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FROM EDEN TO DYSTOPIA: AN ECOCRITICAL EXAMINATION  
OF EMERGENT MYTHOLOGIES IN EARLY  
LOS ANGELES LITERARY TEXTS

by

Jaquelin Pelzer

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

American Studies

Approved:

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Melody Graulich, Ph.D.  
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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2017

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## ABSTRACT

From Eden to Dystopia: An Ecocritical Examination of  
Emergent Mythologies in Early Los Angeles Literary Texts

by

Jaquelin Pelzer, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2017

Major Professor: Dr. Melody Graulich  
Department: English

*From Eden to Dystopia: An Ecocritical Examination of Emergent Mythologies in Early Los Angeles Literary Texts* explores the way nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors wrote about the natural environment of Los Angeles and how those early depictions of nature laid the foundations for later iterations of nature in Los Angeles, both in literature and in practice. The thesis first examines popular travel guides and narratives of the 1870s and 1880s, which helped introduce the region to a wider audience in the first decades after California statehood in 1850, and traces how Anglo-American sentiments about Los Angeles tracked the “emparadising” of the region. Next the thesis calls attention to the work of Charles Fletcher Lummis and the booster magazine *The Land of Sunshine* from 1894-1902, examining the ways poetry, editorials, artwork, and even advertising shaped a specific vision of Los Angeles as a “new Eden for the Saxon home-

seeker”—subtly and overtly excluding certain groups from this invitation to paradise based on class and race. The success of these and other efforts paved the way for hundreds of thousands of new arrivals, and the subsequent chapter of the thesis studies the resulting problems of that population explosion through the emergence of *environmental noir*, seen in literature and in various civic publications. Here the thesis analyzes two novels (Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* and Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*) alongside Chamber of Commerce promotional materials and the 1930 Olmstead and Bartholomew *Parks* plan, finding the effects of rapid growth and continued overselling of LA’s nature, which resulted in noticeable changes in the environment. Finally, the thesis looks to the history of the Los Angeles River as a site of the city’s complex and damaging relationship with its own environment, regarding the river’s demise as ecologically tragic yet also finding hope in its recent (ongoing) revitalization—perhaps an indicator that other aspects of nature in Los Angeles, and other urban areas more broadly, might also be reclaimed.

(151 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

From Eden to Dystopia: An Ecocritical Examination of  
Emergent Mythologies in Early Los Angeles Literary Texts

Jaquelin Pelzer

In *From Eden to Dystopia: An Ecocritical Examination of Emergent Mythologies in Early Los Angeles Literary Texts*, ecocriticism and critical regionalism were utilized alongside other American Studies practices to analyze nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century depictions of nature in Los Angeles. Specifically, these tools were applied to travel guides and narratives of the 1870s and 1880s, the turn-of-the-century magazine *The Land of Sunshine*, Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1926) and Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), and other non-fiction publications of the 1920s and '30s to track an evolving narrative of Los Angeles as a paradise and later as a place perched on the edge of ecological ruin. Key themes included nature as aesthetic or health-related amenity vs. exploitable resource, along with both subtle and overt class- and race-based environmental exclusions. The chief aim of this thesis was to elucidate how Los Angeles went from a "new Eden for the Saxon home-seeker" to the place where its river was paved with cement and virtually forgotten for decades. This thesis concluded that with the Los Angeles River's recent revitalization efforts, there could be future gains made for other aspects of the city's environment, with the hope that uncovering past idea-shaping narratives of nature in Los Angeles may help illuminate how current ideas of Los Angeles as a place without nature came to be and how that city-versus-nature dichotomy can be both damaging and false.



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Acknowledgments are also due to the many scholars upon whose shoulders I've stood to glimpse the formation of this idea of nature in Los Angeles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I feel a special debt of gratitude for Bill Handley at USC, Sharon Sekhon of the Studio for Southern California History, and Jenny Price, all of whom I had the chance to meet during a research trip to Los Angeles in the summer of 2011. During that trip, I was assisted by the famously helpful Dace Traube at USC Special Collections and Liza Posas at the Autry Center's Braun Research Library at the Southwestern Museum. Early drafts of Chapter 2 received feedback at both the California American Studies Association conference in May 2011 and at the Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth in June 2011. Thank you to my Futures workshop leader, Hamilton Carroll, and my fellow workshop members for their helpful, detailed responses.

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## INTRODUCTION

### STARTING POINTS: A THOMAS GUIDE® OF WORDS<sup>1</sup>

“The history of LA storytelling, if more complicated, still basically boils down to a trilogy. Nature blesses LA. Nature flees LA. And nature returns armed.”

(Jenny Price, “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.” n.p.)

In “The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles,” a chapter in his evocatively titled *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998), Mike Davis categorizes the myriad ways in which a century of writers and filmmakers have enjoyed wreaking apocalyptic havoc on the City of Angels. While perhaps taking some creative license in unleashing zombie hordes, alien invasions, incredibly fast-growing grass, irradiated ants, and the occasional visit from Satan himself, the creators of LA’s fictional destruction(s) have actually had a rich history from which to construct their “dark rapture[s]” of the city’s demise (277). After all, Davis reminds us, “Los Angeles ... is perfectly cast in the role of environmental suicide. Only Mexico City has more completely toxified its natural setting, and no other metropolis in the industrial Northern Hemisphere continues to grow at such breakneck speed” (318). From its first US census in 1850 to the most recent one in 2010, the city of Los Angeles has ballooned from a small pueblo of 1,600 souls to a sprawling megalopolis of over 3,792,000. Amidst the stereotypical dreamers, schemers, and (as a bit of both) moviemakers comprising those millions of Angelenos—joining another 6,000,000-plus residents in LA County—there

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<sup>1</sup> Before GPS, the ubiquitous Thomas Guide® (a spiral-bound atlas) was the best and sometimes only way to navigate the chaotic maze of streets and web of freeways that is Los Angeles.

are even some nature lovers. But, many ask, other than its famed beaches, what is there for a nature lover to love about LA? This thesis won't attempt to answer that particular question, but it will assay to unravel the conception of Los Angeles as a place apart from nature by peering into the past representations of LA and Southern California to see exactly where the "natural" LA went. More specifically, I aim to understand how the idea of nature has been pivotal to the construction and deconstruction of a mythology of Los Angeles as seen in literary texts from the first decades of its existence as part of the United States. However, as immense as Greater Los Angeles is, the body of literature and scholarship about it remains equally immense. Therefore, I will borrow a scholarly move from cultural historian David Wrobel and declare that, "[g]iven the extent of scholarship on" the region, this thesis "can hardly provide a comprehensive overview. ... [T]he intent here is to be provocative rather than comprehensive, to raise a range of interesting and important issues for other scholars to consider"—or, rather, for me to consider in my own future scholarship (22).

To begin, I must first try to specify exactly what I mean when I talk about "Los Angeles." Others have defined it as "the sprawling up-for-grabs city lying at the end of the frontier"; "a museum of failed urbanism, the great what-not-to-do of twentieth-century city building and civic enterprise"; and a "metropolis that suffers both extreme environmental ruin and polar social and economic inequities" and yet is "the finest place in America to think and write about nature" (Fine 118; Deverell & Hise 2; Price, "Thirteen" n.p.). In cultural representations, Los Angeles "writing would perpetuate ... three topics: delight in an Arcadian paradise, frustration that a potential utopia is stalled for lack of water, and a critical eye cast on the citizenry" (McClung 24). Jenny Price

declares that LA is “not just a place where we’ve liked to *tell* stories. It *is* a story” (“Thirteen” n.p.). Part of its story has become, like the rest of the American West, “the multitudinous mythologized versions of its past ... a sanitized, simplified version of a messier more ambiguous history” (Wrobel 19). Since Los Angeles is a city notoriously created by advertisers and boosters from the get-go, Hal Rothman’s reminder that “[t]he identity of such [heavily promoted, touristic] places became what they marketed” introduces a darker irony in the idea of LA’s mutation from the booster’s Edenic wonderland to the noirists’ bleak human wilderness (106). Similarly, Michael Ventura removed Los Angeles from something rooted in physical place and chronicled history when he noted, “*Imagination is all that finally defines L.A.*” (qtd. in Price, “Thirteen” n.p.). But Price vividly counters that idea: “L.A. is not ‘all imagination.’ It has never been ‘your dream life,’ so watch out for the blowback—for smog, mud, freeway gridlock, racial violence, poverty, homelessness, beach erosion, sewage spills, severe water pollution, and the fact that the rest of the West hates you for hoarding their water supplies” (“Thirteen” n.p.). Clearly, the idea of “Los Angeles” brings with it a heaping pile of cultural baggage and identities, so a more clear-cut definition seems necessary for the purposes of this thesis. In his essay “Los Angeles Against the Mountains,” John McPhee defines LA geographically, stating that “[t]he words ‘Los Angeles’ as generally used here refer neither to the political city nor to the county but to *the multinamed urban integrity* that has a street in it seventy miles long (Sepulveda Boulevard) and, from the Pacific Ocean at least to Pomona, moves north against the mountains as a comprehensive town” (184, emphasis added). It this definition that represents what I mean by “Los Angeles” in the following pages—a complex geographical entity that then becomes

further complicated by “the tension between ... [t]wo broad positions: the paradigmatic singularity and prognostic quality of metropolitan Los Angeles” (Villa & Sanchez 499). In other words, LA is both itself, bounded by McPhee’s (still rather amorphous) physical geography, and the great harbinger of what’s down the line for the rest of the world if LA’s lessons aren’t heeded—which brings me to a final definition of Los Angeles: a place that “Americans have used ... to think” (Price, “Thirteen” n.p.).

One of the things that, according to Price, “Americans have used LA to think” about is *nature*. Even more slippery and difficult to define than “Los Angeles,” the idea of nature lies at the heart of this thesis and therefore must be defined in some fashion. At its most basic, my use of the word “nature” here refers to the physical environment of the Los Angeles area—the mountains, the Pacific, the rivers, the flora and (less so) fauna, and the climate. Nature in this sense encompasses both the found, “unaltered” landscape of early Southern California history and the human-altered environment found in the agricultural and more extractive uses of the environment. But there are other, specific inferences of nature that come to the fore in these discussions. First, there’s the idea of “nature as amenity,” which William Deverell and Greg Hise describe as “the climatological and topographical advantages of the region” (8). Nature as amenity is fundamental to the efforts of the boosters in creating a mythological Edenic LA as it captured the “inchoate longing for a more ‘natural’ environment [that] enter[ed] into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt[ed] toward urban life” (Marx 5)—especially the crowded, industrial urban life of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—as will be seen in chapter 2, in Charles Lummis’s pride that his adopted city

didn't (yet) have the crowding and pollution of the immigrant- and factory-filled urban East.

Part of the amenities offered by nature in Los Angeles and Southern California can be categorized as purely aesthetic. "Nature," Kevin Starr explains, "finally, had been the great fact and theme of art in California, and it was invariably the landscape they inhabited that Californians referred to when they wanted to describe who they were" (*Americans* 208). Although the landscape inhabited by Southern Californians lacked some of the drama of other, more celebrated parts of California like the Sierras and the coast along Big Sur, nature as scenery and "scenery as asset" nonetheless informed views of nature in early Los Angeles literary texts. Influenced by nineteenth-century Romanticism, this view "legitimized nature by finding aesthetic, spiritual and cultural value in scenic landscapes" while its "seemingly contradictory use of the language of commerce—'asset' ... —to promote the ideals of nature preservation reflects a long history of shifting attitudes about the role of nature in American culture." In short, the "scenery as asset" view of nature "seeks to reconcile the machine and the garden" (Shaffer 364, 362). The "machine" represents yet another conception of nature treated in the pages of this thesis: nature as exploitable resource. Through agriculture and horticulture, oil drilling and the promotion of LA as "Nature's Workshop" with all the raw materials necessary for industry, the idea of nature in Los Angeles ultimately reflects "man-made interventions on nature, impositions of human will exerted on the landscape" (Fine 135). Historian Douglas Sackman reminds us that "[i]t is useful to consider this landscape succession not as natural evolution ... but as *a series of conquests that remade landscapes*. These landscapes each were a cocreation of a dominant social group and the



environment” (“Garden” 250, emphasis added). Along with a physical remaking of the landscape, thinking about nature in LA and Southern California means, always, thinking about nature as a constructed and mediated entity—an idea suggested by (among others) William Cronon, who remarks on “just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is” (79), and Alexander Wilson, who explains that “our experience of the natural world ... is always mediated” (qtd. in Bennett 34).

In the constructions and mediations of nature in Los Angeles, binaries emerge as fundamental and inherent to any discussion of nature in the region, with “urban space as the product of an ongoing contest” between a number of related and interconnected binaries: romantic aesthetic vs. economic resource, nostalgia vs. growth, pastoral vs. urban, “scenery as amenity” vs. usable resource, and more (Hise & Deverell 55).<sup>2</sup> These binaries are also reflected in LA’s literary texts, but are the binaries necessary—or even accurate? Neil Campbell argues that these and other binaries prove to be reductive and limit our understanding of places like Los Angeles:

Although the American West is an immensely complicated and multiple cultural space, it has too often been defined by similar binary and reductionist grids of thought and image, expression the region uncritically as myth and reality, true and false, utopia and dystopia, rural and urban, local and global, when, in fact, it has always existed as a *blurred, contested zone*, both region and more than region, national and international, imagined dreamspace as well as real, material space. (Campbell 60, emphasis added)

Perhaps the most pervasive and “blurred” binary materializes in the juxtaposition of “city” vs. “nature,” which Nash articulates as the “love of wilderness ... offset by an antipodal attraction to civilization” (78). And Price argues that this “vision of wild nature as counterpoint to a corrupted modern civilization has always played a central role in

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<sup>2</sup> The “economics vs. aesthetics” binary (and instances where the binary is troubled) is central to my understanding of the treatment of LA’s nature in this thesis (Gumprecht 123).

American national myths and identity” (“Thirteen” n.p.).<sup>3</sup> So are the two really “antipodal,” serving as the “counterpoint” to each other? The pages of *The Land of Sunshine*, for instance, promote the idea that Los Angeles and its environs provided a middle space, where people like Lummis could have both civilization and nature. And, later, the writers of noir and “environmental noir” present the true wilderness *as* the city, going by Nash’s definition of wilderness not as just “uncultivated and otherwise undeveloped land” but also as “the feelings they produce in the observer. Any place in which a person feels stripped of guidance, lost, and perplexed may be called a wilderness” (3). Finally, Michael Bennett also takes umbrage at the notion of city and nature as binaries (something that certain ecocritical works seem to suggest) when he asks, “Does it imply that nature and urban space are antithetical? *Is there no such thing as urban nature?*” (41, emphasis added). This and related questions inform the central mission of my thesis.

Two theoretical modes in contemporary literary and cultural studies of the American West serve as the underpinnings of my work in this thesis: *ecocriticism* and *critical regionalism*. Lawrence Buell has suggested that the field “define[s] human identity not as free-standing but in terms of its relationship with the physical environment and/or nonhuman life forms” and looks for evidence of that relationship in cultural productions such as literature and film (101). In his 2005 monograph, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*, he discusses how, since the 1980s, the field has evolved in so many different directions, from ecofeminism to environmental justice and many other subfields, that “ecocentric thinking

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<sup>3</sup> Importantly, her work seems to directly oppose the idea that “wild nature” is wholly separate from “modern civilization”—at least in Los Angeles.

is more like a scattergram than a united front” (101). For a new ecocritical scholar, such as myself, it’s impossible to be a master of all (if *any*) of these subfields, but Buell suggests a place for the kind of work I aim to do in this thesis as part of “[s]econd-wave ecocriticism [that] has so far concentrated strongly ... on locating vestiges of nature within cities and/or exposing crimes of eco-injustice against society’s marginal groups” (24).<sup>4</sup> In addition, Buell offers “such thematic configurations as pastoral, eco-apocalypticism, and environmental racism” as areas for emerging ecocritical work (130); I see the three substantive chapters in this thesis as addressing these particular “thematic configurations,” though in the order of first pastoralism (chapter 1), then environmental racism (chapter 2), and finally “eco-apocalypticism” (chapter 3). Through these and other “thematic configurations,” I hope to present part of the story of how Los Angeles went from “ecocultural icon” to the embodiment of an ecocultural *anti*-icon today (Buell 76). To do so, I move away from “first wave” ecocriticism, with its focus on wilderness and “Deep Ecology,” towards what Michael Bennett describes as a “social ecological perspective [that] requires a shift from Buell’s literary analysis of wide open spaces to cultural studies of metropolitan places” (43-44). In encouraging a reconsideration of *urban ecocriticism*, Bennett suggests that the hyperfocus on wilderness in earlier ecocriticism—namely the Deep Ecology movement, the tenets of which he “argue[s] ... can just as easily be found in urban environments” (32)—neglects huge swaths of human experience and potential texts for ecocritical study:

much of the most interesting literature of the American West and some of the most astute readings of the western landscape have been devoted to unearthing the

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<sup>4</sup> While the following chapters attend to the former, with a focus on literary “urban ecology,” the latter emphasis on addressing environmental racism remains a goal of my work but perhaps not one addressed throughout the entirety of this initial project.

culture of one of the largest urban environments in the world: Los Angeles. ... Yet these are not the [texts] which appear in deep ecocritical analyses of the literature of the American West. And some of the best contemporary cultural criticism has also focused on [LA] ... [They're] not the usual suspects when one lines up nature writers and ecocritics, but their work speaks to an experience of urban environments more germane to the lives of the majority of the inhabitants of the western states, who live in cities and suburbs, than the most eloquent testimonials to one man or woman's encounter with the wilderness. (40-41)

I hope to begin to address some of that imbalance with my own ecocritical scholarship.

Another key component of the work I *aim* to do, whether or not I actually succeed, falls under the umbrella of “critical regionalism”—especially as reflected in the work of Neil Campbell in *The Rhizomatic West: Representing the American West in a Transnational, Global, Media Age*. In his 2008 manifesto for critical regionalism as applied to Western American studies, Campbell explains that the theory attempts to address how “the West ‘traveled’ beyond the grids and maps of regionalism, state and nation, existing as real and imagined in the lives of many communities inside and outside the United States who had particular relationships to something they referred to as ‘western,’” leading to “rhizomatic, traveling approaches to westness” (42). I see critical regionalism as crucial to studying how Los Angeles and California in particular “[exist] as real and imagined in the lives of many communities inside and outside the United States,” and how these other, external conceptions of the region of Southern California in turn affected the internal realities and experience of life within the region—particularly life and expressions of that life (i.e. literature, film, visual media, etc.) as it connected to nature, both positively and negatively. As Campbell more eloquently expresses in regard to the West as a whole, Los Angeles and Southern California stand as “a complex discursive space that appears transparent, clearly represented and archived in a thousand

canonical texts of history, literature, film, photography, art, geography, and every other form, and yet as one looks closer within this apparent clarity other forces emerge, spilling out and provoking ‘new passages’ and connections to be made” (299). The study of Los Angeles—as a representative western, American, and global space—and how its “local cultural practices are intimately related with economic and political conditions of global proportions ... reveals the potential of social ecology-inspired cultural studies at its best” (Andrew Ross, qtd. in Bennett 44). In this rhizomatic way, critical regionalism and ecocriticism together open up “new passages” in the accepted view of the city and what it stands for in the national and global imagination. And since “any region is more the creation of ‘human thought and behavior’ than of nature” (Campbell 43), understanding how people have *used* nature to formulate an idea of and mythology about the Los Angeles “region” requires a look back at some of these expressions of “human thought and behavior” in literary texts. Finally, I hope that the use of critical regionalism and the kind of urban ecocriticism I strive to do in this thesis allow me to “consider how American studies as a field, like Los Angeles as a subject, calls for a particular kind of situated intellectual practice” that nevertheless doesn’t fall into the trap of regional navel-gazing (Villa & Sanchez 500).

Part of the key to critical regionalism in the study of the American West is, for Campbell, the selection of texts, and he states that it is “vital to introduce ... those texts that deviate from the established and canonical grid, interjecting various forms of ‘outsideness’ and ‘folly’ into how ‘westness’ is defined” (303). Similarly, Robert Kern writes that “eco-criticism becomes most interesting and useful ... when it aims to recover the environmental character or orientation of works whose conscious or foregrounded

interests lie elsewhere” (qtd. in Buell 26). In selecting which texts to study for this thesis, I’ve attempted to give snapshots from the period of “early” Los Angeles—more specifically early *US-American* Los Angeles, since LA obviously existed as a physical and ideological entity long before it became the property of the US government<sup>5</sup>—and a similar range of types of texts that address the ways in which I believe the emerging and shifting mythology of Los Angeles reflected the contemporary conceptions of nature in the region. While my selections may not all be reflective of canonical conceptions of “literature,” they do reflect my belief that “[t]he strategy of converting subjective place-evocation into a shareable representation of environmentality without bounds is not the property of any one genre or style” (Buell 55). And, most importantly, they reflect my ideas of what the most influential “share[d] representations of environmentality” were during the time periods in question: travel guides and narratives during the 1870s and early 1880s; *The Land of Sunshine* during the late 1890s and at the turn of the century; and literary noir (and “environmental noir”) during the 1920s and 1930s.

Beginning with the 1873 guide to California by Charles Nordhoff, chapter 1 explores expressions of Southern California as paradise and Los Angeles as the perfect (or, per Nordhoff, imperfect) spot of civilization within that paradise. More specifically, this reading of Nordhoff’s and other guides—Benjamin Truman’s (1874) and Oliver Roberts’s (1884)—reflects the process of turning the native landscape into the Anglo idea of paradise, which Roderick Nash has described as a place where “[a] mild climate constantly prevailed. Ripe fruit drooped from every bough, and there were no thorns to prick reaching hands. The animals in paradise lived in harmony with man. Fear as well as

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<sup>5</sup> The pueblo of Los Angeles was founded by the Spanish in September 1781.

want disappeared in this ideal state of nature. ... Wilderness had no place in the paradise myth” (9). The process of this transformation and its effect on the landscape and literary texts of the time found encapsulation in a word coined in 1881, when “Governor Perkins ... came up with a new transitive verb, to *emparadise*” (Sackman 252). As I explore in that chapter, Anglos actively engaged in writing about and physically reshaping the landscape of Southern California, and they began to reshape the mythology of it in their creation of a *pseudo-hacienda class*—a term explicated in my discussions of these texts in chapter 1.

Moving forward a decade, chapter 2 reads the treatment of nature in the booster magazine *The Land of Sunshine* (and editor Charles Lummis’s *A Tramp Across the Continent* [1892]) as part of the evolution of LA’s mythology from natural paradise to one also embracing the emerging metropolis, creating the idea of a *romantic frontier*. Revising and improving upon the process in which, in the larger story of the US, “anticipations of a second Eden quickly shattered against the reality of North America ... [as] seventeenth-century frontiersman realized that the New World was the antipode to paradise” (Nash 25), Lummis created the idea of civilization (Los Angeles) in synergy with nature that realized the dream of paradise where the other, more rugged frontier of the New World had failed. Lawrence Culver has noted that “[t]he potent appeal of Lummis’s ... romanticized Southwest lay in an idealized—and largely invented—past[,] ... an illusory past when there had existed a harmony between individuals and between humans and nature. The need for these illusions spoke to underlying anxieties about modern humanity’s alienation from nature” (31). As part of this “illusory past,” Lummis embraced the appeal of the natural environment of the Los Angeles area as well as of the

cultural environment bequeathed to him by Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* in 1884, a text which Karen Ramirez highlights as "important in redefining Southern California as a civilized and replete culture, full of history and ritual, rather than part of some 'primitive, empty, and wild' West" (qtd. in McClung 30)—i.e. as a *romantic frontier* vs. the traditional Turnerian frontier. Lummis's efforts were part of this "transition [that] began sometime in the early 1870's" in which "California did not abruptly soften, but it ceased being a uniformly harsh frontier" (Starr, *Americans* 175). The marriage of nature and civilization, as depicted within the pages of *LOS*, was at the center of that transition.

The final transition examined in this thesis comes during the 1920s and '30s, with the emergence of a different kind of literature that responded directly to the (over)selling of the idea of a Los Angeles as situated within Eden. "*Noir*," Davis explains, "was like a transformational grammar turning each charming ingredient of the boosters' arcadia into a sinister equivalent" (*City* 38). Beginning with Upton Sinclair's opus *Oil!* (1926) and concluding with Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), chapter 3 explores the rise of what I call *toxic fiction* in fictional and historical texts of this period. Intertwined with Sinclair's and Chandler's novelistic portrayal of the destruction of the natural environment of Los Angeles, I examine the LA Chamber of Commerce's role in conflicting efforts to sell and/or preserve nature in the city—most importantly in the creation (and rejection) of the 1930 Olmstead and Bartholomew report, *Parks, Playgrounds, and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region*. And, finally, the effects of the failure of that 1930 plan, as well as of the cumulative layering of *toxic fictions* on the landscape of Los Angeles, inform an exploration of the LA River as text in my concluding chapter—the river about which Blake Gumprecht states, "perhaps nothing



symbolizes the environmental transformation of Los Angeles more than the destruction of the Los Angeles River, that thing, ironically, to which the city owes its life” (115).

With the primary texts I have chosen for this thesis, certain gaps and silences seem evident. The first is that of film—both as an art form and an industry—critically important in the literary, cultural, and environmental history of Los Angeles. Simply put, film seemed too big a subject and too important in the creation of a mythology of LA for this thesis; therefore I’m saving an examination of film for my future dissertation, since film as art, industry, and promotional machine all affected the LA and the nature-in-LA myth. The second and more egregious gap that I perceive in my selection of texts can be summed up by one question: “Why only dead white (US-American) guys?”—something I asked myself more than once in the process of researching and writing over the last year. To answer my own criticism, I once again defer to a future dissertation as a place for me to address this lack of women’s and non-Anglo-American voices, as I see this thesis as just a first stab to help me establish a framework and direction for my work by starting with a big picture understanding of what “an ecocritical examination of emerging mythologies in early Los Angeles literary texts” would actually look like. The particular “literary texts” in this thesis are by the “dead white guys” I see as those most influential in shaping a mythology of Los Angeles during this time period by shaping public opinion *and* the landscape. Of course, Jackson’s *Ramona* begs to differ with that notion, and Jackson and other women writers in California during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seem to glare at me from the corner of my mind in which my future dissertation lurks. (I see you, Mary Austin and María Amparo Ruiz de Burton.) Beside them stand others neglected in my thesis, those Chicano/a, Native American, Asian

American, African American, and non-US writers whose words might shed a different light on the path of a mythological LA from Eden to a toxic dystopia. I look forward to learning about and from their work in my future scholarly efforts.

When I began this project in the fall of 2010, originally conceived as the incredibly ambitious and vague topic of “the literature of Los Angeles,” one of the first books I read was Phoebe Kropp’s (now Phoebe Young) *California Vieja*, which traces the evolution of Southern California’s affinity for and production of its romantic Spanish past. Young’s model, that of selecting a small number of cultural artifacts—“memory places” in her work—to examine the way in which Californians “do not passively inherit memory ... [but] actively produce it” (15, 13), immediately struck me as a valuable one for getting at the broad swath of cultural productions that interested me beyond the novels and poetry that seemed more expected in such a project. By looking at different kinds of texts, I could follow Young’s model to use different moments in time to illustrate the historical and theoretical issues at stake as a whole. Another model for my work, as I began to home in on the “natural” aspects of LA’s cultural artifacts as the point of interest for me, emerged in the work of William Cronon. His essay “The Trouble with Wilderness” emphasizes the need to see beyond some iconic, romantic view of Nature and Wilderness in order to escape the epidemic of blindness to “the wildness in our own backyards, ... the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it” (86). As I delved deeper into Lummis’s complicated treatment of nature within the pages of *LOS* and recalled my own surprise at falling in love with Los Angeles *because* of its nature (vs. despising it due to a lack of nature, as I had been led to expect before I actually arrived there), his exhortations immediately locked into place the central topic of what

would become my thesis: “By seeing the otherness in that which is most unfamiliar, we can learn to see it too in that which at first seemed merely ordinary ... if it can help us perceive and respect a nature *we had forgotten to recognize as natural*” (88, emphasis added). I wanted to understand why exactly nature had been somewhat “forgotten” in the various iterations of a public conception and mythology of Los Angeles, since Lummis’s time to my own. Yet I harbored a secret fear that focusing on nature in LA might get me laughed out of scholarly discussions until I read Jenny Price’s illuminating essay, “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in LA.” In my concluding chapter I’ll count the ways that I love this essay and Price’s crusade as a writer and Angeleno. For now the epigraph to this introduction reveals enough of why I consider her work one of the most important models for my own—echoing Price’s assertion that there *is* nature to love in Los Angeles, especially when she notes that’s “why so many of the best-known interpreters of L.A. as the American dream and nightmare ... have written obsessively about nature” (“Thirteen Ways” n.p.).

Even limiting my research into the literature of Los Angeles by focusing on the way nature has been treated in that literature amounted to a daunting and, for a Master’s thesis, unfeasibly large project. Selecting the time periods and texts I chose to examine helped to make it a more manageable project, yet I worried that by leaving gaps in time and texts (as noted in the “why all the dead white guys” discussion above) I wouldn’t be telling the whole story, the accurate story. The work of two final scholars utilized a deliberate scholarly move such as the one I was trying to make. For Philip Deloria’s *Indians in Unexpected Places*, a mere 300 pages would never have been enough to fully examine the ways in which conceptions of Native Americans reflected how “[i]deology is

not simply an idea reproduced by individuals in and through systems of representation” but “a lived experience, something we see and perform on a daily basis” (9). To escape the sense of incompleteness or futility of trying to express such an enormous facet of Native American studies, Deloria makes it clear that in his book he’s not aiming for a comprehensive overview that informs exhaustively but snapshots that evoke a response and, hopefully, further reflection: “I aim to tell stories ... that may produce a scaffolding by that will not necessarily add up to a master narrative. ... I am aiming for the evocative and provocative rather than for the final word” (12). Wrobel makes a similar move in the introduction to *Seeing and Being Seen: Tourism in the American West*, which I quoted in the first paragraph of this introductory chapter. Thanks to Wrobel and Deloria, I feel more confident in presenting small “stories” as slices of the overall arc of the role of nature in creation and the metamorphosis of a mythology of Los Angeles—and vice versa.

In “Surf, Sagebrush, and Cement Rivers: Reimagining Nature in Los Angeles,” J. Scott Bryson surveys the treatment of nature in LA texts, writing that “[a]s surprising as it may be to many readers, the natural world pervades the city’s literature” (167).<sup>6</sup> By examining the questions raised by nature in this literature, he argues, “we can begin to appreciate the intricate role nature plays in LA literature, and in the city itself,” especially in its cultural iterations and popular conceptions (167). Using the tools of ecocriticism and critical regionalism to review literary texts of LA from its first 90 years as part of the US, in this thesis I attempt to uncover the “intricate role nature plays” in the creation of a mythology of Los Angeles as a physical and metaphorical entity. Such work speaks to

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<sup>6</sup> Ironically, I only read Bryson’s informative essay long after I’d already chosen my thesis topic and written (and presented) the first version of the conference paper that is now chapter 2.

some key questions in Western American studies—questions about urban spaces, environmental issues, race and class, and cultural representations of commonly held beliefs (i.e. mythologies) that continue to affect how we understand the region. Finally, the work begun here gestures towards the idea of “Los Angeles as an emblematic site through which the scholarship of American studies can be examined at its most innovative—as a city in which the local is deployed in complex practices of identity and community formation within the broader networks of globalization that continue to define and redefine what constitutes America” (Villa & Sanchez 499). I hope my examination of some of these “complex practices of identity formation” in the following chapters contributes to this body of “innovative” scholarship.

## CHAPTER 1

“WRITTEN IN NATURE’S OWN HAND-WRITING”: LOS ANGELES AND  
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IN TRAVEL GUIDES AND NARRATIVES, 1873-1884

“[T]he California of fact and the California of imagination shape and reshape each other.”

(Starr, *Inventing the Dream* vii)

On August 4, 1883, the Boston Commandery of the Knights Templar set out “in full Templar regalia” from their headquarters to “march” to the train station and depart on a “California Pilgrimage” three years in the making (Roberts 33). The primary purpose of their month-long trip—via railroad, with six newly built Pullman cars for their own dedicated use—was to attend the 22nd Triennial Conclave of the Grand Encampment (the national Templar convention) in San Francisco on August 21, 1883. (Figure 1-1) In the published account of the “California Pilgrimage,” author and Boston Templar Oliver Ayer Roberts reveals some of the other motivations for such an elaborate and costly (\$300 a person) journey: “[It was] undertaken for pleasure, profit, and fellowship,—the pleasure of seeing our vast domain, its plains, rivers, and mountains, of realizing its diversity of climate and productions, and of beholding what the hand of man hath wrought in a century. It was undertaken for profit in new vigor of the body, new food for the mind, and new and enlarged fellowship” (6). Part of that “vast domain” included a stopover in Los Angeles.



Figure 1-1. An 1883 postcard shows the Templars on parade during their conclave in San Francisco (Source: calisphere.universityofcalifornia.edu and the Bancroft Library; BANC PIC 1963.002:0602—C. < <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/tf7w1011h7/?order=1>>)

Traveling from Boston to Montreal, the group of around 200 men (and some of their wives) headed West, stopping in Michigan, Chicago, Missouri, Kansas, Santa Fe, and the Arizona Territory before reaching California on August 12. Roberts recalls their entry into Southern California and Los Angeles—the “Land of Flowers”—as a dramatic and welcome change from the dry southwest and the Mojave Desert: “Suddenly we emerged from the desert, and the foot-hills, with their scant herbage, were succeeded by green fields” (114). Their train traveled through Riverside, “the poor man’s paradise,” and “[f]orty-eight miles farther, past pretty villages with foreign names” to San Gabriel,

where they were greeted with locals bearing “delicious oranges” to refresh the weary travelers. Finally, “[e]ven miles more, through orchards, vineyards, and beauty, and we entered the Land of Flowers—Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles” (114). There the Templars received a warm welcome, with a large crowd of excited Angelenos greeting them at the train station.

Patricia Limerick reminds us that “many of our ideas about the West originated in the minds of people who were just passing through, people who saw only a little and who still wrote as if they knew the whole” (43). For the Boston Commandery, with just one day to spend in Los Angeles,<sup>1</sup> the brief glimpses of the region shown them by their LA hosts served as the introduction to the region as a whole and informed these New England elites what Southern California had to offer. Therefore, the significance of moments such as their dramatic desert crossing into a fertile, beautiful paradise likely would have remained with those travelers for some time, possibly even bringing to mind certain Biblical passages as referenced by Roderick Nash in *Wilderness and the American Mind*:

“The land is like the garden of Eden before them,” wrote the author of Joel, “but after them a desolate wilderness.” And Isaiah contains the promise that God will comfort Zion and “make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the Lord.” This story of the Garden and its loss embedded into Western thought the idea that wilderness and paradise were both physical and spiritual opposites. (15)

Emerging from the “wilderness” of the desert Southwest and the untamed Western frontier (not yet “closed” in 1883), the “paradise” characteristics of Los Angeles—itsself a “desert” transformed “like the garden”—certainly struck Roberts and his companions,

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<sup>1</sup> According to the schedule reproduced in Roberts’ account, the Boston Commandery arrived in LA the evening of Sunday, August 12, and left the next evening for San Francisco (35).



whose reactions he recorded in *The California Pilgrimage of Boston Commandery, Knights Templars, August 4 -September 4, 1883* (1884). A fellow traveler (one of the wives accompanying the Templars) “described Los Angeles as a lovely town, with orange and banana trees weighed down with luscious fruit, ready to be plucked. Flowers bloomed on every side, and white, tempting grapes hung in rich clusters within reach. She expressed delight and amazement at the profusion of . . . the magnificent heliotrope, which covers one whole side of houses. She confessed her inability to adequately describe the grandeur of the scenery” (116-17). Backing up his fellow Bostonian’s assessment, Roberts writes that, indeed, “[t]oo much cannot be said in praise of the soil and climate of this part of California. They seemed to be all that can be desired for the health, pleasure, and prosperity of man” (119).

Although the Boston Commandery arrived in special Pullman cars and sported the regalia of Knights Templar, they weren’t all that different from others in the waves of Anglo tourists that flocked to Southern California in the 1870s and 1880s due to increased rail access first from San Francisco to the north and later from the east with the Southern Pacific (transcontinental) Railroad. Prior to the first boom of tourism, access to and interest in the small pueblo of Los Angeles remained relatively low. The first Federal census of Los Angeles, at the time of California’s statehood in 1850, showed only around 1,600 inhabitants in the city and 3,500 in the county. The next census in 1860 showed a population that had more than doubled (4,400 in the city; 11,300 in the county), but by 1870, that rate of increase had slowed and resulted in a population of only 5,700 (city) and 15,300 (county). With the arrival of the railroads, the city’s growth picked up exponentially. By 1880, the City of Los Angeles had a population of 11,200, while the

county's population had likewise doubled to over 33,000 (McNamara xi-xii). While much larger than it had been, Los Angeles still had a long way to go to compete with San Francisco, whose Gold-Rush-fueled population boom resulted in a spectacular 800 to 35,000 to more than 50,000 inhabitants in just five years, 1848-1853 (Reiser 52). By the time Benjamin Truman, one of Southern California's first major chroniclers, came along in the 1870s, LA's larger and more cosmopolitan northern neighbor already had a population close to 150,000.

The Gold Rush and railroad access contributed to the accelerated growth of San Francisco versus Los Angeles, but that wasn't all: nature also played a role. Northern California boasted the Sierras, Yosemite Valley, a more dramatic coastline, and other marvels that attracted a touristic eye. Lawrence Culver has observed of these celebrated natural spots that, in regard to early California tourism in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, "in addition to being those most likely to be appreciated by Eastern urbanites and tourists steeped in the Romantic affinity for sublime mountain vistas, [these] were also the places most accessible by train or boat" (19). Meanwhile, in Southern California, the landscape remained somewhat more subdued and "warranted little attention. When Southern California appeared at all in such texts, it was as a remote and exotic realm, with a balmy 'tropical' climate" (Culver 19).<sup>2</sup> In fact, biologist and California environmental historian Paula Schiffman postulates a particular native ecosystem for the Los Angeles area: an enormous, grassy prairie. While later nineteenth-century writers, in particular, extolled the abundant and fertile "new Eden" of the Los Angeles basin and

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<sup>2</sup> In *Cadillac Desert*, Marc Reiser presents an even starker, more depressing difference from the metropolitan and natural landscape to the north: "Los Angeles, meanwhile, remained a torpid, suppurating, stunted little slum ... [that] sat forlornly in the middle of an arid coastal basin" (52-53).

coasts, Schiffman proposes a reaction to the landscape that preceded this (human-influenced) “paradise”:

[LA’s] broad flat prairies composed a subtle landscape lacking the obvious visual drama of California’s rocky Pacific coast and majestic mountain ranges; the prairies may have elicited less attention. Early settlers were not naturalists. They viewed Los Angeles’ valleys and plains as a resource to be exploited. They saw little intrinsic value in this new environment and were so driven to dominate it that they failed to notice regional changes in vegetation and ecology. Whatever the reason, the early settlers exhibited a high degree of “verbal (and visual) blindness.” (Schiffman 50)

Leaving the “broad flat prairies” to the domain of the Californios and early Anglo settlers, Los Angeles developed into a small pueblo surrounded by large “ranchos” whose primary livelihood remained the cattle business. Due to numerous complicating factors, including droughts and US legal moves to deprive the Californios of their enormous land holdings (promised to remain in their hands by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ceded California to the US in 1848), the native grasslands surrounding Los Angeles were slow to fall under Anglo domination and—eventually—manipulation of the natural environment. Where LA grew, so did changes to the landscape, resulting in “massive environmental changes ... [that] transformed this largely treeless prairie terrain unto an agricultural and livestock landscape,” which “[m]ore recently ... has been transformed yet again as an imported, ornamental, urban woodland” (Schiffman 50). Into this “synthetic” environment (50), Anglo dreams of paradise emerged as a *fait accompli*, with Californios’ property and native ecosystem both subsumed by the newest, US-American inhabitants in the appropriated form of the hacienda or, rather, what I term the *pseudo hacienda*. This new, hybridized Anglo-Californio entity (which I will expand upon later in this chapter) embodied the changes occurring in the Southern California environment

culturally, economically, and ecologically—changes that were captured in travel guides and narratives of the time.

By the time the Southern Pacific RR reached LA in 1879, decades of agriculture had already begun to transform the landscape into the pastoral ideal that would be promoted by LA's boosters for decades to come. Initiated by the Missions and their acres of cultivation in the 1700s, continuing with the beginning of the modern citrus industry in the early 1870s, and augmented by the increased Anglo presence and their "improvements" to the Californios' ranchos with imported trees, flowers, and produce-bearing plants, the landscape and literature of Los Angeles changed dramatically starting in the mid-to-late-1800s—thanks in part to the rise of the pseudo hacienda. Accelerating the idea of an Anglo paradise, immigration of both people (Anglos) and horticulture enacted the "emparadising" of the landscape while literature of Southern California, including guidebooks, "perfected the genre of Edenic travelogue" (Sackman, "The Garden" 247). Increased population called for even more increases in population, mimicking the literary efforts of early American colonists centuries earlier who, in "[t]rying to persuade European friends and relatives to come over, or promoting various business enterprises, ... described the new land as a retreat, a place to retire to away from the complexity, anxiety, and oppression of European society" (Marx 87). Since the "new land" of eastern North America had, by this time, fallen prey to the very same "complexity, anxiety, and oppression," the newest wave of "colonists" began to call their peers to California—particularly Southern California—in order to reclaim some of those pastoral, "retreat" qualities, rediscovered in pre-industrial, sunny Los Angeles region. Around the same time, "a certain sort of tourist began to argue against [an earlier]

ecological indifference ... relat[ing] in a new manner to California, in enjoyment, not exploitation[.] ... [T]hey described what California was and should be[,] ... the authentication and liberation of man through nature, since nature in California was such an overwhelming fact” (Starr, *Americans* 175).

One of the first travel writers to embrace this conjoining of California and nature as “enjoyment” was Charles Nordhoff. The earliest and arguably most influential of the early travel guide writers to focus on California,<sup>3</sup> Nordhoff saw much that was praiseworthy in the landscape of Southern California yet little merit in the city of Los Angeles itself. His 1873 guide, *California: for Health, Pleasure, and Residence, A Book for Travellers and Settlers*, presented the Golden State to his readers like a tantalizing buffet of Edenic possibilities. *California* consisted of essays Nordhoff had published in *Harper’s*; selling millions of copies within 25 years,<sup>4</sup> Nordhoff’s travel guide successfully “put Southern California on the map” (McWilliams 147). An immigrant from Prussia, Nordhoff eventually moved from New York to Southern California and died in San Diego in 1901 (McWilliams 147), making him somewhat different from other early explorer-writers about the American West who “extracted western experience and packed it out of the West” (Limerick 43). In California, Nordhoff seems to find some respite from “the urbanization and monopolistic business practices of the Gilded Age” by which he “was troubled” yet supported as “a professional railroad boomer” (Culver 20, McWilliams 116). These competing impulses, between hawking California for the

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<sup>3</sup> Culver reminds us that Richard Dana’s description of California in *Two Years before the Mast* (1840) predates Nordhoff’s by several decades and was likely “the first account for many eastern readers” (17). In the book, Dana famously declares, “In the hands of an enterprising people, what a country this might be!” (qtd. in Culver 18)—a sentiment echoed by Lummis almost 50 years later in *The Land of Sunshine*.

<sup>4</sup> Nordhoff’s *California* sold three million copies by the turn of the century (Culver 21).

railroad's benefit and extolling the pastoral landscape of Southern California as a silent protest against the rapid urbanization of the age, become part of the story of the region he describes—embodying the recurring tension between economic and aesthetic contemplations of nature in the Los Angeles area.

Although much of Nordhoff's *California* focuses on Northern California and San Francisco as the place of the most cultural and scenic interest, he devotes six (out of twenty-six) chapters, plus two appendices, solely to the amenities and options in the less populous, less developed southern part of the state. Praising its natural setting with an appeal to the discerning upper-class reader, he deems that "Southern California"—including, for Nordhoff, not just the region as it is commonly understood now, but all of California "south of Stockton and San Francisco"—"is, in fact, the Italy of this continent; its equal climate, its protection from cold by mountain ranges, its rich soil and healthfulness, give it a place alone among its sister states" (172). This need to conflate the relative frontier of Southern California with the established, known world of European resorts and scenic wonders plays an important role in the writing of early Los Angeles boosters, and Nordhoff's appellation of a US Italy became a popular way to denote to Anglos the particular appeal of the climate and aesthetic offerings of the region, as can be seen in Charles Dudley Warner's 1891 *Our Italy*. With this new conception of the region as something that would speak to European-traveling Americans, writers like Nordhoff and Warner participated in the Southern Pacific's "campaign in the 1870s to domesticate the image of Southern California" and boost travel via their newly opened Los Angeles rail lines. Therefore, in *California*, Nordhoff's metaphoric creation of a North American Italy helped to "put forth Southern California's new identity ... of

plantings, harvests, and domestic life” (Starr, *Inventing* 42). This pastoral Eden, a conquered natural paradise, illustrated a common colonial-American conception of the environment, that of a “distinction between two garden metaphors: a wild, primitive, or pre-lapsarian Eden ... and a cultivated garden embracing values not unlike those represented by the classic Virgilian pasture” (Marx 87). Nordhoff lavishes verbal love on this pastoral, “new identity” of Southern California, with descriptions of local scenery markedly changed from the native prairie grasslands Schiffman sees as preceding European settlement in the area. On a winter day in Los Angeles, Nordhoff writes,

Around us the air was musical with the sweet sound of the baa-ing of young lambs. Surely there is no prettier or kindlier sight in the world than a great flock of peaceful, full-fed ewes, with their lambs, covering a plain of soft green, as far as the eye can reach. ... Below us, as we looked off a hill-top, lay the suburbs of Los Angeles, green with the deep green of orange-groves, and golden to the nearer view with their abundant fruit. Twenty-one different kinds of flowers were blooming in the open air in a friend’s garden in the town this January day. (136-137)

The idyllic Los Angeles landscape, with cavorting lambs, green grass, distant orange groves, and myriad flower species showcase the area as a “synthetic” paradise, one that is equally fecund below the surface as above. For in this “new Italy,” Nordhoff is sure to mention all aspects of its particular natural gifts. He talks about the specific soil content of the area, the manner and success of local irrigation, the types of things grown (and how they’re grown with great success to an astounding size), and the overall tremendous productivity of Southern California’s agriculture. Whether or not this was part of a Virgilian and Jeffersonian inspired pastoralism (and/or) part of the Southern Pacific’s larger goal to increase travel and immigration to the area, Nordhoff’s prose embraces the aesthetic view of the pastoral—as in the quote above—as well as the nitty-gritty,

capitalistic merit of pastoral nature as economics. Providing specific, detailed information on the productivity of different farms, Nordhoff “sells” the same pastoral landscape that offers a redemption and “retreat” from the industrialization of, say, 1870s New York. In one instance of an amazingly productive farm, Nordhoff rattles off facts and figures that might wow even the most jaded reader:

[Mr. Rose’s] orchard consists of 400 young but bearing orange-trees, 4000 not bearing, and 2000 more now being planted; 500 lemons [trees], of which fifty are in bearing; 135,000 vines, from which he made 100,000 gallons of white wine, and 3000 gallons of brandy, last year; 350 English walnuts [trees], 150 almonds [trees]; and the place contains besides, in considerable quantities, apples, pears, peaches, apricots, nectarines, pomegranates, figs, Spanish chestnuts, and olives.

He mentioned to me, as part of his last year’s crop, 250,000 oranges, 50,000 lemons, 25,000 pounds of walnuts, etc., etc. (171)

And, in all of that, Nordhoff notes that he “did not see a single weed or bunch of grass in all [of Mr. Rose’s] orchards, and such clean culture is very pleasant to the eye” (171).

Productive *and* “pleasant to the eye”? Indeed, Nordhoff’s book claims, by embracing an agricultural lifestyle in Southern California, potential immigrants to the region could enjoy the oft-mentioned pastoral beauty of the orange-laden landscape and reap the financial benefits of such a landscape. He quotes a local orange cultivator who states, “when you have a bearing orange orchard, it is like finding money on the street.”

Nordhoff declares that “this is not an overstatement” and backs up this claim with some specifics about a 40-acre orange orchard in LA that “bring[s] a clear rent of \$15,000; and the lessee is believed to have made a fortune for himself” (170-171). It evidently paid to be a pseudo don of a Southern California pseudo hacienda.

Of course, it’s not all oranges and roses in Nordhoff’s Los Angeles. If the pastoral landscape represents paradise for him, then the “city” of Los Angeles (1870 population:



roughly 5,700) represents, in part, the “wilderness” that one must pass through to reach paradise. Writing of Los Angeles in 1873, he declared, “Nature has done much; man has not, so far, helped her” (114)—ironically ignoring the fact that the “nature” he praises is nature as already altered by man. Kevin Starr also comments on the roughness of LA as a city and civilized place during the first few decades of statehood, noting that despite LA’s pastoral elements, “the contrast between San Bernardino, with its watered fields and village of 1400 where flourished the life of church and school, and nearby Los Angeles, a wild cowtown, was not lost on travelers” (Starr, *Americans* 201). Nordhoff anticipates Starr’s findings and discusses flaws in the city itself, saying that “the town of the angels ... is not, in its present state, a very angelic place” (137). However, he does allow for *some* small glimmer of hope for the city, telling potential tourists that when they “walk down the street, you will be surprised at the excellence of the shops and the ... abundant signs of a real and well-founded prosperity, which will surprise you *if you have listened to the opinion of San Franciscans* about this metropolis of Southern California” (137, emphasis added).<sup>5</sup> Nordhoff continues in this encouraging vein, advising visitors on how to maximize their enjoyment of Los Angeles and Southern California by approaching it in just the right way:

Wherever you go, you need to take with you a cheerful and also an inquiring spirit. The whole of Southern California is full of novelties and wonders to an intelligent person; but oftenest he must discover them for himself. You will not find highly cultivated and ornamental gardens; but from January onward to June, you will, if you have an eye for them, discover in your rambles a succession of beautiful, and to you new wild flowers. Theatres and other places of amusement you will not find in the towns I have mentioned; but for all healthful open-air enjoyments you will have extraordinary facilities, because the life is free and untrammelled. ... and you carry with you, wherever you go, fine mountain scenery, [and] bright sunshine. (Nordhoff 116)

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<sup>5</sup> At least in this respect, little has changed in California in the last 150 years!

If Nordhoff's readers—those “intelligent” Southern California travelers—approach the area “with an inquiring spirit,” they might not miss the lack of “places of amusement” so much if they instead embrace the nation-building, nineteenth-century attitude that Nash articulates as “America’s nature, if not her culture, would command the world’s admiration” (68). Los Angeles and its environs, according to Nordhoff, may not yet boast the “culture” that would merit “the world’s admiration,” but, by golly, it’s got “bright sunshine,” an incredible climate, “fine mountain scenery,” and orange groves that stretch for miles.

With the notion of climate comes the other, remarkable aspect of Los Angeles and Southern California that Nordhoff takes many pages to elaborate upon: the healthiness of the air there. “In the 1880s”—no doubt due, at least in part, to the efforts of Nordhoff and others—“emerges a consolidated myth of Southern California. Its two most important elements are health [i.e. natural assets] and romantic nostalgia [i.e. cultural assets]” (Starr, *Inventing* 54). The “romantic” aspect of this myth will be further explored in the next chapter, as this becomes more prominent after the publication of Helen Hunt Jackson’s *Ramona* in 1884. (Other than noting the co-opting of the hacienda and its lifestyle by the pseudo-hacienda class, Nordhoff and the other travel writers examined in this chapter certainly do not seem as obsessed with the romantic Spanish mystique of Southern California’s past as do Charles Lummis and other boosters of the post-*Ramona* period.) However, the health benefits of Southern California’s climate remain central to Nordhoff’s discussions of the appeal of the area to Anglo travelers and immigrants in *California*—not surprising with the subtitle *For Health, Pleasure, and Residence*. For

instance, Nordhoff writes of winter in Southern California, “The constant or almost uninterrupted brightness of the skies has, I suspect, a good deal to do with the healthful influence of the climate. ... There are no gloomy days. ... Moreover, all winter the gardens are full of flowers, the grass is green, and Nature is in her most-inviting garb” (113-114). In addition to such mentions of the healthiness of its natural environment in every chapter on Southern California, Nordhoff devotes an entire chapter to “Southern California for Invalids” and includes appendices on “Tables of Temperatures” (comparing Southern California to the better-known European health destinations) and “Southern California for Consumptives.” The latter reprints a letter from Francis S. Miles, written in 1872, regarding his own experiences of the region as a curative place for tuberculosis in particular: “Southern California presents a most gloriously invigorating, tonic, and stimulating climate, very much superior to any thing I know of, the air is so pure and so much drier than” at famous sanitariums in Europe, and “it has a most soothing influence on the mucous membrane ... and without the enervating effect of” the climate of a place like Florida. “It is quite as stimulating as Minnesota, without the intense cold of that climate.” The Italy of the US, in fact, even betters the original, since “Italy generally is a poor climate for the invalid”—falling far short of the celebrated climate of Southern California (248).

With Nordhoff’s *California* leading the way, a long stream of travel and tour guides of California soon followed. Along with the emergence of a California literary scene, William McClung argues, “almost all of these fictions [from the period of 1850 to 1920] merge imperceptibly with travel writing to constitute a literature of place, obsessed with analyzing, publicizing, and critiquing both the found and the constructed landscape”

(“The Anglo Invention” 23). A particularly strong example of this blurring of the line between fiction and travel writing is Benjamin C. Truman’s *Semi-Tropical California: Its Climate, Healthfulness, Productiveness, and Scenery: Its Magnificent Stretches of Vineyards and Groves of Semi-Tropical Fruits, Etc., Etc., Etc.*, published in 1874, just one year after Nordhoff’s *California*. With metaphoric, lyrical language, Truman sets out “to bring permanently into notice the county of Los Angeles, or, more properly, Semi-tropical California” (14). A well-regarded reporter, Truman served as a war correspondent for the *New York Times* during the Civil War and special secretary for President Johnson after Lincoln’s assassination. Several government posts and world travels later, he married a Los Angeles resident in 1869, moved to the city in 1871, turned his pen to travel writing and professional boosting—in addition to owning several Southern California newspapers—and, as his 1916 obituary reports, “remained a loyal champion of California until the end” (“Famous Times Writer” n.p.).

Given his extensive background, Truman’s prose is a remarkable example of the construction of “a literature of place” due to his detailed observations and his exuberant, poetic (modern readers might call it florid) prose describing all the wonders of his chosen homeland of Southern California. To help readers understand the great changes that had come to the region by 1874, Truman recounts his introduction to Los Angeles in 1867:

Crooked, ungraded, unpaved streets; low, lean, rickety adobe houses, ... and here and there an indolent native ... were the most notable features of this quondam Mexican town. But a wonderful change has come over the spirit of its dream, and Los Angeles is at present ... an American city. Adobes have given way to elegant and substantial dwellings and stores; the customs of well-regulated society have proved to be destructive elements in opposition to lawlessness and crime; industry and enterprise have now usurped the place of indolence and unproductiveness; and places of public worship, institutions of higher learning, newspapers, hotels,

banks, manufactories, etc., produce ornamental dottings throughout a city, the site of which might have been dedicated by nature as a second Eden. (27)

Elaborating on the pastoral, “second Eden” found in Nordhoff’s Los Angeles,<sup>6</sup> Truman showcases how far he thinks the city itself has progressed in less than a decade—from “indolent ... Mexican town” to “an American city.”<sup>7</sup> Where Nordhoff cautioned urbane visitors that they wouldn’t find much culture there, Truman proclaims that “[a] distinguishing feature of the city is the cosmopolitan character of its inhabitants” (21). And Nordhoff’s not “very angelic place” becomes for Truman, just one year later, “one of the most law-abiding, and one of the best governed cities in the State” (28).

In addition to this remarkably rehabilitated, genteel, burgeoning city, Truman finds in *Semi-Tropical California* both “a second Eden” and the promised land, a region “flowing with milk and honey, ... where every man may sit under his own vine and fig tree” (7). Truman’s Eden, in fact, resembles nothing more than one immense conglomeration of gardens: “Her vineyards, and orange and lemon groves, and orchards of almost every known fruit, make Los Angeles the garden spot of Semi-tropical California. It is a collection of gardens six miles square” (48). Truman’s (like Nordhoff’s) repeated attention to the gardens of Southern California—“The city is favored by miles of vineyards, and presents the appearance of a vast collection of gardens” (27)—raises

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<sup>6</sup> Although there are, surprisingly, no illustrations in Truman’s 1874 guide, its cover reflects the intent to depict the pastoralism of “semi-tropical California.” (Figure 1-2) Incidentally, there are few images of Los Angeles or Southern California in any of the travel guides discussed here. Nordhoff’s illustrations are entirely focused on Northern California; on the opening page of a chapter titled “A January Day in Los Angeles,” the accompanying illustration is of Yosemite Valley. Roberts includes a few Southern California illustrations: one of downtown LA (Figure 1-3) and an unnamed, tree-lined street (Figure 1-4), neither showcasing the flowery, “Edenic” landscape he describes.

<sup>7</sup> Ironically, thanks to the phenomenal success of *Ramona*, such “lean, rickety adobe” structures became the embodiment of all that was attractive, romantic, and culturally exotic in Southern California, as we’ll see in the next chapter. In fact, as Kropp details in *California Vieja*, the adobe style heavily influenced (i.e. dominated) the direction of vernacular architecture for the entire region to the present day.

important questions about the environmental and social repercussions of the emerging garden metropolis: What alterations to the native ecosystem did these (presumably imported) garden flora bring? Who benefited from these alterations? How did they alter the perceptions of Los Angeles from “wild cowtown” to “garden spot”? And, most importantly, how were these gardens created? By whose labor did they flourish? In examining such questions, Douglas Sackman’s astute assessment of the role of the garden in the city’s development comes to the forefront, when he writes that “the gardens of Los Angeles inscribed social hierarchy into the landscape” (“The Garden” 255). As with the pseudo haciendas they surrounded, the gardens of LA proved to be indicative of and directly related to the class and racial stratifications that would, in fact, eventually come to define the city when the more Edenic aspects succumbed to the progress of time, as well as to the increased population and industrialization of Truman’s “garden spot.”

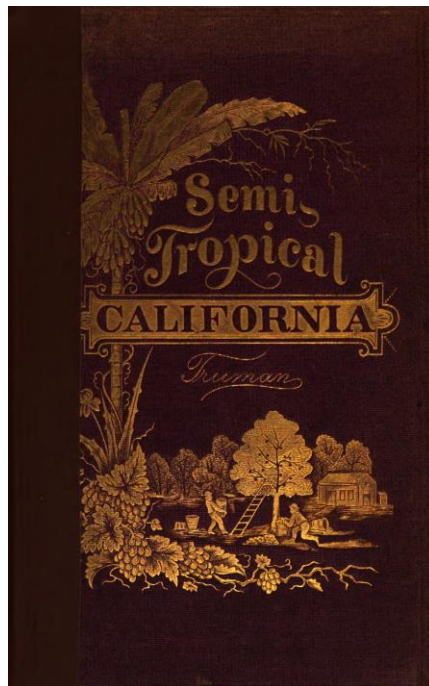
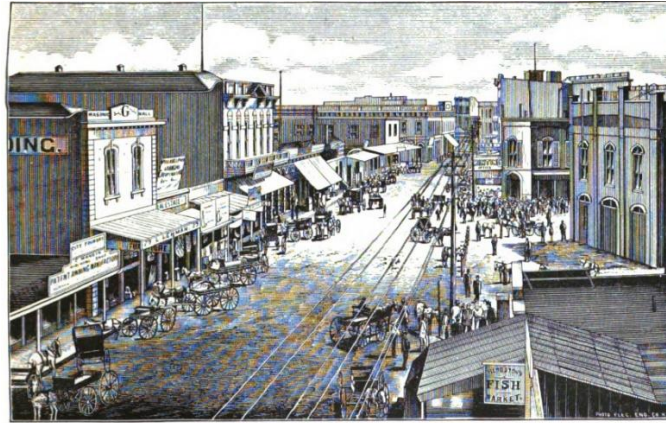


Figure 1-2. Cover of *Semi-Tropical California* (1874). (Source: Google Books.)



LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA.

Figure 1-3. Scene of downtown LA, circa 1883 (Roberts 117).



AN AVENUE AT LOS ANGELES.

Figure 1-4. Tree-lined street that may be surrounded by distant orange groves (Roberts 120).

The theme of the garden and Los Angeles as Nordhoff's "new Italy" come together in Truman's repeated allusions to classical Mediterranean cultures (particularly ancient Greece and Rome<sup>8</sup>), which he uses to strengthen the tie of Southern California as

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<sup>8</sup> Notably, these Mediterranean ties receive greater emphasis than the more obvious ones to Spain and (closer to home) Mexico, as Anglo-Americans in pre-*Ramona* California remained eager to distance

a Mediterranean paradise both climatically and culturally. As Kevin Starr has noted in regard to this comparison—seemingly disjointed from the “semi-tropical” idea of the book’s title—“Truman invokes the semi-tropical metaphor, is uneasy with it, and midway through his treatise replaces it with a Mediterranean comparison” (*Inventing* 45). The uneasiness is understandable, given the vigorous promotion of Los Angeles as an ideal place to recuperate from illness, whereas truly “semi-tropical” climates (such as Florida) may actually exacerbate certain kinds of diseases and potentially even introduce new ones.<sup>9</sup> But, as Starr explains, the “new Italy” and general Mediterranean parallel evokes a completely different set of more appealing visions and ideals, especially for the well-traveled and educated Anglo-Americans in Truman’s target audience:

[This] comparison invoked values of responsible order and conveyed a sense of impending civilization. It did so because the Mediterranean was rich in both nature and history, and Southern Californians wanted both blessings. Abundance, sun, aesthetic surroundings, a measure of ease and social discourse: they wanted a bourgeois utopia, with an emphasis on outdoor living and domestic pleasures. (*Inventing* 45-46)

While allusions to ancient Mediterranean civilizations did not belong solely to the provenance of enthusiastic travel writers and other boosters—and, in fact, appeared frequently in other promotions and visualizations of Southern California, such as the art of citrus crate labels—Truman’s lush prose style situates such allusions deep in the metaphoric language he uses to describe Southern California. He regularly invokes

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themselves from their racial and ethnic “inferiors”—the (defeated) cultures of Spanish and Mexican California before US annexation.

<sup>9</sup> Truman quotes “the popular McPherson” in regard to these climatic threats from non-California places: “What, to [the immigrant], are fair fields and flowering meadows, buried in the tropical growth of fertile soils and tropical suns, if they generate fever-producing miasma and surcharged vapor? What are soft and perfumed breezes, if they waft the seeds of pestilence and death? What are the bountiful harvests of golden grain, and rich, mellow fruits, and all the wealth the world can yield, if disease must annual visit the threshold, and death take away, one by one, the loved and beautiful blossoms of the family?” (qtd. in Truman 38). In short, not only is LA’s climate and nature perfect, but the climate/nature everywhere else is deadly and dangerous.



Mediterranean, ancient cultures (and their epic literatures) in descriptions of nature, as in this passage: “The grass in the gardens, on each hand, is like the ‘freshly-broken emeralds’ that Dante saw,” while “such roses as rival those of Paestum, or of the Bosphorus” bloom. Visiting one of the many orange groves allows one to

feast your eyes upon a miniature Paradise, and a cluster of gardens only approached, poetically, but what Aladdin’s might have been; ... or you may dash down to the beach where the foaming billows of the Pacific roll distantly away to a tropical southern sea; and when you return by the soft starlight of heaven’s imperishable garniture, you may sit in the coolness of the evening, away into the twilight shadows, till there comes stealing upon nocturnal zephyrs the ravishing sweetness of myriads of flowers, which lose their fragrance lifting their cups to catch the dew which falls from heaven. (40-41)

Into this passage, and many others like it, Truman packs so many literary and mythic allusions that it’s difficult to imagine them all being contained by “a miniature Paradise,” much less in one paragraph in *Semi-Tropical California*.<sup>10</sup> From Dante to the Bosphorus, Aladdin and heaven’s dew, Truman doesn’t miss any opportunities to elevate the scene of a Southern California orange grove to the heights of Mt. Olympus and beyond. In a similar moment, he references some of the mineral wealth of California: “For here, in this delightful garden, teeming with fruits and flowers, Midas, of the golden touch, serenely wandered, leaving behind him sparkling footprints—quenching his thirst at many a babbling stream, which each in turn thereafter swept, like the Pactolus, over aurific

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<sup>10</sup> “From Aurora’s fanning zephyr to Cynthia’s delicate breath, day in and day out, from one year’s end to the other, the voluptuous atmosphere seems laden with balms from Hygeia; and for picturesqueness of situation, the whole country is charming beyond description. One may feast his ravished gaze upon the solemn grandeur and boundless immensity of old ocean, upon the most symmetrical of hills and the ruggedest of mountains, majestically lifting their hoary heads to sky’s azure dome, or enveloping themselves in wanton clouds of the most bewitching colors and exquisite pencilings; upon emerald valleys, prodigal with nutritious grasses and aromatic shrubs and flowers; upon sweeping plains, banqueting in bosky luxuriance; upon rivers and rills; while here and there over the vast expanse of landscape are farms and farm houses, orange groves and vineyards, and a multiplicity of other objects which may be taken in at one sweep of the vision” (Truman 66-67). This lavish description of the Los Angeles countryside goes on to include the “fertility of soil” which is, as Truman has repeatedly noted, exceedingly productive for planting and grazing of livestock.

sands” (96).<sup>11</sup> With such poetic diction, Truman’s role in bridging the gap between fiction and travel writing to create McClung’s “literature of place” seems self-evident.

Also evident while reading *Semi-Tropical California* is one of Truman’s repeated themes throughout his 1874 Southern California guidebook (the first of many others that would follow): an insistent veracity of seemingly larger-than-life claims about the region.<sup>12</sup> While depicting the best possible reality for Los Angeles and Southern California, a reality that sometimes seems to verge on exaggeration, Truman also repeatedly declares that he’s only stating the unvarnished, documented truth: “I pledge myself,” he writes in his brief preface, “that I have not made a statement in the following pages that is not strictly true in every particular” (7). He concludes the book with a similar pledge, stating that “to th[ese] fact[s] the reputation of the author stands pledged” (204). Within the pages of *Semi-Tropical California* he includes tables, charts, and lists of numerous, quantifiable testaments to the abundance of nature in and productive wealth of Southern California. In addition to Los Angeles County temperature charts, Truman provides a table of LA’s exports for the year 1873, showing the biggest exports by weight to be corn, bullion (beef), wool, wine/brandy, corn meal and rye, and all fruit (76-77). (Fruit exports would increase, of course, as oranges came to play an even bigger role in LA’s economy.) About that export list he later writes, “I claim that tabular statement as the crown of my book, because it presents figures which *cannot betray the truth*” (83, emphasis added). Yet Truman’s prose and his “facts” do sometimes seem to push to

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<sup>11</sup> Midas’s “sparkling footprints” reference the first discovery of gold in California that, at least according to Truman, actually happened in LA County in 1833 (96).

<sup>12</sup> Truman’s body of work includes: *Occidental Sketches* (1881); *Tourists’ Illustrated Guide to the Celebrated Summer and Winter Resorts of California* (1883); *Homes and Happiness in the Golden State of California* (1885); *From the Crescent City to the Golden Gate* (1887); and *Southern California* [a book of photos for which Truman wrote an introduction] (1903).

bounds of truth, adding an unfortunate uncertainty and taint of skepticism to the rest of his book. For example, some of the “facts” Truman includes are attributed to another authority on the subject, when he quotes “the popular McPherson”: “No nation bred in an arctic or torrid climate has ever become prominent in science, art, or literature”; “At London and Amsterdam, there are about sixty unclouded days in the year. At New York, one hundred. At Los Angeles, two hundred and forty”; and, accompanying another table of numbers and indisputable facts, “The deaths for each one thousand inhabitants, in several of the leading cities of the United States, are presented in the following table, and the comparison cannot fail to be suggestive” (Truman 35-36). This table, which seems to be missing some important qualifiers of time or cause, is especially puzzling as a piece of “evidence” to the superiority of LA’s climate since—the last time I checked—1000 out of 1000 people all die at some point, no matter where they live.<sup>13</sup> (Figure 1-5) With “facts” such as these to support his argument, Truman’s claims for *Semi-Tropical California* fall under more skepticism with each “pledge” to the absolute truth.

<b>St. Louis</b> .....	<b>21</b>	<b>New York</b> .....	<b>29</b>
<b>San Francisco</b> .....	<b>21</b>	<b>New Orleans</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>Boston</b> .....	<b>24</b>	<b>Los Angeles</b> ..	<b>13</b>
<b>Chicago</b> ..	<b>24</b>	<b>San Diego</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Philadelphia</b> .....	<b>25</b>	<b>Santa Barbara</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Baltimore</b> .....	<b>27</b>		

Figure 1-5. The “death chart” from Truman’s *Semi-Tropical California* (35).

<sup>13</sup> He adds, “If the eastern invalids ... could only be made acquainted with the remarkable climate of Los Angeles, its charming equability and rare healthfulness, how many, many hundreds of lives might be spared yearly” (32).

Truman's liberal use of literary allusions and poetic language (those travel writing/fiction lines blurring again) also contributes to the straining of credulity, at least for the modern-day reader. Prefiguring Emma Lazarus and the most symbolic statute in American culture, Truman writes of the Los Angeles area, "Look this way, ye seekers after homes and happiness! ye honest sons of toil, and ye *pauvres miserables* who are dragging out a horrible life in the purlieus of large eastern cities! Semi-tropical California welcomes you all" (29). Lazarus's poem welcomes the "huddled masses" to Ellis Island, but are the "*pauvres miserables*" really welcome in Southern California? Truman continues that for a mere "twenty-five hundred to five thousand dollars" investment, these "honest sons of toil" can own their own piece of paradise (29). Could anyone but the upper classes really afford that?<sup>14</sup> In fact, Truman later reveals that even current employment opportunities for "honest sons of toil" are imperiled because "the experiment of employing Chinese labor in this direction [agricultural labor], ... if successful, will doubtless supplant the present laborers in this field" (72). If Truman's audience were in actuality anything other than the upper class, this would sound like a disadvantage for the potential immigrant and a possible deterrent for moving to Southern California.

This contradiction directly returns us to the question of how race and class were "inscribed ... into the landscape" by the emerging garden metropolis of Los Angeles. And part of that answer also reveals how the change from prairie grassland to cattle "ranchos" to established agriculture (and purely aesthetic horticulture) reshaped Southern California from an environment of "little intrinsic value" to a picturesque "second Eden"

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<sup>14</sup> We'll see this problem again in the next chapter with Lummis and *The Land of Sunshine*.

where growing a certain citrus fruit equaled “finding money in the street.” When American Anglos moved into the area in larger numbers after the 1850s, when California became a state and legal maneuvers “freed up” some of the hundreds of thousands of acres held by the Californios,<sup>15</sup> some of them took over the land *and* the lifestyle of the Californios, and the pseudo hacienda was born. The attempts of these pseudo dons to adopt an idealized Southern California lifestyle of the upper class, Spanish-descended Californios resulted in cultural, environmental, and social changes to the preexisting nature of the area. The practitioners of the pseudo-hacienda-class lifestyle aimed to recapture some of the elegance and ease of the formerly empowered Californios—but by doing it better than the Californios had even done. (Those “indolent natives” didn’t have the proper Yankee wherewithal to maximize the Edenic possibilities in the land, of course.)<sup>16</sup>

This pseudo-hacienda class often holds a starring role in the narratives of the Southern California paradise crafted by Truman, Nordhoff, and even Roberts.<sup>17</sup> Truman quotes an unnamed reporter from back east, who visited a Los Angeles area rancho that embodies what I mean by “pseudo-hacienda class”: “[T]he proprietor of Los Cerritos,” an enormous, prosperous ranch, “is a genuine down-east Yankee” whose domicile

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<sup>15</sup> Truman lists the 60 land grants made in LA County, of which about half belong to Anglos in 1873-1874. The grants, including the mission lands, range in size from 44 acres (Mission San Juan Capistrano) to 121,619 acres (the privately owned San Fernando ranch, formerly mission lands) (74-76).

<sup>16</sup> Spelling this out, Truman declares that “the natives of the soil [i.e. Californios and Mexicans] are engaged in ranching, sheep-herding, and in laboring in the vineyards and orange-groves. A great portion of them are very poor and ignorant. ... The very nature of [their] vocations ... precludes the possibility of their attainment to any degree of intellectual cultivation or knowledge of the arts and sciences” (29). Obviously, this is pre-*Ramona* and the romanticization of the Californios, after which the Anglos still held themselves superior to their Southern California predecessors, but they more overtly attempted to adopt aspects of the vanished lifestyle of “the natives.”

<sup>17</sup> This continues into the twentieth century, with the promotion of early gated communities in Southern California also selling this idea. I’m indebted to Phoebe Kropp’s *California Vieja* chapter “The Home: Rancho Santa Fe and Suburban Style” for first alerting me to this reconceptualization of the Californios’ haciendas for wealthy Anglo-Americans.

“combines the home-likeness and genuine comfort of New England with the large-heartedness and generosity of the Southern plantation in the old days” (74). The new pseudo-hacienda class in Southern California therefore combines the best of North and South, mixing it with a touch of old-world culture inherited from its (romantic) Spanish past. Indeed, Truman quotes another unspecified writer who “truthfully declared that the landed estates of European noblemen sink into insignificance, when compared with some of the ranchos of semi-tropical California” (74). Thinking of these Anglo pseudo haciendas as “estates” slots into place Culver’s conception of the relationship between class aspirations, labor, and racial/class stratifications in early Los Angeles. In a discussion of Nordhoff’s presentation of the Anglo-American ranchos in the late nineteenth-century, Culver reflects that “this new land would prosper not from the labor of diligent white farmers, but instead through workers drawn from a preexisting resident non-white population” in “a future that shared more with the Deep South ... than it did with the pioneer homesteads of the archetypal Anglo-American West” (20-21). Truman apparently agreed with Culver’s assessment, writing that success in Southern California requires only “the judicious use of wealth, seconded only by good taste and the employment of the most skillful labor obtainable” (50)—i.e. the modified plantation system, the pseudo hacienda.

But the pseudo-hacienda class involves more than just the appropriation of land from one conquered group (the Californios) and economic/labor system from another (the plantation owners of the South). By appropriating and then improving upon the lifestyle of the Californios, those in the pseudo-hacienda class embraced the *nature as economic resource vs. nature as aesthetic amenity* dichotomy and followed the “national preference

for having it both ways[,] ... defining its [the nation's] purpose as the pursuit of rural happiness while devoting itself to productivity, wealth, and power" (Marx 226). In other words, with a return to the vanished, pastoral lifestyle of the Californio *dons*, those in the pseudo-hacienda class moved closer to that "precapitalist Eden" later embraced by Lummis and others who further romanticized the haciendas in the post-*Ramona* era (Culver 34).<sup>18</sup> In *Semi-Tropical California*, Truman expounds upon the idea of the pseudo hacienda as something *beyond* simple capitalism, as something that offers aesthetic, cultural, and social benefits by merely aspiring to be an Anglo-American *don*—preferably of a large orange orchard vs. the less productive cattle ranchos favored by the Californios. He declares that the loveliness of one exemplary pseudo-hacienda property, owned by Mr. Childs, and its horticultural wealth "bear tribute to the excellent qualities of the owner and his wife." (It would be more accurate to say they "bear tribute to" the Childs' expenditures on hired labor to maintain their pseudo hacienda.) "This is even so[,]” Truman continues, since “mean men and women do not, as a general rule, adorn their homes with these voiceless witnesses of a Creator’s love and bounty” (53). Child’s extensive property and its plantings are “ample for the support of a family in more than a comfortable—in an elegant manner. ... [His] estate is a study for the new-comer, and a lesson, *written in nature’s own hand-writing*, for the experimentalist” (54, emphasis added). Using nature to adorn the home instead of primarily to support/sustain/feed the home (aesthetics vs. economics) stands as a primary indicator of the pseudo-hacienda

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<sup>18</sup> “Though Lummis professed racial views different from those of Charles Nordhoff decades before, their underlying visions for the region were nevertheless similar. The image of modern California as a place of orchards, gardens, gracious homes, and resorts likewise ignored all the labor performed by people of color to maintain the fiction of an Anglo-American world of leisure” (Culver 49).

class since, as Truman seems to say, only those who are not “mean” (i.e. superior) would have nature adorning the home.

Continuing the theme, Truman reprints part of an 1874 *Overland Monthly* article by former California governor John Downey, in which Downey encouraged the spread of orange cultivation as a way to elevate the society, beauty, and economy of the state:

There is nothing that excites the interest of the refined and cultivated woman--maiden or housewife—like the orange grove; ever green; always in fruit or in blossom; symmetrical in shape, and commanding in size and appearance; filling the air with delicious perfume; feasting the eye with its beautiful contrast of deep green leaf, snow-white blossom, and beautiful golden fruit. ... [E]very family can raise their own orange trees in pots, boxes, or in seed-beds. The lady of the house, *her servant*, or children, can water them ... An orange orchard must not be undertaken as a specialty by a poor man or a man of moderate means. (Truman 87-89, emphasis added)

Yet, an orange orchard is a bonified money maker in addition to having “a refined and softening influence, ... [and therefore] the multiplication of orange plantations should be encouraged” (90).<sup>19</sup> In case the word “plantations” does not make clear the details of the pseudo-hacienda-class lifestyle of a Southern California orange orchard owner, Downey drops in several mentions of the labor behind his own “orange plantation”: “the man who takes care of” his property, his “assistant,” and the “men and help [potential orange growers] must necessarily have” (90). Far from the Homestead Act’s 160 acres for an independent farming family to work alone, the orange orchard Downey (and Truman) envisions demands a different type of set up. For “the gentleman of wealth or of literary habits,” this pseudo-hacienda-class lifestyle of the Southern California orange orchard

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<sup>19</sup> Downey wasn’t just being considerate of the individual wealth of Californians: the spread of citrus culture in Southern California also brought in communal wealth and, importantly, brought in *railroad* wealth; the fruit going out on eastbound trains also brought in citrus-craving and pastoral-landscape-seeking tourists on the westbound return trip. See Douglas Sackman’s *Orange Empire*.



will no doubt allow him to “find the same pleasure in this pursuit,” taking up the orange-growing business as another hobby and “a most salutary relaxation” (91).

From prairie grassland to grazing land for cattle *ranchos*, from hacienda to pseudo hacienda, from economic system to a form of “salutary relaxation”—the rise of the Anglo-American *don* also gave rise to one final aspect of the pseudo-hacienda class that warrants mention in a chapter about travel writers and tour guides: tourism. By creating the landscape of “six square miles of gardens” and verdant orange groves, the pseudo-hacienda class made Southern California even more attractive to tourists (a fact that the Southern Pacific and citrus growers capitalized on). With the Anglo “inheritance” of paradise, and the emergence of this pseudo-hacienda class, the aesthetic and economic uses of nature come together in one purpose—the selling of the “second Eden,” recalling Hal Rothman’s assertion that “tourism is the most colonial of colonial economies” (102). With a conqueror’s “most colonial” of impulses, the pseudo hacienda performs an alchemy of taking the productive (grazing), non-aesthetically valued landscape of early Southern California and transforming that into an aesthetic and pastoral landscape that was also actively (citrus industry) *and* passively (tourism, real estate, and general propaganda) productive nature. In one final moment of pseudo-hacienda elegance from *Semi-Tropical California*, Truman quotes an unnamed reporter who visited San Fernando in 1874:

The arcades [of the estate’s main building] suggest the Alhambra; they are full of memories of the past; they were the scenes of hospitable entertainment; they are the same to-day ... [M]ilk and honey, and wine, and, all the substantial were spread out on a profuse board. Music filled up the pauses between the libations, and beautiful women lent the charm of their presence to the occasion. The Senator [this pseudo hacienda’s owner] was happy; he was at home; he was surrounded by all that makes life beautiful. (Truman 186-187)

With “milk and honey,” music and “charm,” the alchemy of Southern California results in an environmental, cultural, and mythological transformation from prairie grassland and dusty “cowtown” to pseudo haciendas “full of memories of the past,” surrounded by an Anglo-created paradise.

But let us to return to those Boston Templars visiting Los Angeles in August 1883. During their brief, 24-hour stay and tour of the area, Roberts dutifully reports favorable impressions of the fine hotel, lavish banquet (where “[t]he principal attraction was the carving and disposing of two [paradise-grown] watermelons, one weighing eighty-seven and the other eighty-eight pounds”), beautiful city streets (“fragrant, luxuriant, and seemed as if we were in a dream”), and, of course, the pastoral landscape—and perhaps even a pseudo hacienda or two: “Did you ever visit an orange grove when the rich, yellow fruit surrounded you on every side? Oranges behind and in front of you; oranges on the right and on the left above you; and the ground yellow with oranges at your feet, perfuming the air with their delicious fragrance? We did, at Los Angeles” (119, 116, 116). Reinforcing Truman’s assertion that “[a] romantic glamour overhangs the region” (14), Roberts concludes his account of the Boston Commandery’s one-day Los Angeles stopover with a poem:

*‘Know’st thou the land where the lemon-trees bloom,  
Where the gold orange grows in the deep thicket’s gloom,  
Where a wind ever soft from the blue heaven blows,  
And the groves are of laurel and myrtle and rose?’*

Such is Los Angeles, from which we so reluctantly parted. (125)

Despite the brief exposure to (and account of) Los Angeles, the report of the Templars’ experiences in *California Pilgrimage* suggests the mythology of the city emerging during

the latter decades of the nineteenth century. With the arrival of the railroads, new avenues opened up to tourists and travelers of all stripes—especially when a resulting fare war lowered prices significantly—to visit Southern California and formulate similar impressions of the “second Eden,” which they could then spread by word of mouth or, like Roberts, printed word. And, like Nordhoff and Truman, some nineteenth-century writers “found a direct channel to influencing public opinion[,]” which resulted in, “by 1900, a western landscape blanketed by words, covered two or three inches deep with the littered vocabulary of romantic scenery appreciation” (Limerick 45). Neil Campbell reminds us of the importance of sifting through this snow of words to uncover a crucial part of the story of California and the American West, since “conventional narratives have ‘privileged relations of dwelling over relations of travel,’ despite the fact that travel was central to the processes that brought people to the West in the first place” (2).

In Southern California, this centrality of travel and Limerick’s “romantic scenery appreciation” found voice in Nordhoff and Truman, two eastern writers who found an eventual home in the region that they had praised in their 1870s travel guides. For them, Los Angeles and Southern California (re)embodied the mythic promise of America that some believed to be lost in the increasingly industrialized US:

In its simplest, archetypal form, the myth [of America as a new beginning] affirms that Europeans experience a regeneration in the New World. ... In most versions the regenerative power is located in the natural terrain: access to undefiled, bountiful, sublime Nature is what accounts for the virtue and special good fortune of Americans. It enables them to design a community in the image of a garden, an ideal fusion of nature with art. The landscape thus becomes the symbolic repository of value of all kinds--economic, political, aesthetic, religious. (Marx 228)

While a native prairie landscape of greater Los Angeles may not have embodied the “undefiled, bountiful, sublime Nature” European-Americans sought for “regeneration,” the modified and “synthetic” version of that landscape (with imported trees and flowers, irrigation, and pseudo haciendas) allowed Anglos in the second half of the nineteenth century to discover in Southern California the “image of a garden” that brought together two seemingly conflicting views of nature—the economic and aesthetic. Truman reflects this happy “fusion” in an account of the view from Los Angeles in 1874: “The city itself ... afford[s], from almost any point, a matchless panorama of mountain, valley, orchard, vineyard, and the distant sea-coast ... To the gratification thus afforded to the aesthetic taste, is to be added the assurance of a future career of undiminished and constantly increasing prosperity” (17).

Increasing the aesthetic and economic impact of the landscape of Southern California, especially of the Los Angeles area, necessitated enormous environmental change to Schiffman’s envisioned “LA prairie.” Wildflower-dotted grasslands may have been perfect for cattle grazing in the days of Californio *ranchos*, but Anglo-Americans already had the Edenic garden planted in their mental imagery, thanks to nearly four centuries of myth-propagation of the US as a New World and “virgin land,” to borrow from Henry Nash Smith. And so, the landscape with “little intrinsic value” was transformed into “six square miles of gardens” and pseudo haciendas in a process that fed into its own cycle—as myth inspired immigration, immigration inspired planting, and increased planting inspired increased belief in the myth of Southern California as a “second Eden”:

The region's inhabitants, many of them newcomers who had been drawn to the place by pictures of its lush landscape, took up gardening in earnest. They planted for beauty as well as for the market and remade the landscape in Eden's image. But aesthetic delight in this cultural landscape was ultimately subordinated to a drive to turn place into profit. This is the magic that growth engines perform, *turning landscape into an economic engine*. (Sackman, "The Garden" 247, emphasis added)

With the (literal) growth of a garden metropolis as an economic engine, it produced not just tangible results with the success of the orange groves but less direct financial benefits with increased tourism, immigration, real estate sales, advertising and promotion, and so on. Truman predicted in 1874 that "it is safe to say that the tide of immigration is just setting in" (203), and within twenty years the population would have grown nearly ten times, from 5,700 in 1870 (for the city, with 15,300 in the county) to a city population of 50,400 by 1890 (101,500 in the county) (McNamara xii).

In *Semi-Tropical California*, Truman and others speculate what a population boom might look like and how it might change (already altered) Los Angeles nature: "there would in ten years be twenty Anaheims in the ample spread of Santa Ana valley ... The beautiful country of the San Jose valley would then be too valuable to be devoted to alfalfa, or to the myriads of wild poppies and desert lilies which make its carpet of green like an exquisite spontaneous mosaic of nature" (qtd. in Truman 82). While it's somewhat difficult to discern whether the unnamed Southern California reporter Truman that quotes here thinks the exchange of a "mosaic of nature" for "twenty Anaheims" is a good or a bad thing, other passages from Truman make it abundantly clear that aesthetics are subordinate to economics in the growth of the region. Here, another local correspondent makes a similar prediction: "Time, patience, and industry will transform these new settlements into thriving towns, and ... the sunny slopes of the Duarte and

Asuza will rival the best-developed sections of the county in beauty and productiveness. Nature has been lavish of her gifts, and it only remains for the recipients of her bounty to do their parts” (qtd. in Truman 184).<sup>20</sup> Looking back from present-day Los Angeles, it’s difficult to image why they would want this subversion of “sunny slopes” and “myriads of wild poppies and desert lilies” for the “twenty Anaheims” and all the freeways and paved streets that now carpet the Valley instead of grass and wildflowers. Nonetheless, the predictions of the travel writers set in place the work that would consume Southern California boosters for decades to come. Moving out of its rustic past in the late nineteenth century, “Southern California was no longer a frontier, but a province awaiting the subtle and complex developments of urbanization and art it would experience in the 1890-1915 period” (Starr, *Inventing* 49). Along with this urbanization, the emergence of the pseudo-hacienda class contributed to the creation of a more romantic, productive, and pastoral landscape in the miles surrounding the growing city of Los Angeles, which helped to attract even more visitors and settlers to the area. What happened to Southern California’s nature—both physical and mythological—in the process of LA’s resulting growth and continued urbanization remains the central question for the next two chapters.

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<sup>20</sup> Truman quotes the same correspondent, who continues: “In a few years San Fernando will be adorned with groves and orchards. It will become the site of a resort of seekers after health. It is removed from everything which can, in a sanitary point of view, be considered deleterious. The sea breeze wanders there, but is tempered by its passage over the twenty miles of intervening plains. Surrounded on all sides by hills, it is a garden spot” (qtd. in 187). Having lived in the San Fernando Valley, I am especially struck by the (sadly) unintentional irony of this prediction.

## CHAPTER 2

A PARADISE FOR SOME: CHARLES F. LUMMIS, NATURE,  
AND MYTHMAKING IN *THE LAND OF SUNSHINE*, 1895–1901

“The fact that Los Angeles is now considered toxic to nature seems all the more monstrous—even matricidal—given that the growth of Southern California was congenitally linked to Mother Nature’s unique beneficence.” (Sackman, *Orange* 24)

When Charles Fletcher Lummis stood on Pike’s Peak in Colorado in November 1894, his whole life stretched before him. The twenty-five-year-old writer was in the middle of a journey from the stultifying life of an unhappily married reporter in Ohio to a reinvented self in the unknown land of Southern California. Moving by foot through the landscape of the West left a mark on the man from the East, although it wasn’t the expected mark of the newcomer overwhelmed with rapturous reactions to larger-than-life western scenery. In *A Tramp Across the Continent* (1892), Lummis recounts his experiences along the route from Ohio to Los Angeles; more often than not, his most positive encounters involve cultural or social exchanges rather than experiences with the nature around him. His thoughts and reactions while standing on the summit of Pike’s Peak exemplify his overall response to the western landscape:

The view from Pike’s Peak is of the noblest and strangest. Such a vista could only be where the greatest mountains elbow the infinite plains. Eastward they stretch in an infinite sea of brown. At their edge are the cameos of Manitou and Colorado Springs; the Garden of the Gods, now a toy; the dark thread of the Ute Pass, through which, in Leadville’s palmy days, streamed the motley human tide. Seventy miles north is the cloud that is Denver. Fifty miles to the south, the

smoke of Pueblo curls up from the prairie, falls back, and trails along the plain in a misty belt, that reaches farther eastward than the eye can follow. (47-48)

When confronted with one of the most storied views in the West, Lummis fixes his focus not on the “greatest mountains” in “an infinite sea of brown” but on the human element—“Leadville’s palmy days,” the “human tide,” the “misty belt” and beckoning “smoke of Pueblo,” and the distant “cloud that is Denver.” His warm and familiar tone when recounting these human elements makes a striking contrast to his palpable unease when confronted with the natural sublime a few paragraphs later:

A perpendicular mile below my feet that night the soft, fleecy clouds went drifting along the scarred flanks of the grim, unmindful giant, while the full moon poured down on them her cold, white glory. ... The icy wind howled against the low building [of the summit’s hut], or dashed off to drive his cloud-flocks scurrying hither and yon down the deeper passes of the range. Time seems hardly to exist up there. Alive, one is yet out of the world. The impression could hardly be stronger if one stood upon a planet sole in all space. (48-49)

When he is faced with the solitary aspect of wilderness, Lummis feels a pull towards the human and away from the natural environment. On Pike’s Peak he perceives the “grim, unmindful giant” of the mountain as bathed in the moon’s “cold, white” light, and the “icy wind howl[ing] against the low building”—the lone symbol of humanity and civilization—while wind and clouds “dash” and “scurry” to create a feeling of insecurity and even peril. Finally, Lummis’s image of being “upon a planet sole in all space” conveys the desolation he feels away from the civilized, human world. Lummis’s palpable discomfort when faced with unadorned nature, along with his preference for “tramping” while utilizing the creature comforts of the Southern Pacific railroad and enjoying the hospitality of the different types of people he meets along the way, helps to inform the way he viewed nature once he’d gone from a traveler and newcomer to bonified Los Angeles booster.



Ten years later, in January 1895, as he took on the role of editor of *The Land of Sunshine* in Los Angeles, Lummis was caught between two opposing impulses: to glorify the nature of Southern California as something to be celebrated in and of itself (i.e. the romantic impulse) or to promote the landscape around Los Angeles as something to be exploited for commercial gain. His interest in the human sublime allowed him to choose another, third space option: combining a commercial appeal with the romantic vistas of the sublime *and* with the cultural inheritance of the vanquished Spanish and Mexican past. In doing so, Lummis combined the idea of a rugged, frontier West in California and a safe and civilized (but just exotic enough to be enticing) territory ready for the genteel to move in—resulting in a new, *romantic frontier* for the discerning visitor or settler; in short, he presented a Southern California that was ripe for the picking, a “new Eden of the Saxon home-seeker” where Anglos were the (sole) inheritors of Eden’s gifts (*LOS* 2.2: 34). Promoting the region as a paradise for sale, Lummis’s editorials and selections of essays, poems, artwork, and advertisements reveal race- and class-based exclusions from this paradise, even while some of these same excluded groups appear in the magazine as tokens of the exotic or even subjects for social justice. Lummis the editor also served as Lummis the Southern California advertiser, but what exactly was he interested in, or inadvertently, advertising? An examination of *The Land of Sunshine* and Lummis’s depiction of the nature in Los Angeles at this moment in history—before the city’s growth despoiled the Edenic qualities that Lummis admired and before increased population brought in the non-Anglo immigrants and manufactories that he so despised of the East—provides a fascinating window through which to view creations of a mythology of Edenic Los Angeles, a mythology doomed to be changed by virtue of its very success.

Previous scholarship about Lummis and *The Land of Sunshine* has been primarily focused on Lummis's editorial relationships, role as champion booster of Los Angeles and the Southwest, folkloric and ethnographic interests, and civic ventures, including his efforts on behalf of Mission Indians and founding of the Landmarks Club and Southwest Museum.<sup>1</sup> However, Lummis's attitudes towards and treatment of nature within the pages of *The Land of Sunshine* remain relatively unexamined. With the magazine's origins in the Chamber of Commerce and its successful publication, an examination of depictions of nature within its pages informs the booster mythologies of Los Angeles and Southern California that emerged during this time—mythologies that influenced the perception of “Eden lost” in later years. To begin to unravel the creation of this Edenic mythology, a look at Lummis's views of wilderness and nature sheds light on how, as editor, he promotes LA's nature within the pages of *The Land of Sunshine*.

As previously noted, Lummis's remarkable career as a promoter of Los Angeles began in Ohio, where he was living when he decided to move to California by “tramping” his way to LA, writing dispatches for the *Los Angeles Times* along the way. Starting out in the fall of 1884, Lummis traversed the Rockies and the desert Southwest to reach Los Angeles in February of 1885, where he found a job at the *Times* waiting for him. His

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<sup>1</sup> For recent scholarship on Lummis and his work, see Culver's chapter “Inventing the Frontier of Leisure: Charles Fletcher Lummis and the Creation of the ‘Great Southwest’” in *The Frontier of Leisure* (2010); William McClung, “The Anglo Invention of Los Angeles” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles* (2010); Martha J. Cutter, “Sui Sin Far's Letters to Charles Lummis: Contextualizing Publication Practices for the Asian American Subject at the Turn of the Century” (2006); Joe Staples, “‘Discovering’ New Talent: Charles F. Lummis's Conflicted Mentorship of Sui Sin Far, Sharlot Hall, and Mary Austin” (2005); Jennifer A. Watts, “Photography in the *Land of Sunshine*: Charles Fletcher Lummis and the Regional Ideal” (2005); Dominika Ferens, “Native Americans, Chinese, and White Progressivists in the *Land of Sunshine*, 1895-1909” (2001); David Fine, “Boosters and Boasters: The Making and Unmasking of a Myth” in *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (2000); and Martin Padget, “Travel, Exoticism, and the Writing of Region: Charles Fletcher Lummis and the ‘Creation’ of the Southwest” (1995).

dispatches, later collected as *A Tramp across the Continent*, provide a telling look at Lummis's conceptions of wilderness and nature as he encountered it on his journey. As the moment on Pike's Peak illustrates, Lummis does not appear to have been someone prone to fits of the natural sublime; instead, his eye for detail and enjoyment of adventure tended to focus on the ethnographic. Describing the fortitude and bizarre physical appearance of lone traders and miners he encounters in the mountains, Lummis declares that such encounters "[send] a thrill through one's veins" to stumble upon one of "those old heroes, whose superhuman valor and vigor opened these western States ... to civilization" (54). He recounts the kindness of "the first Mexican in whose house [he] began to understand the universal hospitality of these simple folk" and his initial encounter with Isleta Pueblo in New Mexico, where "[t]here was a little dream in [him] ... that this was some time to be [his] home," which was indeed the case (136, 140).<sup>2</sup> Besides his interest in the people and cultures he encounters on his "tramp," Lummis frequently expresses his pleasure at successfully hunting coyotes, cougars, and seemingly every other kind of animal in the western US, whose hides or antlers he took as trophies and conveniently shipped to himself via the closest rail station. When he does encounter a vista or bit of natural beauty that merits a mention, we get a glimpse of Lummis's version of the sublime: gravitating towards the human or known element while expressing a vague disinterest or even outright discomfort with the overwhelming spectacle of nature in the West, as on Pike's Peak.

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<sup>2</sup> His strong affinity for Isleta Pueblo and the "old" Southwestern culture found voice in Lummis's personal choices (to relocate to Isleta, adopt the *don* lifestyle in Los Angeles, and work as ethnographer and folklorist, eventually establishing the Southwestern Museum) as well as editorial choices, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Lummis's attitude towards nature, as seen in that telling mountaintop moment and in other moments of *A Tramp across the Continent*, reflects his deeper interest in the anthropological and ethnographic and at times even resembles that of Teddy Roosevelt (a fellow student at Harvard), with his quest to reinforce his virility through nature via hunting and frequent reference to the "manly" aspects of his journey. But thoughts of late-nineteenth-century nature, especially in the West, inevitably lead to a comparison with John Muir, whose fervent embrace of the natural sublime is a fundamental part of our conceptions of nature in the American West. Compare Lummis's reaction to the view from Pike's Peak to Muir's thoughts on top of a summit in the Sierra Nevada range in July 1869:

Ramble to the summit of Mount Hoffman, eleven thousand feet ... And what glorious landscapes are about me, new plants, new animals, new crystals, and multitudes of new mountains far higher than Hoffman, towering in glorious array along the axis of the range, serene, majestic, snow-laden, sun-drenched, vast domes and ridges shining below them, forests, lakes, and meadows in the hollows, the pure blue bell-flower sky brooding them all,—a glory day of admission into a new realm of wonders as if Nature had wooingly whispered, "Come higher." What questions I asked, and how little I know of all the vast show, and how eagerly, tremulously hopeful of some day knowing more, learning the meaning of these divine symbols, crowded together on this wondrous page. (*My First Summer in the Sierra* 149)

It seems improbable that Muir and Lummis would find any middle ground in regards to nature, with one who preferred the lonely mountaintop and the other who longed to be anywhere but. Despite their mutual interest in associating masculinity with the "tramp"—Muir's in the untrammelled Sierras, Lummis's within spitting distance of a railroad—Muir would have likely abhorred Lummis's focus on dominating nature by killing its wild creatures instead of simply visually consuming the scenery, as Muir did so

famously. Yet the two men shared a nearly twenty-year correspondence and friendship.<sup>3</sup> They also shared a connection to Los Angeles—a surprising fact when Muir seems iconically anchored to Yosemite, the Sierras, and Northern California. Indeed, Muir lived in Martinez, California, but he spent time in Los Angeles visiting family and friends and wrote some of his best-known works there, including *My First Summer in the Sierra* in 1910 (“John Muir Life” n.p.). In 1914, Muir died of pneumonia at a Los Angeles hospital, a fact that seems morbidly ironic when thinking about popular conceptions of LA today as a place where nature has died.<sup>4</sup>

Nature in Los Angeles was still very much alive and well when Lummis’s “tramp” concluded after a perilous Mojave Desert crossing:

I trotted gayly down the cañon, climbed over the western wall, and struck out along the foothills. Now I was truly in “God’s country”—the real Southern California, which is peerless.

It was the last day of January. The ground was carpeted with myriad wild flowers, birds filled the air with song, and clouds of butterflies fluttered past me. I waded clear, icy trout brooks, startled innumerable flocks of quail, and ate fruit from the gold-laden trees of the first orange orchards I had ever seen. Pretty Pomona gave me pleasant lodgings that night, and next day, February 1, 1885, a thirty-mile walk through beautiful towns, past the picturesque old Mission of San Gabriel, and down a matchless valley, brought me at midnight to my unknown home in the City of Angels. (269)

Cronon’s ideas about the emergence of a pro-wilderness and pro-nature ideology in the nineteenth century provide a helpful background to this moment in the text. Cronon sees the causes for the changes in the American attitude towards nature at this time in both the

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<sup>3</sup> The letters provide an interesting look at a more prosaic Muir, whose exchanges with Lummis often concerned subscription costs, requests for Muir to write something for *LOS*, and other quotidian matters. While the letters’ contents do touch on the natural world occasionally, the most explicit mention of nature in Los Angeles comes from a July 4, 1907 letter in which Muir tells Lummis he was in the city visiting a friend who had become seriously ill “in your blessed braggy climate” (Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, 1888-1928, Braun Research Library Collection, Autry Museum, Los Angeles, CA; MS.1, MS1.1.3221B Correspondence. Accessed 28 July 2011.)

<sup>4</sup> I’m indebted to Char Miller for fleshing out Muir’s link to Los Angeles in “Urban Idyl: John Muir in the New World of Los Angeles,” a KCET blog post from April 13, 2011.

sublime/romantic view and the frontier view of wilderness. He notes that “the two converged to remake wilderness in their own image, freighting it with moral values and cultural symbols that it carries to this day” (72). That this was especially true for Southern California can be seen in Lummis’s description of this moment, with his introduction to Los Angeles through the potent local icons of missions and orange groves.<sup>5</sup> The convergence of the sublime/romantic and the frontier views of the wilderness is equally evident within the pages of *The Land of Sunshine*, where Lummis used words and images to craft a kind of *romantic frontier* of which Los Angeles was the pinnacle, a place where man could relish the beauty of nature and reach out with a mastering hand to tame it.

In the moment of crossing over the “western wall,” Lummis finds the beginnings of his own Eden in Southern California’s pastoral landscapes, complete with “gold-laden trees.” Welcomed by the regional symbols of oranges and missions (iconography which he will later utilize in *The Land of Sunshine*), Lummis entered Los Angeles, where he dove headfirst into its burgeoning energy and into the efforts of the city’s boosters. As the city editor for the *Times*, Lummis worked himself into poor health, suffering a stroke after only a few years on the job. He retreated to Isleta Pueblo in New Mexico and to his anthropological interest in the Southwest, whose people and culture had so enchanted him on his “tramp.” After spending several years convalescing there, Lummis returned to Los Angeles and attempted to recreate this Southwestern mode of living by adopting the

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<sup>5</sup> There is a greater cultural symbolism in Lummis’s consumption of the “golden” fruit after crossing over into “Eden,” calling to mind both a quasi-Biblical story of entry *into* paradise followed by consumption of the fruit of knowledge, as well as the classic Greco-Roman mythology of the Garden of the Hesperides. The orange’s central importance to the cultural iconography of Southern California cannot be adequately addressed here, so I will let Lummis’s own words on the subject suffice (as attributed to him by Carey McWilliams): “the orange ... is not only a fruit but a romance” (207). (I’m grateful to Lawrence Culver for pointing me to this particular Lummis *bon mot*.)

dress and nickname of “Don Carlos” (Culver 34) and building an Isleta-inspired home (“El Alisal”) in Arroyo Seco. At El Alisal, Lummis established a salon of writers and artists, including Mary Austin, Sui Sin Far, and Maynard Dixon, whom he gathered in his efforts to promote Los Angeles and its nascent literary and cultural scene.

Lummis became editor of *The Land of Sunshine* in January 1895 and, over the next fourteen years, took the publication from a purely promotional tool of the Chamber of Commerce to a literary magazine read by locals, hopeful emigrants in the Midwest, and armchair travelers of the urban East. The mix of educational and informative articles on Southern California, short stories and poems, hand-drawn art, and copious photography (much of it taken by Lummis himself) made the magazine a successful promotional tool for tourism and settlement. Founded in 1894, *The Land of Sunshine* went through a major redesign under Lummis’s editorship and, in 1902, was renamed *Out West* to reflect a content shift towards the West (especially the Southwest) as a region versus the magazine’s earlier focus on Los Angeles and California alone. But from 1895 to 1901, the years under Lummis’s stewardship, *The Land of Sunshine* showcased the natural environment in and around Los Angeles and, simultaneously, ingrained in the public imagination the city’s ostensibly fabricated romantic past—a past built on Anglo dreams of haciendas and mission romance alongside picturesque California Indians.

As with any publication, the artwork and design Lummis chose for the cover of *The Land of Sunshine* reflect his goals as a booster. For his inaugural issue, issued in January 1895, the predominance of nature and natural imagery visually declares the charms of Los Angeles and “the land of sunshine” are to be found in the sun, palm trees, mountains, orange groves, and flowers that grace the issue’s cover. (Figure 2-1) The large

spray of roses, covering two-thirds of the cover itself, suggest fecundity, romance, perfumed lands, and the cultivation of this sophisticated, most highly prized flower. The roses may also be a nod to two local festivals, started around the same time as the Chamber of Commerce began the magazine, in 1895: Pasadena's Rose Parade, first held in 1890, and LA's own festival, Fiesta de los Flores, also started by the Chamber of Commerce (in conjunction with the Merchants' Association) in 1894. Above the roses, a romantically framed glimpse of the Southern California landscape showcases mountains, tidy orange groves, and lofty palm trees, each element an important part of the popular conception of the region.<sup>6</sup> Notably, the landscape spreads unobstructed to fill the entire frame: no city skyline or visible structures of any kind mar this presentation of the "new Eden," and even the human-created rows of orange tree serve as just one more "element" in this image's composition. And, of course, the sun itself "rises," dawn-like, from behind the frame, in the same luxe gold of the word "SUNSHINE" in the magazine's title. With rays stretching to the fill the top right corner of the cover itself, the sun's symbolic tie to the landscape below it represents the famed Southern California climate and light, the healthiness of that climate (and its residents), abundance, good fortune, energy, or even a promise of imperial power. When Lummis redesigned and relaunched *LOS* in June 1895, some of the other natural elements were gone but the sun itself remained front and center, along with some roses. (Figure 2-2) In place of the framed scene of the Southern California landscape, however, now sits the proud California mountain lion—"the most perfect of the animate creatures of the New World, the highest type of physical grace and sinewy strength, the most typical sun-lover"—who Lummis describes as "basking

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<sup>6</sup> Unlike similar, ubiquitous images on the citrus crate labels that traveled with oranges to advertise Southern California a different way, this cover landscape seems to missing one requisite item: a mission.



Sphinx-like in the setting sun” (*LOS* 2.6). Behind the lion, the rays of the sun stretch even further than before, filling the entire top half of the cover. Emphasizing the sun’s importance, the word “Sunshine” in the magazine’s title appears larger and more visibly central than the “The Land of,” and all this sunniness is capped off with a new motto, placed right in the center of top of the cover frame: *Los paises del sol dilatan el alma*. “The lands of the sun expand the soul,” according to Lummis, who explained the redesigned cover in the May 1895 editor’s column: “As the king of beasts stands for physical, so does the queen of flowers for mental, grace. There are no roses where man is uncultivated; and while California is not the only country where roses grow, it is the one where they reach their highest perfection” (*LOS* 2.6). With the romantic curve of the vine of roses, a pattern like crackled leather or adobe serves as the background for all the artwork and text, suggesting an antiquity and cultural richness that Lummis and other boosters wished to see California attain, by marrying the idea of this new, natural paradise to ancient Mediterranean cultures and even to the homegrown mission culture of early California. But the words and titling *on* the crackled background spell out more changes to Lummis’s version of the magazine, which before had been in the creative control of Chamber of Commerce types. Under the magazine’s title, it’s declared to be “A Southern California Magazine,” “Edited by Chas. F. Lummis,” and, simply, “Los Angeles.” Using text, illustrations, symbolism, and other, more subtle design elements, Lummis presents to the reader his idea of what Los Angeles and the greater Southern

California region is: cultured, graceful, proud, and, above all, a place brimming with nature.<sup>7</sup>

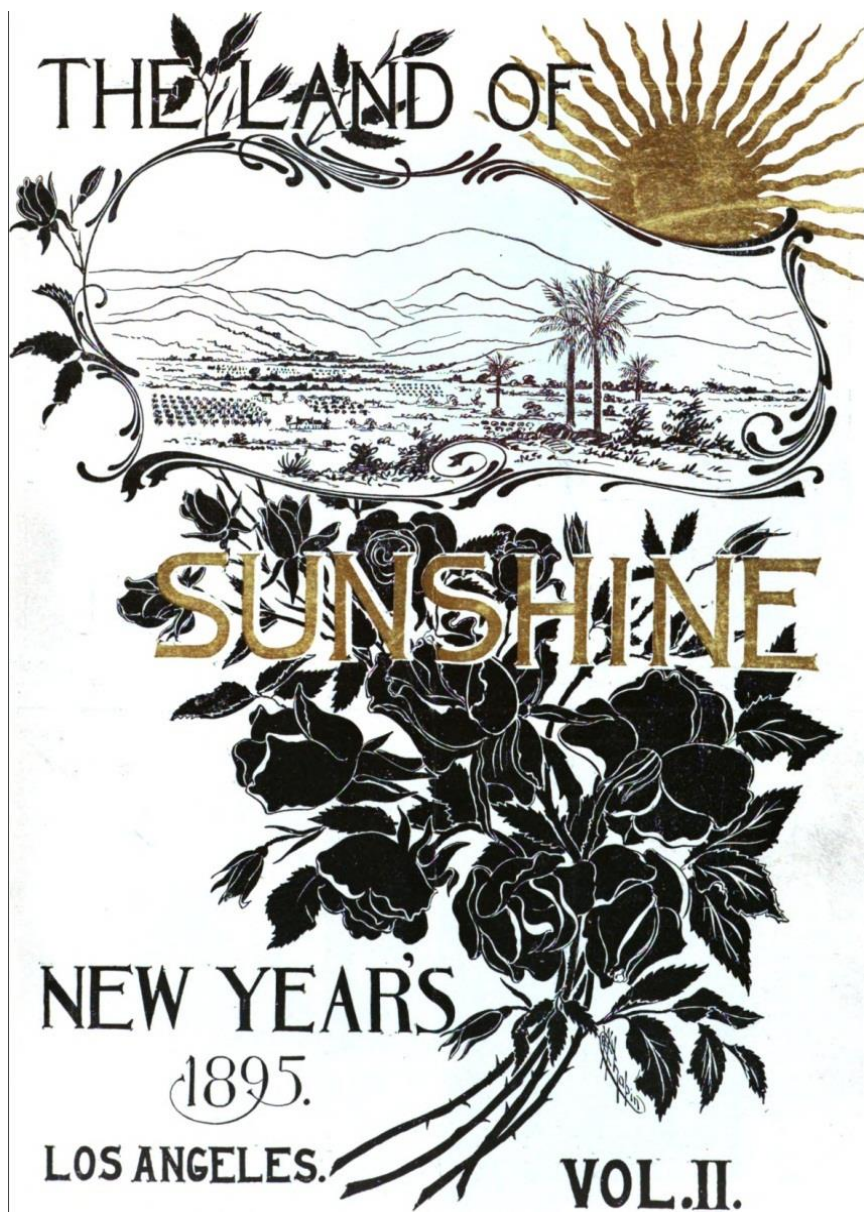


Figure 2-1: Front cover of Lummis's inaugural issue (2.2, Jan. 1895).

<sup>7</sup> The new masthead for the redesign of *The Land of Sunshine* reinforces this by using the sun and its rays behind a row of California poppies. Although the roses and “crackle” effect would disappear by 1901, the *LOS* poppy-filled masthead remained, foregrounding the natural world despite the other changes to the magazine.



Figure 2-2: Redesigned cover with the motto “The Lands of the Sun Expand the Soul” (LOS 3.1, June 1895).

One of Lummis's primary influences as an editor lay in his editorial column, which he renamed "In the Lion's Den"—perhaps in honor of an encounter with a mountain lion on his "tramp" but more likely a move to ally himself with the titular lion.<sup>8</sup> (This explanation seems more plausible when taking into account Lummis's occasional habit of using "the Lion" in lieu of "I" or even the royal "we" in his editorials.) Each month, Lummis used this space to make explicit the booster messages of LA's natural assets, messages expressed throughout the magazine in its artwork, poetry, and selection of essay topics. In 1895, Lummis's first year as editor, typical content included articles on the chrysanthemum and the almond, excursion guides offering "Pictaescque Byways" and "A Country of Outings," as well as tributes to "The Mother Mountains" and "Memories of 'Our Italy.'" That same year, Lummis used "In the Lion's Den" to endlessly boast about the superiority of life in Southern California, starting with his inaugural issue in 1895, where he first references the idea of Southern California as "the new Eden of the Saxon home-seeker." Lummis declares that "[t]he Southern Californian loves and admires his new home not because he has never seen anything else ... but specifically because he *has* seen other places, and found this better" (*LOS* 2.2: 34). A few issues later, he describes the region's residents as those who have the good sense to "smell the difference between glue-factories and orange blossoms" (*LOS* 2.5: 90). This difference, he posits, is the source of "California Fever ... the most malignant disease known to medicine," a disease so contagious that "it spreads by letter—by hear-say—by

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<sup>8</sup> In the April 1901 issue, a month before revealing the prominence of the California lion on the new cover design, Lummis penned an article on the mountain lion, in which he lavishes praise on the animal: "Stalking his prey, he is more graceful than a perfect woman, and inevitable as the End. In repose, he is the last word of contained force. Noblest of all is he when he promenades ... not for prey, but just for joy of his legs" (*LOS* 2.5). Fitting emblem for a man who walked from Ohio to Los Angeles and later suffered a stroke and (temporary) paralysis.

a picture—even by a telegram” (90).<sup>9</sup> But Lummis sees California Fever as an Anglo disease, excluding others from enjoying the “new Eden” at the Fever’s source:

We are reasonable people here, and human people. We wish more population of the right sort, and are not ashamed to induce it by honorable means. But we are particular. We are anxious to have our friends come; but not everybody. ... This is no penal colony; we are not crying for “population at any cost.” The immigration we wish—and emphatically the only kind we wish—is of a refined, intelligent class. (*LOS* 2.5: 91)

Wanting just “our friends” (i.e. Anglos) to come to Edenic California isn’t enough; Lummis specifies that anyone not belonging to the “refined, intelligent class” (i.e. upper class) need not apply. Lummis’s sentiments place him within what Nash describes as a group of “writers [who] represented themselves as a particular social type whose ‘sensibilities’ were superior to those who brought only economic criteria to wild country. Enjoyment of wilderness, for them, was a function of gentility”—and, by extension, race and class (60). Lummis’s limits on who could come to his California paradise are no different from the exclusions from that “wilderness” Nash describes. For, in Lummis’s view, Los Angeles and Southern California represented an answer what Nash terms the “antipodal” lures of civilization and wilderness (6). In this “new Eden,” Lummis envisioned, one could enjoy the conveniences of modern life arriving daily in the growing city and, at the same time, avoid the ugliness of the industrial age by keeping out the less savory elements (the poor and foreign, manufacturing)—or, if all else failed, run off to the nearby mountains or seashore to reconnect with the natural part of himself.

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<sup>9</sup> Dana uses the same term “California fever” in *Two Years before the Mast*, although to very different effect. In his hopes for California’s future, Dana also despaired of the Spanish influence on its Anglo inhabitants, noting that “if the ‘California fever’ (laziness) spares the first generation, it always attacks the second” (qtd. in Culver 18).

The seashore is exactly where the author of “A Ballade of California” finds his inspiration. Published in the August 1895 issue of *The Land of Sunshine*, the poem by Edward W. Barnard harkens back to classical mythology to elevate California with references to Neptune, the Greek island of Cythera, and the ancient site of Hybla in Sicily—all within the first stanza. Referring to California as a “thrice happy strand of song and shine,” Barnard calls attention to the orange as “[t]he golden fruit of the Hesperides,” luring the potential visitor or immigrant with a description of “groves of gold bound in a zone / Of bloom as honey-sweet as Hybla’s own!” (115). Urging the travel-worn “young mariner” to hasten himself to Southern California, the poet offers these final lines of appeal:

Here’s Youth’s Renaissance—care forever flown,  
On this thrice happy strand of song and shine.  
    ... The East is haughty grown!  
We lack her tumult, tinsel, manners fine;  
But Beauty speaks from peak, from tree, from stone,  
On this thrice happy strand of song and shine. (115–16)

California, lacking the “haughtiness,” “tumult,” and “tinsel” of the established East, offers up nature in its place. This natural beauty is emphasized in the poem “The Transplanting,” which appeared in the June 1895 issue. Using the metaphor of a transplanted oak tree, the poet presents a belief in Southern California that echoes Lummis’s “new Eden of the Saxon home-seeker.” The poet compares the natural elements in Southern California to the “hostile sky” and “bullying icy blast” of “the North,” against which “the Saxon oak” has struggled for so long (34). While the fight for survival has caused the oak to grow strong, the poet argues that “strength is meant for something more than merely to be strong; / And *life* is not a lifetime spent in strain to

keep alive!” (34). But, never fear, for there is hope in “Southern skies” and “kindlier soil”:

Where Mother Nature smiles: “They called you oaks, at home, forsooth!  
But wait—I fain would show you, now, *my* notion of a tree;  
And what an oak was meant to be, that shall fulfill in truth  
Its own potential, and the scope of acorns yet to be![]” (34)

Southern California, of course, is the blessed place where the oak can finally “expand at will, unvexed and undeformed”; here, the Saxon oak will “feel its pulse warmed / To joy of life and grace” and, eventually, “learn as well the evergreen of the palm!” (34). This promise of renewed vigor, the successful planting of little Saxon “acorns,” and hint of the proverbial fountain of youth in the “evergreen of the palm” no doubt received a rousing reception when delivered, as a footnote informs the reader, at a May 1895 Chamber of Commerce banquet. Its author? None other than Charles F. Lummis.

Like the “transplanted” Saxon oak, Lummis used *The Land of Sunshine* to promote his idea of paradise to the white, affluent Californians that are depicted enjoying this paradise in the magazine’s artwork. Each issue featured photographs of Anglos enjoying nature, such as men fishing, a woman picking up seashells at the beach, a solitary hiker, and, most frequently, well-dressed children contrasted with natural examples of Lummis’s “bigger and better in California” refrain—standing beside a rose bush as tall as a house or floating on a giant lily pad. (Figure 2-3) In the photograph with the giant lily pad, titled “The Victoria Regia—Blossom and Leaf,” an Anglo family enjoys a leisurely outing beside a pond. Well-dressed and fully outfitted in hats and ruffles, watch-chains and waders, the figures in this photograph appear to be the kind of upper class patrons that Lummis so often addressed in his sales pitches—the *right* sort of

people for Lummis's "new Eden of the Anglo Saxon home-seeker." In the background we have three women, two seated, one standing, all taking in the scene in the center of the pond while holding on to a toddler, the youngest member of their party, in the lap of the middle woman. More engaged with the scene is the solitary man in the photo, a figure so immersed in the natural world of Southern California that only his hips and upper torso are separate from nature. He stands confidently in the pond water, donned in his three-piece suit, watch chain, pocket square, hat, mustache, and, in adapting to the environment around him, the aforementioned waders. Thus attired, he presumably strode out into the pond, young daughter in his arms, and placed her on the "Victoria Regia" lily pad on which she sits. The man's adaption to and mastery over the environment—all without even removing his hat—seems almost secondary to the central figure in the photograph, the figure that draws most of the attention in the image. The girl, who appears to be the only one smiling out of the entire group, sits comfortably on a lily pad that looks like it must be at least three feet in diameter, and it appears to be supporting her weight without disturbing the equilibrium of the pond. All around the lily pad is still, glassy water, cluttered with other "Victoria Regias"—waiting for more lily-white Anglo children to fill them—and smaller, more common water lilies. The girl's body is swathed in white, and she rises above the lily pad where she sits in a froth of white ruffles and, I imagine, ribbons and lace, like Botticelli's Aphrodite rising from the waves to signal the birth of the dawn and the rising of new, Anglicized beauty in Southern California. *She* is the titular blossom of the photo's title, and thus even the title of the photograph, named as it is for the species of giant lily pad imported from England, confers regality, status, and



the assumed right to rule over and dominate region by “blossoming” there.<sup>10</sup> And so, with this image of the “Victoria Regia” lily pad supporting the weight of a young Anglo girl, the idea that nature in and around Los Angeles was somehow meant to service and support its upper class Anglo inhabitants became a literal, photographic fact.



Figure 2-3: Photo of “The Victoria Regia—Blossom and Leaf” (*LOS* 3.1, June 1895).

Compared to the “Victoria Regia” image, the three figures in “Juana and Her Children” (Figure 2-4) seem far removed from any concept of leisure and even nature.

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<sup>10</sup> The plant’s history provides a snippet of environmental colonial history: It was first spotted by British explorers in South American in the early nineteenth century, who named it after Queen Victoria, but several attempts to transport seeds and grow the “Victoria” in England proved unsuccessful. Finally, in 1849, some specially shipped cuttings were successfully grown in Kew Gardens (“From the Gardeners Chronicle 1850” n.p.). The *LOS* article that this image accompanies states that, in Southern California, the “Victoria Regia” had been “grown outdoors in the Cahuenga Water Garden, and in one of the parks of Los Angeles,” although it doesn’t specify which one (“The Victoria Regia,” *LOS* 3.1).

The mother, daughter, and son sit on the ground beside, the caption informs us, the San Gabriel Mission. Unlike the ground-sitting pair of women in the “Victoria Regia” photograph, Juana and her children sit on the bare earth, the dirt and dust clearly visible in the photo. Their clothing, while Anglo in style, appears to be quite dirty and unadorned, easily imagined to be hand-me-downs. Juana has her hand in what looks like a stone mortar with pestle, performing a small act of labor while her daughter clings protectively to her younger brother. The children stare at the camera, with perhaps an expression of distrust, while Juana simply keeps her eye on her children with an inscrutable expression. The San Gabriel Mission building itself seems rundown and in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. Some scrub dandelions and other short weeds grow along the perimeter of the wall, and with this the only evidence of nature in the scene, the grass, flowers, trees, and waterscape (not to mention the astonishing Victoria lily pad) are greatly missed here. Context adds scant information to the photo: the article with which it appears discusses the “Pasadena Loan Association,” which appears to be a community project to gather and protect archival materials about the pre-US Southern California past. Juana, labeled as “India Pure,” would seem to be part of that history that the Anglo members of the Loan Association want to preserve; her children, labeled as “Anglo-Indian” (the girl) and “Hispano-Indian,” part of a mestizo present and future for the state. But while the future Anglo generations (the girl on the lily pad in “Victoria Regia”) can trust they’ll thrive and flourish, supported by the natural world and dominating everything around them, the future Indian/Mexican/mestizo generations represented in this photograph will likely face it with great trepidation, looking cornered and wary on the bare ground with their backs to the shabby mission wall. Photographs

such as these along with other artwork in *The Land of Sunshine* created a kind of boundary on the limitless sale of Los Angeles and Southern California found in the magazine's back pages. Every issue featured advertisements for fertile (irrigated) land, orange groves, tracts for urban and suburban houses, and the very images of nature itself—appropriately and visually “contained” by local engraving and framing companies. These back pages of *The Land of Sunshine* seem to proclaim, “Come one, come all! The California Dream can be yours, too!” However, examining these ads against the racially coded exclusions in the magazine's primary artwork reveals the real message in *The Land of Sunshine*: Yes, paradise is for sale here. But only some may buy it.



Figure 2-4: Photo of “Juana and Her Children, Mission San Gabriel”  
(*LOS* 2.3, Feb. 1895).

Such was the magazine's portrayal of nature in 1895, during Lummis's first year as editor. By 1901, the final year of *The Land of Sunshine* by that name, little had changed in his direct language about the exclusive qualities of paradise. In the July 1901 "In the Lion's Den," Lummis "yearns to see the relatively few people worthy to enjoy God's country" and "is thankful that California will never get jammed with the sort of people who are contented with the East" (*LOS* 15.1: 54). However, Lummis's exclusions of race and class are complicated by his simultaneous efforts to help the Mission Indians of Warner's Ranch. "They owned California once," he states without irony in the same editorial column. He goes on to attest to their worthiness to be saved through Anglo efforts "to care for and help these bedevilled [sic] people, whose only crime is that they were here first and that they have lands that stronger people hanker for" (51). Despite the altruistic founding of the Sequoia League (which also became a regular column in the magazine) to further the cause of the Mission Indians, the frequent mention and depictions of Native Americans in the pages of *The Land of Sunshine* read more as Lummis's efforts to showcase the exotic and use the romanticized idea of the other to add yet another selling point to "God's country." In this way, two California Indian articles that appeared in the December 1901 issue—the last issue of the magazine before it became *Out West*—point not so much to Lummis's deliberate exploitation of the Natives to sell Southern California as to the conflicting ways in which he unconsciously (or consciously) engaged in these types of problematic marketing practices: the first, titled "Pomo Indian Baskets and Their Makers," by Carl Purdy, describes the acclaimed woven baskets by the Pomo Indians of California, speaking to their artistry and technical skill; the second, "A New Indian Policy," outlines a formal letter sent to the Commissioner of

Indian Affairs in Washington by Lummis and a group of other powerful Angelenos (likely the members of the Sequoia League) about the plight of the Mission Indians, about whom Lummis frequently wrote. With these two articles, ostensibly chosen for altruistic purposes, Lummis states that his aim is to aid the California Mission Indians, yet his actual practices serve to commodify the non-Anglo people in Southern California as one more exotic element making the region attractive to tourists *and* work to solidify the idea of innate Anglo superiority.

The use of the Mission Indians as decorative accent, adding cultural depth to Southern California's romantic frontier, contrasts sharply with Lummis's treatment of another non-Anglo group whose homes and livelihoods were threatened: the Chinese. The November 1901 "In the Lion's Den" references the Chinese Exclusion Act and its possible expiration at that time. Although Lummis allows that the individual Chinese immigrant may be "a quiet, rather human, steady-going, effective person without whom it be rather inconvenient to do," his assertion that "all the old race-hatred has died out" is refuted on the very next page by Lummis himself (*LOS* 15.5: 368). For his main argument against repealing the Chinese Exclusion Act is that, unlike other immigrants, the Chinese immigrant "*stays* foreign" and "is not assimilated" (369). Lummis goes on to say, "The Chinaman does not come to stay. He comes to go as soon as he can afford to. He has no children—and, if he does, in the one case of a thousand—they are Chinese children: pretty, picturesque, dear, but irreconcilably alien" (269). Given that the Exclusion Act *excluded* the immigration of most Chinese women for that very reason, Lummis's objection to their lack of children seems especially petty. Later in the same editorial, Lummis again calls the reader's attention to the plight of the Warner's Ranch

Indians, who deserve help, while the Chinese “deserve” exclusion due to the competition for resources. Give a Mission Indian a place to live, and you can take an artistic photo of them in front of crumbling mission walls to help sell a magazine; give the same to Chinese “homeless aliens” and they will compete with you for land, jobs, and other finite resources (370). Cynical though it may sound, Lummis’s view seems to be that non-white exclusion from the “new Eden” is the only possible solution for Anglo peace of mind.<sup>11</sup>

In 1901, Lummis still boasted that living in Los Angeles meant “living next door to Nature and just across the street from the only Better Country that the heart of man hath conceived” (*LOS* 15.2/3: 158). Two representative poems from this year of *The Land of Sunshine* sustain the idea of Southern California as an Eden. “Eagle Rock” by Blanche M. Burbank, which appeared in the November 1901 issue, employs familiar classical allusions to give weight to the images of natural beauty in the brief poem. Eagle Rock in Los Angeles lies, Burbank writes, in “a charmed valley,” where roses are “in bright perennial blossoming” and birds fill the air with “melodious magic s[o]ng” (38). In

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<sup>11</sup> Lummis’s publication of Sui Sin Far (Maude Eaton) seems like an exception to his disparaging claims about Chinese Americans. From the years 1895 to 1901, at least eight of her stories appeared in *The Land of Sunshine*, and Lummis continued to publish her work in *Out West*. Since Sin Far’s stories reflected a more complicated and nuanced (and generally more positive and humane) conception of Chinese Americans, their publication alongside anti-Chinese stories, articles, and editorials presents another problematic set of contradictions in Lummis’s treatment of non-Anglos in the pages of *LOS*. Martha Cutter explains some of this contradiction as something that was not actually that much of a contradiction, though perhaps a tamped down form of racism. In “Sui Sin Far’s Letters to Charles Lummis: Contextualizing Publication Practices for the Asian American Subject at the Turn of the Century,” Cutter analyzes the correspondence between writer and editor and contextualizes them against her stories that appeared in the magazine. Over and over, she found that Lummis referred to Sin Far in diminutive terms—as Lummis’s “little ‘Chinese Contributor,’” and praised her writing while encouraging her to stick to short-form sketches and stories in lieu of Sin Far’s ambitions towards longer works (qtd. in Cutter 268). And while Lummis only ever published her “‘little’ stories” (qtd. in Cutter 268), he *did* publish her and at least in some way exposed his readers to a warmer, more positive portrait of Chinese Californians. But with every pat on the back, Lummis also didn’t hesitate to put the writer in her place (beneath Anglo writers, likely), as in the profile of Sui Sin Far he published in the November 1900 issue, when he writes that her stories “lack somewhat of literary finish, . . . are simple, unstudied” but that her lack of polish is offset by her “poignant intuition for her people that makes it good to all who understand that literature is, after all, something more than words” (*LOS* 13.5). Thus, by putting Sin Far in her proper “place,” Lummis’s treatment of all *other* Chinese and Chinese Americans could remain unaffected.

“these Arcadian lands,” the poet finds “orchards [that] lift white, fragrant, happy hands”—a scene that represents Southern California as home to the “new treasures of the Hesperides” guarded by the titular eagle (that symbol of US nationalism and imperialism) of Eagle Rock (38). A similar scene of natural bliss is the subject of “April Bloom” by Juliette Estelle Mathis. In this April 1901 poem, the theme of Southern California’s natural superiority to the rest of the country comes across through details of poppies on the California hills as “living, rippling gold [that] the magic rain distills” and canyons “where pink, wild roses” cover every “roof and wall and eaves” to create an Edenic bower (305). Birds and a colorful profusion of flowers flourish in “the Southern summer’s warm and winsome grace,” while in other parts of the country winter still has a tentative grasp (305). “But,” the poet drives home, “in these sheltered valleys of the setting sun, / Eons of eastern Junes are by each April won” (305). Echoing Lummis’s favorite refrain, the poem is essentially taunting anyone *not* taking advantage of nature’s gifts by living in Southern California.

Aside from these poetic examples, the magazine’s artwork and literary content had, for the most part, shifted focus in 1901 from Los Angeles and Southern California to include the wider West; *Land of Sunshine* would be renamed *Out West* by the year’s end. Foreshadowing this move, the cover design of the 1901 issues reflects a significant move away from the old immediately regional focus. (Figure 2-5) Stripped of many of the ornamental flourishes that previously tied the magazine’s cover so explicitly to the natural world, the front cover now features a streamlined sun symbol with truncated rays. The sun still sits behind the “Sphinx-like” figure of the California lion, and its new bolder color and simpler silhouette evokes a crown-like or even halo-like adornment to the lion.

As for the California flora and the romantic rose illustrations so prominent on past covers, for 1901 the more modern design instead features a cover photograph (vouching for the claim that *LOS* is “Richly Illustrated”), which varied with each issue: in the July 1901 cover in Figure 2-5, the “exotic” flora of (non-native) eucalyptus blossoms serves to remind the reader that this magazine focuses on a region quite different from the eastern US. The motto *Los paisés del sol dialten el alma* remains at the top of the cover frame; surrounding that frame are now stylized, perhaps Aztec-inspired rays or flames, extending the iconography of the sun’s rays from the (shrunken) version of the sun on the 1901 cover. The most significant changes in this cover design, however, occur in the text itself: Gone are the proud indications that this is a Southern California magazine or that Los Angeles serves as the magazine’s exclusive home.<sup>12</sup> *The Land of Sunshine*, in 1901, had become “The Magazine of California and the West”—not even *Southern California*—yet is still prominently edited by Lummis, of course. The teaser content listed on the top left corner of the magazine could just as well be advertising the contents of *National Geographic*, for where is Los Angeles’s “new Eden” or Southern California’s romantic uniqueness in articles on “The Panama Canal,” “The Ark People,” or even a general article by “Smythe” on irrigation in the West?

Despite the 1901 covers’ non-regionally-specific appearance, some indications of *The Land of Sunshine*’s original purpose remained inside the magazine through the stories, poems, artwork, and monthly columns Lummis selected. After six years of Lummis’s boosterism, it seems that the myopic and lococentric emphasis of the early

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<sup>12</sup> Although it has been cut off in this particular image, other covers from the 1901 volume state that the *LOS* has its home in Los Angeles *and* San Francisco—which is almost a bigger downgrade than leaving LA off altogether.



years of his editorship made such predominantly Southern California and Los Angeles focus somewhat unnecessary; yet monthly columns devoted to “The Landmarks Club” and “The 20<sup>th</sup> Century West” enabled a look back at the romanticized past and a look ahead to LA’s place as the “Metropolis of the Southwest,” the gleamingly modern crown jewel of “the richest and happiest section of a rich and happy nation” (*LOS* 15.5: 370).<sup>13</sup> In the promotion of LA as both “next door to Nature” and as developing metropolis, *The Land of Sunshine* exemplifies what Marx sees in American literature as the age-old “contrast between two worlds, one identified with rural peace and simplicity, the other with urban power and sophistication”—a contrast that dates back to Virgil and the *Georgics* (18–19). Lummis saw this contrast, this tension, as having little negative impact on the present and future he envisioned for Los Angeles: a city offering all the benefits of modern life without the crowds, poverty, and unpleasant environment that came with manufacturing; a city and modern life surrounded by orange groves, snow-capped mountains with trails made for ambling, and pristine Pacific beaches. Much like the pastoral ideal embraced by Jefferson, Crevécouer, and others—a pastoralism that is ironically often touted as part of the “democratic” foundation of the nation—Lummis’s view of the “new Eden” excludes non-Anglos.

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<sup>13</sup> Even the masthead for the latter column (Figure 2-6) seems to escape from the bounds of Southern California. In fact, it looks more like the nineteenth-century West, with a single farmer using a horse-drawn plow and lone farmhouse and barn (no adobe in sight) hidden among the trees; a grove, possibly citrus, and vague shapes of field workers set in front of low hills could be anywhere in the West. A classic scrolled title and woman pouring out a urn of water onto the ground, along with the complete lack of any signs of a modern “Metropolis of the Southwest,” confirm the fact that *this* West has little to do with the city that had been the magazine’s focus and original purpose.

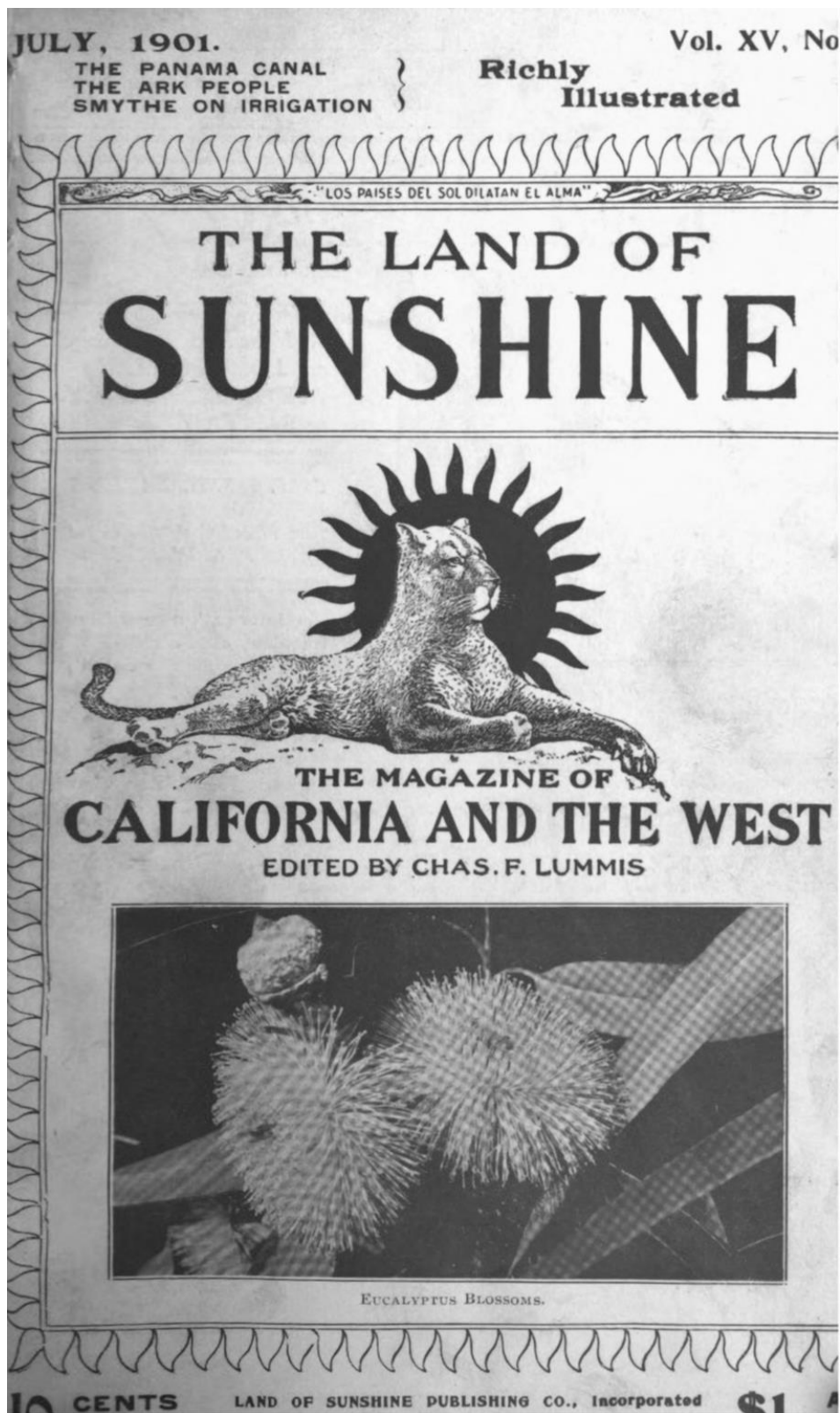


Figure 2-5: Final cover design for *The Land of Sunshine*, renamed *Out West* in January 1902 (15.2, July 1901).



Figure 2-6: Masthead for the “20<sup>th</sup> Century West” column (*LOS* 15.2/3, Aug/Sept.1901).

This exclusion complicated his efforts to create the image of an exotic, culturally rich Southern California by highlighting the importance of California Indians and, to a lesser extent, Mexicans and Californios in *The Land of Sunshine*. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the attention Lummis paid to the Mission Indians and other Native American groups fills the pages of the magazine from 1895 to 1901, and his interest in these groups culminated in the founding of the Southwest Museum in 1907. Lummis’s anthropological eye also found a source of inspiration in the idea of old California, in haciendas and *senoritas*, *caballeros* and *dons*, and the content of *LOS* consistently reflected that romanticization of the past and the resulting disregard for the present and future of Mexicans and Californios in Southern California. For example, two stories by Amanda Mathews in 1901 bring to the magazine’s pages the exotic setting of a Mexican theater (and the romantic aspirations of the titular actress) in “Consuelo’s Hour” (*LOS* 14.2) and the traditional setting of a Mexican village and another tale of romance in “A Guadalupe Wooing” (15.5). Both stories are paired with simple line drawings showing images of a *senorita* with a lute (“Consuelo’s”) or a *caballero* (“Wooing”). In the same issue as “Consuelo’s Hour,” Lummis penned an article on Don Antonio F. Coronel, an exemplar of “the old-school cavaliers of California. A man of courtly presence, ripe experience,

high integrity, and great personal fascination” (*LOS* 14.2).<sup>14</sup> The accompanying photograph of the Don shows him dressed in full *caballero* regalia, playing a Spanish guitar, looking lovingly at his wife, Doña Mariaña; the article, “Relics of Old California,” also discusses and shows the various items in the *don*’s possession from LA’s past,<sup>15</sup> although it fails to note whether or not Coronel and his hacienda suffered the same disenfranchisement under US annexation that so many other Californios did. These 1901 indications of Lummis’s interest in—or, at least, interest in selling—the romantic Spanish and Mexican part of Southern California past merely act as a continuation of the direction taken in his first issues as editor of the magazine. The June 1895 issue opened with the fiesta-day poem “San Juan’s Day at Dolores” by Lummis, while the March 1895 issue featured an opening image of a classic scene of the courtly Californio days of Don Antonio Coronel’s time with the illustration “When Juan Goes By” (*LOS* 2.4). When compared side by side, that 1895 illustration and the 1901 photograph of Don Antonio and his wife appear strikingly similar, with the added touch that the 1901 photograph also features a guitar-playing *cabarello*, upping the romantic ante. (Figures 2-7 and 2-8) When combined with the monthly appearance of the column devoted to the activities of the Landmarks Club, the trend is unmistakably one of romanticizing the Spanish and Mexican past of Southern California. But the key here remains the focus on the *past*: the Californios, Mexicans, and the historic Spanish influence belong to the past, where they could stay safe, unthreatening, and able to be appropriated by Anglos looking to add a little

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<sup>14</sup> Although not mentioned in Lummis’s article, Coronel’s biography includes his friendship and mentorship of Helen Hunt Jackson (“Antonio F. Coronel” n.p.).

<sup>15</sup> These relics did not end up in Lummis’s Southwestern Museum but can be found at the Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, according to that museum’s website.

touch of exotic romance to the “new Eden of the Anglo-Saxon home-seeker.” Along with this focus on a romanticized past, the magazine mostly ignores the presence of these groups in then-present-day Southern California and presents the future of the region—especially the future as tied to nature—as solely the provenance of Anglo Californians. Native Americans receive different treatment in the magazine because Lummis may approach them as a cause for wealthy readers to support, as a group (like the image of “Juana and Her Children”) to be pitied and aided because of their misfortunate, subservient, and non-threatening state.



Figures 2-7 and 2-8: Illustration of “When Juan Goes By” (*LOS* 2.4, March 1895) and photo of “Don Antonio and Doña Mariaña” (*LOS* 14.2, Feb. 1901).

Overall, references to Southern California and Los Angeles no longer held center stage in the final year of *The Land of Sunshine*; Lummis had shifted his editorial eye to the larger target of the West as a whole. Therefore, by the 1901 issues of the magazine presented other moves away from the hardcore boosterism of 1895. Images still showed

Anglos enjoying the beaches and flowers of Southern California's paradise, but other articles spotlighted places in Northern California, New Mexico, and even Salt Lake City. The many pages of advertisements in the back of *The Land of Sunshine*'s still offered land and readily consumable, framed nature for sale, but these types of ads were outnumbered by others selling the conveniences of modern life—including retail options, travel opportunities, and technological conveniences. In other words, Los Angeles was no longer in danger of being seen as a frontier town but was now the bustling, modern city that Lummis and LA's boosters had dreamed of for decades.

As for the other part of Lummis's dream—the exclusive paradise, the “new Eden”—perhaps we can find clues to its fate in the reduced number of images depicting Southern California's nature, in Lummis's shrill repetitions of the “worth” of those he wanted to see emigrate, and in the magazine's shifted focus to the greater West. These clues tell the story that history has revealed: by creating such an appealing vision of paradise, Lummis, *The Land of Sunshine*, and all of LA's boosters succeeded almost too well. For despite an occasional, half-hearted call to protect the mountains and forests around Los Angeles, Lummis for the most part did not seem concerned about preserving the area's resources and natural beauty.<sup>16</sup> What seems to us an incredible lack of foresight—what exactly did he think would happen when the city grew and grew?—may be explained by a few key aspects of Lummis's thoughts as evidenced in the pages of *The Land of Sunshine*.

First, Lummis honestly believed in his vision of a tidy, idyllic city, surrounded by picturesque small farms and orange groves, and capped off with the looming spectacle of

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<sup>16</sup> Lummis's attitude perhaps explains some of the superficiality in his correspondence with Muir, an ardent naturalist and preservationist.

the San Gabriel, San Bernardino, and Santa Monica mountains—all embraced by the Pacific and perfect climate. Lummis simply could not conceive of the smoggy sprawl that was in LA's future. (Such problems belonged to eastern cities and their impoverished, working-class immigrants.) Secondly, while Lummis may not have seen himself as a salesman, he was clearly caught up in the spirit of the times and took to his role as regional promoter with zeal. Culver notes that while Lummis "might have thought of himself as a scholar and public intellectual, ... he was first and foremost an advertising man" (42). Even if *The Land of Sunshine's* explicit commercial appeal lay in the back pages of the magazine's ads, as its editor Lummis was equally complicit in the efforts to sell the region. It would seem that he was too preoccupied with the business of selling—and thus developing—Los Angeles as part of the "20<sup>th</sup> Century West" to be terribly concerned with the price that would be paid for his success. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, Lummis's true fascination seemed not to lie with the natural sublime to be found in the wilderness. Unlike John Muir's, Lummis's passion, as also evidenced in *A Tramp across the Continent*, was inspired instead by the *human* sublime he found in Southern California's older cultures—as in that moment on Pike's Peak, when he rejected the appeal of the traditionally defined sublime in raw nature and, instead, chose to focus on the indications of human civilization. While Lummis certainly seemed to appreciate the recreational and aesthetic appeal of LA's natural surroundings, his efforts went towards causes like the Landmarks Club and preserving the California Missions that would legitimize and make permanent the attractive patina of an exotic Spanish past and solidify Southern California's identity as a romantic frontier. Whatever his more philanthropic motives in, for example, making appeals for the plights of Mission Indians

with the Sequoia League or creating the Southwest Museum for the preservation of Native cultural artifacts, the end result of Lummis's attentions to the exotic aspects of LA's human wildernesses lay in adding strata to the overall appeal of the area for future (Anglo) visitors and residents.

When we ponder a mythology of early Los Angeles, Richard Slotkin's assertion that "American myths ... frequently turn out to be the work of literary hacks or promoters seeking to sell American real estate by mythologizing the landscape" would likely have given Lummis offense (6). Seeing himself as neither literary hack nor someone simply hawking real estate—although the ads in the back of his magazine would say otherwise—Lummis instead saw his work in *The Land of Sunshine* as a kind of proselytizing, bringing the gospel of the "new Eden" of the West to the poor suckers still eking out a miserable existence in the crowded, smoggy cities of the East. (Of course, Lummis had a very specific kind of "sucker" in mind and would not have welcomed the teeming masses of Lady Liberty.) But Slotkin's statement nonetheless holds true for the messages contained in *The Land of Sunshine*: by perpetuating an Edenic mythology for Los Angeles, Lummis intentionally (or inadvertently) sold the region's charms and benefits quite effectively—so effectively that within his lifetime he would see the degradation of that very Eden.

So what does this bit of environmental mythmaking (and breaking) from over a century ago have to teach us about our ideas of Los Angeles and nature today? In "What is the L.A. River?," Jenny Price describes Los Angeles as "a city with a notorious, extreme tendency to erase both nature and history" (63). As the city continues to struggle with its urban and environmental reputation, a look back on how the city was presented in



the past reminds us of the myths we may still hold in our minds today—myths that limit or prejudice the way we perceive contemporary Los Angeles. For William Deverell and Greg Hise, a reconceptualization of how we see nature in the city is,

fundamental for rethinking Los Angeles and for recasting the region as a sustainable metropolis. Part of that recasting—a critical part, in our estimation—demands very close attention to regional history and the ways in which metropolitan nature has been constructed and construed for well over a century in greater Los Angeles. (12)

By reviewing the way Charles Lummis—one of early LA’s most influential mythmakers—wrote about, thought about, and reacted to nature, perhaps we can begin to unravel the old formulations of Los Angeles and arrive at a clearer understanding of present concerns and future potential of nature in this paradise lost.

## CHAPTER 3

TOXIC FICTIONS: CIVIC VISIONS OF NATURE IN LOS ANGELES  
AND THE EMERGENCE OF NOIR, 1921-1939

“With the novels of ... the thirties ... the sunny myth was fully eclipsed. The dream, if it once had potency, was behind them. ... [T]hey replaced it with a counterfable: that of the dream running out along the California shore.” (Fine 82)

“Los Angeles understands its past ... through a robust fiction called *noir*.” (Davis, *City* 36)

“WHERE NATURE HELPS INDUSTRY MOST,” proclaims the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce’s (LACC) 1924 informational pamphlet “Facts about Industrial Los Angeles: Nature’s Workshop” (10). Primarily intended to showcase the natural resources ready to be utilized in the service of manufacturing, the pamphlet contains information about raw materials and their relevance to various industries, including textiles, steel and ironworks, and motion pictures. Detailing why LA served as “The Home of Contented Labor,” an explanation is offered as to why the city could boast of “approximately 200,000 contented workers—Americans predominating—living and working under ideal conditions” (10, 2):

The real secret of the efficiency of the workers of Southern California may be found in their home life. ... A tenement is unknown here and the workers live in their own little bungalows, surrounded by plenty of land for fruits, vegetables and flowers, and where children romp and play throughout the entire year under

climactic conditions that are as nearly ideal as exists anywhere on the face of the earth. This spells contentment and contentment spells efficiency. (10)

The promised contentment—complete with bungalow, produce, flowers, and children—allows the smiling worker to leave his home (through white picket fence, no less) and cross the road to gainful employment at a local factory, indicated by the heaving smokestacks in the image on the front cover of an earlier LACC pamphlet, “Nature’s Workshop: The Home of Efficient Labor” from 1921. (Figure 3-1) With the city spread out below, busy port and distant orange groves denote other sources of productivity and “contentment,” while a train chugs along the hill between the worker’s piece of paradise and the source of his financial well-being. Distant mountains, daffodils, grass, cypress and palm trees, and “romping” children remain blessedly unaffected by the factory’s emissions—at least for the time being.

The image, exaggerated as it may seem, again reflects a moment in time for Los Angeles, between the sprawling ranchos of the “pseudo hacienda class” of the travel writers and Lummis’s dreams of a pastoral, factory-free Anglo Saxon kingdom, and before the myth of Los Angeles as an Eden began to shift into something darker, something reflective of the inevitable change headed towards the city. Reaching for both a prosperous, high-tech future and clinging to the idea of its pastoral, natural past, the LACC’s image of Los Angeles as “Nature’s Workshop” once again tries to overcome the inherent dichotomy to embrace an “industrialized version of the pastoral ideal” (Marx 222). Thus, in William Deverell and Greg Hise’s words, using these pamphlets and this moment in Los Angeles’s evolving myth allows us to “explor[e] the intersection of regional, metropolitan development and attitudes toward nature” (202).



Figure 3-1. Cover of the 1921 "Nature's Workshop" brochure. (Source: Box 53, California Historical Society collection of Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce records and photographs, Collection no. 0245.1, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.)

By 1921 and 1924, the years these particular “Nature’s Workshop” pamphlets were produced and mailed to manufacturers and companies across the country, the Los Angeles of Lummis’s vision had gone through significant changes—the most obvious of which was population growth. The 1900 census gave the city’s population at over 102,000, with the county nearly double that amount at 179,300. Just ten years later, the population of Los Angeles city and county had both tripled to 319,200 and 504,100, respectively. By 1920, the population had nearly doubled again, to 576,700 in the city and 936,500 for the county (McNamara xiii-xiv). Along with over 800,000 new residents, the region had gained the important additions of the automobile and the motion picture industry, both destined to shape the face of the city and its mythology through the present day. The crisis of water supply for the expanding populous received part of its solution, along with decades of controversy, in the 1913 completion of the Owens River Aqueduct. The city was booming, well on its way to becoming the gleaming “Metropolis of the Southwest” Lummis had envisioned.

However, as Culver has noted of Lummis’s efforts, “all his preaching about the redemptive power of the Southwest was used by [LA’s civic leaders] for purely material ends” (42). Proselytizing to the unwashed masses of the East about the superiority of the region resulted in the arrival to Southern California of the very same polluting industry and unskilled immigrant labor he boasted of *not* having in common with the great eastern cities. Fortunately for the city’s perennial supply of boosters, “the movies arrived as more effective promoters of immigration than *The Land of Sunshine*, and, in any case, the Mission Romantics [such as Lummis] became older and more disenchanted in rapidly urbanizing and auto-congested Southern California” (Davis, *City* 30). As early as 1907,

the local press, including the powerful and notoriously conservative *Los Angeles Times*, had begun to call attention to the environmental changes wrought by the city's increasing population and popularity, thanks to the efforts of Lummis and other boosters:

Sunshine and pure air have been potent factors in the growth of Los Angeles. There was a time when the city could boast truly of its healthful climate, but of late that boast has been an empty mockery. Too often the sun shines upon Los Angeles through a pall of dim smoke, and except when strong winds blow from the ocean, the air is poisoned with acrid fumes and choking dust. ... We are ruining the climate of Los Angeles by poisoning the air with soot and dust. (*Los Angeles Times* editorial, qtd. in Johnson 91)

The degradation of LA's fabled climate threatened the economic engine of the city, but the rapid development and population growth in the region continued apace. This "continuing influx of desperate migrants ... made the city ripe for exploitation by oil, water, real estate, bootlegging, gambling, protection rackets, and crooked pension schemes," all of which were reflected in the themes of the literature of the period (Fine 84-85). Because the waves of migration to Los Angeles and Southern California arrived, at least in the early decades, in "the absence of heavy industry"—hence the heavy-handed efforts of the LACC to remedy the situation with the lure of "nature's workshop"—the resulting economy "ensured a vicious circle of crisis and bankruptcy," at least for the part of the economy "fueled by middle-class savings and channeled into real-estate and oil speculations" (Davis, *City* 37). For these "Depression-crazed middle classes of Southern California," the economic instability and vortex of less-than-honest capitalists ready to take advantage of the sustained belief in the California Dream (delivered via real estate, oranges, or oil), the middle class became, in Davis's words, "the original protagonists of that great anti-myth usually known as *noir*" (*City* 37). Yet before the familiar noir fiction of Raymond Chandler and others arrived on the scene, there emerged something I'd like

to call *environmental noir*—where the primary death and whodunnit involves the destruction of nature. With environmental noir, traditional noir’s themes of human depravity and emotional “blankness” get combined with an equally bleak portrait of the natural world around the characters. For Los Angeles in the 1920s and ’30s, as I will examine in this chapter, environmental noir was being written by novelists and city officials alike. Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1927) exemplifies texts of this type.<sup>1</sup>

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In *Imagining Los Angeles: The City in Fiction*, David Fine reminds us that by the time “[f]iction came to Los Angeles in the 1920s ... the booster-bloated city was ripe for deflation” (Fine 53). Years of overselling the merits of Southern California meant that every new arrival to the region determined for him- or herself whether or not the myth of this “new Eden for the Anglo Saxon homeseeker” warranted the claims made by its promoters. Along with a simple reality check, each wave of population growth further taxed the natural resources and demanded that its dreamers and schemers come up with new and ever-more-elaborate methods to make their fortunes. While citrus crate labels and other advertising of the time promoted a pastoral, scenic Southern California landscape—complete with picturesque red-tile-roofed adobe architecture, lustrous orange groves, and snow-capped mountains supplying endless water for irrigation<sup>2</sup>—the city’s

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<sup>1</sup> Other texts that might qualify as this type of environmental noir include Nathaneal West’s *Day of the Locusts* (1939); John Fante’s *Ask the Dust* (also 1939); Mary Austin’s *The Ford* (1917), published earlier than the time period under discussion but definitely featuring themes that fit in with the other texts; and, much later than this time period, even some of Joan Didion’s work that is set in Los Angeles. With non-fiction included in my idea of environmental noir, many Southern California texts meet my basic criteria of a work that addresses, proposes solutions for, or merely reflects environmental degradation in the region.

<sup>2</sup> This scene was so prevalent in orange crate label art that a label with this exact image was a basic “template” utilized by a number of different brands and labels across Southern California. For examples, see labels for “Valley Vista” and “Glen Ranch” brands in UC Riverside’s collection of citrus labels on UC’s online archive, Calisphere (<https://calisphere.org/collections/26760/>).

powerful leaders aimed to boost LA's reputation as a regional, national, and global center of business. Part of this was reflected in the "nature's workshop" promotional campaign, but one of the biggest contributors to the city's economic growth came via other channels, when the Signal Hill oil reserves burst onto the local scene outside of Long Beach in 1921.<sup>3</sup>

Upton Sinclair's 1927 novel *Oil!* ostensibly tells the story of the oil industry in Southern California, beginning with the Signal Hill strike (renamed "Prospect Hill" in the novel) and continuing through the labor disputes and scandals of the industry's subsequent decades.<sup>4</sup> Following on Sinclair's earlier success with exposing the problems of the meat-packing industry in *The Jungle* (1906), *Oil!* similarly exposes some of the corruption and greed involved in LA's oil industry. Sinclair, a well-known socialist, clearly found in the high-octane capitalism driving Los Angeles industry and growth (in all sectors) rich fodder for his work as a writer; but his objections to what he saw didn't stay solely within the covers of a book: he ran for political office several times, most notably for governor in 1933, using the platform of "End Poverty in California." Sinclair's background and passionate political beliefs play out in *Oil!*, for while the novel records the history of the early oil boom years in Los Angeles, through the eyes of J.

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<sup>3</sup> The inextricable connection between the arrival of the oil industry and the boom of the automobile in Southern California, another ingredient to Los Angeles's growth *and* its environmental destruction, further enriches and complicates the appearance of oil drilling (past and present) in all of the texts discussed in this chapter, but particularly in *Oil!* and *The Big Sleep*. Jeremiah Axelrod's *Inventing Autopia: Dreams and Visions of the Modern Metropolis in Jazz Age Los Angeles* (2009) serves as a contemporary, definitive text on the subject of the rise of the automobile and the simultaneous rise of Los Angeles. However, as Phoebe Kropp Young points out in the chapter "The Road: El Camino Real and Mission Nostalgia" in *California Vieja*, the link between the automobile and LA's growth (and implicit degradation of its nature) dates back to the early 1900s, with Lummis and his "Landmarks Club" effort to revitalize the missions and see El Camino Real—the road connecting all of the California missions—rebuilt, an effort wholeheartedly supported by the newly founded Automobile Association of Southern California.

<sup>4</sup> *Oil!* was the basis for the 2007 film *There Will Be Blood*.



Arnold “Bunny” Ross Jr., Sinclair also seems to be critiquing the “nature’s workshop” theory of Los Angeles and its connected “representation of the idea that machine technology is a proper part of the landscape,” as seen in the LACC’s pamphlets (Marx 220). Examining the early sections of the novel shows how Sinclair accomplishes this critique in two seemingly conflicting ways:<sup>5</sup> first, by allowing glimpses of non-desecrated nature in Los Angeles through the eyes of the young Bunny, a breathless observer of the world around him, prone to excited exclamations of wonder at everything he sees; and second, by allowing the same excited boy to chronicle the effects of his father’s (and his) oil drilling on the same environment he’s observed in its pre-contaminated state.

The opening section of the novel, “The Ride,” details the journey Bunny and his father take in a day’s drive from “Lobos River” to “Angel City,” stopping in “Beach City” before arriving at the site of the oil find on “Prospect Hill.” Like the title of this section, the day’s drive reads like a literal amusement park ride, perhaps of the educational Disneyland variety, with scrolling visions of the changes to the landscape of the Los Angeles region through time. “The Ride” travels through the spreading LA sprawl to reach the site of the latest oil strike, passing through mountains, agricultural valleys, small towns, gritty city, posh beach town, and finally arriving in the oil-coated instant boomtown surrounding Prospect Hill. Fine notes that this opening section of *Oil!* “lays the foundation for everything that follows: Los Angeles is still the ... ruthlessly promoted city on the make” that was previously glimpsed in the back page ads of *The Land of Sunshine* (60). As “The Ride” focuses on the pleasures of the road itself as well

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<sup>5</sup> Due to *Oil!*’s massive size and soap-opera complexity, I will only focus on the first third of the novel. For instance, a love story takes center stage later in the novel, as promoted by the image of a couple and the tantalizing tagline “A romance of the Oil fields” on the dust jacket cover of the first edition.

as the passing scenery, the language Sinclair uses to describe man's imprint on the land and Bunny's (as narrator) equal enjoyment and wonder at the "machine" and the "garden" warrant a closer look, beginning with the novel's opening sentence: "The road ran, smooth and flawless, precisely fourteen feet wide, the edges trimmed as if by shears, a ribbon of grey concrete, rolled out over the valley by a giant hand" (1). The mark of the "giant hand" continues, and the marriage of the natural and the mechanical combine to approach something of the sublime in Bunny's breathless impressions, as seen in this passage describing the drive through the mountains surrounding the city of Los Angeles:

Sailing along up there close to the clouds, with an engine full of power, magically harnessed, subject to the faintest pressure from the ball of your foot. ... And this magic ribbon of concrete laid out for you, winding here and there, feeling its way upward with hardly a variation of grade, taking off the shoulder of a mountain, ... twisting, turning, tilting ... always balanced, always safe ... what magic had done all this?

... Men of money had said *the word*, and surveyors and engineers had come, diggers by the thousand, swarming Mexicans and Indians, bronze of skin, armed with picks and shovels; and great steam shovels with long hanging lobster-claws of steel; derricks with wide swinging arms, scrapers and grading machines, steel drills and blasting men with dynamite, rock-crushers, and concrete mixers that ate sacks of cement by the thousand, and drank water from a flour-stained hose, and had round steel bellies that turned all day with a grinding noise. All these had come, and for a year or two they had toiled, and yard by yard they had unrolled the magic ribbon.

Not since the world began had there been men of power equal to this. And Dad was one of them ... (5)

Like "the Word" in Genesis, the building of the road represents not the destruction of the landscape but pure creation. With non-white laborers given the same textual treatment as machines, the anthropocentric view of the building of a mountain highway as a "magic ribbon" celebrates man's achievement without batting an eye at the environmental consequences. It might seem from this passage that Sinclair espouses this view, but in the following pages, Bunny's description of the unfolding scenery—gradually transitioning

from rugged to pastoral to urban as they drive through the outskirts of the city to reach the Pacific—reveals the equal joy in the natural world as well as some awareness of the uglier side of civilization. Moving in the reverse direction of George Inness’s iconic Hudson River School panorama *The Lackawanna Valley* (1856),<sup>6</sup> the journey in this chapter of the novel passes through the Southern California landscape: from the mountains (“It was a giant’s panorama unrolling itself; new vistas opening at every turn, valleys curving below you, hilltops rising above you, processions of ranges, far as your eye could reach”); to the sparsely populated agricultural valleys (“They were passing through a broad valley, miles upon miles of wheat fields, shining green in the sun; in the distance were trees, with a glimpse of a house here and there”); through the verdant orange groves and citrus towns (“The road ... was lined with orange-groves; dark green shiny trees, golden with part of last year’s crop, and snowy white with the new year’s blossoms. Now and then a puff of breeze blew out, and you got a ravishing sweet odor. There were groves of walnuts, broad trees with ample foliage, casting dark shadows on the carefully cultivated, powdery brown soil. There were hedges of roses, extending for long distances, eight or ten feet high, and covered with blossoms”);<sup>7</sup> to the edge of the city (“They were coming to the outskirts of Angel City. Here were trolley tracks and railroads, and subdivisions with no ‘restrictions’—that is, you might build any kind of house you pleased, and rent it to people of any race or color; which meant an ugly slum, spreading like a great sore, with shanties of tin and tar-paper and unpainted boards”); to the Pacific and its resort-like seaside towns (“They came to Beach City, with its wide

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<sup>6</sup> Leo Marx discusses this painting in *The Machine in the Garden*, noting that it is “a striking representation of the idea that machine technology is a proper part of the landscape” (220).

<sup>7</sup> Although they are mostly vanished now, John McPhee reminds us that “[f]or many decades, there was a moat of oranges between the built-up metropolis and the mountain front” (194).

avenue along the ocean-front. ... [and] stopped before the big hotel”); and, finally, to the site of the Prospect Hill strike, the purpose of their long journey (17, 20, 21, 22).<sup>8</sup>

Before delving into the vivid details of the effects of the strike on the people and landscape around Prospect Hill, Sinclair pauses to first describe the other uses of the land, before the strike: “You would have had to know this land of hope in order to realize that it stood in a cabbage field. ... out here a bare slope of hill, quite steep, yet not too steep to be plowed and trenched and covered with cabbages, with sugar beets down on the flat” (23). Why is it important to know that Prospect Hill was the source of produce and, presumably, income for the local truck farmers? Or that part of the land on the hill had been recently subdivided and developed into a small neighborhood of modest homes for people of moderate means? By showing the small, pastoral details of the pre-oil landscape, Sinclair’s introduction on the next page of the spectacular results of the oil strike do not, despite Bunny’s boyish excitement, come without real cost and some sense of loss for what had come before—just as the vision of the Angel City “slums” introduces an anxiety about the “great sore” possibly spreading outward to overtake the “golden” citrus groves and fertile fields of wheat, sprawling inevitably towards the “magic ribbon” of man’s work, already marked on the mountains. (The fact that this is indeed what transpired with LA’s growth perhaps contributes to that anxiety and comingles it with some grief for the loss of those other, pastoral landscapes.) But first, the great wonder of oil:

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<sup>8</sup> James Fenimore Cooper utilized a similar, painterly “scrolling landscape” trope to show, in James Grossman’s words, “the history of the rise and fall of a society compressed into the space of a few short years” (qtd. in Ringe). Of course, in the case of *Oil!*, Sinclair has instead compressed this progression (at least the *rise* part of it) into the dizzying space of a few short hours of “The Ride.”

The greatest oil strike in the history of Southern California, the Prospect Hill field! The inside of the earth seemed to burst out through that hole; a roaring and rushing, as Niagra, and a black column shot up into the air, two hundred feet, two hundred and fifty—no one could say for sure—and came thundering down to earth as a mass of thick, black, slimy, slippery fluid. It hurled tools and other heavy objects this way and that, so the men had to run for their lives. It filled the sump-hole, and went streaming down the hillside. Carried by the wind, a curtain of black mist, it sprayed the Culver homestead, turning it black, and sending the women of the homestead flying across the cabbage-fields. ...

Meantime the workmen were toiling like mad to stop the flow of the well; they staggered here and there, half-blinded by the black spray—and with no place to brace themselves, nothing they could hold onto, because everything was greased, streaming with grease. You worked in darkness, groping out with nothing but the roar of the monster, his blows upon your body, his spitting in your face, to tell you where he was. ... [resulting in] forty-two suits for damages to houses, clothing, chickens, goats, cows, cabbages, sugar-beets, and automobiles, which had skidded into ditches on too well-greased roads. (25-26)

Although Bunny seems immune to any sense of real horror, the apocalyptic image of the oil-covered neighborhood and workers that makes this otherwise exciting scene of discovery and its imminent wealth (at least for the claim owners) a truly nightmarish vision. Compounding the vivid imagery of the “black spray,” the “curtain of black mist,” and “the roar of the monster” is the narrator’s lack of emotion and humanity; witnessing environmental destruction and human suffering, Bunny and his non-empathetic response seem to spell the “darkness” of humanity as a whole as well as that of the once-pastoral, oil-covered landscape.<sup>9</sup>

A similar moment of unnatural destruction destroying a pastoral ideal arises a few sections later in the novel, when Bunny’s “own” well, on the family land of his friend Paul Watkins, erupts spectacularly. As with the “cabbage” and “sugar-beet” elegy of

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<sup>9</sup> In 1944, Angeleno Charles Lockwood provided an account of the actual consequences of this kind of oil-related environmental destruction: “The oil boom had ruined one street after another in Los Angeles. Entire neighborhoods had vanished under the forest of wooden derricks and a grimy film of oil[.] ... [I] saw beautiful sections of this city ruined and I hope that such will never come again. ... Human greed and avarice, unless restrained, would destroy our beautiful beaches, our residential areas, without any compunction” (qtd. in Johnson 44).

Prospect Hill, we hear directly from Paul exactly how *he* sees the land his family depends on for their survival. Had “Paradise Valley,” the Watkins’ ranch, been imagined up by the boosters of the nineteenth-century, there might have been long, glowing descriptions of the golden oranges, the fertile soil, the ample water, and the overall tranquility and picturesque ease of life on a Southern California ranch. Instead, Paul paints quite a different picture when he describes the ranch to Bunny upon their first meeting: “We got a big ranch, but it’s mostly rocks, and we’d have a hard time anyhow; you plant things, and the rain fails, and nothin’ but weeds come up. Why, if there’s a God, and he loves his poor human creatures, why did he have to make so many weeds?” (45). Naming such a ranch “Paradise Valley” deepens the biting critique Sinclair makes with this desolate, anti-pastoral scene of Southern California country—a critique that prefigures that of Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* twelve years later.<sup>10</sup> Sinclair then calls to mind the culpability of the Anglo “masters” of the Southern California landscape, who altered the environment to suit their own needs without regard to potential consequences down the line, when Paul continues: “Pap says it wasn’t God that made ‘em [the weeds], it was the devil; but then, God made the devil, and God knew what the devil was goin’ to do, so ain’t God to blame?” (45). The rhetorical question, though not asked rhetorically by Paul, gains urgency when the Ross family establishes a drilling site on the Watkins land of Paradise Valley. Once again, Paradise becomes its opposite through the intervention of human beings, with another apocalyptic vision of a blackened world (this time of a nearby, competing drill site): “you could hear the gusher roaring like Niagra Falls! And ... you could see the valley, and everything in sight was black; there was a high wind

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<sup>10</sup> Steinbeck’s bleak vision of the struggles of the Joads and other migrant families, both before and after their arrival in California, might also qualify as a novel that reads as “environmental noir.”

blowing, and it was a regular thunder cloud, a curtain of black mist as far as you could see” (155). Oil transforms the landscape of Southern California into literal noir.

As with the site of the Prospect Hill strike, Bunny’s excitement and thrill at the successful drilling allow Sinclair to show the aesthetic value of a pre-contaminated Southern California landscape while also “objectively” presenting the damage that human activities like oil drilling can exact on nature. After the “curtain of black mist,” Bunny taps into nature’s beauty, in a quiet moment of joy and belonging to the world around him: “After supper [Bunny and Paul] went back to the well ... It was a crisp cold evening, a new moon in the sky, a big white star just over it—everything so beautiful, and Bunny so happy, he owned a ‘wild-cat,’ and it was ‘coming in,’ it was going to yield him a treasure that would make all the old-time fairy tales and Arabian Nights adventures seem childish things” (156). This heavenly vision, the moment when Paradise promises to return to Bunny happiness, beauty, and magical treasures of fairy tales, inexorably returns to the Inferno that will mark the landscape and the boy with loss. With a sudden jolt, a loud sound knocks Bunny off his physical and emotional equilibrium when the well blows and “it seemed as if the whole inside of the earth suddenly blew out” (157). At the center of the apocalyptic vision he’d so far only witnessed from a safe distance, Bunny is exposed to the hellish possibilities that are the flip side of “fairy-tale treasures” when the blow turns into a fiery explosion.

They were never to know what did it; perhaps an electric spark, or the fire in the boiler, or a spark made by falling wreckage, or rocks blown out of the hole, striking on steel; anyhow, there was a tower of flame, and the most amazing spectacle--the burning oil would hit the ground, and bounce up, and explode, and leap again and fall again, and great red masses of flame would unfold, and burst, and yield black masses of smoke, and these in turn red. Mountains of smoke rose to the sky, and mountains of flame came seething down to the earth; every jet that

struck the ground turned into a volcano, and rose again, higher than before; the whole mass, boiling and bursting, became a river of fire, a lava flood that went streaming down the valley, turning everything it touched into flame, then swallowing it up and hiding the flames in a cloud of smoke. The force of gravity took it down the valley, and the force of the wind swept it over the hill-side; it touched the bunk-house, and swallowed it in one gulp; it took the tool-house, everything that was wood; and when there came a puff of wind, driving the stream of oil and gas to one side, he saw the skeleton of the derrick, draped with fire! ...

The tower of oil dropped! It leaped and exploded a few times more ... The river of fire was still flowing down the arroyo, and would take a long time to burn itself out ...

Bunny ... stood by the edge of the red glare, gazing at the stump of his beautiful oil derrick, and the charred foundations of his home-made bunk-house, and all the wreckage of his hopes. (157, 159)

Never mind that “the Watkins house had long ago been swallowed by the flames,” and their land ruined by a rain of oil and river of fire; it is Bunny’s “wrecked” hopes that finally move him past the state of excited observer and enthusiastic bystander to the destruction of nature. Sinclair adds to the shock of the explosion and the direction of Bunny’s thoughts when his father reminds him to chin up because Bunny’s now “a millionaire ten times over” (159). The explosion was simply a momentary nuisance, but they’ll “open it up again, or drill a new one in a jiffy.” The accident that set fire to the landscape and the Watkins’ home? J. Arnold Ross Sr. tells his son, “This was jist a little Christmas bonfire, to celebrate our bustin’ in among the big fellers!” (160). With a now-toxic natural environment and a near-toxic attitude of inhumanity towards the Watkins, Bunny’s father and the early chapters of *Oil!*’s environmental noir exemplify what I am co-opting from Lawrence Buell’s term “toxic tourism” to identify this mode of Los Angeles literature: *toxic fiction* (31).

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If *Oil!* exemplifies toxic fiction, another textual piece from this period of Los Angeles history represents the even more alarming “genre” of toxic *nonfiction*. Submitted to the LACC in 1930, the substantial report *Parks, Playgrounds and Beaches for the Los Angeles Region* represented years of work by the acclaimed urban planning firms of Olmstead Brothers and Bartholomew & Associates.<sup>11</sup> Commissioned by the LACC in response to increased concerns about the city’s unregulated growth and development, the 1930 report details plans for all aspects of the city’s natural resources to maintain and increase the scenic and aesthetic aspects of those resources. “The crisis [the report] defined was one brought on, in part, by the Chamber’s and other boosters’ success at attracting visitors and increasing numbers of new residents to the Southland. ... At the very least, a shortage of beaches and scenic mountain retreats foretold a crisis for the tourist economy” (Hise & Deverell 2-3). Between 1920 and 1930, the city and county’s population more than doubled again, to 1,238,000 in the City of Los Angeles and 2,208,500 for the county (McNamara xv). With the city’s population at well over a million for the first time, and the county population twice that, serious consideration needed to be given as to how to preserve the aspects of “Eden” that had attracted many of these new residents in the first place. As Blake Gumprecht has noted in regard to the environmental crisis resulting from LA’s expanding population, “Aesthetic concerns have little chance when basic human needs are threatened; government officials, moreover, had no mechanism for stemming the tide of newcomers”—as unlikely as it would be for

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<sup>11</sup> For this section I will be heavily referencing Greg Hise and William Deverell’s *Eden by Design* (2000), which reproduces in full a facsimile of the original report that, for reasons I will discuss, had only 200 printed copies made at the time of its release and, thus, had been “lost” to the depths of local archives for decades.

them to try to do so after decades of actively selling the idea of a Southern California Eden (122).

Founded on the city-shaping work of Frederick Law Olmstead, Sr.—work that included New York’s Central Park, Boston’s Emerald Necklace, and Washington, DC’s Rock Creek Park, among others—the Olmstead Brothers firm was highly sought after by municipal governments and organizations like the LACC, in part because “[t]hese grand exercises” of ambitious civic landscape design “sought to impose order ... on cities that contemporaries viewed as out of control” (Hise & Deverell 7). Partnered with Bartholomew & Associates, Olmstead Brothers were first contracted to create a plan to help reduce traffic congestion in downtown LA; in 1924, they completed *A Major Street Plan for Los Angeles*, much of which was implemented and is still used in the city today—especially in and around downtown (22). Members of the LACC and other citizens attempted for many years to get the firms working on a solution for preserving the natural, scenic aspects of the Los Angeles environment, but it wasn’t until 1927 that they were officially hired by a newly-formed LACC Citizen’s Committee, headed by John Treanor, and began work on the ambitious task (37). However, the work of the Committee and the Olmstead & Bartholomew firms did not just require saving the pastoral and natural elements of Los Angeles for nature’s sake. As Marguerite Shaffer articulates in her 2001 article, “Scenery as an Asset: Assessing the 1930 Los Angeles Regional Park Plan,”

It is not the dynamic system of nature that is being protected; rather, it is a cultural image and experience that is defined in opposition to the city. Thus, not only does nature become an antidote to the ills of modern, urban-industrial society, ... but it also becomes just one more product to be consumed. ... In other words, nature can be defined in market terms: scenery is an asset. ... a product of

cultural, economic and social concerns, rather than ecological and environmental ideals. (378)

While “scenery as asset” may have informed the intent of the Olmstead & Bartholomew plan, the in-depth study of the Los Angeles region provides a comprehensive overview of the ecosystems and sub-regions, or “systems,” contained within the 1500-square-mile area at the time of the report. A focus on these “systems—the robust but ultimately endangered systems of nature in the mountains, high desert, the basin, and the Pacific coastline” took into consideration “the ways these might best be integrated with urban systems, especially the infrastructure necessary for an expanding metropolitan region” (Hise & Deverell 8). With each system in danger from encroaching development and increased usage from the booming population, the plan’s authors provided nearly 200 pages of plans, charts, maps, tables, survey and census data, photographs, architectural sketches and schematics, projected costs, as well as a cogent narrative of the numerous problems at hand and their proposed solutions. In presenting this wealth of information to the LACC, the plan’s authors called for immediate action: “The present opportunity thus to improve the Region should not be lost. The public must be informed of the economic urgency of the enterprise as a means to protect and promote the health, welfare, and contentment of the people now here and the millions yet to come” (Hise & Deverell 135).

A visit to or even quick glimpse of a map of contemporary Los Angeles reflects few of the ambitious plans called for, and definitely not a manmade “pleasure harbor” in the Santa Monica bay, serving Santa Monica and Venice Beaches, or the miles and miles of parks and parkways the plan details, including a version of Boston’s Emerald Necklace along the banks of the Los Angeles River. So what happened? “Despite the immoderate

pleas for urgency”—and the \$80,000 price tag for Olmstead & Bartholomew’s services—“the report garnered almost no public attention. The response, in truth, was a resounding silence” (Hise & Deverell 4, 2). Given the timing of the report’s release, 1930, financial and national/international economic concerns with the onset of the Depression seem a logical explanation as to why so much time, effort, money, and thought was dedicated to a plan that barely registered on the public radar. But, as Hise and Deverell explain, “what happened in this case was more deliberate, more planned. The Chamber of Commerce and its allies effectively limited circulation of the report and discouraged public discourse” (7).

Figuring out *why* it failed and why the LACC might have quashed it reveals a more complicated picture than the simple explanation of the onset of the Depression could account for—a noirish onset of greed and corruption, power struggles and shortsightedness.<sup>12</sup> For example, apparently the pushback on the Committee’s work began when some other parts of the LACC began to feel threatened by the growing (and potential) power of the Committee should the grand plan be implemented. “More problematic was the dawning realization by many that the comprehensive nature of the plan would, by necessity, create the need for equally comprehensive jurisdictional and supervisory bodies; here lies one of the primary reasons why the report went flat” (Hise & Deverell 38). Reluctant to give away their sizable power base to another group, inside or outside the LACC, the governing board resisted when, in 1929, Committee Chair Treanor pushed the Chamber to support “a legislative enabling action,” which “would allow a referendum to go before the citizens of Los Angeles County at some point in the

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<sup>12</sup> This description could be just as easily applied to the notorious Owens River Valley scandal, as discussed in the next chapter.

future.” The Chamber failed to do so, effectively killing any hope of the plan’s success (42). In addition, although the report was finished and preliminarily presented to the Chamber earlier in 1929, “[b]y the time the report had been printed, bound, and distributed to committee members, the national economy ... had collapsed. The resulting crisis was less severe in Los Angeles County than in other metropolitan regions,” but clearly the costly and ambitious plan could not feasibly be put forward to the public in 1930. But the report “died” months earlier, in March 1929, when LACC director Hill declared, “If you want to kill this thing, let’s kill it. ... Let’s kill it now and get it out of the way.” Thus, “the report was killed off well before the arrival of the Great Depression” (Hise & Deverell 46).<sup>13</sup>

With the effective “killing” and burying of the Olmstead & Bartholomew plan in this environmental noir, the LACC and the city’s other leaders faced an unceasing tide of immigration, as well as increasing water shortages, automobile congestion, and other problems that seem inevitable when a city of more than a million people (and a million more outside the city but within the county limits) arises in a natural setting not capable of supporting such a population.<sup>14</sup> As a result of these urban woes and other financial struggles for the city, “Whatever regenerative possibilities Los Angeles offered in its first spectacular growth period from the 1880s to the 1920s, those possibilities could not be sustained during the depression” (Fine 82)—a reality reflected in the emergence of “true” (vs. environmental) noir. The additional implications the failure of a comprehensive plan to “save” the city emerged in the manner predicted within the plan itself:

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<sup>13</sup> For a much more detailed outlining of the complex circumstances that led to the report’s demise, see Hise and Deverell (38-46).

<sup>14</sup> Especially dramatic is the story of LA’s repeated water issues and, in particular, the Los Angeles River, which I will address in my final chapter/conclusion.

*Continued prosperity will depend on providing needed parks, because, with the growth of a great metropolis here, the absence of parks will make living conditions less and less attractive, less and less wholesome ... In so far, therefore, as the people fail to show the understanding, courage, and organizing ability necessary at this crisis, the growth of the Region will tend to strangle itself.* (qtd. in Hise & Deverell 83, emphasis in original)

When an ecocritical lens is applied to noir novels of the 1930s, the pastoral Eden of Lummis's and Truman's booster years vanishes; what's left, the "less and less attractive, less and less wholesome" human environment of the city, underscores the sad fact that, in 2012's view of Los Angeles, such "[p]rojects and programs once viewed as fanciful, quixotic, or utopian have come to be seen as prescient, prudent, and necessary" (Deverell & Hise 12).<sup>15</sup> The impact of the inaction of the LACC and others emerges from the pages of noir like the oily, noxious, "black cloud" of Bunny Ross's narrative.

\* \* \*

Bunny's "black cloud" hung over the city for some time. As David Fine describes, "A sinister mood descended on crime-blackened Los Angeles in the thirties, and ... 1930s authors, writing against the grain of city optimism, were quick to reflect this mood in their fiction" (Fine 86). Capturing this darker, "against the grain" writing of the 1930s, Mike Davis has termed noir "Los Angeles's anti-mythography" (*City* 41). The LA "anti-myth" reacted in part to the overriding message of boosterism, including the messages within *The Land of Sunshine*, which dominated public conceptions of Southern California and Los Angeles for nearly half a century. In a Southern California affected by rapid population growth, environmental changes and destruction, and global economic

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<sup>15</sup> At least one group is trying to resurrect the 1930 Olmstead & Bartholomew plan today: The City Project, which advocates "Equal Justice, Democracy, and Livability for All," has an entire section on their website devoted to the plan and their ideas and efforts to bring it to fruition in present-day Los Angeles. See <http://www.cityprojectca.org/ourwork/olmsted.html>.

growth, *LOS*'s "promot[ion] [of] all of Southern California and the Great Southwest as 'shelter' from a rapidly changing world many Americans found troubling" fell prone to increased skepticism, criticism, and outright dismantling (Culver 37). The resulting fiction of noir shakes, breaks, and remakes this 'shelter' into a nightmare trapping LA's residents in a shattered world of their own making. In this urban milieu, another form of wilderness emerged—one that was articulated by Robert Woods in his 1898 tome, *The City Wilderness*: "The implication is that modern man feels as insecure and confused in an urban setting as he once felt in the forest among wild beasts" (qtd. in Nash 3). With the city replacing the great outdoors as a site of disorientation and (importantly in noir) danger, reading nature in the texts of the time reveals much about the transition period.

Embodying this transition, the iconic noir protagonist Philip Marlowe's creator, Raymond Chandler, arrived in Los Angeles in 1912 and soon became, fittingly, an employee of a local oil company. Unlike those of other period writers of noir who came to Hollywood as hired pens, Chandler's affiliation with the oil industry rather than the film industry adds another layer of biting irony to his depictions of nature in LA. In addition, due to his longer residency in Southern California (vs. William Faulkner, for instance, who spent as little time as possible in the "Golden Land"),<sup>16</sup> Chandler's details of the city stand out amid the murders and lies Marlowe encounters. "With an eye to the growth and changes the city underwent from the time of his arrival in 1912," Fine writes, "Chandler invests its physical ... landscape with symbolic and moral meaning" (124). When his first novel, *The Big Sleep*, was published in 1939, the city's population had

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<sup>16</sup> "Golden Land" (1935) is the title of the lone LA-based story Faulkner published from his time spent working in the studio system. It's not terribly surprising that Faulkner was not a fan of Los Angeles—a far cry from his beloved (and fictional) Yoknapatawpha County,

swelled to nearly 1,504,300, with 2,785,600 living in the county—according to the 1940 census (McNamara xvi). With nearly three million people crammed into an Anglo-created myth of paradise, the added pressures from the economic struggles of the Depression and increased crime set in place a potentially volatile situation, where the physical and ideological structures holding the “new Eden” together seemed poised to tumble at any moment. “Such a vision—of an empire built on a spurious foundation, decked in tinsel, and beguiled by its own illusory promises—is central to the Los Angeles novels of Raymond Chandler” (Babener 128).

*The Big Sleep* traces private detective Philip Marlowe’s journey through the city and surrounding area over the course of roughly a week as he tries to piece together the crime he was hired to solve (involving pornography and blackmail) and murders he wasn’t. Not quite an anti-hero, Marlowe is nonetheless a reluctant center of the fraying morality in Los Angeles, a former soldier who wearily confronts the “crime [that] is not just an aberrant act ... but a pervasive feature on the urban landscape” (Fine 119). Marlowe is initially hired by General Sternwood, a rich, dying old man, to track down his blackmailer and—implicitly—to find out what happened to his former son-in-law, Rusty Regan, whose absence seems to affect the General more than the extravagant misbehavior of his daughters, Carmen and Vivian. It’s the daughters’ crimes and missteps that Marlowe eventually finds himself on the trail of, witnessing several connected murders along the way, only to find that Carmen killed Rusty herself and older sister Vivian covered it up. The twists and turns the story takes mirror the physical journey Marlowe takes through Los Angeles and its surrounding landscape, encountering the moral bankruptcy and natural corruption only befitting the city-as-wilderness image.



Given Chandler's familiarity with and long residency in LA, "it is hardly surprising that Chandler gravitated to the genre which ... embodies the problem of deception at the heart of his fictional realm," for "[t]his is the central fact about Chandler's city: pare away the layers of pretense and you find only more delusion" (Babener 128, 141).

When we use nature as a window into Chandler's struggle to understand the "wilderness" that Los Angeles has become, what emerges may be bleaker even than Bunny's apocalyptic visions of rivers of fire and blackened valleys in *Oil!*; for, in *The Big Sleep*, there are indeed moments of nature, more than one might have anticipated for a genre grounded in the urban and modern, mechanized age. But for all the glimpses of the natural world Marlowe-as-narrator provides, these moments are either presented as negative—such as the frequent references to the unseasonably (for LA in October) heavy rains—or, if presented as positive, corrupted by the intrusion of human vileness or remaining as reminders that even this, even nature, offers no redemption or lasting solace from the "black cloud" overhanging the city. For an example of the spoiling of natural moments, the famed Southern California climate (which, as previously discussed, had become "soiled" due to increased industry and automobile use) serves as a punchline for Chandler when Marlowe notes that his office contains "five green filing cases, three of them full of California climate" (56). The same "famed" climate, now a symbol of emptiness, lingers in his home and robs him of even the simplest of natural pleasures—a fresh breeze: "I walked to the windows and ... opened [them] wide. The night air came drifting in with a kind of stale sweetness that still remembered automobile exhausts and the streets of the city" (158). When Marlowe does encounter some clean air or "good" nature, even these moments of what could be solace in nature become disrupted by the

reminder that there *is* no solace in nature in Chandler's Southern California: "It was a crisp morning, with just enough snap in the air to make life seem simple and sweet, if you didn't have too much on your mind. I had" (45). As could be said for his treatment of nature in the novel, "For Chandler, falsity is so prevalent that the truth, if it surfaces at all, is neither redeeming nor ameliorative" (Babener 129). Neither "truth" nor truth-in-nature offers a respite from the labyrinth of human deception that the city of Los Angeles has become.

One of the recurring images of nature that Chandler utilizes in *The Big Sleep* to highlight the deceptive character of Los Angeles comes in with the groomed, domesticated, and artificial instances of plant life that Marlowe observes. Because so much of the natural in the novel refers to the trees, flowers, grass, and other accoutrements of gardens, even these glimpses of organic matter bring with them reminders that almost all of it was introduced artificially to the region. As Liahna Babener observes in "Raymond Chandler's City of Lies," "Landscaping means wrenching the plant life from another ecosystem and grafting it onto the Southern California soil" (137). Although she does not make note of it, the use of "graft" here serves dual purposes: reminding us of the artificiality of most of the horticulture Marlowe-as-narrator chooses to focus on and ties that "natural" element to the other meaning of "grafting"—the very corruption and dishonesty the detective observes in Los Angeles. After all, interference with the natural world in Southern California began long before Chandler wrote of it in 1939: the grafting of outside nature physically and metaphorically onto the region went hand-in-hand with the other kind of grafting, i.e. the selling of a manufactured Eden to the rest of the world. Along with the horticultural

grafting on the landscape, the famed Southern California climate advertised by the LACC, Lummis, and even Nordhoff, functioned as another graft (as well as its near homonym, “grift”) for some newcomers to the region:

The [boosters’] promise, of course, outran the reality. Some [of the healthseekers] found restoration, but many more coughed away what little life remained, alone and lonely in a faraway land, mocked by the sunshine they thought would save them. The effect on Southern California’s developing culture of so many desperate Americans fleeing there only to die is easy to imagine. A paradoxical morbidity ... and a mood of death, strange and sinister, like flowers rotting from too much sunshine, remained with the city. (Starr, *Inventing* 55)

Noir as a whole, of course, reflects this “paradoxical morbidity” and “mood of death,” but Chandler gets even more explicit in giving a physical dimension to Starr’s metaphor. When Marlowe first meets the General, he has been led by the butler into a greenhouse where the wheelchair-bound General waits for the newly hired PI and for his own imminent death. “The air was thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom. ... The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalked like the newly washed fingers of dead men. They smelled as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket” (7). When the two men meet a few moments later, General Sternwood describes the orchids’ scent as “the rotten sweetness of a prostitute” (9).

In striking contrast to the prostitute-smelling orchids in the Sternwoods’ greenhouse and the other people and places that reek of deception throughout *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe finally catches a break—both personally and case-wise—when he meets Mona Mars, the absence in the center of many of the novel’s overlapping plot strands. Mona, the wife of a significant LA gangster, had been previously assumed to be missing or, at least, to have eloped with Rusty Regan, but her real location is described to

Marlowe by another figure in the murder investigations: “A mile or so east of Realito a road turns towards the foothills. That’s orange country to the south but to the north it’s as bare as hell’s back yard and smack up against the hills there’s a cyanide plant where they make the stuff for fumigation” (181). When Marlowe does locate her, in this place between oranges (the symbol of Southern California’s healthy and abundant nature) and a cyanide plant (a symbol of toxicity and death or even murder), his descriptions of Mona textually tie her to nature throughout the chapter, possibly representing an elusive goodness and longing for release from the “black cloud” of modern life in the city—a release and goodness that Marlowe can’t ultimately hold on to. Marlowe awakens from a beating to see Mona sitting before him, and he observes her: “The woman withdrew her gaze from some distant mountain peak. Her small firm chin turned slowly. Her eyes were the blue of mountain lakes. Overhead the rain still pounded, with a remote sound, as if it was somebody else’s rain” (190). Chandler further links Mona (a.k.a. “Silver-Wig,” due to her platinum blond wig) to nature when Marlowe remarks that the room she’s in has “blue curtains at the windows, [and] a wallpaper with bright green trees on it” (193),<sup>17</sup> “[h]er breath was as delicate as the eyes of a fawn” (192), her “knuckles were as white as snow” (196), and her laughter “shook her as the wind shakes a tree” (196). When Marlowe finally kisses her—and of course he kisses her—“Her face ... was like ice. ... Her lips were like ice, too” (198). The next morning, after “saving” Mona and killing her

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<sup>17</sup> While the blue curtains and tree-patterned wallpaper in this instance are literal rather than figurative descriptions, Fine notes that “Chandler’s ironic similes, as tropes, are ... suggestive of the erasure of boundaries between organic and made worlds; they mediate the space between the natural and the constructed, the landscape and its representation in landscape” (135). Chandler uses such similes and metaphors throughout *TBS*: “the white carpet [in Vivian’s room] that went from wall to wall looked like a fresh fall of snow at Lake Arrowhead” (17), and, again with Vivian, “She was in oyster-white lounging pajamas trimmed with white fur, cut as flowingly as a summer sea frothing on the beach of some small and exclusive island” (221).

“captor” (also the murderer he’s been hunting), Marlowe matter-of-factly notes, “This was another day and the sun was shining again” (203). Meeting Mona (who seems to bring out the sunshine again) delivers much-needed clarity and brightness to Marlowe’s life, something that he attempts to recapture after “losing” Mona to her husband and returning from City Hall to his apartment: “I lay down on the bed with my coat off and stared at the ceiling and listened to the traffic sounds on the street outside and watched the sun move slowly across the corner of the ceiling,” and, again, “It was like that over and over again, lying on the bed and watching the patch of sunlight slide down the corner of the wall” (207, 208). In this rare moment of inaction, Marlowe seems depleted of his usual vigor, thrown into a stupor as he vainly tries to cling to that bit of clarity and purpose Mona brought him, grasping at the sunlight as a bit of nature like the nature Mona reminds him of. But the sunlight is reflected and mediated, much like Plato’s cave wall; Marlowe cannot engage with nature directly, only by refraction, just as he can only love Mona as a memory and intangible ideal. This sense of loss concludes the novel, with Marlowe’s last words of narration going back to Mona: “a couple of double Scotches. They didn’t do me any good. All they did was make me think of Silver-Wig, and I never saw her again” (231). If Silver-Wig/Mona embodies nature as well as love and the equally elusive truth/morality for Marlowe, then there’s no possible redemption, salvation, or balm through nature (or love, or truth) for him.

While the natural element tied to Mona represents possible redemption and solace for Marlowe, the nature of the Sternwoods represents death, decay, and all the moral corruption inherent to noir itself. At the center of the natural world that Carmen, Vivian, and the General inhabit stands a symbol of the source of their wealth, the source of much

of the environmental degradation of the 1920s and '30s, and the site of the murder that Marlowe can't seem to solve until the end of *The Big Sleep*: the remains of an old oil-drilling site, much like the ones that Bunny raved about in *Oil!*. Marlowe first sees the site from a distance while standing in the gardens of the Sternwood estate:

looking down a succession of terraces with flowerbeds and trimmed trees to the high iron fence with gilt spears that hemmed in the estate. ... Beyond the fence the hill sloped for several miles. On this lower level faint and far off I could just barely see some of the old wooden derricks of the oilfield from which the Sternwoods had made their money. ... The Sternwoods, having moved up the hill, could no longer smell the stale sump water or the oil, but they could still look out of their front windows and see what had made them rich. If they wanted to. I didn't suppose they would want to. (21)

From afar, the old equipment and sump seem a “harmless,” antiquated reminder of the power the Sternwoods wielded over their environment—both in shaping the terraced gardens and in extracting oil from the earth—and the environmental class system in Los Angeles where upper-class whites frequently live above the pollution, noise, and aesthetic unpleasantness that their changes to the landscape wrought on LA, while lower class and non-white Angelenos are left to deal with oil-coated yards and breathe in the “stale sweetness” of pollution. But when Marlowe takes Carmen to the site at her request to teach her how to shoot, a different landscape emerges:

The road was fringed with tall eucalyptus trees and deeply rutted. ... It was empty and sunny now, but not yet dusty. The rain had been too hard and too recent. I followed the ruts along and the noise of the city traffic grew curiously and quickly faint, as if this were not in the city at all, but far away in a daydream land. Then the oil-stained motionless walking beam of a squat wooden derrick stuck up over a branch. I could see the rusty old steel cable that connected this walking-beam with a half-dozen others. The beams didn't move, probably hadn't moved for a year. The wells were no longer pumping. There was a pile of rusted pipe, a loading platform that sagged at one end, half a dozen empty oil drums lying in a ragged pile. There was the stagnant, oil-scummed water of an old sump iridescent in the sunlight.

... The hum of the traffic was a distant web of sound, like the buzzing of bees. The place was as lonely as a churchyard. Even after the rain the tall eucalyptus trees still looked dusty. They always look dusty. A branch broken off by the wind had fallen over the edge of the sump and the flat leathery leaves dangled in the water. (217)

In a place he later describes as “pretty creepy” and “kind of eerie” (222), Marlowe pieces together the rest of his case when Carmen shoots him (with blanks, as it turns out) as he stands on the edge of the stinking sump. When he confronts Vivian with his discovery and the recreation of Rusty Regan’s murder, the source of the sump’s putrid scent turns out to be Regan’s decaying body, left in the dirty sump water. “The corpse in the oil field is the family secret ... that must be discovered, the crime lying hidden in history and buried deep in the landscape” (Fine 123). Of course, the choice of the oil sump as the site of murder, cover-up, and putrefaction of Regan’s corpse is deeply symbolic of the tie between the exploitation and “murder” of nature in Los Angeles and Chandler’s own hand in that murder, as a former oil company employee. The layering of crimes and guilt and vileness of all sorts leaves Marlowe feeling sickly complicit in the novel’s final paragraphs. With nature-as-Mona too elusive to save him, Marlowe is overcome with a nihilism that embodies the corruption of nature all around him.

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. (230)

For Chandler, living in LA, whether you live by oil derricks or up above it all in the hills, you ultimately cannot escape “the nastiness.” Unmediated natural beauty, just like morality and simple truth, proves to be hard to come by in this version of Los Angeles. “In Chandler’s city of rampant illusion, truth has been so *denatured* that it has lost its

power to redeem” (Babener 143, emphasis added). What possible redemption can there be in the world of LA noir?

\* \* \*

In 1926, actress Mary Pickford spoke to the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce, addressing the need for greater attention to the natural and aesthetic “assets” of LA. Appealing to their business sense as well as their ingrained sense of the film industry as an integral part of the city, Pickford explained her sense of urgency: “It is very important. That is part of the *staging of a city*” (qtd. in Hise & Deverell 33, emphasis added). Like those of Lummis and other boosters before her, Pickford’s words spoke to the centrality of presentation and mediation in the myths of Los Angeles as a natural paradise. With the emergence of noir (and environmental noir) in the literary and cultural representations of LA, that myth was threatened while it was simultaneously being promoted and produced by “the power of cinema as an advertising and promotional tool ... [since] the film scenery shown the world over created illusions of an ever-beautiful Southern California landscape. But that illusion, although perhaps based in some reality, was threatened” (Hise & Deverell 33). One year after Pickford addressed the LACC, Olmstead and Bartholomew were hired to start their work that would become the 1930 plan.

“An exploration of the origins and implications of the scenery-as-an-asset idea reveal[s]” that civic plans like the 1930 one by Olmstead and Bartholomew “embraced a complex and ambiguous heritage and agenda that was a product of cultural, economic and social concerns, rather than ecological and environmental ideals” (Shaffer 378). While the 1930 plan failed and was never implemented, the priorities behind it hint at the future course of environmental thinking in Los Angeles. When protecting nature as part



of “staging” a city—or even as part of “Nature’s Workshop”—elicits a stronger positive response than ideas of preserving the natural assets for more ecocentric reasons, the feedback loop for LA’s environmental trajectory becomes clear: the boosters sold it and the noirists reflected the perceived deception of that sale, and on it goes. Neil Campbell writes of critical regionalism in the study of the American West in a way that seems particularly useful for understanding this process of myth becoming accepted fact to the anti-myth that results then *also* becoming accepted fact. Campbell states,

This is a redefinition of regionalism that refuses to get to the border ... and turn back, to simply close up on itself in some homely and familiar act of territorialization, as if protecting itself from the wider world beyond, but one that also deterritorializes and directs us simultaneously outside itself to the postregional and the postwestern ... (44)

As this relates to the case of nature and the myth (and anti-myth) of Los Angeles, there were certain ideologies and actions taken regarding nature, but this idea of nature was exported to the rest of the country and world and thus took on a different character *outside* of LA and beyond the control of the mythmakers and myth-shapers (like Lummis and the LACC)—only to shift again when this outside view of nature in LA was confronted with and caught up in the actualities of an *internal* conception of nature in LA. While this process, I contend, cycled over and over during the twentieth century, for the time period under consideration here the resulting cultural form to reflect this process was literary noir, i.e. toxic fiction. With the promotion/consumption downward spiral of LA’s environment well under way by the 1930s, and in no danger of being “fixed,” this “sunlight/noir dichotomy: the disjunction between the visual and the experiential” of nature and daily life in Southern California “would be fodder for LA writers for another century and beyond” (McClung 29).

## CONCLUSION

“AND A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT”:<sup>1</sup>

## TWO CENTURIES OF READING THE LOS ANGELES RIVER

“[A]s hundreds of thousands of newcomers poured into Southern California,  
the river did not stand a chance.” (Gumprecht 119)

“[T]he foundational L.A. story is, what?—a nature story...”  
(Price, “Thirteen Ways of Seeing Nature in L.A.” n.p.)

For the previous three chapters, I’ve followed William McClung’s dictum that “fiction is merely a device for narrating the city itself” as I’ve examined changes to nature in Los Angeles reflected in its literature over time, from early travel guides to Lummis and the other boosters to noir and *environmental noir* (28). But fiction and other literary texts are not the only ways to “narrate” LA: the environment itself tells a story. According to story read in the natural environment, how do things stand in Los Angeles now? The environment tells us of the changes we might also read in the literature of the sixty-odd years since Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. First, a look back at the early texts and Truman’s 1874 travel guide, in which he praises the landscape and every other facet of LA’s natural environment:

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<sup>1</sup> My title, of course, comes from Norman Maclean’s novella, specifically its final lines: “Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river was cut by the world’s great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs. I am haunted by waters.” I would argue that Los Angeles is similarly “haunted by water(s).” Others must agree, since I’ve recently discovered articles about the LA River that each use variations of this title. (See footnote 8.)

One of the most charming views imaginable ... The greater part of the city lies stretched out before you like a map, while the hills in the background rise and swell gradually, until they are lost in the lofty eminences of the mountain ranges far beyond. I can imagine no more agreeable mode of life than to ... have the privilege of sitting beneath one's own vine and fig tree, and gazing at will upon the beautiful and ever-shifting panorama which lies beyond. (61)

A little over a hundred years later, John McPhee encountered a slightly different vista as he looked out onto Los Angeles from high in the San Gabriel Mountains:

If you turn and face south, you look out over something like soft slate that reaches fifty miles to an imprecise horizon. The whole of Los Angeles is spread below you, and none of it is visible. It is lost absolutely in the slate-gray sea, grayer than a minesweeper, this climactic wonder, this megalopolitan featherbed a thousand feet thick, known as 'the marine layer.' Early in the day, it is for the most part the natural sea fog. As you watch it from above through the morning and into the afternoon, it turns yellow, and then ochre, and then brown, and sometimes nearly black—like butter darkening in a skillet. (187)

From a “most charming view” to a burnt-butter-colored “megalopolitan featherbed a thousand feet thick,” something clearly went terribly, terribly wrong. What happened to the Edenic pastoralism of the nineteenth century? Had it all succumbed to the “black cloud” of Upton Sinclair’s apocalyptic vision in *Oil!*, or had Olmstead and Bartholomew been right when they predicted that unchecked growth in LA would “strangle” itself along with those very aspects of nature that had drawn people there in the first place? Simply put, says Jenny Price, Los Angeles became “sort of the Death Star to American nature lovers” (“Thirteen” n.p.).

If LA is the “Death Star,” then “the river whose story tells the story of L.A.” must surely represent its core, the heart of the natural destruction that defines LA’s past and present identities (Price, “What” 60). “The L.A. River,” Robert Gottlieb has stated, “in fact, was both symbol and substance of Anglo Los Angeles’s complex view of its surrounding environment” (141). The sad, strange history of the river reflects the same

history of the city as a whole, and thus we can read the LA River as a canvas upon which the environmental changes in LA through the years have been writ large. From simple beginnings as the pueblo/town/city's primary source of water, "the Los Angeles River, was a smallish creek in a large bed" that nonetheless could have extremely high and heavy water flows with the right storm systems (Reiser 53). But such storm systems couldn't be depended upon, so early on "Los Angeles in the semi-arid Southland had no doubts whatsoever that water controlled its destiny. So uncertain a source was the Los Angeles River, even the frontier cattle town felt threatened"; nonetheless, by the turn of the century, the city recognized its "ability to create its urban future through water" (Starr, *Material* 46-47). And that's where the story of the river takes on some of the same characteristics of "environmental noir," complete with a mysterious disappearance, although this whodunit wasn't terribly difficult to solve: "What makes the L.A. River so peerlessly amazing is that its city actively 'disappeared' it: we stopped calling the river a river. And it all but vanished from our collective memory" (Price, "What" 63). So how could a city lose its river?

To begin with, the Los Angeles River—like the LA "prairie"—failed to strike the fancy of "American settlers from more humid eastern states, unaccustomed to the climate and hydrology of Southern California and unimpressed by the little stream that barely flowed most of the year" (Gumprecht 117).<sup>2</sup> Despite disdainful views of the river's appearance and output, it "was able to fertilize a rich soil that was ... 'black and loamy and [capable] of producing every kind of grain and fruit which may be planted,'" as LA's

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, the other problem posed by the river was the result of too much water: "In Southern California, the Los Angeles River—growing from a sluggish stream to a storm-fed torrent ...—has been known to increase its flow three-thousand-fold in a single 24-hour period" (Davis, *Ecology* 16).

boosters certainly could attest, “while its ‘banks were grassy and covered with fragrant herbs and watercress,’” at least according to its earliest “chronicler Father Juan Crespi,” who “wrote about the river he called Porciuncula in his diaries back in 1769” (Gottlieb 138).<sup>3</sup> Such “sentiment about a lost river” speaks to the image of the river that its “restoration advocates seek to invoke[:] the historical image of a free-flowing river filled with those willows, cottonwoods, watercress, and duckweed” (Gottlieb 138). By the time Truman and Nordhoff arrived on the scene, the city’s growth already threatened the river, and, eventually, the same unimpressed Anglo Americans from the east would “[drain] the river dry and turned it into an industrial site and a dumping ground” (Gumprecht 117). But that time was decades away. Meanwhile, the growing city’s boosters could continue to indulge their “desire to promote its image as a ‘garden’ based on ample water” (Gottlieb 152).<sup>4</sup> For Truman, especially, the region’s ample supply of water served as a favorite example of the abundance of nature in LA, as when he claimed that it was “well supplied with water from the Los Angeles river ... The supply of water is ample for a city ten times the present population when properly utilized” (20). Even the incidents of drought didn’t dent Truman’s belief in the endless supply of water from the LA River and the rest of the watershed: “in the way of springs, rivers, creeks and marshes, there is always an abundance of water, the only exception being the great drought a few years ago—a freak of nature which is liable to occur in any country, and which no man can

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<sup>3</sup> When founded in 1781, Los Angeles’s full name was *El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora de los Angeles de Porciuncula*.

<sup>4</sup> The boasting of endless water supplies and, especially, the conversion of desert to watered garden brings to mind certain Biblical references, as noted by Nash: “Conversely, when the Lord wished to express his pleasure, the greatest blessing he could bestow was to transform wilderness into ‘a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs.’ In the famous redemption passage in Isaiah, God promises that ‘the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad ... for waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.’ To ‘give water in the wilderness’ was a way God manifested his care” (14). This fits their idea of LA as both Eden and the promised land.

account for or prevent” (70).<sup>5</sup> Ignoring the semi-regular drought cycle, Truman acknowledges the centrality of water and the river to the city’s (future) growth with his characteristic optimism and confidence:

That nature has been bountiful in this section, all declare with one accord. Yet the entire success attending certain neat agriculture here, depends upon the artificial introduction of water upon the lands. A great deal, if not, indeed, all of this delightful garden, would have remained unreclaimed from the desert, were it not for the system of irrigation. It is the water, and not the land, comparatively speaking, that is the source of so much wealth in Los Angeles county. The question is not ‘how much land have you got?’ but ‘how much water?’ (107)

Without human (Anglo) intervention, the land of “Semi-Tropical California” would have remained an “unreclaimed” desert—vs. “the land of milk and honey.” Anglo Americans had literally made Eden, creating for themselves a paradise where none existed before. And such creation and manmade improvements upon the land could continue apace, according to California governor Downey, who in 1874 claimed that “with proper management we can irrigate to the sea with the same supply that then [14 years earlier] existed. The same example will apply to the Los Angeles and Santa Ana rivers” (qtd. in Truman 114).

Of course, history played out much differently—which brings us to the time of Charles Lummis and the heyday of boosterism. By the time Lummis took over *The Land of Sunshine* in 1894, “[o]nly one thing stood in the way of what looked as if it might become the most startling rise to prominence of any city in history—the scarcity of water” (Reiser 55). Through repeated processes of drilling and pumping out artisanal wells to extract the LA River’s underground supplies of water, the rapidly expanding

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<sup>5</sup> See McPhee’s “Los Angeles Against the Mountains” for a discussion of the long tradition of Angelenos’ denial and ignorance of natural perils, partially due to the constant influx of newcomers who lack historical knowledge.

populace of Los Angeles (egged on by Lummis's work with *LOS*) threatened to suck the river completely dry. It was dry often enough that "[b]y the early 1900s, ... the once arcadian landscape of the Los Angeles River was pressed into service as a sewer for the city's expanding industrial district" (Davis, *Ecology* 63). Turned into a backdoor dumping ground for increasing industry along its banks, "the L.A. River began to lose some of its visual appeal as anchoring the region's attractive landscape. Instead, it came to be seen as a barrier for existing and future residential and industrial development along its path" (Gottlieb 139). The loss of the river's aesthetic appeal and value as "scenery as asset" was compounded by the increasing difficulty of extracting water for the city during the dry months. Something had to be done. Enter the development of the Owens River Aqueduct and the massive resulting scandal. One of the chief figures in the project, Fred Eaton, could foresee the water problems that would plague Los Angeles to this day:

When Los Angeles finally began to take on the appearance of a place with a future [in the late nineteenth century], he had been intensely proud. But he was one of the few people who understood that this whole promising future was an illusion. ... Everyone was living off tens of thousands of years of accumulated groundwater, like a spendthrift heir squandering this wealth. No one knew how much groundwater lay beneath the basin or how long it could be expected to last, but it would be insane to build the region's future on it. (Reiser 60-61)

In 1905, the problem seemed solved—at least for the time being—when Eaton and the other notorious participants in the Owens River project delivered a new source of water for the city. The day the story broke in July 1905, the headline in the *Los Angeles Times* read, "Titanic Project to Give the City a River," as if Los Angeles didn't already have a river of its own (qtd. in Reiser 70). With this, the bleak future of the LA River was set in place and "[t]he river that had been a magnet for settlement for thousands of years and had nurtured the city for more than a century was destroyed in the process," first by the

city using the underground sources of water before the 1913 Owens River aqueduct solved the water shortages, and then by the decision to use the river to “flush” pollutants and excess runoff so that the water from the Owens River could run its course. “The once ample stream became a local joke,” but the punch line hadn’t even been revealed yet (Gumprecht 122).

The state of the LA River by the 1920s reflected perfectly David Fine’s notion of noir as the moment when “[t]he land of the fresh start was transformed into the land of the disastrous ending” (82), as well as Mike Davis’s assertion of noir revealing “the parasitical nature of Southern California” (*City* 40). With water from outside rivers and reservoirs being pumped into the Los Angeles area at a staggering rate (and new water projects always on the horizon, to keep up with the rapid population growth), the LA Chamber of Commerce confidently boasted in the 1924 brochure “Facts about Industrial Los Angeles: Nature’s Workshop”: “*At no place in the US are the three essentials of industry available in such large measure and at such low costs as at LA—Water, Power and Fuel*” (4). (Figure 4-1) Soliciting even more industrial and naturally exploitative ventures, the LACC’s promotion of ample water and ample oil, while the LA River became even more of a toxic dumping ground, captures the spirit of *toxic fiction*. Then there’s the fate of the Olmstead & Bartholomew 1930 parks report and the effect of that failure on the already struggling LA River. While the 1930 report promised to save the parts of the river that were salvageable and to rehabilitate the parts that weren’t, thanks to the plans for green space all along the riverside—for aesthetic, environmental, economic, health, and communal benefit—the real loss from the failure of the plan, and the part that ultimately doomed the Los Angeles River, could be found in the plan’s “genius ... call



for a ‘pleasureway park’ along a route [Arroyo Seco] that could be inundated during periods of heavy rain and mountain runoff” (Hise & Deverell 30).<sup>6</sup> Less than a decade after the death of the Olmstead & Bartholomew vision for a thriving LA River, devastating floods struck in 1938, wreaking havoc on the closely settled floodplain and causing mass panic about future floods doing even more damage. And so, with federal assistance from the New Deal, the local government put those funds towards a massive public works initiative “to pave over the wetlands and streams that were so central to” the 1930 plan and that, without the plan’s green space and implemented flood zone, were seen as the great enemy of civic safety and continued development in the city. With its paving and the fatal blow of officially renaming the river as the Los Angeles Flood Control Channel, “[t]he death of the Los Angeles River ... was a dismal portent of the continuing role of government in reshaping and degrading the regional environment” (Davis, *Ecology* 68-69). In addition to the “death of the Los Angeles River,” the paving of the river (and others in the watershed) resulted in other major environmental problems, such as beach erosion and, simultaneously, horrible ocean and beach pollution, as the new LA Flood Control Channel acted as a conduit to sweep industrial and human waste out to sea. “[A] decade after Olmstead and Bartholomew’s report, the ‘parks and recreation crisis’ had become a comprehensive environmental crisis” that was in fact only just beginning (Davis, *Ecology* 72).

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<sup>6</sup> Like the LA River, the Arroyo Seco (former stomping grounds of Charles Lummis) was paved over after 1938 and renamed the Arroyo Seco Flood Control Channel by the WPA and Army Corps of Engineers.

## Cheap and Abundant Supply of Water, Power and Fuel

### Water

LOS Angeles possesses an ultimate water supply. By this we mean that the combined resources which the City of Los Angeles now possesses are sufficient to provide all the water needed for a population of 2,000,000 persons.

The bulk of this water is brought to Los Angeles from the High Sierras, through the Los Angeles Aqueduct, and is of the finest quality. Los Angeles also has huge supplies of subterranean water which local manufacturing plants secure at very low cost per million gallons.

### Power

Coupled with its water aqueduct, the City has available large sources of hydro-electric power and the district, outside of the City itself, is served with almost unlimited private power resources.

Power rates in Los Angeles are extremely low as compared with all other large industrial centers. The service is dependable, and the potentialities for power development in California and the Southwest are unlimited, the possibilities of the Colorado River alone being eleven times greater than Niagara.

### Fuel

No industrial center anywhere in the world is more generously served than is Los Angeles and Southern California with fuel.

This area is now one of the largest oil producing centers of the world and this fuel is piped direct to the industries. These great oil fields produce almost unlimited supplies of natural gas of a high B.T.U. content.

The cost of this fuel, either oil or gas, is very low, and the fuel problem for the manufacturer ceases to be a problem because of the enormous supply and low cost.

*At no place in the United States are the three essentials of industry available in such large measure and at such low costs as at Los Angeles—Water, Power and Fuel.*

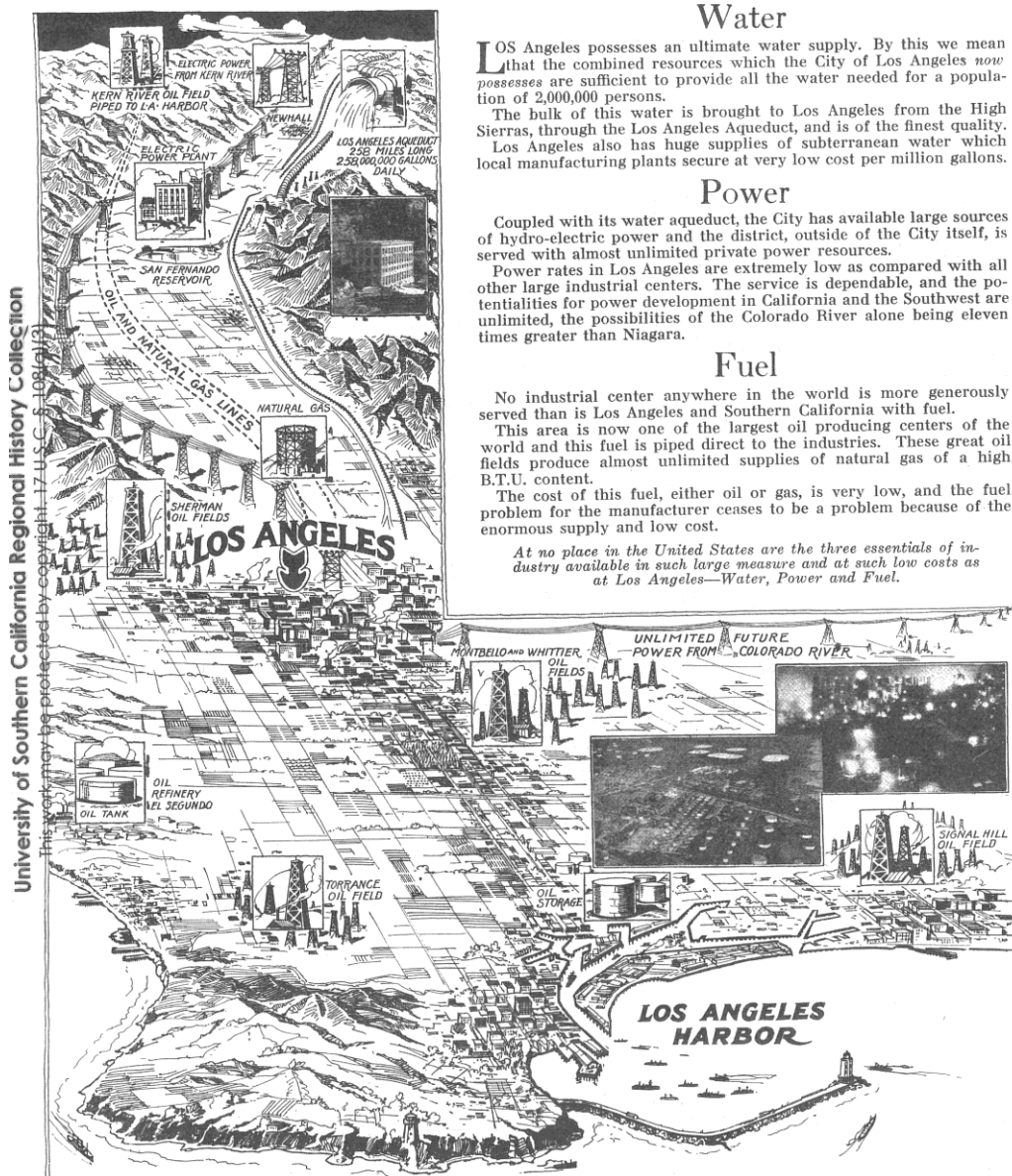


Figure 4-1. Map of Los Angeles from the 1924 “Facts About Industrial Los Angeles: Nature’s Workshop” brochure. Promoting LA’s abundant “water, power, and fuel,” this drawing seems to omit the LA River altogether in favor of “the Los Angeles Aqueduct,” piping in water from the Owens River Valley. (Source: Box 53, California Historical Society collection of Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce records and photographs, Collection no. 0245.1, Regional History Collections, Special Collections, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.)

And so the Los Angeles River has spent most of the last 70 years as a Flood Control Channel and, incidentally, a national joke: “How could you not laugh at a river with a concrete bed and without much water ... in a city that was supposed to be America’s new Eden?” (Price, “What” 63). The concrete channel became part of urban blight, attracting crime and pollution, and the city essentially turned its back to this former riparian ecosystem that became an eyesore and “contained hazard that was filled with debris, guarded by barbed wire, marked by graffiti, and inhabited at its banks by the homeless” (Gottlieb 149). In addition to creating something that threatened both local aesthetics and public health, Gottlieb explains, “the urban river and stream flood-control projects contributed to the reconfiguration of whole neighborhoods and sections of cities into bleak new urban landscapes” (164). Instead of providing the city’s population with use of the one uniting physical presence that actually existed in the vast sprawl of Los Angeles, the river became a divisive element, a Berlin Wall of sorts smack in the middle of the heart of the city and running 51 miles through the San Fernando Valley and all the way to Long Beach. (Figure 4-2) For decades the concrete riverbed served as a sewer, storm drain, film set—for apocalyptic scenes such as the cyborg vs. cyborg motorcycle chase in *Terminator II* (1992), the city-saving lava diversion in *Volcano* (1997), and even a nest of giant irradiated (killer) ants in *Them!* (1954)—and general reminder of all that had gone wrong with nature in Los Angeles. Eventually, many forgot that LA even *had* a river, so used to the existence of the Flood Control Channel that hardly seemed connected to the city at all, except as an uneasy reminder of the darker, seedier side of Los Angeles.



Figure 4-2. Map of the Los Angeles River.

(Source: EPA, “The Clean Water Act and Trash-Free Waters.”

<[https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-11/la\\_river\\_trash.jpg](https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2015-11/la_river_trash.jpg)>)

Despite this “disappearing” and the erasure of the very name and identity of the LA River, Cronon reminds us that “[t]o think ourselves capable of causing ‘the end of nature’ is an act of great hubris, for it means forgetting the wildness that dwells everywhere within and around us” (89). Remembering the “wildness” of the river—concrete channel, graffiti, and all—has become the central focus and rallying cry for a

new movement to reclaim the river. Because the LA River “was rarely viewed as an asset, as something to be saved,” LA River historian Blake Gumprecht reminds us that “[s]ignificant environmental concern for the river is a modern phenomenon” (133, 134). Even the grand plans of the 1930 Olmstead & Bartholomew plan were motivated less by ecocentric concerns than aesthetic and socio-economic ones. But since the founding of the Friends of the LA River in 1986 (by a local poet and artist, once again showing the ties between literature and nature in LA), there has been a slowly growing groundswell of support for an Olmsteadian vision of the river as once again a positive focus for the entire area. The hope of advocates and activists is that LA River restoration will “turn it into a major social and environmental asset ... that shows what a city can do with its river ... [and] that recreates the ultimate symbol of what’s gone wrong in L.A. as a symbol of things done right” (Price, “What” 67). And despite the overwhelming task at hand and the long history of environmental exploitation and destruction of the river—along with “the apparent quixotic nature of the quest for river renewal” (Gottlieb 148)—some real, measureable successes have been achieved. A cluster of non-profits has sprung up in support of the river’s rehabilitation, some riverside real estate has been reclaimed and turned into community parks, and a complete master plan for the river’s revitalization has been drawn up.<sup>7</sup> Bicycle paths, nature walks, and even kayak and canoeing trips down the river have become a regular part of activity instead of just the crime, pollution, and decay

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the groups working together to rehabilitate the river include: LA River Revitalization Corporation, LA Conservation Corps’ LA River Keepers, LA River Cooperation Committee, City Department Task Force on the LA River, Friends of the LA River, Los Angeles Urban Rangers, the Mayor’s Ad Hoc Committee on the Los Angeles River, and The River Project. To see some of the other riverside projects currently under consideration, visit the LARRC’s projects page: <http://www.thelariver.com/revitalization/los-angeles-river-revitalization-corporation/our-projects/>. The complete LA River Revitalization Master Plan is also available online, along with a history of the plan’s creation in 2005-2007: <http://www.lariverrmp.org/index.cfm>.

that used to characterize the river. But the most exciting and significant result of the activists' work happened just two years ago, in July 2010, when the EPA declared the Los Angeles River as a "navigable river"—thereby guaranteeing increased environmental protection under the Clean Water Act: "we're moving away from the concrete," declared an EPA administrator at the public announcement ("L.A.'s River Clears Hurdle" n.p.).<sup>8</sup> The effect of this victory has been a fairly rapid increase in public attention to the river and the efforts of the rehabilitators. Major political backing from the current mayor of Los Angeles, Antonio Villaraigosa, as well as other senators and legislators, has helped to push the river's environmental crisis and its potential salvation to the forefront after decades of Angeleno amnesia about the LA River's very existence. Although the destruction of the river will take years to undo—and its rehabilitation cannot be a straightforward ecological utopian dream of back-to-nature restoration due to the millions of people involved, many of whom live in homes that still lie within the flood plain that the Flood Control Channel was created to protect in the first place—it is nevertheless an exciting time for people who care about the river and improvements to both community and nature in LA.

So what, then, can the Los Angeles River tell us about the confluence of environment, culture, and mythology in Southern California? To start, we can follow Campbell's prescriptive of "finding new ways of looking at accepted narratives ... to question and challenge received wisdom" (73). One widely accepted narrative is that of a paradise lost, but Hise and William Deverell argue against such reductive reading:

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<sup>8</sup> See also "Restoring the L.A. River" (*LA Times* 7/9/2010), "A River Really Runs Through It" (*WSJ* 7/31/2010), and "Yes, a River Runs Through It: Kayaking the Forgotten Waterway of Los Angeles" (*Time* 9/16/2011).

Ultimately it is too simplistic to rehearse the standard narrative about Los Angeles as Eden lost. Too simplistic because these accounts typically ignore the manifest ways in which the Southern California landscape had already been transformed by the turn of the twentieth century ... Too simplistic because the tellers of these tales seldom ask: Whose Eden? (Hise & Deverell 55)

Questions of “What Eden? Whose Eden?” might lead to some of the same thoughts and mental trajectories I’ve followed in the course of writing this thesis, which revealed that the transformation of the environment of LA (including its river) was not a straightforward, clearly delineated process. We can read the nuances of this transformation in the narratives presented by the literature about Los Angeles and its river, and then we have the narrative inscribed on the landscape itself. Like the Friends of the LA River and other activists, we can “question and challenge” the predominant ideas about the river and other environmental issues in the “Death Star” of American nature—by first going *within* the mythology to deconstruct it and then by going *without*, to openly experience that nature first hand. After all, “[i]f wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world—not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both” (Cronon 90). In other words, we can embrace as imperfect the nature of Los Angeles, with its blighted river, smoggy air, and imported garden landscape. Another way to learn from the narrative of the Los Angeles River is looking at how the 1938 decision to “squeeze the river into a concrete box ... defied ecological sense and privileged unbridled private development over public space” (Price, “What” 62). “Unbridled” development has driven LA’s economy and growth patterns, as well as its treatment of the environment, since before the arrival of the Southern Pacific railroad and the first

population boom in the 1870s and 1880s. So the instinct may be to want to turn away from that “strangling” development and return to a past with its carpets of wildflowers and even *pseudo-haciendas*, but Michael Bennett cautions against that fantasy in lieu of a more productive path:

Rather than search for a mythic Edenic past, a society can try to model itself after other societies which have been more beneficent toward their environment, but this requires complex social, political, and economic—that is, theoretical—decisions. *There is no unmediated way of existing in harmony with Nature, and there never has been.* Once we make human decisions on how to exist in our surroundings, we are already involved in socio-cultural (and again, theoretical) modes of thought. (35, emphasis added)

The mediation of nature can be seen in the earliest texts I examine in this thesis, undoing the idea of an untrammelled “second Eden” for the Anglo escapists of the nineteenth century. And no one would confuse contemporary LA with its “Edenic past,” but instead of dismissing its natural qualities altogether—as well as the empty promises of its boosters—a more fruitful choice might be to decide to make “human choices” that accept the mediated interaction with nature in a way that is more “beneficent” towards the environment *and* towards the other human beings sharing our surroundings. For, in the end, our ideas about the environment are never unmediated, and our experiences in the same environment can never be wholly apart from human imprints on the same environment. Therefore, to (re)embrace the “lost” nature in a city like Los Angeles, it’s imperative to recognize “the continuing challenge of creating a sense of place based on community or environmental renewal, whether for the river or for Los Angeles itself, when the representation of place as isolating, dangerous, or hostile still permeated the culture of the river” and the city. In the process of working toward a rehabilitated river



*and* a resulting sense of place, the current effort to recover the LA River provides “a way to reenvision not just the river but the entire Los Angeles region” (Gottlieb 158,149).

In the revitalization of the LA River, my examination of various Los Angeles “texts” finally returns to ecocriticism’s “ultimate interest[,] ... the remediation of humankind’s alienation from the natural world” (Buell 8). The work to rectify this localized alienation and the environmental damage done in LA’s past mirrors a similar shift that Lawrence Buell sees within the field: “we are starting to see the beginning of incorporation of urban and other severely altered, damaged landscapes ... into ecocriticism’s accounts of placeness and place-attachment” (88). And if among those other urban, “damaged landscapes” there’s hope for the Los Angeles River, “the bleakest, most laughable symbol of everything gone wrong in L.A.” (Price, “What” 64), might there also be hope to recover some of the natural environment that was lost along the way in literary and other cultural representations of the city itself? Through ecocriticism, we might find that recovery work in the literature of LA while, through activism, such recovery work offers hope for city and its environs: “Restoring the L.A. River is about far more than the river. It’s about L.A—and beyond. ... [I]f L.A. succeeds, the river will be the ‘anything is possible’ of a more sustainable L.A.” (Price, “What” 66-67). And since by the tenets of critical regionalism, “region is not contained by the boundaries of place, but its study can relate directly and vitally to the comprehension of a wider world” (Campbell 44), such work in Los Angeles literary and cultural studies—alongside the physical recovery work happening with the LA River—offers a possible model for other urban areas who might have similarly sordid pasts in terms of environmental exploitation and (cultural) misrepresentation. It is this hope that informs my own scholarship, with the

belief that “by examining Los Angeles’ relationship with the world around it, and the way that relationship has been depicted in the ‘literary landscape’ of the city, we offer ourselves the opportunity not only to understand Los Angeles texts in wholly new ways, but to achieve a fuller understanding of ourselves and our place in the world as well” (Bryson 174). Like the initial kayak expedition down the LA River in 2008, which produced the findings that led to the EPA’s 2010 declaration of the LA River as an *actual* river, maybe this thesis can serve as an exploratory mission resulting in other potentially myth-busting discoveries.

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