely the value of such minor-writing, in the grumbles and disaffection of a value-producing *ressentiment*, here manifest as satire, there as denunciation. The poet-narrator of Paul Beatty's splendid comic novel *The White Boy Shuffle* (1996) expresses its satiric mode thus:

There was a different vibrancy to 24th Street that day. The decibel level was the same, but a grating Hollywood hullabaloo replaced the normal Hillside barking dog and nigger cacophony. The newest rap phenoms, the Stoic Undertakers, were filming a video for their latest album, *Closed Casket Eulogies in F Major*. Earlier in the day I had wandered into the production tent to audition for a part as an extra. The casting director blew one expanding smoke ring in my direction and dismissed me with a curt 'Too studious. Next! I told you I want menacing or despondent and you send me these bookworm junior high larvae.'

Moribund Videoworks was on safari through the LA jungle. A caravan of film trucks and RVs lurched through the streets

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like sheet-metal elephants swaggering through the ghetto Serengeti. Local strong-armed youth bore the director over the crowds in a canopied sedan chair, his seconds shouting out commands through a bullhorn. 'Bwana wants to shoot this scene through an orange filter to make it seem like the sun's been stabbed and the heavens are bleeding onto the streets.' 'Special effects, can you make the flames shoot farther out from the barrel of the Uzi? Mr. Edgar Barley Burrows wants the guns to spit death. More blood! You call this carnage! More blood.' My street was a soundstage and its machinations of poverty and neglect were Congo cinema vérité. 'Quiet on the set. Camera. Roll sound. Speed. Action!'⁹

To reclaim the street from the soundstage; that would be one effective way of summarizing the representational urge of the Los Angeles writer. So Beatty's improbably named black hero Gunnar Kaufman scrawls his verse on the seven-foot wall separating his ghetto from the white-populated hill community above, gesturing through syntax and poetic trope against the serial reductions of his lived space to the Congo imaginaries of crude speculators in the image.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari once issued a manifesto in the name of Franz Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature! Los Angeles is already there. It is the place where all literature is minor; and by a logic as inevitable as metastasis, its literatures split, spread, deterritorialize, leap from subdivision to subdivision on a line of flight from the Sense of vision. This is the first characteristic of 'minor literatures'. The second is that 'everything in them is political . . . [Their] cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics'. And the third characteristic is that here, where actual collective consciousness is fractured and dissipated, 'literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation . . . [A]nd if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.'¹⁰ In LA this possibility begins in the *ressentiment* of a writerly minority, becomes allegorized when articulated with other spatial and ethnic modes of minoritization, and finally emerges from the cracks in the vision machine as poems, novels and performance works, like weeds, 'blades of grass' waving faintly in the last breath of wind blowing from paradise. Another consciousness? Another sensibility? Perhaps. There are no masterpieces here, no great artificers; just intensities of immanence and

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becoming-minor. We are not at any rate in need of 'classics' or 'masters', only of sober syntactical enunciations of what goes unvoiced, the 'people's concern' in this time of an ever more purified domination.

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at lang's. he again praises atlantis to the ersatz skies. he sees a special lifestyle where I only see high capitalism: possible that I can't see the 'real' atlantis for the high capitalism; but he just obscures it. here you have the unadulterated version before you; development, without anything actually developing.¹

The greatest difficulty in coming to terms with Los Angeles will always be not seeing it as such; not for a lack of representations of it, but because of their contradictory plenitude.² Brecht's scare-quotes spring up automatically around any mention of the 'real' LA, due to the sheer volume of incompatible definitions. According to your point of view, Los Angeles is either exhilarating or nihilistic, sun-drenched or smog-enshrouded, a multicultural haven or a segregated ethnic concentration camp – Atlantis or high capitalism – and orchestrating these polarized alternatives is an urban identity thriving precisely on their interchangeability. The city (or is it a city, and not a collection of cities?) recycles an extraordinary amount of oxymoronic self-referential discourse, never cohering into anything more than a patchwork of undecidable clichés – this paragraph perhaps being just another instance of that tendency.

To suggest that all of this slippery signification is nothing but a superficial appearance beneath which squats a deeper and iniquitous essence is to lapse into the kind of moralistic dismissal of the place that is now so shop-worn as to be useless. It is the kind of strategy that plays, on the one hand, to the interests of a puritanical national anti-urbanism,³ and on the other, to the capricious elasticity of the metropolitan identity itself, which happily converts negative tropes into touristic affirmations of native cool.⁴ 'Los Angeles', both place-name and epic national myth, springs precisely from the point

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at which the jargon of authenticity gutters out. Surface and depth, appearance and essence, all the hoary dualisms lose their hierarchy of values here, a semantic exhaustion which poses problems not only to urban analysis and historiography, but to literary criticism as well.

Indeed, the challenge here is to think of appearance *as* essence, and vice versa: to accept the '[i]neluctable modality of the visible', as Joyce once put it, in the representation of this place;⁵ but also to insist, *pace* Joyce, that today the visible is technologically administered, not phenomenologically given. The vision machines and their ubiquitous product anticipate any act of seeing in Los Angeles; the commercial-visual undergrids the perceptual. So the primary acts of selection and exclusion implicit in that 'ineluctable' advance screening of the city tend to shape the secondary acts of representation with which citizens (and artists) attempt to reclaim it. LA is in this sense the virtual birthplace of what Jean Baudrillard has called the 'precession of simulacra',⁶ the coming-first of perfect fictional representations of itself, which cannot then be measured against some underlying original, but are assimilated in advance into the real and, ipso facto, its further imaginary elaborations. The 'real' of Los Angeles is always and already 'real-and-imagined', as Edward Soja phrases it.⁷

Such a subsumption of the real by representation dates back to the very origins of modern LA, from the 1880s on, as a radical experiment in real estate speculation. If the Chicago School insisted that the dominant pattern of urbanization in America was the gradual radiation of suburbs around central industrial and financial districts, then Los Angeles, a true aberration, sprang up conversely in patches, a case of urban small-pox on the sun-baked face of Southern California. And unlike New York, whose modern phenomena struck the bemused Henry James 'as having, with their immense momentum, got the start, got ahead of, in proper parlance, any possibility of poetic, of dramatic capture',⁸ the modernity of Los Angeles was preceded and produced by an audacious rhetorical capture.

Los Angeles is a city that was imagined long before it was built. It was imagined to avoid city-wide bankruptcy in the 1890s, and has stayed on a knife-edge ever since, camouflaged by promotional rhetoric . . . It was the new Jerusalem, first come, first served, at the semi-arid, most westerly – and newly civilized – corner of the great frontier. However inflated the language, the strategy was simple enough. Through a consortium of local businessmen and large railroad interests, a small city would be merchandized into a metropolis.⁹

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The 'boost', a tissue of distortions about the climate and the air, the Mediterranean fragrance and luxuriance of the region,¹⁰ was inexorably *there* ahead of any objective attempt to represent the city's actual social and natural configuration. And this was enough to distinguish the city from all previous urban forms.

Los Angeles' exceptionalism *vis-à-vis* the rest of America, itself a notable and recurrent trope in discourse about California,¹¹ must be properly understood in order to clarify more recent celebrations of the city as the first 'postmodern' metropolis.¹² The critic's standard optic for seeing Los Angeles was polished classically, in Louis Adamic's colourful prose, in 1929:

Los Angeles is America. A jungle. Los Angeles grew up suddenly, *planlessly*, under the stimuli of the adventurous spirit of millions of people and the profit motive. It is still growing. Here everything has the chance to thrive – for a while – as a rule, only a brief while. Inferior as well as superior plants and trees flourish for a time, then both succumb to chaos and decay. They must give way to new plants pushing up from below, and so on. This is freedom under democracy. Jungle Democracy . . . [I]t is a bad place . . . full of . . . wildcat enterprises, which, with their aim for quick profit, are doomed to collapse and drag down multitudes of people . . .¹³

Adamic's vision of urban anarchy and the free reign of unplanned development has been immensely influential, and contains a great deal of truth (Brecht's 'development without anything actually developing'). As long ago as 1929, intimations of a vulgar 'postmodernity' hovered over the city in the sun; Adamic's clear distaste for this experiment in unfettered modernity finding its echo in the dismissive reflections of no less a figure than Frank Lloyd Wright:

Despite the elaborate effort that went into the scheming to make these houses 'original' or 'different', they all looked exactly alike. 'The same thought, or lack of thought', wrote Mr. Wright, 'was to be seen everywhere. "Taste" – the usual matter of ignorance – had moved toward simplicity a little, but thought or feeling for integrity had not entered into this architecture. All was flatulent or fraudulent with a cheap opulent taste for tawdry Spanish Medievalism.'¹⁴

The offended eye of the civilized East was unable to approve of this newer visual logic of mass-reproducibility and fraudulence. Refusing to submit to aesthetic standards established elsewhere, Los Angeles architects and designers catered to transient and jumbled fashions of style, debasing architectural 'taste' with flyweight buildings that could be erected and demolished with minimum disturb-