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Los Angeles in *The Day of the Locust*

Published in 1939, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*¹ depicts the hardships of the artist and middle-class Midwesterner in an emergent Los Angeles, a city vastly different from the image of paradise it exports to the world. The novel emanates from Tod Hackett and his "painter's eye"² viewpoint in 1930's Los Angeles, following his artistic and social struggles, as he aspires to succeed in Hollywood and survive in the city. However, West does not limit the novel's retrospection to just Tod and the portrait of an artist, but also includes other character studies, such as the mild-mannered midwesterner – Homer Simpson – who longs for retirement in paradise, and the seemingly naïve and attention-seeking wishful actress – Faye Greener – who, in her *femme fatale* role, will stop at nothing to achieve her goals. No matter their contrasting goals, all of the characters have migrated to the self-proclaimed "land of sunshine" to reach their dreams, but eventually it seems all for naught. Over the course of the narrative, it becomes clear that Los Angeles is a simulacra-producing city and not at all what it was represented to be, everyone falling victim to the dystopia and capitalist system of the city, and each losing his or her innocence along the way. But, often, desolate situations produce radical and counter-cultural art, evident by West's novel.

At first glance, the characters may seem too cut-and-dry to really add much depth to the novel; however, it is these caricatures of the city's residents that ultimately drive

¹ Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust*. New York: New Directions Books, 2009

² Gerald Locklin, "The Day of the Painter; the Death of the Cock: Nathanael West's Hollywood Novel." ed. Fine, David, *Los Angeles in Fiction: A Collection of Essays*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995.

the novel's themes home. *The Day of the Locust* is understood by most Nathanael West critics as satirical and not simply a melancholy tale about people coming to Los Angeles to see their dreams and themselves wither and die. West highlights and blows up certain elements of the narrative to best convey his argument about disenfranchised individuals and their lost dreams, creating his own world amidst the "real." By his own admission, his fiction is a "peculiar half world which [he] attempted to create."³ In particular, West opts not to include ordinary people because it would have hurt the satire of the novel, using individuals at a crossroads in their lives and inflating the characters into stereotypes to encompass a broader range of people. His style uses distortion, caricature, satire, and prophecy; still, his narrative voice is not outlandish or fantastical, but rather is clear and direct. Randall Reid writes, "Dreams were West's special subject and clarity is not kind to dreams."⁴ West creates a world grounded in fiction and representative of Los Angeles, his own experiences often sinking in to his fictional narrative, depicting the hard truths of the proclaimed urban hell.

Essentially victors in a new land,⁵ Los Angeles' patrons and promoters had the ability to alter history, suppressing much of the region's contentious past and creating the image of Los Angeles as it went. As they steamrolled the previous, vastly Mexican, inhabitants of Southern California, Harrison Gray Otis [a divisive city-planner and benefactor of Los Angeles and publisher of the *Los Angeles Times*] along with Charles Fletcher Lummis [a young historian and journalist from Cincinnati] facilitated certain imagery, motifs, and legends that would speak to Americans' romantic sensibilities of the

³ Randall Reid, *The fiction of Nathanael West: no redeemer, no promised land*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967. p. 11

⁴ Reid, 11

⁵ The last governor of Alta California, Pio Pico was once the richest man in the city only to become the victim of fraud and lose all his real estate holdings. In 1894, he was buried in a pauper's grave during Los Angeles' Anglo-boom.

West and, thereby, strengthen the migratory appeal from the Middle West to the Pacific. Spearheaded by General Otis, Los Angeles' rapid expansion, deceptive marketing, and illusion-producing capitalist system lured not only the artist, but also the common man and the starlet dreamer; however the supposed paradise took them in only to then spit them out, the mid-westerner (e.g., Homer in *The Day of the Locust*) the frequent victim. Similar to other migrants, Homer becomes manipulated by everyone around him, starting with the environment he willfully chose to live out his days. These Middle West migrants had never known boredom, or leisure for that matter, but slaved away "at some kind of dull" job, with the dream to eventually slow down, get a simple job, and enjoy life in some sort of angelic location. "With sunshine and the open shop as their main assets,"⁶ early Los Angeles boosters teamed with developers, bankers, and transport magnates to sell the region to the "restless but affluent babbity" in Middle America.

In the 1880 US Census, Los Angeles ranked as the 187th largest city; by 1930, Los Angeles was the most populated city in the West, reaching nearly one million residents. While Los Angeles may not have been the new Eden it was advertised to be, it was most certainly a developer's paradise: gorgeous weather, beautiful landscapes, and seemingly never-ending land that could be acquired nearly for free. Although several Mexican Californians still controlled much of the land in bulk, the vast real estate holdings remaining from Alta California were often invalid in the eyes of the new American state, subsequently allowing land proprietors to easily wrestle the lands away for practically nothing. Demonstrative of the Anglo-Americans' ruthlessness, former Alta California governor, Pio Pico, owned approximately half a million acres only to be "buried in a

⁶ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: "Excavating the Future in Los Angeles"*. New York: Verso, 1990. p. 25

pauper's grave virtually as Lummis's floral floats were passing down Broadway."⁷ After commandeering the expansive lands that remained from Alta California, all Otis needed was to get people to come – and soon the Los Angeles myth was formed: rising out of the ashes of Spanish California, Los Angeles was the final frontier – a paradise complete with sunshine, beautiful ocean and mountain landscape, and endless cheap, fertile land. In order to enthrall people to the area, Otis hired Lummis to his newly created paper, *The Los Angeles Times*. Following in Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* footsteps,⁸ Lummis took particular components of Southern California's past (e.g., 'mission' theme) in order to paint a mythic picture of Los Angeles and create a socio-historical identity that would bolster the city's appeal. Lummis evolved these myths, combining the Spanish culture with Anglo-Saxon elements (e.g., inserting "a Mediterraneanized idyll of New England life" into the region)⁹ and, thus, is credited as "the impresario who promoted the myth as the motif of an entire artificial landscape"¹⁰ and fueled the Los Angeles migration.

By the 1890's, Lummis was the editor of the influential *Out West (Land of Sunshine)*: "The Magazine of California and The West", which shared the city's exhilarating growth and especially the region's expansive beauty with the rest of the country, creating the Southern California myth along the way. An excerpt from one of the early volumes reads:

Then come the winter rains; a week of sunshine, then a day or two of uncertain weather... This for a day – rain in patches, in flurries, in mists, in a soft settling

⁷ Quartz, 27

⁸ Jackson's *Ramona* (1884) is regarded as one of the first Southern California works that fused local history and romantic fiction. Because of its focus on California's missions, the novel is credited with originating the highly influential quixotic mission myth that survives to this day. (Exceedingly common in the Los Angeles school system, my fourth-grade class' keystone assignment was to report on a chosen mission, consisting of one visit and a production of a papier-mâché replica.)

⁹ Quartz, 20

¹⁰ Quartz, 26

finest that will hardly keep you in doors, with singing birds and nodding, beckoning flowers without. Then perhaps for a night a settled downpour... running in rivulets through the groves and vineyards. Following this, another week or so of warm, clear brightness that...coaxes the germs of wild flowers up and over every sport in beds of bloom.¹¹

The sunny weather – common to the region’s myth – is expressed from the start, highlighting that even “the winter rains” are mild, comprised primarily of “a week of sunshine” and then only “a day or two” of shoddy forecast. And, even these days will not force “you in doors” or keep the birds from singing. However, it is critical the article does not shy away from including the rain as well because it depicts California as a wet and lush natural environment (“wild flowers...in beds of bloom”), perfect land for farming. Marketing the region’s weather, then untreated beauty, the article seems to also focus on the farmer, as it includes the imagery of water “running...through the groves and vineyards.” As Middle American farmers are a primary target base for Los Angeles’ patrons, the article constructs the motif: perfect weather, perfect land no matter the season.

Soon, the myth became “the script for the giant real-estate speculations...that transformed Los Angeles from small town to metropolis.”¹² The myth and legends were subsequently, and endlessly, reproduced by Hollywood, cementing the SoCal image into the consciousness of America. However, every attractive feature that the city’s boosters produced, from the Los Angeles’ weather to its trademark bungalows, was turned on its head by authors of Los Angeles *noir*. Typical of the genre, the protagonist is often a victim or suspect – unlike the detective role featured in hardboiled – that functions within a corrupt system no less crooked than the protagonist’s perpetrator, resulting in a no win

¹¹ “The Raisin-Making” by D.E. Kessler, Vol. 11-12, 1899-1900.

¹² Quartz, 20

situation. Additionally, like the figures in *The Day of the Locust*, it features cliché characters that fall into a certain category rather than possessing a uniquely expressive individuality. In an odd development, writers under contract to Hollywood studios were the first to pen *noir* novels, repainting “the image of Los Angeles as a deracinated hell” and often including autobiographical sentiments of a “déclassé middle strata”¹³ within their work.¹⁴ West captures this relationship in *The Day of the Locust*, depicting a contracted-artist, who produces a painting that distinctly contradicts the region’s myth. Although certainly not exclusively *noir*, West’s novel toys with the genre, as it notably illustrates the horrors of Los Angeles in Homer’s narrative and Tod’s focal painting, while constructing Faye as the *femme fatale* figure.¹⁵

Locklin notes the parallels between Tod and West; both were brought to Los Angeles by a talent scout and must reconcile their own dilemma between creative work and commercial labors. West’s writing was experimental, trained in European forms such as Dadaism, but now became pressured to follow a supposedly more “American grain” that spoke to the “drift to consumership” in a country centered around and fueled by big business.¹⁶ West needed to align his work with the expanding consumer-based market in America if he wanted to achieve success in the emergent, commercial city. Similar to his depiction of Tod, West seemingly longed for critical acclaim as well as fortune his entire career, but did not want to submit to the capitalist system of Los Angeles. More than anything, however, West apparently wished for *acceptance* in Los

¹³ The middle-class migrants that fell into poverty due to Los Angeles’ parasitic economy amidst the Depression.

¹⁴ *Quartz*, 37, 38

¹⁵ Characteristic of noir, though not unique to the genre, a *femme fatale* is a beautiful, mysterious, and seductive woman who uses her charms to make others irresistibly fall mad in love with her.

¹⁶ Jan Gorak, *God the artist: American novelists in a post-realist age*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. p. 67

Angeles society, feeling isolated and alone socially and artistically until his death at thirty-seven. While the plot is not unique to *The Day of the Locust*, Tod also struggles with this social and artistic balance throughout the narrative, as he works to retain artistic individuality; he tries to push against commercial art, yet all the while he longs for approval in his community and among his close peers – the same community that facilitates this commercialism. Both are the artist, the individual, and the dreamer who come to Los Angeles, lured by Hollywood, to try to make their dreams become reality.

The Artist

“The studio lot was one in the form of a dream dump... Many boats sink and never reach the Sargasso, but no dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled it will be reproduced on the lot.”¹⁷

In an emergent Los Angeles, the artist falls victim to the culture and industry of the disjointed city, forced to either lose individuality, as he or she becomes a puppet of Hollywood, or instead descend into the despair of failure and its subsequent loneliness. Despite warnings from his professors that he “would never paint again” and was “selling out,” (60) Tod Hackett migrates from the Yale School of Fine Arts to Los Angeles after a talent scout lures him to learn set and costume design. However, Tod soon learns that Los Angeles is built and sustained through *image* (“If the scout had met Tod, he probably wouldn’t have sent him to Hollywood...” (60))¹⁸ and Hollywood is the city’s new illusion-producing vessel that makes the capitalist engine run. The premiere character in West’s *The Day of the Locust*, Tod represents the artist who desires recognition and critical acclaim despite the hard truth that his or her success must be compromised, or

¹⁷ *Locust*, 132

¹⁸ cont. “...His large sprawling body, his slow blue eyes and sloppy grin made him seem completely without talent...”

else remain impotent, and distressed, in an urban hell. As Tod chips away at his ‘The Burning of Los Angeles’ painting, a centerpiece of the novel – and “a picture [that] proved he had talent” (3) – so does West buildup to the climatic riot scene. The narrative unfolds as Tod works to remain intact and individual against the weight of the city, his ambitions potentially leading to his own undoing. Emulating Tod’s apocalyptic painting, the novel’s final scene distorts the line between reality and one’s own vision, as the reader remains stuck behind Tod’s lens. Whether the artist has eventually cracked or not, succumbing to social and cultural pressures, remains to be seen; however, it is clear that the pressures of Hollywood, and his parasitic relationship with the city, have affected Tod.

In “The Art of Significant Disorder: The Fiction of Nathanael West”, Gorak examines the artist in Los Angeles and the difficulties that arise when he or she wants success, but resists conforming to the commercial world. For instance, West saw his work as unclassifiable and, therefore, without a market, leaving him feeling cheated and lonely – much like *The Day of the Locust*’s Tod. As a result of the emergence of Hollywood’s booming film industry, there was often self-pressure to retain artistic integrity when a healthy paycheck seemed right around the corner. Los Angeles was a city in which culture and commerce were seemingly growing side by side; film (i.e., the export) was not only a major financial asset, but was also a worldwide image of the city. With artists working on sets – many reproductions of historical events – or famed writers (e.g., William Faulkner) rewriting screenplays, art not only became attached to commercial ends, but also was incredibly recursive, focused more on replication rather than originality. Furthermore, these replicas or simulations were dispersed throughout the region – from the city’s initial marketing, to the architecture, to fashion – and not limited to the Hollywood production lot. West reveals these extrinsic entities from the

onset of the narrative when Tod walks about in Hollywood on Vine Street,¹⁹ identifying the “miniature Rhine castle with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers” and the “Arabian Nights” themed domes and minarets next to it (61). Such architecture originates far from Los Angeles, yet the city includes the foreign structures and decides to make them part of its society, foregoing an attempt at pioneering its own unique culture. Even in present Los Angeles, the nouveau-riche’s ‘chateaus’ line the desert, not reminiscent of the current surrounding landscape, but representing an essence of France. Reproductions and simulations present all over Southern California – and not limited merely to film sets – demonstrate the recursive cultural environment in Los Angeles that Tod is thrust into, ultimately making it even more difficult for him – and the artist – to distance herself from outside influences and create something original.

While not always explicitly expressed in the novel, it appears Tod struggles to balance his individualism with this glitz and glamour and inauthentic reproductions found in Los Angeles. It is unmistakable that Tod does not embrace these alien objects along Vine: “both houses were comic, but he didn’t laugh.” He seemingly believes their presence to be “truly monstrous” because of the desperate “need for beauty and romance” in the barren region (61). At a Hollywood party hosted by Claude Estee, a screenwriter, Tod can accept the illusions of the town despite his reservations and, thus, be embraced and further integrated into the film industry. In spite of the opportunity, however, Tod strains to resign himself to the humorous illusions of Hollywood, ostensibly opting to remain genuine when confronted with mere representations of the ‘real.’ Requested to peek into Estee’s pool, Tod notices a dark object at its bottom:

The thing was a dead horse, or, rather, a life-size, realistic reproduction of one.

¹⁹ The intersection of Hollywood (boulevard) and Vine (street) is a seminal symbol of Hollywood to this day.

... “Isn’t it marvelous!” exclaimed Mrs. Schwartz, clapping her hands and jumping up and down excitedly like a little girl.

“What’s it made of?” [said Tod.]

“Then you weren’t fooled? How impolite! It’s rubber, of course. ...”

“But why?”

“To amuse... You’re just an old meanie”

She stood on the edge of the pool and “ohed and ahed” rapidly several times in succession.

“Is it still there?” someone called.

... “But it’s only full of air,” said one of the women.

Mrs. Schwartz made believe she was going to cry.

“You’re just like that mean Mr. Hackett. You just won’t let me cherish my illusions.” (70, 71)

Tod appears stuck inside a lens in which he can only appreciate and accept authenticity, choosing to quickly dismiss the “life-size, realistic reproduction” of the horse, rather than appreciate the spectacle of it. However, Mrs. Schwartz “ohed and ahed” to the sight of the recreation, taking pleasure in the ridiculousness of its presence. She “clapp[ed] her hands and jump[ed] up and down excitedly” despite already having seen the faux-dead horse because she understands the point is “to amuse” and, so, she gives way to her “little girl” sensibilities; yet Tod cannot see the “thing” in the same light, bewildered why anyone would have or make such an object – “But why?” he says. As a result, Mrs. Schwartz rather quickly dismisses Tod, calling him a “meanie.” He cannot even feign interest and be polite to his host’s expensive decoration, choosing instead to remain true to his feelings.

Although the fake horse was custom-made for the Estees, it resembles the set pieces and reproductions found on the Hollywood lot that Tod encounters daily. This glance behind-the-scenes allows Tod to know the trick behind the trade and, therefore,

likely leaves him unimpressed with such reproductions. Yet, despite working for a film studio, contributing to the thrills of such illusions with his set and costume design, Tod does not understand that his art and the city's business are one: in response to Tod's film pitch that evening, Estee later tells him, "It's good, but it won't film. You've got to remember your audience. What about the barber in Purdue? ...he's tired... What the barber wants is amour and glamour" (72). The barber – a representation and stereotype of Hollywood's audience – has no use for authenticity in a film, as he deals with the reality of his own mundane life all day long. The barber wants to be amused and, so, Hollywood manufactures a hyperbolic representation of life that aims to entertain. The barber wants the spectacle of the faux-dead horse at the bottom of the pool; however, Tod does not make this connection. His inability to do so – paired with his unwillingness to accept the regions' representations – adds to his frustrations with Los Angeles. In order to succeed, Tod must first recognize that art void of "glamour" will not sell, and then embrace the spectacle and simulations of 'real' that Los Angeles produces. Without a willingness to become a producer of these images he so hastily disdains, Tod's manifestation as a successful artist in the city will never come to be.

In Los Angeles, the artist has become yet another mechanism that constructs the myth, creating simulations of the real from the papier-mâché film sets to the stucco Mediterranean homes. Jean Baudrillard argues that simulation is the "substituting of signs of the real for the real itself,"²⁰ and the film industry in Hollywood – and real estate firms throughout the region – produce these illusions in Los Angeles, spreading its seemingly edenic culture all over the world. Hollywood is constantly trying to reproduce something from the past, creating sets that mimic the "real" which subsequently blur the line between the real and the represented,

²⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*

This time the same mistake had a different outcome. Waterloo, instead of being the end of the Grand Army, resulted in a draw. Neither side won, and it would have to be fought over again the next day. Big losses, however, were sustained by the insurance company in workmen's compensation...

...When the front rank of Milhaud's heavy division started up the slope of Mont St. Jean, the hill collapsed. The noise was terrific. Nails screamed with agony as they pulled out of joists. The sound of ripping canvas was like that of little children whimpering. Lath and scantling snapped as though they were brittle bones. The whole hill folded like an enormous umbrella and covered Napoleon's army with painted cloth. (134)

In *The Day of the Locust*, the Waterloo film set is not only an attempt to recreate the backdrop of Napoleon's famous battle, but also to reconstruct the battle itself. Without the authentic Waterloo location, the film studio decides to represent it through reconstruction, the set attempting to be a sign of the "real." In the process, however, the film production actually becomes a simulation – its sign not equivalent to the "real." Yet, even though the recreated Waterloo "masks and denatures [the] profound reality"²¹ of the historical Waterloo battle, the production willingly goes through with the simulated battle. For instance, the narrator does not break down the simulation, never referring to "Napoleon's army" and company as a collection of actors; rather, he maintains this simulation just as the production does during shooting, intertwining the simulated with the realness of stage hands and "workmen's compensation." This entwining blurs the line between the simulated and the real, leaving the reader at times unsure of what is part the film's script versus that which is extraneous to the narrative (i.e., behind-the-curtain). But, even within the novel's setting, the "simulation threatens the difference between the

²¹ Baudrillard, 4

‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real and the ‘imaginary’”²² because the studio exports has begun to believe some of its own falsities.

“No longer a question of imitation, nor duplication,” the studio creates its own “real” via its simulation, and shares its unacknowledged inaccuracies with the film’s release, subsequently reshaping a historical event. The narrator is hardly joking when he expresses that “Waterloo, instead of being the end of the Grand Army, resulted in a draw” because he knows the influence Hollywood illusions have on mass culture and consciousness. The simulation can then slowly become a representation, the sign (i.e., the Waterloo film) essentially developed into the real (i.e., the historical Waterloo battle), as the producers never draw the line between fact and fiction.²³ In other words, the film studios, like producers of simulacra in all of Los Angeles, avoid the issue of authenticity and simulation and, instead, simply leave the voyeur to determine fact and fiction on his or her own. But – as the narrator notes – the set crumbles to pieces when confronted with the weight of reality. During Waterloo, Mont St. Jean had no issues remaining relatively intact, but with its wet paint and struts not in place yet, “the hill collapsed” under the weight of real people. The “nails screamed with agony” as the set met a quick death, a stark contrast to the painful demise of French soldiers over a hundred years prior as part of the “real.” The simulated masquerade can only remain for so long before its hollow interior collapses and its trick is unveiled (“The whole hill folded like an enormous umbrella”).

Those at the Estee party understand this trick, knowing fully that the horse is simulacra. While Tod interacts with Mrs. Schwartzen, two other guests shout out, “is it

²² Baudrillard, 2

²³ Speaking to this fusion between misrepresentation and the “real,” Baudrillard asserts that Hollywood historical fiction “is a total simulacrum that links up with ‘reality’ through a complete circumvolution” (7) of the real.

still there?” and “but it’s only full of air,” aware that the simulation of the real horse is a façade and fragile to reality. These constituents of Hollywood have drawn the line between fact and fiction, enabling them to compartmentalize between the two spaces. Other than Tod, the guests completely understand the simulacra of city and not only adopt the simulation, but – by working for the studios – become part of the vessel that controls it. While they may still be part of the system or machine that Tod is hesitant to commit himself, they are on other side of it in a way that is freeing. They decide to benefit from it financially and socially, rather than become victimized by it like slaves and involuntary voyeurs of simulacra. At first glance, it may seem like selling out, the studio employees choosing financial success over authenticity, but this noir-fused narrative offers the characteristic lose-lose situation to the protagonist. Tod has the option to accept and truly own the simulacra of Los Angeles, achieving his desires as a result, but he instead continues to reject the city’s productions and faces artistic and social barriers in *The Day of the Locust*.

Tod seemingly exists in a liminal space between the illusory of Hollywood and the individuality and authenticity of his own paintings. With his set and costume design job, Tod has one foot in capitalist Hollywood, but his independent paintings at his Inland Empire home²⁴ demonstrate that he has another in counter-culture, *noir* art. Straddling the boundary between those opposing worlds, Tod battles whether to remain part of this charade, leading to a crisis of self. Unlike San Francisco, which has a distinctive cultural history (e.g., Beat movement; Argonauts), Los Angeles imports its talent – just as Tod was recruited to Hollywood – as a means to fuel its “culture industry.”²⁵ Mike Davis uses

²⁴ Tod lives in an apartment complex in San Bernardino. The county lies in the Inland Empire (a region of the now Greater Los Angeles Area) that thrives on agriculture and commercial development.

²⁵ Quartz, 17

this term to describe the inclusion of culture in the city's economy, which thrives, in short, on its exports and media; the real-estate development and agriculture provides the groundwork, but the subsequent image that Hollywood produces makes the vessel run. It may seem contradictory that the focus of Los Angeles' economy is exportation because, after all, it needs people to *come* to the city – and then, too, the city lacks enough jobs for substantial employment of these migrants²⁶ – but, in fact, its main export is actually the land itself. To this day, real-estate developers from around the globe purchase vast quantities of barren land in the region, only then to develop it and set up the infrastructure: “they just clear, grade and pave, hook up some pipes to the local river (the federally subsidized California Aqueduct), ...and plug in the ‘product.’”²⁷ The region's economy supported through its image, Tod is not part of a cultural movement that is independent from the market; rather he is part of the capitalist system that exports illusionary culture in order to generate revenue, Hollywood the antipode of critical intelligence and art.

Tod, representative of the hopeful artist, has the option to create art independent of the capitalist system with the desire for critical acclaim and, markedly important, produce a work that lasts the test of time. Or instead, continue to work for the film industry (i.e., “signs of the real”), produce illusions, and conform to public demands in order to move up in the world and – for Tod – get the girl of his dreams. Unfortunately with the latter, though, Tod's work will likely cease to exist, as the Waterloo set symbolizes not so subtly; though, in order for his work to become recognized, it must be part of the system that challenges this individuality. However, no matter the extent of art

²⁶ Quartz, 25

²⁷ Quartz, 4

and society's colliding, an artist's work likely reflects the society and culture in which he or she lives, the environment often spurring a particular creativity within the artist.

West wastes no time to express that Tod certainly possess talent, "The Burning of Los Angeles" the object of praise, demonstrating that the tensions perpetuated by Los Angeles can certainly lead to innovative art and exemplary works independent from the capitalist system. While details of Tod's talent and craft are limited after these first couple pages, it appears important for West that the reader knows that Tod is not a hack (like his last name 'Hackett' may imply). Understanding that the fledgling artist is in fact talented limits questions about his capabilities and instead draws attention to the environment that rejects and ultimately fails a promising artist. Los Angeles enticed artists from around the world to migrate to the city to achieve acclaim and monetary reward; unfortunately, though, the artist's financial circumstance is based around Hollywood, artistic originality and drive all but dying with this bind to paycheck. However, in *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, Jerome McGann expresses the unequalled influence of history and society on an artist, adamant that the historical and sociological are completely unavoidable for the artist and in the artist's art. Therefore, all the hardships Tod encounters may not be in vain, as they – through producing negative emotions – will directly influence Tod's creativity, and likely catalyze poignant works.

Eventually, in *The Day of the Locust*, Los Angeles' abrasive, competitive, and notably illusory environment takes its toll on the artist, resulting in a notable piece of cultural art. As mentioned, this functions in West's novel via Tod, whose own sense of pressure and strain from Los Angeles has seemingly led him to create the painting "The Burning of Los Angeles." It is impossible to avoid the external features of a work; McGann writes, "the fact that the poem makes an artistic pretense to anonymity... cannot begin to be understood outside the biographical context it pretends to have eliminated."

In other words, Tod's painting cannot stand on its own and will unavoidably allude to those elements (i.e., the socio-historical context) that influence its creation in one way or another. The painting speaks to Tod's feeling of disenfranchisement and loneliness in the sprawling city. He comes to Los Angeles to make a career in set and costume design, forsaking his teachings because he felt his work was becoming generic and recursive ("toward illustration or mere handsomeness" (4)), but Los Angeles has renewed his creative vigor due to the harsh realities beneath the simulacrum of the region. Upon seeing a group of desolate people of Los Angeles, Tod had the urge to create,

Scattered among these masquerades were people of a different type. Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses. While the others moved rapidly, darting into stores and cocktail bars, they loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred. At this time Tod knew very little about them except that they had come to California to die.

He was determined to learn much more. They were people he felt he must paint. He would never again do a fat red barn, old stone wall or sturdy Nantucket fisherman. From the moment he had seen them, he had known that, despite his race, training and heritage, neither Winslow Homer nor Thomas Ryder could be his masters and he turned to Goya and Daumier. (60)

He sees the despair on the faces of this "different type" of people and shares their contempt, partly feeling like an outsider of the city along with them. Tod had accepted the Hollywood job principally because he had become disillusioned with his art, believing it was becoming too similar to the bland work of his classmates, and perhaps wanted that rebirth associated with the upstart city in the west. However, despite taking the job, as previously mentioned, Tod is not embraced with arms wide open. He works to fit in, networking at the Estee party, yet remaining outside of the boundary of acceptance.

Similarly, the “different type” has already been rejected, coming to the new paradise and renting their individual homes only to find that there is no heavy industry in the region to keep them employed, and so, they hopelessly stare. They are voyeurs, and simply take in the images of people wearing oxymoronic clothes – and do not want “their stare ... returned.” They are the audience of Los Angeles’ images; they are the barbers in Purdue that – like Homer – fall victim to the simulacra of the city.

Meanwhile, “The others” are not laborers and seemingly buy into Los Angeles, eventually becoming part of its machine; they “dart[] into stores and cocktail bars” that help make the market function, and pay for clothes they really do not need and buy drinks they could get cheaper elsewhere. These others are masqueraders that want to fit a specific image of Los Angeles (“The fat lady in the yachting cap was going shopping, not boating; the man in the Norfolk jacket and Tyrolean hat was returning, not from a mountain, but an insurance office” (3)). More importantly, these “others” become part of the simulation, as they dress for stares, not in the least bit wearing the appropriate, authentic attire for their jobs or errands; as a result, they further fuel this illusion-producing system. Meanwhile, the outsiders turned their “backs to the shop windows” and just “stared” at the pretense walking past them. “Their eyes filled with hatred” because they were those mid-westerners lured to Los Angeles, buying the “mail-order houses,” before they realized the city would be turning its back on them.

McGann asserts that an artist’s work and ideas are the result of his “period” and society during the artist’s time – no matter how hard the artist tries to avoid his external factors or believes his voice to be solely unique. Tod sees the anger, understanding their frustration just as he feels cheated and discontent, and immediately his thought-process and creativity is stirred. He cannot transcend his surroundings and produce work that is solely withdrawn creativity; rather, he is in part a product of his environment, influenced

as much by the *appeal* of capitalism as by the *victimized poor* of its system. Tod “turned to Goya and Daumier” because they chronicled their eras, commenting on their socio-historical environments through their paintings. Bold painters, they often captured the grittiness of their surroundings, unafraid to depict disaster. Tod would soon portray this feeling of betrayal among these “different type[s],” bold enough to portend an apocalyptic riot and put his prophecy on a blank canvas.

The Femme Fatale (and The Fall of The Everyman)

“When the West was filled, the expansion turned inward, became part of an agitated, overexcited, superheated dream life. The film studios threw up their searchlights as the frontier was finally sealed, and the romantic possibilities of the old conquest of land turned into a vertical myth, trapped within the skull.”²⁸

An incredibly simple and mild-mannered man, Homer had come to California because, in short, it was warm and he figured it would be a nice place to retire. Like most mid-westerners, he was seemingly seduced by the romanticism of Los Angeles, believing it would be a quiet place in which he could bask in the sun. Homer soon realizes that Los Angeles is as boring as his previous environment – “After an aimless tour of the house and the yard, he sat down... as though waiting for someone in the lobby of a hotel. He remained that way for almost half an hour” (82) – unfortunately, the people were not the same. After Homer arrived in the city, it was only a matter of time before Faye Greener – the representation of everything Los Angeles – ate him alive. As a result of his environment, Homer descends into a narrative of deception and desolation in *The Day of the Locust*, embodying the victimization of the lower middle-class present during Los Angeles’ rapid growth. Representing all that was wrong with the city, this despairing

²⁸ Norman Mailer, *Esquire Magazine*: “Superman Comes to the Supermarket”. November, 1960.

group became the “original protagonists of that great anti-myth usually known as ‘noir.’”²⁹ While there is considerable disagreement over the novel’s genre, many critics going so far as to refrain from labeling the work, it appears that Homer’s narrative follows a particularly noir-esque framework.

With her platinum blonde hair and tantalizing long legs, seventeen-year-old Faye – the *femme fatale* of the novel – moved to Hollywood with her aging father, a former Vaudeville performer, with the desire to become a famous actress. Despite the innocence that her age suggests, Faye uses her youth and beauty to manipulate those around, noticeably all men, creating a faux geniality in hopes of getting ahead. Unfortunately, Faye’s admirers learn the hard way that she is far from sincere; her deception paralleling the stereotypical seductive mistress characteristic of noir, both Homer and Tod fall victim to her charade. Constructing an image of herself – fertility (i.e., youth), beauty, and fake friendliness - Faye resembles the controlling illusory city. West’s devious incarnation of Los Angeles, – the name “Faye” rhyming with “LA” is no accident³⁰ – the young aspiring starlet elicits the city’s yearning for control, victimizing Homer, and the middle strata he represents. Exceedingly reminiscent of the early patrons’ plan for the Southern California region, Faye’s plan for success “was very vague until she came to what she considered would be its results, then she went into concrete details,” (105). General Otis and company manufactured the city to acquire riches; despite the large public works that Los Angeles’ growth is founded on, the “city-building has otherwise [mostly] been left to the anarchy of market forces,” resulting in a remarkably fragmented construction of the city.³¹ Seemingly similar to Faye’s ‘go big or go home’ attitude – “I’m going to be a star

²⁹ Quartz, 37

³⁰ A character’s name is often representative of the person’s nature/morals in parody and LA noir, as is the case in *The Day of the Locust*.

³¹ Quartz, 23

some day... If I'm not, I'll commit suicide" (98) – the city's founders pursued their dreams without regard for others, merely using people in order to become a piece of Los Angeles' machine, each and everyone fueling its system in some way (i.e., Tod by his image-making; Homer by investing his savings). The novel's projection of Los Angeles onto Faye grounds the parasitic relationship between Los the city and the Midwesterner as it brings a decisively human and individualized element to a widespread problem.

Initially, Faye "ignored Homer," (93) caring not for the Midwesterner; but upon realizing there was something to be gained from Homer, she spun around and charmed her way to his pocket. After Harry Greener, now a door-to-door salesman in Los Angeles, falls ill in Homer's home, Faye comes in to help her father and meets Homer for the first time. When Faye and Homer met, she did not even need to speak at first, as her appearance did the talking: Homer "thought her extremely beautiful," but even more so, "she was taut and vibrant. She was as shiny as a new spoon." Analogous to Los Angeles' early benefactors and city-planners' marketing scheme, Faye entices Homer with her beauty and congeniality, captivating Homer and subsequently making him believe he will be loved in return. Homer was trying not to stare, but "his good manners were wasted." (After all, though, "Faye enjoyed being stared at," the narrator added.) All appearance and no substance, Faye misrepresents herself just like the city, leaving Homer and the rest of her admirers without any sexual or emotional satisfaction; this lack of fulfillment, as a result, fuels notable displeasure and accurately symbolizes their frustrations in Los Angeles. With Faye's construction of self – "odd mannerisms and artificial voice" (94) – that so closely paralleled Los Angeles' disingenuousness, Homer should have been warned. He did find this artificiality strange, but who could have guessed that this teenage girl was out to get him:

She was supposed to look inviting, but the invitation wasn't to pleasure... Her invitation wasn't to pleasure, but to struggle, hard and sharp, closer to murder than to love. If you threw yourself on her, it would be like throwing yourself from the parapet of a skyscraper. You would do it with a scream. You couldn't expect to rise again. (68)

After taking in her attraction, he becomes excessively hospitable – making her food and offering to get candy delivered especially for her – seemingly captivated by her image like migrants were by Los Angeles' simulacra. With little hesitation, it appears Homer has thrown himself “from the parapet of a skyscraper” and Faye immediately takes advantage of him. “With the infallible instinct of [Homer's] kind,” (87) in which they can become easily manipulated, Faye fulfills her role as noir's prominent seductress and occasions Homer to become another victim of her trap. More generally, the narrator explains that “when they had [saved] enough,” California was on the forefront of Americans' minds due to this simulacra that Faye embodies; the region's marketing proving effective, they moved to “the land of sunshine and oranges” (177). The migrants throw their money at Los Angeles, expecting the city to fulfill their desires in return, but only fall prey to the harsh mistress. Taking her to the movies and buying her dresses, Homer longs for mutual affection, but Faye continually turns down his sexual advances. As she is simply using him, Homer encounters the struggles of the city, feeling “hard and sharp” pains, “closer to murder than to love.”

Far from the only casualty of Los Angeles, however, Homer hosts a cockfight at his home – a seminal scene in *The Day of the Locust* – that represents the sexual suffering of Faye's male admirers in the narrative. The bird, or cock, stands in for the men's own sexual success with Faye, or lack thereof, the death of the red hen a crippling blow to the desires of Tod and Abe, the loud-mouthed dwarf of the narrative:

Abe, moaning softly, smoothed its feathers and licked its eyes clean, then took its whole head in his mouth. The red was finished, however. It couldn't even hold its neck straight. The dwarf blew away the feathers from under its tail and pressed the lips of its vent together hard. When that didn't seem to help, he inserted his little finger and scratched the bird's testicles. It fluttered and made a gallant effort to straighten its neck. (155).

Abe's effort to revive the hen evokes a transparent imagery of sexuality, from his "moaning softly" to the depiction of fellatio ("took its whole head in his mouth"), which needs no explanation. Paramount, however, to the motif that these migrants come to Los Angeles never to rise again, the hen is described as "finished" and unable to "hold its neck straight." Its vain "effort to straighten its neck" represents the collapse of the men's dreams and goals. Tying together the symbolism of the scene, the cockfight's winner – "The Mexican" – is the only person, other than her wealthy clients, to actually copulate with Faye.

Gerald Locklin asserts that the scene demonstrates the sexual alienation among the men, believing that this sexual frustration is the major thematic feature of the novel,³² but this is too narrow a reading of the narrative. Already noted, there is undoubtedly a sexual dissatisfaction among the primary male characters with their inability to win over Faye; however, Faye is merely a vehicle for the narrator to express the parasitic relationship the men have with Los Angeles. The novel focuses on these men's desires when arriving in Los Angeles (i.e., success in the film industry, retirement in a sunny paradise) and not their sexual desires. The female vessel merely acts as a natural way for the narrator to elicit Tod and Homer's struggle to achieve their goals, using sexuality to simplify the migrants' relationship with the city. Faye is Los Angeles personified, so when she will not return her sycophants' love, it principally represents the city not

³² *Los Angeles in Fiction*, 77

fulfilling their desires on a whole. While Tod's sexual frustrations and futile desires become fully realized and collapse in the scene, the narrator previously yields that Tod was warned about the misrepresentation of the city.

At no one's insistence, Tod moved to Los Angeles and entirely gave himself over to Faye, yet her plainly marked 'warning label' should have been a sign to tread cautiously, and avoid the deception and pain brought on by her charade. After (also voluntarily) moving to Los Angeles, Tod rents a decrepit apartment "without hesitation... when he saw Faye Greener in the hall," (67) willfully becoming influenced by her image. Exemplary of the belief that "the American is betrayed not by the brutalities of the city, but by the image of its own salvation,"³³ Tod dreams of love with Faye, only to have his world shattered when his affections are not returned. Representative of Los Angeles' misleading open arms, upon moving into the apartment,

[Faye] had given him the photograph willingly enough, had even autographed it in a large, wild hand, "Affectionately yours, Faye Greener," but she refused his friendship, or, rather, insisted on keeping it impersonal. She had told him why. He had nothing to offer her, neither money nor looks, and she could only love a handsome man and would only let a wealthy man love her. (67)

Tod misconstrues Faye's willingness to give him the photograph, soaking in the "affectionately yours," as if she really meant it. Yet, Faye had only been advertising herself – her beauty – just as Los Angeles markets its image, spreading the photo around in the hopes of a casting agent giving her a role. Other than taking in her image, Tod "had nothing to offer her" because he did not have a personally appealing image ("she could only love a handsome man") nor the riches to sustain her lifestyle ("would only let a wealthy man love her"). Viewing herself as a commodity, Faye refrains from sleeping

³³ Winchell, 166

with her middle strata admirers, only putting herself out as a high-end prostitute at Mrs. Jennings brothel. In a telling moment, Faye will not accommodate Tod sexually while working there, Tod completely unable to fill the role of consumer in Los Angeles. Yet despite Faye's upfront attitude and insistence "on keeping [their relationship] impersonal," Tod still pursues her, walking into the same spell that victimized Homer.

Despite Homer even acknowledging to himself that Faye was noticeably constructed and manufactured to a degree, he offers himself over to Faye, as well. According to the narrator, it was the Midwestern-migrants' nature (i.e., "infallible instinct") to give in to force, but there seems little doubt that Homer was not partially responsible for his collapse. Regardless, the narrator proclaims that he was luckier than the rest of his manipulated peers, at first, because "only those who still have hope can benefit from tears;" not yet numb to the city, Homer "cried himself to sleep." (103) But this hope quickly fades after Faye sleeps with "The Mexican" at Homer's home, completely insulting and emasculating the kind Midwesterner. Additionally, it seems to terminate any hope Homer had of becoming satisfied – sexually or otherwise – by Faye, with her affection falling onto another. The distrust and emotional abuse that Faye exhibits leads to Homer going mad in the novel's final act; last seen amidst the contentious mob, one "couldn't expect [him] to rise again." "Like certain humble field plants which die when transferred to richer soil," (78) Homer wholly withers away in Los Angeles, better off staying in his former modest Iowa town.

After the "few minutes [it took] to get settled in his new home" (81), Homer realizes there is nothing else to do, and boredom takes over. "Miserable and lonely," (83) he even forces himself to head down to Hollywood Boulevard for food ("although he was not hungry") merely because "the temptation to go to sleep again would become irresistible" (87). Homer followed the migration to Los Angeles because of the city's

alluring image of a westward paradise, but here it appears he slowly comes to terms that the advertisements are not accurate representations of the real environment. The city's patrons concern themselves with drawing Homer and other migrants to the land, rather than focusing on entertaining them once they have arrived and already put money into the benefactors' pockets. Unfortunately, this tedium does not fade, as evident by the narrator's depiction of the crowd "of the lower middle classes" (177) prior to the culminating riot:

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, war. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can't titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing. (178)

Other than the large public works that Los Angeles was founded on, the city "has otherwise been left to the anarchy of market forces,"³⁴ effectively leaving the poor and middle class to their own resources. Consistent with the anti-myth of Los Angeles – the belief that the city is parasitical in nature – Southern California's population and economic growth was disproportionate to its actual production base ("the paradox of the first 'postindustrial' city in its preindustrial guise"),³⁵ subsequently leaving migrants without a job and source of income. The image of Los Angeles was that of a prosperous and edenic city, but this produced simulacra merely causes Homer and this group feeling "tricked and burn[ing] with resentment." Without "the mental equipment for leisure, the

³⁴ *Quartz*, 23

³⁵ *Quartz*, 25

money nor the physical equipment for pleasure,” (178) they become excessively bored, turning to newspapers and movies for any sort of entertainment. The city’s patrons would prefer to amuse them with Los Angeles own business venture (i.e., film, newspaper), after all. These outlets feed them on sensationalism, stuffing their appetites for stimulants – taking them away from their misery if only for a moment. Aforementioned, Los Angeles only embraces the “wealthy man,” (67) and, so, the lower classes are submitted to an environment whose reality is unable to satisfy them. Subsequently, they turn to simulations of this “real,” yet, the narrator acknowledges, this manufactured entertainment merely makes them additionally bitter. This lower middle-class has even become contemptuous to the natural environment – “The sun is a joke. Oranges can’t titillate their jaded palates” – as it lacks the produced thrills they are now inclined to in a city built on simulations and proliferations. “Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies,” not even a riot, because they have been conditioned on misrepresentations of the “real.” Seemingly forgotten, Homer and company come to Los Angeles only to die, withering away in West’s 1939 novel.³⁶

Only adding to the migrants’ abuse, the savings they bestowed to the city’s patrons only promoted this unemployment and disenfranchisement. The region’s extensive boom depended on this Middle America money, directing it into real estate and oil speculations; however, it consequently “ensured a vicious circle of crisis and bankruptcy” for this lower middle-class.³⁷ A prominent literary figure in 1930’s Los Angeles, Louis Adamic³⁸ wrote that “[wildcat enterprises]...with their aim for quick

³⁶ Richard Lehan, “The Los Angeles Novel and the Idea of the West”. p. 33

³⁷ *Quartz*, 37

³⁸ Adamic hailed from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the first non-Jew immigrant to become a prominent American writer. Predominantly writing about his labor experiences in the US, Adamic’s work became attached with Los Angeles’ early workers’ movement despite his unwillingness to be a spokesperson for the struggle.

profit, are doomed to collapse and drag down multitudes of people.”³⁹ Heavily influenced by Adamic’s work, West constructed a novel that spoke to this conflict, encapsulating in part these people’s toils; *The Day of the Locust*’s narrator acknowledges that these little people “have been cheated and betrayed” by their new environment. In the moments leading up to the riot, the crowd already magnifying around a Hollywood film preview, Tod spots Homer with “trousers on over his nightgown” (178) and heading back to Wayneville – his former Iowa home – with suitcases in hand. The protagonist of this class struggle, Homer eventually cracks, turning from a mild-mannered and kind man to a frustrated lunatic. While Homer attempts to run away from the chaos of Los Angeles, other victims’ aggravation often culminates in violence, as depicted in the novel’s climax.

As mentioned, the city is not the Eden it represented itself to be, the narrative’s buildup to a riot an accurate representation of the violent conflicts ever-present in Los Angeles, rooted deep in its history. Additionally, the combative relationship between secondary characters, Earle Shoop (nicknamed “the Cowboy”) and Miguel (nicknamed “the Mexican”), markedly represents the residue of the race battles in and for Los Angeles. In the 1860s and 70s, less than two decades before Lummis’ arrival, Los Angeles was the most violent town in the West with Mexican-Anglo hostility as the focus of these clashes. Symbolizing the contentious take-over of Alta California, West’s narrator depicts a Mexican saddle in Earle’s store surrounded by “a large collection of torture instruments” (108). But General Otis and Lummis had glazed over this strong friction by the turn-of-the-century, making race relations out to be a “pastoral ritual of

³⁹ Quoted in McWilliams, *Louis Adamic*, pp. 80-81

obedience and paternalism.”⁴⁰ West, however, further illustrates that nothing has changed, portraying the Cowboy and Mexican as regularly contemptuous towards one another (“[Tod] saw Earle raise his stick and bring it down on the Mexican’s head” (117)). Los Angeles’ patrons may have transformed the city from the Wild West to a metropolis of glitz and glamour, but the simulacra of Los Angeles is merely covering up that the city is still a very tense and potentially violent place. Homer and company’s disenfranchisement fictionally documents the origin of class violence that becomes central to the construction of the city, capturing the class struggle – and subsequent aggression – of the middle strata. With Adamic illustrating the forty-year battle between the Capitalist and Labor forces in Los Angeles and esteemed author Upton Sinclair at the forefront of the city’s Socialist Movement in 1934, the city’s authors were conscious leaders of the political and social strife, West debunking the Los Angeles myth along with the rest of them.

Professor at the University of California Los Angeles, Richard Lehan believes this manipulation and fraudulency – followed by the extreme apathy – of the lower-middle class are the “moral consequences of a state of mind founded on commercial exploitation, the movement from the desire to control the land [becoming] the desire to control other people”⁴¹ But, no matter its treachery, Hollywood “can claim none but the willing victim.”⁴² The narrator acknowledges that Homer “somehow knew that his only defense [against Faye] was chastity,” (107) implying that Homer could only be saved from Faye (i.e., Los Angeles) by not desiring sex (i.e., retirement in ‘paradise’) in the first place. Tod was given all the signs, specifically told not to seek Faye’s beauty, but he has become drunk off her image. Similarly, the only action that could save him would have

⁴⁰ *Quartz*, 26

⁴¹ Lehan, 36

⁴² Mark Royden Winchell, “Fantasy Seen: Hollywood Fiction Since West”. p. 166

been forgetting Faye existed at all. The narrator – despite the negative depiction of Faye and Los Angeles – asserts that both men are subconsciously willing participants in their demise, “[Homer] was destroying himself, and although he didn’t mean it that way, forcing [Faye] to accept the blame” (143), yet attempt to cast the responsibility onto the city. Even when Tod notices the construction of Faye’s image, a warning signal to her deception, he still longs for her love without a second thought (“Faye’s affectations, however, were so completely artificial that he found them charming.” (103)). Furthermore, in this vein, Tod’s profession allows him to peek behind the curtain of Hollywood, observing the cheap, simulated creations that make the illusory system run; regardless, Tod – like West did – wishes for notability in Los Angeles. Due to the romantic expectations that people’s desires will be met in Los Angeles, the shocking realities of the Southern California city take on added dread, leaving people feeling despondent and without a voice. While sometimes these frustrations lead to violence, West’s *The Day of the Locust* will tell you: “any dream was better than no dream and beggars couldn’t be choosers.” (104)