formations and cultural practices and as sites marked more by impermanence than continuities.

The relationship between urban formations and postmodern cultural signification is mimicked by my texts. Associations are developed whereby key characteristics of the new frontier city, such as spectacle, subterfuge, simulation and speculation, are manifested by my thematic and stylistic approaches. The work examines the collapse of distinction between the "real" (traditionally represented by the city and urban formations) and the hyperreal (presented by fictionality). I see and position the cities of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and the Gold Coast as texts—as new frontier cities where the language of signs, simulation and consumption permeates the cultural and urban fabric in intriguing ways.

I argue for the new frontier city as a site rich in narrative potential. I critique readings that privilege eurocentric, modernist notions of high cultural values and cosmopolitanism which continue to exclude the new frontier from "serious" cultural status.

*****

Gittes
There's going to be some irate citizens when they find out they're paying for water they're not getting.

Cross
That's all taken care of. You see, Mr Gittes, either you bring the water to L.A.—or you bring L.A. to the water.

Gittes
How do you do that?

Cross
Just incorporate the Valley into the city so the water goes to L.A. after all. It's that simple.

Gittes
(nods, then) How much are you worth?

Cross
(shrugs, then) I have no idea. How much do you want?

Gittes
I want to know what you are worth—over ten million?

Cross
Oh, my, yes.

Gittes
Then why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?

Cross
(a long moment, then) The future, Mr Gittes—the future.[1]

On a Sunset Boulevard overpass Jake Gittes gazes down at what's left of the Los Angeles Riverbed below. "Sun glazes off its ugly concrete banks. Where the banks are earthen, they are parched and choked with weeds."[2] This is a town where a man can drown in a riverbed in the middle of a drought and no one is supposed to figure it out. Just another riddle in the city, a riddle without a client. But Jake Gittes is not Jake Gittes, he's Jack Nicholson and this is not L.A. but *Chinatown*, a screenplay by Robert Towne.

This is a fiction. Scene 99. This is a story, a film noir drama about water and Los Angeles, but it is also part fact, part mocumentary and part historical excursion. Jake Gittes never actually happened, his nose was never sliced open for its flagrant curiosity, but the water did happen; the diversions, the run offs and the theft. Los Angeles did steal its own water. However, it is the first "fictitious" incident, Jake Gittes and his nose, that leads us to the water, brings us to the moment where we reflect on the possible reality and

I draw on *Chinatown* because it assists in contextualising my own narrative position; it provides an access point to the interpretation of new frontier cities and their methods of cultural production that is otherwise difficult to articulate. Cities like Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Australia's Gold Coast are places where images resonate, where pictures overlap and imitate each other. In this way *Chinatown* offers a valid and useful model of contradictory signification, for it becomes apparent in most analytical literature on Los Angeles that the sense of lack and failure which emerges is infused with a

The fragmented perspectives shared by Didion, Ellis and Ellroy are the extreme reactions and manifestations of the frontier experience no longer with anywhere else to go. It finally ruptures here, at the edge of the country and turns back on itself, annihilating but at the same time offering a distance that separates the protagonist from the agonies and corruptions s/he perceives.

In this way the position of the "native" Californian is as inflated and elevated as Didion claims it always has been. For the frontier generations of the American West, ideological possession of California was something that had to be earned. It was a test of initiation Didion often experienced as a randomly attributable "Code of the West."[15]

> New people, we were given to understand, remained ignorant of our special history, insensible to the hardships endured to make it, blind not only to the dangers the place still presented but to the shared responsibilities its continued habitation demanded… but the ambiguity was this: new people were making California rich.[16]

This pervasive notion of an elusive but "real" or "native" Californian underwrites the remove of California's literary characters. These are voices that speak from the inside of a culture seen to be inhabited by strangers, impostors, aberrations and amoral events. Often the protagonist hovers at the edge of apparent horrors not quite participating but not quite looking away:

> When we get to Rip's apartment on Wilshire, he leads us to the bedroom. There's a naked girl, really young and pretty, lying on the mattress. Her legs are spread and tied to the bedposts and her arms are tied above her head. Her cunt is all rashed and looks dry and I can see that it's been shaved. She keeps moaning and murmuring words and moving her head from side to side, her eyes half closed…Spin kneels by the bed and picks up a syringe and whispers something into her ear. The girl doesn't open her eyes. Spin digs the syringe into her arm. I just stare. Trent says, 'Wow.'[17]

> affected only part of her. Her heart was broken perhaps but it was a small inexpensive organ of local manufacture.[18]

The observational device Waugh utilises here not only allows the narrator to keep his distance, it also allows him a position from which to pass absolute judgment, for the remove of the character is reiterated by the conservative language of permanence, tradition and a sense of history that Waugh has brought with him from Europe to the territory. This is not the language of Los Angeles, nor is it the language of Aimee Thanatogenos, rather it is the language om(m)-2(e)(lg)1()-2(cit is)1iti0(e)4qm(m)-2(e)( )]the lang(m)-2(e)(la)

holed up in their bungalows in the orange groves and told the world that hell was a movie set full of *femme fatales* who drove you mad until they were avenged:

> I would read books like *The Loved One* or *Day of the Locust* or *Ape and Essence* by Aldous Huxley. The point of these books as far as I, a bleached blond teenager growing up in Hollywood, was concerned was that though the authors thought they were so smart—being from England or the East Coast and so well educated and everything—they were suckers for trashy cute girls who looked like goddesses and just wanted to have fun. These men could say what they liked about how stupid and shabby and ridiculous L.A. was, but the minute they stepped off the train, they were lost. All their belief in the morals and tenets of Western civilisation was just a handful of dust.[20]

As Eve Babitz suggests, the weight of such powerful fictional representations has continued to infuse percep h(o i)-2iBTw 0 -2.z/chnt (a)-c4t(us)-10(odr0 A[H)2Td T8.040md004 Tc 0.004 T

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urge to surrender to the city or to its temptations—they have already done so—and this devil-may-care admission attracts and speaks to the culture of California held for so long under the pressure of narrative abuse and attack. These are "insiders" hanging by a thread, seeking at all times to unplug themselves from a sense of association with a reviled and fractious system:

> I must have been mad. Unshaven. Undershirt full of cigarette holes. My only desire was to have more than one bottle on the dresser. I was not fit for the world and the world was not fit for me and I had found some others like myself, and most of them were women, women most men would never want to be in the same room with, but I adored them, they inspired me, I play-acted, swore, pranced about in my underwear telling them how great I was, but only *I* believed that. They just hollered, "Fuck off! Pour some more booze!" Those ladies from hell, those ladies in hell with me.[21]

A recent anthology of Los Angeles-based writers heeds the canonical influences of its literary past while encouraging the irruption of difference. The title, *Absolute Disaster: Fiction from Los Angeles*, emerges as more of an effective marketing strategy than an accurate reflection of the content. The editors have attempted to position the works in a familiar apocalyptic vein with sections dedicated to "Disasters in Love," "Disasters in Cars," "Disasters in the Hood" and "Disasters in Spirit Imagination and Thinking," but the tone, style and nuances of the writing begin to unhinge the framing through predictable doomsday rhetoric. "Disaster" is rather a position from which to start: from the end of the world back, these emerging writers retrace human threads through what might have been caricatured or regurgitative noir narratives.

The language operating in *Absolute Disaster* is closely, sometimes cruelly intimate; the "camera" is not outside the head—the view comes at you from the inside. The protagonists often want entry points more than they want exits:

> Behind him, he could hear Carolyn and his brother shouting and running after him on the pavement, but he kept going, feeling the speed as the skateboard started to rattle beneath him, and he heard dogs barking at the noise behind him, howling, and the whole world seemed to be opening. At the bottom of the hill was a thin film of blue that covered the world. With enough speed he could puncture it and tumble through….[22]

This Californian voice of confusion, at once sharp and oblique, surfaces in its most dystopian form in the filmic landscapes of Los Angeles and Hollywood. The narrative shift from pragmatism into what Didion referred to as an "eccentric" delusion is complicated by David Lynch to great cinematic effect in *Mulholland Drive*. The leading character's interior monologue is manifest as a grand metaphysical delusion: a surreal visual narrative which spirals out of her own reach to a state of being in which nothing, not even her own mortality, is beyond reinterpretation. Lynch directs the characters of *Mulholland Drive* into a kind of possessed oblivion, wet-nursed by the Hollywood machine, a place where he questions the randomness of intersection, and the ownership of dreams:

> The notion of Hollywood as the world capital of corrupt, twisted fantasy is hardly new, thanks to Nathaniel West, Raymond Chandler, Roman Polanski and countless others. But in wrestling with that notion, Lynch makes an extraordinary leap to embrace the irrational. Its sheer audacity and the size of its target make the director's earlier eviscerations of idyllic American oases and the rot beneath them seem comparatively petty….
> For 'Mulholland Drive' finally has little to do with any single character's love life or professional ambition. The movie is an ever-deepening reflection on the allure of Hollywood and on the multiple role-playing and self-invention that the movie-going experience promises. That same promise of identity loss extends to the star-making process, in which the

> star can disappear into other lives and become other people's fantasies. What greater power is there than the power to enter and to program the dream life of the culture?[23]

What emerges from an analysis of the Californian narrative position is a number of distinct and significant movements all of which gravitate back to, and have their thematic roots in, the formative frontier experience: that of the loner, the disconnected individual adrift in a new hostile territory, given up on his/her history and possessed at all costs by the enchantment of an unfounded promise. We have seen the confusion of European writers in exile who revelled in the baroque opulence of their disdain; the coke addled anti-heroes and despairing heroines of Ellis and Didion; the self-destructive shadows of

> Without ignoring the city's rich past, we have tried to focus on the present —living writers active in the final decade of the last century and the first few years of the new one. One guiding conviction is that the literary arts have taken their own shape in Southern California; from its poetry to its pulp fiction, a shape that often baffles its Eastern and British visitors.[24]

Here again, the dichotomy between Los Angeles' success and the invisibility of its

In Wanda Coleman's poem, "Prisoners of Los Angeles," the speaker wakes to the sounds of "workbound traffic," to the world "going off," and instead of curling in on herself (as you could imagine some of L.A.'s previous heroines would have) she faces first her own face in the mirror, and then, through the frame of an open window, the reflection of herself that she registers in the panorama of the city:

> so this is it, i say to the enigma in the mirror
> this is your lot/assignment/relegation
> this is your city
>
> i find my way to the picture window
> my eyes capture the purple reach of Hollywood's hills
> the gold eye of sun mounting the east
> the gray anguished arms of avenue
>
> I will never leave here[26]

Interestingly, Coleman chooses to capitalise the "I" only in the last phrase, lending extra weight and determination to her final declaration, *I will never leave here.* And while the title of the poem suggests that this may not be a choice, in the end it emerges as one. She has seen in the mirror, and in the window, an unmistakeable if somewhat reluctant affinity with her city. These examples and the essays in *The Misread City* suggest that a potential for emotional and spiritual rearrangement is occurring in contemporary Californian narratives. In these more recent fictions the authorial position has dramatically shifted. The protagonists are no longer outside the frame. They are enmeshed in the landscape. The city is inside them. The need for remove and the passing of judgment is no longer applicable. Like the complicit protagonists of Ellis and Ellroy, these characters are not exempt from responsibility but they also seek a kind of personally defined freedom from redemption.

In this way the current manifestations of Californian literature remain less useful for the kind of social deconstruction that theorists like Mike Davis[27] employ because they are, more often than not, first-person narratives where the liability of misery, sexual abuse and apocalypse is shared. If we consider how pervasive and how useful the Armageddon depiction of Los Angeles remains as a primary source of its self-perpetuated

cities and others like them, which have imitated the grand narratives and ceremonies of Los Angeles' dreams, circumvent its disasters? As derivative territories they are in the unique position of being able to see where they are headed.

Picturing the City

When we visualise a city we often recall and reflect on monuments or icons that signify municipal identity or form a frame for its placement in the world. If6(e)6(m1(a)/TT1 55(f)5(6(e)5(6th)2(5(a)

The desire to revert to a particular concrete reality is removed from the equation. Living

like Las Vegas and the Gold Coast not only to epitomise this contemporary state of flux but to translate and reinterpret the evolution of (im)pure simulation.

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[1] *Chinatown*, dir. Roman Polanski, screenplay Robert Towne (Los Angeles: Long Road Productions, 1974).
[2] Ibid.
[3] N. King, "View From The Couch: Robert Towne" (Sydney: *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2002), n.p.
[4] Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 1986), 194.
[5] Martin Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 79-80.
[6] Paul Virillio, *Open Sky* (London: Verso), 97.
[7] Ann Hulbert, *The Last Thing We Expected* (http://slate.msn.com/id/2944/ - 1996).
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (London: Flamingo, 2003), 7.
[11] Ibid., 7-8.
[12] Ibid., 30.
[13] Ibid.
[14] James Ellroy, *American Tabloid: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 1995), 9.
[15] Didion, *Where I Was From*, 96.
[16] Ibid., 95-96.
[17] Bret Easton Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (London: Picador, 1986), 189-90.
[18] Evelyn Waugh, *The Loved One* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1951), 103-4.
[19] Nathaniel West, *The Day of the Locust* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1957), 386-7.
[20] Eve Babitz, "Bodies and Souls" in R. David, ed., *Sex Death and God In L.A.* (London: Random House, 1992), 108-9. -