

University College London  
PhD Architecture

**(Re)Imagining Los Angeles:**  
Five Psychotopographies in the Fiction of Steve Erickson

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I, Rebecca Lynne Litchfield, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that it has been indicated.

The thesis investigates psychotopography: the dynamic interrelationship of emotions, landscape, and the individual. Psychotopography suggests an all-encompassing connection between landscape and emotion and attempts to outline the intricacies of this, subsequently providing new ways of mapping the landscape, in particular, a re-mapping of emotional and psychic responses to the urban space. The aim of psychotopography is to create new understandings of ourselves, the ways in which we interact with the city, and the identities that arise as a result, through an exploration of the psychotopographic states and tendencies of a place, as identified in creative processes such as fiction, art and film.

This study is done with particular reference to the landscape of Los Angeles and individuals relationship with it. Psychotopography is a term specifically used by Los-Angeles based American novelist Steve Erickson, and therefore the thesis approaches psychotopography principally through Erickson's writings, using studies of five psychotopographic states identified in his work: emotion, happiness, numbers, liquidity and apocalypse. These five main chapters deal with themes that are significant not only in Erickson's writings but as part of the experience of Los Angeles and the surrounding area, and the interrelation between these themes, their motifs and the notion of psychotopography.

The psychotopography of Erickson's novels and characters is intricately woven through all aspects of his writing and therefore the methodology used during the study of Erickson's writing is close thematic analysis. This allows a highly detailed and deliberate exploration of both the mechanics and concepts within Erickson's fiction.

The thesis will develop the notion of psychotopography both within the novels and the wider context of the Los Angeles and Southern Californian landscape, going on to suggest how this notion might be applied to other disciplines and mediums.

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## Introduction

*Tip the world over on its side and everything  
loose will land in Los Angeles*  
Frank Lloyd Wright

## Introduction

In 2001, National Geographic announced the launch of a new series of literary travel books. The series would involve authors of both fiction and non-fiction visiting and then writing about a place of their choosing, the aim being to produce volumes of travel literature that explained and explored the places visited whilst retaining and reflecting the “strong personal voice”<sup>1</sup> of the author. As anticipated the results yielded writing about the expected classics: London. Paris, Barcelona, Sicily. However, when American novelist A.M Holmes was approached, her choice was neither a great site of beauty nor a majestic city of old. It was Los Angeles.

Despite initial “visions of a walking tour across France” or “dogsledding across Canada,” Holmes, “chose Los Angeles because it feels like one of the most American cities in America.”<sup>2</sup> It was Thomas Jefferson, the third President who presented the American people with the notion that the pursuit of happiness should be part of their inalienable rights,<sup>3</sup> who sent the expedition west to explore the American frontier, a move that eventually led to the settlement of what became the state of California. However, it wasn’t until more than a century later that Southern California – Los Angeles in particular – began to emerge as the site of the dynamic and creative future that Jefferson had envisaged.<sup>4</sup> In 1900 Los Angeles became the “best advertised city in America”<sup>5</sup> placing the city and its Mediterranean-style climate in the forefront of the American imagination. The city of Los Angeles was the first to be lit entirely by electric lights and in the following ten years an aqueduct was built to carry water into the arid landscape allowing the rapid expansion of suburbs to cater for the influx of people.<sup>6</sup> Between 1920 and 1930 more than 2,000,000 people came to California, and 1,272,037 of those settled in Los Angeles County.<sup>7</sup> As Carey McWilliams suggests, it was during these years of rapid boom that “the village began to disappear and the city, at long last, to emerge.”<sup>8</sup>

The growth of Los Angeles, and its entrance into the psyche of the American people as the “Promised Land,”<sup>9</sup> was by no means coincidental. The authorities and developers of the region saw the

1 Nina Hoffman. President, National Geographic, from, Library Journal.  
<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA156293.html> Jan. 8th 2001.

2 Holmes. A.M. *Los Angeles: People, Places and The Castle on the Hill*. Washington. D.C. National Geographic, 2002. p. xv.

3 Jefferson, T. ‘A Declaration by the Representatives of the United States of American’, in General Congress Assembled. 1776. In *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*: Ed. Merrill D. Peterson. New York: The Library of America. 1984 P. 19

4 Ellis, Joseph J. *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Random House, 1996. pp. 253-4.

5 McWilliams, C. *Southern California An Island on the Land*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1983. p. 129.

6 McWilliams, pp. 129-30.

7 McWilliams, p. 135.

8 McWilliams, p. 161.

9 Holmes, A.M. p. 17.

opportunity provided for them by the unique topography and climate of the area. Although the area was dry, this was quickly solved with the introduction of water from across the state, leaving a landscape of beaches along the coast, mountains and trees to the rear and desert beyond. When irrigated, this mix of topography produced an almost year-long growing period for farmers, and fresh produce such as citrus fruits. Once advertisers coupled this with the warm climate, and with the potential humidity regulated by sea breezes meeting the cool mountain air, they had an image of a healthy outdoor life to sell to the population of America. Once these images began to be carried across the country, along with the fresh oranges being grown in the region, the influx to Southern California was inevitable, and within ten years there was a population increase of almost 115%<sup>10</sup> causing the strange phenomena that Garet Garrett observed as early as 1930, whereby every other person in Los Angeles had been there less than five years.<sup>11</sup> This statistic has changed little as Los Angeles has expanded. The 2000 census shows that more than a third of inhabitants in Los Angeles County are foreign born, and this doesn't include individuals who have moved into the area from other states in the union.<sup>12</sup>

Los Angeles has intrigued Americans and non-Americans alike because of the way it embodies and makes manifest notions of the American dream, and has thrived on this mythology. It is also a place that is frequently seen as "simultaneously a city of the future and the past,"<sup>13</sup> that has become what Holmes refers to as an "epicentre for visionaries, romantics and dreamers."<sup>14</sup> It is clear that Holmes herself cannot help but be caught up in the city's dream, it's interweaving of fact and fiction. She idealises about the "fantasy life" she will live whilst there, and how she will "capture my own Los Angeles" during her "exotic adventure."<sup>15</sup> Once again, Holmes' encapsulates something that lies at the core of Los Angeles, not only as a place, but as an idea: it is a city of (re)imagining, one where people come to change their lives and live out the myths and promises of the American dream in a landscape of perpetual blue skies and sunshine. It is where "men and women are elevated"<sup>16</sup> and anything seems possible. As Kevin Starr, Southern California's most comprehensive historian puts it, California, and by extension Los Angeles, is "linked imaginatively with the most compelling of American myths, the pursuit of happiness."<sup>17</sup>

It is not simply the seemingly perfect climate and mix of geographies that has produced the ongoing appeal of Los Angeles and Southern California: the attraction has carried further than the literal, growing from the initial physical properties of the place, to a deeper psychic lure. The root of this cultural ideology can be found in the advertising images first put out about California, with their depiction of a "perfect" life amongst the orange groves, and has since then been built upon, cementing the image of Los

10 McWilliams, C. p. 135.

11 Quoted in, McWilliams, C. p. 165.

12 <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/06037.html>

13 Holmes, A.M. p. xv.

14 Holmes, A.M. p. xvi

15 Holmes, A.M. p. xvi.

16 Holmes, A.M. p. 16.

17 Starr, K. *Americans and the California Dream*. New York. Oxford University Press (OUP), 1973. p. viii.

Angeles as the place for the American dream: a place where everyone could start again and have the life they always wanted. The event that truly began the widespread acceptance of this ideology about California was the move of the film industry away from the east coast in search of more daylight hours in which to shoot pictures. The impact of this move was two-fold. Firstly, it meant that as the popularity of films increased they were physically and mentally connected to Los Angeles, giving it immediate recognition as a city of future ideas and technologies and of a glamorous, successful lifestyle. Secondly, it meant that images of Los Angeles were exported to the rest of the United States, meaning that, as Starr states, "Southern California was destined to secure for itself a fixed place in the collective day dream of America."<sup>18</sup>

Hollywood – as the American film industry has become known – is one of the most significant components of the rise of Los Angeles as the ultimate manifestation of Jefferson's wish for the uninhibited pursuit of happiness. As Holmes asserts, Hollywood is "the American Dream machine [...] where hopes and desires are manufactured and delivered back as though they were our own."<sup>19</sup> Kirse Granat May draws out the success of this dream machine in her writing, pointing to the fact that although California is able to encompass "the fastest growing present and the promise of the [...] future" it does so whilst remaining like "every city in America."<sup>20</sup> Herein lies the success of the appeal of Los Angeles: it is exciting enough to offer something different, whilst remaining fundamentally American. It offers an image that epitomises happiness, and maintains that this happiness is indeed obtainable.

However, despite this impression of a city that offers happiness and security, Los Angeles is a city of fragmentations that is in a state of flux. As a product of the unique topography and the strange periods of boom expansion the city is one of contradictions: topographic, meteorological, emotional, and even psychic. All of this leads to a strange experience of a place that has grown very difficult to map, know, or experience coherently.

The topography of the Southern Californian region consists of a wide coastal basin backed by mountain valleys, beyond which is desert. As McWilliams says, "basically the region is a paradox: a desert that faces the sea."<sup>21</sup> This combination of topographic elements also produces the unique climate of the area. Although it appears to be a mild region, where sunshine dominates, there are numerous elements that make the weather in the area difficult to deal with. McWilliams states that tourists visiting Los Angeles in the early boom years "discovered that umbrellas were useless against the drenching rains" and that "it was hot in the morning and cool in the afternoon."<sup>22</sup> These conditions seem minor however, when compared to the Santa Ana winds that sweep the region annually and are regularly the catalyst for large-scale fires that often destroy whole areas of the city. The land is essentially too dry to be inhabitable unless water is provided

18 Starr, K. *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era*. Oxford: OUP, 1985. p. viii.

19 Holmes, A.M. p. 16.

20 May, K. G. *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture 1955-1966*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. p. 36.

21 McWilliams, C. p. 6.

22 McWilliams, C. p. 105.



from elsewhere. Developers however, constructed large-scale aqueducts to carry water across the state. As a result, a whole region that technically should not be able to support a large population has become one of the most heavily occupied metropolitan areas in the world. Another aspect of Greater Los Angeles that makes it a paradoxical place for such population density is that it is situated directly on the San Andreas Fault. This means that throughout its history California has experienced a number of large and devastating earthquakes, the repercussions of which only grow as the expansion of the metropolitan area continues.

Los Angeles as “the ‘peaceful’ land of sunshine” is, “part fluke, part myth.”<sup>23</sup> Although it has a climate and topography that appears to provide varied outdoor lifestyles, offering not only swimming and skiing, but also surfing, skateboarding, rock climbing, sunbathing and hiking, and the potential to successfully farm produce with little change in the seasons, all of this comes at the cost of being in an area at constant threat from fires, earthquakes and drought. This produces not only a contradiction within the image of Los Angeles, but the threat that the landscape could literally shift and change dramatically at a moments notice. As Mike Davis points out, Southern California is a place where “cataclysm has become virtually routine”<sup>24</sup> and the inhabitants of Los Angeles must live with this information everyday, knowing that at any moment the city they live in could change shape forever. As Marc Reisner puts it, the most striking thing about California is that the inhabitants continue to settle where they shouldn’t have.<sup>25</sup>

The shifting nature of the landscape of California and the potential for fragmentation that this brings is echoed in the construction of Los Angeles. The rapid growth of the city during a series of boom decades has meant that Los Angeles has continually expanded outwards, gradually enveloping the suburbs, and leading to a series of centres, each dominated by different features: rather than being a city that is defined by its centre, Los Angeles is the city defined by the fact that it doesn’t have one. The city has created numerous small centres as it has expanded. Some areas are simply large suburbs that have been swallowed by the expansion of the city, others have sprung up due to business or leisure demands. All of these sections of the city are connected by the freeways, meaning the experience of the city is one of disconnection: people drive from place to place, feeling little relation between them because of the time it takes and the transitional space they must use.<sup>26</sup> Therefore the experience of the city is a disjointed one, and the identity of the city fragmented: not only does this affect the cultural identity of the city, but also that of the inhabitants themselves, who find it difficult to emotionally relate to such a decentered environment. For example, when questioning individuals about their experiences of the city, Kevin Lynch established that people found it difficult to conceptualise it as a coherent urban space, which lead to “weariness and

23 Davis, M. *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Picador, 1998. p. 25.

24 Davis, M. 1998. p.7

25 Reisner, M. *A Dangerous Place: California's unsettling fate*. New York: Penguin, 2004. p.3.

26 Brodsky, D. *LA Freeway: An Appreciative Essay*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987. p. 24.

disorientation,<sup>27</sup> here the unconventional construction of the city also leads to an unconventional relationship with it.

However, despite these negative aspects of Los Angeles, it does provide for positive reactions. Los Angeles expands and shifts rapidly in order to accommodate the influx of people drawn to the area; and the people drawn to the city and its mythology often come specifically because of the potential for change, reinvention and experimentation the city offers. As Holmes writes:

all have come to California in search of something [...] something other [...] each one carrying their own vision [...] they come to lose themselves, to find themselves.<sup>28</sup>

Los Angeles offers a space in which reimagining is possible, whether in terms of the physicality of the city, its architecture and landscape, or on a more human level, with new approaches to lifestyle. It has captured the heart of the American people, because it is a laboratory of imagination – and once again the fact that Los Angeles is home to the largest builder of imaginations, the film industry, is no coincidence. Similarly, technologies such as the internet, and ongoing developments in computing and robotics are also strongly connected with California, a situation which confirms Los Angeles as a city of the future. As a result it has become “the prototype of the ‘ultimate city,’<sup>29</sup> it is a “prefigurative mode,”<sup>30</sup> a “new type of city, a new range of options, a new set of spatial solutions [that has ...] deconstructed itself into multiple identities and options.”<sup>31</sup> It is a “city of a thousand cities”<sup>32</sup> and these “cities” are constantly changing, evolving and reinventing themselves, be it in terms of their literal geography, or their emotional landscape.

The ongoing shift of Los Angeles has produced a landscape of unconventional urban and psychic geography: a site of literal and imaginative experimentation that has resulted in an unknowable space that theorists, historians and geographers are persistently attempting to decipher and map. These ways of mapping the city have varied; some use historical development to chart its growth, either in terms of geographic spread or cultural impact, while others have used the combination of the actual layout of the city and the inhabitants’ understanding of it to produce “cognitive” maps of the area. More recently, theorists have attempted to produce new ideas about space based on postmodern understandings of the city.<sup>33</sup> All of these studies have attempted to structure, map or re-map Los Angeles according to quantifiable means, for the most part ignoring the individuals that experience the space. Even Lynch’s study, which specifically approached individuals about their experience and understanding of the city, did so through maps that are abstractions of experience drawn by the subjects so that the evidence could be more easily understood.

27 Lynch, K. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT, 1960. p. 40.

28 Holmes, A.M. p. 16.

29 Nelson, H.J. and William A.V. Clark. *Los Angeles: The Metropolitan Experience*. Cambridge, Mass: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1976. p. 1.

30 Davis, M. *City of Quartz: Excavating the future in Los Angeles*. London: Pimlico, 1990. p. 228.

31 Starr, K. *Coast of Dreams: A History of Contemporary California*. London: Penguin, 2004. p. 558.

32 Holmes, A.M. p. 22.

33 Soja, E. W. *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. London: Verso, 1989.

However, as the outcomes of these studies have shown, Los Angeles is a difficult city to organise, and becomes increasingly so as its attraction, and population, grows. As Holmes writes, “Los Angeles exists in [a] disconnect, in [a] fissure,”<sup>34</sup> it is a place full of disconnections and gaps that makes it hard to determine. Similarly Holmes talks of how Los Angeles is a place that “specializes in the suspension of disbelief, the suspension of time, reality, history, memory,” where “fact turns to fiction, twists and turns and then fiction turns to fact,”<sup>35</sup> all of which suggests that conventional techniques of understanding cities and the relationships between the spaces and their inhabitants, are not quite enough when looking at Los Angeles. Instead, approaches to understanding the city need to be expanded beyond current means to take into account the experimentation and imagination that exists as a part of both the city’s geography and its cultural ideology.

These notions could be explored further through a variety of means: architecture, urban planning, anthropology, sociology, film, or art. But it is the non-visual with which this study is concerned, specifically, literature. Whereas in other media words are used largely as a springboard from which to produce images – for example with architects producing plans, drawings and visualisations in relation to briefs and theories, and film makers creating storyboards, sounds and images from a script – an author must create images using only words and their layout. This can be achieved not only through literary techniques within the writing, such as metaphor, simile, pathetic fallacy, narrative and plot, but also by using format techniques such as ellipsis, paragraph and line breaks and the literal layout of the text on the pages. Writers must work to produce images on conceptual and mechanical levels, without actually relying on pictures. Thus they must create an imaginative space, both on the page of the novel, and within the mind of the reader. The parallels between the notion of literature as a primarily non-visual space of imagination, and the way in which Los Angeles has continued to attract individuals due to its function as a highly visual, yet unknowable, space of experimentation and imagination, provide a territory for the re-mapping of the city through examination of fiction.

There is a strong ongoing relationship between landscape and writing in America, not least because of the connection between overcoming and taming the landscape of the United States, and conquering the frontier. Brian Jarvis suggests that this identification with the landscape is a way of the American people staying connected through one idea across such a large landmass.

[h]omages to American geographical splendour [provide]  
an ideological foundation for the promotion of a sense of  
national identity rooted in the land, enhancing social  
cohesion across vast territorial boundaries.<sup>36</sup>

34 Holmes, A.M. p. 17.

35 Holmes, A.M. pp. 17 -18.

36 Jarvis, B. *Postmodern Geographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. 1998. p. 3.

Jarvis expands on this idea, stating that, “we cannot separate the geographies of who we are and what we are.”<sup>37</sup> This connection between identity and geography in America is certainly true of California, the identity of which is entirely bound up with topography, climate and geography. Starr affirms, “it was invariably the landscape they inhabited that Californians referred to when they wanted to describe who they were.”<sup>38</sup> Therefore it is understandable that this interrelation between landscape and identity has permeated aspects of American, particularly Californian, literary life. As David Wyatt comments, “the literature of California everywhere explores the way we express identity in terms of topography.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, writing becomes a space for authors to attempt to know not only the spaces they occupy, but the identities that are constructed as a result of occupying them, indicating the interrelationship of landscape, emotion and identity that is fundamental to the psychotopography in this study.

The connection between identity and landscape is a significant one in relation to Los Angeles, a city in which so many of the occupants are not native to the place, and who have come specifically to reinvent or rediscover themselves. David Fine points out that in many cases novels about Los Angeles are not written by natives, instead they are used as an “act of entry,” and are “about the discovery and the taking possession of a place.”<sup>40</sup> It is through the writing that the authors attempt to make sense of Los Angeles, both geographically and emotionally. Fine draws connections between the geographic location of Los Angeles, the emotional state it produces and the contradictory status of Los Angeles as a place that simultaneously embodies the myth of the American dream and where “cataclysm has become virtually routine.”<sup>41</sup> He argues that,

[p]ositioned literally at the edge of the continent, a place where an unstable physical geography collided with an unstable human geography of displaced and inflated expectations Los Angeles lends itself to both destruction and self-destruction.<sup>42</sup>

Fine also points out that “disaster is not rendered as sudden destruction, but is woven into the fabric of everyday living,”<sup>43</sup> and therefore becomes an integral part of the emotionality of the individual within the city, and the writing about it.

Due to the way that California exists as both a promised land and as the land of earthquakes and apocalypse, a particular nuance of the literature of Los Angeles is this “way in which imagination bifurcates

37 Jarvis, B. p. 94.

38 Starr, K. 1973. p. 207.

39 Wyatt, F. *The Fall into Eden: Landscape and Imagination in California*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (CUP), 1988. p. 18.

40 Fine, D. *Imagining Los Angeles: A city in Fiction*. Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 2000. p. 15.

41 Davis, M. 1998. p. 7.

42 Fine, D. 2000. p. 234.

43 Fine, D. 2000. pp. 237-8.

towards utopian and dystopian antipodes.”<sup>44</sup> This split is expressed through both the form and themes of Californian novels, calling on what Robert Lawson-Peebles refers to as “an integral instability in the relation of text and terrain.”<sup>45</sup> This instability manifests in a variety of modes, most commonly, as pointed out by Davis<sup>46</sup> through images of literal topographical destruction. However, authors have also expressed this instability using “surreal topographies, genders and futures”<sup>47</sup> alongside techniques such as non-linear narratives, movement between perspective, the instability of themes or characters within the fictions and a compulsion to reimagine the space of the city. This reimagination occurs on the level of both geography and genre: writing about Los Angeles shifts the city’s topography literally, through destruction or emotional understanding as well as on a more literal level by adapting the mode of writing according to historical and literary theme.

There has been a gradual shift in mode of writing about Los Angeles as the history of the city has progressed, and this expresses the way in which feelings for, and understandings of, the city have been revised. By tracing the lineage of literature as it has adapted to the historical and cultural shift of Los Angeles, it is possible to show how literature reflects what Starr refers to as the “inner landscape of California – which is to say California as a shared social and imaginative identity,”<sup>48</sup> and by extension suggest where a new mapping of Los Angeles through literature might begin.

Three main stages can be identified in the literature of Los Angeles that delineate different manners of writing about the city, and which in turn reflect the changing nature of the “inner landscape” of the place. These three periods do not correspond directly with specific historical epochs; rather they pre-empt and overlap, often spanning decades. However, these literatures, in their themes, techniques and styles, illustrate the “interplay between the literary imagination and what happens outside literature in the general culture,”<sup>49</sup> and thus present how the cultural and imaginative identity of the city has shifted, represented, been dealt with and interpreted.

In the early stages of Los Angeles’ growth the landscape maintained the mission style communities that had been settled by the Spanish. Small settlements were clustered together separated by farmland. Expansion had begun in the region, however, and whilst it remained a largely pastoral area, it was gradually being developed to make way for urban settlements. It was the start of a large transition for California, as it began to urbanise, bringing in tourism and industry to capitalise on the landscape and climate. It was whilst this change was taking place that the first form of Californian literature came to the fore.

The early stages of writing in California were defined by their descriptive techniques and focus on the landscape that the characters and plots inhabited. This form of representing the Californian landscapes

44 Jarvis, B. 1998. p. 6.

45 Lawson-Peebles, R. *Landscape and written expression in Revolutionary America: the world turned upside down*. Cambridge: CUP, 1988. p. 13.

46 Davis, M. 1998. p. 276

47 Davis, M. 1998. p. 331.

48 Starr, K. *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace 1940-1950*. Oxford: OUP, 2002. p. x.

49 Marx, L. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral ideal in America*. London: OUP, 1964. p. 4.

emerged as part of the broader tradition of pastoral writing that was popular across the United States during the nineteenth and early-twentieth century. The pastoral ideal of the American landscape was one that has roots in the thinking of Thomas Jefferson, who presented the notion of America as a rural republic, a garden in which individuals could pursue their happiness surrounded by a natural, yet tamed, safe, cultivated, landscape.<sup>50</sup> As Leo Marx points out:

For more than a century [...] the American people held onto a version of the pastoral ideal not unlike the one that Jefferson had set forth in 1785, investing it with a quality of thought and feeling that can only be called mythic.<sup>51</sup>

The early Californian literature took this notion and expanded it further, adding to the mythic pastoral ideal, the very real landscape of the Californian region: an area that was beginning to be cultivated and tamed, and that was coupled with a climate perfect for gardens and produce. The literature was able to achieve this through long descriptive passages recounting the beauty and majesty of the natural landscape that the characters inhabited. *The Octopus* (1901)<sup>52</sup> by Frank Norris provides an example of this:

[S]tretching out there under the sheen of the sunset forever and forever, flat, vast, unbroken, a huge scroll, unrolling between the horizon, spread the great stretches of the ranch of Los Muertos, bare of crops, shaved close in the recent harvest. Near at hand were the hills [...] a faint breath of wind out of the south passed slowly over the levels of the baked and empty earth [...] it was the season after the harvest, and the great earth, the mother, after its period of reproduction, its pains of labour, delivered of the fruit of its loins, slept the sleep of exhaustion, the infinite repose of the colossus, benignant, eternal, strong, the nourisher of nations.<sup>53</sup>

One of the central issues within pastoral writing was the threat to the “garden” by the “machine” – any industrial development that endangered the natural beauty of the land through harm or pollution. This placement of industry into the land produced a tension across America, polarising the response to the American landscape: those in favour of industrial and economic advancement, and those against, who believed in protecting the image of the American “garden.”

50 Marx, L. pp.143-2.

51 Marx, L. p. 1442-3.

52 Norris, F. *The Octopus*. Original publication date 1901, citations from: New York: Penguin, 1994 edition

53 Norris, F. 1994. pp. 46-47.

Once again, the literature emerging from California, given the exceptional position that the state occupied, provided a heightened response to this tension. Even during its early development California represented the potential future that faced the rest of America, and this landscape with its unique combination of topographies, perfect for a host of different industries, was the ultimate expression of the desire to maintain natural beauty, whilst pushing for economic growth.

The literature during this period reflected the tensions felt about the landscape. Novels such as *Ramona* (1884) by Helen Hunt Jackson<sup>54</sup> and Frank Norris' *McTeague*<sup>55</sup> (1899) and *The Octopus* (1901) drew on these conflicts as underlying themes and metaphors. They used highly realistic descriptions of the landscape, and the characters relationships with it, as the basis for the overarching themes within their fiction, expressing the need for a harmonious relationship between individuals and the landscape of California, where urban expansion and industrial development is accepted if it is shown to help and complement the existing elements of the topography.

What makes this particular period of writing about California stand out is the reliance upon a depiction of the landscape. Norris, Jackson and numerous other writers during this time – Dana, Muir, Carlos Williams et al<sup>56</sup> – rely on extended passages, often pages long, that describe in great detail the natural landscape which the protagonist occupies. This form of writing about Los Angeles and California is not, however, about making sense of the landscape or topography, but about appreciating it, and this is done through the mode of realism.

The next significant period in the writing about Los Angeles came during the 1930s and 1940s. These are important decades not only because of world conflict, but for California specifically it heralded a dramatic increase in population due to the migration into the state of those affected by the Dust Bowl. The intense influx of people from outside of the state resulted in several issues for the city of Los Angeles: if and how to provide housing and work for the migrants, and how to cope with the xenophobia that was directed at those not from other countries, but from other areas within the United States. The root of the problem was the over-advertisement of the work available in the Southern Californian citrus farm belt. Producers knew that the Dust Bowl had provided a cheap mobile workforce, and so had deliberately targeted it, recognising that there would be a high ratio of people to jobs, and that the incoming workforce would be desperate enough to work for low wages. This provided such a level of competition that producers could continually lower their rates and still have a willing workforce. What had not been anticipated was the fact that those entering the state would have nowhere to live, and no money for housing. Thus Los Angeles found itself setting up migrant camps, where people lived in squalid conditions, only increasing the prejudice against them.

54 Jackson, H.H.. *Ramona*. Original publication date 1884, citations from: New York: Random House, 2005 edition.

55 Norris, F. *McTeague*. Original Publication date 1899, citations from: Oxford: OUP, 2000 edition

56 Wyatt, D. pp. 1-30.

It was during these events that the veneer of Los Angeles was beginning to wear thin. It was not only the migrant workers that began to learn that Californian wasn't necessarily the promised land that had been sold to them, but other inhabitants of the city were also beginning to realise that moving to Hollywood wouldn't guarantee a place in the movies, or a house by the beach. If anything, individuals had to work even harder in Los Angeles to be noticed, precisely because its appeal had attracted so many people.

During this decade a new way of writing about the city emerged, and showed how the image of Los Angeles was changing in the imagination of those who inhabited the city. This new mode was a dramatic move away from the pastoral and landscape orientated writing that preceded it, with short sentences and stark, stilted writing replacing the earlier long flowing passages of realistic description. This form of writing was epitomised by the detective novels that came to be known as "hardboiled" fiction due to the unsentimental writing and subject matters.

This new writing about Los Angeles was no longer rooted in the positive aspects of the city. It depicted the dark, difficult, and often violent, life that existed alongside the sunshine and American dream that Los Angeles appeared to epitomise. These themes are not subtly placed beneath the imagery in the writing; instead the violence and arrogance is direct and on the surface: it is seen not only in the plots and narratives of the novels, but also in specific techniques such as short sentences and long passages of stilted dialogue. Equally, the landscape is depicted very differently. It is not only an urban rather than pastoral setting, but it has very little depth; the characters move between the places in the novels as if they are scenes and sets in films. This not only discloses the growing influence of Hollywood in the literature of this time, but also that the relationship with the landscape has changed as it has become urbanised: it is a place that is occupied and moved through, without having much resonance or significance. This change in the relationship between the landscape and those inhabiting it is also reflected in the way it appears. In the earlier pastoral writing, the individuals travel through landscape that is lit with sunshine and filled with golden corn, strong horses and beautiful delicate flower and insects. In the urban settings of hardboiled fiction, the landscape is dark. It is often raining, and the streets are both deserted and dirty. There is also little mention of animals or plants, which heightens a sense of separation between man and the landscape.

What writers such as Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett expressed in their novels was the way that the rapid urbanisation of Los Angeles, the constant advertisement of the city and the resulting influx of people, had all changed the way the landscape of the city was experienced by those living within it. Hardboiled fiction shows its protagonists trying to make sense of Los Angeles. It was no longer simply a place of beauty and mild climate where people could come and be successful. Instead the city was one of competition, violence and an obvious divide between those who had become successful and rich, and those who struggled. It also explored how Los Angeles had become a place where the relationship with the landscape was no longer about appreciation of nature, but instead about getting from A to B, and that this



existed in both the literal movement between areas of the city, and in the cultural imagination of the city's inhabitants whose concerns lay in social mobility and success.

The final and most recent way of writing about Los Angeles began to emerge in the 1960s, and is a mode that has continued to expand and evolve just as the city has. As the city has grown, and developed into a metropolis, swallowing up the suburbs that surrounded it and becoming a sprawling mass of different areas, communities and centres, it has in turn become increasingly more intricate to navigate. It is a place that no longer offers a coherent strategy for understanding, and as a result is more difficult to relate to, both physically and emotionally. This growing sense of disconnection and confusion is reflected in the recent writing about the city, which attempts to find ways of coping with the seemingly illogical environment. The overarching premise of novels within this genre is to acknowledge the incoherence of the city, and see its mapping or understanding as unattainable. Therefore a remapping, or reimagining of the city is useless, as it cannot, and will not, provide the security for which the protagonists might hope. Instead, one might contend, characters should draw comfort from the fact that Los Angeles cannot be understood, and live their lives accordingly.

There are two key examples within this mode of writing, Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*<sup>57</sup> and Bret Easton Ellis' *Less Than Zero*.<sup>58</sup> When contrasted these two novels clearly illustrate the progression of this literary mode, both in terms of literary techniques and increasingly explicit expression of their theme.

Pynchon's writing is dense. Every word is significant and builds on the intricate plot to reflect the incoherence of Los Angeles. The protagonist is constantly searching for signs of how to interpret what is going on around her, and how to navigate the situations in which she finds herself. The protagonist finds potential signs all around her, and eventually becomes consumed by her desire to interpret them, even if they conflict: her desire to bring meaning into her life gradually causes her to become more confused.

Pynchon not only places his characters in ambiguous situations, but his literary techniques are deliberately misleading: he uses cyclical storylines, is unclear as to whether episodes in the plot are real or imagined, and he constantly changes the spelling of key words. He therefore expresses the futility of imposing order or understanding on such an illogical city through both his narrative and his techniques. One of the key examples of the notion that the city is undecipherable, and that the best way to cope with this is not to attempt to know it, but to accept it, is found at the conclusion of *The Crying of Lot 49*. The novel ends without closure. The reader never discovers whether the protagonist finds what she is looking for. Indeed, the novel ends just before a large reveal is set to take place. This not only frustrates the reader, echoing the frustration of the character, who cannot make sense of her surroundings, but shows the futility of the reader having tried to make sense of the narrative, as the novel never comes to a conclusion, just as Los Angeles is destined to remain fundamentally unknowable.

<sup>57</sup> Pynchon, T. *The Crying of Lot 49*. Original publication date 1967, citations from London: Vintage, 2000.

<sup>58</sup> Ellis, B.E. *Less Than Zero*. Original publication date 1985, citations from the London: Picador, 1986 edition.

The writing of Bret Easton Ellis, almost two decades later, holds the same themes as those found in Pynchon – the unknowable nature of Los Angeles, the futility of attempts to decipher the physical and emotional landscape of the city, and a need for the acceptance of incoherence. However, the way that Ellis expresses these notions is dramatically different. Ellis' writing is sparse, and relies upon a mixture of stream of consciousness and dialogue given from the perspective of the main character. Even the physical difference between the two novels is immediately apparent. Both novels are under 200 pages long, and yet Pynchon's writing is in small print and is crammed into the pages, making the reader experience the density and confusion of experiences that the protagonist goes through. Ellis' work on the other hand is in a much larger print and is spaced out on the page, reflecting the lack of depth that his characters experience.

It is this lack of depth that is key for Ellis' writing, and indeed the way this mode of writing about Los Angeles has evolved. Ellis represents the extreme version of accepting the incoherence of this city. In his novel the protagonists – most of whom are no older than their mid-twenties – make no attempts to see if they can know the city. Instead they exist in their world of parties and mindlessness and give little thought to anyone other than themselves. Not only are they not concerned about the indecipherability of the city, they are not aware of it. The only way they have known the city is precisely by not knowing it, by existing almost outside of any contact with it. They skim the surface of the city, physically, emotionally and culturally.

Ellis' writing illustrates just how separated individuals have become from their surroundings. It is as if the actual landscape of the inhabitants of Los Angeles, and the inner landscape, have both become so disconnected and fractured that the only way of dealing with them is not simply to accept incoherence, but to not even try to find ways of connecting to the city. The unmappable nature of the city has become self-fulfilling in Ellis' writing: if there is a growing inability to understand or relate to a place physically and emotionally, then the solution would seem to become separated from it entirely.

This most recent tendency to express Los Angeles in almost despairing terms, where characters either try to understand the signs they are faced with and fail, or simply decide not to bother attempting to relate to their physical and emotional surroundings, suggests that there is no way of mapping or relating to the city in order to make sense of it. Even the characters in Joan Didion's novels, who try to relate to the landscape through the objects that define it – the freeways, swimming pools, etc. – ultimately fail, and as a result also fail in their human relationships.

There is, however, a more positive approach that can be taken to the impact of Los Angeles and the surrounding landscape on the emotions of those inhabiting the city. This approach is set out in the notion of psychotopography, a theory that accepts the interrelationship of landscape and emotion and attempts to outline the intricacies of these connections and provide new ways of mapping the landscape, in particular, a re-mapping of emotional and psychic responses to the urban space.

The connection between the landscape and emotion is key in gaining a potential understanding of Los Angeles and its "inner landscape." As a result, it is appropriate to attempt a reimagining and remapping

of Los Angeles that, rather than relying on traditional methods of understanding or mapping the city, strays outside of these in order to create a new response more grounded in emotion. This approach is what lies at the core of the notion of psychotopography: whereby the interrelationship of emotion and landscape means that a shift in one directly impacts the other. This term, psychotopography, lies at the heart of this thesis and therefore needs to be introduced in some detail. The word psychotopography comes from American writer Steve Erickson. It refers to the conscious and subconscious interaction between the individual and their surroundings; how they construct, understand and relate to their psychic, emotional and literal landscape. Erickson's writing implies that this relationship is reciprocal; space, in shape and structure – not just perceived experience – varies with and according to the ephemeral psychic and emotional states of the characters. Erickson is based in Los Angeles, and has spent the majority of his life writing novels that attempt to make sense of the city through the connection between landscape and emotion. He is also concerned with the broader issue of the pursuit of happiness and the connection between this, time, history and landscape, and how they shape both individual and national identity and emotion.

Although the term is similar to the Situationist's notion of psychogeography they are distinctly different. The Situationist's psychogeography is an almost playful strategy<sup>59</sup> used to provide an alternative understanding of city spaces based on subverting the rational to become irrational. Psychogeography is a "collective rethinking of the city"<sup>60</sup> that is deliberately enacted through group "derive[s]" often in "psychogeographically favourable places."<sup>61</sup> Guy Debord describes psychogeographical research as a "study of the exact laws and precise effects of the Psychogeographical environment," going on to remark that the progress of psychogeography as a strategy is dependent on "the statistical extension of its methods of observation [and] principally on experimentation through concrete interventions in urbanism."<sup>62</sup> This shows that psychogeography is a discipline that is employed by individuals or groups in a seemingly scientific manner in order to produce an "organized spontaneity"<sup>63</sup> that allows new understandings and experiences of urban spaces.

Erickson's psychotopography however does not need, require, or assume rationality to begin with. Equally it cannot be paused, stopped or stepped outside of, it is all encompassing. Psychotopography is also more literally connected to the interrelated construction of landscape and psyche: as demonstrated in Erickson's writing by how the actual shape and structure of time and space vary according to the psychic and emotional actions of individuals, and conversely the impact of topographical shift on the characters.

Erickson's first work was published in 1985, and he has written books both about and influenced by Los Angeles, with his most recent work being published in 2007. The beginning of Erickson's career comes

59 Guy Debord, quoted in, Sadler, S. *The Situationist City*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999. p. 77.

60 Sadler, S. p. 77.

61 Guy Debord, quoted in Sadler, S. p. 107.

62 Debord, G. 'Report on the Construction of Situations', *Guy Debord and the Situationist International* Ed. Tom McDonough. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004. p. 45.

63 Sadler, S. p. 78.

just two years after Bret Easton Ellis published *Less than Zero*, and presents an alternative approach. Erickson's writing suggests that there are ways in which Los Angeles can be made coherent, and that the way to do so is unconventional: directly considering the interconnections of emotion, identity and landscape. By exploring the psychotopography of Erickson's writing in great detail it is possible to open up a territory of new ways of mapping the city, both in terms of the techniques used – psychotopography – and the tool – literature. From this case study of Erickson's writing, it is then possible to suggest how psychotopography could be used as a more extensive model, both in the understanding of Los Angeles through other medias, and in the gaining of new understandings of other city spaces.

Unlike many residents, Erickson was born and grew up in the city, and has openly stated that the unique and constantly shifting landscape of the city has influenced his writing, and lies at the heart of it. Throughout his work, the Los Angeles he depicts shifts geographically, emotionally and chronologically, changing according to the protagonist's emotions and vice versa. It is through these shifts and the themes that occur alongside them that the psychotopography of the novels becomes increasingly evident. Erickson states that,

Los Angeles in particular seemed to lend itself to the idea of a psychic landscape [...] because it's so undefined in conventional urban terms [...] it is so much a city of the mind, [and as a result] it just sort of makes sense to me in my writing for Los Angeles to be constantly transformationalised"<sup>64</sup>

The term psychotopography only actually appears in Erickson's writing once, during his ninth novel, *Our Ecstatic Days* (2005), in which Los Angeles is transformed more explicitly than in any of his other writings. In this book a lake has appeared in the city and one of the characters comments that the lake is, "altering the surrounding psychotopography,"<sup>65</sup> suggesting that the rising of the lake has impacted on not only the physical, but the emotional landscape of the city's inhabitants. Although this is the only overt mention of psychotopography, the notion in fact underlies all of Erickson's fictional writings and is intricately woven throughout his narratives, present not only in the themes he uses, but also in the techniques with which he expresses them. Therefore in order to investigate the psychotopography in Erickson's novels, and to draw out ways in which this notion can then be furthered for other cities or media, a technique is needed that can unpack the density of both the concepts and mechanics of Erickson's writing. The most effective system for such a study is a close textual and thematic analysis.

Close reading is a method that evolved out of the critical methodology of practical criticism, a technique of examining literature pioneered by the formalist New Critics such as John Crowe Ransom.<sup>66</sup>

64 Interview with Erickson, by author. Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

65 Erickson, S. *Our Ecstatic Days*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005. p. 110.

66 Lentricchia, F and Andrew DuBois. Eds. *Close Reading: The Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. p. 1.

New Criticism was a theoretical approach that examined literature as self-contained pieces of work, therefore focusing purely on the literary devices used within the writing, and ignoring the author's intentions or the historical and cultural context of the work. More recently, however, these methods of close textual reading have been combined with contextual understanding, and it is this method, referred to as "close reading" or practical criticism, that has become the main tool for gaining an understanding of a piece of literature. It is a method that works particularly well for the exploration of dense writing that holds layers of concepts or methods, as it is a detailed labour that provides a deliberate means of unveiling and highlighting themes and techniques and their interconnections. By using an initial close reading of a text, the words, literary techniques and motifs used, it is possible to outline how a thematic and contextual approach might highlight underlying ideas within a text or series of texts. It is this aspect of close textual and thematic reading that is used during this study.

The recent understanding of close textual analysis, that assumes a degree of connection between the text and its historical and cultural context, is a significant aspect of close reading that augments the benefit of it as a method for examining Erickson's work, thus allowing an exploration of experiences of Los Angeles, historically, physically and emotionally, that have influenced his writing. In Erickson's work, the literary devices, motifs and narratives cannot be separated and a close thematic reading can draw out these connections and their importance to psychotopography. Textual analysis will also demonstrate the way that psychotopography, although not always explicitly referred to, saturates all of Erickson's writing and is built up gradually through his use of themes and techniques. Andrew Dubois comments that close reading refers to "reading with specific attention"<sup>67</sup> and this is precisely the approach that Erickson's work requires, given the way that psychotopography permeates his work. As Paul de Man has pointed out a focus on "singular turns of tone, phrase, and figure" allows readers "not to hide their non-understanding behind the screen of received ideas."<sup>68</sup> This shows that by paying particular attention to what is actually taking place within the text, the meaning of the work can gradually be revealed and understood with the evidence coming directly from the words, phrases and techniques used by the author. As Thomas Docherty has commented, close reading is able to "exact meaning and give voice to the critical consensus,"<sup>69</sup> and as a result close reading has become recognised as one of the most successful forms of critical textual analysis.<sup>70</sup> Therefore the research for this study is based upon an initial close reading of the texts, which highlight the thematic concerns that underlie Erickson's writing. These themes, once identified, become the focus of the close reading that draws out the psychotopographic nature of Erickson's writing.

The thesis is therefore structured with an extensive thematic analysis of Erickson's work at the core, preceded by two pieces of contextualisation. The first contextualisation details the history of Los

67 Lentricchia, F and Andrew DuBois, p. 2.

68 De Man, P. Quoted in Lentricchia, F and Andrew DuBois, pp. 2-3.

69 Docherty, T. *On Modern Authority: The Theory and Condition of Writing 1500 to the Present Day*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1987. p. 43.

70 Lentricchia, F and Andrew DuBois, p. 2.

Angeles, both in terms of its historical progression, and the theoretical work that has already been carried out. The second contextualisation explores in more detail than above the progression of literature produced in, and about, Los Angeles. Once this context has been set out and Erickson's work is situated within its historical, theoretical and literary background, it is thus possible to move on to the close reading of the novels.

The analysis of Erickson's work is grouped into five psychotopographic states that feature prominently throughout his work: emotion, happiness, numbers, liquidity and apocalypse. Each of these states are explored in relation to the motifs and techniques that Erickson uses, as well as their impact on and reference to landscape, particularly that of Los Angeles. The five psychotopographic states also draw out the other concerns found in Erickson's work, such as notions of identity – both national and individual – and memory. The study of the themes in Erickson's work through detailed textual analysis allows for the drawing out of the non-quantifiable aspects of the relationship which characters have with the landscape they inhabit, and for an investigation of the interrelation of shifts that take place in the psychic, emotional and geographic cartography of Los Angeles.

Once these issues have been explored and outlined in an analysis of Erickson's work, an extended conclusion to the thesis suggests how this psychotopography might be drawn out to provide a new way of mapping and understanding first of Los Angeles, and then of other cities. This conclusion also addresses the use of close textual analysis and literature as a tool for providing new concepts and new ways of understanding and relating to urban space as well as discussing how psychotopography might be utilised in other media and academic disciplines.

**Chapter one:** An introduction to the history and landscape of Southern California.

*Nothing was in that place except my imagination*

*John Steinbeck*

## **Introduction**

As Carey McWilliams comments in his seminal work *Southern California: an Island on the Land*, “it is easy to say much about the land, but difficult to say it so as to be clearly understood.”<sup>1</sup> Southern California has been a subject of fascination for historians, theorists and novelists alike since its inception; yet despite the volume of work relating to the region, no comprehensive understandings have been drawn about the area other than, agreeing that no single totalising realization can be clearly reached as McWilliams suggests.

At the heart of Southern California’s enigmatic nature is the varied topography of its landscape, coupled with its geographic location as the furthest westerly point of the contiguous states of America. It is the status of being the ultimate frontier, along with the contradictions present in the topography of the region, that have, throughout its ongoing history, shaped, produced and re-produced the circumstances that make Southern California and Los Angeles so distinct. As McWilliams points out, California, and specifically the southern regions of the state, is effectively a desert edged by coast.<sup>2</sup> However the landscape is not as simple as this observation suggests: it is not a flat plain desert that reaches down to the sea. Within the Californian landscape there are also high mountain ranges, flatlands, basins, semi-arid plains and valleys. The seemingly conflicting topographical features produce both a very specific climate and a fragmented geography that cannot help but impact upon the use, understanding and response to the landscape by all those who inhabit it. It is the underlying significance of this impact of the terrain on the inhabitants of California that theorists, novelists and historians all acknowledge: the landscape is ingrained deep in the psyche of California and that of its natives and occupants.

One way in which Southern California’s topography has affected the development of the region, and conversely the identity of the inhabitants, is how this it has become communicated to the rest of the United States within various formulations of the “American dream.”

Landscape has always been of foremost importance during discussions of the construction of national identity, particularly in relation to American identity. The American dream has become epitomized by an idyllic image of life in California, which supposedly demonstrates that the pursuit of happiness – itself a notion so ingrained in American national and individual identity that is it part of the national constitution – can indeed yield the desired lifestyle. Again the core of this notion lies in the temperate climate of California

1 McWilliams, C. p. 106.

2 McWilliams. C. p. 6.

produced by the specific geographic and topographic conditions, the outdoor lifestyle it promotes, the abundance of produce it can sustain and the movie industry it supports.

California, particularly Southern California and the city of Los Angeles, has therefore been strongly present in the imagination of Americans; however, the region is much more complex than is generally perceived. Beyond the sunny beach-orientated, citrus- and film-producing image lie varying experiences, understandings and constructions of the contradictory, often cruel, landscape and the way it has been urbanized. Equally Southern California and Los Angeles may be part of the collective imagination of the United States, but the forms these imaginings take differ dramatically according to the individual's encounters with, access to, and construction of, the area's geography and cartography. The following discussion explores the history of Southern California, with a specific focus on Los Angeles, via a series of different imaginings of the city and surrounding area, whilst demonstrating that the significance of the particular topography of the region and its subsequent encompassing impact is implicit in any writing about, and understanding of, the topic.

#### **Normalizing LA: McWilliams, Starr and Banham**

Although, as McWilliams himself is quick to point out, it is difficult to be clearly understood when talking about the land of Southern California,<sup>3</sup> this challenge has not prevented some from trying. Three historians in particular have been drawn to the task of trying to make sense of the fragmented, contradictory and paradoxical Los Angeles: Carey McWilliams, Kevin Starr and Reyner Banham. Each attempts to bring the city together into a totalised whole. McWilliams and Starr work in a way typical to many historians: following the course of the area's development so as to produce a chronological history, hoping that the history will naturally create the desired order. Banham's approach is slightly different. He focuses on the architecture of the city within the historical and topographical context, allowing him to "present [...] the total artifact that constitutes Greater Los Angeles."<sup>4</sup> However, his overall object is the same as McWilliams and Starr: to construct a unified sense of the place. Due to the tendency of these three writers to frame their imaginings within a chronological historical approach, it is advantageous to use this section to outline a general overview of the history of the region's development, therefore allowing a setting up a basic understanding of the area before moving on to more complex imaginings in the following sections.

#### *Carey McWilliams*

Carey McWilliams' work *Southern California: an Island on the Land* has long been recognised as one of the most significant writings about the history of the state. An important member of the artistic and social scene in Los Angeles between the 1930s and 1950s, McWilliams was not a native, but came to the city from

3 McWilliams, C. p. 106.

4 Banham, R. *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. p. 5.



Denver in the 1920s. In the introduction to the book he talks about the immediate impact the landscape had upon him as he entered the state across the desert by train; the large spacious houses and lawns, and, coming as he did from a Colorado blizzard, the lack of snow and instead the warm sunny climate.<sup>5</sup> Although graduating as a law student, it was in journalism that McWilliams found his niche and from there was able to observe, participate in and subsequently write about Los Angeles' boom. McWilliams comments that:

Those years, from 1922 to 1951, mark a definite period in the history of the region. These were the years when it began to make a real impact on national and world opinion and when papers other than *Time*, began to write it Southern California.<sup>6</sup>

McWilliams was one of those writing about Southern California from the perspective of being within it. As he is quick to point out, he did not just "happen to write this book: I lived it."<sup>7</sup> He is in the position of being observer as well as participant, and thus is able to provide an intimate interpretation and framework for the better understanding of Southern California.<sup>8</sup>

McWilliams begins his history during the mission era of Southern California towards 1833, ignoring the early settlement of the state. His reason for this exclusion is that numerous volumes on the topic already exist, and instead he aims to use the space to "examine, with a degree of realism, the actual structure of social classes in Alta California."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to stress that he wishes to present this early period, and thus implicitly the periods to follow, from "the point of view of the real parties in interest."<sup>10</sup> Although in the following chapters McWilliams does seem to focus on the "Indian"<sup>11</sup> point of view, it is worth pointing out that the history is inevitably influenced by his own beliefs and so this Indian point of view must be understood as filtered through his own concerns. Similarly, the more contemporary the history becomes, and the closer to McWilliams' own period in Los Angeles, the more strongly his concerns are evident. This theme of the importance of personal experience and involvement is one that will be touched on throughout the exploration of the histories and imaginings of Los Angeles and Southern California.

The particular nature of the landscape of Southern California occupies a central position throughout McWilliams' work. Although, as mentioned earlier, landscape, topography and cartography are implicit parts of any writing about the area, McWilliams' writing addresses these issues explicitly and consciously, rather than them being underlying topics that emerge as a result of the overall project. Throughout *Southern*

5 McWilliams, C. pp. viii-ix

6 McWilliams, C. p. xxi.

7 McWilliams, C. p. xxi.

8 McWilliams, C. p. xxi.

9 McWilliams, C. p. xxiii.

10 McWilliams, C.p. xxiii.

11 McWilliams' term for the Native Americans already in the state when the missions arrived.

*California* McWilliams returns unequivocally to discuss the importance of the structure or impact of landscape on the topic he is addressing, demonstrating just how crucial the particular geography of the area has been throughout its development.

One of the most useful basic pieces of information about the area that McWilliams outlines right at the beginning of his work is to point out the geographic boundaries he is using to delineate Southern California:

While egregious errors [...] have frequently been made, there has never been any real uncertainty about the region's boundaries. Southern California is the land "South of Tehachapi" – south, that is, of the transverse Tehachapi range which knifes across to the ocean just north of Santa Barbara [...] It includes part of Santa Barbara county (the portion south of Tehachapi), all of Ventura, Los Angeles, and Orange counties, and those portions of San Bernadino, Riverside and San Diego counties "west of the mountains." [...] The land area itself embraces approximately 11,729 square miles.<sup>12</sup>

Although this seems like an almost too obvious definition of exactly what constitutes Southern California's geography, it is an important one, and something that few writers actually do. McWilliams makes no assumptions about the reader's knowledge and so he physically marks out the region he understands as Southern California. Prioritising the landscape so early in his writing sets it up as an important theme that will surface constantly during the book and demonstrates how intimately connected landscape is to the history and development of the region. McWilliams argues that, due to Southern California being separated from the rest of the country by the mountains and desert, it is "an island on the land, geographically attached, rather than functionally related to the rest of America."<sup>13</sup> This is an insightful notion that suits the area, not only because of its topographical singularity, but also because of its psychological reverberations: Los Angeles has often been seen or presented as an almost mythical city where the American dream is found, created and reproduced, and thus has had a unique effect on the national psyche.

Climate was one of the key factors that lead to the boom development of Los Angeles and the surrounding area and, as McWilliams is quick to point out, it is the particular combination of topographical elements in Southern California that produces the weather system. McWilliams also recognises the reciprocity in this relationship: "terrain [...] makes the 'climate' and the climate in turn makes the land."<sup>14</sup> The

12 McWilliams, C. pp. 4-5.

13 McWilliams, C. p. 14.

14 McWilliams, C. p. 5.

result is a Mediterranean-style climate, unlike anything else found in the United States. The consistently temperate weather, coupled with what McWilliams terms “climatology” – the belief that mild, dry, and sunny conditions could have restorative, even curative health benefits – was the primary catalyst for the initial rapid growth in Southern California.<sup>15</sup>

The rise of “climatology” meant that by 1870 “climate had become a merchantable commodity in the region”<sup>16</sup> and as advertisements and word-of-mouth stories spread the tourists began to both visit and settle in Southern California in order to take advantage of the exotic climate. McWilliams highlights how “almost every aspect of life in Southern California possessed a delightful novelty – an element of surprise – for the tourists”<sup>17</sup> they were perplexed by the way “umbrellas were useless against the drenching rains [...] but that they made good shade in the summer, that many beautifully coloured flowers had no scent However the paradoxical nature of the place and it’s “tricky environment”<sup>18</sup> didn’t stop the people coming, if anything it just sparked their interest and so the tourists “learned to discard...their umbrellas,”<sup>19</sup> the appeal just got greater and “the process of mutual assimilation between people and land which they began continues so long in their successors that it is nowhere yet complete.”<sup>20</sup>

The influx of the tourists in the land boom of the 1870s and 1880s was, as McWilliams highlights, essentially due to the railroad promotions, and by 1890 “Los Angeles was known as the best advertised city in America.”<sup>21</sup> In his writing McWilliams stresses this point and then couples it with the information that Los Angeles was the first city in America to be lit completely by electric lights.<sup>22</sup> These facts seem to say something about the nature of Los Angeles: that as early as the turn of the twentieth century it was a city aiming to be seen as an almost unreal, magical place, the identity it has subsequently continued to perpetuate. Indeed McWilliams comments that even on a very basic level “it is an artificial region, a product of forced growth and rapid change.”<sup>23</sup> This notion of Los Angeles as artificial, on many different levels, is another one that repeats itself over the various different imaginings presented here.

This ‘unreal’ character of Los Angeles, the city that developed into the apotheosis of the American dream, was perpetuated by its dramatic and continued growth and development throughout the early twentieth century. Southern California went from a sleepy mission region to metropolis in a matter of decades. McWilliams states that between 1920 and 1930 “over 2,000,000 people moved to California, 72% of whom settled in Southern California.”<sup>24</sup> He goes on to state that, “to understand the cultural landscape in

15 Unlike the northern regions of the state, such as San Francisco, the soil and river beds of Los Angeles and the surrounding region did not contain gold, and so the area remained relatively untouched by the Gold Rush.

16 McWilliams, C. p. 100.

17 McWilliams, C. p. 104.

18 McWilliams, C. p. 107.

19 McWilliams, C. p. 107.

20 McWilliams, C. p. 112.

21 McWilliams, C. p. 129.

22 McWilliams, C. p. 129.

23 McWilliams, C. p. 14.

24 McWilliams, C. p. 135.

Southern California, it is necessary to know something about these people,”<sup>25</sup> and then later explicitly mentions that “it is extremely important to note that persons born in California have never constituted a high percentage of the total number of residents in the state.”<sup>26</sup> McWilliams understood that the landscape was involved in not only a reciprocal relationship with the weather system, but also with the people who were drawn to the region for the temperate climate that was being produced: people came to the region as a result of the landscape, then modified it to suit them further.

For instance, despite opening onto the sea, Southern California is backed by desert and lacks local fresh water resources; in fact McWilliams talks about the region as being one that embraces the sea, whilst trying to forget and being haunted by the desert.<sup>27</sup> Despite the increasing pressure on already significantly depleted local water sources, Los Angeles continued to promote itself and encourage a continuous flow of immigrants to the area.

Another problem faced by settlers in the area was that there is a dramatic variation in regional rainfall. McWilliams gives the examples of San Diego and Los Angeles, which receive an average of 9.7 inches, and 15.0 inches respectively. Although Greater Los Angeles has a relatively high rainfall, there was still never going to be enough local water to satisfy the needs of the growing population and so the politicians and planners took water from Owens Valley, in the south eastern area of the state, transporting it to the city and outlying areas using an immense aqueduct. Although the circumstances by which the water was acquired demonstrate what McWilliams calls “reprehensible tactics”<sup>28</sup> – the pressure placed upon Owens Valley residents to surrender their water rights, the withholding of information from the public until the last possible moment and, perhaps most importantly, the underlying politics behind the scheme, namely that key landholders who made sure the project gained approval benefited from the irrigation of vast tracts of lands that could then be developed to their profit – he does argue that it represented “the greatest good for the greatest number...[a] familiar American doctrine.”<sup>29</sup> Although the project was a “fiasco,”<sup>30</sup> both in terms of its engineering and its failure to recognise and plan for the demand for water that would continue to increase sharply alongside the population growth,<sup>31</sup> there is a sense that it was still a great achievement, not just for Los Angeles, but for the nation as a whole. It represented the notion that anything could be done, that no feat was beyond the American people, and once again this came from Los Angeles, reinforcing its position at the heart of the American dream.

Yet, as McWilliams recognises and demonstrates, behind the prosperity and sense that any crisis could be conquered was the harsh reality of a landscape unforgiving and unprepared for the growth and

25 McWilliams, C. p. 138.

26 McWilliams, C. p. 162.

27 McWilliams, C. p. 200.

28 McWilliams, C. p. 187.

29 McWilliams, C. p. 187.

30 McWilliams, C. p. 191

31 No storage dams were planned during the building of the aqueduct, and so excess water that could have been stored and used at a later time simply ran off into the sea.

development demanded of it by Los Angelenos. The landscape, as McWilliams presents it, appeared to be warning the people of Southern California of the consequences of rapid, unplanned, and unsustainable expansion:

Flood and forest problems arose in direct ratio to the increasing density of population. There is for example, an almost perfect correlation between the number of forest fires and population increases.<sup>32</sup>

Here McWilliams makes clear that the relationship between the landscape and the people in Southern California has been intimately and reciprocally connected, and will continue to be so. As the continued discussion of the various imaginations of the region will also demonstrate, the inhabitants of the land modify it according to their needs, the landscape then reacts, and so the people must respond, and thus a cycle of action and reaction between the population and the landscape is perpetuated. Although this is the case across different geographic locations, the particular nature of the topography of Southern California heightens the reactions and carries it beyond a physical or cartographical level into the deeper identity and psyche of the inhabitants. As McWilliams states, “almost every eccentricity of social behaviour in Southern California has been attributed, at one time or another, to the climate or the physical environment.”<sup>33</sup> This is another theme represented throughout many of the different writings and theorisations about the region.

The boom-cycle of the development of Los Angeles had an impact upon not just the natural landscape, but also on the process of man-made construction. McWilliams talks about the way that “the old and the new exist in curious juxtaposition,”<sup>34</sup> there being no time or inclination for the old to be replaced. So different types and styles of architecture were built side-by-side. McWilliams also points to a phenomenon that he calls “onomatopoeic architecture,” whereby buildings are built to look like the things they represent – “a restaurant called The Green Dragon, looks like a dragon”<sup>35</sup> – eliminating, according to Stoyan Cristowe, the need for signs.<sup>36</sup>

The speed and type of development in Los Angeles – the preference for quick-build single-family residences – increased the seeming artificiality of the city. McWilliams cites Sarah Comstock’s reaction that “they are instantly created synthetic communities of a strangely artificial world”<sup>37</sup> before going on to

32 McWilliams, C. p. 194.

33 McWilliams, C. p. 227.

34 McWilliams, C. p. 227.

35 McWilliams, C. p. 229.

36 Quoted in McWilliams, C. p. 229.

37 McWilliams, C. p. 233.

comment, famously, that Los Angeles is “a collection of suburbs in search of a city”<sup>38</sup> and, as a result, “there is often lacking a true sense of community as well as any feeling of being related to a larger unit.”<sup>39</sup> This emerging notion of a fragmented city, one seemingly without a truly recognised centre is another motif that arises within the other imaginings of Los Angeles. It should be noted here that despite his focus on the rapid development of suburban culture McWilliams does not explore the role of the railways, and the loss of this system to the freeways. This is a topic that many historians believe is central to the particular construction and experience of Los Angeles, and one that occupies its own sort of imagination of the city, as will be explored later.

What McWilliams could not ignore was the cult of Hollywood, the role it has had in the construction of the area’s character, the impact on the residents of Los Angeles (and their own identity construction), and the wider implications of its persona on the national understanding of not only the city, but of America itself. McWilliams also points to Katherine Fullerton Gerould’s statement that Hollywood “exists only as a state of mind, not as a geographical entity.”<sup>40</sup> This statement gives credence to the perception of Los Angeles as a seemingly artificial city that has penetrated the psyche of the American people and perpetuated the notion of the American dream.

Hollywood became the centre of the movie-making industry as McWilliams points out, precisely because of the landscape; “within a two-hundred mile radius of Los Angeles was to be found every variety of natural scenery from the Sahara Desert to the Khyber Pass.”<sup>41</sup> This was coupled with the continually mild and sunny climate that allowed film shooting outside for most of the year, and so gradually the movies migrated west. The area soon became synonymous with movies and celebrity and these were the images of Los Angeles that were transported around the world: perfect climate, perfect surroundings, perfect lifestyle. McWilliams comments that the influence of Hollywood was so strong because of its timing; “motion pictures arrived just when the community was beginning to assume the dimensions of a city”<sup>42</sup> and so Hollywood grew as Los Angeles grew. This settling of the industry of the imagination within Los Angeles only served to heighten the already unreal and disconnected feel of the city, and so, as Paul Schrecker commented, “the city seems, not like a real city resulting from natural growth, but like an agglomeration of many varied movie sets, which stand alongside each other, but have no connection with one another.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, as early as 1915,<sup>44</sup> the image of Los Angeles as an unreal, fragmented imagined place – a living movie set where anything was possible – was becoming entrenched in the local and national psyche.

38 McWilliams, C. p. 234.

39 McWilliams, C. p. 234.

40 McWilliams, C. p. 330.

41 McWilliams, C. p. 331.

42 McWilliams, C. p. 345.

43 Quoted in, McWilliams, C. p. 344.

44 The period when Los Angeles and Hollywood truly embraced the motion picture industry according to McWilliams. McWilliams, C. p. 332.

McWilliams ends his writing by looking to what the future holds for Southern California and pointing to the idea that some sort of special destiny awaits the region. He believes that “no notion is more deeply seated [...] than the theory that a new and vital culture would some day be born in California.”<sup>45</sup> It is interesting that although throughout his work McWilliams seems to criticize the circumstances by which Southern California developed – the ousting of the Mexicans and Native Americans, the desperate and poorly planned acquisition of water, the rapid and insubstantial development, the unreality presented by Hollywood – the overall response to the region is one of celebration. Indeed he ends the book talking in these terms:

This land deserves something better [...] this tiny region, seems to be [...] waiting for the future that one can somehow sense, and feel and see. Here America will build its great city of the Pacific, the most fantastic city in the world.<sup>46</sup>

Ultimately, even though Southern California is not his native region McWilliams cannot help but buy into its dream; it has conquered his subconscious just like that of everyone else.

#### *Kevin Starr*

McWilliams’ *Southern California* may still be one of the most significant works about the region, but the most comprehensive is undoubtedly Kevin Starr’s seven book series “Americans and the California Dream,” chronicling the progression and development of the state from its settlement to the present.<sup>47</sup> Although the books aim to cover the entire state, it is inevitable that there is a certain degree of focus on Greater Los Angeles simply because of its importance to the area and the influence the city has had on the general progression of the United States, socially, politically, economically, technologically and culturally. The books can be treated as individual works, each looking at a specific time period, or as a series whereby each work presents an episode that contributes to the broader exploration of the continuing development of the area. This section will take the latter approach in order to gain a greater comprehension of Starr’s overall response to and understanding of the region.

It is particularly apt for Kevin Starr, more than any of the other historians examined in this section, that his understanding of the history and landscape of Los Angeles and Southern California should be

<sup>45</sup> McWilliams, C. p. 367.

<sup>46</sup> McWilliams, C. p. 377.

<sup>47</sup> Starr, K. *Americans and the California Dream*. New York: Oxford University Press (OUP), 1973. . *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive era*. New York: OUP, 1985. *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990. *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California*. Oxford: OUP, 1996. *The Dream Endures: California enters the 1940s*. Oxford: OUP, 1997. *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940 – 1950*. New York: OUP, 2002. *Coast of Dreams: A History of Contemporary California*. London: Penguin, 2004.

considered an imagining. Whilst explaining the premise of his writing, Starr stresses that his aim is always to follow the imaginative aspects of California. He states that he is “concerned with the process whereby California was encountered and settled in imagination and symbol as well as social fact.”<sup>48</sup> Starr believes that “the California of fact and the California of imagination shape and reshape each other”<sup>49</sup> and that his series “seeks to integrate fact and imagination in the belief that the record of their interchange through symbolic statement is our most precious legacy.”<sup>50</sup> Thus his writing explores not only the social and cultural phenomenon within California, but also the “intersections of social and imaginative experience”<sup>51</sup> and the way that these intersections produced a particular psychic and emotional response to the place that has been carried across the decades of its development and subsequently become an integral part of the region.

The notion that there is a direct correlation between the social, cultural and imaginative aspects of an area is particularly relevant to Los Angeles and Southern California because of its role at the heart of the American dream and because it is the home of Hollywood. Los Angeles is synonymous with the production of dreams and imaginings, so much so that the city itself has often been described as unreal. The belief in the importance of Los Angeles to the American dream, indeed that the city embodies the dream, is inherent in Starr’s writing, as the title of his series *American’s and the California Dream*, demonstrates. For Starr, California is so central to the American dream that he uses his title to rename it the “California Dream” and comments that, “Southern California was destined to secure for itself a fixed place in the collective daydream of America.”<sup>52</sup> California has indeed become fixed in this way, not only in the consciousness of America, but increasingly the wider world, and as the most recent work in Starr’s series, *Coast of Dreams: A History of Contemporary America*, demonstrates, the fascination seems unlikely to abate.

Before addressing each work in turn it is useful to outline Starr’s approach and methodology. Starr aims to integrate and outline the shared social and imaginative experience of the region so as to present the inner landscape of California,<sup>53</sup> and so order to do this, Starr engages in exploring history using a slightly unusual technique. Rather than simply aiming to present the facts from the various eras objectively he will be covering, Starr’s writing is “intended as a dramatization of the actual and symbolic relationships,”<sup>54</sup> a process which he achieves through detailed examination of representative moments or individuals, within their (slightly less detailed) broader context. This approach allows him the freedom to explore the imaginative as well as the social in order to present the “texture” of California. Thus his series runs as chronologically as these episodes allow, focusing on particular shaping events, characters and situations throughout the history of the state with the aim of bringing the region to life whilst picking up on its nuances.

48 Starr, K. 1990. p. vii.

49 Starr, K. 1985. p. vii.

50 Starr, K. 1973. p. viii.

51 Starr, K. 1997. p. viii.

52 Starr, K. 1985. p. viii.

53 Starr, K. 2002. p. x.

54 Starr, K. 1973. p. vii.



Starr's project begins with *Americans and the California Dream*, a book concerned with the early settlement of the state from pre-annexation to the beginning of the twentieth century and the time prior to its boom in the 1920s. Unlike McWilliams, Starr does outline the circumstances of the settlement of California by the Americas, via the French, Spanish and Mexicans. Indeed he dedicates his whole first chapter to a detailed exposition of how the Americans came to own the region. One of the key reasons for starting his account by looking at the period just before the American settlement is Starr's belief that "no evocation of imaginative aspiration can atone for the burdens of the California past, especially the violence and the brutality."<sup>55</sup> This is a theme that Starr often points to in the books early in the series, not only acknowledging the violent past from which present day California emerged, but implying that it remains in the imaginative experience of the state. Interestingly this aspect of Starr's work – the reflection on the violence seated behind the ideal – hints at the larger theme of paradox that is a constant throughout the writings and understandings of the area: Los Angeles and California are ideals behind which is seated what Starr refers to as "a burden of violence and frustration and failure."<sup>56</sup>

California had always been "coveted by foreign visitors."<sup>57</sup> It was a possession of Spain, and then of Mexico before the Americans gained control of the territory in 1846, and both the French and English harboured aspirations to ownership. The potential of the land was clearly recognised by all who came across it, their imaginations being captured by the rich promise of prosperity signaled by the mission settlements and their fertile gardens. However, it was the Americans who managed to turn their tentative contacts into full occupation.<sup>58</sup> Despite the landscape's apparent fertility, Starr points out that many feared sterility due to the high aridity of the area.<sup>59</sup> The existing farming and the luscious mission gardens implied abundance, and yet the prevailing dryness of the summers and resulting poor soil quality meant that, as John Bidwell, an earlier settler, commented, "people generally look on it as the garden of the world, or the most desolate place of creation."<sup>60</sup> Thus Southern California reveals itself as paradoxical from the very beginning, with the landscape being the central component within the issue.

Starr ends his first chapter by asking the question that frames the whole of his chronicle; "what did all this hold for the future?"<sup>61</sup> Starr uses this point to highlight the importance of California as a frontier. He mentions in his preface that, "while barely a name on the map, it entered American awareness as a symbol of renewal. It was a final frontier: of geography and of expectation."<sup>62</sup> Having outlined the pre-American history of the region, Starr again points to this notion of the frontier, this time connecting it more firmly to its importance to the development of the national psyche: "as a concept and as an imaginative goal [...]"

55 Starr, K. 1973. p. viii.

56 Starr, K. 1973. p. 126.

57 Starr, K. 1973. p. 4.

58 Starr, K. 1973. p. 13.

59 Starr, K. 1973. p. 13.

60 Quoted in Starr, K. 1973. p. 13.

61 Starr, K. 1973. p. 46.

62 Starr, K. 1973. p. vii.

California showed the beginnings of becoming the cutting edge of the American dream. Geographically and psychologically, it was the ultimate frontier.<sup>63</sup> The ensuing expectations that rested on the region, is a theme that underlies all of Starr's books with varying degrees of explicitness.

Although the Gold Rush (1848-49) was geographically concentrated in the northern parts of California, its impact had implications for the whole of the state. Starr points to the affect of the situation on the temperament of the state for, "the energy of the Gold Rush, the thirst for excitement, and the habit of speculation remained part of [...] California."<sup>64</sup> Starr's belief that the early history of Southern California set up the social and imaginative development of the region in the decades to follow is again signaled in his writing about the these events. He implies that various characteristics of this period had broad implications that were carried through and became part of the general underlying ethos of Southern California and Los Angeles: "whatever else California was, good or bad, it was charged with human hope. It was linked imaginatively with the most compelling of American myths, the pursuit of happiness."<sup>65</sup> Here again emerges the theme of the region being inextricably linked with the American dream and the pursuit of happiness, illustrating that even during the very early states of development Southern California was held in specific regard by the psyche of not only its inhabitants, but the rest of the United States. As further investigation of not only Starr, but the following writers, will demonstrate, this connection seems to permeate every aspect of Southern Californian life.

The state of Californian itself promoted this impression during its early maturation, reinforcing its psychological impact. As Starr comments, "a fable was being put together, a means by which Californians sought to know – and sometimes to delude – themselves."<sup>66</sup> This need to rapidly construct its own identity, rather than wait for it to develop, seemed because, as Starr indicates, Southern California felt the pressure of its own future, the "sense of importance and glamour upon a remote undeveloped region, unsure of its status"<sup>67</sup> and under this pressure grew the myth that provided Californians with an element of stability.

One of the key reasons behind the Southern Californian need to create a sense of social and cultural stability, a clear sense of purpose and identity, was that the landscape around them was a continual reminder of instability, and, as Starr emphasizes, "it was invariably the landscape they inhabited that Californian's referred to when they wanted to describe who they were."<sup>68</sup> It is the importance of landscape to the construction of the region both architecturally and imaginatively that Starr is concerned with in relation to Southern Californian during the rest of *Americans and the California Dream*.

63 Starr, K. 1973. p. 46.

64 Starr, K. 1973. p. 67.

65 Starr, K. 1973. p. 68.

66 Starr, K. 1973. p. 120.

67 Starr, K. 1973. p. 126.

68 Starr, K. 1973. p. 207.

Starr refers to the writing of Josiah Royce, and the influence of landscape on the construction of the social and cultural character of Los Angeles and Southern California. Starr mentions Royce explored the way that;

environments give rise to specific ideal possibilities  
[...] which in turn reshape events and environments.  
This is never a fully conscious process [...] rather a  
subliminal awareness of what ideas are both possible  
and necessary.<sup>69</sup>

This is exactly the kind of reciprocal relationship that Californians had with their surroundings. As Starr comments, “from the start Californians were challenged by the landscape,<sup>70</sup> and so the ideals, events and consequences of the history of their region were subsequently difficult. The very landscape that brought them dramatically beautiful scenery, a perfect climate, the potential for successful crop production, and previously untapped land and resources also harboured aridity and the looming possibility of numerous natural disasters such as flooding, hot winds and earthquakes. Starr describes the relationship between the Californian landscape and its inhabitants as “[no] subtle drama, but a bold confrontation of flatland, mountain and valley.”<sup>71</sup> Southern Californians would always, across the centuries, be torn between a love and a fear of their habitat, and so the theme of the paradoxical nature of the landscape and the native’s response to and understanding of it is once again present.

However, despite the concerns about the landscape and the role of California within America that Starr presents, he ends his first work in the series, as McWilliams had also done, with an undeniably optimistic tone. He hints at it when discussing the relationship between the people and the landscape by suggesting that being “topographically spacious, California allowed for an expansion of personality as the self grew outward to fill the large vistas which the eye always possessed.”<sup>72</sup> He talks about the way the American dream was an inherent part of the state:

California provided a special context for the working-out  
of this aspiration, intensified, it, indeed gave it a probing,  
prophetic edge in which the good and evil of the American  
dream was sorted out and dramatized.<sup>73</sup>

69 Starr, K. 1973. p. 149.

70 Starr, K. 1973. p. 172

71 Starr, K. 1973. p. 172.

72 Starr, K. 1973. p. 173.

73 Starr, K. 1973. p. 444.

Although he goes on to refer to the “elusiveness (the failure, if you will)”<sup>74</sup> of the California dream there is a clear sense that Starr does not believe there to have been any failure at all, simply that the first volume of his series, focusing as it does on the pressure and uncertainty surrounding the new state, must remain apprehensive. Thus he ends his first work with the words “California remains an American hope.”<sup>75</sup> Allowing this hope to be carried on through the following volumes, perhaps, he seems to be implying, to reveal that the California dream is very much alive and well, and perhaps not so elusive after all.

As implied by this conclusion, Starr’s next work is aptly titled *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era*, suggesting that the California dream was not elusive or failed but still in the process of being worked out. In this work, Starr continues his exploration of social, imaginative and symbolic experiences as a way of forming a greater understanding of California and its importance to the United States and the psyche of America. His objective in this work is to explore “how certain Californians, Southern Californians especially, defined their region to themselves and to others in the 1850 – 1920 period.”<sup>76</sup> Starr emphasizes the fact that “few American regions have experienced accelerations and quantum leaps comparable to those experienced by Southern California”<sup>77</sup> and that due to a unique series of events, including booster spirit, eccentricity, Progressive reform, and the “finest weather on the planet,”<sup>78</sup> Southern California, “emerged a regional society that in its future developments and transformations would set national standards of American identity.”<sup>79</sup> Thus, Starr argues, the importance of Southern California is more than fleeting. Instead it is “fixed in the collective daydream of America,”<sup>80</sup> with Starr making a continuing investigation into how the particular identity and character of Southern California came about, and pervaded the rest of the nation. Having used his preface to re-instill the notion that a California dream did, and still does, exist, Starr goes on through the work to explore in more detail exactly how it was constructed.

Although Southern California was accepted into the union of the United States in 1850, Starr argues that there was little change brought by American occupation during the early stages. It was not until the decade of the 1880s, and the beginning of hotel construction that, according to Starr, the founding of Southern California really began.<sup>81</sup> During this period there was a price war between the various railroad companies that serviced the state. As this price war progressed between 1885 and 1889, the fare to the region became as low as fifteen dollars and people flooded to the area. This meant that by 1890 Los Angeles had grown by 500 per cent from 8,239 to 50,000 inhabitants.<sup>82</sup> After decades of what Starr refers to

74 Starr, K. 1973. p. 444.

75 Starr, K. 1973. p. 444.

76 Starr, K. 1985. p. viii.

77 Starr, K. 1985. p. viii.

78 Starr, K. 1985. p. viii.

79 Starr, K. 1985. p. viii.

80 Starr, K. 1985. p. viii.

81 Starr, K. 1985. p. 49.

82 Starr, K. 1985 pp. 13 and 49.

as “obscure lethargy,”<sup>83</sup> Southern California “was no longer a frontier, but a province awaiting the subtle and complex development of urbanization.”<sup>84</sup> Its population had multiplied fivefold in the space of a decade and so the urbanization was going to have to be dramatic in order to keep up with the needs of the new inhabitants. Due to the speed of the development, the metropolitan area in particular took on what Starr calls “an eclectic patchwork,”<sup>85</sup> as rapid building combined various styles and the new was thrown up next to the existing infrastructure. Despite the seemingly haphazard nature of the development, Starr comments that, “certain of [Los Angeles] larger buildings [...] proclaimed solid satisfaction with the present and confidence regarding the future”<sup>86</sup> demonstrating that as the region progressed and became more grounded, as it moved from provincial town to thriving metropolis, it was becoming more confident. Nestling inside this confidence was the belief in the pursuit of happiness and the possibility of a Californian dream that would encompass the American dream.

As Progressivism transformed the United States, moving it away from an agricultural society towards one of urban industrialism,<sup>87</sup> the American dream was about to become truly synonymous with Los Angeles, particularly through the emergence of Hollywood. As Starr points out, through a focus on director D.W Griffith, no matter how prolific was its east coast rival in film production, Los Angeles had the edge needed to capture and hold the industry. Starr comments that, “Southern California [...] possessed an affinity between medium and place that would soon attract the entire industry like a power magnet.”<sup>88</sup> Los Angeles held all the fragments needed for successful film production: good climate and any and every style of scenery. The social and imaginative structures were slowly developing, and now Hollywood had arrived to carry the images of Southern California all over the nation. As Starr illustrates, “questions of talent and art aside, industrial Hollywood created a new genre of Southern Californian, the Hollywood movie star, who in turn began to exercise enormous influence on the ways and means by which Americans defined their values and identities.”<sup>89</sup> Thus as Starr suggests in the title of his book, *Inventing the Dream*, the beginning of the 1920s had begun the task of inventing and perpetuating the American, now Californian, dream. As predicted, Starr is able to end his second work with a far more positive approach: “A sustaining connection, however, between Southern California and the dream of better days had been preserved; and this after all – the dream – had energized Southern California,”<sup>90</sup> and with this conclusion he can go on to investigate how the dream developed in the following works.

*Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* is Starr’s third work in the ongoing chronicle. As the title suggests, the focus in this work is to look at the way Southern Californians “acted out

83 Starr, K. 1985. p. 64.

84 Starr, K. 1985. p. 49.

85 Starr, K. 1985. p. 70.

86 Starr, K. 1985. p. 65.

87 Starr, K. 1985. p. 199.

88 Starr, K. 1985. p. 293.

89 Starr, K. 1985. p. 317.

90 Starr, K. 1985. p. 339.

in material forms their individual and collective aspirations.<sup>91</sup> The 1920s was the beginning of a more material age and Starr's focus reflects this. Similarly the advent of Hollywood and its growing cultural importance meant that Southern California was able to more intentionally construct its identity, and so Starr outlines his underlying theme as the "deliberately fashioned identity in this era."<sup>92</sup> This focus on the material aspects of the progression of the area makes *Material Dreams* more of a conventional history than Starr's previous writings, with emphasis given to infrastructural, architectural and cultural development. It seems that Starr may be concerned that the previous two volumes in the series did not dedicate enough to the literal, rather than the imaginative, account of Southern California. Since the 1920s was a period of such rapid development, it is now that Starr chooses to concentrate on the historical outline of the region.

Starr structures his work with this more conventional focus in mind, dedicating sections of the work to various topics that he sees as being at the heart of the structural development of Southern California. He begins by looking at the need for water throughout the region – how Southern California went about getting water and the implications this had on the irrigation of such an arid area. As Starr sees, the acquisition of water and irrigation of the region "bespoke a civilization enlivened by profound metaphors,"<sup>93</sup> and so it was paramount to the continued development of the region, not just in terms of having enough water to sustain its population, but also in relation to the perpetuation of its imaginative hold on the nation. Like McWilliams Starr draws on the Owens Valley project as symbolic of Los Angeles' belief that anything could and should be achieved to support its growth, and that despite the negative impact this would have on the landscape or the people occupying it, it sustained the image of California as the place where anything was achievable, specifically the American dream.

Starr reiterates this point with his sections exploring Los Angeles' development as a city. The 1920s was the boom decade of Southern California and every aspect of its society went into overdrive. Oil and water made Los Angeles the most prolific economic centre in the United States, and it was not just a city that was ready to support mechanical industry, but also the social, cultural and academic industries; the 1920s was the decade in which Hollywood truly settled in, and the University of Southern California thrived and took advantage of the growing metropolis. Perhaps at the core of Los Angeles' popularity was the fact that "doing the ordinary in an extraordinary way had long since become a recognizable signature of Southern California in both life-style and architecture."<sup>94</sup> The extraordinary had become a way of life in Los Angeles and Southern California and so there was a real sense of anything being possible, a notion central to the American dream and encapsulated by the state.

However, despite this triumphant beginning to the century, Southern California still retained a sense of underlying discomfort. Starr talks about the way that "Los Angelenos were always struggling

91 Starr, K. 1990, p. vii.

92 Starr, K. 1990. p. viii.

93 Starr, K. 1990. p. xi.

94 Starr, K. 1990. p. 218.

against a sense of emptiness, of void even, in their psychological relationship with the city.<sup>95</sup> The reason for this, he states is that they had “an inability to center themselves in the cityscape” which was caused by “underlying uneasiness as to whether or not Los Angeles was truly there in the first place.”<sup>96</sup> The myths that had been created by a city that, according to Starr, willed itself into existence,<sup>97</sup> coupled with its fragmented structure as an urban metropolis seemingly without a centre, were leaving its citizens with a very strange relationship with the city. Thus again emerges an apparent paradox: the inhabitants of Southern California, natives and tourists alike, loved the exciting fairy-tale life that it represented, and yet found that they were simultaneously left with a sense of uncertainty and emptiness.

In his epilogue, Starr raises the question as to why this uncertainty may have manifested, despite the wonders of culture, architecture and industry that were being achieved. He comments that, “it was one thing to materialize metaphors in the physical fabric of a civilization. It was another to reflect on what was being done and why.”<sup>98</sup> Starr goes on to speculate that Southern California was unable to produce a unifying body of articulated ideas.<sup>99</sup> This argument demonstrates the connection, that Starr has impressed throughout his volumes so far between the social and the imaginative in Southern California. The city was made up of sprawling suburbs, and as a result a series of centres developed rather than a unified whole; the imaginative responses reflected this condition and so, in turn, the citizens had difficulty in formulating connections imaginatively.

However, as Starr points out at the close of *Material Dreams*, there was no time for Southern California to address these disjunctions; the depression hit and Southern California needed to focus on maintaining the “materialized established sub/urban identity [that had become] the matrix of the California Dream.”<sup>100</sup> So Starr poses the question, ready for the start of the next volume, as to whether “the Great Depression could undermine what had been achieved” in the 1920s.<sup>101</sup>

*Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* attempts to show the depth of the depression not only on the state of California, but also on the nation. By the 1930s, California, and the Southern region in particular, had become so synonymous with the American dream and the hope of the United States, that how it coped and responded to the depression would carry across the national psyche. Although California had so many different resources, as Starr points out, “its good life, for those who had it, rested on such insubstantial foundations.”<sup>102</sup> Since the depression was so encompassing, Starr uses this book to focus on the whole state whilst trying to discern how the Californian dream would endure. However for the purposes of this section the focus will be placed on Starr’s accounts of Southern California and Los

95 Starr, K. 1990. p. 229.

96 Starr, K. 1990. p. 229.

97 Starr, K. 1990. p. 229.

98 Starr, K. 1990. p. 392.

99 Starr, K. 1990. p. 392.

100 Starr, K. 1990. p. 394.

101 Starr, K. 1990. p. xiv.

102 Starr, K. 1996. p. 57.

Angeles specifically, which concentrates on the mass migration into the region due to the events known as the Dust Bowl, a period in American history when severe drought hit the farmlands of the Mid-West causing mass migration of families to more fertile states in search of work.

One aspect of the depression that affected California, rather than the rest of the United States, was this sudden influx of migrants. In the lead up to the economic crash, California had been the most advertised state in America, with pamphlets being distributed all over the nation boasting about the affluent lifestyle, abundance of jobs and the yields of fruit and vegetables that the now irrigated and fertile land was able to produce. The result was that when the depression hit the farming communities of the mid-west states, people headed towards California hoping to start a new life. The reality was that the state had nowhere to put the new population and it “created a disaster in housing and health.”<sup>103</sup> By 1933, the middle of the first wave of migration, Starr points out that “scenes of incredible squalor and suffering soon pervaded the California countryside”<sup>104</sup> quite contrary to the affluence promised by the advertising.

One of the results of the mass influx of migrants was that Southern Californians began to fear for their way of life, especially as they were already seeing the defilement of their beautiful landscape with camps to house the immigrants. So, as Starr emphasizes, although the migrants were white Anglo-Americans, “they were regarded as a despised racial minority.”<sup>105</sup> The inhabitants of Los Angeles and California feared that their carefully constructed social and imaginative identity was about to collapse due to the Dust Bowl migration and so immediately became hostile to the migrants.

The resistance to the Dust Bowl migrants also demonstrates the paradoxical nature of Southern California: its planners and politicians promoted the region as a place with a need for people to work, where dreams could be realised, yet when faced with an influx of people desperate to work the jobs had already been filled and there was nowhere to house the new population. The California dream remained unattainable for the majority of residents of the area. Another outcome of the migration was that the social composition of Southern California inevitably changed, and as that changed so did imagination. As Starr comments, “already by 1940 [...] a new people, a new type of Californian, had its version of the California dream.”<sup>106</sup> However, this process took almost a decade, and the advent of the Second World War, to unfold. By the early 1940s migration was still taking place, but people were needed to fill the shipyards, the antagonism towards the “Okies” shifted to the American-Japanese, and the Dust Bowl migrants had assimilated themselves into Southern Californian society.<sup>107</sup>

103 Starr, K. 1996, p. 229.

104 Starr, K. 1996. p. 229.

105 Starr, K. 1996. p. 231.

106 Starr, K. 1996. p. 224.

107 Starr, K. 1996. p. 244.



As the depression waned, and the mass migration crisis came under control, the politicians and planners returned to wanting to define, develop and build the region's metropolitan identity.<sup>108</sup> It became apparent once again that water would be the key to the continuing development of the region and so the Hetch Hetchy Aqueduct and the Colorado River Projects were completed. These projects worked to bring water to California from sources out-of-state in order to irrigate land that would be otherwise too dry to build or farm. As Starr states, "once completed, these public works assured California its urban future"<sup>109</sup> and allowed Southern California and the growing metropolis of Los Angeles to continue expressing itself as a place of progress, growth and success, on every level: social, cultural and imaginative. Starr argues that, "if California were to reach its full potential [...] it would have to be physically adjusted, it would have to be rendered complete."<sup>110</sup> Starr's wording here – "adjusted", "rendered" – demonstrates on a subtle level the way that Southern California could not just evolve naturally, it had to fight against the landscape at every step of the way, right down to the necessity of having water to sustain its population. Similarly, Starr goes on to suggest that the area needed to complete "itself as a physical region."<sup>111</sup> This heightens the suggestion of Los Angeles and Southern California as somewhere that has always existed imaginatively, and has since had to struggle to construct its reality. Here again Starr's writing indicates evidence of a series of broader themes that emerge during discussion about, or understandings of, Southern California.

With this emphasis on the public works building programme that was going on at the close of the 1930s, Starr ends *Endangered Dreams* with a positive view of what has been and what is to come in the region, and so enters his next work, *The Dream Endures: California enters the 1940s*, in the same spirit. This next work overlaps somewhat with the previous volume, and does touch on certain things with relation to the depression and the 1930s, particularly Hollywood. However, this allows Starr to examine how "the creativity of pre-war California defined and broadcast a message of great social significance to the rest of the nation,"<sup>112</sup> using Southern California's build up to the Second World War, and the way that it emerged from the depression.

Again, at the beginning of *The Dream Endures*, Starr is keen to emphasize that, despite the depression, "a persistent quest for a place called California that existed, first and foremost, in the imagination"<sup>113</sup> was still dominant. Starr also points to the rise in the 1930s and 1940s of the prominence of the automobile, stating that it would become the "first premise and sustaining metaphor" of the region.<sup>114</sup> The importance of the car to Southern California was significant not only in the imaginative and metaphorical way that Starr describes, but also in a literal manner in the way that the area, and specifically metropolitan

108 Starr, K. 1996. p. 276.

109 Starr, K. 1996. p. 276.

110 Starr, K. 1996. p. 309.

111 Starr, K. 1996. p. 309.

112 Starr, K. 1997. p. vii.

113 Starr, K. 1997. p. 57.

114 Starr, K. 1997. p. 4.

Los Angeles, was directly affected in terms of planning: freeways were vital and suburbs were swallowed up and became part of the bounds of Los Angeles, perpetuating its urban sprawl. Also, other aspects of society adapted to the consequences of the car: hotels became motels, restaurants added drive-ins, parks for camping became trailer parks etc. Thus the Californian dream that Starr examines must also adapt to include this new significance that was encompassing all aspects of society, literally, emotionally and imaginatively.

It is here perhaps, during his discussion about the impact of the automobile, that Starr most obviously misses the opportunity to discuss one of the most significant features of the Californian dream: its necessary adaptability. Throughout his volumes, Starr is constantly demonstrating that, despite many circumstances that could have undermined the California Dream, it nonetheless endures. However, he never talks specifically about how this is possible, therefore seemingly ignoring one of the most important aspects of the dream: the way it has shifted and adapted to meet the changing circumstances of the region. Since the Californian dream is constructed from the imaginative response of the inhabitants, native and tourist, of Southern California and Los Angeles, the flexibility at its core is a reflection of that demonstrated by the population; a people who have learned to cope with unstable surroundings and the unstable history that evolved as a result. Therefore it seems strange that Starr doesn't mention this aspect of the California Dream in his chronicle. It may be that he is aiming to demonstrate it implicitly across his writings, but it seems that an open discussion would be more beneficial to understanding not only the California Dream, but also the relation between it, the people and the landscape of the area.

Returning to the issue of the car, Starr does focus on the way that the automobile was not simply a new way of negotiating the city; it was "a way of being."<sup>115</sup> This is a motif that occurs in many writers' imaginings of and responses to the city, as a following section of this chapter illustrates. As Starr points out, driving and the importance of the automobile were ways of "of relating to the city in social and psychological terms"<sup>116</sup> and so soon became entrenched in the Los Angelean imagination, and thus an integral part of the image of the city and Californian dream that was carried across the United States. What is interesting about Starr's approach to the relationship between Los Angeles and the automobile, is that he doesn't follow the belief that it was responsible for the "horizontalness of the city."<sup>117</sup> Instead he argues that the car was a logical progression of the horizontalness that was already written into the make up of the city by the "vast spaces of Spanish and Mexican land grants" and so it was a "bold and continuous progress of the Los Angeles plain between mountains and sea."<sup>118</sup> Therefore Starr suggests again that the past of the region continued to shape the development of Southern California, socially, imaginatively and in its use and response to technological progression.

115 Starr, K. 1997. p. 160.

116 Starr, K. 1997. p. 160.

117 Starr, K. 1997. p. 159.

118 Starr, K. 1997. p. 159.

Another aspect of Southern Californian development upon which Starr chooses to focus is the maturation of fiction. He argues that, “by the 1930s Californians interested in fiction were anticipating a golden age for the novel.”<sup>119</sup> The reason for this potential, Starr claims, was that “society was reaching the point of complexity that would generate better and better fiction.”<sup>120</sup> This is an intriguing observation for Starr to make; between the 1930s and 1940s, and specifically during the year 1939, many of the most widely known works about the area were written – *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, *The Day of the Locust* by Nathanael West, *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler, to name a few.

Whilst talking about fiction, Starr returns to the theme of landscape. He explains that “from the early nineteenth century Americans had been equating the power of their landscape and the noble experiment of their society with what they believed would be an equally impressive and inevitable literary result.”<sup>121</sup> This is a highly significant statement, not just in relation to Southern California’s landscape and its impact on literature – and vice versa – but also in relation to the general American approach to the connection between landscape, literature and national identity. Starr recognizes the strong interrelationship between landscape and identity. As his comment illustrates, Americans recognized the importance of their surroundings for the construction of their identity, and were expecting to see this reflected in the literary response to the period. Yet none of the great novels of the time were explicitly about the landscape of Southern California and the notion of it as the ultimate frontier. Nevertheless, the novelists’ responses to the landscape and its impact on them and the people and psyche of Southern California are a deeply rooted implicit aspect of their writings, as the later sections in this thesis about the fictional writing show. This illustrates the significance of landscape to the American identity, and specifically the strange topography of Southern California; it is at the subconscious heart of the fiction and is reflected in every aspect of the writing, characters, themes, structure and so on.

Starr illustrates this point more clearly by pointing to Edmund Wilson’s suggestion that “California writers avoided grand themes and literary structure in favour of an intense presentation of fragments of experience with an emphasis not on the dreams of society but upon the experiencing self.”<sup>122</sup> This statement holds a clue to the way the fictional response to Los Angeles and Southern California can reveal the subtleties in the human experience of, and response to, the landscape that surrounds them. The urban topology has been described as fragmented by numerous historians and theorists writing about the era and here, in the reflection on the author’s approach to their works, Starr, using Wilson, demonstrates how this can become an integral but subconscious part of the imagination of the inhabitants of the area: authors could not but help responding to their fragmented landscape in a fragmented way.

119 Starr, K. 1997. p. 285.

120 Starr, K. 1997. p. 285.

121 Starr, K. 1997. p. 286.

122 Starr, K. 1997. pp. 286-7.

It is with a discussion of fiction and a focus on particular writers that Starr ends *The Dream Endures*, talking specifically about immigrants, such as actress Marlene Dietrich and filmmaker Samuel Goldwyn, who, fleeing Hitler's Nazi Germany, found themselves in the totally different environment of Southern California. He comments on how they discovered a new home in California, bringing with them "not only their creativity but the rituals and protocols of daily life as they had known it before."<sup>123</sup> Therefore Southern California had to deal with a new set of inhabitants that affected not only the landscape, but also the identity of the region. Once again the Californian dream was showing its allure, but as a consequence would be subtly altered.

The repercussions of the 1930s and 1940s on the "inner landscape of California [...and its] shared social and imaginative identity"<sup>124</sup> is what Starr explores in the penultimate volume of his chronicle, *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace. 1940 – 1950*. He comments that the "pre-war ambitions of California had served [...] as only a prologue to what California now envisioned"<sup>125</sup> and that, despite the enormity of what the state had already achieved, or rather because of it, Californians wanted more of everything. As a result, Starr argues, all of America, Californian or otherwise, wanted to "see in California the possibilities for their own fulfillment and the creation of an even more challenging and paradigmatic American place."<sup>126</sup> This, according to Starr, was the expectation facing Southern California and the progression of the California Dream in the 1950s.

Starr focuses most of his attention in *Embattled Dreams* on California's rise as a military state, which is particularly pertinent in the Southern region because it was in this area that land was available for the building of military bases and factories. This concentration on the role of Southern California in the war allows Starr to outline two significant aspects of the region during this period: the increase in industrial military production, and the rising fear of the Japanese expressed by Californians. As the final frontier of the American west, California inevitably faced the Pacific, and thus also the threat of Japanese invasion. As the reality of war grew concrete, Californians prepared themselves in two ways: practically, with the construction of military bases, training centers and factories; and mentally, by finding an outlet for their fear through discrimination against Japanese-Americans. As Starr stresses, it was suggested at the time that Japan could and would declare war not on the United States, but California alone.<sup>127</sup> Southern California was not prepared to contemplate the possible attack on, and expected surrender of, its dream of the good life. Socially and imaginatively the region prepared itself to go to war.

Southern California, as Starr emphasizes in his early volumes of the *Americans and the California Dream* series, has long been linked to the military. As he reiterates here, it was through conquest that

123 Starr, K. 1997. p. 396.

124 Starr, K. 2002. p. x.

125 Starr, K. 2002. p. x.

126 Starr, K. 2002. pp. x – xi.

127 Starr, K. 2002. p. 49.

California was seized from Mexico, while a military administration oversaw the state until it was granted a place in the Union.<sup>128</sup> Therefore the establishment of military training camps did not have as dramatic impact as it might have had in other regions; instead it “recapitulated and reanimated California’s long involvement with the military.”<sup>129</sup> It had been an underlying aspect of the “inner landscape”<sup>130</sup> of California since its inception.

The growing need for military strength on the Pacific coast of America specifically affected the Southern region. Aircraft manufacture meant that it was placed at the centre of the national industrial network.<sup>131</sup> Starr comments that this allowed for Los Angeles to become “the Detroit of American aircraft.”<sup>132</sup> The “garrison state”<sup>133</sup> was reaching full maturity. Yet, despite the seeming confidence in California’s military ability, and the reputation this was promoting not only across the United States, but more importantly, across the Pacific to the Japanese, did little to calm the worry of a Japanese uprising in the cities. Starr states that by 1935 Los Angeles had a population of approximately 13,000 Japanese residents, mostly situated in the Little Tokyo district of Downtown.<sup>134</sup> This comment demonstrates two important aspects of Southern California, and Los Angeles in particular: firstly that the Californian dream had extended beyond Americans and, as the end of *The Dream Endures* highlighted, was now being embraced by people all over the world; secondly that these populations were creating and locating themselves within specifically outlined regions of the city, highlighting the notion of Los Angeles as a fragmented city. Rather than assimilate themselves with the native population and attempt to settle in existing neighbourhoods, the immigrants to Los Angeles chose to settle with their own communities and as a result took-over specific areas of the city as their own.

This sectioning of communities was not simply a choice, it was often subtly enforced by the existing inhabitants who did not wish to have migrants and immigrants settling down in the nice respectable neighbourhoods and spoiling the Southern Californian’s safe (predominantly white) and finally-achieved American dream. As the fear of the threat of the war in the Pacific grew, so did the animosity towards the Japanese-Americans. The latter become increasingly excluded, and being annexed in a specific area of the city they were easily targeted.

The paranoia about the non-white portions of Southern Californian society was not solely directed towards a “yellow fear” of the Japanese; Mexicans were also targeted. The increasing social anxiety about Mexicans reached a climax when servicemen on leave clashed with Mexican teenagers in what has come to be known as the “Zoot Suit Riots” – so called because of the style of suit worn by Mexican men, with wide lapels. The servicemen perceived these suits as a sign of disrespect to those serving in the war, a deliberate

128 Starr, K. 2002. p. 67.

129 Starr, K. 2002. p. 67.

130 Starr, K. 2002. p. x.

131 Starr, K. 2002. p. 153.

132 Starr, K. 2002. p. 153.

133 Starr, K. 2002. p. 67.

134 Starr, K. 2002. p. 53.

symbol of the Mexicans flaunting their civilian status and the potential threat of them dating American girls while the American men were away at war. Thus, when the servicemen confronted and fought with the Mexicans they would tear the suits.

These riots, along with the fear of the Japanese-Americans in Los Angeles, began to display a somewhat darker side to Los Angeles and Southern California that had previously lain hidden. The California dream was beginning to show itself as more complex and less idyllic than it had first appeared. Starr explores this aspect of the region through a discussion of how the *noir* aspects of Los Angeles found in literature and film were rooted in the harsh realities of life in the metropolis. Starr begins this investigation with the now famous “Black Dahlia” case, in which a young girl was brutally tortured and murdered in central Los Angeles. Although this was an exceptional case that resulted in much media coverage, he states that, by 1947, “Los Angeles had so many murders that approximately fifty of them – which is to say, at least half – warranted little more than a minor paragraph in the back pages of the newspaper.”<sup>135</sup> Similarly Starr comments that, “the war and post-war period produced more instances of assault with intent to commit murder, or mere felonious assaults, than murder itself.”<sup>136</sup> Starr links this, and the newspapers increasing love of spectacular scandal and crime,<sup>137</sup> to the rise of *noir* film and literature.

What is frustrating about Starr’s account of this underside of Los Angeles, seemingly the antithesis of the California Dream, is his lack of investigation into what may have brought about such conditions, aside from post-war increased paranoia. Indeed, although he dedicates several chapters to specific acts of violence that were taking place in Southern California, it is not something he dwells on in his concluding remarks. Instead he comments that although “tensions and ambiguities” would remain<sup>138</sup> “no matter: whatever the dangers, the dream was there, energizing California.”<sup>139</sup> It seems that Starr is reluctant to admit that the California Dream was increasingly becoming marred, socially and imaginatively by the realities of Los Angeles and Southern California.

Starr himself points to this tendency in the introduction to his final installment in the series *Coast of Dreams: A History of Contemporary California*.<sup>140</sup> Here he talks openly of how he had projected his own hopes and dreams onto California<sup>141</sup> and was now faced with the “inner struggle to find California – that radiant golden vision that I had glimpsed so powerfully as a young man – as being still worth the living, the writing, the struggle”<sup>142</sup> precisely because of the “grim realities”<sup>143</sup> that he now saw in the state. However, he remains optimistic, hoping that the period between 1997 and 2003 would actually reveal “not only the end of

135 Starr, K. 2002. p. 221.

136 Starr, K. 2002. p. 225.

137 Starr, K. 2002. p. 213.

138 Starr, K. 2002. p. 339.

139 Starr, K. 2002. p. 339.

140 Starr, K. 2004.

141 Starr, K. 2004. p. xii.

142 Starr, K. 2004. p. xii.

143 Starr, K. 2004. p. xi.

one California” as he fears, but “the beginning of another.”<sup>144</sup> Thus he begins his final volume again searching for the “imaginative dimensions of social experience”<sup>145</sup> that he hopes will demonstrate that his optimism and aspirations for the California Dream are not unfounded.

One of the key themes that Starr returns to in *Coast of Dreams* is the landscape of Southern California, both natural and constructed. As with the very first volume of his writings, Starr discusses the landscape’s impact on the social and psychological character of Los Angeles and the surrounding area. He reiterates that, “Americans had used architecture, gardening and landscape design to create California – especially Southern California, which was semi-arid and near treeless or outright desert – as a physical and imaginative place.”<sup>146</sup> Therefore both the constructed and natural landscape is an implicitly integral part of the identity and psyche of the area and its inhabitants.

What Starr then goes on to discuss, however, is the way that the result of construction in the Southern California region has caused the already inherently unstable landscape to become almost an active threat. Over-development of the once so seemingly attractive and abundant land has, in the late-twentieth and early-twenty first century, finally begun to show signs of repercussion. The concern about the landscape, Starr states, has gradually become more dominant in the Californian imagination, as the threat grows to become reality. Starr talks about the way that “within the context and atmosphere of such beauty, there also lurked a persistent insecurity that could [...] edge into active fear.”<sup>147</sup> Perhaps the worst aspect of this insecurity was that, as Starr points out, there was not just one thing to fear, but many: “the entire decade [1990s] had witnessed recurrent onslaughts of earthquakes, fire, flood and mudslide.”<sup>148</sup> These disasters were not just important due to the impact they had on the residents of the areas where they occurred, but because of broader implications across both Southern California and the United States.

Starr highlights the example of the months of January to March in 1998 when “the nation had been perceiving California through the repetitive and cumulative imagery of rainstorms, flash-floods, mudslides, accident-impacted freeways”<sup>149</sup> and the subsequent “blanket-wrapped refugees huddled in gymnasiums or beautiful California homes.”<sup>150</sup> These were not the images the United States expected to see, particularly from the Golden State, and as a result Southern Californians and Americans alike were having to reassess their formulation of the California dream to incorporate these new situations. It was not an easy task. As Starr states, “no longer could California be considered exempt from the life threatening possibilities of planet Earth.”<sup>151</sup> Instead Californians were having to “reassemble for themselves a new and more sophisticated

144 Starr, K. 2004. p. xiii.

145 Starr, K. 2004. p. xii.

146 Starr, K. 2004. p. 53.

147 Starr, K. 2004. p. 63.

148 Starr, K. 2004. p. 66.

149 Starr, K. 2004. p. 66.

150 Starr, K. 2004. p. 66.

151 Starr, K. 2004. p. 66.

identity.”<sup>152</sup> Due to the reciprocal relationship between Southern Californians and the landscape they occupied and were surrounded by this also meant, according to Starr, that they “were being challenged to evolve for themselves a much more complex and nuanced sense of place.”<sup>153</sup>

Although Starr likes to focus on particular events or people he still tends to do so on a relatively simplistic macro level. For example, whilst exploring the connotations of the increasing instances and impact of natural disasters in the region, he fails to comment on one crucial reason why it had such a dramatic effect on the overall response to the Californian (and American) dream: the landscape shifts were something that affected the affluent and poor without distinction. Starr ignores here, and elsewhere in his volumes, the micro issues, such as class or ethnicity<sup>154</sup> and thus fails to recognise one of the factors that is at the heart of why the threat to the Californian identity and dream was so significant. It is unlikely that such disasters would have been felt as such a threat to the imaginative construction of Southern California if they had only impacted upon the poor areas of the region and not, as Starr explicitly points out, the “beautiful California homes.”<sup>155</sup> The rich white homeowners of Southern California are the symbols of the successfully achieved California dream, not the poor ethnic groups in the inner city areas.

Starr moves from discussion of the increasing number of natural disasters and threats that the Southern Californian landscape seemed to be delivering to looking at how the suburbs of Greater Los Angeles were developing. He refers to urbanologist Charles Lockwood’s notion that a national trend was developing based on “Americans’ hunger for community”<sup>156</sup> which was borne out of their desire “to create a public realm, a sense of place and identity out of anonymous suburban sprawl.”<sup>157</sup> Los Angeles seems then an obvious place for this trend to exhibit itself most strongly, largely due to it being a city that had expanded to encompass the suburbs and towns around it, thus becoming the epitome of sprawl. Starr goes so far as to state that “sprawl overwhelmed and dissipated [...] and] pushed the physical fabric of the city beyond the ability of a dilated culture to hold social attachments and institutional loyalties together.”<sup>158</sup> It is no wonder then that Los Angeleans wanted to construct and embrace a new sense of community. Starr here refers to the notion of New Urbanism and the “desire to bring classic urban values to the suburb”<sup>159</sup> and the way that building in the metropolis began to change in order to reflect the new need for space that would breed a sense of coherence and community.

Starr not only demonstrate how the insecurity of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century filtered into the social experience of the region; he also points to the imaginative experience by turning to the

152 Starr, K. 2004. p. 66.

153 Starr, K. 2004. p. 66.

154 Although Starr does refer to certain ethnic or lower class groups in his work, such as the experiences of the Japanese or Mexicans outlined in *Embattled Dreams*, it is rarely to explore their experience of the California dream, instead it is used as an aside to his main argument about the vision of California being constructed.

155 Starr, K. 2004. p. 66.

156 Charles Lockwood, quoted in Starr, K. 2004. p. 316.

157 Lockwood, in: Starr, K 2004. p. 316.

158 Starr, K. 2004. p. 498.

159 Starr, K. 2004. p. 316.



literary responses to Los Angeles in the period. He argues that the apocalyptic vision of Los Angeles and the surrounding area had filtered through and somehow become part of the expected imaginative and social experience.<sup>160</sup> As a result:

Even the most casual survey of the Los Angeles novel during the 1990s would reveal such mayhem, degradation, dysfunctionality, perversion, marginalization, sadomasochism as the norm, not the exception.<sup>161</sup>

He also observes that detective fiction is the predominant genre of the period, and comments that these novels present Los Angeles as “a subterranean, disconnected city in which[...]only the detective had a chance of finding the truth, hence keeping the City of Angels marginally coherent.”<sup>162</sup> Starr’s tone here is slightly defensive, implying that these novels could not be relied upon to present a truth about the city. It highlights the view seen across the whole of Starr’s chronicle, namely that Los Angeles and Southern California must be considered in terms of one encompassing story or understanding, and that it could not, rather, be made up of a series of imaginings. This notion is then strengthened by Starr’s comment that due to the overwhelming amount of literature that presents Los Angeles as dysfunctional or marginalizing, “literary scholars will have their work cut out for them assessing the validity of the social and psychological critique at the core of Los Angeles.”<sup>163</sup> Again this statement implies that Starr believes there can only be one valid understanding of the region, rather than numerous understandings resulting from varying experiences, all simultaneously truthful.

All of this suggests that Starr is determined to maintain his optimism about Southern California despite the social and imaginative experiences that might suggest that this overly positive outlook is somewhat misguided, particularly considering the earlier focus on the growing profusion of natural disasters. It seems strange that Starr continues his overall concern with a totalizing view of Southern California, one grounded in hopefulness, given that, towards the end of *Coast of Dreams* he talks about the way that the city has formed itself into multiple identities and options.”<sup>164</sup> However, even with this acknowledgement of the changing nature of the city and region, and his concern that “the California of 1990-2003 had grown incredibly complex, competitive and cold compared to the dreamy lotus land that had once been imagined,”<sup>165</sup> Starr still refuses to let go of the idea that it is still the landscape of the American dream. He argues that the area has responded by becoming “a reality in search of a myth”<sup>166</sup> and argues that the

160 Starr, K. 2004. p. 126.

161 Starr, K. 2004. p. 476.

162 Starr, K. 2004. p. 477.

163 Starr, K. 2004. p. 476.

164 Starr, K. 2004. p. 558.

165 Starr, K. 2004. p. 629.

166 Starr, K. 2004. p. 629.

California dream has never been repudiated. Therefore Starr closes *Coast of Dreams*, and his seven book volume about the social and imaginative experience of California and its impact on the rest of the United States, with the same belief in the positive nature of the Californian dream and the region he believes it represents:

By 2003, if and when the United States wanted to see  
and know itself as a successful world commonwealth,  
an ecumenopolis, all it had to do was look to California  
as it remained the coast of dreams.<sup>167</sup>

At the conclusion of his work, and three decades of studying and chronicling Southern California, Starr maintains that the region has rapidly grown and developed to become not simply a success in itself, but synonymous with the success of America as a whole. Thus Starr, whilst writing about the Californian dream and hoping to provide a totalizing understanding of Southern California and Los Angeles, has, like McWilliams before him, become hypnotised by the very myth he was trying to unravel.

Both McWilliams and Starr were historians writing about Southern California from positions within it. McWilliams, although not a native, was at the heart of the artistic and political aspects of the region, whilst Starr was born in San Francisco and lived in California all his life. Therefore, their total immersion in the landscape – social, imaginative and cultural – cannot help but have affected how they comprehend and relate to the region. Thus it is understandable that neither Starr nor McWilliams can fully discard their belief in the idealistic myth of Southern California. Reyner Banham on the other hand, the final writer in this section to be considered as attempting to “normalize” Los Angeles and Southern California, is a British architectural historian. He is, as a result, approaching his study from a very different perspective than that of McWilliams and Starr.

### *Reyner Banham*

Although Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*<sup>168</sup> is concerned more directly with architecture than are the more general histories of McWilliams and Starr, he is still attempting to collate a normalized, totalized vision of Los Angeles. As Anthony Vidler outlines in his introduction to the 2000 edition, the book attempts to characterize the city in a unified sense.<sup>169</sup> Banham states that he is trying to present the architecture of the city within a broader topographical and historical context so as to present “the total artefact.”<sup>170</sup> Banham believes that previous studies of Los Angeles have failed to take into account that the structures that would seem unusual to any other architectural history, such as freeways and “pop

167 Starr, K. 2004. p. 631.

168 Banham, R. *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. Berkeley: University of California Press (UCP), 2000.

169 Anthony Vidler, as quoted in Banham, R. p. xvii.

170 Banham, R. p. 5.

ephemeridae,” are “crucial to the human ecologies and built environments of Los Angeles”<sup>171</sup> and therefore must be included alongside structures by named architects. Banham is thus outlining the notion that although Los Angeles can be comprehended as a unity, in order to do so it must be understood that things which might appear ‘abnormal’ (such as hamburger restaurants in the shape of hamburgers) are actually considered conventional in the city.

Banham also points to the extremes that have gone into shaping Los Angeles. He comments that, “no city has ever been produced by such an extraordinary mixture of geography, climate, economics, demography, mechanics and culture.”<sup>172</sup> This emphasizes again Banham’s view that any study of Los Angeles must take into account the fact that the unconventional is actually the conventional and that extremes are the norm.

Although Banham separates his study into four separate “ecologies,” the one of most interest here focuses on the freeways and driving, or what he refers to as “autopia.”<sup>173</sup> Banham argues that the language of Los Angeles is “the language of movement”<sup>174</sup> and that in order for him to “read” Los Angeles he had to learn to drive.<sup>175</sup> Clearly freeways, the car and driving are essential to Banham’s overall understanding of Los Angeles, and it is from this focus that his method for unifying the city emerges.

Banham argues that although it was water that Southern California needed in order to make it “a reasonable facsimile of Eden,”<sup>176</sup> this irrigated and fertile soil would have been of no use if no-one could have reached it. As a result, he states, “transport has been an obsession that grew into a way of life.”<sup>177</sup> Banham believes that the freeways that were built as a result of a need to reach the previously inaccessible areas of the city, or in response to an increasing growth of outlying suburbs, mean that; “all parts are equal and equally accessible from all other parts at once.”<sup>178</sup> This is a highly utopian view of what the freeways offer the citizens of Los Angeles. Although the freeways do provide access to the majority of areas in Greater Los Angeles and then Southern California, they cannot be expected to render different areas of the city as equal to others. Similarly, like many of the theorists who are interested in the automobile and Los Angeles (explored in the following section), Banham ignores the fact that the freeways only allow equality for those wealthy enough to own and maintain a car. Therefore the equality of the freeway cannot extend to the whole population.

Banham continues his discussion by pointing out that Los Angeles has embraced the automobile to such an extent that the drive-ins, parking lots and freeways are part of the fabric of the city. He believes that one of the reasons that these new features have not “wrecked” the city form is due to “the fact that Los

171 Banham, R. p. 4.

172 Banham, R. p. 6.

173 Banham, R. p. 195.

174 Banham, R. p. 5.

175 Banham, R. p. 5.

176 Banham, R. p. 13.

177 Banham, R. p. 13.

178 Banham, R. p. 18.

Angeles has no urban form at all in the commonly accepted sense.”<sup>179</sup> The little form that Los Angeles has as a city, Banham argues, is taken from modes of transportation and the development of land that built up as a result.<sup>180</sup> He states that these urban patterns predate the freeway and can be mapped according to “a deep palimpsest of earlier methods of moving about the basin.”<sup>181</sup> He therefore highlights that there was a sense of wholeness to Los Angeles, coming from the transport routes around the city: first the trolley cars, then the trains and finally the freeways. Banham also suggests that the subconscious unification offered by the freeways comes from the experience of driving:

The actual experience of driving on the freeways prints itself deeply on the conscious mind and unthinking reflexes. As you acquire the special skills involved, the Los Angeles freeways become a special way of being alive, which can be duplicated, in part, on other systems.<sup>182</sup>

The implication here is that the experience of the freeway is at the core of a person’s relating to Los Angeles, and that those who use the freeway automatically gain an understanding of the whole city whilst driving because of the way the road forces them to relate to the city. The extent of this role of the freeway is something to bear in mind in the following sections not only about the automobile and Los Angeles, but also during the different cartographic imaginings section.

Banham concludes *Los Angeles* by returning to the subject of landscape, the theme that seems to be part of almost all imaginings of Los Angeles or Southern California. He comments that, “Los Angeles cradles and embodies the most potent current version of the great Bourgeois vision of the good life in the tamed landscape.”<sup>183</sup> Interestingly Banham chooses not to mention the way that this “taming” of the landscape has resulted in it being even more volatile and susceptible to natural disasters. Instead he argues only that the “dream retains its power in spite of proneness to logical disproof,”<sup>184</sup> going on to talk about his “delight to drive down the last leg of Wilshire towards the sea.”<sup>185</sup> As with McWilliams and Starr, Banham ends his study of Los Angeles in celebration, thus disclosing how the Californian dream is able to capture natives and non-natives alike.

### **Traversing LA with Bottles and Brodsky**

179 Banham, R. p. 57.

180 Banham, R. p. 57.

181 Banham, R. p. 57.

182 Banham, R. p. 196.

183 Banham, R. p. 220.

184 Banham, R. p. 220.

185 Banham, R. p. 222.

As Banham's study has already emphasized, the freeway is an integral part of the Southern California landscape, and has thus inevitably become highly significant in shaping people's understanding of, and relation to, Los Angeles and the surrounding area.

Scott Bottles and David Brodsky are theorists who share a fascination with the role the freeway and the car have played in the construction of Los Angeles, both geographically and socio-culturally. Brodsky's writing is concerned with not simply the way the freeway changed the landscape, but how it influenced the "values"<sup>186</sup> of the region. Bottles' work however, is a conventional history of the freeway, during which he explores not only its introduction to the landscape and life of Southern California, but also the preceding transit systems and the potential impact these may have had on where and why the freeways were built. Despite their different approaches, the imaginings of Los Angeles by Brodsky and Bottles have both resulted from a relation with, and understanding of, the freeways and thus inevitably the car. It will be important to examine what broader themes their writing exposes, and how these themes might then carry across into other imaginings of Southern California.

#### *Scott L. Bottles*

In *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City*<sup>187</sup> Scott L Bottles uses a study of the emerging importance of the freeway and car in Los Angeles first to explore that region and then broadening his findings to other cities. He is essentially arguing that Los Angeles is no different to other urban centers, only that it decentralized earlier and to a greater extent.<sup>188</sup> Bottles suggests that Southern California was eager not to suffer from the crowded conditions found in other cities, and so "began to espouse the merits of decentralizing many of the urban functions traditionally found in the downtown area."<sup>189</sup> As a result, planners in Los Angeles saw themselves, according to Bottles, given the chance to design a new type of city, one in which the automobile had to become key if the city was to carry its ideals into the future.<sup>190</sup> Bottles seems to imply here, in his introduction, that it was the planners who were responsible for Los Angeles' reliance on the car. However, later he comments that "[c]ommuters and shoppers in Los Angeles began using their automobiles because fifteen years of inadequate street cars and interurban services finally convinced many citizens to seek alternative means of transportation."<sup>191</sup>

Here, Bottles suggests that the real reason behind the profusion of cars in Los Angeles, and subsequently the demand for freeways, is actually a combination of inadequate preceding transport networks and citizens choosing cars as an alternative. Therefore, the planners may have felt themselves to

186 Brodsky, D. p. 4.

187 Bottles, Scott L. *Los Angeles and the Automobile: The Making of the Modern City*. Berkeley: UCP, 1987

188 Bottles, SL. p.5.

189 Bottles, SL. p. 19.

190 Bottles, SL. p. 19.

191 Bottles, SL. p. 56.

be designing a new type of city, but really they were simply responding to the demands made of them by a series of interlinked circumstances.

One of the factors that lead to Los Angeles being a city ruled culturally and geographically by the car was, according to Bottles, the lack of a satisfactory public transit system, and it is this that forms the basis of all Bottles' conclusions about the freeways and automobiles in Southern California. He argues that it is not actually the freeways that dictated the geographic structure of the city and the resulting socio-cultural relationship with it held by inhabitants. Instead, says Bottles, it was the transport infrastructures that were already in place, and lacking, that impacted upon how the city was constructed. He begins by pointing to a study by Kelker and De Leuw that states that it was the lack of a rapid transit solution in Los Angeles that set it apart from other emerging metropolises.<sup>192</sup> In the early stages of Los Angeles' growth, the train services ran into the city through the outlying regions. As a result, people, wanting their own homes away from the bustle of the city, began to settle in the suburbs. The invention of the automobile made it even easier to reach areas further away from the city, and those not serviced by the public trains. The comfort and ease of owning a car, coupled with the inter-urban train systems running on specific limited routes and the expense and inconvenience of the trolley cars in the very centre of the city, made owning an automobile very attractive. After 1914, as Bottles describes, the purchasing of automobiles increased dramatically.<sup>193</sup> All of the above factors meant that a rapid-transit system across Los Angeles failed to become a feasible, self-sustaining, financially viable option for the city.<sup>194</sup>

Thus, in a small space of time, the automobile became seemingly the only option for the citizens of Los Angeles and the city had to adapt accordingly. Bottles comments: "Los Angeles after 1920 [...] began to develop several focal points. It was this transition from the centralized city to the multifocal urban structure that marked the arrival of the modern decentralized metropolis."<sup>195</sup> Fortunately, although Bottles argues that Los Angeles' decentralization does not mark it apart from other urban centers, he cannot ignore the fact that Southern California has become a region with much greater urban sprawl. He attributes this to the fact that "it did not emerge as a major urban area until the twentieth century."<sup>196</sup> He argues that because of the late development of Los Angeles the city was unable to create a "rigid, densely packed environment"<sup>197</sup> before the introduction of the automobile, thus resulting in "highly decentralized traffic patterns running throughout the suburbs."<sup>198</sup> Los Angeleans were able to use the freedom given to them by the car to take advantage of the vast expanses of previously unsettled land in the outlying regions of Los Angeles and so to settle as far away from the city as possible. Inevitably, as these region filled up, new inhabitants just pushed the

192 Bottles, SL. p. 129.

193 Bottles, SL. p. 56.

194 Bottles, SL. p. 129.

195 Bottles, SL. p. 206.

196 Bottles, SL. p. 252.

197 Bottles, SL. p. 252.

198 Bottles, SL. p. 252.

boundaries further into the countryside, causing the extensive urban sprawl now found around Greater Los Angeles and stretching across almost the entire Southern California region.

Two interrelated themes underlie Bottles' study: the importance of freedom (social and geographic) to Southern Californians, and the importance of the region's landscape. The migration away from the city to the suburbs demonstrates the tendency of Californians to need geographic freedom, particularly in light of the continuation of the trend to reside further and further outwards into the surrounding countryside. Similarly the desire to own an automobile and the lack of interest in rapid transit systems indicates a wish for personal space: the car meant that people could travel in comfort at their own leisure. This is also an issue on which David Brodsky's work picks up, thus showing its relevance not only in respect to Bottles' findings, but as a potential broader theme in relation to the impact of the car and freeway on the social imagination of Los Angelenos: landscape and its importance to the geographic and identity construction of Los Angeles. Bottles states that one of the things that the car, and subsequently the building of the freeways, produced was "the hope that [people] could bring control to their physical and economic environment."<sup>199</sup> This mention of needing control of the environment in Southern California returns to the underlying condition of the landscape being volatile and unpredictable: by building structures over and through it, allowing an easy flow of movement over potentially difficult terrain, the landscape appears tamed.

Therefore the cars and the freeway provide not only social and geographic freedom; they also lead to a feeling of escape from the potential dangers of the variable landscape. Bottles, however, due to focusing on a more conventional history of the automobile in Los Angeles, chooses not to explore these themes as they emerge in his work. Therefore he fails to recognise what makes Los Angeles so unique in its relationship to the car, and consequently as a city: the emotional and psychic impact this relationship has on the construction of the identities of the city's inhabitants.

#### *David Brodsky*

It is precisely the emotional and psychic impact of the freeways that David Brodsky focuses on in *LA Freeway: An Appreciative Essay*. He talks about the freeways being not only of importance "to the history of the region's spatial organization, but to the history of its values."<sup>200</sup> For Brodsky, the freeway is not only an "extensive system serving more than 1,000 square miles" it also "exists singularly in the local psyche."<sup>201</sup> To him, any understanding or imagining of the Southern Californian landscape and experience cannot be separated from the freeways. The freeway is not only deeply embedded in the Los Angelean psyche, but

199 Bottles, SL. p. 27.

200 Brodsky, D. p. 4.

201 Brodsky, D. p. 37.

holds, just as strongly, notions inherent in the American psyche. As Brodsky argues, “the LA freeway embodies a tension long present in American culture: the pastoral verses the technological.”<sup>202</sup>

In his essay, Brodsky simultaneously explores the way the freeway changed the landscape of Southern California, and the impact this had on the inhabitants. Brodsky believes that the “freeway system has also changed the way people think about the urban landscape.”<sup>203</sup> He comments on the decentered nature of Greater Los Angeles, yet, unlike some other theorists, he does not believe that the freeway is responsible for this, nor, more importantly, does he see this decentralization as a negative outcome of the rapid growth of the city. At least it is not negative due to the existence of the freeways, which provide the nexus of “a fluid system of exchanges” that integrates the suburbs.<sup>204</sup> He continues this line of thinking by arguing that, “[i]n an area of sprawling suburbanization and hundreds of randomly attached communities, the freeway serves to evoke a sense of clarity and sharpness, to delineate and integrate urban space.”<sup>205</sup> Therefore, instead of accepting the argument that the freeways and the car only serve to push the boundaries of the city further into the countryside, thus producing a more segmented metropolis, Brodsky advocates the freeways as a way of bringing order.

Again, as in the underlying themes of Bottles’ work, Brodsky touches on the notion that the freeway brings freedom. However, his discussion implies that people escape not only from geographic constraints, but also those of time and distance. He hints at the possible impact of the use of the freeways on interaction with temporality and spatiality: “who knows what changes occur with a growing irreverence for distance and an increasing impatience with time?”<sup>206</sup> Brodsky’s answer to this speculation is to suggest that “the individual mobility epitomized by the freeway frees us from the constraints of the locality.”<sup>207</sup> This supports his idea that the freeways have “created a new sense of place”<sup>208</sup> and that individuals must therefore change the way they relate to and understand the urban landscape. Although the landscape that Brodsky is concerned with is man-made, it still demonstrates the inherent link between the terrain of Southern California and the way the inhabitants relate to and understand it, and the subsequent impact this has on the construction of their own identity.

### **Mapping LA with Soja and Lynch**

As the previous section exploring the imaginings of Los Angeles through the automobile demonstrates, the freeways have helped to create both the literal and psychic space of the city. It is important therefore to follow on by exploring understandings of Greater Los Angeles grounded in cartographic imaginings. This

202 Brodsky, D. p. 4.

203 Brodsky, D. p. 23.

204 Brodsky, D. p. 23.

205 Brodsky, D. p. 23.

206 Brodsky, D. p. 33.

207 Brodsky, D. p. 33.

208 Brodsky, D. p. 23.



does not mean a simply looking at literal maps of the city of Los Angeles in order to determine its different areas; rather it involves exploring how theorists have examined different types of mapping – literal and emotional – that the inhabitants of Los Angeles construct as a result of their particular experience and understanding of the space of the city. Two theorists are particularly relevant: Edward Soja and Kevin Lynch.

### *Edward Soja*

Edward Soja has written extensively about Los Angeles, questioning whether the new type of space, which he sees as having been created there, should impact on how to understand, relate to and map the city. His overall project, across a number of books and essays, is to “spatialize historical narrative,”<sup>209</sup> and so to explore what he refers to as postmodern geographies. His aim with this theory is to bring about a reassertion of space in critical thinking so as to “create more critically revealing ways of looking at the combination of time and space, history and geography, period and region, sequence and simultaneity.”<sup>210</sup> Soja focuses closely, though not exclusively, on Los Angeles, often using the city as the basis for his “voyage of geographical exploration and discovery.”<sup>211</sup> Although his investigation is collated into three substantial works, the attention here is on his primary writings on Los Angeles, specifically his essays “It All Comes Together in Los Angeles” and “Taking Los Angeles Apart: Towards a Postmodern Geography” from *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*.<sup>212</sup> These two pieces set out his notion of postmodern geography through a critical focus on Los Angeles, thus presenting his particular cartographic imagining of the city.

One of the aspects of Los Angeles that Soja is interested in yet again highlights the paradoxical features of the city that many historians and theorists are drawn to and fascinated by. Soja comments that Los Angeles is a city “in which the micro and the macro, the idiographic and nomothetic, the concrete and the abstract can be seen simultaneously in an articulated and interactive combination.”<sup>213</sup> Soja goes on to argue that, “seemingly paradoxical but functionally interdependent juxtapositions are the epitomizing features of contemporary Los Angeles.”<sup>214</sup> Thus Soja explicitly states that it is the paradoxes that make Los Angeles what it is, and subsequently it follows that these paradoxes must also be at the core of the individual’s experience of the city and the identities constructed as a result of their interaction with it.

It is significant to point here to how the notion of simultaneity that Soja talks about (and which is at the heart of much of Los Angeles’ paradoxes) suggests a different way of relating to time and space. This is something that Brodsky has hinted at, and is particularly important here given Soja’s wish for a new spatialization of history that inherently suggests a new approach to temporality because of the link between

209 Soja, E. 1989. p. 1.

210 Soja, E. 1989. p. 2.

211 Soja, E. 1989, p. 8.

212 Soja, E. 1989. pp. 190 – 248.

213 Soja, E. 1989. p. 191.

214 Soja, E. 1989. p. 193.

the two. As Soja comments “Los Angeles [...] is difficult to grasp persuasively in a temporal narrative for it generates too many conflicting images.”<sup>215</sup> He continues by suggesting that the city is always “seeming to stretch laterally instead of unfolding sequentially.”<sup>216</sup>

Equally the city cannot be easily grasped spatially either, due to it seeming “limitless and constantly in motion.”<sup>217</sup> Therefore, Soja implies, the inhabitant of Los Angeles cannot be expected to map the city conventionally, because their experience cannot be considered conventional as the city doesn’t correspond to what might be considered the norm.

It is disappointing, however, that Soja’s focus throughout both his “It All Comes Together In Los Angeles” and “Taking Los Angeles Apart” essays, does not stay with the potential impact of the temporal and spatial singularity of the city. Instead, his emphasis is on the way that economic flux, industrialization and deindustrialization has impacted on the growth of the city. His cartographic exploration of the city is similarly conventional. He begins by choosing an area upon which he will focus, “defined by an embracing circle drawn sixty miles (about a hundred kilometers) out from the central point located in the downtown core of the City of Los Angeles.”<sup>218</sup> Here, Soja restricts the space of his study very specifically, something that doesn’t seem to cohere with his remarks about how the city is spatially challenging and free-associative.<sup>219</sup> He also chooses to delineate a central point in the city, despite stating that Los Angeles is constructed from “a shattered metro-sea of fragmented yet homogenized communities”<sup>220</sup> and is “an exemplary case of the decentralized urban/suburban growth”<sup>221</sup> which implies that no centre should be prioritized.

Soja ends both his essays with comments about how Los Angeles, despite its paradoxes and seeming singularity, can be used productively in the broader exploration of contemporary historic narrative. In “Taking Los Angeles Apart,” Soja argues that although Los Angeles has been “ignored for so long as aberrant, idiosyncratic or bizarrely exceptional” it has “more than any other place, become the paradigmatic window through which to see the last half of the twentieth century.”<sup>222</sup> He goes on to comment that Los Angeles holds “representations of spatiality and historicity” that are “archetypes of vividness, simultaneity, and interconnection.”<sup>223</sup> These statements demonstrate the paradoxes that lie at the heart of the city, showing that although Los Angeles is a city of decentered fragmentation it can still be used as an example – for Soja at least – of an overall whole: the “heterotopias of contemporary postmodern geographies”<sup>224</sup> that are present in other urban environments and thus demonstrate the need to reassert space in historical

215 Soja, E. 1989. p. 222.

216 Soja, E. 1989. p. 222.

217 Soja, E. 1989, p. 222.

218 Soja, E. 1989. p. 224.

219 Soja, E. 1989. p. 223.

220 Soja, E. 1989. p. 244.

221 Soja, E. 1989. p. 208.

222 Soja, E. 1989. p. 221.

223 Soja, E. 1989. p. 248.

224 Soja, E. 1989, p. 248

narrative. It is unfortunate, however, that Soja chooses not to explore in more detail how this postmodern geography is present in individuals' mappings and understanding of their surrounding urban environment.

### *Kevin Lynch*

Unlike Soja, Kevin Lynch's cartographic imagining of Los Angeles is indeed grounded in how the varying experiences of individuals within the city result in different literal mappings. His work *The Image of the City*<sup>225</sup> is concerned with how experiences, associations and perceptions affect how people relate psychically to their surroundings, and the impact this has on the "imageability" of various cities. As Lynch explains, his study, "[w]ill look for physical qualities which relate to the attributes of identity and structure in the mental image. This leads to the definition of what might be called *imageability*: that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer."<sup>226</sup> Lynch is therefore investigating the way that in different cities (in particular his study focuses on Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles) people's cartographic understanding can vary, but certain aspects of the city stand out and remain prevalent in any mapping. Lynch approached various different sections of society from the cities he studied and asked them to draw "cognitive maps" according to how they understand and relate to their urban environment in order to find the "imageability" and legibility of the areas he studied.

Lynch argues that, "nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings."<sup>227</sup> He goes on to explain that not only are "moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, [...] as important as the stationary parts" but that "most often, our perception of the city is not sustained, but rather partial, fragmentary."<sup>228</sup> This is particularly relevant for Los Angeles. As the imaginings already discussed in previous sections have begun to demonstrate, Los Angeles is already a fragmentary city whose citizens have played a very important part in both its social and imaginative construction. One of the things that Lynch is concerned with is the "legibility" of a cityscape. He believes that "a legible city would be one whose districts or landmarks, or pathways are easily identifiable and are easily grouped into an overall pattern."<sup>229</sup>

Lynch points out that although the centre of Los Angeles has distinctive buildings and is "heavily charged with meaning and activity,"<sup>230</sup> a number of factors mean that it has a "less sharp image"<sup>231</sup> than would be expected. He outlines three factors: firstly the decentralization of the metropolitan region means "the central area is still by courtesy "downtown", but there are several other basic cores by which people are

225 Lynch, K. *The Image of the City*. Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1960.

226 Lynch, K.. p. 9.

227 Lynch, K.. p. 1.

228 Lynch, K.. p. 2.

229 Lynch, K.. p. 3.

230 Lynch, K.. p. 33.

231 Lynch, K.. p. 33.

orientated;<sup>232</sup> secondly that the grid pattern in Los Angeles is “undifferentiated” and so “cannot always be located with confidence;”<sup>233</sup> finally; “central activities are spatially extended and shifting”<sup>234</sup> resulting in their impact not being as strong.

Despite these factors, Lynch’s investigation did highlight several locales that featured strongly in people’s mapping of Los Angeles, such as Pershing Square and Broadway.<sup>235</sup> However, people still had trouble with their precise location. Lynch comments, for example, that “for all its importance in the city image, Pershing Square seems to float a little.”<sup>236</sup> Similarly he found that “it is difficult to differentiate the numbered cross streets from one another”<sup>237</sup> and that varying regions of the city were associated with certain classes or ethnicities and thus, although locatable, they existed on the periphery or core of individual’s maps accordingly.

When asking the subjects he studied to describe the whole city, rather than sections of it, Lynch found that people used terms such as “spread-out,” “spacious,” “formless” and “without centers,”<sup>238</sup> thus confirming the view of Los Angeles as a decentralized or fragmented city. As Lynch comments, “Los Angeles seemed to be hard to envision or conceptualize as a whole.”<sup>239</sup> Lynch does not automatically denote this finding as negative. Instead he argues that it could have both positive and negative outcomes. It may “carry pleasant connotations of space” or it might hold “overtones of weariness and disorientation.”<sup>240</sup> Lynch then goes on to conclude his focus on Los Angeles by reiterating the notion demonstrated in the cognitive maps he has been working on, that “fluidity of the environment” is both “exciting” and “disturbing.”<sup>241</sup>

These statements are significant to the overall understandings and imaginings of Los Angeles for Lynch is the only theorist so far to explicitly suggest that the city could be simultaneously utopic and distopic, rather than insisting on one or the other. Even those such as Starr, who recognise the flaws in the city, still overwhelmingly focus on the dream and the positives that emerge from it. Significantly, similarly to Lynch, Soja’s suggestion that Los Angeles, despite being so decentered, can be used to demonstrate his theory that the importance of space should be accentuated in critical social theory, illustrates the way that what are traditionally viewed as disadvantages of the city are actually positive and constructive.

### *Politicizing LA with Davis*

232 Lynch, K. p. 33.

233 Lynch, K. p. 33.

234 Lynch, K. p. 33.

235 Lynch, K. pp. 36-37.

236 Lynch, K. p. 37.

237 Lynch, K. p. 38.

238 Lynch, K. p. 40.

239 Lynch, K. p. 40.

240 Lynch, K. p. 40.

241 Lynch, K. p. 45.

Whereas the previous section explored the geographic and cartographic fragmentation of the city, this section carries that theme into the social and psychic understandings of Los Angeles. Mike Davis' work in his book *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*<sup>242</sup> and his article "Chinatown, Part Two? The 'Internationalization' of Downtown Los Angeles"<sup>243</sup> both examine Los Angeles from a socio-political standpoint in an attempt to expose aspects of the city neglected by previous theorists and historians. Davis states that he is not interested in the cultural history of Los Angeles, instead he is concerned with "the history of culture produced *about* Los Angeles."<sup>244</sup> He is particularly focusing on where this "has become a material force in the city's actual evolution."<sup>245</sup> He is thus interested in the juxtaposition between the myth of Los Angeles and the reality, if and how these merge, and the underlying commodification of the city.

In the opening chapter of *City of Quartz* Davis explicitly states the way that Los Angeles "has come to play the double role of utopia *and* distopia for advanced capitalism."<sup>246</sup> For some it is a heaven that offers all sorts of social and cultural opportunities, whereas others see it as a hell with an unstable volatile landscape that is reflected in the society.<sup>247</sup> Although he is aware of both of these sides of Los Angeles, it is clear from the start of his work that he leans more towards the opinion that Los Angeles, and indeed Southern California, is dystopic. As early as page 27, when he is discussing the early history of the region, he states that:

[T]he mission aura of 'history and romance' was rated as an even more important attraction in selling Southern California than weather, or movie industry glamour[...]this capitalization[...]not only sublimated contemporary class struggle, but also censored and repressed from view, the actual plight of Alta California's descendents.<sup>248</sup>

This comment not only demonstrates Davis' view about the harsh reality beneath the California myth that was broadcast to the rest of the United States, it also subtly sets up the socio-political focus on class struggle, and subsequently power structures, that underlies the rest of the book. This becomes more strongly argued by Davis when he begins his more detailed exploration of aspects of the city. For example, he explicitly states that "political power in Southern California remains organized by great constellations of private capital, which, as elsewhere, act as the permanent government in local affairs."<sup>249</sup> It is with this

242 Davis, M. *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. London: Pimlico. 1990.

243 Davis, M. 'Chinatown, Part Two? The 'Internationalization' of Downtown Los Angeles', *New Left Review*. No. 164. July-August 1987, pp 65-86.

244 Davis, M. 1990. p. 20.

245 Davis, M. 1990. p. 20.

246 Davis, M. 1990. p. 18.

247 Davis, M. 1990. p. 18.

248 Davis, M. 1990. p. 27.

249 Davis, M. 1990. p. 102.

animosity for private capital and scepticism about the infrastructure that has been put in place as a result that Davis continues his study of Los Angeles.

It is during chapter four, "Fortress LA," that Davis' argument about the manipulation of space in the city is most explicit. He begins this chapter by talking about the way an "obsession with physical security systems"<sup>250</sup> was one of the key trends in building in Los Angeles in the 1990s. This was so eminent that Davis comments on the "unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture and the police apparatus into a single comprehensive security effort."<sup>251</sup> At the heart of this fixation on security, according to Davis, is not safety, but rather insulation from 'unsavory' groups.<sup>252</sup> Not only does this lead to segregation, but the increasing destruction of public space,<sup>253</sup> meaning that the once democratic space of Los Angeles is slowly disappearing.

Davis, like Soja, also refers to Los Angeles as a possible example of broader trends in urbanisation, with its extremities highlighting the trend more explicitly. Davis is concerned with how Los Angeles demonstrates the "emergent liaisons between architecture and the American police state,"<sup>254</sup> and states that the most obvious impact this has had on the public spaces of the city, other than ensuring there are fewer of them, is that it has made racial integration very difficult. He argues that the concern for security, both public and private, has come primarily from the white middle and upper-middle classes.<sup>255</sup> As a result, other ethnic and class groups become segregated into annexed areas of the city and are made to feel uncomfortable if they venture into other neighbourhoods. It is this formation that is central to Davis' understanding of Los Angeles and the imaginings he reveals in his writing: Los Angeles must be made up of dramatically varying understandings of the city and its space because it is not equally available to all. Therefore, according to Davis, different ethnic and class groups not only experience and relate to the city in different ways, they literally have access to different spaces because of the influence of the affluent white citizens.

Davis explores similar issues of spatial segregation in his 1987 essay "Chinatown, Part Two? The 'Internationalization' of Downtown Los Angeles."<sup>256</sup> During this essay, however, Davis focuses on how the economic development of Los Angeles has affected its spatial development as well as the social evolution of the region. Davis is concerned with the large working class low-wage earning group that is situated in Downtown Los Angeles, and comments that this group has "created its own spatialized social world"<sup>257</sup> yet remains largely ignored in the history of theory about the area.

250 Davis, M. 1990. p. 223.

251 Davis, M. 1990. p. 224.

252 Davis, M. 1990. p. 224.

253 Davis, M. 1990. p. 226.

254 Davis, M. 1990. p. 228.

255 Davis, M. 1990. p. 244.

256 Davis, M. 1987, pp 65-86.

257 Davis, M. 1987. p. 67.

Again, the issue of the contradictory juxtapositions within Los Angeles is present, with Davis explaining that the Downtown area of the city has increased its high-rise building without considering the need for residential spaces. Thus “commercial overbuilding produces rampant underhousing.”<sup>258</sup> This increase in commercial building in the Downtown area also produced mass problems with transit, especially as the car became the increasingly popular mode in which to travel to work. As a result traffic gridlocked and forced business, and those residents affluent enough to afford it, to move further out of the city, leaving behind the low-wage earning population. Davis points out that, unlike other cities, “Los Angeles makes no contribution from the general city revenue for social programmes for the poor and relies [...] entirely on federal or county intervention.”<sup>259</sup> By concentrating public revenue on financial services and commercial progression, the city has only “accelerated the deterioration of socio-economic conditions for citizen workers of color” and the other working-class minorities of Los Angeles.<sup>260</sup>

Davis ends his essay by pointing out that the continual market-driven interest in the internationalization of the metropolitan economy and the laws and policies produced in response to it, coupled with a refusal to invest in areas typically seen as occupied by the poor sections of society, and thus without need of renovation, has a ripple affect on the city as a whole. Therefore a problem that was once confined to the inner city and the low-wage earning section of society begins to move outward: as Davis emphasizes, the continued priority of the wealthy has “ensured an erosion of the quality of life for the suburban middle-classes as well as for the inner-city poor.”<sup>261</sup> Eventually, he argues, the rich are going to have to reassess the consequences of an obsessive economic over-development.

The significant aspect of this essay in relation to the spatial imaginings of Los Angeles is the way that Davis again highlights that the areas occupied by different groups in society are quite explicitly separated, and that this is not simply the result of town planning, but also of socio-economic and political choices in the development and progress of the city. As in *City of Quartz*, this demonstrates the way that inhabitants of Los Angeles cannot help but relate to and understand the city in varying ways because often the spaces they occupy are vastly different. Therefore the underlying notion within both of Davis’ pieces, that the myth about Los Angeles is not actually representative of the city is evident; some people may experience the Californian dream of prosperity and affluence, but they physically occupy a different space in the city, and thus gain a different imaginative as well as spatial experience.

### **Mythologizing LA with May**

258 Davis, M. 1987. p. 68.

259 Davis, M. 1987. p. 74.

260 Davis, M. 1987. p. 75.

261 Davis, M. 1987. p. 80.

The mythology of Los Angeles, and of California more generally, is the overall subject in Kirse Granat May's book *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture 1955-1966*.<sup>262</sup> She explores the way that the image presented by the youth-centered culture in California in the '50s and '60s carried across the United States, and the way it successfully created "an image to which millions of teenagers could respond."<sup>263</sup> These images of the youth culture in California, according to May, were able to temporarily distract the nation from issues such as civil rights by sending a prevailing message of prosperity and contentment. The image presented of the California youth culture was, as May points out, not very representative of the statewide experience, and she comments that "the popular culture representation of Los Angeles youth was marked by its exclusion of minorities."<sup>264</sup> Instead the California teen icon was of "a white, middle-class version of the American dream."<sup>265</sup> It is the creation of this myth, and its "brief strength and saliency," which May explores.<sup>266</sup>

One of the prevailing aspects of the teen culture that was broadcast from California (and from the southern region especially) was the way in which it was situated not downtown, but in the suburbs, and as a result "the suburbs of California became part of the iconography of America."<sup>267</sup> This meant that the car was a focal point of any aspect of the teenage culture. To be free from the restraints of parents, Californian teenagers, based in the suburbs, had to have control of their own movement. Thus the car became integral to their social and cultural lives, and subsequently further imbedded not only in the psyche of Los Angeles and Southern California, but the rest of America: the nation's teenagers aspired to the teen version of the American dream that was emanating from California, and so yearned for the same things: the same commodities, the escape from parental control, the same right of movement, whether they lived in the suburbs or not. One of the most interesting parts of May's discussion is her consideration of the rise of beach culture across even landlocked states. Surfing and hanging out at the beach, listening to bands such as the Beach Boys, became an integral part of the life of a California teenager. As these images were projected across America, teenagers began wearing beach clothing and carrying surfboards on the racks of their cars. They had no beach to actually go to, but wanted to emulate the attitude and lifestyle as closely as possible. This demonstrates just how strongly the images of Californian youth culture penetrated the minds of other American teenagers.

May recognizes that one of the most influential factors in determining how California's place at the heart of the American dream was cast into the national psyche was Disney. She explains that the rise of Disney, and in particular Disneyland and the advertising and television programming that grew from it, had a

262 May, K.G. *Golden State, Golden Youth: The California Image in Popular Culture 1955 – 1966*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2002.

263 May, K.G. p. 6.

264 May, K.G. p. 25.

265 May, K.G. p. 8.

266 May, K.G. p. 8.

267 May, K.G. p. 18.



dramatic impact on what was presented to children across the United States. As May comments, not only was Disneyland “a celebration of the American dream”<sup>268</sup>; it also aimed to be “every city in American, a replica that was ‘just like your hometown.’”<sup>269</sup> Disneyland also held a very important and singular aspect: “a geographical location uniquely suited to foster those hopes [presented by the American dream].”<sup>270</sup> May goes on to state that the relationship between Disneyland, California and the American dream was one of complex reciprocation: “in a state portrayed as the fulfillment of that dream, California mirrored its new theme park.”<sup>271</sup> Without the landscape and the images and metaphors of the American dream that came with it, Disneyland wouldn’t have been as successful, and yet, without Disneyland, California would not have been able to perpetuate the American dream as effectively.

Disneyland also embodies another aspect of the American dream that had been cemented in the settlement and development of Southern California: the love of continual progress. As May points out, “Disney took pride in the idea of a continually unfinished project forever being redesigned and rethought,”<sup>272</sup> similar to the way that both the metropolitan area of Los Angeles and the suburbs were continually developing and changing. However, Disney did have an interesting impact on people’s geographic identification and understanding of the Southern Californian landscape. May quotes a survey from a 1965 article about the theme parks place in the American psyche. It states that most visitors to California were only there to visit the park. May argues that this shows both the impact of the park on the psyche of the nation and a narrowing of the conception of what California had to offer as a state for tourists.<sup>273</sup> She states that, “the mental maps of most Americans in the East would show the park as taking up ‘most of the territory west of the Mississippi.’”<sup>274</sup> Thus May illustrates that the park was understood as being large not just metaphorically, but also literally and geographically, presenting the notion of Disneyland, and subsequently that area of Southern California as having been merged into one.

May ends her study by suggesting that although “California played a central role in the American ideology, conditioning the nation to see life in the state as ‘better than real,’”<sup>275</sup> the impression of this conditioning can only last for a limited period. May suggests that “by the end of the 1960s California represented a cautionary tale instead of a fairytale promise,”<sup>276</sup> and she points to the way that the spotlight on California that was created by the impact of its youth culture on the rest of the nation would inevitably illuminate the bad as well as the good. So, in the 1960s the social disruptions in California became national

268 May, K.G. p. 39.

269 May, K.G. p. 36.

270 May, K.G. p. 39.

271 May, K.G. p. 39.

272 May, K.G. p. 40.

273 May, K.G. p. 44.

274 May, K.G. p. 44.

275 May, K.G. p. 186.

276 May, K.G. p. 189.

concerns and resulted in “a flood of anti-California skepticism.”<sup>277</sup> Thus, according to May, “California lost its identity as a baby boom paradise, becoming instead a catchphrase for the nation’s modern troubles and the youth showplace of racial rioting, drug use and campus upheaval.”<sup>278</sup> This time, May’s writing seems to suggest, the impressions of the state seemed to work reflexively, and so the image being presented to the rest of the United States became the myth that Californians began to believe as true. May comments that, “anxiety about earthquakes in the Golden State spawned religious and astrological predictions of doomsday.”<sup>279</sup> This presents an interesting point that will be followed up not only in the next section, but also in terms of the broader themes relating to Los Angeles and Southern California: perhaps the contemporary mythology of the state has become a self-fulfilling negative image that the region cannot help but perpetuate by believing?

### **Destroying LA with Davis and Reisner**

As suggested in the works of May and Starr, amongst others, there is an increasing trend in the contemporary history, experience and imaginings of Los Angeles and Southern California towards a negative mythology of destruction and chaos. This tendency comes not only as a response to the natural and constructed landscape, but also to socio-cultural aspects of the region as demonstrated by Davis’ writing in *City of Quartz* about the increasing focus on the need for more and more evident and strict security across the urban regions in order to bring about feelings of stability. It can be argued that the socio-cultural level of insecurity and fear of chaos is rooted in the experience of landscape in the Southern California area; it is, as has already been explained, an exceptional region of mixed terrain that is susceptible to natural disasters such as earthquakes, and has become prone to other disasters, such as mudslides and fires due to the rapid man-made enforced changes to the landscapes.

This section examines the imaginings of Los Angeles by Mike Davis and Marc Reisner that are grounded in the destructive elements of both the natural and constructed landscape, and the implications this has for both the social and topographical experiences and understandings of the region by its inhabitants. Mike Davis’ *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*<sup>280</sup> looks at the political history of the way that “cataclysm has become virtually routine”<sup>281</sup> in Los Angeles, and how this affects not only the inhabitants of the city, but the views of people outside the region as well as how it has influenced the California dream for the rest of the United States. Marc Reisner’s work in *A Dangerous Place: California’s Unsettling Fate*<sup>282</sup> explores how the historical development of the land throughout California has helped to create a place vulnerable to earthquakes and flooding. Significantly, his book is not simply a

277 May, K.G. p. 189.

278 May, K.G. p. 190.

279 May, K.G. p. 189.

280 Davis, M. *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. London: Picador, 2000.

281 Davis, M. 2000. p. 7.

282 Reisner, M. *A Dangerous Place: California’s Unsettling Fate*. New York: Penguin, 2003.

factual report; instead in the second half of the book he turns to writing a fictional account of what would happen should a large earthquake strike in the modern Bay Area of San Francisco. This is an intriguing way to present the circumstances described during the first part of the book, and is something that will be returned to during the investigation of his work.

### *Mike Davis*

In *Ecology of Fear* Davis is concerned with the way that disaster has infiltrated the everyday social, political and cultural life of Southern California. He points immediately to the landscape being topographically complex, and that this leads to what Stephen Pyne refers to as “a complex geographic life.”<sup>283</sup> Therefore, Davis argues, the tendency towards natural disasters and topographical shifts has always been an inherent part of the experience of the region. In addition to this, the construction and development of the Southern California area for habitation and industry has only increased the vulnerability of the landscape. Davis comments outright that “the ‘peaceful’ land of sunshine is park fluke, part myth,”<sup>284</sup> it is an atypical geography and so the relationship with it must also be atypical.

One aspect of the disasters in the area that Davis points to is their coincidence with specific economic phases. He comments that the “tempo of actual disaster [...] has been oddly attuned to the business cycle. All the major twentieth-century floods and earthquakes have coincided with recession or slow-growth years.”<sup>285</sup> Although this can be no more than chance, Davis, as in *City of Quartz*, makes the connection between the need for reassurance and the response in construction of the built environment: “nothing would bolster the confidence of residents and investors as much as dramatic improvement in the stability and safety of the built environment.”<sup>286</sup> This again demonstrates the connection between the wish for a stable natural environment and the obsession with safety and security in neighbourhood and house construction. The tendency towards disaster is embedded so deep in the psyche of the residents of Los Angeles and Southern California that it manifests itself in all aspects of their lives.

One of Davis’ main concerns throughout *Ecology of Fear* is the way that “cataclysm has become virtually routine”<sup>287</sup> and has affected the impression of Los Angeles that is broadcast outside the city. He explores this largely by investigating the fiction being produced in and about Los Angeles. Davis points out that “the destruction of Los Angeles has been a central theme or image in at least 138 novels and films since 1909.”<sup>288</sup> This is indeed a remarkable fact that suggests that the prevailing images of Los Angeles throughout its modern history have been the paradoxically juxtaposed dream of success and nightmare of apocalypse.

283 Davis, M. 2000. p. 19.

284 Davis, M. 2000. p. 25.

285 Davis, M. 2000. p. 38.

286 Davis, M. 2000. p. 39.

287 Davis, M. 2000. p. 7.

288 Davis, M. 2000. p. 276.

It is the paradox within the nature of the fictional destruction of Los Angeles that Davis turns to next. He highlights that what is unique about the city lies not “in the frequency of its fictional destruction, but in the pleasure that such apocalypses provide to readers and movie audiences.”<sup>289</sup> He goes on to say that everyone seems to be “rooting for Los Angeles to slide into the Pacific or be swallowed by the San Andreas Fault.”<sup>290</sup> This is not a propensity that can be linked to any other metropolitan area: there is a distinct relish in the obliteration of this particular region, Southern California. As Davis points out “no city, in fiction or film, has been more likely to feature as the icon of a really bad future.”<sup>291</sup> Fate has become so embedded in the Southern Californian – even American – psyche that there is a distinct sense of inevitability about the disasters that occur in, or are created for, Los Angeles.

The theme of disaster is so prevalent in the thinking about Los Angeles and Southern California that Davis argues that it is shifting in its cultural position from an initial negative to, if not a prevailing positive, then at least a potential asset:

Many of the city’s best writers [...] have exploited catastrophe to fashion alternative Los Angeleses with surreal topographies, genders and futures. Cataclysm, usually without racial subtitles, allows them to shape fantastic physical and psychic landscapes out of old clichés.<sup>292</sup>

Thus, Davis suggests, Los Angeles, in the wake of disaster, does what it has always done best, it reinvents itself, turning a negative into a (in this case even profitable) positive. As Davis concludes: “the city that once hallucinated itself as an endless future without natural limits or social constraints now dazzles observers with the eerie beauty of an erupting volcano.”<sup>293</sup> However, this is what occurs within fiction. As Marc Reisner’s work will point out, reality is not so easily reconstructed.

#### *Marc Reisner*

Marc Reisner’s work *A Dangerous Place: California’s Unsettling Fate* looks at the way the development of California has increased its chances of suffering a major catastrophe such as an earthquake. He starts by presenting an historical account of the region’s progression, with an emphasis on how the already volatile landscape was manipulated by planners and developers to such an extent that disasters are now inevitable. He combines this with an investigation into the development of architectural defenses against earthquake damage and the progresses in science that have allowed the patterns of earthquakes in the area to be

289 Davis, M. 2000. pp. 276-7.

290 Davis, M. 2000. pp. 276-7

291 Davis, M. 2000. p. 279.

292 Davis, M. 2000. p. 331.

293 Davis, M. 2000. p. 422.

revealed, and become subsequently predictable. Reisner then goes on to demonstrate, using a fictional account, what the effects would be of a major earthquake in the Bay Area of San Francisco.

Reisner begins his work with the statement that all of the inhabitants of California “have settled, and will continue to settle, where they shouldn’t have.”<sup>294</sup> He argues that this is the most striking thing about the region; not that it has managed to develop so successfully and rapidly, but that it has done so whilst ignoring the inevitable dangers of any development in such a topographically unstable landscape. He continues by outlining the social and economic accomplishment of the state, only to juxtapose this suddenly against the knowledge that “the real estate and public infrastructure that’s on top of California’s major fault zones is valued in trillions of dollars.”<sup>295</sup> To highlight the potential consequences of this even further he states that “the economic loss from the next great earthquake [...] might surpass the ten most expensive disasters in the United States history – might surpass all of them *combined*.”<sup>296</sup> From this dramatic opening, Reisner goes on to recount the major instances throughout Californian history that highlight hurdles in development that should have warned the planners about the dangers of large-scale industrial and domestic construction. For example, he focuses at one point on the Bay Area in San Francisco, which has been constructed by filling in areas of shoreline with earth and then building on top, without any consideration for how this might hold in the event of an earthquake. As Reisner points out, “if the shaking is strong enough, trillions of soil particles lose their cohesiveness. Water within loose sandy soils increases in pressure, to the point where soil particles begin to float and the land liquefies.”<sup>297</sup> Thus the whole area could one day just disappear into the sands.

Reisner continues his investigation by moving away from architectural consequences, and returning to the actual topographical make-up of the state and the potential future seismic activity that could occur. He points out that it is not the size of the fault line that is of concern, but how densely populated is the area along it. The San Andreas fault, for example, runs for 700 miles in California, yet threatens very few of the population.<sup>298</sup> The Hayward fault however is, according to the California Office of Emergency Services, “probably the most built upon fault in the world”<sup>299</sup> and so holds the potential to do an immense amount of damage in relation to its size. Not only does the Hayward fault cross multiple densely populated areas, it also runs through areas of industrial density meaning even a small quake risks huge toxic chemical spillage.<sup>300</sup>

From this Reisner, looks at earthquake patterns over the entire history of California’s development and following even the faintest shift in the fault lines, are attempting to predict when earthquakes may strike,

294 Reisner, M. p. 3.

295 Reisner, M. p. 5.

296 Reisner, M. pp. 5-6. Italics original.

297 Reisner, M. p. 48.

298 Reisner, M. pp. 91-92.

299 Reisner, M. p. 91.

300 Reisner, M. pp. 92-93

and in turn produce “scenarios” related to the impact of possible disasters.<sup>301</sup> Using these combinations of information Reisner decides to end his book by taking the “leap into fictional reality, leaning on expert opinion, but helping [himself] to literary liberty”<sup>302</sup> in order to produce a fictional account of what might result from a major earthquake occurring in February of 2005. What follows is a detailed first person perspective description of the architectural, social and cultural impact of an earthquake in Northern California, not simply considering the immediate impact, but the repercussions years into the future. It follows the Marc Reisner “character” as he initially attempts to get through to his wife and his children, then his impression of the city, outrage that the authorities had not attempted to preempt the consequences geographic, social and infrastructural, and the horror and resignation as the events sink in. He closes his account by wondering how the rest of America would respond to the magnitude of the repercussions of an earthquake such as the one described, particularly considering “the billions and billions of dollars [that] will also come from American taxpayers living elsewhere.”<sup>303</sup> The conclusion he comes to, and the sentiment with which he ends his account, and the book is, “give California nationhood. Saw it off from the rest of the United States [...] that’s what they must be thinking [...] where blizzards are the worst thing to come around.”<sup>304</sup> The suggestion here is that there is no hope for California, that damage cannot be reversed and so the state must just be resigned to its fate.

## **Conclusion**

The discussion above illustrates the variety of approaches that have been taken to produce a theoretical or historical understanding of the city of Los Angeles, and the cultural iconography that surrounds it. These approaches can be roughly grouped according to the form of imagining they take in response to the landscape.

McWilliams, Starr and Banham all try to make sense of the fragmented landscape of Los Angeles. They attempt, largely through historical narratives, to piece together the city according to its development, be that historically and culturally as in the case of McWilliams and Starr, or architecturally in the case of Banham. This form of imagining attempts to normalize the city and to make sense of it in terms that can be related to other, more straightforward urban environments. Even Banham’s writing, which is perhaps the most unconventional due to the aspects of the city he chooses to study – such as the freeways – still attempts to show how the supposedly paradoxical, fragmented space can be made whole.

Bottles and Brodsky on the other hand use the unconventional aspect of Los Angeles – the reliance of the city inhabitants on the freeway – not to attempt to consolidate the fragmentation of the urban

301 Reisner, M. p. 103.

302 Reisner, M. p. 103.

303 Reisner, M. p. 180.

304 Reisner, M. p. 181.

landscape, but to celebrate it. They accept the decentered, contradictory nature of the city, and instead use the freeway as a point of access for understanding: physically, mentally, emotionally and culturally.

Similarly, Soja and Lynch do not attempt to gain a “normal” understanding of Los Angeles. They, like Bottle and Brodsky, take their theorizing from the unconventional facets of the city. Their mapping of the space is not based on typical cartographic practices; instead they formulate new ways of mapping in order to understand a city that is fundamentally new in the way it approaches space. Within this context, their methods also differ, with Soja relying on postmodernist theory to produce a new understanding of space, and Lynch attempting to cognitively map urban landscape according to the relationships between the city and its inhabitants.

Both Davis and May are theorists drawing their ideas about Los Angeles from the political and cultural ideology that has arisen in relation to the city. Davis believes that to gain a comprehensive understanding of Los Angeles, interpretations must be connected with the political divides that operate within the city. May, on the other hand, explores notions of the city through the impact they’ve had on American culture, thus expressing ideas on a macro scale through the cultural mythology of the urban and imaginative landscape of Los Angeles.

All of the above writers offer ways of understanding Los Angeles historically, culturally or theoretically, yet none of them seem able to provide the additional level of knowledge that comes from the relationship between the inhabitant and the city landscape. Although Lynch does draw on the experience of Los Angeles residents, he does so in order to attempt to understand the space itself, rather than the interrelationship between the space and its population, and the possible impact, physically and emotionally, that the unconventional urban landscape might have on those who experience it.

It is Reisner’s work that begins to suggest how a comprehension of the interrelationship between the landscape and its inhabitants might be achieved. What is so significant about Reisner’s writing is the way he turns to fiction to illustrate the notions he has already explored in his historical account. This is not something that is seen in the other writing about Los Angeles. Reisner’s work implies that there is an additional understanding of the landscape found in fiction, that should be used alongside theoretical investigations and historical accounts in order to present the broadest imaginings of Southern California. This study will now move on to explore the imaginings of Los Angeles and Southern California presented in fiction that coincide roughly with the methodological imaginings outlined above.

**Chapter Two:** An Introduction to the landscape of Southern California through fiction.

*Let your fiction grow out of the land beneath your feet*

*Willa Cather*

## **Introduction**

As the previous chapter explains, the contradictory nature of the Southern Californian landscape makes it difficult to capture. There is a need to combine both non-fiction and fiction in order to express the different kinds of imaginings engendered by responses to, and understandings of, the landscape. This chapter, therefore, explores the way that the landscape of Southern California has been portrayed and understood in a selection of fictional writing about the area. This explanation of fictional accounts show that there are literary and imaginative procedures, such as hope, love, struggle and desire that history or theory cannot adequately, or easily, express.

As with the non-fictional writings, there are multitudes of fictional works that touch upon the region of Southern California, not all of which can be included here. The ten novels explored in this chapter have been chosen for a number of specific reasons: they cover a broad time period (1884 – 1997) a wide section of the communities in the region – from Hispanic to black as well as upper middle class white – and a broad range of issues; political, social and cultural. The works were either popular at the time, or have become so later, and thus have demonstrated their importance outside the purview of this study. The novels are also works that have been named by the authors from the previous chapter as exemplars of fictional writing expressing the landscape and an understanding of Los Angeles and the Southern California region. Therefore the writings are complementary to the methodologies and imaginings explored in chapter two.

One of the most significant ways that fictional works augment historical and theoretical writings is their inability to be bracketed into one methodology or imagining. Unlike in the previous chapter where the writings are loosely grouped according to their focus – mapping, movement, destruction etc. – these works are harder to limit to one methodological area: instead each work encompasses numerous imaginings of the landscape that cannot be clearly expressed in historical or theoretical writings, such as hope, struggle, knowingness, uncertainty etc. As a result of the range of issues touched on, the fiction cannot be grouped and explored according to the non-fictional categories, and instead will be looked at chronologically with different themes in mind. It will become clear that the novels chosen do not cover every decade of Southern Californian history specifically – there is no novel from the 1920s for example – and there are numerous examples from the year 1939 in particular. This is because the works have been chosen not to represent a period in Southern California's development, but rather to more generally demonstrate themes that arise as a result of an understanding, experience and relationship with the region and its topography.



Each section outlines the basic plot of the novel and then goes on to examine the issues the plot addresses, alongside the themes and motifs used by the author, including language and literary techniques. Once each novel has been explored there follows a discussion outlining commonalities across the writings, before re-examining how the fictional and non-fictional works can be combined to form a more thorough understanding of the particular variable landscape of Southern California and individuals' responses to, and relationships with, that landscape.

### ***Ramona* – Helen Hunt Jackson**

Helen Hunt Jackson published *Ramona*<sup>1</sup> in 1884, only four years after her initial trip to Southern California. She had originally intended to put together a collection of travel sketches, but instead, upon being so moved by the treatment of the Mexicans and “mission Indians,”<sup>2</sup> she found herself “feverous[ly]”<sup>3</sup> writing a novel. The reason behind her choosing fiction rather than tract writing was because she felt that “the public would be more willing to read a novel than a piece of serious writing”<sup>4</sup> and that she needed to be “sugaring the pill”<sup>5</sup> in order to maintain reader’s interest in the concerns she wanted to express. Her aim was to alert people to the situation in the Southern California mission region through fiction in the hope of bringing about actual reform.

*Ramona* is the story of an orphan raised on a Mexican mission farm, or ranchera, in Southern California. Ramona is half-Native American and part Scottish and is brought up by Señora Moreno who, despite raising Ramona as much like a daughter as possible cannot love her due to her Indian blood,<sup>6</sup> and instead focuses all her affection on Felipe, her only son. Señora Moreno had promised to adopt Ramona upon the death of her sister Señora Ortegna, Ramona’s mother.<sup>7</sup> However, it turns out that Ramona is not the daughter of Señora Ortegna, but rather the illegitimate child of an Indian woman and Angus Phail, the man to whom Ortegna was betrothed before she ran away and married someone else. Señora Moreno neither tells Ramona of her past nor her mixed parenthood, and thus cannot explain that it is her Indian blood which stops her from being fully accepted into the family.

During the sheep-shearing season on the ranchera, Ramona falls in love with Alessandro, an Indian herder. Señora Moreno is outraged that Ramona should fall for an Indian and refuses their marriage, and so the two lovers elope together, are married by a sympathetic priest and have a daughter. They attempt to settle down in several villages, but each time they are forced off their land by Americans. Travelling in a harsh winter results in the death of their child, a turning point for Alessandro. Alessandro, a

1 Jackson, H.H. *Ramona*. Original publication date 1884, citations from the New York: Random House, 2005 edition.

2 Jackson, H.H. p. vii.

3 Jackson, H.H. p. vii.

4 Jackson, H.H. p. viii.

5 Jackson, H.H. p. viii.

6 Jackson, H.H. p. 31.

7 Jackson, H.H. p. 30.

man proud of his race and protective of his wife and child, is slowly driven mad by the loss of his daughter, his home and, in his eyes, his dignity. Despite them having a second child the following year, Alessandro continues to suffer. One day he wanders off and returns home mistakenly riding the horse of an American. He is followed and shot, leaving Ramona to cope with the child on her own.

Meanwhile Señora Moreno has died, leaving Felipe in charge of the ranchera. He has been constantly reminded of the hardship suffered by Ramona and so takes great pains to track her down to make amends. He finally finds her, and, upon discovering the fate of Alessandro, takes her back to the ranchera, marries and supports her. However the ranchera is subsequently targeted by the Americans and so Felipe decides to sell the farm and return with Ramona and her daughter to Mexico, where they can live without being persecuted.

There are several issues that Jackson highlights during the plot: the Americans' continued quest for frontiers as manifested in the desire for more land; the persecution of non-American settlers in California; and the rivalry and racism between minorities. Although these subjects would appear initially to be of minimal concern to the themes expressed in relation to Southern California, closer inspection demonstrates their importance. One of the overarching subjects of the novel is ownership and development of land. This is at the heart of the understanding of and relationship with the landscape of Southern California, not only during the period when Jackson was writing, but throughout the development of the region. The significance of this theme, along with that of continually searching for and conquering frontiers, is especially apparent when combined with the recurring motifs and language that Jackson employs.

The central motif that Jackson uses throughout the novel is that of the contrast between different types of landscape: the partially developed, the over-developed and that which has been left untouched. It is through the contrasting images of these differing landscapes that Jackson demonstrates to the reader her view that the persecution of Mexicans and Native Americans is destructive not just socially, but to the natural world as well. Jackson's suggestion is that by taking the land from these people the Americans risk destroying the beauty and resources that make it so desirable.

Jackson sets up this notion of the taking of land by the Americans as harmful with the comment that, "[t]he people of the United States have never in the least realized that the taking possession of California was not only the conquering of Mexico, but a conquering of California as well."<sup>8</sup> Having stated this so explicitly, Jackson continues more subtly through her descriptions of the different types of landscape that the characters encounter: simple settlements such as the rancheras and small native towns are beautified, whereas the overdevelopment of areas by the Americans is denounced. When referring to the land around the ranchera, Jackson's language is positive and pastoral. She uses words and phrases such as "languid,"

8 Jackson, H.H. p, 14.

“glowed,” “delicious,” “like an enchanter’s spell,”<sup>9</sup> and all the colours used are heightened: “golden” rather than yellow, “emerald” rather than green.<sup>10</sup> Jackson uses similar language in her descriptions of the slightly tamed landscape that Alessandro and Ramona pass through on their journey away from the farm to get married. The places at which they settle are unspoiled, but unthreatening because they are places that have been passed through rather than conquered. The landscape is again “green and rich,”<sup>11</sup> they see “a beautiful crescent of shining beach,”<sup>12</sup> the places are “soft” or “sparkling” and Ramona often describes them as “a beautiful world” or a “fairy-land.”<sup>13</sup> The right balance of development and wilderness has left these landscapes with their natural beauty and resources – the correct equilibrium according to Jackson.

Land that has been conquered or developed by the Americans in the novel, however, is described using negative language. The American’s “reap”<sup>14</sup> their land rather than cultivate it, they are described as “pouring in”<sup>15</sup> to settlements which suggests greed rather than rational population. Jackson couples this disrespect of the landscape with a focus on the material. When Alessandro sees the Americans that have moved into his house, all they are talking about is their possessions: “I can’t clear up until the bureau comes [...] and the bedsteads, I can’t seem to do anything.”<sup>16</sup> Similarly all of the passages where the Mexicans or Native Americans interact with the Americans involve money, demonstrating their concern lies with consumption and wealth not the landscape. During an exchange with Alessandro, the narrative describes the American as wanting to take all of Alessandro’s possessions, “by fair means or foul,”<sup>17</sup> and the bargaining that follows results in his acquisition of all of the farming tools and buildings for very little money. Alessandro comments that the wheat alone is worth three hundred dollars and at the close of the conversation he is given two hundred for everything.<sup>18</sup>

It is the contrast between the Mexican and Native American understanding of and relationship with the land, in comparison to that of the Americans, that acts as the underlying metaphor for Jackson’s overall concerns about the persecution of the natives and the continued push for new frontiers. Her successful use of the landscape to express these notions demonstrates the significance they hold not only for the inhabitants of Southern California – Mexicans, Native Americans and Americans alike – but also for the readers of the novel.

Returning to the issue of combining the fictional and non-fictional accounts of the landscape for a greater understanding of its significance to Southern California, Jackson’s use of contrasting responses to the use of landscape, as represented in the motifs and language of her novel, illustrates issues such as

9 Jackson, H.H. p. 105.

10 Jackson, H.H. p. 105.

11 Jackson, H.H. p. 221.

12 Jackson, H.H. p. 221.

13 Jackson, H.H. pp. 221-222

14 Jackson, H.H. p. 37.

15 Jackson, H.H. p. 37.

16 Jackson, H.H. p. 210.

17 Jackson, H.H. p. 258.

18 Jackson, H.H. p. 258.

individual struggle and hope – or the dissolution of hope – and love. Jackson's writing shows the struggle that Ramona and Alessandro face as a result of the landscape: both against the landscape itself while they are running away or trying to build a home, and against the Americans who believe they have the right to the country. Throughout the novel, Ramona and Alessandro attempt to maintain hope. Ramona is able to do this despite the loss of her child and eventually Alessandro. For Alessandro, however, his hope is not found in his love for Ramona, but in his dignity, and once he believes this dignity to be lost he gives up hope. Themes such as love, hope and struggle are experiences linked to the interaction and relationship with and understanding of landscape that fictional writing is more clearly able to express. Fiction has the inherent ability to exaggerate, heighten or focus on emotional responses of individuals or groups, as factuality is less important. This is why Jackson chose to write about the struggle of the Mexicans and Native Americans using fiction rather than tracts or appeals: she could intensify the emotions to highlight the struggle of individuals such as Ramona and Alessandro, using their hope and love in the story. Although not all authors are using fiction so explicitly to help a cause, the ability to emphasise aspects of the relationship between an individual or group and their surroundings, such as emotion, illustrates different things to those found in non-fictional writing, which are of equal importance to a comprehensive understanding of a place.

### ***The Octopus* – Frank Norris**

As with Jackson's Ramona, Frank Norris uses the pastoral as the central motif in *The Octopus* (1901).<sup>19</sup> However, in Norris' work the pastoral is more starkly contrasted with the mechanical industrial imagery of the railroads. In *The Octopus*, Norris takes an actual event – a dispute between farmers and the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1880 – and uses it as the basis for his novel, building a wider image of the landscape of California and the issues that arose during the progressive development of the region. What is significant about Norris' approach is that, unlike Jackson, who polarizes her characters into clear good and bad, his interpretations are more ambiguous, allowing him to suggest that there are aspects of both viewpoints, the farmer's and the railroad official's, that are equally correct.

Although it is the railroad that is used as an explicit simile throughout the book – its extending tracks constantly being referred to as an octopus' tentacles – it is the landscape and, more specifically, the wheat grown on it, which remains the underlying concern. The farmers wish to keep the land as their own to cultivate, whereas the railroad executives wish to build on it to bring people into and across California. Again, like Jackson's work, there is a sense in Norris' writing that there is a continued desire to be conquering new frontiers: Jackson's *Ramona*, having been written slightly earlier, was still about literally gaining new land; in Norris' *The Octopus*, the type of frontier has shifted, the land has already been conquered in terms of being owned by Americans, and now the landscape itself will literally be conquered by

19 Norris, F. *The Octopus*. Original publication date 1901, citations from the New York: Penguin, 1994 edition.

man's use and development of it. Both of these examples highlight in fiction the psychological, social and cultural impact of California as the ultimate frontier that, for example, Starr's historical writing emphasizes.

*The Octopus* focuses on a group of wheat farmers in the San Joaquin Valley in California. They had the land originally from the government because it required time and effort to make it profitable. The farmers have worked on and improved the land and, as a result, are able to successfully farm wheat, make a profit and live off their earnings. However, the land between their plots was owned by the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad (P&SR), but the ranchers had settled on these lands anyway with encouragement from the state, with the proviso that once the railroad company settled on a value they would be placed up for sale. The farmers come into a dispute with the P&SR when the railroad attempts to take back the improved land by forcing the farmers to buy it at a much higher value than it would have originally been worth, thus capitalizing on the improvements made by the farmers as a way of justifying the increase. This, coupled with an increase in freight rates for wheat (which had originally been fixed by the railroad in return for the farmers always shipping with P&SR), threatens to force the farmers out of business. They come together, headed by Magnus Derrick, the most respected of the group, in an attempt to fight the railroad's decisions. The dispute becomes underhand on all sides, with both the P&SR representative S. Behrman and eventually Derrick and the other farmers sinking to bribery in an attempt to win the battle. The dispute becomes a physical battle to occupy the land, culminating in a final stand-off during which most of the farmers and many of the P&SR men are killed.

The character of Priestly, a college graduate from the East who is trying to write an epic poem, frames the novel. Priestly begins the novel unsure of what the subject of his poem will be, yet, "determined that his poem should be of the West, that world's great frontier."<sup>20</sup> It is only having seen and been a part of the farmers' battle against the railroad that he is finally able to write. He discovers that an epic about the West cannot be impersonal; instead it must be "for the People."<sup>21</sup> Norris uses this framing device to demonstrate that although the landscape is at the heart of his novel it cannot be fully comprehended without the people that occupy it, whether they be the farmers or the railroad employees: the totality of the landscape is both topography and those who are part of it.

One of the most significant uses of metaphor throughout *The Octopus* is that of the wheat. Rather than using the image of the wheat as representative of the farmers' "honest" use of the landscape, Norris is more subtle and employs the image of the wheat as one of overarching truth: neither the farmers nor the railroad men in particular, but instead a veracity of the landscape. As the narrative at the close of the novel explicitly comments, "[b]ut the WHEAT remained. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, where Norris uses images and descriptions of the wheat he is signifying that the focus should be on the landscape

20 Norris, F. 1994 p. 9.

21 Norris, F. 1994 p. 372.

22 Norris, F. 1994 p. 651. Italic and capitals original.

as a whole rather than the farmers' plight in particular. Similarly it is the wheat (the landscape) that is the result of the demise of the farmers, as well as the death of P&SR representative S. Behrman. The farmers' downfall comes as a result of them wanting to cultivate the land as much as possible to produce more wheat every year and sell it at a profit. Their greed for the landscape is less explicit than the railroads', but is still present. Behrman of P&SR, however, is literally crushed by the wheat when he falls into a grain store as it is being loaded into a ship at San Francisco – a literal connection between greed, his death and the wheat.

Although Norris is more ambiguous than Jackson about the rights and wrongs of his characters, showing both sides as corrupt and violent to various degrees, his depiction of the contrast between the Californian landscape and the actual railroad is starker, and it is here that the pastoral versus industrial imagery is clear. Norris' descriptions of the San Joaquin Valley are passages that demonstrate the beauty of the landscape that takes into account its harshness. It is "parched, and baked and crisped after four months of cloudless weather"<sup>23</sup> and yet it is also "shimmering"<sup>24</sup> "exuberant"<sup>25</sup> and "blooming."<sup>26</sup> The descriptions of the railroads starkly contrast these images. There is no understanding of the different aspects of it as there is with the occasionally harsh yet fruitful landscape. The railroad is unnatural, it represents an "interruption"<sup>27</sup> to the landscape's beauty and majesty and shatters and disintegrates Preistly's thoughts of the romance of the West.<sup>28</sup> What is most significant about the passages about the steam engines themselves is the anthropomorphism and zoomorphism that Norris uses. The locomotive has "a roar"<sup>29</sup> and it is seen "vomiting"<sup>30</sup> smoke before becoming truly unnatural with its "enormous eye, cyclopean, red, throwing a glare far in advance."<sup>31</sup> These attributes, combined with the imagery of "filling the air with the reek of hot oil,"<sup>32</sup> heighten the menace of the railroad for the reader and suggest an overriding negative image of the impact of industrialism on the landscape and the people.

One aspect of Norris' novel that is of particular importance with reference to the need to combine fiction and non-fiction to fully comprehend the significance of the landscape of California is the fact that he took the basis for his work from an actual event. This compliments Reisner's technique in *A Dangerous Place*<sup>33</sup> which uses fictional writing to present the potential consequences of an earthquake. Here, however, Norris is taking an actual rather than possible event and making it into a fictional story. This allows Norris to emphasise the consequences of the actions of both the railroad companies and the farmers, using techniques such as metaphor, simile and positive or negatively associated language and imagery so that the

23 Norris, F. 1994 p. 4.

24 Norris, F. 1994 p. 46.

25 Norris, F. 1994 p. 141.

26 Norris, F. 1994 p. 141.

27 Norris, F. 1994 p. 49.

28 Norris, F. 1994 p. 13.

29 Norris, F. 1994 p. 49.

30 Norris, F. 1994 p. 49.

31 Norris, F. 1994 p. 49.

32 Norris, F. 1994 p. 49.

33 Reisner, M. 2003.

events have a more dramatic impact on the reader. Also, as Jackson suggested of *Ramona*, the fictionalisation may result in more people reading it. As with *Ramona*, Norris' *The Octopus* looks at concepts of struggle. However, the struggle in *The Octopus* is collective rather than individual, not only in relation to just the farmers, or just the railroad men, but both groups together. Norris' writing not only shows the struggle from both points of view, but also illustrates the strong conviction of each party that their desire for the land is the correct one. Here again struggle and desire are central to Norris' narrative about the land and are used to demonstrate the varying experience of and relationship with the same surroundings by different groups of people.

### ***The Grapes of Wrath* – John Steinbeck**

*The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)<sup>34</sup> was written some years after *Ramona* and *The Octopus*, and, as a result, the themes and motifs John Steinbeck uses are somewhat different, reflecting the gradual changes brought about in Southern Californian culture and society. Images of frontiers and contrasts between the pastoral and the mechanical and industrial are less overt, and are instead replaced by issues such as California as the land of manifest destiny, the consequences of promoting the region's success and the contrast between perception and actuality. However, like the previous works discussed, the themes and issues in Steinbeck's writing remain grounded in the experience of and response to the Californian landscape.

Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* as a response to the social, cultural and political consequences of the Depression of the 1930s. California had been promoting itself as a region that, despite the economic downturn, was prosperous and could offer work for those from other states. Unfortunately, when the Dust Bowl hit the mid-western states, the families of the failing farms, having seen the tracts offering work picking and collecting fruit, all set off for California. The result was a mass influx of migrants looking for work, with supply far outstripping demand. The migrants, who couldn't afford homes, set up camps or were taken into government run camps and were forced to live in squalid conditions with little food or prospect of work. As the number of migrants kept increasing, the Californians came to resent those entering the state, viewing them as polluting the landscape and diminishing the chance of work for existing state residents. The result was the racist social out-casting of the "Okies."<sup>35</sup> Steinbeck witnessed this, and *The Grapes of Wrath* was his attempt to humanize the migrants and show the situation from their point of view.

Although the novel, therefore, doesn't focus on individuals from California, instead focusing on the Joad family from the mid-west, it does highlight issues and themes that the historical and theoretical works about the region have already touched on, such as the contradictions apparent between the perception of Southern California and the actuality that many people who live, or come to live, there experience, the

34 Steinbeck, J. *The Grapes of Wrath*. Original publication date 1939, citations from the London: Penguin, 2002 edition.

35 So called because many of the original migrants came from Oklahoma.

consequences of over-promotion of the regions prosperity and the image of Southern California as the epitome of happiness, wealth and health. Since many of these issues are presented in Steinbeck's work through images and experiences of the landscape of Southern California, it is well suited to the discussion of fictional responses to the region.

The novel follows the journey of the Joad family, who are forced to give up their farm in Oklahoma at the onset of the Dust Bowl. Like many other families, they have seen the fliers advertising work on the fruit farms and citrus groves in Southern California and so make the decision to move the family west. They sell as many of their possessions as they can and load up two trucks to make the long journey to California. The journey takes weeks and along the way the family suffer the deaths of Grampa and Granma, yet are forced to continue the journey. However, upon finally reaching California they discover the reality that there is very little work, for very little money, with the volumes of migrants outweighing the work available. Thus farmers can pay as little as they like for a day's work knowing workers will always be desperate for any money at all. The Joads are unable to make enough money, even with all of them working, to afford the small house they had hoped for and so are forced to live in migrant camps. When Tom Joad and his friend Casy (a lapsed preacher) attempt to get involved in unionizing the workers they come up against the state police. A strike becomes violent, Casy is killed and Tom kills, forcing him to become a fugitive and leave the family. The novel ends with the controversial image of the character Rose of Sharon who, having given birth to a stillborn baby, uses her breast milk to suckle an old man who is dying of starvation.

The most prevalent motif that Steinbeck uses in the novel is that of contrast between the image of Southern California presented by the advertisements, and held in the minds of the migrants, and the reality of what greets the migrants when they arrive in the state. This is depicted successfully through Steinbeck's interjection of descriptions of the luscious fruit fields and prosperous Californian lifestyle between the chapters that follow the Joads' journey, which then are subsequently contrasted by the descriptions of the harsh conditions the Joads experience upon their arrival. It is through these descriptions, the language they use and the images they provoke, that Steinbeck emphasises the larger concerns and themes of the novel.

While the Joads are still in Oklahoma trying to decide what to do about the failing farm, someone suggests to Ma that she should take the family west to California. He comments to her that, "[t]here's work there, and it never gets cold. Why, you can reach out anywhere and pick an orange."<sup>36</sup> Although Ma has her doubts, and suspects that California "seems too nice,"<sup>37</sup> the whole family become fixated on the images of the fruit and bountiful landscape. Steinbeck here deploys the image of orange trees and white houses which were used throughout the 1920s and 1930s to promote the appeal Southern California in its advertisements. These symbols became synonymous with the prosperity, health and wealth that Southern California and its temperate climate were said to produce. Despite her doubts, Ma too gets wrapped up in the image and says

36 Steinbeck, J. p. 36.

37 Steinbeck, J. p. 94.



that people are living in the “nicest places, little white houses among the orange trees. I wonder [...] maybe we can get one of them little white houses.”<sup>38</sup> Even when Tom comments that someone he knew from California had told him about the migrant camps, the family won’t believe him, and instead they put all of their trust in the advertisements and Ma retorts “[o]h that ain’t so [...] [y]our father got a han’bill on yella paper, tellin’ how they need folks to work.”<sup>39</sup> In this simple exchange at the start of the Joads’ journey Steinbeck sets up the notion that the image of Southern California as a place of hope and success is so deeply rooted in the minds of those from outside the state as a result of the promotional leaflets sent by the fruit packing and producing companies, that people ignore any suggestion that the reality might be otherwise.

All the while they are on the road the Joads talk about how “rich an’ green”<sup>40</sup> California is, how they will be able to get themselves a nice white house and even grow their own fruit, and everyone else on the road shares their hope and the images of California are always the same ones of fruit trees and overabundance. At one point a character they meet along the road says “[w]hy, jus’ think how it’s gonna be, under them shady trees a-pickin’ fruit an’ taking a bite ever’ once and in a while. Why, hell, they don’t care how much you eat ‘cause they got so much.”<sup>41</sup> What is significant about Steinbeck’s descriptions of California, as cited by the characters traveling there, is that they are rote passages that deliberately echo those found on the handbills the mid-westerners have received. Steinbeck is demonstrating that the images and descriptions come directly from those wanting to sell the symbol of California, who have an interest in attracting people to the state. They are such good images, however, that people instinctively trust them and shield themselves from the potential reality of what they might find when they arrive.

When the Joads finally complete their 2,000 mile journey and reach California, Steinbeck begins to emphasise the contrast between the ideal they have carried in their mind, and the truth of how they will actually have to live. He does this almost immediately with perhaps the most effective and dramatic contrast possible: that between the white house the Joads dreamt of, and the places they see in camps:

The first house was nondescript. The south wall was made of three sheets of rusty corrugated iron, the east wall a square of moldy carpet tacked between two boards, the north wall a strip of roofing paper and a strip of tattered canvas, and the west wall six pieces of gunny sacking.<sup>42</sup>

38 Steinbeck, J. p. 95.

39 Steinbeck, J. p. 96.

40 Steinbeck, J. p. 200.

41 Steinbeck, J. pp. 153-4.

42 Steinbeck, J. p. 252.

By making this description, one of the first extended images when the Joads reach California, Steinbeck achieves an immediate dramatic effect, portraying just how different the reality of the migrant life was to that expected. The fact that the house described above is not only made up of scraps of materials, but that it is dirty, is what makes the image so efficient as it contrasts so starkly with the clean pure white of the house the Joads were holding in their minds. Dirt is then a motif that is carried through the rest of the novel. Wherever the Joads settle, they are in places with little or no running water, forced to live in shacks, and Ma becomes obsessed with the need to wash the children as often as possible. This leitmotif is used by Steinbeck not simply to show the bad conditions the migrants were forced to accept, but as a signifier of the way the Californians began to believe the migrants were inhuman and were treated like animals: they were viewed as no more important than the dirt in which they lived.

The contrasting images in *The Grapes of Wrath* echo the views found in the historical writing about Southern California: despite the advertisements suggesting that coming to California would result in a prosperous healthy lifestyle, the reality was very different. Not only were migrants unable to find work, earn money and enjoy the results of the newly irrigated fertile land in Southern California, they were also social outcasts. The fictional writing, which shows the migrant's perspective, is able to show hope, alienation, blindness to the reality that might face them and lack of experience of the surroundings they are entering. Steinbeck's narrative also displays the strong emotional connection to the landscape held not only by the migrants, who pin all their hope for a better life on it, but also the Californians who feel threatened when another group of people wish to share the landscape. Thus Steinbeck, although focusing on the migrants, is able to illustrate the emotional impact the landscape has also had on those already occupying it: his fiction demonstrates a poignancy of experience felt by both the natives and the migrants that is directly connected to the Southern Californian landscape.

#### ***The Day of the Locust* – Nathanael West.**

Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*<sup>43</sup> was also published in 1939, like Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It depicts the world of 1930s Hollywood, yet despite being set in a totally different location covering a different section of society, West's work also focuses on the disparity between the image presented of Southern California and the reality of the experience of those living or moving there. This is manifested in *The Day of the Locust* in two ways: firstly in the image of Los Angeles burning that the protagonist is one day hoping to paint, and secondly by using the characters as a metaphor. This is a different approach to that of Steinbeck, but one that is equally successful.

The novel is focused primarily on the life of Tod Hackett, a young artist who is brought to Los Angeles by a film studio to become a set designer. He arrives in Hollywood excited about the prospects he

43 West, N. *The Day of the Locust*. Original publication date 1939, citations from the London: Penguin, 2006 edition.

will have, finding it still a “very exciting place”<sup>44</sup> even months after he has moved there. However, it is clear from the beginning that Tod is an interesting combination of naïve and aware about his new home. As early as the second page of the narrative, West mentions Tod’s wish to produce a painting called “The Burning of Los Angeles” which illustrates that Tod may be more cynical about the city than it sometimes appears. Tod is infatuated with Faye, a wannabe starlet who lives in his building. Faye’s father, Harry Greener, is an out of work actor who has turned to door-to-door selling of silver polish in order to get by, often using his learned theatrics to get him through the door. It is through Faye and Harry that Tod comes to meet Homer Simpson, a man who, having recently moved to California to try to aid his health is tricked by Harry into buying some of the silver polish. As a result of this event Homer came across Faye and has become her suitor. The narrative alternately focuses on Tod, then Homer, and describes the varying other people they meet as a result of knowing Faye. All of the characters are struggling in their lives in some manner and West seems to make them deliberately shallow in order to heighten the metaphors they represent: the shallowness of the dream and success that Los Angeles appears to offer.

Each of the characters in West’s novel are unsuccessful in some way, and yet are clinging to the idea that at some point their time for achievement will come: Faye continues her attempts to become a starlet; Homer, having failed to reinvent himself in California, has turned his attention to attracting Faye, another thing he is failing at; Harry is neither a good salesman nor a good actor. They all act as metaphors for West’s notion that the dream that California offers is a falsehood that can rarely be attained, yet the desire for it cannot be cast aside because the few success stories make it so alluring. As Faye comments to Tod, “any dream was better than no dream,”<sup>45</sup> and thus the characters, despite ongoing failure, persist nonetheless.

Faye is a particularly good example of the theme of the superficial nature of things that West is signifying in his metaphors. She doesn’t want to be anything more than an acquaintance of Tod’s, not even a friend because, “[h]e had nothing to offer her, neither money, nor looks.”<sup>46</sup> However Tod persists with her, partly because of her lack of sincerity. He finds her affectations so artificial that they become charming,<sup>47</sup> and he enjoys watching the “surface animation” when she tells a story. This surface image is highlighted later in the narrative when the connection is made between the selling of the dream of California and the need to market an image for it in order to do so: “there wasn’t a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn’t sooner or later turn up [...] having first been made photographic.”<sup>48</sup> As this comment demonstrates, the image is not the reflection of the dream, but vice-versa.

44 West, N. p. 2.

45 West, N. p. 66.

46 West, N. p. 12.

47 West, N. p. 65.

48 West, N. p. 106.

Significantly, the only character who achieves their goal in the novel is Tod. By the end of the novel he has managed to paint “The Burning of Los Angeles,” the image he has been carrying around and adding to in his head since he moved to the city. The importance of this success is that it is rooted in the experience and image of destruction. Throughout the novel, Tod envisages parts of the painting he is destined to produce. However it is only after he experiences a riot outside a movie theatre, where people are waiting to see the stars arrive for a premiere, that he manages to visualize and paint the masterpiece.<sup>49</sup> During the riot, the narrative comments on the realisation of those in the crowd about the truth of California: “[t]hey discover that sunshine isn’t enough.[...] [t]heir boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they’ve been tricked and burn with resentment. They have been cheated and betrayed.[...] They have slaved and saved for nothing.”<sup>50</sup> As a result of these terrible events, Tod succeeds in his goal to paint the picture.

This motif of success from destruction is prominent throughout *The Day of the Locust* and is the theme that allows West’s work to illustrate a sense of joyous inevitability about destruction or lack of success: a paradoxical naivety and knowingness. The characters know they are unsuccessful, but by simply being in or near Hollywood they can feel as if they have been successful. As Tod knows at the beginning of the novel, moving to Los Angeles might well mean he never paints again, and yet he is still attracted to the idea: it could be the destruction of his artistic career, and yet he revels in the attempt. For West’s characters, the inevitable destructive force of Los Angeles and Hollywood is precisely what makes it attractive: they desire it and fear it simultaneously.

### ***The Big Sleep* – Raymond Chandler**

The notion of Los Angeles as a city composed of a dreamlike surface covering an underlying feeling of negativity and betrayal is prevalent in *The Big Sleep*<sup>51</sup> (1939) by Raymond Chandler. However, unlike West’s novel, there is no redemption at the conclusion of the story. Instead; the reader is left with a prevailing negative image of Los Angeles and those who inhabit it. Throughout the story there are constant images of decay held within or beneath objects of beauty, and it is these that offer the underlying metaphor of the work, that the beauty and dream of Los Angeles only exists at the surface.

Chandler’s novel, although published in 1939 like *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Day of the Locust*, not only covers a new section of society – the rich – but is also an example of a particular genre: the ‘hardboiled’ detective novel. This slight variation on the usual detective novel was given its name due to the tough, arrogant, often violent, attitude of the detectives and the unsentimental approach of the narratives.

49 West, N. pp. 181-3.

50 West, N. pp. 172-3.

51 Chandler, R. *The Big Sleep and Other Novels*. Original publication date 1939, citations from London: Penguin, 2000 edition.

Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe stories are some of the most refined and popular examples of this genre.<sup>52</sup>

In *The Big Sleep*, private detective Philip Marlowe is hired by General Sternwood to investigate the blackmail he is being subject to as a result of his youngest daughter, Carmen, being involved in gambling. Whilst investigating the source of the blackmail note General Sternwood has received, Marlowe unearths a high-end pornography syndicate that Carmen has also been embroiled in. He also begins to suspect that the disappearance of Vivian Sternwood's husband, Rusty Reagan, is not as simple as him just walking out on her. The story repeatedly implies and then illustrates an undesirable world of corruption and seediness that sits just below the surface of a supposedly rich and respectable society. This is a key metaphor used throughout the book by Chandler to represent what he thinks of Los Angeles. The metaphor is underlined by the language of rot and decay that is used to describe things that the reader would expect to be beautiful and attractive. When Marlowe first visits Sternwood they meet in his greenhouse where he grows orchids. However, rather than being a place of beauty the greenhouse is, "thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom."<sup>53</sup> All the language that Chandler uses is negative and suggests an air of oppression. This highly negative image of the flowers is continued: "[t]he plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men."<sup>54</sup> These descriptions do not just come from Marlowe's point of view, but from Sternwood himself who comments that orchids "are nasty things. Their flesh is too much like the flesh of men. And their perfume has the rotten sweetness of a prostitute."<sup>55</sup> This opening image and exchange between Marlowe and Sternwood sets up the tone for the rest of the novel, through which images and language such as that found here are perpetuated. The dank oppressive feeling is one that seems to settle over the city as a whole throughout the story. Soon after Marlowe gets hired by Sternwood there is a thunderstorm, anticipated by a "pressure in the air"<sup>56</sup> that seems to hang over the whole book. Marlowe's narration makes several references to the air being "as still as the air in General Sternwood's orchid house"<sup>57</sup> or how "the fog dripped from the Monterey cypresses"<sup>58</sup> and "[t]he world had a wet emptiness"<sup>59</sup> which precipitates a general sense of inevitable doom, like the inevitable rainstorm.

The other prominent way that Chandler indicates the fact that the beauty or dreamlike quality of Los Angeles exists only on the surface is through the descriptions of women. The women are supposed to be gorgeous and alluring. However, throughout the novel their beauty is undermined by the constant

52 Dashiell Hammett's stories about Sam Spade are another obvious and popular example.

53 Chandler, R. p. 6.

54 Chandler, R. p. 6.

55 Chandler, R. p. 7.

56 Chandler, R. p. 13.

57 Chandler, R. p. 19.

58 Chandler, R. p. 100.

59 Chandler, R. p. 106.

comparison between their attributes and various animals. Carmen Sternwood is described as “hissing”<sup>60</sup> and Marlowe comments “[y]ou look like a Pekinese.”<sup>61</sup> Another woman, is described as “limp as a fresh-killed rabbit”<sup>62</sup> and at one points lets out “a low animal wail.”<sup>63</sup> Later, during an encounter with Marlowe, Vivian Sternwood tears at a handkerchief with her teeth, another animalistic portrayal.<sup>64</sup> Chandler makes anything in the novel that had a potential for being attractive, unattractive and corrupt.

The final and most poignant image that Chandler uses to demonstrate the notion of an unpleasant truth being hidden behind the façade of the dreamlike city of Los Angeles and its supposedly beautiful rich individuals that others aspire to be, is that of the oilfields owned by Sternwood. The Sternwoods made their money from oil and in the novel the derricks are still partly functioning. Marlowe comments on them soon after his meeting with Sternwood. He explains that 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 made them rich.”<sup>65</sup> Marlowe’s statement shows that what has made the Sternwoods rich and successful is actually something rather unpleasant – the smell of the oil, its slick all-coating nature – and so they must try and find ways of distancing themselves from it. At the close of the novel, Marlowe returns to the image of the oilfields. He goes there with Carmen Sternwood and sees “the stagnant, oil-scummed water of an old sump iridescent in the sunlight.”<sup>66</sup> Whilst there he discovers that Carmen had shot Rusty Reagan and that the body was hidden by her sister Vivian who had pushed it into an oil sump.

By framing the novel with these images of the oilfields as both the root of riches and the scene of decay and vice, Chandler highlights two of the main notions in his novel: the inevitability felt by the characters about what they experience, and the subsequent acknowledgement of things as they are. Throughout the narrative there is no sense that Marlowe is going to attempt to try and change anything that is going on; instead he investigates what he is told to and accepts the findings without any surprise. Indeed the novels ends with Marlowe’s comment that Sternwood just ends up “sleeping the big sleep”<sup>67</sup> like the other dead characters: there is no redemption, just inevitability and acceptance.

### ***The Crying of Lot 49* – Thomas Pynchon**

Thomas Pynchon’s 1967 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*<sup>68</sup> presents a very different response to Los Angeles than the writing previously discussed. Whereas the previous works have made sense of the landscape of Southern California, using it as a metaphor or placing it at the heart of their main themes and motifs,

60 Chandler, R. p. 63.

61 Candler, R. p. 63.

62 Chandler, R. p. 60.

63 Chandler, R. p. 67.

64 Chandler, R. p. 108.

65 Chandler, R. pp 15-6.

66 Chandler, R. p. 155.

67 Chandler, R. p. 164.

68 Pynchon, T. *The Crying of Lot 49*. Original publication date 1967, citations from the London: Vintage, 2000 edition.

Pynchon does the opposite. *The Crying of Lot 49* is concerned with precisely how difficult it is to make sense of things, and he uses the backdrop of the city of Los Angeles and its resistance to normal mapping techniques in order to emphasise this condition. As this indicates, his writing sits well in conjunction with those of Edward Soja and Kevin Lynch and their notions about how to geographically and psychically map and respond to urban surroundings.

*The Crying of Lot 49* follows the progress of Oedipa Maas who is trying to unearth the truth about her old lover Pierce Inverarity and his estate since she has been named the executer of his will. Her discoveries lead her to unearth the potential existence of an underground postal network called Tristero that was put out of business in the 1700s but has been operating ever since as a secret underground network which uses the acronym W.A.S.T.E, which stands for "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire". However the story of Tristero is gradually revealed to Oedipa during her encounters with various eccentric characters (such as a band called The Paranoids, scientist John Nefastis who is obsessed with the quest for perpetual motion, and the suicidal playwright Randolph Driblette). Oedipa becomes so entangled in the wish to discover the truth about Tristero that she begins to see, or think she is seeing, their post horn symbol everywhere she goes. She becomes increasingly paranoid about the extent of the W.A.S.T.E network, alternating between believing and disbelieving its existence, to the point that she begins to wonder whether Pierce Inverarity has constructed the whole thing simply for her. The novel does not give any conclusion as to whether the Tristero actually exists, has been constructed by Inverarity or is simply a figment of Oedipa's imagination, leaving the reader as confused and unsatisfied as Oedipa.

Pynchon uses the confusion of networks and the inability to make sense of their surroundings by various characters, Oedipa in particular, as a metaphor for the difficulty in mapping and making sense of Los Angeles and the surrounding area. There are various techniques that Pynchon uses to present this idea, such as the descriptions of Oedipa's surroundings, her unreliability as a character and the deliberately conflicting and confusing use of language and spelling throughout the writing.

When Oedipa first travels to San Narciso, just outside of Los Angeles, the narrative describes it as "less an identifiable city than a group of concepts."<sup>69</sup> The description then continues with the notion that it is like a "hieroglyphic" with a "sense of concealed meaning" that, however, cannot be uncovered because it is "past the threshold of [Oedipa's] understanding."<sup>70</sup> When Oedipa fails to find what she is looking for she returns to the outskirts of Los Angeles to find a business address. When she arrives it is just as confusing, with "auto lots, escrow services, drive-ins, small office buildings and factories whose address numbers [are] in the 70s and then 80,000s."<sup>71</sup> Oedipa's response to this muddle of buildings and address is to call it

69 Pynchon, T, p, 14.

70 Pynchon, T. p. 15.

71 Pynchon, T. p. 15.

“unnatural.”<sup>72</sup> This early sense of bewilderment related to surroundings is the beginning of a more general confusion that will penetrate not only all aspects of Oedipa’s life, but the text itself. No matter how much Oedipa wishes to escape the “reeling landscape”<sup>73</sup> she cannot, and soon, with the discovery of the Tristero, her confusion and paranoia become even more invasive.

As Oedipa’s search continues, things around her grow “less and less clear”<sup>74</sup> and Pynchon heightens this for the reader by literally making the narrative, language and text of the book inconsistent whilst also using a play within the novel as a device by which to self-reflexively comment on the novel itself. At one point the narrative, talking about the play, comments that, “things get really peculiar, and a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words.”<sup>75</sup> The reader cannot help but make the connection between the comment about the play and *The Crying of Lot 49*, and thus begins to look more closely for the ambiguities in the novel; therefore the reader’s heightened awareness of what might be going on in the text of the novel helps to perpetuate the sense of confusion and ambiguity: they are looking for inconsistencies whether they exist or not. This mirrors Oedipa’s search for the Tristero, as she begins to look for and see it whether it is there or not. Pynchon comments on this notion using the character of Randolph Driblette, the playwright, who undermines the notion that there is something important held in the text when he asks, “[w]hy, [...] is everybody so interested in texts?”<sup>76</sup> This at once calls into question the previous statement that seems to point the reader to the importance of the textual aspects of the novel. Now the reader is placed in the same position of confusion as Oedipa, not knowing what to believe or look for and what to ignore.

Pynchon then takes the ambiguity of text even further by being deliberately confusing about the spelling of the underground postal system. At the beginning of the novel it is always spelt “Tristero”; however, as the plot and Oedipa’s findings become increasingly confused, the spelling shifts between “Tristero” and Trysterero” causing both the plot and the text itself to become progressively less reliable. Pynchon also reiterates this mood within the plot, as Oedipa is suggested to be an unreliable narrator. She suffers from hallucinations right from the beginning. In the first chapter, whilst on the phone to her therapist, she states that she is “having an hallucination now”<sup>77</sup> and these episodes continue throughout the novel suggesting that any aspect of her search in for W.A.S.T.E. and the Tristero has the potential to be imagined. As the narrative comments, she becomes so involved in the search for the Tristero that “everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero,”<sup>78</sup> thus demonstrating that she can no longer distinguish between things that are and are not connected to the underground

72 Pynchon, T. p. 15.

73 Pynchon, T. p. 16.

74 Pynchon, T. p. 27.

75 Pynchon, T. p. 48.

76 Pynchon, T. p. 53.

77 Pynchon, T. p. 10.

78 Pynchon, T. p. 56.



network. Finally there is the outright statement that “[e]ither Trystero did exist, [...] or it was being presumed, perhaps fantasied by Oedipa.”<sup>79</sup> By this point the reader is no longer able to discern what in the text should be believed and what is being placed there to deliberately mislead.

With all of the above, Pynchon demonstrates the difficulty that arises when trying to produce structure and logic from essentially disordered nonsensical surroundings, therefore suggesting that it is more successful to accept the chaos and bring about new understandings rather than attempt to fit into already accepted modes. This idea highlights the notions of knowingness and unknowingness that are present throughout the novel, coupled with notions of individual struggle: struggle by individuals to make sense of, and “know” their surroundings, and Pynchon’s suggestion that they may never succeed.

### ***Play it as it Lays* – Joan Didion**

Joan Didion’s *Play it as it Lays*<sup>80</sup> (1970) is a novel that combines a use of literal description and metaphor to provide an understanding of both Los Angeles and a particular group of people that inhabit it – those involved in the film industry. One of the most significant aspects of Didion’s writing is that it attempts to depict the whole of an experience of Los Angeles by focusing on very specific parts of the city. For example, Didion is particularly interested in the relationship between the freeway and the city and how they are interrelated; therefore the freeway and the act of, and response to, driving on it is a central aspect of the novel. Didion is also concerned with the “blankness” that Los Angeles seems to produce, and this is presented metaphorically both through the characters and their interaction as well as the literal space that she leaves between the text on the page. Didion’s combination of literal description and metaphor echoes the need to combine the fictional and non-fictional accounts of Los Angeles and Southern California in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the various relationships with, and experiences and constructions of, the area.

Didion’s novel focuses on protagonist Maria Wyeth, her movements around Los Angeles and her interaction with a small group of friends, all of whom are connected to the Hollywood film industry. Maria is recently divorced and her young daughter from the marriage, Kate, is undergoing treatment as a permanent resident at a psychiatric hospital. The relationship between Maria and Kate seems to be the only one that truly holds any concern for Maria, and it is suggested that her focus on Kate may have been one of the definitive factors of her marriage breakdown. All of Maria’s other relationships in the novel are portrayed as fleeting, insubstantial and often destructive or dangerous: she has numerous one night stands with minor actors and acquaintances, and even those who are supposed to be her friends do not appear to have her best interests in mind. She also seems to be surrounded by death. The narrative recalls the tragic death of her mother in a seemingly self-provoked car accident, and her father’s death soon afterwards. At one point,

79 Pynchon, T. p. 75.

80 Didion, J. *Play it as it Lays*. Original publication date 1970, citations from the London: Flamingo, 1998 edition.

when Maria discovers herself to be pregnant her ex-husband Carter insists she aborts, the experiences of which causes her to dream of dead children. Finally, her friend BZ dies from a barbiturate overdose whilst staying with Maria.

Maria's response to these events, both those from her present experience in Los Angeles and those, like her mother's death, haunting her from her past, combined with the increasing guilt about her inability to help her daughter and give her a better life, causes her to become increasingly introspective. As a result, she immerses herself in the self-medicating experience of driving the Los Angeles freeways until her eventual breakdown results in her, too, being placed in a psychological rehabilitation unit, from which the opening monologue (before the beginning of the third person narrative) is retrospectively being written.

The ephemeral relationships that Maria has throughout the novel are used by Didion as a central metaphor for the experience of Los Angeles, and Los Angelean society. This metaphor is then coupled with the literal text of the novel, which combines short chapters and the use of plenty of white space to heighten the "blankness" and transient characteristics that Didion believes Los Angeles epitomizes. One of the most obvious demonstrations of sparseness in the text is Didion's use of dialogue. Maria's interactions with people rarely involve extended conversations, and the dialogue predominantly consists of a series of one-line exchanges, often with only a few words per line, per character. For example, what follows is a typical phone conversation between Maria and another character, in this case her ex-husband:

"I'm going to do it," She would say on the telephone.

"Then do it," Carter would say. "It's better."

"You think it's better."

"If it's what you want."

"What do you want."

"It's never been right," he would say. "It's been shit."

"I'm sorry."

"I know you're sorry. I'm sorry."<sup>81</sup>

This conversation then continues with these few word interchanges, similar to numerous other exchanges both in person and on the phone, that occur throughout the novel. The effect of these layouts on the page means that there is little text and more white space, a technique that Didion uses frequently throughout the book. Her chapters begin a third of the way down the pages, leaving a large expanse of white space above any new chapter. There are eighty-seven chapters, spread across two hundred and fourteen pages, meaning that it often feels as though there is more space than text in the novel, a deliberate technique used by Didion to enhance the feeling of emptiness. This is emphasised again through the fact that not only are there so many chapters in so few pages, but many chapters, particularly towards the end of the book,

81 Didion, J. p. 105.

nearing Maria's breakdown, consist of only a paragraph set in the middle of the page, intentionally leaving large white spaces. For example the entirety of chapter 78 is:

*Except when they let Carter or Helene in, I never minded  
Neuropsychiatric and I don't mind here. Nobody bothers me.  
The only problem is Kate. I want Kate.*<sup>82</sup>

The extent of the white space and both literal and metaphorical blankness within the novel demonstrates Didion's understanding that the experience of Los Angeles, and in particularly Hollywood, is characterized by a transience and ephemerality.

However, the emptiness expressed in Didion's exploration of aspects of Los Angeles is not entirely negative, as her interest in and portrayal of the experience of the freeways demonstrates. For Maria, the freeways represent an exhilarating and therapeutic freedom: escape from all the other parts of her life. The freeways offer a different sort of "blankness," a positive connotation that allows escape, meditation and the opportunity for a sort of control that cannot be reached in other aspects of life. The narrative comments that it is from the freeway that Maria gains "the day's rhythm."<sup>83</sup> It is the navigation of the intricate sections of the freeway that provides Maria with an outlet for her stress, and allows her something in her life that she can control. She drives the freeway "as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents"<sup>84</sup> and she continually returns to difficult stretches attempting to negotiate them successfully for the release she knows it will provide. As the narrative states, the day she manages to move across an intricate interchange, moving across four lanes of traffic, "without once braking or once losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly."<sup>85</sup> Therefore, for Didion, the expanse of the freeway is something that both physically and metaphorically ties together the expanse of Los Angeles. The city may produce a feeling of emptiness, but it manages simultaneously to provide an escape, a therapeutic solution. As the narrative confirms, "[s]ometimes at night the dread would overtake [Maria], bathe her in sweat, flood her mind [...] but she never thought about that on the freeway."<sup>86</sup> These examples demonstrate the notions of therapy and escapism that for Didion are central to the emotional relationship between her protagonist and the man-made landscape around her.

### **Less Than Zero – Bret Easton Ellis**

82 Didion, J. p. 206. Italics original.

83 Didion, J. p. 15.

84 Didion, J. p. 16.

85 Didion, J. p. 16.

86 Didion, J. p. 18.

Highly influenced by Didion's writing, Bret Easton Ellis' fiction about Los Angeles and Southern California reflects similar themes to *Play it as it Lays*. However, his 1985 work *Less Than Zero*<sup>87</sup> explores the seeming emptiness of the experience of Los Angeles from a different perspective. Rather than exploring this notion using someone totally immersed in the culture like Didion's Maria, Ellis chooses to place his protagonist, Clay, in the position of returning to Los Angeles after an extended period away from the city and his friends. This presents a very different view of Los Angeles and those who inhabit it: Clay is a native, and yet finds himself alienated due to having spent three months at college on the east coast. As the novel progresses, following Clay's reintroduction to his friends and their social activities, the complex relationship between Clay and his native surroundings becomes more evident. It begins to become apparent that only after having left and then returned to California does its singularity become so noticeable.

Ellis' writing focuses on the experience of Los Angeles as had by a group of people in their late-teens and early-twenties, drawing on his own experiences as a teenage in Southern California who then went away to New England to college. The plot of the novel follows Clay's return to Los Angeles for a three week Christmas vacation from college during which he attempts to rekindle relationships with various friends who stayed in the city, knowing he must make a decision as to whether he stays in California, or returns to college in New Hampshire. He goes to numerous parties over the period and grows increasingly alienated by his friends seemingly increasing amorality. He discovers that his friend Julian has become a heroin addict, and is prostituting himself to businessmen in order to support that habit. As the novel progresses, the scenes that Clay encounters become gradually more disturbing, another character shows a snuff film at a party, which only Clay seems to find unsettling. The climax of Clay's experience comes when another friend, Trent, takes a group of them back to his apartment to see a twelve year old girl tied to a bed where it is implied she has been repeatedly raped. Again, only Clay seems disturbed by the actions. At the close of the novel Clay leaves the city, which for him is now defined by a series of violent images, the suggestion being that he will never return.

Like much of the fiction and history already mentioned Ellis' work focuses on the apparent juxtaposition between the Los Angeles and California that is advertised and presented to the world via the perfected images of Hollywood, and the potential reality of the underlying truth. Unlike previous works that have explored the experiences of a different class or racial group in order to present the gap between the reality and the myth, Ellis takes the image of the supposedly perfect rich white people and implies an amoral rot and violence that exists below the surface image. Ellis is frequently concerned with the disjunction between surface veneer and underlying truths or issues. In *Less Than Zero* he explores this theme with a heightened portrayal of violence and malcontent to demonstrate his belief that the mythical image of Los Angeles – as a place of health, pleasure and contentment – not only implies that the sunshine and

87 Ellis, B.E. *Less Than Zero*. Original publication date 1985, citations from the London: Picador, 1986 edition.

promised prosperity of the state can solve people's problems, but that it has the potential to hide considerable underlying problems leading to dangerous undercurrents in even (or perhaps especially) the most privileged members of society. Ellis expresses these concerns throughout his novel using a series of heightened and deliberately extreme violent and/or disturbing images that many characters just accept as the norm. It is the contrast between the characters who have spent their entire time in Los Angeles, and Clay, who has chosen to leave it, and will, at the end of the novel, leave again perhaps never to return, that Ellis uses at the heart of the exploration of his concerns.

The contrast between Clay and the other characters begins gradually at the beginning of the book and is expressed in very superficial terms: it is his clothing, his lack of tan etc that make him stand out. Clay comments in the narrative on the first page that the Argyle vest he is wearing suddenly "seems vaguely more eastern than before, especially next to Blair's clean tight jeans and her pale blue T-shirt."<sup>88</sup> At several points early in the novel, just after Clay has arrived home, other characters mention that he looks pale. When Trent comments "[y]ou look pale,"<sup>89</sup> Clay notices that "compared to Trent's deep, dark tan and most of the other people's complexions"<sup>90</sup> he does. His response to Trent is to remind him that he has been at college in the east, the implication being that he hasn't been able to get as much sun as those in California. However, Trent produces a business card that advertises an artificial tanning technique. This is the first implication given by Ellis that the superficial understanding of something actually hides the truth. It is significant that Ellis' inference uses the notion that Trent's tan, a symbol of the healthy, sunny climate of California, is fake, suggesting that other aspects of the Los Angelean lifestyle may be hiding artificiality: such as the wealth and privilege of the teenage characters hiding the inherent amorality that is depicted later in the novel. Similarly many of the characters keep their sunglasses on even at night or in dark clubs and restaurants. Ellis uses this as another implication that there is something hidden under the surface.

As the novel progresses, Ellis begins to reveal that the superficial differences between Clay and the other characters are present on a much deeper level. It is during these moments that Ellis heightens the disturbing nature of the images to have a greater impact on the reader. The two incidents that are most prominent in Clay's narrative are the prostitution of his friend Julian and the restraint of a young girl at Trent's apartment. Julian owes Clay money and tells him that if he wants it back he must go with him on an errand. Clay is reluctant, but, wanting the money, decides to go along. It turns out that Julian is being used as a prostitute for businessmen and Clay inadvertently gets involved. Ellis does not actually describe the acts that take place between Julian and the businessman that Clay is forced to watch, instead Ellis slips into the scene images of a memory that Clay has of Julian in fifth grade kicking a soccer ball, and the wallet of the client holding a picture of his children. More than the actual act these hints at innocence enhance the

88 Ellis, B.E. p. 1.

89 Ellis, B.E. p. 6.

90 Ellis, B.E. p. 6.

disturbing nature of what Clay witnesses. This is then emphasized by the beginning of the next section starting with Clay commenting, "I have been sitting in the chair for five hours,"<sup>91</sup> the implication being that the episode was not only distressing, but prolonged.

The most disturbing incident in the novel, both for Clay and the reader, is towards the close when Trent takes Clay back to his apartment to show him a twelve year old girl who is tied up there. Unlike the previous episode, Ellis chooses to depict this in graphic detail:

Her legs are spread and tied to the bedposts and her arms are tied above her head. Her cunt is all rashed and looks dry and I can see it's been shaved. She keeps moaning and murmuring words and moving her head from side to side, her eyes half closed.<sup>92</sup>

He then contrasts the horror of the event with the nonchalance, even revelry of those in the apartment. One of the responses is laughter<sup>93</sup> followed by a move towards her with his trousers down and the comment "[y]ou can watch if you want."<sup>94</sup> Clay is the only character who is horrified, he keeps asking why and the only response he gets is "[w]hy not?"<sup>95</sup> followed by an incredulous "don't look at me like I'm some sort of scumbag or something,"<sup>96</sup> suggesting that the characters have no understanding of what is or isn't acceptable behaviour.

When Clay leaves Los Angeles at the end of the novel he comments that the images he carried with him were of people being driven mad:

Images of people, teenagers my own age, looking up from the asphalt and being blinded by the sun. These images stayed with me even after I left the city. Images so violent and malicious that they seemed to be my only point of reference.<sup>97</sup>

Throughout the course of the novel he has discovered that, having left the city, he now no longer relates to it on any level and having been distanced from it has begun to see things as they really are, the reality behind the façade.

91 Ellis, B.E. p. 165.

92 Ellis, B.E. p. 176.

93 Ellis, B.E. p. 176.

94 Ellis, B.E. p. 176.

95 Ellis, B.E. p. 176.

96 Ellis, B.E. p. 177.

97 Ellis, B.E. p. 195.

Ellis' examples demonstrate, albeit in an extreme manner, issues of morality, alienation and the way that one type of knowledge does not suit all places. Clay's new understanding of Los Angeles has been coloured by his break in New England, and as a result is no longer helpful in his interaction with those who have been in the area their whole lives, he has become alienated. His friends cannot understand the disgust he expresses at their actions, and Clay cannot understand why his friends don't see their actions as morally reprehensible: the same experiences are viewed in completely different ways. Clay's only response is to leave the place that he no longer seems to relate to correctly.

### ***The Tortilla Canyon* – T.C.Boyle**

T.C.Boyle's *The Tortilla Canyon*<sup>98</sup> (1995) explores a variety of interlocking themes – xenophobia, illegal immigration, middle-class values – through which he presents the mid-1990s in the suburbs of Los Angeles. As his themes demonstrate, he is concerned with showing not just how one group of people in the region relate to their surroundings, but how various groups interact and how their understandings and experiences may influence and impact on each others and the subsequent response of each group. This overlapping of social groupings and understandings is significant because it allows a broader comprehension not only of a region, but how the various occupants of that region interact. Boyle gives an equal amount of space to the presentation of each set of characters, thus demonstrating that, despite their class, they deserve equal representation. This is important because in previous works, both fictional and non-fiction, the focus has tended to be largely on one group or another. Another significance is the connection between Boyle's work and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. *The Tortilla Curtain* deliberately invokes this comparison through the use of a quotation from *The Grapes of Wrath* as an epigraph. This illustrates that Boyle, like Steinbeck, aims to demonstrate that hostility towards those in poor conditions is unfounded as often the conditions are perpetuated by the prejudice they encounter. It also demonstrates that the social problems that Steinbeck was writing about, the prejudice against the migrant workers from the mid-western states, has not disappeared; instead in the 1990s it has now shifted to focus on the Mexican workers.

*The Tortilla Curtain* follows two sets of people, a privileged upper-middle class family living in a community in a hill suburb of Los Angeles and a poor Mexican immigrant couple living rough in the same area. Boyle follows the consequences of a series of chance meetings between the two families, and how various encounters between the middle-class group and immigrants begin to change their responses to each other. The Mossbacher's moved out of the city to Topanga Canyon in order to be closer to nature and avoid the crime of the city, whilst still being able to drive to the amenities. However, their life in the new community is soon being disrupted; first a coyote manages to jump their fence and carry off one of their pet dogs, then they are increasingly told by the housing association that the community should become gated in

98 Boyle, T.C. *The Tortilla Curtain*. Original publication date 1995, citations from the London: Bloomsbury, 1997 edition.

order to prevent the increasing number of Mexican immigrants in the area from getting near their homes. Delaney Mossbacher is at first resistant to this idea, arguing that they moved out of the city to avoid the need to take such measures and that it would disconnect the community from the very hills and scenery he wished to move into. However, after several encounters with Mexicans in the area he relents and the wall is built. Soon graffiti appears, and Delaney becomes obsessed with catching those responsible. His concern about the Mexicans increasingly turns to racism and xenophobia and gradually his response to the immigrants perpetuates this view: he turns them into criminals in his mind and so he begins to treat them as such, rather than trying to see things from their perspective.

Candido and America are a Mexican couple who have illegally crossed the border and ended up in Topanga Canyon living rough and attempting to get work at a labour exchange that has been set up by a leading member of their society. As the novel opens, Candido is run down whilst trying to cross the highway to the exchange. The driver, Delaney, resolves the situation by simply giving Candido 20 dollars as Candido has no health insurance and refuses to go to hospital. To Delaney this seems fair because Candido is only a Mexican and so 20 dollars, a pittance to him, is good money to an immigrant. Delaney's justification of this act is the beginning of his change of view about the Mexicans from simply being people looking for work, to being criminals out for any money they can get. Although the money means that Candido can immediately buy food, his injuries mean he cannot work, and so his pregnant wife America is forced to go to the exchange, an incredibly shameful thing for Candido. Finally, however, they seem to be making some progress and storing a little bit of money away from them both having had bits of work – one of which being Candido helping out a contractor put in a new fence at the Mossbacher's house, an action that Delaney sees as confirmation that Candido is trying to target him for more guilt money.

At Thanksgiving, Candido is given a turkey, and whilst trying to roast it in their shelter to feed America and their new born daughter Socorro he inadvertently starts a fire that quickly engulfs the canyon and forces the Mossbacher's and other residents of the Arroyo Blanco estate to leave their homes. The community suspect Mexicans of having deliberately started the fire, and evidence of Candido and America's camping near their newly built wall only act to confirm their suspicions. Rather than see if they need help, they simply return to their homes, which fortunately did not end up in the path of the fire. Candido and America however are not so lucky. They are swept down the canyon by the water used to stop the fire and in the process their child is lost in the waters. What is significant about this choice of ending is that despite Boyle's implication that the middle-classes are actually the root of problems throughout the novel, their prejudice, fear and insensitivity leading to the chain of circumstances (beginning with their forced closure of the labour exchange to stop the grouping of Mexicans in the street, leading eventually to the accidental fire), he does not close the novel by giving the Mexicans retribution against the white Americans. Instead, he chooses to enhance the message of the novel, by highlighting the continued injustice against the Mexicans.



*The Tortilla Curtain* ends not with an unrealistic happy ending, but with a tragically honest account of the more likely outcome for Candido and America, thus strengthening Boyle's argument.

It is through his use of contrasting imagery that Boyle presents the contrast between the two sets of lives, and particularly in relation to the food and housing he portrays. One image that sets up the contrast between the lives appears during the crash. The narrative comments that "Delaney's first thought was for the car (was it scratched, dented?), and then for his insurance rates (what was this going to do for his good-driver discount?),"<sup>99</sup> it does not occur to him until after these considerations to think of the person he may have hit. The image of the importance of the car is continued later in the novel. Delaney, having had his car damaged in the accident soon afterwards has it stolen. His response is to go immediately to the dealership and buy a new one of exactly the same make and model. Despite the cost "[i]t was going to cost him four and a half thousand on top of the insurance premiums to replace the car"<sup>100</sup> Delaney is "determined to replace his car, exact model, color, everything."<sup>101</sup> It is an important status symbol and he wants to show the people who stole his car – he has assumed Mexicans – that something as important and costly as a car is of little significance to him, it is replaceable. This is in complete contrast to Candido who is struck down by Delaney at the beginning of the novel when trying to cross the freeway precisely because he cannot afford anything to eat at the closer stores, let alone a car. Instead he is dragging his few possessions back to his camp in "just a shopping cart, pocked with rust"<sup>102</sup> a complete contrast to the shining aluminum, chrome and leather of Delaney's immaculate car.

These stark dissimilarities are continued with descriptions of the two different living conditions. The Mossbacher's live in a large house in what soon becomes a gated community. In the mornings Delaney is about to juice "the oranges he'd picked from the tree in the courtyard."<sup>103</sup> They have a dishwasher, two cars, their son Jordan has a Nintendo. They are described as "joggers, nonsmokers, social drinkers and if not full-blown vegetarians, people who were conscious of their intake of animal fats. Their memberships included the Sierra Club."<sup>104</sup> They are a very comfortable upper-middle class family who don't have to worry about food or material things. America and Candido on the other hand represent the other end of the spectrum. They are unable to find enough work to eat enough to stop themselves being hungry. Often all they have to eat are "*tortillas* out of the package, pinto beans [and] the broth she'd been simmering for two days to keep it from going bad."<sup>105</sup> They don't even have any sort of a house or shelter, they "didn't have a roof over their

99 Boyle, T.C. p. 4.

100 Boyle, T.C. p. 146.

101 Boyle, T. C. p. 147.

102 Boyle, T.C. p. 6.

103 Boyle, T.C. p. 31.

104 Boyle, T.C. p. 34.

105 Boyle, T.C. p. 24. Italics original.

heads<sup>106</sup> at all, and are just sheltering in a canyon. They only own one set of clothes each, and have no material goods at all.

These pieces of description represent the heart of what Boyle is expressing: different notions of hope and struggle and varying understandings of happiness and security. The Mossbacher's find happiness in their large home, with a secure fence, the knowledge that they can eat what they want, when they want, they don't really have to struggle for anything. America and Candido on the other hand seem to only experience struggle, and happiness for them can be found in having something to eat and a little shelter. The desires felt by the two families are the same, but different things represent them.

***Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned – Walter Mosley.***

Similar to Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*, Walter Mosley's novel *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*<sup>107</sup> (1997) addresses issues of the contrast between the rich and poor experiences of Los Angeles. Mosley's work however looks specifically at the African-American community in downtown Los Angeles and their particular experience of the city and how it differs from the more affluent, typically white, experience. Like Boyle, Mosley's central technique is to contrast the presentation of the experiences of African-American protagonist Socrates Fortlow with that of the white people and neighbourhoods. Although Mosley chooses to follow one character, rather than directly contrasting two different sets of people, his novel remains extremely effective when the incidents and images presented are seen in comparison to what is the expected image of Los Angeles.

Mosley's novel is about an ex-convict who, after having spent 27 years in prison for killing a man, has been released and is determined to redeem himself by looking out for those around him and combating the depression and gang-cycles of the Los Angeles ghettos. Socrates Fortlow lives in the Watts area of Los Angeles, and despite having been out of prison for eight years, is still having difficulty earning a living. He exists in a tiny two room apartment with only a hot plate to cook on, and must try collecting bottles and cans to be recycled for the small amount of money it gives him. However, he is determined to earn his money legitimately whilst helping those around him so as not to become part of the stereotypical image of the African-American poor communities that other Los Angeles residents believe.

The novel opens with Socrates stopping a young boy, Darryl, getting into trouble. Socrates takes it upon himself to try to help the boy in an attempt to stop him falling into the gang culture of Watts. Whilst keeping an eye on Darryl, Socrates is also trying to hold down a job in a grocery store that was difficult to obtain. He has had to go miles away from his neighbourhood to find a supermarket that might take him, they are reluctant because he is 58 and an unemployed black man with no telephone, however he resists the

106 Boyle, T.C. p. 26.

107 Mosley, W. *Always Outnumbered, Always Outgunned*. Original publication date 1997, citations from the London: Serpent's Tail, 1997 edition.

urge to get angry and talks reasonably with them, as a result he gains a job stacking and delivering groceries in Santa Monica. The novel continues to follow Socrates as he is faced by various challenges that could potentially provoke him to be violent. However, Mosley chooses for his protagonist to remain calm and measured, using questions rather than violence as a way of solving the things that face him. Although at the close of the novel Socrates hasn't managed to significantly change his situation, he has had a positive impact on the people around him, and has even managed to drive a crack dealer out of the neighbourhood. As with Boyle's ending, Mosley's, because it remains realistic, enhances the possible reality of the other events in the book, leading the reader to have more empathy with the characters. It also demonstrates that there are both positive and negative aspects of the Watts ghetto, but implies that this is the case in any neighbourhood in the city – as demonstrated by the prejudice that Socrates encounters in the rest of the city, but refuses to succumb to himself. Again, as with many of the other writings about Los Angeles, Mosley is keen to demonstrate that a singular linear understanding does not produce the most realistic comprehension of the city, and instead, although more challenging, the complex, muddled versions should be explored.

The contrast between the Hollywood image of Los Angeles and the reality of the Watts ghetto is immediately apparent in Mosley's first description of the area where Socrates lives: "The sun was just coming up. The alley was almost pretty with the trash and broken asphalt covered in half-light. Discarded wine bottles shone like murky emeralds in the sludge."<sup>108</sup> This description, with similes being used to make the negative aspects of the alleyway seem more attractive, subtly indicates the way that Socrates approaches his post-prison life: trying to see the positive in every situation. However, of course, it still shows that the bad things are there. The description of Socrates living room (the only room in the apartment other than the kitchen) also shows how differently he lives in comparison to the expected image of houses in Los Angeles:

[I]t was a poor man's room. The wallpaper had been pink at one time but now it was worn down to shopping-bag brown. The wood slats of the floor had buckled in places and separated. A tall man would have brushed the ceiling with the top of his head. On a windy day even the open-faced heater couldn't keep it warm. [...] There were no windows. Socrates' only neighbors were two burned-out furniture stores and an almost always empty street.<sup>109</sup>

108 Mosley, W. p. 13.

109 Mosley, W. p. 25.

Another indication of the reality of the Watts neighborhood comes when shots are heard close-by and a police helicopter goes overhead. Socrates is having a meeting with a group of friends when the incidents happen, and they barely respond to the sounds: “[f]rom somewhere blocks away four shots were fired in quick succession. The men all looked at the pinkish-brown wallpaper for a moment and then turned their attention back to the room.”<sup>110</sup> Similarly with the police helicopters, the response is sarcastic rather than surprised: “[t]he loud noise of a police helicopter sounded overhead [...] [t]he helicopter hovered over the building for a minute or two before moving off. ‘C-cops always be flyin’,’ Right said. ‘Shit if they come down here to earth maybe Petis wouldn’t be goin’ all over killin’ folks.”<sup>111</sup> These two reactions, or rather lack of them, demonstrate the acceptance that their neighbourhood is dangerous and that this is normal, yet is not something that would be accepted in the white communities, as Boyle’s writing has indicated.

Another telling example of the contrast between the life Socrates leads and the life typically expected in Los Angeles is illustrated when he first visits the Bounty Supermarket on Venice Boulevard. This is miles away from his neighbourhood in an affluent area of town and very different to his experience of shopping, which revolves around trying to collect enough recyclables to gain some money to only buy the most essential food. In contrast to the worn out, almost dirty feeling of his area of Los Angeles, the supermarket is a “glittering palace”<sup>112</sup> that immediately indicates cleanliness and wealth. These notions are continued in the rest of the description: “[t]he front wall was made from immense glass panes with steel framing to hold them in place. Through the big windows he could see long lines of customers with baskets full of food.”<sup>113</sup> The description ends with the recognition that this is not a place where someone like Socrates could shop, only somewhere he could work; the shoppers are white, the checkers and packers are black.<sup>114</sup>

The final, and perhaps most significant incident in the novel, that truly emphasises the difference between the life Socrates leads in Los Angeles, and the image of Los Angeles that has been mythologized, comes when he travels on the bus to Santa Monica. He explains to the bus driver why he is making the trip: “I wanna see the ocean. I been in L.A. for eight and a half years an’ I ain’t seen the ocean once.”<sup>115</sup> This announcement is the most poignant and revealing moment in the novel. It demonstrates just how different Socrates life, and by association the lives of those around him in Watts, is to the typical image of what life in Los Angeles is all about. Although presenting this contrast between Socrates’ life in Los Angeles and the typical images of the city, Mosley’s tone, and that of Socrates in the novel, is not resentful. Instead the focus is on notions such as improvement and community. Socrates’ is constantly helping those around him before himself, and is concerned about his community and those who live there. He is not bitter about having to live

110 Mosley, W. p. 26.

111 Mosley, W. p. 27.

112 Mosley, W. p. 63.

113 Mosley, W. p. 63.

114 Mosley, W. p. 63.

115 Mosley, W. p. 113.

in Watts, instead he wants to be proud of his neighbourhood and is emotionally attached to it and the people there. The overwhelming impressions that the novel gives are those of community, support and friendship that are directly connected to the area.

## **Conclusion**

As the analysis of the novels indicates, there are elements expressed in and by fiction that are not found in historical or theoretical writing. The techniques and procedures used by fiction allow an emphasis on emotions and responses that are not apparent or possible in non-fictional writing. Being able to emphasise aspects of the relationship with an individual or group and their surroundings, without being concerned with the distortion of facts, allows a distinctive investigation of the understanding of a place, and thus the contribution of fiction to studying places and areas is extremely important.

The novels discussed above use different tools and approaches to express relationships between characters and their surroundings, and often do this for varying effects. Jackson uses *Ramona* to depict the treatment of Mexicans and “mission Indians” in such a way that it wouldn’t feel like the American people were being preached at in yet another piece of tract writing. Fiction allowed Jackson to present the issue using the perspective of individual characters, exaggerating the connection between these people and the landscape they inhabited. By using story and characterization instead of statistics, Jackson’s writing was able to make her concerns appeal to and reach more people.

Norris employs a similar technique in his writing. He exaggerates both situations and metaphors to intensify the emotional connections between his characters and the landscape. He would not be able to do this using an historical account alone, and thus he draws on the facts of an event and fictionalizes them in order to gain the impact he wants.

Steinbeck too draws on actual events in his writing, this time presenting in his fiction an alternative perspective to that presented in the news media. Throughout the narrative Steinbeck moves between the idealized images of California and the lives and actual living conditions of the characters. The contrast produced by these conflicting images is fundamental to the way Steinbeck expresses the emotional impact of the landscape, and changes in it, on those occupying it. This movement between narrative perspectives, coupled with the very specific language that Steinbeck uses for each perspective is what gives his writing such emotional impact, and is something that would be difficult to achieve in non-fictional writing without appearing biased.

Nathaniel West has a very different approach to Jackson, Norris and Steinbeck. He is not overly concerned with the use of real events in his fiction. Instead his writing revels in the potentially destructive force of Los Angeles, and this is achievable precisely because it is a fictional account. West is then able to use this underlying wish for joyous destruction as a base for the other concerns throughout the novel.

Chandler writes using Los Angeles as a metaphor in itself, he draws on the city as the location for the American film industry as a way of using the city, and its superficiality, as a stage for his story. *The Big Sleep* is all about surface and appearances and Chandler uses aspects of the city and its emotional and physical landscape in order to help create the mood and metaphors that underlie his narrative. Once again, this is not a method that is employed in the historical or theoretical writing about cities, and thus presents the landscape in an entirely different way. Pynchon, Didion and Ellis also write using Los Angeles in this manner, with the city providing the underlying metaphor and atmosphere of the narrative. Pynchon combines the illogical, seemingly unstructured and confused landscape of Los Angeles, and couples it with an unreliable narrator, constantly changing spellings, conspiratorial plots and non-linear, non-sequential chronology. Didion uses the layout of the page and the language to emphasise the emotional and physical response of her characters to their surroundings. Ellis draws on Didion's approach and extends it in order to suggest a complete emotional disconnection between the protagonist and their surroundings. These four writers, their use of the city as the subject of their stories and the inspiration for their approach to the landscape in the novels, the response to it by their characters, and even their literary techniques, demonstrate just how differently fiction can respond to and represent relationships with urban environments.

Finally, Boyle and Mosley use their fiction as a way of demonstrating how one city can hold various experiences, and vast differences in lifestyle, within a few miles of each other. Boyle and Mosley present these ideas by focusing very closely on one or two experiences, and contrasting them using detailed imagery and language. Focusing on such specifics in this way is a technique rarely used in non-fictional writing as it is not representative, however, with fiction this does not need to be taken into account, and so authors can produce a narrative that deals primarily with emotional responses, rather than representative ones.

As these summaries show, fiction provides expressions of places according to different ways of understanding mapping or time, for example by not being forced to represent things in a linear way. The narratives discussed also illustrate the way that poignancy of experience can be highlighted by being able to simultaneously follow stories of two or more groups of people and the emotions they express. Fiction also tends to allow an insight into more generic spaces such as houses, freeways, beaches etc from a more personalized viewpoint, which again is able to represent the personal or emotion attachment felt to these places in ways that are different to objectified historical or theoretical writing. Finally, and most importantly, fiction can explore subjects such as emotion, death, love, hate, desire, struggle, hope, etc. that cannot be adequately expressed in other more distanced forms of writing. Literature represents a way of thinking that is not readily present in history and theory; it can be looked to for things that can be shown, but never properly explored, such as emotion, happiness and apocalypse. Fiction must therefore be explored alongside history and theory as another way to help comprehend the understanding and experiences of, and interactions with, landscape.

The most effective way to explore fiction is through the technique of textual analysis, like that used throughout the discussions of the novels in this chapter. This method allows a very close reading of a text, which, when dealing with such dense material, is paramount. In order to draw out the nuances of the emotional and physical, understanding of, and interaction with, landscape that fiction provides, every small detail is important, particularly with writing as dense as that of Steve Erickson. As the following chapter will show, Erickson's work is saturated with psychotopography, in concept, method and themes, and in order to fully comprehend it only such a close analysis of his writing will suffice.

**Chapter Three:** An Introduction to the fiction of Steve Erickson.

*What I would hope to do with my fiction is find a way to  
obliterate the barriers between the exterior landscapes  
and the interior ones.*

*Steve Erickson*

**Introduction**

Following the publication of Steve Erickson's debut novel *Days Between Stations* in 1985, the *San Francisco Chronicle* commented that "Erickson creates a world all his own. It is a world marked by familiar coordinates but always in fantastic light, as if seen for the very first time."<sup>1</sup> This remark encapsulates what lies at the core of Erickson's writing: those aspects that make his work so difficult to categorise, and thus respond to, within the boundaries of specific genres or disciplines. Although Erickson describes himself as a traditional writer with traditional concerns – love, freedom, sex, identity, idealism, redemption<sup>2</sup> – his expression of them is far from conventional. These familiar themes are articulated in a fantastic manner, through a manipulation of form, structure, and within the plots, time, history, linearity and spatiality. It is his treatment of these devices that has made his writing difficult to place within genres and disciplines. The "alternative" histories that appear in *Tours of the Black Clock* and *Arc d'X* and the apocalyptic landscapes that are often essential to his works seem to suggest that his novels are works of science fiction. Yet they rarely deal with any form of technology, or the future that might arise as a result of technology. Instead, Erickson's work presents varying expressions of the past, present and future that *already* exist, often simultaneously. This combination of tradition and eccentricity would perhaps suggest that Erickson's writings are postmodern. Indeed, this connection has been made on several occasions. However, as Erickson himself has pointed out;

[P]ostmodernism seems to involve a cultural or aesthetic self-awareness, and an insistence on art recognizing and tweaking its own artifice. My aim isn't to call attention to the artifice of my books but to make readers forget the artifice, to persuade them to exchange their reality for the one I've created.<sup>3</sup>

Erickson stresses that his fiction is not concerned with writing in a specifically self-conscious way, as is seen in much of the postmodern genre. Instead, he wishes to absorb his readers in the novels so that the non-linear or apocalyptic realities of the narratives become their realities as they read.

1 Quoted in Erickson, S. *Days Between Stations*. New York: Simon & Schuster. 2005.

2 Erickson, S. 'Formula for Arc d'X'. *Science fiction Eye*. Issue 12, Summer 1993.

3 Erickson, S. quoted in, 'An Interview with Steve Erickson.' McCaffery, L and Takayuki Tatsumi. *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 38. No. 3. Autumn 1997, pp. 399-400.



Similar difficulties arise when trying to attach Erickson's work to a particular discipline. Eight of his ten pieces of writing are novels, and thus are assumed to constitute fiction. However, the aforementioned novels *Tours of the Black Clock*, and *Arc d'X* use the historical figures of Hitler and Thomas Jefferson as central characters. Equally, the remaining two writings of the ten, *Leap Year* and *American Nomad*, are journalism covering the campaign trails of the 1988 and 1996 American Presidential elections. However, both of these works contain fictionalised elements. Therefore neither his novels nor journalism can be wholly and accurately described as fiction or non-fiction, literature or history.

Erickson has pursued notions of history and fiction being intricately connected to an individual's memory and psyche, despite the difficulties this provides for narrative construction and genre definition. The characters' emotional experience of, and response to, the landscape that surrounds them provides the basis for the psychotopographic nature of the novels and the complex relationship of themes in Erickson's work. It is this that makes him "so admirably equipped for the deep lateral exploration of our dire and marvelous era,"<sup>4</sup> as Erickson is concerned with the way that individuals' psychically and emotionally relate to their surroundings, and in order to do this he does not rely on the techniques or constraints of any one genre. Thus his writing can readily be discussed outside of the boundaries of specific academic disciplines.

Erickson grew up in the San Fernando Valley in California during the 1950s and has often spoken of how the shifting landscape around him had a significant impact both on his writing and his response to history. Erickson, when talking to Yoshiaki Koshikawa, explains how he "took it as a matter of course that all of [his] childhood reference points could be established and eliminated in the course of a childhood."<sup>5</sup> This degree of changeability was what informed both Erickson's relationship with the landscape around him and his understanding of history. He describes how it wasn't until he traveled to Europe in his twenties that he realised how unusual the experience of Los Angeles is, with its continually shifting urban topography and precarious natural landscape compared to cities such as Paris, which seemed ancient and solid in comparison. According to Erickson, it is not just the variable landscape that makes Los Angeles such an unusual city, but the broader psychic implications of the way the city has been constructed and is constantly being re-constructed, a characteristic of Los Angeles that has been pointed to by other writers such as McWilliams who is said to have commented that "there's no there, there", and theorists such as Edward Soja and Kevin Lynch who have worked extensively on notions of how to map such a difficult and shifting space.<sup>6</sup> He explains how "Los Angeles is not just up-to-the-hour new, it's up-to-the-minute new. And in Los Angeles if you drive by a building that was built in the 1930s, you're driving by history."<sup>7</sup> He describes

4 Gibson, W. As quoted in Erickson, S. 2005.

5 Koshikawa, Y. *History Changes Itself: An Interview with Steve Erickson*. 1993. np. From: [www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~nomad/koshikawa/profk](http://www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~nomad/koshikawa/profk)

6 Lynch, K. Soja, E. 1989.

7 Koshiawa, Y. 1993. np.

the city as “the furthest extension of the American idea taken to the point of no return,”<sup>8</sup> with people traveling to it “for the specific reason of displacing their reality with the one that Los Angeles allows them to invent.”<sup>9</sup> It is these factors that have led to the way that Erickson deals with the correlation between history, memory, psyche and landscape that features as the main thread throughout all of his work, over which “hovers the ghost of America.”<sup>10</sup>

### **The novels**

Although Erickson’s fictional writing is published as eight separate books, the concepts, motifs and themes that are evident throughout, coupled with recurrent characters, suggest that the works could be combined into one large volume that spans and captures the “millennium of the spirit”<sup>11</sup> that Erickson reflects. Indeed, writer and journalist Brian Evenson suggests that the elaborate connections from book to book and the introduction of the same characters in new contexts mean that his work might be considered “a big sprawling novel.”<sup>12</sup>

The intricacies of connection between the plots, characters and concerns of the novels are apparent both in the themes and motifs that Erickson uses across his writings, and also in the literary techniques he utilises. His writing is incredibly dense, often with single words or images being indicators of psychotopographic themes or concerns. As a result, the fiction must be carefully and deliberately inspected, not only for the conceptual details but for the mechanical devices. Textual analysis and a thematic close reading has been consciously chosen as the methodology used here for analyzing Erickson’s writing specifically because it focuses on the intricacies of writing, not only in relation to literary techniques employed, but also the broader themes and motifs that highlight Erickson’s concerns and psychotopography.

As a brief summary of each novel, their plots, characters and concerns demonstrates, each of the works has its own issues which are dealt with in a specific manner whilst continuing or expanding that which has come before. These intersections occur not only across the novels, but across the non-linear chronology of the stories that unfold, highlighting the impact that the concerns Erickson addresses have had on him, consciously and subconsciously.

### ***Days Between Stations***

8 Erickson, S. Summer 1993. np.

9 Koshikawa, Y. 1993. np.

10 Erickson, S. 1993. np.

11 Erickson, S. 1993. np.

12 Evenson, B. ‘The Romantic Fabulist Predicts a Dreamy Apocalypse’. *The Believer*, Third Issue, June 2003. p.11.

*Days Between Stations* (1985)<sup>13</sup>, the first of Erickson's novels, sets up many of the themes, motifs and techniques that Erickson uses throughout his writing. The plot shifts between three narratives, which span two centuries, and eventually come together through a complex series of events and connections. The non-linear, almost cyclical plot structure is a method that Erickson uses and manipulates in more complex ways in the later novels as the form of his writing echoes his concerns more evidently. Erickson interweaves the lives of three characters. Lauren is a woman whose cyclist husband is continually unfaithful, and whose son has died inexplicably. She becomes connected to the second character, Michel, a man who wakes up one morning unable to remember anything about his life. His search for his past coincides not only with Lauren, but also with the final character, Adolphe Sarre, an ageing film director whose entire life has been consumed by the attempt to make a film. All of these narratives span not only a series of decades, but also different continents. The most significant aspect of the novel is the way that the shifting emotions of the characters become manifest in the shifting landscape that they occupy. As Lauren and Michel become involved and their emotions confused, the landscape of Los Angeles become engulfed in sandstorms, then, as they move to Paris, the city experiences the harshest winter in its history. This connection between emotions and landscape lies at the core of psychotopography, and is fundamental to Erickson's narratives.

### ***Rubicon Beach***

*Rubicon Beach* (1986)<sup>14</sup> follows many of the same literary traits seen in *Days Between Stations*, with the intersection of various narratives that gradually become intricately entwined before revealing themselves as part of the same story, despite arching decades, or even slightly different constructions of the same geography. In this novel the psychotopography is more dramatic. The protagonist, Cale, is released from jail and taken to Los Angeles. The city presented by Erickson, however, is vastly different to the Los Angeles the reader might be expecting; it is flooded and connected by an elaborate canal system, which leads out to a harbour where semi-submerged buildings are reachable only by boat. Not only is the physical city changed, but the psychic one, as music, created by the sounds of the water, affects the moods of the citizens. Cale begins to have visions of a murder and becomes consumed by trying to find out who the killer and victim are. It turns out that the murderer is a girl from the South American jungles, who exists in a history that is seemingly parallel to that which Cale occupies. She crosses between the histories at various points in the novel, and eventually ends up on some train tracks traveling west across a vast river along with a mathematician who is trying to find the number between nine and ten. This coming together of strange landscapes and histories appears frequently in Erickson's writing, the movement between which is often triggered by the emotional states of the characters shifting between them.

13 Erickson, S. *Days Between Stations*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985.

14 Erickson, S. *Rubicon Beach*. London: Quartet, 1986.

### ***Tours of the Black Clock***

*Tours of the Black Clock* (1989)<sup>15</sup>, the third of Erickson's "fiction" pieces, continues his interest in the nature of history and geography to such an extent that it refigures the history of the twentieth century. However, this occurs not in a manner suggestive of science fiction,<sup>16</sup> but as a sideline to the main story of character Banning Jainlight. Indeed, as the events unfold it becomes clear that this is not even necessarily an "alternative" history but a change that occurred as a result of certain personal decisions made by Jainlight. *Tours of the Black Clock* is also the first of two novels that reconfigures an historical character. In this case Erickson uses the figure of Adolf Hitler, who is the model for the character of Z. Jainlight becomes Z's personal pornographer. Whilst writing the pornographic stories for Z, Jainlight has hallucinations of being with a woman. These visions seem like dreams, yet, Dana, the woman Jainlight sees, actually experiences being with Jainlight. Once again, Erickson gradually brings these co-existing chronologies together at the end of the novel, in a shift of both history and landscape, as Jainlight attempts to come to terms with his emotions.

### ***Arc d'X***

Erickson's fourth novel, *Arc d'X* (1993)<sup>17</sup> clearly follows closely from *Tours of the Black Clock*. Again this book deals with a fictionalised account of history, or a form of alternative history, whilst weaving and cutting between a complex series of perspectives that eventually come together to form a cyclical narrative rather than a linear whole. The novel begins with the story of Thomas Jefferson, (or rather, Erickson's version of him) and follows his struggle with the notion of happiness and its connection to his feelings about slavery. Thomas struggles with the fact that his personal pursuit of happiness comes from his sexual possession of a slave girl, despite his belief in the abolition of slavery. He therefore becomes trapped by the incompatibility of his ideals and his emotions. Again, Erickson splits the narrative into two alternate histories, one focusing on the life of Thomas, and the other on the alternative life of Sally Hemings, his slave lover. In the alternate history Sally remains tied to Thomas, despite having a completely different life in a strange, futuristic volcanic landscape. Throughout *Arc d'X* Erickson plays on the connections, both literal and metaphorical, between the emotions of the characters, their ideas and the landscapes they occupy.

### ***Amnesiascope***

*Amnesiascope* (1996)<sup>18</sup>, Erickson's fourth novel, marks a slight departure from the style of his earlier works. Although the themes, motifs and trajectory of his concerns remain the same, the style is very different. *Amnesiascope* is a rambling episodic narrative written entirely in the first person and follows an unnamed

15 Erickson, S. *Tours of the Black Clock*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989.

16 Such as seen in Philip K. Dick's *Man in the High castle*. (1962)

17 Erickson, S. *Arc D'x*. London: Vintage, 1993.

18 Erickson, S. *Amnesiascope*. London: Quartet, 1996.

narrator, the implication being that he is some incarnation of Erickson himself, and that the novel is somewhat autobiographical and confessional. The story takes place in an apocalyptic version of Los Angeles, this time after an earthquake, where “backfires” burn in rings around the city and it rains ashes. The novel opens with the narrator moving suites in the run down Hotel Hamblin where he is living, from a small apartment to a suite on the top floor with windows that look out across almost every direction of the city. While this is taking place, the narrator explains how the devastation of the city matches or possibly changes according to his emotion and psychic state. Throughout the novel, the protagonist attempts to navigate the strange landscape of Los Angeles, negotiating the numerous time zones and living with first extreme rain, and then heat, before eventually attempting to leave the ravaged city behind for the bleak landscape of the desert. All the while the character attempts to make sense of the emotional and psychic decisions he has made throughout his life. Eventually the narrator decides that his psyche and memory are too connected with the city of Los Angeles, and its apocalyptic landscape, and so returns for a final attempt to make sense of things, at which point the novel ends, leaving the reader without closure.

### ***The Sea Came in at Midnight***

*The Sea Came in at Midnight* (1999)<sup>19</sup> sees Erickson return to his previous style with a strange, slightly non-linear plot that jumps around in chronology and often switches between first and third person narrators and viewpoints. The novel opens with the character of Kristen answering a personal ad to become the companion of a man who has become emotionally ravaged by his wife walking out on him with their unborn child. In an attempt to make sense of the chaos of his life the man, known only as the Occupant, has spent his life mapping the new millennium, which according to him happened years before the year 2000, eventually creating a shifting apocalyptic calendar. Alongside the Occupant’s life story, Erickson also tells the story of a husband and wife team of pornographers who invent the first snuff film. Through a series of circumstances all of their lives coincide at various points in the narrative. In this novel Erickson seems to focus on the connection between emotion and history, shown in particular through the relationship between the Occupant and the understanding of the millennium he builds up as a result of emotional events in his life. Similarly, Erickson seems to suggest different forms of mapping, for example mapping subjective things such as love or dreams, rather than mapping landscape.

### ***Our Ecstatic Days***

Although it is usual for common themes, motifs and sometimes even characters to turn up across Erickson’s writing, *Our Ecstatic Days* (2005)<sup>20</sup> is the first time that one of his works has been written as a sequel to a previous novel. The story in *Our Ecstatic Days* picks up approximately four years after the end of *The Sea*

19 Erickson, S. *The Sea Came in at Midnight*. London: Quartet, 1999.

20 Erickson, S. *Our Ecstatic Days*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005.

*Came in at Midnight* and the birth of Kristen's son Kierkegaard. They are living in a run down hotel in a Los Angeles that has been transformed by a lake that one day just rose up and slowly began engulfing the centre of the downtown area. As in *Rubicon Beach*, the landscape of Los Angeles becomes completely transformed by water; however this time it is most explicitly connected to the emotions of the protagonists, with the lake actively ebbing according to Kristen's feelings and encounters. It is also from this novel that the term "psychotopography" originates, as one character refers directly to the way that, "the lake has manifested its own psyche, altering the surrounding psychotopography."<sup>21</sup> In *Our Ecstatic Days* Erickson also uses literary techniques to express his themes, rather than relying solely on plot or narration. As a result the text layout on the page changes according to shifts in characters locations or emotions. It is this novel that represents the apotheosis of psychotopography in Erickson's writing.

### **Zeroville**

The most recent of Erickson's novel marks another move away from his usual style. *Zeroville* (2008),<sup>22</sup> follows the story of Vikar, a man so obsessed with film that he has a tattoo of Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift on his shaved head. In contrast to the previous novels, *Zeroville* has a fast-paced linear plot, and does not use shifting or apocalyptic landscape. Although the character of Vikar fits the obsessive, compulsive behaviour of previous protagonists, he is not a character that is emotionally expressive. It seems that having taken psychotopography to its metaphorical, literal and literary heights in *Our Ecstatic Days* Erickson has decided to attempt a more straightforward narrative structure. The events within the plot however, remain unusual, with Vikar frantically searching for a film that exists within the frames of all other films.

### **The critical response**

Despite the fact that Erickson has been writing for more than two decades there has been little critical academic response to his work. Brian Evenson's article in *The Believer* provides the only overview, specifically questioning why it seems to have been sidelined. In the academic arena, Lee Spinks and Jim Murphy have both published papers dealing with the role of history in his work. Amy Elias briefly refers to *Arc d'X* in her piece about postmodernism and the Enlightenment, and Paul Kincaid's essays in *Foundation*, the science fiction review, explore the nature of time, chronology and morality. Aside from these, however, the majority of writing about Erickson consists of interviews and book reviews. Although the detailed conversations conducted by Larry McCaffery, Rob Trucks and Yoshiaki Koshikawa are useful, and offer insight into topics such as Erickson's influences, they fail to provide the textual analysis needed to gain a

21 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 110.

22 Erickson, S. *Zeroville*. New York: Europa, 2007.

comprehensive understanding of both the individual novels and overall concerns. As a closer exploration will demonstrate, the critical work already produced on Erickson remains limited in its scope.

Brian Evenson's article "The Romantic Fabulist Predicts A Dreamy Apocalypse" in the June 2003 issue of *The Believer* discusses the ways in which Erickson does not quite fit amongst typical white male postmodern writers, and how this, coupled with the difficulty of not being quite old enough to be considered Pynchon or DeLillo's peer, and not quite young enough to fit with writers such as Foster Wallace and Moody, means that his work has been largely overlooked. One of the strengths of Evenson's piece is his focus on the notion of postmodern writing. He correctly highlights the fact that that the Pynchon blurb that appeared on Erickson's first novel immediately categorised his writing as postmodern, and, as a result, whenever his work is mentioned references to Pynchon arise. At this point, rather than address whether or not Erickson's work actually *is* postmodern, Evenson points to the ambiguity of the term, meaning that instead of committing Erickson to being, or not being postmodern, he is able to maintain that he is a little of both. This ambiguity may frustrate readers of his article, but Evenson has captured immediately part of the essence of Erickson's writing. From this premise Evenson is then able to talk more specifically about aspects of the novels.

Instead of focusing on specific themes in the novels, Evenson's article continues to concentrate on aspects of the work that set him aside from his (not-quite) peers. He points to the lyrical rhythm of Erickson's prose, that is "anti-macho,"<sup>23</sup> compared to the staccato sequences found in the narrative of someone like DeLillo. The florid quality of Erickson's writing,<sup>24</sup> according to Evenson, highlights his romanticism, which is an almost paradoxical part of Erickson's work, considering the cynicism that is also strongly present. It is this observation that leads Evenson into the second half of his article looking at the originality of Erickson's writing: his "out-of-stepness."<sup>25</sup> It is here that Evenson explores "Erickson's fixation on multiple – and competing and contradicting – realities"<sup>26</sup> with a more detailed outline of the novels and their subjects. Evenson uses this to consider the narrative complexity that is evident throughout Erickson's writing. He argues that the plot formulations and heterotopic spaces of the novels serve to maintain the apocalyptic aspects at both a structural and thematic level. Although Evenson is limited in the space he has to discuss Erickson's work, his overview is extremely successful and indeed manages to provide suggestions as to why Erickson's work has not been more thoroughly examined.

The academic response to Erickson's work has been specific in its focus, concentrating on particular aspects of one or two of his novels, rather than his works as a whole. Lee Spinks' essay "Jefferson at the Millennial Gates: History and Apocalypse in the Fiction of Steve Erickson" is an example of this. It explores specifically the way that Erickson uses the figure of Jefferson, with the novel *Arc d'X* as his

23 Evenson, B. p.10.

24 Evenson, B. p.10.

25 Evenson, B. p.12.

26 Evenson, B. p.12.

particular focus, and a peripheral use of other novels to expand and strengthen his argument. Spinks' discussion also relies upon the theoretical work of Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida in order to put Erickson's figuration of history into a broader context. The overall concern of the piece is to demonstrate the way that American history and identity lie at the core of all of Erickson's other themes.

Like Evenson, Spinks, early in his essay, refers to the correlation between the thematic and structural concerns of Erickson's narratives. He follows this by outlining how "Erickson's fascination with the apocalyptic structure of the American origin diffuses itself continually throughout his fiction and animates much of the following discussion."<sup>27</sup> Indeed it is the correlation between Erickson's interest in the construction of America and the recurrent theme of the apocalypse that Spinks argues underlies all of Erickson's other concerns. Primarily Spinks seems concerned with the way that Erickson uses the figure of Jefferson, and more broadly the understanding of American history and identity, as the crux around which the other themes and motifs are conceived and configured.

He points out the difficulty presented by Erickson's work, the "unavoidable impression made [...] by spatial and temporal disorientation"<sup>28</sup> and the simultaneous use of linear and cyclical narrative. In order to make more sense of this construction Spinks turns to Benjamin's remarks about the "angel of history" and the way that history itself is both cyclical and linear. The discussion moves swiftly from this seeming contradiction, to the notion that America too has been formulated on a paradox, and it is here that Spinks makes an unfortunate mistake. He argues that Erickson believes "like Jean Baudrillard, in the "paradoxical" idea that America is an 'achieved utopia'."<sup>29</sup> Spinks has misread Baudrillard's original comment and in doing so has subtly, yet fundamentally, changed the nature of his remark. Baudrillard's original comment, that Spinks himself places in his footnotes, implies *not* that America has actually reached a state of utopia, as Spinks reading suggests, but that it "has behaved from the very beginning *as though* it were already achieved."<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the connection between the thinking of Baudrillard, and what Erickson is suggesting in his novels is correct, but only when referring to Baudrillard's original comment. The suggestion according to Spinks' reading, that Erickson believes America is an already achieved utopia, is not an accurate reflection of either Erickson's or Baudrillard's response to America. Fortunately for Spinks, this small error does not seem to affect the rest of his essay, as the focus soon shifts to the reconfiguration of the character of Thomas Jefferson and the "tension between history and what exceeds and perhaps constitutes the historical"<sup>31</sup> in the three novels Spinks will refer to, *Leap Year*, *American Nomad* and *Arc d'X*.

The notion that time, history and memory are simultaneously cyclical and linear is one that Spinks returns to at the centre of his essay, at which point he turns to Derrida's analysis of "spectropoetics" to

27 Spinks, L. 'Jefferson at the Millennial Gates: History and Apocalypse in the Fiction of Steve Erickson'. In. *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 40. No. 2. Summer 1999. p. 215.

28 Spinks, L. p. 216.

29 Spinks, L. p. 218.

30 Baudrillard, J. *America*. Trans. Chris Turner. London, Verso: 1988 p. 28. Italics mine.

31 Spinks, L. p. 218.



enrich his understanding of Erickson's writing. He argues that "Derrida's insistence that the meaning of history is produced at the intersection of the future and the past" and "offers a useful context within which to explore the formal and thematic character of Erickson's writing."<sup>32</sup> Spinks then uses this Derridian notion as a way of launching into the more detailed exploration of *Arc d'X* that forms the climax of his essay, the core focus of which is the meaning produced by Erickson's understanding and construction of the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave lover Sally Hemings. Spinks argues that this "relationship" is utilised by Erickson "because it supplies him with the vibrant metaphors with which to represent the imaginative negotiation between inauguration and nihilism that he detects in the Jeffersonian sense of history"<sup>33</sup> the impact of which, Spinks' essay aims to demonstrate, is evident throughout Erickson's work.

Similarly to Spinks, Jim Murphy's piece "Pursuits and Revolutions: History's Figures in Steve Erickson's *Arc d'X*"<sup>34</sup> again focuses specifically on Erickson's formulation of history and construction and use of the character of Thomas Jefferson. Murphy opens his essay with a recognition of Erickson's narrative acuity, the historiographic weaving of fact and fiction and the notion of "America" as a psychological country. It is these issues that Murphy posits are central to *Arc d'X*, and thus also to his essay. In order to explore these considerations more thoroughly Murphy grounds his response by referring to various theories of historiography, Faulkner's influence on Erickson and a comparison of Erickson's techniques and Escher's art. The combination of these theme allows for the "historical, scientific and psychological" exploration of the novel that Murphy aims to provide.

Murphy begins his discussion by referring to Linda Hutcheon's observation that in much postmodern art, although the formalist and historic coincide, there is no dialectic, leaving unresolved tensions and contradictions.<sup>35</sup> He believes that this statement helps the consideration of the tensions between Jefferson and Hemings in *Arc d'X*. Unfortunately the plot summary of the novel that follows this argument demonstrates the difficulty in applying Hutcheon's statement to Erickson's work. It is clear that Erickson cannot be considered a formalist, as there is a strong correlation between form and content in his work, with each informing the other. In addition, there is a clear connection between his choice of form and structure and the concerns he is trying to demonstrate, which are both situated in, and respond to, American History.

Murphy points to the negative criticism Erickson received in response to *Arc d'X* and states that it "focuses too much on traditional notions of how a fictional plot ought to work"<sup>36</sup> from which point he turns the discussion to the impact of Faulkner's influence on Erickson's construction of narrative. Murphy highlights how Faulkner's form reflected the psychological combination of his characters, just as is evident in *Arc d'X*.

32 Spinks, L. pp. 229-230.

33 Spinks, L. p. 231.

34 Murphy, J. 'Pursuits and Revolutions: History's Figures in Steve Erickson's *Arc d'X*.' In. *Modern Fiction Studies*. Volume 46. No. 2. Summer 2000. pp. 451-479.

35 Murphy, J. p. 453.

36 Murphy, J. p. 455.

Although he is indeed correct to make this connection, again it only serves to emphasize that his previous allegiance to Hutcheon's comments is invalid for Erickson's work. Murphy uses the connections between Faulkner and Erickson to explore the nature of time and chronology in the novel. Having picked up on Erickson's understanding that in Faulkner's work reality ticks to the clock of memory, not time, Murphy argues that the time scheme in *Arc d'X* "is a significant gesture by Erickson to incorporate the nonlinear physics of chaos" into his writing.<sup>37</sup> It is true that Erickson's sense of time, chronology and history is far from linear, however Murphy's response seems far too scientific and calculated for Erickson's writing. It is more likely that Erickson's response to time is an emotional one, rather than a conscious effort to incorporate chaos theory into his work. Fortunately Murphy addresses this in more detail towards the close of his article.

Murphy returns to historiographic theory in order to explore more closely Erickson's possibly problematic use of the figure of Thomas Jefferson. Here he calls on work by both Hutcheon and Naomi Jacobs, arguing that fiction writers should be allowed a certain degree of freedom when using historical figures due to the subjective nature of history itself. It is from this that the core of Murphy's discussion develops, pointing to the ambiguities of Jefferson and the relationship between love and freedom. Finally Murphy connects the paradoxical and cyclical images of Escher's art work with the structure and form of Erickson's writing, again returning to its affinities with scientific chaos theory. It is here that he makes it clear that "the book's more chaotic dynamics are part of an artistic vision that accommodates the theory, not vice versa."<sup>38</sup> However, the discussion that follows is grounded in Hayles work exploring the potential of chaos theory in fiction, the cause and effect notions evident in *Arx d'X* and the relationship between the theories of relativity and chaos and the arcs of emotion throughout the novel. From this mention of the emotions and psychologies within *Arc d'X*, Murphy begins the close of his essay with a reference to the portrayal of race relations in the novel and the subsequent mentalities that grow out of this and permeate the narrative. Although Erickson uses the relationship between Jefferson and his slave Sally as the core of the novel, the racial issue that forms the basis of its difficulty is used as a catalyst for broader concerns. He uses it, as Murphy recognizes, at the end of his writing, to re-assess history whilst highlighting the conflicts and paradoxes that form the foundations of the nature of American identity.

Paul Kincaid's essays published in *Foundation* not only take a step away from the focus on history in Erickson's writing, they also serve to outline how easily his writing can be considered as part of a number of genres. The previous academic criticism of Spinks and Murphy places Erickson's work across the boundaries of historiographic and postmodernist fiction, whereas here it is referred to as science-fiction. Kincaid's first piece is "Secret Maps: The Topography of fantasy and Morality in the Work of Steve

37 Murphy, J., p. 157.

38 Murphy, J. p. 465.

Erickson.”<sup>39</sup> His second essay is a slightly shorter companion piece called “Defying Rational Chronology: Time and Identity in the Work of Steve Erickson.”<sup>40</sup> The two works focus on the same four novels, *Days Between Stations*, *Rubicon Beach*, *Tours of the Black Clock* and *Leap Year*, exploring slightly different themes, whilst highlighting the crossover between them. It is possible that the two essays could have been combined, especially as there are duplicated paragraphs, however since they are published separately they are considered as such here.

Kincaid’s first essay opens with a recognition of the role of barriers and boundaries in Erickson’s work and the topographical and temporal landscapes within which these are situated. From this, Kincaid progresses to emphasise the importance of maps in Erickson’s novels, arguing that they fascinate him not as guides, but as icons and “representations of the real world which are as unreliable as fictions.”<sup>41</sup> Although Kincaid is correct in realising the importance of maps in Erickson’s work, there are two failings in his reading of how this presents itself in the novels, which become an underlying problem in his essay. The first error, which becomes increasingly evident and fundamental as the piece progresses, is that Erickson’s notion of what a map might be, is much broader than Kincaid recognises. It is from this that the second error arises; Erickson *does* use maps as guides throughout his novels, however they are not necessarily used, relied upon, or successful in this respect, often making them more significant. This very failure of different guises of maps as guides is an important aspect of Erickson’s writing.

Kincaid then goes on to make some interesting observations, particularly in relation to the role of topography in the novels. He points to the reoccurrence of natural disasters in the books, such as the sandstorms in *Days Between Stations*, and emphasises the “specific link between changes in the natural world and the psychology of Erickson’s characters.”<sup>42</sup> From this literal landscape Kincaid moves on to focus on the landscape of the twentieth-century mind, and the way that this is portrayed in the novels not only thematically, but structurally, with disjointed plots and narratives. These shifts, which are often disconcerting for the reader, with the central character only referred to as “he” or “she” for several pages, are, according to Kincaid, another way of Erickson breaking down the barriers of time and space, an action which is crucial to the, often strange, topography.

Kincaid makes a connection between memory, identity and temporal and geographic location, and explores this with detailed reference to instances in the novels. However, within this lies another questionable statement. Kincaid argues that, “in [the] constant questioning of reality, emotions are only real if they are shared, as if the sharing is all that breaks the isolation.”<sup>43</sup> Evidence from the novels however,

39 Kincaid, P. ‘Secret Maps: The Topography of Fantasy and Morality in the Work of Steve Erickson’, *Foundation* Volume 57. Spring 1993. pp. 26-48.

40 Kincaid P. ‘Defying Rational Chronology: Time and Identity in the Work of Steve Erickson’, *Foundation*. Volume 58. Summer 1993. pp. 28-42.

41 Kincaid, P. Spring 1993. p. 27.

42 Kincaid, P. Spring 1993. p. 28.

43 Kincaid, P. Spring 1993. p. 31

illustrates that this is not the case. The characters in Erickson's work frequently have fundamental problems sharing their emotions and experiences, often because they themselves cannot understand them. Therefore their isolation and alienation is never broken. Interestingly Kincaid himself seems to point to this in his following sentence which comments that "such alienation is reified in the surreal landscapes within which the characters move,"<sup>44</sup> thus contradicting himself.

The following section of Kincaid's essay is an extended piece of textual analysis using *Days Between Stations*, *Rubicon Beach* and *Tours of the Black Clock* which continues his discussion of the connection between the landscape within which the characters are situated and their memory, identity and psyche, a correlation that is essential to Erickson's work. Finally, Kincaid draws his argument to a close by focusing on *Leap Year*, Erickson's journalism about the 1988 American Presidential Election campaign, that includes fictional elements about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. Here his comments about the nature of landscape in Erickson's work culminate in a discussion of America, as it is dealt with in his novels. Kincaid, like Spinks and Murphy, is aware of Erickson's obsession with America having been "born in contradiction"<sup>45</sup> and concludes that it is this notion, which lies at the heart of America, that is also the core of Erickson's writing. Thus, Kincaid surmises, "topography [...] is stretched and distorted, time twists and turns and even identity becomes fragmentary."<sup>46</sup>

Kincaid's second essay "Defying Rational Chronology: Time and Identity in the Work of Steve Erickson", builds from the conclusions in the previous piece. Kincaid premises his writing on Erickson's way of "breaking down the normal structure of time and space to isolate his characters"<sup>47</sup> from which he begins to explore the connections between chronology and psyche in the four novels. He describes the way that what he calls "private time"<sup>48</sup> permeates Erickson's narratives, and it is this "private time" which is at the heart of the shaping of the character's identities. Kincaid moves from this back to the theme of topography and restates many of the issues addressed in his previous essay, such as the link between dislocated landscape, chronology, memory and identity. Although this essentially repeats his earlier work, the analysis does subtly pick up on a few motifs in Erickson's writing, such as the importance of windows, music, rivers and the emotions of betrayal and guilt, which are evident in the broader themes.

Interestingly one of the things that all these academic responses to Erickson's work share is their underlying assumption that his work should be considered postmodern. Indeed Amy Elias' writing on *The Postmodern Turn on (:) the Enlightenment*, which very briefly refers to Erickson's *Arc d'X*, does so because it is one of "the most provocative of contemporary novels that [takes] the eighteenth century as [its] setting

44 Kincaid, P. Spring 1993. p. 31.

45 Kincaid, P. Spring 1993. p. 47.

46 Kincaid, P. Spring 1993. p. 47.

47 Kincaid, P. Summer 1993. p.27.

48 Kincaid, P. Summer 1993. p.27.

[...] to ask [...] the central question of postmodern theory: 'Was the Enlightenment a Good Thing?'"<sup>49</sup>

Therefore the implicit understanding is that Erickson's books are postmodern. This problematic assumption, as accentuated earlier in Evenson's *Believer* article, is one topic that Erickson often responds to during interviews. Erickson is aware of this characterisation of his work, and yet feels that it doesn't accurately describe the way he writes. Instead he believes that his work, despite its often disjunctive plot construction, is very traditional. An examination of these interviews and the recurrent questions and topics that arise, when combined with the academic articles, provide a basis from which to begin a more thorough exploration of the themes and motifs in Erickson's work.

### **Erickson in conversation**

Despite the shortage of academic or critical responses to Erickson's work, there are numerous interviews with him in print. These range in context and detail; some merely introductory and focusing on the publication of his newest novel, others more comprehensive and concerned with the broader scope of his work. There is, as can be expected, a degree of repetition across these conversations, which provides confirmation of the themes and topics that Erickson is dealing with. Three of the most useful and extended interviews are those with Larry McCaffery, Rob Trucks and Yoshiaki Koshikawa. These pieces cover not only the concerns present in Erickson's writing, but also the influences, both literary and environmental, which have had a significant impact on his work and his approach to it.

One of the most prominent topics highlighted by these interviews is Erickson's relationship with Los Angeles and Hollywood and how this affects his writing. It becomes clear, as the conversations progress, that Los Angeles and its ideology has significantly impacted upon Erickson and his novels. When talking to Rob Trucks he suggests that he aims to create a Los Angeles in his imagination that is close to the true spirit of the city.<sup>50</sup> He refers to the way that people who go to the city do so because of the way it displaces reality,<sup>51</sup> a feature present in much of his writing, something which seems to be linked to rapid changeability, another trait of Los Angeles that is also present in Erickson's narrative and plot structure. Erickson also argues that Los Angeles can be considered the "subconscious" city. It is free-associative and has the ability to connect random associations. In his conversation with McCaffery he speaks of the way that "any random influence permeates the city's membrane."<sup>52</sup> Similarly, later, when talking to Koshikawa about *Amnesiascope* Erickson outlines how he has used the city in that novel as an "urban apocalyptic metaphor"

49 Elias, A. 'The Postmodern Turn on (:):the Enlightenment.', *Contemporary Literature*. Volume 37. No. 4. Winter 1999. p. 534.

<sup>50</sup> Erickson, S. In Trucks, R. *The Pleasure of Influence: Conversations with Male American Fiction Writers*. Indiana: Purdue University Press. 2002. p. 45.

51 Erickson, S. In Koshikawa, Y. 1993. np.

52 Erickson, S. In McCaffery, L and Takayuki Tatsumi. 'An Interview with Steve Erickson' *Contemporary Literature*. Vol. 38. No. 3. Autumn 1997

for the emotions and psychology of the narrator. This demonstrates the suggestion that Los Angeles is a city that is simultaneously created by and creating its occupants.

One more implied aspect of Los Angeles that Erickson's interviews express is the relationship between the city and memory, as is subtly expressed in the quote Erickson gives Koshikawa from *Amnesiascope* in which the narrator comments "LA surrounds me in amnesiascope." The importance of memory, how it is constructed and affects an individual's emotions and its connection to the response to time, is a theme that runs throughout Erickson's work and comes from the influence of Faulkner who taught him that "time ticks not to the clock on the wall but to the clock of the psyche,"<sup>53</sup> In the Trucks interview, Erickson expands on this, explaining that *Go Down, Moses* and *The Sound and the Fury* "were doing things with memory and consciousness that had a big impact."<sup>54</sup> Similarly in *Light in August*, Faulkner frames the plot around the subplot, and that this resonated with him.<sup>55</sup> Faulkner's character Joe Christmas also influenced the way that Erickson responds to the American identity, something that is an underlying issue throughout his writing. He comments to Koshikawa that Christmas is the ultimate American character because of the connection between the confusion and paradoxes that surround him and his ambiguous racial identity and America being born out of the "moral confusion and moral bankruptcy of slavery."<sup>56</sup> Erickson called his seventh novel *American Nomad* because he believes that America is a fragmented country within which people are becoming disenfranchised and spiritually nomadic.

The fragmented nature of both Los Angeles, and on a greater scale America, is a fundamental part of Erickson's writing, both schematically and thematically. Erickson himself openly states that he is "sure the way my narratives work so disjunctively has a lot to do with growing up in Los Angeles, watching the landscape change constantly."<sup>57</sup> The complex non-linear structures of Erickson's novels often raise questions about his writing process. He comments that he never uses an outline or notes when writing, preferring instead that the novel sounds as if it is written from the head and heart, not an outline. Erickson explains that he also likes to experience the momentum of the narrative like the reader, and so he writes from beginning to end, an interestingly linear approach that contrasts with his disorientating non-linear plots. When talking to McCaffery Erickson states that he wishes he "was naturally more inclined to write a linear story"<sup>58</sup> but that he just is not able to do so, as his choice of influences, both conscious and subconscious implicitly seem to suggest. Instead he writes instinctively and aims to involve the reader as deeply as possible in his work.<sup>59</sup> One of the most significant ways that Erickson seems to manage this is through the

53 Erickson, S. In Koshikawa, Y. *Finding a way to Obliterate the Barriers*. 1997. np. From: [www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~nomad/koshikawa/profk](http://www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~nomad/koshikawa/profk)

54 Erickson, S. In Trucks, R. p. 59.

55 Erickson, S. In Trucks, R. p. 59.

56 Erickson, S. In Koshikawa, Y. 1997. np

57 Erickson, S. In McCaffery.

58 Erickson, S. In McCaffery.

59 Erickson, S. In McCaffery.

complex network of themes, motifs, signs and connections that are present in not only one novel, but across his oeuvre.

The interviews conducted with Erickson, like the academic responses to his writing, begin to highlight themes and issues in his work, yet they too are limited in their scope and provide even less of an opportunity for the detailed textual analysis to which Erickson's novels lend themselves. However, when combined with the academic critical writings, the conversations carried out by Trucks, McCaffery and Koshikawa can provide a starting point from which to begin a more detailed outline of the signs, signifiers, themes and motifs used by Erickson and from which a more extensive discussion of his work can then be realised.

### **Themes and motifs**

The complexity of the construction of Erickson's narratives with their strange combination of simultaneously logical and illogical historiography and concurrent linear and non-linear plot construction is both fundamental to, and the result of, the concerns he is addressing in his writings. The best way to begin exploring this is to outline the overarching issues present throughout his novels, and then use this to highlight the motifs he uses as signifiers or metaphors.

The themes found in Erickson's work are, unsurprisingly, just as complex as his actual writing. They are often interconnected, or overlapping, and frequently this occurs not with one theme, but several. This demonstrates just how complex and palimpsestic Erickson's ideas and narrative are, and how densely packed they become when the additional layer of motifs and signifiers is revealed. The broad themes that form the basis of Erickson's underlying concerns can be loosely described as history, memory, psyche and personal identity. These are connected through the topics of time, chronology and various forms of apocalypse. Arising from these themes comes an exploration of Los Angeles that again occurs on several levels. Encompassing all of these areas is the subject of national (American) identity and an explication of the notion of America itself. It is the combination of these topics, and the way Erickson intimately connects characters, signs and signifiers with landscape (both an emotional and literal landscape), that makes a study of psychotopography in his work paramount.

There are numerous motifs and techniques that Erickson places throughout his writing, ranging from loose aspects such as his interest in forms of loss, to more specific things like the importance of water, or the use of ellipsis. These are then interwoven both within and across the novels to form an intricate network representing Erickson's concerns on a subtle textual level. For the purpose of this section, however, the analysis will simply point out the existence of such motifs, and the layers within them, leaving until later the detailed exploration of how and why they are used and the relevance of this to Erickson's overall concerns and influences.

Given the interrelation of landscape and emotion that lies at the core of psychotopography, it is unsurprising that two of the key themes in Erickson's are emotion and happiness. What is important is the distinction between the two. Emotions act as catalysts throughout Erickson's work, with motifs of loss, desire, betrayal, guilt and desperation driving the characters and plots and subsequently causing the psychotopographic shifts – emotional and geographic – within the fiction. Happiness, however, is not simply treated by Erickson as an extension of the emotions within the novels. Instead it is connected to various other notions, such as those of identity and the separation of personal and public life. The pursuit of happiness is an ideal that fascinates Erickson, and how this plays out in his novels is extremely important, particularly in relation to his character's response to landscape and history and the literal shifts of chronology that occur during the novel's plots.

Natural disasters, and shifts in landscape, are some of the motifs that have the biggest direct impact on the characters in the novels, and of course the most obvious metaphorical connotations. Events across the novels include sandstorms (*Days Between Stations*), earthquakes (*Amnesiascope*) and the looming potential eruption of a volcano (*Arc d'X*), all of which hint at impending or perhaps even occurring apocalypse. An extension of this is seen with the continual significance of water in Erickson's work. Storms occur in many of his novels, particularly in *Rubicon Beach* and *Our Ecstatic Days*, as does flooding, in *Amnesiascope* and *Our Ecstatic Days*. However, water is also present in a less immediately dramatic way. Lake Zed that begins to rise in the centre of Los Angeles in *Our Ecstatic Days* arrives suddenly, but rises gradually, and retreats in the same way. Similarly, in *Days Between Stations*, although Lauren witnesses the receding of the oceans in Europe, and arrives in Venice to empty canals, this is a reasonably gradual process, albeit disconcerting. Bodies of water, and the act of crossing them are clearly highly significant images for Erickson, as is seen with the recurring motif of "crossing the Rubicon" a phrase referring to going beyond the point of no return. This is implicit in any crossing of or encounter with water in the novels, and so lakes, rivers, and oceans become important signifiers.

The colour blue, with its obvious connection to water, also permeates Erickson's writing. A long blue coat is often worn by male protagonists, and in *The Sea Came in at Midnight* it is a blue dress that Kristen finds to wear in the Occupant's closet, like that worn by Kara in *Tours of the Black Clock*. Many important objects in the novels are blue, such as the bottle with the eyes, first seen in *Days Between Stations* and returning in *Tours of the Black Clock* and *Arc d'X*. Most importantly, blue is the colour of the Calendar that the Occupant is working on in *The Sea Came in at Midnight*.

The Calendar highlights, and is part of, another important series of layers that come under the collective motif of numbers. Numbers seem to be present in all of Erickson's novels in some guise. For example in *Rubicon Beach* Jack Mick Lake hears numbers, in *Arc d'X* Seroq is trying to find out the coordinates that demonstrate the impact of memory on time, in *Our Ecstatic Days*, and *The Sea Came in at Midnight* the characters called Angie both excel in the subject. These offer just a few instances. This



heading can also be expanded to include dates, times, calendars and coordinates, all of which frequently occur. Erickson himself plays around with dates, changing the chronology of his plots or enforcing non-linearity. Similarly his characters share this obsession, as with the Occupant's insistence that the new millennium actually began in May 1968 demonstrates. This implication, that perhaps time and dates have an arbitrary aspect, is signified in the constant use of the letter X in names, titles and dates. This is seen in *Tours of the Black Clock with Client X*, or *Our Ecstatic Days*, when the dates become written as 2XXX. The importance of different understandings of time and dates in the novels is also apparent in the way characters use and construct maps; they are rarely of places, instead they chart alternative topographies of emotion and history, such as Carl's map of unrequited love from *The Sea Came in at Midnight*.

### **Methodology**

As the above examples all illustrate, few aspects of Erickson's novels exist by chance, and even the smallest seemingly inconsequential detail such as a blue coat, or a character looking out of a window, may have repercussions across not only one, but potentially all, of the books. It is these elements, their connections, and reverberations, which will lie at the core of a discussion about psychotopography. They are the signifiers of the characters and Erickson's conscious and subconscious interaction with their surroundings; how they construct, understand and relate to their psychic, emotional and literal landscape. Due to the density of Erickson's writing, in terms of the concepts, themes, mechanics and the connections between them, the psychotopography permeates the work on all levels. For this reason, the best method of drawing out the intricacies of Erickson's psychotopography, and its broader implications, is a close reading with a focus on the thematic concerns of the books themselves.

Thomas Docherty, in his work *On Modern Authority*, writes that the task and function of reading, and the criticism that arises as a result, is to "exact meaning and give voice to the critical consensus."<sup>60</sup> Docherty goes on to state that criticism should construct both knowledge and meaning.<sup>61</sup> In order to do this in Erickson's work, close and detailed attention must be paid to the themes and motifs that Erickson presents, and the textual and literary techniques he uses to present them. Docherty argues that, "[i]n print or writing [...] the potential of meaning is located in the typographic font or linguistic possibility itself,"<sup>62</sup> and this is particularly true in Erickson's case, as even the layout of the text on the page can highlight psychotopographic indicators, the psychotopography of the novels is deeply embedded in all aspects of Erickson's writing. Although the term psychotopography only occurs explicitly once, is demonstrated by using words, phrases, and images to outline the themes and motifs Erickson is concerned with. An intricate network of psychotopographic signs exist across Erickson's writing, as the above introduction to the themes

60 Docherty, T. p. 43.

61 Docherty, T. p. 43.

62 Docherty, T. p. 17.

and motifs and their interrelation demonstrates, and as a result only a methodology that mimics this intricate deliberateness is suitable as a form of analysis. Practical criticism, as understood in contemporary literary theory, is a critical method of exacting meaning from literature through close reading of the text in context. This method, with a thematic, rather than textual focus, is therefore appropriate for the analysis of Erickson's work as its dense nature is rooted in his understanding of a specific context: Los Angeles. It will therefore inform the following discussion of the five core psychotopographies identified across Erickson's work: emotion, happiness, numbers, liquidity and apocalypse.

## Chapter four: Emotion

*Intellectually, I know that America is no better than any other country;  
emotionally I know she is better than every other country.*

*Sinclair Lewis*

### Introduction

Of the five psychotopographies in this thesis, it is emotion that must be discussed first due to the inherent connection between emotion and landscape that underlines the other four psychotopographies of Erickson's work. There are a series of emotions that act as catalysts for all of the other actions, reactions, themes and motifs in Erickson's novels: loss, guilt, betrayal, desire and desperation. These states of being provoke the emotional responses of the characters in the novels that result in all their other actions throughout the narratives. These emotions are the five things that can be considered the emotional heart of the novels. They represent the way all of the situations throughout Erickson's writing can be traced back to a few fundamental events: an experience of loss; a betrayal, an act of desperation etc. Often one features more prominently than others in a particular plot, or two are combined – such as loss being linked to betrayal, or desire leading to desperation. Different types of these categories exist within Erickson's writing; for example, loss is manifest in many ways: loss of a child, parent or lover; loss of a character's sense of self or identity; loss of memory; loss of freedom, etc. Similarly these emotions do not only impact upon the personal situations of the characters, they often have social implications. Betrayal occurs on both a personal and social level throughout the books and often these are interrelated: a personal betrayal can have a considerable societal impact and vice versa. This is also the case with guilt; a character can feel guilt about actions that are personal, social or both and the circumstances of their guilt subsequently affects their response to it.

There are also themes and motifs that underlie the emotional acts and states and these produce the psychotopographic aspects of the novels. Thus loss, guilt, betrayal, desire and desperation cannot be discussed without considering the consequent impact they have on the time, memory, history, travel, chaos and boundaries within the narratives, and the inherent shifts of landscape and identity brought about. Therefore this chapter will explore each of these emotions and their commonalities in Erickson's novels.

### Loss

The experience of loss appears in some form in all of the novels and is often the catalyst for all the protagonists' subsequent actions or emotional responses. In some novels one large tangible loss is experienced, whereas in other narratives the protagonist suffers from a series of cumulative losses; for example losing memories, which provokes a loss of a sense of identity and then often both a literal and figurative loss of direction. The overarching loss, the one that is most prevalent and is encompassed in all

other losses, is the perceived loss of control. It is a “perceived” loss as there is a sense that the characters don’t actually have control to begin with; however they often believe they do, hence the sense of loss is significant.

Whatever the other losses or emotive actions that are experienced in the narrative, the inevitable result is a breakdown of control and coherence in the protagonist’s life. Not only do they no longer seem to have command of what is going on, but the time, history and landscape of the novel is also affected: time stops being linear, parallel histories come into coexistence, and the characters’ surroundings manifest dramatic shifts such as earthquakes, flooding, and extreme climate changes. The protagonist subsequently finds they are unable to navigate or make sense of what is going on around them. Characters are subject to these very real changes and so slip in and out of different histories, experience a slowing or quickening of time or find the landscape around them taking on remarkable changes. What is most interesting about these shifts is how the characters move through them; they may seem perplexed by the sudden flooding of Los Angeles, their move from revolutionary Paris to a futuristic volcanic plain, or the discovery of an entirely new day made up of accumulated lost seconds, yet they always accept it. They may have emotionally lost control, and their surroundings are becoming literally disorganised, but their response is predominantly one of inevitability and resignation. It is this that makes the discussion of loss intriguing: loss of control on a personal level is remarkable, yet loss of control in their surroundings, whether it is time, history or landscape, is inevitable.

This section will therefore explore a variety of the losses experienced by the characters in the novels, and their impact not only on the subsequent actions of the characters themselves, but their chronological, historical and topographical surroundings. Since there are so many experiences of loss in the novels the section will deal with three key types that have the most dramatic and direct impacts on the emotions and psychotopography of the characters: loss of memory, loss of freedom, and loss of a child. It will then return to the question of why the personal and environmental impacts of the loss of control differ and what significance this may hold; both for the characters and psychotopography.

**Loss of memory** and the subsequent search for the gap in identity is one of the things that produces extreme shifts of emotion and time in Erickson’s plots. This is particularly the case with the character of Michel in *Days Between Stations*. When he is first introduced he has no memory of his past, and thus no real knowledge of who he is, where he has come from, or even what his actual name is. This means that he must construct a temporary identity while he tries to regain his memories. This results in a certain degree of confusion when he meets Lauren, who will eventually become his lover. He is sure he has encountered her somewhere before, but doesn’t know where, and when she asks his name he gives it as first Adrien, then Michel, finally admitting that he is not sure which of these identities he might be. At this point in the novel he has taken to wearing an eye patch, though both his eyes are fine. He constantly

switches it between his eyes and as Lauren so astutely points out, he is Adrien with one eye covered and Michel with the other: eventually settling on Michel when he becomes involved with Lauren.

It is when Michel stands to lose Lauren that he begins to regain his past. As he follows her across Europe his memories suddenly begin to catch up with him. This sees the first example in Erickson's writing of the combination of train travel and psychotopography: Michel travels from Paris to Venice by train to meet Lauren, a journey of only a few days, yet for him it takes years as he traverses not simply the European countryside, but the landscape of his memories. The train continues to move, and yet constantly arrives in the same station, Wyndeaux. This is the town that is connected to Michel's past and now that he has happened upon it both the emotional and the literal journey become trapped in a cyclical revisiting of the village. Neither Michel, nor the train, seems able to move beyond this place; chronologically or geographically. This demonstrates the way that, in Erickson's writing, emotion, time and place are all intrinsically linked. When Michel finally arrives in Venice the journey has taken only marginally longer than expected yet he appears with the signs of his arduous personal journey shown physically in his white hair and "ancient" eyes.<sup>1</sup> Significantly, having filled in the gaps in his childhood, restoring what has been lost to him for so much of his life, Michel is faced not with having regained his past, but having lost his potential future: he arrives in Venice to be greeted by Lauren's decision to leave him and return to her husband.

**Loss of freedom** is expressed in a variety of ways in Erickson's writing. It is present in both the literal imprisonment of a character, or, more often, a figurative captivity brought upon themselves as a result of their emotions. Occasionally, as with Cale in *Rubicon Beach*, the two are connected; Cale's literal imprisonment is no longer necessary because of the figurative prison of his conscience created by the guilt he suffers due to his betrayal of a fellow inmate. The loss of freedom for a character automatically changes the way they respond to not only the other characters around them, but to their surroundings, which come to reflect the imprisonment they feel.

In *Tours of the Black Clock* Jainlight has slowly allowed himself to become trapped by his work as the pornographer for Client Z. His resistance to reality of what he is participating in, his denial of the affect his writing has had on Z and the subsequent role it has had in the conflict in Europe, means that Jainlight first loses his principles, then his family, and finally any degree of separation between himself and Z, both literally (they are kept just metres apart in the same tower) and mentally (Jainlight has managed to become so connected to the fantasies of Z that he can no longer separate himself from them emotionally). Jainlight has become imprisoned by what he has been doing. This is also manifested in the surroundings he comes to occupy: the Mediterranean city he is living in with Z is covered with a huge blue tarpaulin so that from above it looks like the city isn't there, it's just the sea, and from underneath the inhabitants are closed in from the outside world. Jainlight is not only imprisoned, but trapped in a place that no-one from the outside thinks

<sup>1</sup> Erickson, S. 1985. p. 222.

exists. The loss of freedom is so encompassing for Jainlight that when he finally manages to escape he takes Z with him, rather than leaving him behind and freeing himself from him forever.

The character of Sally Hemings in *Arc d'X* presents another interesting example of how the loss of freedom is used in the novels. Again Erickson uses the combination of an emotional and a literal freedom. Sally is the slave mistress of Thomas Jefferson and her freedom has already been lost before the narrative begins. Sally then spends the whole of the novel trying to escape from Jefferson both physically and mentally. The novel follows her as she is pushed through not only space, but also time. She runs from Jefferson in revolutionary Paris, only to find herself in a volcanic landscape in another time altogether. Eventually, when they are both back in America Sally attempts to release herself by killing Jefferson. She wakes next to his body believing she has finally regained her freedom only to find herself trapped in another city in another time with no recollection of the place or how she fits in to it. Now she has escaped the literal imprisonment by Jefferson, but finds herself unable to rid her mind of him. He has become a buried memory that she cannot quite recall and so she is trapped by something she doesn't really understand. Erickson uses the landscape that Sally occupies as a metaphor for these hidden, but volatile memories: the city of Aeonopolis sits at the base of a volcano that could erupt at any moment. The memory of Jefferson is never quite lost, and so Sally never quite escapes the loss of her freedom; like Jainlight and Cale, she carries her prison with her. Her loss of freedom looms, like the volcano, even when she can't remember what it is she is missing.

**Loss of a child** is arguably the most painful and tangible loss that Erickson's characters experience and is subsequently one of the most significant factors in the psychotopography of the novels. There are two key instances of child loss in Erickson's novel and significantly both result in feelings of guilt and betrayal for the mothers. In *Days Between Stations* Lauren's son Jules inexplicably dies when he is nine. Lauren however believes that his death is the result of her leaving him one evening upon hearing that her husband won't return to her because he wants to be at the birth of his child with another woman. Lauren walks out of their apartment, leaving Jules, and thinks she is going home to Kansas. Instead she spends a night in Los Angeles and returns the next morning to very little memory of the whole thing. Lauren believes that this act, a potential rejection by her of Jules, is what caused his death. Her actions throughout the rest of the novel are all underlined by her wish to somehow put this rejection right: she cannot ultimately leave her husband for Michel because she feels this would be a further abandonment of Jules. Lauren's loss of Jules and subsequent inability to fully love Michel causes emotional upheaval that is a drain not only on Lauren, but literally on the landscape: as she travels to Venice along the coast of Europe and Africa, chasing a bottle with two eyes in it she believes are her son's, the seas and canals become drained of water.

The psychotopographic relationship between emotion and water is one that is often linked to the loss of a child in Erickson's writing. The other significant instance of child loss appears as a result of, and response to, the inexplicable rise of a lake in downtown Los Angeles in the novel *Our Ecstatic Days*. In this

novel the character of Kristen somehow comes to believe that the lake that has appeared in Los Angeles is coming to take her son, and rather than let it have him she decides to ride a gondola out to the centre of the lake, taking her son Kirk with her, and dive into the lake to challenge it. When she emerges the gondola is empty and she believes the lake has defied her and taken her son anyway. Thus begins the long emotional and physical battle between Kristen, her post-loss alter ego LuLu Blu, and the lake. During this the reader (but not the character) learns that the lake is indeed connected to Kirk, as it started rising in the very spot where Kristen's waters broke. The novel ends with Kristen finally going back to the centre of the lake and once again diving in. This time she emerges to discover Kirk back in the boat waiting for her: the implication being that this whole time she had swum through the lake's vortex and into another reality in which Kirk is gone. On the side where he is waiting in the boat what Kristen experienced as years on the other side has passed in the few moments that she was missing in the water. The events of the novel demonstrate again the connection between emotion, time and landscape for the characters in Erickson's novels.

**Loss of control**, as mentioned before, is the fundamental result of all of the other types of loss experienced by Erickson's characters. No matter what form their loss takes and what their emotional responses and actions might be, the overarching result is loss of control. What is so significant about this however, is the way that the characters respond differently to the emotional loss of control in their lives and the geographic and topographic loss of control that is manifested in the landscape they inhabit. For example; Kristen cannot bear the fact that she has been unable to stop the lake from taking her son and interfering with her life, her emotional response to this lack of control swings dramatically between guilt, anger, regret, resentment and resignation. However both she and the other characters react quite calmly to the existence of the lake. They are intrigued by its appearance, but don't seem fearful; instead there is a general sense of resignation. Similarly, in *Days Between Stations*, as Lauren and Michel are increasingly unable to make sense of their relationship their surroundings become equally chaotic; there are sandstorms and blackouts in Los Angeles, freezing conditions in Paris and receding water across Europe. Yet they continue to attempt to live their lives normally despite these conditions, again seemingly resigned to their environmental, if not their emotional, chaos. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is that of Sally Hemings' experience. Throughout *Arc d'X* she suffers emotionally as she struggles to take control of her life and her freedom, however she copes with the shift in times and spaces with little thought as to why or how they have come about.

There is no overt explanation given in Erickson's writing for why the characters would accept the environmental and topographical chaos so readily; however, it is a response that all the characters share and the examples given above are only three of the most dramatic out of those connected with loss of control. What must be recognised here is that the shift of landscape and the importance of the characters response to it is not something that is only connected to the issue of loss of control, nor loss as a more generalised topic. All of the characters in the novels experience these shifts in some way, illustrating that

they resound beyond the issue of loss. Instead it is a topic that clearly penetrates much deeper into Erickson's work, his themes, motifs and essentially the psychotopography of the novels. Therefore the shifts of time, history and most importantly the environment, geography and topography that the characters occupy and traverse are subjects that should be taken into account all through the analysis of Erickson's writing.

### **Guilt**

Guilt in Erickson's writing is not a straightforward or strictly personal emotion. Instead it is expressed on both a personal and a social level, and usually the two are interrelated. It is also an emotion that is closely connected to the issues of shame, betrayal and even desire. An example that demonstrates all of these notions is the character of Jefferson: he feels no guilt about his initial rape of Sally, however he comes to feel guilty about the implications that his taking of her as a mistress might have in America. He has no personal guilt, but instead becomes consumed by a social guilt, which is linked to his shame about the action, the desire that leads to it and the betrayal of his ideals that his consummation of this desire has resulted in.

This example also demonstrates the way that the guilt shown by Erickson is often unorthodox: Jefferson shows no remorse about his rape, an act the reader would assume he should feel guilty about; instead his guilt is directed to the less tangible act of his betrayal of the ideals of the "America" he is trying to construct. A more personal example is found when a protagonist may express guilt over their desire for another character, even if this is a legitimate emotion to convey. This demonstrates how deeply seated the notion of guilt is throughout Erickson's writing and characters: it can be found on every level of the narratives.

Another unusual aspect of the guilt in the novels is seen in the actions that the emotion provokes in the characters. Some of the guilt expressed does not take the form necessarily expected by the reader, and consequently neither do the responses of all the characters: for instance allowing themselves to be consumed by the guilt or attempting to run away from it, instead of seeking redemption or forgiveness. The most extreme example of this is Kristen in *Our Ecstatic Days*: she is filled with guilt at having abandoned her son in the middle of the lake, and yet it takes her years to attempt to rectify the situation, despite knowing almost immediately how she could do so.

Therefore this section will explore the most significant and varied instances of guilt expressed throughout the novels and the subsequent actions taken by the characters in response, exploring not only the characters conveying the guilt, but those affected or reacting to it's expression. Within this is the inevitable exploration of the link between guilt and other emotions, most significantly the connections between guilt and shame, betrayal and desire. This section will also look at any correlations between the



guilt of the characters and their interaction with their surroundings, once again highlighting the connections between landscape and emotion, the interrelated psychotopography, found in the novels.

**Personal guilt** plays a large part in most of Erickson's writing in some way. Almost all of his protagonists suffer from guilt at some point during their narrative. However, some are more significant instances than others. Both *Rubicon Beach* and *Amnesiascope* are strongly grounded in the guilt felt by their protagonists. It is this guilt that ultimately drives their actions and responses as well as the reactions around them, both of the other characters and the landscape.

*Rubicon Beach* opens with the protagonist Cale being released from prison. He has told a joke whilst incarcerated that has led to the implication of another prisoner, Ben Jarry, and resulted in Jarry's execution. The authorities can release Cale as they no longer feel he needs to be under surveillance. Instead, as Wade, the police detective comments, Cale is a man who "takes his prison with him"<sup>2</sup> by trapping himself with his guilt. Cale's guilt is based on the shame he feels at the betrayal of Jarry, and since Jarry has been killed Cale has no way of seeking redemption. However he seeks it anyway. Cale soon starts seeing visions of a woman killing a man by cutting his throat, and is disturbed to learn when he reports the crime that there is no evidence it was ever committed. He becomes convinced that this recurring vision is of Ben Jarry being killed, and longs for the chance to stop the women and thus save Jarry, finally gaining his redemption. However, when the crime scene is finally discovered, the last time Cale witnesses the act, the police are confused as it is Cale's dead body they find decapitated, so they inexplicably resort to arresting Cale. It is as if Cale's conscience conjures the visions as a way of more visibly expressing the guilt he feels, only to give him the delusion of redemption as a way of taunting him. Interestingly the girl Cale sees turns up as a character in the novel and eventually as Cale describes "I cast myself in flight for the decapitation of my own guilt."<sup>3</sup> He runs away with her, and his guilt, to England.

One of the most significant aspects of Cale's guilt is how he links it to the geography and ideals of "America." He comments early in the novel about the distinction made between "America one" and "America two."<sup>4</sup> He outlines how he doesn't believe in borders, or the notion of "American rivers, or foreign rivers,"<sup>5</sup> and that it is this that was his "first step into danger."<sup>6</sup> He finishes by commenting that just because he doesn't believe these things, "it never meant I didn't believe in America."<sup>7</sup> This distinction between the America that represents an ideal or a set of notions, and the United States that designates a geographic area is an underlying concern throughout Erickson's work, and here it is linked to Cale's betrayal of Jarry and subsequent guilt. It demonstrates that there is an inherent connection between identity, geography and emotion as played out in the psychotopography of the novels. It also indicates that guilt and betrayal can be

2 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 16.

3 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 265.

4 Erickson, S. 1986, pp. 31-32.

5 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 31.

6 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 31.

7 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 31.

a response to landscape as much as a response to a person's actions. This is something that will become apparent again when discussing social guilt and the correlation between social and personal guilt.

The other crucial use of guilt in Erickson's writing can be found in *Amnesiascope*. As with Cale in *Rubicon Beach* the protagonist readily accepts that he could "drown in guilt."<sup>8</sup> However, the narrator is clear about the boundaries of his guilt, explaining that, "my conscience may be touched by my personal betrayals but not my social ones."<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately this separation of the types does not seem to lessen the guilt that the narrator feels. The novel is based around the protagonist trying to reconcile the mistakes he has made in his past, with the mistakes he is continuing to make. The monologue of the narrative continually insists that he will not be responsible for the mistakes made by those around him, particularly the women from his previous relationships, however his insistence about this is so strong that it implies he has indeed added their mistakes to his and feels guilty for it all.

The guilt in *Amnesiascope* is closely connected to humiliation, and yet this revelation doesn't dawn on the narrator until the climax of the novel when he hunts out a film director and pleads for help, explaining that "everything is gone from my life."<sup>10</sup> The director's only response is to tell the narrator to "embarrass yourself."<sup>11</sup> It is only at this moment that the narrator realises that he is so afraid of humiliation that he would rather suffer the guilt of a wrong choice than take a risk by following his instincts. Therefore humiliation is suggested to the narrator as an alternative to guilt; a solution that may cause short-term discomfort, but is not all consuming.

A more direct correlation between psychotopography and guilt is also expressed in *Amnesiascope*. As the narrator's life becomes increasingly emotionally unstable, so do his surroundings, and guilt is often a catalyst for this. The Los Angeles within which the book is set in is already apocalyptic before the narrative begins, the implication being that there has been a massive earthquake. As the narrative progresses it becomes increasingly clear that it was just before the "Quake" that the narrator's marriage broke up, an affair ended and his feelings of guilt and responsibility began to emerge. The connection, therefore, between the narrator's psychic state and the dramatic shifts in the Los Angeles landscape are inescapable. This then continues throughout the novel: at points of emotional shift, there is a corresponding change in the landscape or climate. When the narrator is concerned about his relationship Los Angeles begins to have unusually heavy rains and flooding. During this episode the protagonist rescues a prostitute in a flash flood and takes her back to his apartment. He makes the mistake of not telling his girlfriend and the longer the prostitute stays, the more guilty he feels, the heavier the rains become, eventually penetrating the hotel where he is living so it seems as though it is raining inside. Similarly when the narrator's girlfriend leaves for

8 Erickson, S. 1996, p. 146. Italics original.

9 Erickson, S. 1996, p. 5.

10 Erickson, S. 1996, p. 223.

11 Erickson, S. 1996, p. 223.

Holland and he explains that he cannot go with her, even though he can't think of a reason why not, Los Angeles begins to experience a heat wave that results in a fire.

The psychotopography of the novel is also expressed in more explicit terms by the narrator himself, who is constantly commenting on the relationship between Los Angeles and memory, or consciousness, or emotion. He remarks that Los Angeles becomes "the urbanology of your own particular success or failure"<sup>12</sup> and that he has tried on many occasions to leave the city but can't as he is inexplicably tied to it. It is "the dead city" of his psyche.<sup>13</sup> It is not until late in the novel that he finally admits that by staying in the city he hoped to "defeat guilt and memory once and for all" and yet knows "the effort is doomed."<sup>14</sup> It is as if he has finally realised that a city where "history counts for nothing"<sup>15</sup> must construct its landscape according to the emotions and histories, and therefore in this case the guilt, of the inhabitants.

**Social guilt** is not excluded from the connections with shame, betrayal and desire. If anything it is shown as more closely linked to these other emotions or actions than personal guilt because its implications are on a much broader scale. Whereas personal guilt affects the protagonist and those immediately around him, social guilt by its very nature goes beyond the character's immediate relationships. In this sense social guilt is both harder to bear and more difficult to redeem. An example of the burden of social guilt as a result of both a betrayal and subsequent self-inflicted humiliation in the novels comes from Erickson's characterisation of Thomas Jefferson.

Although the act that initiates Jefferson's guilt is personal, the response is social and Jefferson is stricken with the guilt as a result of his social betrayal, rather than his personal one, and thus it is the former for which he seeks redemption. It is this that distinguishes it from a purely personal guilt. His desire for and resulting rape of his black slave Sally Hemings betrays all of his ideals about his notion of what America should be. Therefore his act is a social treachery. What is significant about the nature of Jefferson's betrayal is the response to it not by him, but by America: both the place and the idea. When Jefferson returns to Virginia he cannot stand the decision he has made to keep the slaves, and is reluctant to accept his election as president. He gradually retreats into his guilt about the decisions he has made and how they will affect the construction of his ideas of America. Finally he leaves his home and travels across the American landscape aiming to talk with the natives. However this does not redeem his actions and so history (and by implication America) rejects him. This comes in the literal shift of Jefferson out of his time into Aeonopolis, another city in another time. However this rejection doesn't end here. Georgie, a Nazi who has come in search of "America", discovers Jefferson in a motel room in Aeonopolis. When Jefferson utters "America" when Georgie asks him who he is, Georgie calls him a liar and kills him: Jefferson has been rejected both

12 Erickson, S. 1996, p. 47.

13 Erickson, S. 1996, p. 32.

14 Erickson, S. 1996, p. 146.

15 Erickson, S. 1996, p. 41.

geographically and physically as a result of his inability to redeem his actions due to having retreated into his guilt.<sup>16</sup>

**Personal and social guilt** cannot fail in some instances to be linked, and this highlights the connection between emotions and their impact on landscape and history, demonstrating the fundamentality of psychotopography at every level of Erickson's writing. The character of Banning Jainlight from *Tours of the Black Clock* portrays the interrelation of personal and social guilt in the novels. For the majority of the book he expresses no guilt or remorse, personal or social, for any of his actions, despite having killed his family in order to escape them. This guiltlessness continues throughout his work writing pornography for the leader of the Germans who are sweeping across Europe. Even when he finally realizes that he is writing specifically crafted fantasies for military leader of Germany, Jainlight refuses to accept responsibility or guilt for his actions. The turning point is the death of his wife and child. When they are killed because Jainlight won't co-operate, he suddenly becomes aware of the effect of his actions, not just on his now dead family, but in the much broader social context: his fantasies give Z the strength he needs to continue with his campaigns. The significant aspect of Jainlight's guilt is the way he responds to it: by committing another act of personal betrayal that in the end results in more guilt. He attempts to redeem himself by enacting revenge on Z by giving him a child, but having this child born a monster so as to show Z the truth about his nature. In order to do this, Jainlight impregnates Dania, the girl in the fantasies, who actually exists, with this supposed evil. Jainlight believes this is the perfect redemption for his actions until he discovers that Dania has battled against the monster inside her, using love to turn it into her son. Jainlight ends the novel by attempting to seek forgiveness from Dania, knowing that he will have to just accept, when Z eventually dies, that there is no redemption for his social guilt.

The psychotopographic aspect of Jainlight's guilt is found in the mapping of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jainlight often looks out of windows and comments that he sees the 20<sup>th</sup> century laid out before him. What is significant however is that he understands that his 20<sup>th</sup> century may not be the same as that occupied by Dania. It is as if history has split itself in anticipation of the acts that Jainlight will commit. It is only when Jainlight admits his guilt, both social and personal, that the notion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century coming back together as one is apparent. Therefore Jainlight's guilt is so significant that it affects both history and chronology.

Once again emotions and emotive actions are at the heart of Erickson's writing, his character's interactions, and the notion of psychotopography. The intimate interrelations of guilt and emotions such as shame, humiliation and desire also indicate that the psychotopography of the novels cannot be linked to a single action or emotion, but is a response to the coming together of numerous emotional circumstances. Similarly, psychotopography is not simply about the connections between landscape or surroundings or emotions, it is also linked to history and the progress of history. Therefore, as suggested in the previous

<sup>16</sup> Erickson, S 1993, p. 259.

section, it is important to be aware of how it is present at all levels, throughout all motifs and themes in Erickson's writing so that a full understanding can be reached of Erickson's overall concerns.

### **Betrayal**

Betrayal is often central to a protagonist's emotional reactions in Erickson's novels. However, as with the other topics discussed in this chapter, it is never the straightforward betrayals that are the most note-worthy. Instead the significant emotional responses come about not because of one character simply betraying another, but due to things such as a betrayal of morals or ideals, or the discovery that a character has been betraying themselves. Therefore this section will forego the more obvious examples of betrayal in the novels, such as Cale's betrayal of Ben Jarry in *Rubicon Beach*, and will look instead at the situations whereby the betrayal is unusual or less tangible. It is important to point out here that one of the recurring instances of betrayal throughout Erickson's work is the notion of the betrayal of the American ideal or promise. It is this notion of betrayal that this section will explore in greatest detail, as it represents an overarching theme across all of Erickson's work that impacts not only on the characters and their emotional responses, but Erickson's concerns overall.

One of the most remarkable instances of betrayal in all of Erickson's works comes from the character of Catherine in *Rubicon Beach*. Catherine comes from a tribal community of Southern America and spends the first years of her life believing that her reflection in the river is a water creature that follows her around and is scared away when she reaches for it. Having no mirrors in her society she has no reason to connect this image with herself, and thus cannot know that it is her reflection. Instead she "claimed it as her pet"<sup>17</sup> and becomes increasingly annoyed with it when it doesn't protect her from a sailor who takes her from her village. It is Catherine's face, her beauty, that leads to her kidnap by the sailor. He recognises the worth of her face that holds a beauty that isn't understood or realised by her village, but that will result, the sailor hopes, in lots of money for him. Eventually Catherine escapes into California, continually asking people to take her to the map that looks like "AMERICA."<sup>18</sup> It is only when she arrives in Los Angeles and is employed by a woman as a housekeeper that she finally encounters a mirror and learns the truth about her pet. She breaks the mirror and concludes that her face has betrayed her.<sup>19</sup> She believes, correctly, that it is because of her face that the sailor killed her father and her whole life changed. Rather than seeing her face as a positive thing, a beauty that she can cash in on like so many of the other women who travel to Los Angeles, she recoils from it: to her it represents "cowardice and treachery,"<sup>20</sup> not beauty.

The importance of this example of betrayal is that it demonstrates how although Catherine's face cannot consciously commit the act of treachery, she still attributes the notion to it. It is not a literal, tangible

17 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 97.

18 Erickson, S. 1986, pp. 133, 136-7, 139, 142, 145-6.

19 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 158.

20 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 158.

act of betrayal, but this is how it is interpreted, and so she responds accordingly; her emotions driven by the belief that her face is her betrayer. Catherine escapes from a party and begins wandering around the houses in the rich neighbourhoods of Los Angeles. She has become determined to change her face, hoping to “replace the face of my treason with the face of my destiny.”<sup>21</sup> However upon catching her reflection in the windows she realises that these faces are the same, upon which she breaks the glass in an attempt to shatter the image and the realisation that there is no escaping it.<sup>22</sup>

The character of Llewellyn in *Rubicon Beach*, the man whose house Catherine is employed to clean and who becomes consumed by her beauty, illustrates another form of intangible betrayal. Unlike Catherine, who doesn't make the connection between the treachery of her face and her destiny until late in the narrative, Llewellyn, when presented to the reader, has already made the connection. He believes that he betrayed his destiny by making the wrong choice early in his life. He was a poet who moved from New York to Los Angeles in order to follow a presidential candidate. Llewellyn supported Robert Kennedy (rather than Eugene McCarthy) who was shot in the Ambassador Hotel moments after winning the presidential primary. Llewellyn believes that had he chosen to support McCarthy instead he wouldn't have stayed in Los Angeles, and as a result his life, his destiny, would have been completely different. Instead, “in choosing the man who quoted poetry, rather than the man who wrote it, whatever the political virtues of such a choice might have been, he had changed his whole fate and betrayed his own destiny.”<sup>23</sup> Llewellyn not only believes that his choice was wrong, but that because numerous other people are also making these wrong choices, “choices not in the spirit of those who made them,”<sup>24</sup> a whole country is different.

The above examples demonstrate the theme of the betrayal of self that underlies many of Erickson's novels and the two main ways in which it is presented. Catherine's experience illustrates a self betrayal that isn't recognised as such until afterwards: Catherine treats her face as an object that is detached from her, ultimately the result is still that she has betrayed by herself, even though she wasn't aware of this while the act was occurring. Llewellyn on the other hand, is aware of the treachery as it happens and so shows a form of betrayal of the self that is both acknowledged and yet remains inevitable. These two forms of betrayal, particularly the latter, occur throughout Erickson's fiction. For example; Kristen in *Our Ecstatic Days* knows that diving into Lake Z, leaving her son Kirk behind in the gondola, is an act of betrayal, of both his and her future, yet she also knows committing it is inescapable.

It is the betrayal of self by characters that tends to particularly impact their psychotopography. It is these betrayals, rather than acts of treachery against other characters, that have repercussions in their surroundings. When Catherine realises the significance of her face she begins having dreams. It turns out that these dreams are actually events that are occurring in another time and in another version of Los

21 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 206.

22 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 206.

23 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 162.

24 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 162.

Angeles. Therefore, like Sally in *Arc d'X*, Catherine manages, without realising it, to move between different histories, only after she realises her face has betrayed her. An almost exact response occurs when Kristen commits her betrayal of her ideals as a mother and abandons Kirk. She dives into the lake only to emerge in another version of the same place in a slightly different history. In each of these cases a betrayal of self leads to the movement between two parallel but very different chronologies.

This splitting of histories, which is significantly only noticed by the character involved, and often not until long after the event, is also important in relation to a notion that both runs parallel to, and overlaps with, the theme of the betrayal of self: the betrayal of America's promise. The conjunctions between these two ideas can be found in the characterization of Thomas Jefferson in the novel *Arc d'X*. It is in the character of Jefferson that the betrayal of self and betrayal of America's promise coincide. Erickson sets up the notion that Jefferson is America: he embodies the ideals and dreams of the emerging nation. However, when Jefferson chooses to keep his black slave mistress, rather than set her, and all his other slaves, free, he betrays both his own soul and the ideals upon which he was trying to ground society. Jefferson argues that it was a choice between the "betrayal of his conscience or the betrayal of his heart"<sup>25</sup> but as with the other examples in Erickson's novel the choice is an illusion and the betrayal is inevitable.

As Jefferson is dying he claims that his choice, and thus his betrayal, is justified because he "made a country once. It was the frontier of the first irrevocable compromise between the heart's freedom and the conscience's justice, past which the soul can redeem itself."<sup>26</sup> What Jefferson fails to recognise is that this formulation of America came about *because* of his compromise between his heart and his conscience, not despite it. Having made these claims Jefferson is then killed by Georgie, a Nazi who has come to the United States in search of what he believes is America and doesn't believe that what he is looking for can possibly be grounded in a man who chose to love a black woman. This incident highlights two important issues; firstly, the notion in Erickson's writing that there is a separation between "America" the idea and The United States, the geographic location; secondly that Georgie feels the promise of America has let him down.

America's betrayal of its promise is a theme that recurs throughout Erickson's fiction. The significant aspect of this notion is that Erickson never states what the promise of America is; instead it varies according to the expectations of the character. This is not Erickson being deliberately illusive to avoid outlining specific ideals that constitute the promise of America, rather it demonstrates that America offers whatever a particular person wants, it is what they make of it. Therefore the betrayal of America cannot be separated from a character's betrayal of themselves: they themselves have constructed the promise in the first place. The reason for this returns the discussion to Jefferson and his reworking of Locke's maxim about the need for life, liberty and property. In the American Declaration of Independence Jefferson changed this

25 Erickson, S. 1993, p. 260.

26 Erickson, S. 1993, p. 261.

to be "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."<sup>27</sup> The change is not insignificant, and is certainly something that Erickson is concerned with, as the next chapter discussing happiness will outline. Jefferson's addition of the pursuit of happiness as an inalienable right in the Declaration of Independence means that America can be constructed by individuals according to whatever they regard as leading to their happiness. This is what lies at the heart of the American promise as understood by an exploration of Erickson's protagonists. Therefore, as Jefferson in *Arc d'X* himself believes, betrayals, social, political or personal can all be redeemed if they were committed during a genuine pursuit of happiness: whether a character's happiness is achieved, and the potential repercussions of the attempts to attain it will be left to discussion in the following chapter.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect betrayal in the novels is that unlike the previously discussed emotive actions it is tied more directly to Erickson's broader themes about America, the United States, and identity. This means that its connections with psychotopography work slightly differently. Although Erickson's separation of the United States as a geographic place and America the idea is not directly linked to the topic of betrayal, is it worth discussing here briefly, not only because it is highlighted during the incident when Georgie kills Jefferson for the betrayal of the promise of America, but also due to this event being an important part of the psychotopography of the novels. The contrast between the literal geography and topography of the United States and the idealistic cartography of America is a theme that is integral to all of Erickson's writing, and is linked to his interests in the construction of identity, both national and individual. It is often during episodes that are integral to the construction of the character's identities that Erickson implements a shift in geography, or explores the themes of America such as the pursuit of happiness. The most obvious example of this in relation to betrayal is when Jefferson is finally coming to terms with his betrayal of both Sally and America: there is a shift out of the United States and into a parallel place that is unnamed. Whilst lying in this hotel room in the new city Jefferson is killed by Georgie who has also stepped into the motel and been moved out of the United States, whilst realising that America has betrayed him. In this example the psychotopography shifts not only the geographic place, but also the idealist one, removing the characters from them: as their connections to them are broken figuratively (by the betrayals) so the literal geographic connection is severed. Needless to say these interconnected relationships between psychotopography, identity, the United States and America are also present in other aspects of the novels. Although the happiness chapter will deal with this in greater detail, the following section exploring the role of desire in Erickson's writing will also touch upon the topic.

## **Desire**

<sup>27</sup> Jefferson, T. P. 19.



Desire is one of the main motivating forces for many of Erickson's protagonists. It is present throughout the novels in numerous forms: sexual; the desire for another character and material; the desire for an object or objects, as well as the desire for knowledge, understanding, and freedom. Erickson also uses desire as a subject that isn't directly linked to one specific character: in *Arc d'X* a whole area of the city is referred to by the locals as "desire." This allows Erickson to draw the reader's attention to how all the events that take place in this region might be linked to the theme of desire, in any form.

Of the types of desire found in the novels there are two that are most prevalent: sexual longing, and the aspiration for freedom. It is these two forms that this section will focus on as they produce the most significant circumstances for and responses from the protagonists in the narratives. The discussion will then go on to explore Erickson's use of "desire" as a literal cartographic area of the city in *Arc d'X*, and the impact this has on the characters and the psychotopography of the novel. Finally the section will briefly address the connections between desire and notions of redemption and happiness.

**Sexual longing** is something that seems to appear in all of Erickson's novels, either as the main driving force of the plot, or subplots, or as singular episodes within the narratives. It is therefore one of the key emotions expressed by the protagonists. *Tours of the Black Clock* illustrates the importance of sexual desire and the impact it can have not just on one character's life, but on society and history. All events in the novel are driven, fundamentally, by the desire of one character or another. It is also the most significant example of sexual desire psychotopographically: the novel contains not simply a splitting of places as has been previously discussed, but a splitting and then eventual reconnection of the twentieth century.

Desire in *Tours of the Black Clock* involves and thus connects three of the characters; Banning Jainlight; Z; and Dania, a woman who becomes the object of both Jainlight's and Z's desire. The nature of Dania's connection to Jainlight and Z is strange, and highlights the psychotopography in the novel. Jainlight sees her in a window in Vienna one day while there is a riot. He immediately becomes besotted with her, so much so that without realizing it she becomes the character in the pornography he is writing for Z. While writing down his fantasies Jainlight imagines himself with Dania, and although these episodes appear to be imagined they become very real. Dania begins waking up knowing she has been raped, she feels his presence in her room at night and hears his voice but never actually sees him. As the episodes increase she begins almost enjoying them, despite their strange nature. The incidents seem like dreams, but she carries the physical effects of what takes place.<sup>28</sup> The explanation demonstrates the psychotopography of desire in the novel: the twentieth century has been split and they are both experiencing the same events, but in different versions of the century.

<sup>28</sup> Erickson, S. 1989. p. 199.

Jainlight, who narrates part of the book, has commented that he sees the Twentieth Century in his window, and explains that he has “no way of knowing yet if it’s my Twentieth Century or another.”<sup>29</sup> However, later in the novel Jainlight recognises “the moment that razors the Twentieth Century down its middle,”<sup>30</sup> it is when he first sees Dania. This moment is significant because the split in the century doesn’t just affect Jainlight, or Dania; it has implications for the whole world. Jainlight begins to write Dania into the fantasies and this pleases Z, except that he asks Jainlight – thinking Dania is a fictional character – for her hair and eye colour to be different. Z wants to adapt this fictional desire to meet what was once his real desire, his niece Geli. When Jainlight complies Z becomes so involved in his fantasy – a life he wished he was living – that he is distracted from his duties in the real world. Oddly, Z’s distraction leads him to make different political and military decisions, the result of which is that the Germany wins the war. Therefore the desire of Jainlight, and consequently the desire of Z, directly impacts upon the rest of the world. It is only when Jainlight dies, lying at Dania’s feet having tracked her down to ask forgiveness, that “the two parallel rivers of the Twentieth Century, which forked the only other time she saw [him], flow back into one.”<sup>31</sup> It is interesting that this coming together of the parallel centuries occurs despite the fact that Dania doesn’t forgive Jainlight, confirming that it was his desire for Dania, the desire that ended when he died, that caused the split in history.

The connection between psychotopography and desire is, however, not concluded at this point. It is after Jainlight’s appearance and sudden death that Dania’s son Marc, who was born as a result of Jainlight writing about getting Geli pregnant by Z, runs away. He is going in search of Kara, a girl he has desired since the moment she stepped onto the ferry he runs. Again the connection between desire and the movement of history is indicated as “having exited the century at one end and entered it again at the other, the year was 1901 when he finally came to a village in northern Asia.”<sup>32</sup> Unlike Jainlight, Marc doesn’t find Kara, and seems destined to relive the twentieth century again. This suggests that if his desire remains unfulfilled, so will his history. It is here that a connection between sexual desire and freedom can be seen; Marc is unable to release his sexual desire and so has become trapped in a cyclical history.

**Desire for freedom** is present throughout the novels in many guises, including, as the above example indicates, in connection to sexual desire. Many of Erickson’s protagonists’ actions are motivated by the desire to release themselves from something, and so this desire for freedom provokes emotional reactions that have repercussions during the rest of the narrative. For example Kristen from *Our Ecstatic Days* wishes to be free of the fear she has of Lake Z taking her son, and so she dives into the lake to challenge it. This action, motivated by the desire for herself and her son to be free of the lake, provokes all of the consequent actions throughout the narrative. This section will focus on a particular example as

29 Erickson, S. 1989. p. 50.

30 Erickson, S. 1989. p. 122.

31 Erickson, S. 1989. p. 311.

32 Erickson, S. 1989. p. 320.

representative of just how significant an impact the desire for freedom, and the acts it elicits, can have on the rest of a novel's plot or subplots. In *Arc d'X* the character of Sally is constantly striving for freedom. Her example is particularly relevant because at different points during the plot she is trying to be free from different things, thus her character covers varying forms of the desire for freedom. At different times she wants literal freedom from enslavement, freedom from the constraints of the dictatorial laws of the city she lives in, freedom from men, and, significantly, freedom from being the object of desire.

Sally starts her life as the slave of Thomas Jefferson who is brought to Paris with his daughter Polly. While she is there, Thomas cannot resist his desire and rapes her. Soon Sally becomes his lover, first resisting him and then finally realising she has come to long for him. However, she acknowledges that having come to enjoy his sexual control of her she has also become enslaved in this way too: she is both his actual and his sexual slave, and he her master. Sally comes to understand that although whilst in Paris she is legally a free woman, she is imprisoned by Thomas as a result of having come to desire and want him as much as he does her. She also knows that if she returns to America with him she will never be free. Eventually her desire for freedom leads her to kill Thomas (or so she believes at the time) and run away. She hides a knife behind her headboard and one night brings it down on what she thinks is his sleeping body. She immediately feels both the rush of release and the guilt of her action. She runs out of the house and across Paris and come across a strange landscape with a solitary building in it. When she gets there she sees a girl who looks just like herself (who turns out to be her daughter in the future) and a strange man. She then runs back to Paris only to discover she did not kill Thomas and so she has not managed to free herself from him at all.

Sally then spends the rest of the novel attempting to free herself. Eventually Sally is literally freed from Thomas because he is killed by another character, however, as the narrative continues, it becomes clear that she is carrying the memory of him with her and cannot release herself from it: she will never gain the freedom she desires. The interesting psychotopographic implication of Sally's desire for freedom occurs when she finally believes she has been liberated from him: when he is killed. Thomas has actually been killed by another character, Georgie, but Sally believes the act is hers and that she has finally found the courage to free herself from him. Sally and Thomas have been moved in not only space, but also time: they go to sleep in an Indian hut and when Sally awakes she finds herself in a motel room in a future city. She is arrested for the murder, only to be released on lack of evidence, and so she goes back to her life in this city as if she has always lived there, the only evidence to the contrary being her vague memories of Thomas. This movement in time as well as place is similar to that shown in *Tours of the Black Clock* and again demonstrates the connection between time, emotion and psychotopography.

During one of the subplots of *Arc d'X* a character discovered that his clock gains a second when he is absorbed in a memory of his wife. He works out that it has ticked backwards during the expression of emotion, and that if all the "gained" seconds were accumulated it would account for another day in the year,

Day X, between December 31<sup>st</sup> and January 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>33</sup> This is something that will be discussed in more detail during the chapter exploring the use of numbers in Erickson's writing, however it is worth noting it here in connection with the shifts in time and history related to the different types of desire.

*Arc d'X* is a significant novel in relation to the topic of desire because within it Erickson uses "desire" as a literal cartographic area of the city of Aeonopolis in order to explore the theme in a less character specific manner. The city of Aeonopolis is governed by an organization of priests called the Primacy, who have divided up the various areas of the city and named them according to emotions "Humiliation," "Sorrow," "Ambivalence" etc.<sup>34</sup> One of the zones has been officially named "Redemption" and yet the church have little jurisdiction over it and the citizens who live in the zone refer to it as "Desire"<sup>35</sup> It is in this region of the city that there is a neighbourhood called the Arboretum: a cluster of lofts, chambers and caves linked by passages housing what the church would deem "nefarious" things such as the "theatre, TV arcade, book outlets and [...] forbidden artifacts."<sup>36</sup> It is also significant that, as one character comments, "you needed either a map or a very weird brain to find your way through the Arboretum, and [...] no map existed because no one person knew everything that was in it."<sup>37</sup> The sections set within the Arboretum and the zone of Redemption/Desire are therefore an incredibly significant aspect of the novel because of its overarching theme of desire and inability to be mapped by the characters.

Throughout the novel various characters become lost whilst wandering in the Arboretum, indicating that desire can lead to being lost. This feeling of being lost is both literal and figurative: characters lose their bearings and cannot find their way out of the unmapped passages, meanwhile they lose their sense of reality and become fixated on, and trapped by, their desire. Within the Arboretum there are also several things that deliberately disorientate the occupants or visitors. At one point Wade, a police officer who has become obsessed with Sally is walking around the passages and discovers a painter outside a strip club, "rendering with dimensional exactitude the image of another corridor"<sup>38</sup> so that throughout the passages there are copies of the corridors that aren't real, but that look so real that Wade, "who had been to the club just twenty hours before, couldn't be sure it was real until he actually stepped into it"<sup>39</sup> thus creating even more disorientation and emphasizing the theme of being lost. The connection in the example between the disorientating corridors and the strip club again highlights the link between desire and the character's sense of being lost or confused. This is re-emphasised during another incident with Wade when he commissions the same artist to paint the room of a stripper he is staying with. He asks the painter to make the room look like there are no walls, ceiling or floor, so that, "Wade could look in any direction and see to the far reaches

33 Erickson, S. 1993. pp. 205-211

34 Erickson, S. 1993. pp. 56-58

35 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 58.

36 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 59.

37 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 59.

38 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 73.

39 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 74.

of the Arboretum [...] the oblivion.”<sup>40</sup> Erickson’s use of these episodes also indicates a link between being literally geographically lost and being emotionally volatile: highlighting the inherent psychotopography of desire.

The connection between the legitimate name for the zone of the city that holds the Arboretum, “Redemption” and the name commonly used by its inhabitants, “Desire” is extremely significant: it inherently links the notions of redemption and desire in the novel. The desire for redemption is another theme that is found not only throughout *Arc d’X*, but Erickson’s other novels. For example, it is the struggle for redemption that motivates Cale during *Rubicon Beach*, and drives Kristen to eventually return to look for Kirk in Lake Z in *Our Ecstatic Days*. The connection between redemption and desire also extends to notions of happiness in Erickson’s writing. Erickson’s protagonists often desire redemption believing that this is what will eventually bring them happiness. However, as the chapter dealing with notions of happiness in the novels will demonstrate, it is not usually as simple as this: characters often discover that although they desire it, they cannot gain redemption, or if they do they do not find themselves happy. Although this topic will be explored in more detail during the happiness chapter it is important to mention it here as it is often unobtainable in the novels, and it is this that has such a dramatic impact on the psychotopography. As with loss, guilt and betrayal it is when desire is experienced negatively that the psychotopography becomes apparent. This is an aspect of emotion in the novels that will be discussed in the conclusion to the chapter when exploring the overarching themes and motifs of emotion in Erickson’s writing as a whole.

### **Desperation**

Desperation is the final emotional state to be examined in this chapter. It is a more ambiguous topic than those previously discussed, as it is difficult to ascertain whether a character is truly desperate or simply losing control. However, there are particular episodes in Erickson’s novels where the desperation of a character is clearly identifiable, and these provide examples that illustrate the impact of desperation on a protagonist, their relationships, and subsequently the plot progression. This then allows an understanding of how a character’s actions affect their surroundings – both emotional and physical – and vice versa.

Unlike the previous examples of emotional states produced by characters, desperation cannot be broken down into varying types. Instead it exists as a core state that characters experience, often as a result of their responses to the previously discussed emotions. For example desire, particularly sexual, and the failure to consummate it, often leads to a character being thrown into despair. Thus one emotional state triggers another, and consequently another chain of events and reactions. For instance; the desperation felt by the narrator of *Amnesiascope* is triggered by a culmination of loss and guilt; the desperation felt by Cale in *Rubicon Beach* is a combined result of his desire for Catherine and his betrayal of Ben Jarry.

40 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 96.

The examples that will be focused on in this section are from *The Sea Came in at Midnight*. In this novel the characters of Kristen and the Occupant come together as a result of their own desperation. The narrative then reveals the way in which desperation not only continues to shape their lives, but how it was an underlying trait of their pasts. The example will demonstrate that although desperation cannot be categorized into varying types, it is experienced by characters to varying degrees; one character may be simply desperate for food, whereas another may have become so desperate for distraction that he will hire a stranger to live with him in his house. Erickson juxtaposes these to highlight the extent of the desperation of one character in contrast with another.

The personal ad posted by the Occupant, that results in his relationship with Kristen reads, in part, "I want you at the end of your rope, lashed to the mast of my dreams [...] Best if you are desperate."<sup>41</sup> Kristen answers the advert assuming, like the reader at this stage, that it is she who is desperate. The narrative compounds this with the suggestion that "because she was even more desperate for what he offered her than he was for what she offered him, she submitted herself."<sup>42</sup> However, it soon becomes clear that although Kristen was desperate at the moment when she answered the advert, the Occupant is a character whose entire life has been framed by desperation. Whilst living with the Occupant, Kristen often hears "hoarse cries of desperation"<sup>43</sup> and it gradually becomes apparent that the desperation felt by the Occupant is not only more deeply seated within his life, it has come to define him. This is particularly evident when he reveals that he is an "apocalyptologist"<sup>44</sup> and spends his time studying and mapping an apocalypse he is convinced has already begun.

Significantly, the Occupant marks the beginning of this continuing apocalypse as a moment in May 1968 in Paris. His choice is not based upon the student protests at that time, but upon the breakdown of his family: his father having been discovered in bed with another woman, who is subsequently shot.<sup>45</sup> It is this episode, specifically the gunshot, which marks for the Occupant the beginning of the "modern age,"<sup>46</sup> his apocalypse and the start of his desperation. The apocalyptic calendar that the Occupant constructs, first in his head, and then later in the room of his house in Los Angeles, is made up of irrational events. As he explains to Kristen "the crucial reference points of the Apocalyptic Calendar were moments of nihilistic derangement no scheme could accommodate."<sup>47</sup> This deliberate decision by Erickson to ground the apocalyptic calendar of the Occupant in chaotic events that are important precisely because of their nonsensical nature, serves to highlight that all aspects of the Occupant's life are linked in some way to his underlying desperation.

41 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 24.

42 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 28.

43 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 32.

44 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 36.

45 Erickson, S. 1999. pp. 58-59.

46 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 58.

47 Erickson, S. 1999. pp. 48-49.

The desperation that underpins the Occupant's life affects his emotional and physical response to his surroundings. For example he runs away from Paris and is reluctant to return due to the despair he felt as a result of his family breakdown. Similarly he appears to Kristen to have "cut himself off from everything"<sup>48</sup> whereas in reality he is reluctant to leave the house in Laurel Canyon in case his wife and daughter return. These examples demonstrate that the Occupant's responses to a place are grounded in the form his desperation takes at the time he occupies them. In Paris his emotional response causes him to reject his surroundings, in such a dramatic fashion that it is years before he can face returning. In Los Angeles however, he is desperately clinging to the idea that his wife and child might return that he cannot bring himself to leave.

Erickson perpetuates the relationship between the characters' despair and their surroundings throughout the narrative. There are three more examples that illustrate this aspect of psychotopography particularly well: firstly the connection between the apocalyptic calendar, the occupants desperation and landscape; secondly the movement of Kristen through her surroundings; and finally the example of the Occupant's wife, Angie, and the relationship between her emotions, desperation and the places to which she will or won't return.

As previously discussed, the Occupant's apocalyptic calendar is rooted in his despair. Therefore when he comes to the conclusion that the central point of the calendar ought to be moveable, shifting in the landscape around him, consequently shifting the geographic location all other dates on the calendar, this too is intimately connected to his desperation. This is confirmed when he decides that the central date on the calendar should be marked on Kristen's body, and that she must be physically moved about in order to observe the shift of the other dates. The two axes of his despair finally come together; the apocalyptic calendar and the loss of his wife and child as represented by the desperate hiring of Kristen to fill the sexual and physical female void in his life – without, he thinks, the emotional attachments that brought about such levels of despair when they left him. Thus Kristen's "body became part of the calendar, the traveling center of the apocalypse."<sup>49</sup> The Occupant begins moving Kristen around, first in the house, then the neighbourhood, then the surrounding hillsides, and finally driving her out into the desert, in his futile attempts to make his apocalyptic calendar make sense, and so make the chaotic landscape of desperation both logical and bearable.

Kristen herself has a complicated relationship with landscape that is also a result of her despair. Whenever Kristen has changed her surroundings it has been enforced by a situation of desperation. She leaves her home on Davenhall Island to escape her drunken uncle and in the hope of experiencing what it is like to dream. This desperation leads her across the landscape of California and inadvertently into a suicide cult. Whilst trying to escape she is once again driven by her despair to hitchhiking with a strange couple,

48 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 39.

49 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 52.

who, once they reach San Francisco, discuss killing her. Finally, Kristen finds her way to Los Angeles, where she is sleeping rough before discovering the Occupant's advert. Not long after having left the Occupant, by slipping out one day, she finds a flight ticket to Japan and once again, in fear that she will be discovered either by the Occupant, or the police, she is forced into a dramatic shift of place. Therefore throughout the novel her relationship with the landscape around her is defined by the desperation that forces her into it.

The character of Angie, who becomes the Occupant's wife, similarly relates to her surroundings according to her emotions. What is so significant about this example from the novel is that in all other aspects of her life Angie does not actively express emotion rather, she labels it. For example, instead of laughing when something is funny she will simply say "haha,"<sup>50</sup> she won't sulk, choosing instead to state "fume" and "dismay,"<sup>51</sup> and perhaps most perversely rather than expressing sadness she responds "sob."<sup>52</sup> It is therefore significant that Erickson has Angie convey such strong emotional responses to her surroundings. This demonstrates the importance of the impact of the surroundings on the characters in his novels, and particularly the way that the despair of his characters is so pervasive that even Angie, who will not physically express emotion, reacts when the Occupant tries to persuade her to join him in New York, a city she desperately fled to in the hopes of escaping her family, only to flee again from the makers of a snuff film.

## **Conclusion**

What connects the despair of all the characters in the novel is Los Angeles; Kristen forced to run towards it; Angie running away from it; and the Occupant afraid to ever leave. Los Angeles is the nexus of the loss, guilt, betrayal, desire and despair of the characters within the novel. Therefore the characters' psychic and emotional landscape is connected to, and shaped by, their literal topographic landscape. With all of the emotional states, it is the connection between them, the characters and their surroundings that form the basis of the psychotopography in the Erickson's novels. How the protagonists relate and respond to their surroundings both creates and is created by their emotions. This then affects all of the other aspects of the characters lives: their happiness and how to achieve it; their need to numerate the incalculable; the perceived liquidity of their surroundings and relationships; and finally the overall apocalyptic vision of Erickson's writing. As outlined earlier in the thesis, Erickson's psychotopography saturates the writing, and often must be extracted through detailed analysis of themes and motifs. The use of emotions throughout the novels and their connections to other themes is a good example of how this dense approach is employed by Erickson throughout. The following chapter will demonstrate the way that the theme of happiness is used not

50 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 85.

51 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 86.

52 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 88.



only as an emotional state to be pursued, but also to facilitate the exploration of other issues, such as personal and national identity.

## Chapter five: Happiness.

*We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal;  
that they are endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable rights;  
that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.  
American Declaration of Independence*

### Introduction

Happiness in Erickson's writing is not simply an emotion expressed or yearned for by the characters. It is used as a basis from which to explore notions of identity – both individual and national – the disjunction Erickson sees between “America” the idea and “The United States” the geographic place; and the psychotopography that arises from the connection between these issues. At the heart of these topics for Erickson is Thomas Jefferson, both as a historical figure and the reconfiguration of him as a character in *Arc d’X*. Jefferson represents for Erickson the contradictions found in the idealist construction of America: a politician who was torn between the ideas he set forth for the nation and the actions he followed himself. Erickson takes the historical figure of Jefferson and makes him, as Spinks outlines, “the conceptual locus that holds the main themes [...] in place.”<sup>1</sup> This is not only true in relation to the themes of narrative, history and temporality that Spinks refers to, but also in connection to memory, landscape and emotion.

The psychotopography of the novels is connected to the pursuit of happiness, and the spectre of Jefferson and his ideals that haunt all of Erickson's writing. As Erickson himself has commented, even when Jefferson doesn't appear as a character in the novels, he's there; “the man behind the curtain.”<sup>2</sup> This chapter will examine the connections found in Erickson's writing between happiness, identity, emotion and landscape. Specific attention will be given to how Jefferson has affected Erickson's writing about the pursuit of happiness and American identity and the contradictions therein that Erickson explores.

### Thomas Jefferson and the pursuit of happiness

Although there is speculation as to whether the notion of replacing the word “property” in Locke's maxim for the term “pursuit of happiness” originated with Jefferson – George Mason wrote a document around the time of the drafting of the Declaration suggesting both the “acquiring and processing of property” and “pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety”<sup>3</sup> – it was nevertheless written into the Declaration of Independence, a document that held the foundational guidelines for America as a newly autonomous nation. It was from the Declaration of Independence that the founding fathers expected the people of America to take their instructions for maintaining and strengthening the nation, and their right to the pursuit of happiness was

1 Spinks, L. p. 230.

2 Interview with Erickson, by author. Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

3 Quoted in Ellis, J. 1996. p. 65.

therein enshrined. Although it has been argued that Jefferson could not have foreseen “all or even most of the ideological consequences of what he wrote,”<sup>4</sup> the consequences of the exclusion of the right to property in exchange for the right to the pursuit of happiness should not be overlooked. It is from this decision that Jefferson’s contradictions emerge, and from which Erickson draws his inspiration in his fictionalization of Jefferson.

As Joseph J Ellis comments in *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, “Jefferson was probably aware of the contradiction between his own version of the natural rights philosophy and the institution of slavery. By dropping any reference to ‘property’ he blurred that contradiction.”<sup>5</sup> This is also connected to evidence which suggests that Jefferson was “accustomed to constructing interior worlds of great imaginative appeal that inevitably collided with more mundane realities.”<sup>6</sup> Jefferson was therefore an idealistic politician, but one who needed to reconcile his ideals with the reality that constantly contradicted them. It is precisely this disjunction that Erickson draws on in his novels, not only in the character of Jefferson, but in the broader context of landscape, emotion and identity: Jefferson’s decision to include the pursuit of happiness as an inalienable right began the search for the American dream; the life that represented and embodied happiness that is connected with going west, the frontier, and subsequently California. As Ellis comments “Jefferson provided a sanction for youthful hopes and illusions, planted squarely in what turned out to be the founding document of the American republic. The American dream, then, is just that, the Jeffersonian dream.”<sup>7</sup> Jefferson, the pursuit of happiness, the American identity and American dream, the landscape, and the emotional response to all of these issues cannot be separated. It is these things that Erickson explores in *Arc d’X*, and which then underlie the rest of his novels.

What Jefferson did by introducing the inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness into the Declaration of Independence was to give the people of America a right that could not be objectified: each man’s happiness would differ and thus so would their pursuit of that happiness. Although this addition to the declaration eased the pressure on the debate about slavery – since property wasn’t mentioned, no man could claim owning slaves as his inalienable right, however, slave owners could argue that owning slaves ensured their happiness, even if it halted the slaves’ own pursuit of happiness – it also made almost any other questionable action justifiable if a man could suggest that halting what he was doing infringed upon his right to pursue what made him happy. Jefferson’s idealism blurred his judgment: he envisioned a republic in which the people would govern themselves without the need to be overseen by politicians and presidents; where people’s rights would not need to be presided over as each man would respect the other’s right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Jefferson’s idealistic ‘interior worlds’<sup>8</sup> overshadowed his reality.

4 Ellis, J. 1996. pp. 63-4.

5 Ellis, J. 1996. p. 66.

6 Ellis, J. 1996. p. 41.

7 Ellis, J. 1996. p. 70.

8 Ellis, J. 1996. p. 41.

Erickson draws on this idealism, and the contradictions within Jefferson's identity that arose as a result of the clash of his idealism and the political realities, when constructing his own version of Jefferson in *Arc d'X*.

### **California and the pursuit of happiness**

The happiness of American individuals became bound up not only with the nation's identity as a republic newly separated from British rule, but by compounding this sovereignty through expansion. The way to do this was by breaking down frontiers; this meant expanding west and the gradual move towards the Pacific. It was Jefferson who began the substantial explorations of the western territories, beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 followed almost immediately by the expedition by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.<sup>9</sup> Although the official aim of the expedition was to study the flora and fauna of the western regions, the underlying interest was to evaluate how much land was available and what interference the United States might provoke from the French, Spanish and British. Jefferson felt confident about the expansion west, and about the inclusion of these lands into the United States. He commented, controversially at the time, that "those of the western confederacy will be as much our children and descendants as those of the eastern, and I feel myself as much identified with that country, in future time, as with this."<sup>10</sup> Although Jefferson cannot have anticipated the way that the west, and California in particular, would come to embody the American dream and the pursuit of happiness, it is apt that he was the figure who began, and believed so strongly in the success of, the exploration.

As outlined in chapter two, the west coast has come to epitomize the apotheosis of the American dream. It is here, more than anywhere else, that Americans envisage not only the pursuit, but also the attainment, of happiness. The relationship between California and the pursuit of happiness is connected to the varied landscape of the region, which allows for the uniquely mild Mediterranean-style climate. The correlation between the pursuit of happiness and landscape is a large part of American identity, both nationally and individually. It is here that Erickson's separation of "America" the idea, from "The United States" the geographic place is a logical extension of Jefferson's notions: Jefferson formulated the ideals of "America" by expanding the cartography of "The United States."

California, as the furthest possible extension west, is therefore understandably the finest embodiment of the relationship between landscape, happiness and American identity. As Ellis points out, Jefferson believed that "the United States was not just integrating the West into the Union; the West was actually integrating the older United States into a newer and ever-changing version of America."<sup>11</sup> Again here, is it possible to see the division between the cartography of the United States and the notion of America that Erickson highlights. The expansion west was a way of bringing these two notions together and

9 Ellis, J. 1996. p. 247.

10 Quoted in Ellis, J. 1996. p. 255.

11 Ellis, J. 1996. p. 253.

attempting to have a United States (the place) that embodied America (the idea). This union of the geography of the nation with its ideals cemented the importance of landscape, and the metaphors it held, in the American identity.

One of the metaphors of the new country was that of the new start; the birth of a nation that would allow the pursuit of happiness, unhindered by monarchic rule such as that found in Europe. This idea of a new start where anything is possible was – and still is – epitomized by the west coast. As Wyatt explains, “California intensifies the national myth that America has been set apart from the beginning by its freedom to test itself against the unmediated. If landscape has meant one thing to Americans, it has meant innocence.”<sup>12</sup> Lynch, highlights the “fluidity of the environment and the absence of physical elements which anchor to the past”<sup>13</sup> in Los Angeles, again implying a space constantly given to new starts without the burden of the past: exactly what the founding fathers were hoping to bring to their nation with the Declaration of Independence. The possibility of a new life of happiness and success is precisely what the American dream entails, and California plays to this perfectly. Starr explores the history of Southern California and how the region managed to translate the American dream into the Californian dream: the pursuit of happiness becoming epitomized in one region’s sunshine and success. As Starr explains, from Southern California “emerged a regional society that in its future developments and transformations would set national standards of American identity.” The region was “destined to secure for itself a fixed place in the collective daydream of America.”<sup>14</sup>

At the heart of California’s success is a Mediterranean-style climate with mild temperatures and plenty of sunshine offering both a yearlong growing season and incredibly attractive living conditions. This is possible due to its varied landscape: beaches backed by mountains, which are in turn backed by desert or forest. Southern California offers any form of landscape one could wish for in one place: the perfect region for anyone to find happiness, with the sunshine to go with it. It also allowed for the film and television industry to thrive with the possibility of shooting any landscape they needed within easy traveling distance of the studios. Thus the virtues of the “golden state” could be broadcast to the rest of the United States ensuring the American dream, and subsequently the California dream, was seen and internalized by the entire nation. To quote Starr again: “the inner landscape of California [became] a shared social and imaginative identity.”<sup>15</sup> The correlation between interior and exterior landscapes is precisely what Erickson’s psychotopography is concerned with.

The connection between landscape, Jefferson and identity (individual and national), is significant for Erickson. These three topics are not only interrelated at the core of *Arc d’X*, but are also implied throughout his other novels. An exploration of happiness in *Arc d’X*; how it is defined, pursued and attained,

12 Wyatt, D.. p. 207.

13 Lynch, K.. p. 45.

14 Starr, K. 1985. p. viii.

15 Starr, K. 2002. p. x.

will provide a platform from which to discuss the interrelation of landscape, identity and Jefferson and how they are relevant to the overarching psychotopography of the novels.

### ***Arc d'X* and the pursuit of happiness**

Although the character of Thomas Jefferson<sup>16</sup> is only actually present in *Arc d'X* for fifty-three pages at the beginning of the novel and five towards the close, he haunts the narrative, driving the plot and its themes of happiness, redemption and freedom. Thomas' memory also literally haunts the character of Sally, his slave mistress who becomes the protagonist and carries the themes introduced by Thomas' character through the varying histories and landscapes of the novel. It is from Thomas' story at the start of the novel that Erickson sets up the notion of the ambiguity of the pursuit of happiness and the impact of one person's passions on the freedom of others through his possession, both sexual and literal, of the slave Sally Hemings. This relationship demonstrates what Jim Murphy calls "the gray areas where love infringes freedom and where the personal encroaches on the public"<sup>17</sup> and which Erickson explores. The relationship of Thomas and Sally at the beginning of the book, and all Sally's subsequent relationships, also act as a metaphor to explore the implication of Jefferson's phrase "the pursuit of happiness" on American identity.

The other key character in relation to notions of happiness, and America, is that of Georgie, a young nazi who is searching for his idea of the happiness that America has to offer. It is the character of Georgie that exemplifies Erickson's exploration of the different interpretations of the pursuit of happiness and of what the idea of America holds. This chapter will first examine the disjunctions of love, freedom and happiness through the relationship between Thomas and Sally, going on to examine Erickson's use of this relationship (and its impact on Sally), and the contradictions arising from it, as a metaphor for notions of American identity. The discussion will then move to examine the role of Georgie, with specific attention being paid to the meeting of Georgie and Thomas towards the end of the novel. The importance of landscape, both literally and emotionally will feature throughout both of these discussions, particularly in connection with Erickson's separation of the United States, the place and "America" the idea.

### **Contradictory Thomas: Happiness, love, freedom and Sally.**

The contradictions between the ideals Jefferson wanted for his country and those of his private life is one of the qualities that Erickson develops in his character of Thomas and uses in various ways throughout the narrative to explore the contradictions inherent in the American identity, all of which is rooted in the inclusion and subsequent importance of the "pursuit of happiness" in the Declaration of Independence.

<sup>16</sup> In order to distinguish between the historical figure of Thomas Jefferson and Erickson's fictional character during the discussion the former shall be referred to as "Jefferson" and the latter as "Thomas"

<sup>17</sup> Murphy, J. p. 461.

Erickson begins to illustrate the contradictions of Thomas' actions, in both his public and private life, early in the novel. Thomas is shown to ride "to Williamsberg to propose laws that declared no one would own any more slaves"<sup>18</sup> and yet only a few pages later it is revealed that he was "habitually tormented about his slaves, whose ownership he could barely bring himself to accept but whose freedom he could not bring himself to give."<sup>19</sup> Although this was a well-documented fact about Jefferson, Erickson extends the literal and metaphoric struggles with possession, happiness and guilt throughout *Arc d'X*. The contradictions within Thomas' private life also demonstrate these struggles. On her death-bed his wife makes him agree with her about the sanctity of marriage, he does so, and yet it is "only the adulterous ones"<sup>20</sup> of the women offering themselves to whom in whom he shows any interest. This shows that although Thomas won't marry another woman he is still interested in them, and despite his agreement about the sanctity of marriage it is the married women who tempt him. This example also serves to demonstrate one of the key characteristics that Erickson utilises in Thomas: the possession of things he is not supposed to have. The word possession here is important, because it is precisely his literal and sexual ownership of Sally that is at the heart of Thomas' struggle between the notions of happiness, love and freedom and therefore at the heart of Erickson's metaphors and themes.

Thomas' happiness is found in his possession of his slave Sally Hemings. She travels to France accompanying his youngest daughter, and soon after her arrival Thomas gives in to his passions and rapes her. He finds the rape exciting; "It thrilled him, the possession of her [...] not to be a saint for once, not to be a champion. Not to bear, for once the responsibility of something noble or good."<sup>21</sup> Significantly, Thomas justifies his actions using his political principles, the very principles that he had hoped would shape a moral society. He argues to himself that "didn't he believe one must pursue his happiness?"<sup>22</sup>, then going on to state that, "such a pursuit is as ruthless as any other."<sup>23</sup> However this only makes him satisfied until his climax; "his possession made him happy, until he came,"<sup>24</sup> at which point he becomes immediately wracked with guilt and shame, "refusing to look at himself or what he's done"<sup>25</sup> and his happiness is no longer. This incident begins the theme that runs through the book, the idea of happiness always being something that must be pursued: it can never truly be attained because what constitutes it perpetually shifts. The rape of Sally also begins Erickson's exploration of the impact of one person's happiness on others' and the contradictions that lie within the notion of the "pursuit of happiness."

18 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 10.

19 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 13.

20 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 12.

21 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 25.

22 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 25.

23 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 25.

24 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 25.

25 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 25.

The rape of Sally makes Thomas' "possession of her complete."<sup>26</sup> She is now emotionally his as well as physically and sexually, so much so that Sally comments that their relationship has made her hate being alone so much that she longs for his defilement rather than suffer loneliness.<sup>27</sup> Although Sally comments that she had "if only for a moment, felt what it was like not to be a slave"<sup>28</sup> she is mistaken, and has misjudged the nature of their relationship: while she is technically a free woman whilst in France, she cannot return to America and continue being Thomas' mistress unless she remains his slave. Thomas has truly gained full possession of her because he has made her long for him so much that she will give up her freedom in order to accept slavery without any recognition of their relationship as legitimate. As Sally's brother James finally points out to her, "he'll never free you in America."<sup>29</sup> Thomas' own feelings confessed in the narrative compound this: "he throbbed with the prospect of having her on American soil, where her slavery was irrefutable."<sup>30</sup> This makes even clearer the inherent contradiction of each man's inalienable right to the pursuit of happiness, as Thomas' happiness is dependent on Sally's slavery, a situation that will mean that her happiness is never realised.

Thomas doesn't view his possession and ownership of Sally as a choice. He argues that "he had no choice about America"<sup>31</sup> and as a result is unable to free Sally. The narrative illustrates the notion that "it was the nature of American freedom that he was only free to take pleasure in something he possessed, in the same way it would ultimately be the nature of America to define itself in terms of what was owned,"<sup>32</sup>; American freedom to pursue happiness allows the compromise of another person's freedom. When Thomas explains to Sally that she can only return with him to America if she remains his slave he begins once again, as after the first rape, to struggle with his guilt about the disjunction between his happiness as pursued through succumbing to his passions, and his ideals and conscience. Since his happiness at the sexual possession of Sally fails at its consummation, he begins to look to redemption as a way of securing his happiness, or at least to assuage his guilt: not his guilt at the treatment of Sally, but rather the guilt at having betrayed the principles upon which he built the idea of a nation.

Thomas mentions that "one should not make rash promises of one's ideals before so many witnesses"<sup>33</sup> Although he is talking specifically here about the promise to his wife not to marry again, the implication is that he also has in mind the Declaration of Independence and the speeches about the abolition of slavery. This implication is confirmed later during the same chapter when Thomas makes one of the most significant speeches in the book:

26 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 29.  
27 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 27.  
28 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 29.  
29 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 37.  
30 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 37.  
31 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 38.  
32 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 38.  
33 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 45.



I've invented something. As a germ of conception in my head it was the best and wildest and most elusive of my inventions. It's a contraption halfcrazed by a love of justice, a machine oiled by fierce hostility to those who would ride the human race as though it were a dumb beast. I've set it loose gyrating across the world. It spins through villages, hamlets, towns, grand cities. It's a thing to be confronted every moment of every day by everyone who hears even its rumor: it will test most those who presume too glibly to believe in it. But I know it's a flawed thing, and I know the flaw is of me. Just as the white ink of my loins has fired the inspiration that made it, so the same ink is scrawled across the order of its extinction. The signature is my own. I've written its name. I've called it America.<sup>34</sup>

The significance of this speech makes it worth quoting in its entirety. Thomas accepts here the contradiction, or rather the flaw, which exists within his idealization of America that will allow him to pursue his happiness and his passions because of his ownership of another person, but not without it. He can love Sally only he if owns her. Thomas resents that America holds this contradiction within it, wanting it instead to be a pure and innocent nation, however he sees, through himself, how this cannot be possible. Upon returning to America from Paris and being inaugurated as President of the United States Thomas disappears. Eventually he is found living in the west with the Native Americans. Thomas is described as having "great respect for the Indians resourcefulness and honor [...] he felt a special kinship with the savagery of their existence and envied the harmony in which they lived with that savagery."<sup>35</sup> These comments illustrate Thomas' wish to be reconciled with his own savagery and the consequences of the disjunction between the innocence and freedom he wishes for his nation and the passions he cannot control in his own life.

It is significant here that Thomas is found beyond mapped regions, in the far west. The connections between landscape and Thomas' ideas begin the psychotopography of the novel that will be explored in more detail with the characters of Sally and Georgie. Thomas disappears from Virginia because he is haunted by his inability to live according to the ideals he set up for America: something that is brought home to him by his election as President of the United States. The decision for Thomas to travel west is significant for a number of reasons. It allows him to be anonymous, in unmapped territories not yet owned by the United States, and thus not embodying the ideas of America. This means that Thomas can attempt to live in denial of the contradiction between his love and his politics. The extent of his invisibility in the west is highlighted when Sally goes looking for him and is "shocked by how many insisted there had never been

34 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 46.

35 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 48.

such a man.”<sup>36</sup> The move west, as discussed earlier, is also a metaphor for a new start, and particularly one that involves the pursuit of happiness. Thomas, who has been pursuing and justifying his happiness since the rape of Sally in Paris, is chasing a happiness he can accept as compatible with his ideals across both the literal geographic landscape of the United States, and the emotional and psychic landscape of America. Once again this indicates a theme that runs throughout Erickson’s novels of happiness and emotions that are constantly pursued but never reached.

### **Dashing Sally: happiness, histories, landscapes and times**

Although it is through Thomas that the themes of the novel are first indicated, it is the character of Sally whose relationships, actions and experiences carry the motifs through the rest of the narrative. Although it is Thomas who thinks he bears the burden of the contradiction between his politics and his private life, it is actually Sally. She is the one who must justify her decision to forego her freedom in order to pursue her happiness. Sally is also the character who crosses various times, histories and landscapes during the progression of the novel, therefore she is the centre of its psychotopography, as well as the distinction that Erickson makes between “America” and the United States.

When Thomas decides he must leave Paris and return to the United States, he explains to Sally that if she returns with him she can never be free. Her immediate response is that she’ll stay in Paris in order to retain her freedom. However she panics about never being with him again, his possession of her having been so total that she is isolated from everyone around her and longs for the connection with him “as defiled though that connection was.”<sup>37</sup> She decides that she cannot free herself by simply saying “no” to his request for her to return with him, instead “only an act of yes would see her through the nighttime panic”<sup>38</sup> as her refusals have been ignored before, Thomas having continued with this rape and possession despite her pleas not to. Sally’s “yes” action is to kill Thomas, and run from the house.

It is the consequences of this action that begin Sally’s movement through the time and history of the novel, bringing the psychotopography to the fore. Sally believes she has stabbed Thomas and so runs into revolutionary Paris, and the “constant gunfire, into the light of which she’d rush to be obliterated by the flash of freedom.”<sup>39</sup> However Sally’s actions don’t lead to freedom; instead she finds herself in a strange volcanic landscape, in a completely different time and history, a place that exists later in the novel. Sally knocks on the door of the only building and is faced by a woman who she thinks is herself, but who turns out to be her own future daughter, behind whom appears a man she doesn’t recognise. She is both relieved and disappointed that the man isn’t Thomas, but instead someone who “roared out of the unfamiliarity into a

36 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 50

37 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 38.

38 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 39.

39 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 39.

psychic zone of distant but unshakable recognition, remembered more than prophesized.”<sup>40</sup> Upon seeing her the man immediately recognises her and says “Sally,” a statement rather than a question or an exclamation.<sup>41</sup> Sally’s response to this is to run back in the direction she’d come from, finding herself in Paris again and discovered in the street by Thomas who she hadn’t killed after all.

This is an important passage that gives an insight not only to where Erickson is taking the plot of the novel, but also the metaphors he is using and their meaning. What has happened here, as is revealed later in the novel, is that Sally has run out of Paris, across time and space, and into her own future that is set in a futuristic city in an alternative America. Erickson suggests, with his movement of Sally into a different “psychic zone”, that by rejecting Thomas, and the contradictions between his ideals and his actions, she is literally changing the time and space of her history. As the plot of the rest of the novel reveals this will have implications not only for Sally, but also for the rest of “America” the idea, which although existing as distinct from the United States, is nevertheless connected to it. The manipulation of the psychic and literal geography that Sally traverses, as a result of her belief that she has killed Thomas, changes the future America that will be shown throughout the rest of the novel. Therefore both the idea and the geography of the country will be affected by Sally’s decision.

Another interesting point here is that Sally rejects this new America that she encounters, and chooses to return to Paris. Upon discovering she hasn’t killed Thomas, she relents and agrees to return to the United States with him upon the condition that she will be the mistress of his house, that he will never sell her to another and he will free their children when they come of age. Under these conditions they return to Virginia, and to the emotional and literal landscape that Sally is familiar with. “America” stays the same and so does the United States.

However, the psychotopography of the novel and Erickson’s explorations of the contradictions within “America” and the geography of the United States continue. Sally will once more attempt to make the decision to leave Thomas. She goes off to find him when he disappears and one morning she wakes, far out west, to discover that her surroundings have changed overnight. She went to sleep in an empty house, and wakes in a motel room, having dreamt about killing him. In her dream she “could hear the wet rip of the knife” and knows she has killed him this time.<sup>42</sup> This time Thomas is with her, although he lies dead in the bed next to her. She believes that she has finally killed him and freed herself. As she wakes the word “that had been caught in the ventricles of her heart loosened itself and floated up to her throat [...] ‘America’”<sup>43</sup> The narrative goes on to explain that she is in a city called Aeonopolis: a city ruled by priests that is seemingly unconnected to the America or United States that Sally has come from. It transpires that Sally has a husband and daughter in the city and she seems to accept the circumstances of being in this new

40 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 42.

41 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 42.

42 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 52.

43 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 52.

history calmly. The plot makes no mention of why she accepts the new city so readily, and gives no explanation, it is just taken as given that she has passed through time, space and history and into a new life. Rather than question the authorial decisions made by Erickson here, the discussion will simply focus on the metaphorical meaning of Erickson's use of Sally throughout the rest of the narrative, taking the actions of the plot as given like Sally herself.

Once again, Sally's rejection of Thomas has transported her across the geography of the United States and the ideals of America and transplanted her in a very different literal and emotional time and space. This time however, Thomas' death means that the transformation is permanent and so Sally remains in the new surroundings. The new landscape is very different to the America that Sally previously inhabited, both topographically and emotionally. These differences are used by Erickson to explore the connection between the pursuit of happiness and freedom in relation to the idea of America and American identity. The society of Aeonopolis is governed by priests who restrict almost all aspects of life: they control the possessions that people are allowed to own; their movement in and out of the city; their jobs; and even attempt to control emotions by labeling parts of the city as a way of indicating which emotions are permissible and which are not. This is in stark contrast to the previous landscapes Sally has occupied. The Paris and Virginia that Erickson presents in the early parts of *Arc d'X* are lively passionate places, emotionally overwhelming, places where freedom allows Thomas to explore the boundaries of his emotional and political passions in connection to his notions about America. In Aeonopolis, on the other hand, there is very little freedom and all parts of the inhabitants' lives are governed by an authoritative religious "Primacy."<sup>44</sup> The literal landscape also matches the stark dictatorial approach, it is stark and barren, the city is "all built of grey brick"<sup>45</sup> and dominated by blue obelisks. Overshadowing the city is a large active volcano from which a constant stream of ash streams and mixes with the already dark clouds that hang over the area.<sup>46</sup> Erickson uses these contrasts in landscape as a metaphor for the contradictions within Thomas' ideals – and subsequently those inherent in the make-up of America. In Paris and Virginia, where Thomas embraces his passions despite their contradiction of his ideals, the emotional and literal landscape is rich and happiness can be pursued as freely as possible, even by Sally, who is free to make the decision to stay in Paris or return to America. Aeonopolis, a city that attempts to deny the disjunctions between freedom, love and happiness, is oppressive, and dark. Erickson is demonstrating here that the contradictions are at the heart of what makes America and the United States so desirable; they help construct its identity and this shouldn't be denied: rather have passions, contradictions and freedom than no freedom at all.

A significant moment in the narrative that illustrates the contrast between Aeonopolis and America is when the police officer, Wade, discovers the words "the pursuit of happiness" on a wall where the graffiti is

44 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 54.

45 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 57.

46 Erickson, S. 1993. pp. 57-59.

constantly changing of its own accord. As it happens these are messages being sprayed on a fragment of the Berlin wall by the character of Georgie. In Aeonopolis' Georgie has just been discovered dead in a nightclub, whereas in Berlin he is simultaneously still alive. Again here Erickson manipulates time and space in his plots. The graffiti, like Sally, is being carried across psychotopographic time and space from Berlin to Aeonopolis: each time Georgie writes a message in his room in Berlin in 1999 it fades and appears in the city of Aeonopolis to be discovered by Wade. "The pursuit of happiness" is the last phrase that appears on the wall. It is described in the narrative as "the most innocuous and meaningless bulletin yet"<sup>47</sup> and Wade's response is "you're running out of ideas, my man" he is "immediately disappointed" by it.<sup>48</sup> Wade's dismissal of the phrase illustrates the indifference of the inhabitants to the notion of the importance of happiness and its pursuit, and the issues of freedom and love, which might arise from the search for it. This highlights the contrast between Aeonopolis and America because in America anyone seeing the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" would have understood its importance to the core of the nation and national identity, whereas in Aeonopolis it is dismissed as a trite statement by an artist who has run out of more obscure notions such as "the return of the queen of wands"<sup>49</sup>

Erickson, however, does not leave the notion of the pursuit of happiness here. Instead the character of Wade is haunted by it, just as Sally is haunted by the ghost of Thomas. Wade finds an artifact – again a relic from Berlin later in the novel – which is a stone from a broken piece of wall, on the rough inside surface the words "pursuit of happiness" are just visible. Wade takes the artifact and begins carrying it around in his pocket, acknowledging it's importance but unable to work out the significance of the phrase. He loses the rock at one point only to discover it again at the close of the novel when he is in jail. It is only at this point that he realises its significance and acknowledges "that in his possession he had the most forbidden artifact of all"<sup>50</sup>

The artifact is the most forbidden because the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" holds all of the contradictions and passions that the Primacy of Aeonopolis are concerned will bring chaos. Here lies the core of what Erickson, and his protagonists, embrace not only in *Arc d'X* but also the rest of the novels, the need to accept chaos: it is neither a negative nor a positive thing, but an ambiguous morally neutral force that influences almost all aspects of the characters lives. Erickson is suggesting that the pursuit of happiness, and all the contradictions that implies, produces the chaos that is essential to American identity, and that this is not necessarily a negative thing, just something that must be accepted as it is. It is the chaos within America and the United States that produces the continual fluidity that both underlies Erickson's novels and his understanding of the continual progression and flux of the landscape – emotional and cartographic – of the United States.

47 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 64.

48 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 64.

49 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 64.

50 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 297.

Sally struggles in the new psychotopographic landscape where the zones of the city are labeled according to emotional states: “ambivalence,” “sorrow,” “humiliation”, “redemption.”<sup>51</sup> She is literally free of Thomas, but his memory haunts her, so that she continually feels trapped by something: her love for Thomas that is embedded deep in her psyche, as is knowledge of the existence of “America” that is within her but cannot be expressed. She spends the rest of the narrative trying to work out what it is that will set her free. Sally’s captivity – both literal and metaphorical – is a theme that runs through the novel, affecting the lives of other characters she encounters. Now that Thomas is gone, Erickson makes Sally the metaphor for an America that must be free to accept its contradictions. The character of Wade confesses his need to “free himself of the way Sally Hemings’ captivity revolted his conscience”<sup>52</sup> and the narrative goes on to comment that “he knew it wasn’t a miracle Sally had said when she awoke that noon in the hotel room...it was a name, the name of both the man she had killed and the act of killing him; and it was a name he’d known forever, though he’d never heard it before.”<sup>53</sup> Here Erickson is suggesting that the history and nature of America cannot be ignored, that the American identity pervades and must be embraced, despite the contradictory ground upon which it is built. Aeonopolis is a city whose government has tried to discard history, it sits in a vault in books referred to as the “Unexpurgated Volumes of Unconscious History.”<sup>54</sup> It is in these volumes that the history of America, in all its chaotic messy actuality, are hidden from the inhabitants of Aeonopolis. However, as Erickson suggests with the use of the term “unconscious history” the things held within the volumes are inherently part of the people, they exist already within the American identity. Whereas the Primacy wish to hide away the passionate messy history, they cannot stop it from being an inherent part of the peoples’ consciousness. The inclusion of these books in the narrative is Erickson emphasizing his belief that it is the chaos and contradictions that make the American identity what it is, and it should be accepted rather than glossed over: the chaotic passions that underlie Jefferson’s pursuit of happiness in the Declaration of Independence have become an inherent part of American identity, and even if not consciously recognised, they exist beneath the surface, just as they do in Wade’s unexplained understanding of Sally having whispered the word “America.”

Erickson explores the consequences of not accepting the disjunctions between freedom, love and happiness again using the character of Sally as the metaphor. At various points in the novel Sally becomes ill with a problem the doctor cannot diagnose. Her illness is described as her being “lividly caught in some abyss that denied Sally Hemings’ had ever existed.”<sup>55</sup> She has trapped within herself her own unremembered history, and the discovery that she didn’t kill Thomas after all has begun to release the “America” within her. It manifests itself as a “small white seagull [...] growing inside and beating its wings for

51 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 56-59

52 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 75.

53 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 97.

54 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 117.

55 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 145.

release.”<sup>56</sup> Although Sally survives this illness, it is clear that she has still not managed to reconcile the choices she has made and the contradiction between her wish for freedom, her love for Thomas and her happiness; all of which are bound up in the notion of America that she now carries within her. As a result she becomes ill again later in the novel. By this point she has managed to escape from the confines of Aeonopolis, and yet still knows she is not truly free and becomes even more haunted by Thomas. The narrative voice shifts during her illness and explains that Thomas “never believed freedom and love were the same road with two names. He always believed they were two separate roads and that it was always a matter of moving back and forth between the two.”<sup>57</sup> It is this that Sally cannot seem to reconcile, that she must move between love and freedom and will never be able to make them the same thing. This is the contradiction at the heart of Thomas’ thinking and the one that eventually kills her. It is during this illness that Sally finally remembers what it is that is haunting her, she remembers her rape by Thomas and this time rather than resisting, she gives in and accepts her desire. She thinks this decision will obliterate all the other memories, but instead discovers that “desire isn’t the only thing left of her after all. The memory is left, a small trace of it in the embers of her slavery that his seed hunts down, the memory of how he loves her and how she loves him and how it’s bigger than anything they have ever known.”<sup>58</sup> It is with this realisation that Sally is released from the strange illness and dies. Rather than being a negative thing, Sally’s death is presented as a release from the captivity she has felt all her life: having realised that there is no way to reconcile the contradictions in the choices she and Thomas made she can finally be happy. Once again Erickson suggests the embracing of chaos rather than futile attempts to organize it.

Sally appears once more in the book, back in Paris and at the point where she must make the decision as to whether or not to return to America with Thomas. Erickson uses this episode to demonstrate that it wouldn’t have mattered which way Sally’s decision had gone – to stay in Paris or return to America: neither could have made her fully happy without the acceptance of the underlying contradictions that forced the decision. This time around Sally decides not to go with Thomas. He pleads with her, saying “if you leave now [...] you’ll be in a strange country”<sup>59</sup> and yet she leaves anyway this time choosing freedom over love in the hopes that this time it will bring her happiness. Sally hopes that by saying no she had made America “a purer thing” and yet subconsciously knows that the ideas roused by her in Paris remained within Thomas’ mind and so this purity may not be so certain: the contradictions are already embedded within the identity of the nation.

### **Georgie, Thomas, and the American Dream**

56 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 243.

57 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 201.

58 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 202.

59 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 281.

The overall image and identity of the nation is something that Erickson looks at in more detail through the character of Georgie. It is Georgie who actually kills Thomas, arriving in the same motel room as Sally having travelled across the United States from Europe in search of his American dream. Erickson introduces him whilst he is still in Berlin. He is a leader of the neo-Nazi "Pale Flame" group<sup>60</sup> and yet has "a face that was almost pretty [...] a serene sweetness that knocked the edge off any hint of violence."<sup>61</sup> Again here Erickson is highlighting contradictions in his characters. The contradictions within Georgie are much deeper than this and are connected to his obsession with America. This is described when he encounters the character of Erickson, a novelist living in Berlin whom Georgie becomes acquainted with, and attached to, precisely because he is an American. When the characters meet the narrative focuses on Georgie's strange and contradictory obsession with all things American:

Georgie was full of stories about great American geniuses Erickson had never heard of, cracked Midwest Nazi messiahs and white supremacists who Georgie assumed commanded the same rapt attention of everyone in the United States. Georgie's obsession with America often got the better of his politics. Ultimately he didn't discriminate between Thomas Paine and Crazy Horse, between sex goddesses and television stars and soul singers: Erickson was never sure Georgie recognized the contradictions. It didn't seem possible Georgie could have listened to that blues tape of his and somehow heard a white man singing.<sup>62</sup>

At the heart of this explication of Georgie's character is the fact that he has constructed exactly the America that suits his own worldview: he has embraced the contradictions, consciously or subconsciously, in order to create an American dream that fits his pursuit of happiness. Eventually Georgie and his gang of Pale Flame members end up killing Erickson and Georgie takes advantage of this to manipulate Erickson's passport and travel "west" in search of America.

Unfortunately, when Georgie arrives in the United States he discovers that the America he believed in doesn't exist. He arrives in New York only to discover "more flotsam [...] than he ever saw in Berlin."<sup>63</sup> He dismisses his findings, and instead decides to "get out of New York and find [his] way west to the real America"<sup>64</sup> the America of racial purity that will fulfill his dream and provide his happiness. Thus Georgie begins his journey "west" across the United States, constantly looking for his own construction of America,

60 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 218.

61 Erickson, S. 1993. P. 218.

62 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 221.

63 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 250.

64 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 251.



his dream that will bring happiness. As he travels he becomes preoccupied with the date and time, determined to arrive at his destination before the arrival of the new millennium. As the days count down he pushes deep into the west, until he begins to realise that “none of the cars on the highway go his direction anymore”<sup>65</sup> Gradually the landscape of the narrative begins to depart from an United States recognizable by the reader, and as Georgie’s journey towards the millennium, his own American dream and his future progresses, the landscape and notions of both the United States and America also begin to shift. The closer he comes to the end of the “west” the more apocalyptic the landscape. As the narrative explains “by the time he reaches what was once the Mojave Desert he’s passed the highway checkpoint beyond which no one’s allowed without authorization”<sup>66</sup> and it becomes clear that there has been a “Cataclysm.”<sup>67</sup> The exact nature of this disaster is not explained, except to say that the desolation caused by it means the “landscape is bitter and overwhelming.”<sup>68</sup> The correlation here between the landscape and Geogie’s emotions is unavoidable.

The “bitter” and “overwhelming” landscape demonstrates the psychotopography of Georgie’s failed search for his happiness in America. He came searching for a pure country where he could pursue his happiness and realise his American dream and instead he has found a broken landscape that is occupied by “coloreds” and “obvious queers,”<sup>69</sup> the very people he was hoping to expunge from his history. Thus his notions of, and emotions towards, the United States and America gradually degrade, just like the landscape around him. Another significant aspect of Georgie’s relationship with the landscape of the United States, and one that connects him to Thomas, is that his search for America continually pushes him westward. This not only echoes Thomas’ own search at the beginning of the book, but mirrors the expansion west started by Jefferson that became the embodiment of the American dream as it came to be known by the rest of the world. Erickson’s ideas about California will be discussed in more detail later, but as Georgie’s experiences demonstrate, the pursuit of happiness may take him to the west, but the actual attainment remains unfulfilled.

When Georgie finally makes it to the city he has been searching for it is as if he has constructed it himself, psychically projecting his visions of a city from the front of a murdered American novelist’s book onto the final frontier of America. When he asks a passing trucker about the “buried city”<sup>70</sup> the astonished reply is “I don’t know where you heard about that [...] that’s totally hush-hush.”<sup>71</sup> The conversation continues and it transpires that the city being talked about, which turn out to be the ruins of Aeonopolis, has seemingly being uncovered by the cataclysm and everyone has “just spent the last year and a half trying to work out how old” the city actually is.<sup>72</sup> When Georgie finally reaches the ruins of the city he discovers a door and

65 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 252.

66 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 253.

67 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 253.

68 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 253.

69 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 250.

70 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 253.

71 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 253.

72 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 254.

steps through it into the hotel room of Sally's future and after a conversation with Thomas, kills him. These events complete the cyclical history of the novel as it explains the murder of Thomas. The closure of the cyclical narrative and the conversation between Thomas and Georgie are both events that are crucial to Erickson's metaphors and concerns that underlie the whole novel, and which are also found in many of his other narratives.

The encounter between Georgie and Thomas brings the issue of the pursuit of happiness full circle, starting as it did with the contradictions within Thomas' character and then being manifested later in the modern character of Georgie. The encounter is Erickson's way of demonstrating that the ideas that arose within Thomas' notions about America have been carried beyond him and into the nation as a whole, and have subsequently been passed on in the ideas expected of the country by everyone else. The meeting of Georgie and Thomas represents how the idea of the pursuit of happiness has penetrated beyond love and freedom to other aspects of life and yet has retained its contradictory outcome.

The most significant aspect of the encounter between Georgie and Thomas is Georgie's refusal to believe that Thomas could possibly be the embodiment of "America." When Georgie asks the old man he sees in the motel room "who are you" Thomas replies with "America."<sup>73</sup> Georgie refuses this answer "*liar* is the word that catches in Georgie's throat"<sup>74</sup> He cannot accept that this frail man, looking at him "from the perspective of a finished life"<sup>75</sup> can possibly embody the hope and happiness that America represents. Georgie becomes all the more horrified when he sees Sally in the bed next to Thomas. He is not simply repulsed by the fact that the old man, who calls himself America, is in bed with a black woman, but by how attractive he finds her himself. Georgie is finally confronted by the contradictions within his own pursuit of happiness and his American dream. This sudden realisation, which comes as a betrayal to Georgie is coupled with Thomas' question; "what finally loses a man's soul [...] the betrayal of his conscience or the betrayal of his heart?"<sup>76</sup> Thomas then goes on to comment that "happiness is a dark thing to pursue [...] and the pursuit itself is a dark thing as well [...] I made a country once. [...] It was the frontier of the first irrevocable compromise between the heart's freedom and the conscience's justice, past which the soul can still redeem itself."<sup>77</sup> Thomas here finally admits that the contradictions between his personal ideals and his political ones, born out in his formulation of America, have led to an irrevocable promise that lies at the heart of the nation's identity. The combination of the realisation of the contradictions within his own pursuit of happiness, and Thomas' confessions is too much for Georgie who picks up the piece of the Berlin wall with "pursuit of happiness" scrawled on it and uses it to beat Thomas to death and then flees leaving Sally to be arrested for the crime and completing the narrative's cycle.

73 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 259.

74 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 259.

75 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 258.

76 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 260.

77 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 260-261.

When Georgie steps into the hotel room occupied by Thomas and Sally he is effectively stepping from the future of Aeonopolis into the past of the city, which is simultaneously occupying an alternative past for America and an alternative future for Thomas and Sally. Therefore Georgie manages to occupy all the times of the novel simultaneously at the point at which he steps through the door from the ruins to the motel room. It should also be noted that at the exact point at which this action takes place “the ghost city splayed across the Cataclysm’s breach slides into oblivion” and all the times and histories of the narrative momentarily combine. Throughout *Arc d’X*, Erickson has connected landscape, time and emotion, and in the incident between Thomas and Georgie this connection reaches its climax; history and time revealing themselves to be cyclical through the crossover of the places that Thomas and Georgie inhabit, and the contradictions that their emotions share. Another example of this is found earlier in the novel when Sally flees from Paris only to find herself in her own future. The use of emotion to produce a literal shift in time and space is a motif of psychotopography that Erickson uses not only in *Arc d’X* but throughout his other novels. It allows Erickson to explore the way that he believes emotions are tied to all aspects of a character’s life, and in particular their relationship with the surroundings. The shifting of time in Erickson’s writing is fundamental to this idea because Erickson uses Faulkner’s notion that time ticks not to the clock of reality, but that of memory: due to landscape being so important to the emotions and memories of the characters in the novels it is manipulated in the same way as time so as to reflect its connection to the clock of memory.

The connection between history, landscape and time, and their correlation and constant shifting in *Arc d’X* provides a way of returning to the importance of the Californian landscape, in particular, to Erickson’s writing, and also in this case the connection between the Californian landscape, the “West” and the American dream. As outlined in the introduction California has become synonymous with the American dream, and Erickson acknowledges this throughout *Arc d’X* with the constant references to Thomas and Georgie searching for and moving towards the west. However, the more significant use of the connection between the Californian landscape and the American dream in Erickson’s writing is found in his use of it alongside his theme of contradictions.

The region of Southern California, where Erickson grew up and still lives, holds a series of contradictions, both in its social and cultural history and, perhaps most obviously, in its landscape. In terms of topography the landscape of the region varies, with mountains, desert, forest and beaches, producing a uniquely mild and dry climate, and one that, because of the geological foundations is plagued by earthquakes and hot dry winds that lead to raging wildfires. These conditions not only present a contradictory cartography, they also lead to a social one: the climate of the area is perfect for settlement, except that the region is too dry. As a result the authorities began to transport water over large distances in order to make Southern California not only habitable, but desirable and profitable. Therefore one of the contradictions of the region became embodied in its culture: it is a land ill-suited to occupancy thriving and expanding at an almost exponential rate. The contradictions of the Southern California region grew as its

cartography did; it became a place that embodies the America dream, a situation helped by Hollywood, and yet migrant workers were derided and the poor ethnic minorities contained in specific areas of the city often unable to take part in the healthy desirable life that the region advertised to the rest of the world.

The contradictions of the Californian social and topographical construction echo those found in Thomas and Georgie; characters who head west in search of happiness, and in order to do so must attempt to accept the contradictions inherent within it, just as the inhabitants of California know that the idyllic landscape they occupy could be subject to a major earthquake at any moment. A key aspect of California's manmade landscape is also reflected in Erickson's response to, and understanding of, time and history as being linked to memories, and thus shifting according to emotion rather than the time of the clock. Erickson has pointed to the fact that, whilst growing up in the San Fernando Valley, he was used to the landscape constantly changing around him, being developed from wasteland, to condos to freeways.<sup>78</sup> Erickson admits that he accepted these constantly changing surroundings, and history of flux as the norm, until he was able to travel outside of Los Angeles and explore cities that had stayed the same for decades and centuries. It is clear from the way Erickson utilizes shifting landscapes and histories, and in particular when connected to memories and emotion, that his experience of Los Angeles – coupled with the influence of Faulkner's views about chronology – has shaped his own views about the nature of time, history and landscape. Erickson uses dramatic shifts in landscape and history to emphasise and influence the emotions of his characters in a way that reflects what he must have experienced growing up in such changeable surroundings. Erickson uses this narrative technique throughout his novels, though it is in *Arc d'X* that is highlighted so strongly because of the coming together of Thomas and Georgie and the overlap of their circumstances and emotions.

## Conclusion

All of the themes and motifs found in *Arc d'X* are used by Erickson to explore his overarching concerns about American identity. Erickson views the construction of American identity as connected to issues of freedom, innocence and idealism. He argues that "Americans have come to feel more burdened by freedom than invigorated by it"<sup>79</sup> and that at the crux of this profound disillusionment is the illusion of innocence.<sup>80</sup> Erickson expands on this by commenting that "because the idea of America [is] so strong, the country has persuaded itself that it was always nothing but the ideal and innocent country. It has always been an idealistic country, but it has never been an innocent country."<sup>81</sup> Erickson goes on to state that "the great paradox of America has been the conflict between its true idealism and its false innocence."<sup>82</sup> It is because

78 Interview with Erickson, by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

79 Erickson, S. in, McCaffery, L. 1997. p. 406.

80 Erickson, S. in, McCaffery, L. 1997. p. 406.

81 Erickson, S. in, Kobayashi, K. *America vs. United States*, 1997. From: [www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~nomad/erickson/kobayashi](http://www.isc.meiji.ac.jp/~nomad/erickson/kobayashi)

82 Erickson, S. in, McCaffery, L. 1997. p. 406.

of these issues about innocence, idealism and freedom that Erickson fictionalises Thomas Jefferson in *Arc d'X*. Jefferson embodies what Erickson sees as the true America: idealism without the innocence; both liberated and terrified by freedom. Therefore the character of Thomas is the perfect metaphor for the construction and progression of American identity.

The cyclical nature of the narrative and chaotic movement of time and space in the novel are also linked to American identity and Erickson's notion of nuclear imagination: "an imagination liberated by the abyss"<sup>83</sup> and the need to accept and be released by chaos. Erickson believes that "Americans aren't people who have much use for ambiguity"<sup>84</sup> and it is the struggle with the ambiguity of the relationship between idealism and happiness that is at the heart of *Arc d'X*. Again Thomas Jefferson provides the perfect metaphor for an exploration of these issues; a man so obsessed by order that he attempted to construct a formula to calculate and quantify happiness, and yet whose personal life may have been ruled by chaotic passions for a slave girl. It is the inability of the American identity to deal with ambiguity that Erickson sees at the heart of the conflict between the "true idealism" and "false innocence" of the nation. This is particularly prevalent in the metaphor of the relationship between Sally and Thomas in *Arc d'X*: both characters are unable to accept some form of ambiguity that arises as a result of their affair: Sally cannot accept the disjunction produced by the conflict between her lack of freedom and her love for Thomas; Thomas cannot justify the pursuit of his happiness with the ownership of and love for Sally. Erickson demonstrates with this metaphor the inability to cope with the ambiguity that arises as a result of the conflict between happiness, love and freedom. The relationship also demonstrates that Thomas' idealism – his striving for a nation that is able to be free and pursue its happiness, coupled with his own happiness – can never be innocent because it relies upon the slavery (emotional, sexual and literal) of other people.

What Erickson suggests with *Arc d'X* is that although unable to be innocent, the idea of "America", and the identity that has been constructed as a result, should maintain its idealism. This is demonstrated with the ruin of Aeonopolis that Georgie discovers on his journey west for the American dream. The city of Aeonopolis represents a landscape in the novel that represses its history in an attempt to present itself as innocent, the result of which is that none of the inhabitants is truly able to pursue their happiness. Instead they are constrained by the Primacy, their emotions reduced to quantifiable areas of the city to make them containable and ordered. When Georgie first comes across the city in ruins an alternative future is shown in which none of this containment is needed. The American dream that Georgie pursues is chaotic and contradictory and aware of being without innocence, and yet is the source of his emotional freedom and happiness. This example is strengthened by the fact that Georgie's shift in time to Aeonopolis does not in his happiness. Therefore Erickson uses the psychotopography of *Arc d'X*, as a metaphor for how to re-connect

83 Erickson, S. in, McCaffery, L.: 1997. p. 409.

84 Erickson, S. in, McCaffery, L. 1997. p. 407.

the idea of “America” and the place the “United States” and so cure the psychic cracks that are appearing between them.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>85</sup> Erickson, S. in, Kobayashi, K. np.

## Chapter six: Numbers.

*Torture numbers and they'll confess to anything*

*Gregg Easterbrook*

### Introduction

Numbering, calculating, formulating and mapping are actions taken by characters during Erickson's novels in order to construct and impose order on their emotional and physical surroundings. Although it might seem normal to pursue order in surroundings as chaotic as those found in Erickson's narratives, the unusual thing about the characters' acts of numbering is that they involve abstract or subjective notions that do not lend themselves to quantification: love, happiness, memories, landscapes and dreams. As Erickson himself has commented, his characters are constantly "trying to take what's elusive and put it in a concrete empirical form."<sup>1</sup> These attempts to "quantify the unquantifiable"<sup>2</sup> are found throughout Erickson's novels in a variety of forms: co-ordinates, formulas, dates, times, calendars and even visions of numbers. This chapter will explore how the quantifications manifest themselves and the meanings they have. It will consider the similarities and differences between the types and ways numbering is used; what the quantification achieves (or fails to achieve) for the characters involved; and, specifically for the psychotopography, the links between the characters' quantifications, emotions and landscape. It should also be noted that Erickson himself often manipulates dates to change the chronology of the plot or enforce non-linearity. Similarly when Erickson shifts times in the novel it can also 'literally' move the character forwards or backwards in history or space. Therefore the discussion needs to explore not only how and why numbers are used by characters, but also their function as an authorial and technical device.

The use of numbers is present on three levels in the novels, with each level providing a different purpose. They are present as a way of Erickson moving between narratives, or changing plot sequences, manipulating the character's movements or re-directing the reader's attention. These are specifically authorial numbers and can be seen in the dates marking chapter or section headings. Numbers are also present thematically. In this case they are used particularly as a way for characters to try to quantify or make sense of things in the emotional and topographic surroundings. Finally numbers exist as a combination of both authorial and thematic devices; they are a narrative technique whereby Erickson uses the numbers of one character to affect or impact on another, or the plot. Despite these three different levels of numbering and quantification throughout the novels it is important to note that they all illustrate aspects of the psychotopography of the novel and demonstrate both the relationship between emotion and landscape, and a strategy for dealing with it.

1 Interview with Erickson by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

2 Interview with Erickson by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

Although there are a variety of examples of characters relying on numbers to understand and control their emotional and physical landscapes this chapter will deal with four specific characters: Seuroq the scientist from *Arc d’X* who attempts to find a formula for the impact of emotion on time; Carl the map-maker in *The Sea Came In At Midnight* who produces cartographies based upon emotional events; Jack Mick Lake from *Rubicon Beach* who literally hears numbers coming from the landscape and is convinced there is a missing number between nine and ten; and the Occupant from *The Sea Came In At Midnight* who is producing an apocalyptic calendar based upon dramatic events marked out by their meaninglessness. These four examples specifically draw attention to the psychotopography of the novels and the links between memory, emotion, time and landscape. They are also examples not only of the thematic use of numbers, but also the narrative use, as the quantification carried out by the characters influences both other characters and the plot of the novels. This allows for a discussion of the psychotopographic meaning of the numbers in Erickson’s novels not just in terms of the characters, but in terms of Erickson’s broader concerns, by also exploring his use of numbers as a literary technique.

#### **Los Angeles and the need to quantify**

The interrelationship between landscape and emotion that is the psychotopography of Erickson’s novels is prevalent in the characters’ need to quantify the unquantifiable aspects of their lives. The chronological, historical and literal landscapes of characters lives are in constant flux and so, in order to control their surroundings, characters draw comfort from the quantification of memories, dreams, love and happiness. Erickson has commented that Los Angeles seems “to lend itself to the idea of a psychic landscape [...] because it’s so undefined in conventional urban terms.”<sup>3</sup> It is also a chaotic changeable landscape, due to both natural and manmade interference. It is therefore continually growing and adjusting. Erickson has spoken of the impact of growing up in a landscape that was constantly changing, explaining that it made sense “for Los Angeles to be constantly transformationalised”<sup>4</sup> in his writing. Due to the chaos of Los Angeles it is understandable that both Erickson and his characters would attempt to create order in their lives: they are surrounded by a topographical chaos they have no control over and so must attempt to create order elsewhere in their lives. Erickson has openly stated that “if the sink is full of dirty dishes, it bothers me, and I have to wash them before I can deal with the chaos of my head. So it’s a matter of trying to put in some order everything around me” and that “it does have to do with, [...] the landscape I grew up in.”<sup>5</sup> This tendency is also present in the characters that Erickson creates: their surroundings and emotions are interrelated and thus in attempting to bring order to one they must equally attempt it with the other. Since the characters accept topographical, historical and chronological chaos they do not try to create order in

3 Interview with Erickson by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008

4 Interview with Erickson by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008

5 Interview with Erickson by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008



their literal surroundings, focusing instead on controlling their emotional landscapes through empirical means: formulas, calendars, labeling etc.

Although not all of Erickson's novels are situated specifically in Los Angeles, the influence of the city permeates his writing, and he has commented that, "there is enough LA in me that it bleeds into Venice and Berlin, Tokyo when I write about those places."<sup>6</sup> It is clear that the chaotic disorder and continual shifting of Los Angeles is an aspect that defines the psychotopography of the novels and a symptom of this is the characters' attempt to create empirical order from abstract things such as love and memory.

There have been numerous attempts to understand and quantify Los Angeles through a mapping of the landscape.<sup>7</sup> However what these studies show is that the landscape is fragmented, and the response to it reflects this: different people experience different parts of the city in different ways and are unable to provide an ordered view of the whole. Lynch's work demonstrates that occupants found Los Angeles to be "hard to envision or conceptualize as a whole" and as a result it produces "overtones of weariness and disorientation"<sup>8</sup> therefore suggesting that conventional ways of quantifying the city did not help produce a whole image of the city, but also did not help the emotional or psychic relationship with the surroundings. Brian Jarvis suggests that:

traditionally, maps, like the spaces they represent, have been assumed to be fairly neutral affairs – objective and impartial accounts of the external world. This notion needs to be challenged at the outset of any attempt to map the landscapes of postmodernity in recent fiction.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore it is logical that Erickson and his characters would use unconventional mapping, numbering and quantifying techniques in order to make sense of their surroundings.

### **Seuroq and the missing day**

Two thirds of the way through the narrative of *Arc d'X* the plot shifts to the story of Seuroq, a French scientist attempting to cope with the death of his wife, Helen. His grief is unbearable; it has stopped him working and he has taken to spending his days in mourning, absorbed in memories of her. The discussion of formulas and quantification begins early in the Seuroq passage. The narrative comments that, "no one had a formula

6 Interview with Erickson by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008

7 Lynch, K. *The Image of the City*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1960. Soja, E.W. *Postmodern Geographies: The reassertion of space in critical social theory*. London: Verso, 1989. Soja, E.W. *Postmetropolis: Critical studies of Cities and Regions*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. Soja, E.W. *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined places*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996. Banham, R. *Los Angeles the Architecture of Four Ecologies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. Homes, A.M *Los Angeles: People, places and the castle on the hill*. Washington: National Geographic, 2002. Didion, J. *Where I was From*. London: Flamingo, 2003.

8 Lynch, K. p. 40.

9 Jarvis, B. p. 51.

for grief,<sup>10</sup> going on to say “for a marriage of thirty-one years, was eight months too much, too little, or about right? That was one month for every four years, more or less.”<sup>11</sup> These comments suggest that a scientific approach to abstracts such as emotion could be used in order to create order out of the meaningless death of a loved one. Although the narrative states that there is no formula for grief, by suggesting it the implication is that this would be a good way of dealing with the problem; that if it was reducible to a formula Seuroq would not suffer in the way he is: he would know how long to expect the grief to last and thus deal with it accordingly without the chaos brought about by the intangible nature of emotion.

This brief reference to a formula for an emotion also prepares the reader for the following events in the narrative: Seuroq’s attempt to produce a formula for the impact of memories on time. Whilst gazing across the courtyard the sound of the chains rustling in the wind prompts a particularly strong and poignant memory of Helen for Seuroq. In the moment it takes for the memory to wash over Seuroq and cause him heartache his digital clock loses a second. As the narrative explains: “a digital clock, which had said 5:55:55 [now] said 5:55:54.”<sup>12</sup> The impact of the memory on his heart had literally taken a second off the day, “there was no doubt in his mind that a second had been lost, or looked at another way, gained.”<sup>13</sup> Seuroq’s immediate reaction however is to take the clock to an electrician to get it fixed. When the electrician discovers nothing wrong with the clock and begins trying to find excuses for it running backwards Seuroq begins to come to terms with the truth. It becomes a conflict between his head and heart: his rational scientific brain insisting that the clock must be broken, his heart suggesting something less rational than that: “though his head told him there simply had to be something wrong with the clock, Seuroq’s heart was beginning to hear [a] whisper.”<sup>14</sup> Finally Seuroq gives in and accepts that “the psychic debris of Helen’s death was gathering like autumn leaves in a storm, blowing together into a meaning”<sup>15</sup> acknowledging that the “heart’s agenda”<sup>16</sup> might be having a small, yet significant, impact on the physical aspects of his life, such as the passage of time.

Erickson’s use of words is significant during this passage. The term “psychic debris”<sup>17</sup> gives a sense of physicality to abstract issues. The phrase therefore implies that seemingly intangible things such as emotions have a real weight and that they are able to affect other things in the characters lives. This notion is precisely what Seuroq begins to accept, realizing that in order to understand the change in time he had to “factor the heart into the equation.”<sup>18</sup> Again this sentence demonstrates Erickson’s attention to language; the phrase “into the equation” is commonly used to mean “taking something into account” however here

10 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 204.

11 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 204.

12 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 206.

13 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 206.

14 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

15 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

16 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

17 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

18 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

Erickson not only wishes the words to take on this meaning, but to be understood literally: Seuroq is a scientist and thus the only way he can deal with his discovery that emotion may be affecting time is to form it into an equation or formula. Seuroq is going to put the affairs of his heart at the centre of his mathematics in order to understand what is going on.

Seuroq begins to wonder whether “time is relative not simply to the perspective of motion, not simply to what the eye sees from a passing train, or a rocket hurtling at the speed of light, but to the heart as well and the speed at which it travels.”<sup>19</sup> As a result, Seuroq begins trying to calculate the speed at which the heart travels. The narrative explains that he “calculated until the numbers available wouldn’t calculate anymore, at which point he used new ones, remembering [...] the obscure discovery of [...] a missing number between nine and ten”<sup>20</sup> demonstrating that there are ways for Seuroq to quantify the movements of the heart, though he must use unconventional means in order to do so: he must use newly discovered numbers. Having begun his numerations, Seuroq is “flooded with a hundred memories”<sup>21</sup> and using them, attempts to track “the heart’s arc across the course of a lifetime”<sup>22</sup> in the hope of discovering the impact of emotion on time. Erickson demonstrates here how the act of Seuroq’s quantification, although an ordering technique, actually helps to produce the chaos of his emotions. Seuroq begins his calculations as the result of the first memories affecting the clock, however as soon as he tries to “translate them into equations”<sup>23</sup> he is “flooded with so many memories of Helen he could barely keep up with them.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore although Seuroq believes his calculations are ultimately going to provide a solution for his heartache, they are equally unearthing painful memories that consequently affect his heart: in order to attempt to produce meaning and stability Seuroq must accept the pain and chaos of his emotions.

Seuroq comes to the conclusion that the formula that will provide the answer for how emotion can affect time is a result of two separate factors both of which are concerned with freedom; firstly, history’s denial of the human heart; secondly, history’s secret pursuit of the heart’s expression.<sup>25</sup> It is at the intersection of these two points that the emotional affect on the heart by memory, and subsequently on the clock, lies. As the narrative explains, “what lay at the arc’s intersection except the missing moments consumed by memory [...] when the clock unwound itself from 5:55:55 to 5:55:54?”<sup>26</sup> Seuroq’s formula is the Arc d’X that gives the novel its title.

A significant aspect of Seuroq’s quantifications is that he does not stop calculating when he discovers how his memories unwound the clock. Instead he continues working on his equations until he has

19 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

20 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

21 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

22 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 207.

23 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 208.

24 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 208.

25 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 209.

26 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 209.

“found the missing day.”<sup>27</sup> This, according to Seuroq, is the twenty hours, seven minutes and thirty-four seconds that lie between December 31<sup>st</sup> 1999 and January 1<sup>st</sup> 2000: the accumulation “of all the moments over the millennium that grief and passion had consumed from memory.”<sup>28</sup> When this “day” arrived, the narrative explains, “time would measure itself not by the numbers of the clock but of the psyche, which is to say that history would measure itself not by years but by memory.”<sup>29</sup> This is one of the most important lines in *Arc d’X*, not only in relation to Seuroq’s quantification of emotions, but also because it implies the significance these quantifications have for the rest of the characters. Erickson uses this line as both a thematic and authorial device: thematically the discovery of a new day within the novel propels the characters into various situations as they strive to be in certain places when the day arrives; authorially it provides Erickson with an explanation for his shift of history and chronology – it is a textual expression of the shifts in memory and emotion experienced by the characters.

Seuroq’s quantification and its findings reflect Erickson’s belief in Faulkner’s notion that time ticks to the clock of memory rather than chronology. Erickson has stated on several occasions that Faulkner is one of his key influences and has expressed his admiration for the way Faulkner structured his writings according to memory rather than sequential events,<sup>30</sup> thus making the story more real from the perspective of the narrator, rather than making it easier for the reader. Erickson has taken Faulkner’s idea and used it in his writing literally, as Seuroq’s quantifications illustrate. Thus for Erickson the concept of time being linked to memory becomes not just a way of constructing the book’s sequence, but of exploring the characters’ emotions and the impact they have on their relationships, not only with other people, but with their surroundings.

The quantification carried out by Seuroq is different to that of any other character in Erickson’s writing because it’s repercussions impact not just on Seuroq but on the other characters. The discovery of a new “day” by Seuroq propels the character of Erickson to move to Berlin, as he feels that this is the best city in which to experience the newly discovered and reclaimed hours between the end of one millennium and the beginning of the next. It is in Berlin that Pale Flame, a neo-nazi group, kills him, and his identity is used by Georgie to fulfill his American dream in the hours between the end of December 31<sup>st</sup> and January 1<sup>st</sup> by traveling to America. It is Georgie who end up killing the character of Thomas Jefferson within the hours of “Day X”, as these gained hours have come to be known, thus concluding the cyclical narrative.

It is significant that Thomas, a character who is constantly battling with the connections and contradictions between love, freedom and memory, is killed in the hours regained from heart’s impact on memory and its intersection with history. Erickson is demonstrating, through Seuroq’s discovery of the extra day and its impact on the plot and other characters, the relationships between time, emotion and memory

27 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 210.

28 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 210.

29 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 210.

30 Erickson, S. In Trucks, R. p. 59.

and the landscapes and surroundings the characters occupy. Thomas is tied to his surroundings by his emotions: his love for Sally and the contradictions it raises for him are directly connected to America, both ideologically and cartographically. He, therefore, cannot separate his emotions from his landscape. The timing and circumstances of his death, in the hours where the heart's connection to memory, history and freedom is strongest, and by a man who has come in search of America but refuses to believe Thomas could represent it, frees Thomas forever not only from his love and memories of Sally, but also the responsibility he feels he has to America. His death occurs in a form of extra-time that lies unconnected to the centuries either side of it, instead it is all the "missing moments consumed by memory."<sup>31</sup> Consequently Thomas' character experiences a form of redemption – in terms of his emotions rather than his physical acts – by dying at a point "disconnected"<sup>32</sup> from the actions he left behind in one century and those committed by others as a result in the coming centuries.

Similarly Georgie's emotions are tied to landscape and this too becomes significant when the impact of Seuroq's calculations are considered. Georgie believes he must fulfill his American dream before the advent of the new millennium; he must reach the west before the end of the X-Tag, constantly and frantically checking the date and time as he travels.<sup>33</sup> The implication is that Georgie must reach his destination before the end of Day X or he will be flooded by emotion and memory and not gain the new start his American dream has promised for him; he will not gain the "dislocation from time of memory, by which truth is surmised" that is promised in the meaning of the missing day.<sup>34</sup> Although Georgie loses track of time during his journey it is fated for him to arrive on time as it is "at 11:59, the second hand of the watch hurtling towards the twelve" that Georgie steps through a door in a ruined city and faces Thomas.<sup>35</sup>

As the above examples demonstrate, although Seuroq's calculations were initially begun as a way of both solving the mystery of his clock losing time, and coping with his grief, they actually had more impact for other characters in the novel than for him: eventually resulting in the death of Erickson, Thomas and Georgie. Although these circumstances cannot be blamed on Seuroq, they do demonstrate the way in which a character's attempts to produce order through quantification can lead to more chaos rather than a solution. Not only does this occur on a small scale for Seuroq, who during the formulations is flooded with painful memories of his wife, but on a much broader scale with the chaotic actions and subsequent deaths of three other characters. This decision by Erickson to suggest that numeration leads not to solutions but to more chaos is a significant one which should be taken into account during the discussion of other characters' quantifications, the meaning behind them and their outcome.

31 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 209.

32 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 209.

33 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 255.

34 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 209.

35 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 257.

### Jack Mick Lake and the missing number

The character of Jack Mick Lake from *Rubicon Beach* has a complicated relationship with numbers: they are fundamental to how he relates to things, particularly landscape, and yet he is convinced that the numerical system is wrong and missing a number. Also, despite his obsession with numbers, he is unable to be exact about the times and dates that things occur during his life. This gives his numeration a more problematical nature than the other characters in Erickson's novels. All of the other characters rely on numbers, in various forms, to help them control and understand their emotions and events in their lives: they trust the numbers, co-ordinates and dates in their lives to provide concrete rational answers to the chaos they encounter. Jack Mick Lake (JML)<sup>36</sup> on the other hand cannot rely completely on the numbers in his life as he believes they are wrong. Similarly the numbers he encounters in the landscape betray him early on, failing to provide comfort when he needs it.

The opening section of *Rubicon Beach* declares "*there is a number for everything.*"<sup>37</sup> This statement, which is italicised for emphasis, is spoken by JML and demonstrates that although his relationship with numbers is not straightforward, he relies on them nonetheless because he believes them to be relevant to everything. JML's speech continues by explaining, "*there is a number for justice. There is a number for desire. There are numbers for avarice and betrayal.*"<sup>38</sup> Once again this shows that Erickson's characters do not relate numbers to concrete things, but to abstract unquantifiable ones. The start of the narrative about JML's childhood continues this notion by explaining how he could "compute the *equation of [an] illicit moment*,"<sup>39</sup> once again with italics to emphasize the contrast between a rational mathematical equation and something as fleeting as an illicit moment. Following this is the description of when JML's mathematical genius became present: "on the afternoon his seventh autumn lapsed into his seventh winter, his mathematical genius found its first expression [...he] computed the equations of autumn and winter themselves."<sup>40</sup> This recognition of how his mathematical mind is connected to incalculable things such as the seasons is a hint of how his mathematics will become connected directly to the landscape around him later in his life; at which point the connections between the numbers, landscape and emotions will also become clear.

During the explanation of the importance of numbers to JML the narrative illustrates that whilst JML can deal with subjective things, such as seasons and emotions, with explicit numbers and equations, he is unable to be exact about things such as ages and dates. Whilst talking about his mother the narrative explains "she died at the age of forty-one or –two, when the son was twenty-two or –three."<sup>41</sup> This tendency

36 This abbreviation is used because part way through the section about Jack Mick Lake he changes his name to John Michael Lake. Using this abbreviation will eliminate any confusion this might cause during the discussion of the character.

37 Erickson, S. 1986, p. 227. Italics original.

38 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 227.

39 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 227. Italics original.

40 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 228.

41 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 228.

by JML, to be uncertain about things that it seems he should to be sure of, is described as “a perfect example [...] of the exotic futility of [his] abilities.”<sup>42</sup> It is an interesting technique by Erickson to have a character so involved with numbers, yet who is unable to numerically pinpoint ages, times and events. It provides a stark contrast to the way numbers are used and experienced in the rest of JML’s life, thus emphasizing the strange nature of the relationship JML has with numbers and illogical or abstract subjects.

JML’s emotional relationship with numbers is defined by his relationship with the landscape, particularly the landscape he grows up in. Significantly this begins during puberty, when JML is “*twelve or so*”<sup>43</sup> and when JML’s father and uncle return from “*out west*.”<sup>44</sup> At the coincidence of these two occasions JML begins to hear music coming from the landscape. This is unusual enough, but the strangeness is increased because what JML hears is “a hundred numbers, sixes and sevens and threes waving back and forth in the sound of the light.”<sup>45</sup> As with the other characters in Erickson’s writing that deal with numbers and quantification, JML’s experience is accepted, both by himself, and by those around him. It is explained that, “mathematics was his genius, and that he heard numbers in music and music from the earth did not alarm.”<sup>46</sup> It is also explained that JML’s experience of numbers is connected to his mother, who is Native American, and her bond, through her tribe, to the landscape.

The connection between his hearing of the numbers in music from the landscape and his emotions is made more explicit later in the narrative when his mother dies. She is hit by a train whilst walking along the tracks. After her death he returns to the fields in which he heard the music, but cannot hear it. He “came back to the field every day after that, but the music was gone for good”<sup>47</sup> and JML concludes that as his mother walked down the train tracks and across the landscape she must have been the last person to hear the music, and that he will never hear it again because she has taken it with her.<sup>48</sup>

It is at this point that Erickson returns to the importance of “the west” to JML, and the impact it has both on his emotions and his relationship with numbers. Erickson set up this notion earlier in the narrative when JML first hears the numbers. It is made clear that this incident first occurs after his father and uncle return from “*out west*”<sup>49</sup> where they had been attending the funeral of their younger brother. The journey west is presented as a significant undertaking. The weeks that JML’s father and uncle are gone are described as “unnerving”<sup>50</sup> and upon their return the brothers are described as being unable to comment on the trip and, when asked, “stared before them with their mouth slightly open.”<sup>51</sup> This seeming awe and fear of the west becomes more significant when it is made clear that there is a connection between this

42 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 233.

43 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 231. Italics original.

44 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 231. Italics original.

45 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 31.

46 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 232.

47 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 246.

48 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 247.

49 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 231. Italics original.

50 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 229.

51 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 229.

landscape and the missing number for which JML has been searching. The narrative explains that JML gets on a train down the tracks his mother was walking and rides it “across the state about a hundred miles, which is ninety-nine farther west than he had ever been.”<sup>52</sup> When he gets there he discovers a wide river, and coming from the other side is a strange music. JML realises that “this particular music was the music of The Number and that The Number must therefore be “out there, beyond the river.”<sup>53</sup>

Confronted by the fact that the number exists, and that to get to it he would have to cross the river to the west, JML recoils and decides not to cross. He fails to confront his emotions about his mother and, as a result, must continue his life without finding the proof that a number between nine and ten does exist. This incident clearly demonstrates that JML’s emotions are connected to the need to discover the truth of the number. He comments in the narrative that, as he stands on the bank of the river hearing the music he is “*very close to that which had taken her. Confronted by it, courage fled.*”<sup>54</sup> He is unable to deal with the emotional consequences of his mother’s death, the figure in his life that is also connected to the numbers and landscape; therefore he is unable to formulate the truth of the number. This is confirmed later; when JML takes a job using mathematics during the war he tries to explain the existence of the number. The response JML gets to this claim is immediate dismissal, his supervisor explaining, “Of course there is no such number, Mr. Lake. We have all the numbers already. We know all the numbers, we found them hundreds of years ago.”<sup>55</sup> Gradually JML begins to dread working with numbers, but “the numbers found him,”<sup>56</sup> and so in a desperate attempt to leave the numbers behind JML attempts to disconnect himself from them by literally removing himself from their landscape: He refuses to travel west to face them, instead leaving America altogether, heading east to England.

Significantly, it is whilst in England that JML finally becomes overwhelmed, both by the search for the number and the emotions that go with it. He finally admits to himself that he should have crossed the river and traveled further west. The narrative describes how “those footsteps that once led to a river’s edge haunted him,”<sup>57</sup> and it is this situation that prompts his crazed search for the number between nine and ten. JML appears to believe that finding this number will bring relief from the emotions that haunt him; that by finding out this number he will finally be able to face both the emotions and the landscape they are associated with: the west. Once again Erickson presents a character who is reliant on a rational numerical answer to abstract subjective aspects of their life, and once again he demonstrates that the numbers bring more chaos rather than order.

JML’s search for the number, like Seuroq’s investigation for his formula, produces not logical mathematics, but a frantic obsession that begins to take over his life. JML’s hunt for the number is so crazed

52 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 247.

53 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 249.

54 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 249. Italics original.

55 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 250.

56 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 253.

57 Erickson, S. 1986. P. 282.



that he has given up using notebooks or paper; instead he writes on the walls of his cottage, “sometimes he used chalk, sometimes coal, scrawling the equations the length of the room.”<sup>58</sup> Soon, “the entire inside of the cottage was filled with additions and subtractions, multiplications and divisions”<sup>59</sup> and so JML then moves to working on the outside of the building. His feverish search continues to such an extent that “when the outside of the house was covered, he began writing equations in the earth.”<sup>60</sup> Here again Erickson connects the calculations of a character with the landscape he occupies: the narrative explains that, “soon the moors where he lived were filled with arithmetic.”<sup>61</sup> This connection is continued as JML literally begins to numerise the landscape until he is “adding and subtracting himself into a corner of Cornwall”<sup>62</sup> attempting, if he cannot prove the existence of the number, to disprove the existence of everything else.

Erickson strongly empathises the connection between numbers and landscape and emotion during this passage, connecting the two through JML’s calculations to disprove the existence of everything but the number. It is worth quoting this passage in its entirety to follow the connection between landscape and emotion through JML’s mathematics:

He disproved the existence of Penzance. He disproved the existence of the sea and the boats on it, and the castle in the middle of the bay. He disproved the existence of the moors and the sun in the sky. He disproved the sky. He mathematically and empirically disproved his memories, one by one, all the way back to the blonde he had loved whose name and face he couldn’t remember. But what he could not disprove was the love itself and the huge reservoir of hunger of which it was a part. In the end he hoped to disprove his own existence and the huge hungry place of which he was a part and which was a part of him. But he could not. When he had disproved one, two, three, when he had definitely ruled out four, five and six, when he had banished from all conceivable reason seven eight and nine, and every exponent thereof, there was still his awful number left.<sup>63</sup>

As the passage demonstrates, the fact that JML cannot disprove that his love and hunger nor the number exists, is intrinsically linked, and these factors are in turn connected to the landscape in which he is calculating.

58 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 282.

59 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 282.

60 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 282.

61 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 282.

62 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 282.

63 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 284.

The connection between the number that JML is searching for, and the landscape of America is at the core of why JML both cannot find the number, and why he cannot control and order his emotions. As Erickson illustrates, the reason for JML's failure to find the number is because he is trying in the wrong landscape. His being in England, or the "Old World"<sup>64</sup> is what is holding him back: in order to be successful JML must recognise the need to return and face the landscape and emotions that the west holds for him. Finally JML comes to this realisation, admitting that he must return to "the sort of place it was, where dreams had the precision of numbers"<sup>65</sup> and so returns to America. JML boards a train and rides west, finally crossing the river that marks the point of no return, and here, finally, he finds the music of the numbers once again, the novel ending with his joys as "it sings."<sup>66</sup> Thus only when JML actually confronts the landscape and the emotions that this landscape holds, is he able to make sense of the numbers he has been trying to manipulate his entire life: the numbers only bring order to his chaos when understood in relation to the correct landscape.

### **The Occupant and the apocalyptic calendar**

*The Sea Came in at Midnight* provides two examples of characters who obsessively attempt to quantify the irrational emotions and responses in their lives in order to make sense of them: the Occupant and Carl. Despite both attempting to create order out of the emotional chaos of their lives, they are not directly connected in the plot, and remain unaware of each other, their only connection is that they have both been the lover of another character. Therefore their decisions to try to quantify their emotions in order to make sense of them are entirely independent, demonstrating that it is a trait inherent in Erickson's protagonists as a result of their surrounding landscapes – psychic, emotional and literal – rather than the influence of other people. This is also apparent in the fact that both characters manifest their numeration in different ways: the Occupant through his apocalyptic calendar, Carl through map-making. Due to the separation of the two characters, both in the narrative and in their difference of numeration, it is important to explore each example individually. This will allow a greater depth of exploration into how and why each of the characters numerates their emotions, the meaning behind this, and the impact on them and the plot and narrative of the novel. Therefore this section will deal with the Occupant and the following section with Carl.

The Occupant is convinced that the "modern apocalypse"<sup>67</sup> is not a cataclysmic end brought about by divine upheaval, rather it is "an explosion of time in a void of meaning."<sup>68</sup> He adds to this idea by explaining that the apocalypse is not one event that will occur in the future; instead it is has already begun and is continuing as meaningless events take place. The Occupant is attempting to keep up with the "Age of

64 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 284.

65 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 285.

66 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 300.

67 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 47.

68 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 47.

Apocalypse<sup>69</sup> by plotting it on a calendar that takes up an entire room in his house, covering the walls, floor and ceiling with the dates and intersections of events. It is this quantification, the ordering of the events, the emotional meaning behind them, and the relationship of both with landscape, that is of concern here, rather than the nature and impact of the Occupant's notions about the apocalypse itself.

According to the Occupant, the apocalypse began in Paris, May 7th 1968 at exactly 3:02 in the morning. He knows because he was there.<sup>70</sup> He is not referring to the student riots, but instead to a random gunshot in the street which resulted in the end of his secure family life.<sup>71</sup> It is this particular date that makes the Occupant's apocalyptic calendar significant in relation to the quantification of emotion: it is founded not on a random meaningless act, as the Occupant implies, but on an act that deeply affected him during childhood. Therefore although the calendar uses acts that the Occupant believes demonstrate "no rationale at all,"<sup>72</sup> it is all grounded in an act that has considerable meaning. Therefore, the entire calendar can be considered as one large attempt by the Occupant to make sense of the emotional chaos that has been wrought in his life as a result of the gunshot on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1968.

One aspect of the Occupant's calendar, which differs from other characters' attempts to numerate or quantify the chaos in their lives, is that it makes no attempt at logical sequencing; instead it echoes the chaotic nature of the events that are marked on it. As the narrative explains: "the dates on the calendar were not sequential like on an ordinary calendar but free-floating according to some inexplicable order, in some cases far-removed dates overlapping, in other cases consecutive dates separated by the length of the room."<sup>73</sup> Another feature of the calendar that differs dramatically from the calculations made by the other characters is scale: the calendar fills an entire room covering "all the walls except the door" and is described as "a sky-blue mural blotting out the windows and overflowing the walls onto the floor and ceiling."<sup>74</sup> What's more, the Occupant intends to expand the calendar into the surrounding landscape, in order to create a "traveling centre of apocalypse"<sup>75</sup> using a moveable centre point.

It is here that the Occupant's quantification of his emotions becomes inherently linked to the landscape around him. He is convinced that, due to the calendar needing to express the "explosion of time in a void of meaning," then time must be moving, and as a result "the timelines of the Apocalyptic Calendar are moving as well."<sup>76</sup> This means that "all the routes and capitals of the chaos on the calendar are constantly, imperceptibly rearranging themselves in relation to each other."<sup>77</sup> In other words, no one point of the calendar is fixed, and so placing it in a static space – the room in the Occupant's house – means that it

69 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 46.

70 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 47.

71 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 58-59.

72 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 47.

73 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 46.

74 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 46.

75 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 52.

76 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 51.

77 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 51.

is always “out of whack.”<sup>78</sup> As a result of this the Occupant decides that he must make the calendar “move in relation to the timelines of chaos”<sup>79</sup> and so marks a date of the calendar on the body of his lover. Her body then becomes “the traveling centre of apocalypse”<sup>80</sup> and the Occupant drives her around to different parts of Southern California, leaving her standing somewhere whilst returning to make note of the subsequent shift in the calendar’s date’s and intersections.

Kristen has become his lover because he was looking for someone to distract him from the grief of losing Angie, his wife. However, rather than providing a distraction, the very reason for her being in his house as his lover is a constant reminder of his wife’s absence. Therefore Kristen, like Angie, becomes a cause of his emotional chaos as well as a symptom of it. Assimilating her naked body into the calendar’s moving timelines is a way of the Occupant trying to make Kristen part of the order he is attempting to construct through the calendar: as if controlling her through the calendar will stop his emotional turmoil.

A similar conclusion can be drawn in relation to the landscape. All of the landscapes in which the Occupant places Kristen are connected emotionally to previous events in his life: the hillsides are those around his home, that he looked over and shared with his wife; the time-capsule graveyard holds his own capsule in which are buried various artifacts that hold painful memories for him; and the desert represents the bleak nature of his life without his wife or daughter. Therefore, wherever he places Kristen to provide more logic and order in the calendar only produces greater chaos in his heart. Once again, a characters’ attempt to quantify his emotional chaos only results in more uncertainty.

This action reiterates the fact that the calendar is actually more to do with the Occupant’s emotional state than the age of the “modern apocalypse.”<sup>81</sup> Although the calendar’s starting point, or at least the starting point of the “Age of Apocalypse,”<sup>82</sup> comes from the ongoing emotional response to the separation of his parents, it becomes a way for the Occupant to deal with all significant emotional events in his life. Between the break-up of his parents and the loss of his wife and subsequent use of Kristen as the moving centre of the calendar, the Occupant has traveled around, all the time carrying the calendar in his head and often using it as his only way of relating to women: the calendar begins to become both the reaction to emotional distress and the cause of it.

The narrative explains that even before the calendar was constructed the Occupant was thinking about it. When he first traveled to New York aged nineteen, the women he was involved with became part of the calendar in his head: “with every kiss another day was marked on the Blue Calendar of years later, every woman marked by the Kiss of Chaos became a day in the Apocalyptic Age.”<sup>83</sup> Gradually, the women he meets are no longer recognised according to their names or faces, but by the date in the calendar they

78 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 51.

79 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 51.

80 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 52

81 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 47.

82 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 46.

83 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 72.

represent: the Occupant looks for “punk goddesses [he] knew in the year eleven, on the twenty-fifth of July 1978 (first baby born from a test tube) or the second of September (first girl murdered in a snuff film) or the twentieth of November (mass religious South American Kool-Aid suicides).”<sup>84</sup> The Occupant is so insistent on this way of referring to the women that eventually they refer to themselves using the dates as if they are inexplicably connected: “a little redhead, cooling blowing on her cigarette, said, I’m all music banned from Iran on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1979 [...] a voluptuous brunette [...] introduced herself as the seventeenth of April 1979, the ordered execution of one hundred children for no reason whatsoever by the emperor of Bangui.”<sup>85</sup> Again the extent of the Occupant’s need to categorise the women he meets according to the calendar demonstrates his need to separate his actions from his emotions. By referring to the women by dates and events on the calendar the Occupant believes he is able to produce a rational, stable relationship with them, putting aside the emotions that cause the uncertainty and chaos in his life. Therefore he quantifies the women according to the system of the calendar in order to maintain control in his life.

However, as with other characters, the Occupant’s numeration only eventually produces more chaos. The calendar is supposed to stabilize the Occupant’s emotions, and therefore the moving centre of the calendar, when placed on Kristen’s body to stop the calendar being “out of whack,”<sup>86</sup> should represent the Occupant at his most content. However, it is at this point that he begins to demonstrate the true extent of his instability. He drives Kristen out into the desert one night and aims to leave her there while he drives back to check the calendar. The foolishness of this plan doesn’t occur to him and Kristen resorts to shouting at him to try and make him see sense: “*you’re completely out of your mind*, what you don’t understand is that in seven or eight hours I’ll be dead.”<sup>87</sup> The response by the Occupant to this confrontation is for his voice to become a “pathetic howl”<sup>88</sup> and to have “stumbled out into the desert, thrashing clockwise among the undergrowth.”<sup>89</sup> Kristen pointing out the futility of his plan is also a confrontation about the shortcomings of the calendar, and in response the Occupant breaks down: not only has the calendar not helped to order, or resolve, the emotional problems in his life, his dependence on it means that it has in fact increased the emotional instability he experiences. Once again a characters’ quantifications ultimately end in chaos rather than resolution.

### **Carl and the emotional maps**

Carl is an aspiring playwright who is working to support himself as “map master for the city of Manhattan.”<sup>90</sup> The explanation of the maps that Carl makes begins typically with “maps of streets and maps of bridges,

84 Erickson, S. 1999. pp. 72-73.

85 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 104.

86 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 51.

87 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 54. Italics original.

88 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 54.

89 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 54.

90 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 101.

maps of sewers and maps of subways [...]” and then casually reveals the “coordinates for where he first got drunk, where he first had sex, where he had begun writing his first play.”<sup>91</sup> Erickson’s listing of all of these types of maps together with no indication that the latter maps are unusual is a significant technique. It immediately implies that there is nothing extraordinary about Carl’s tendency to map emotional episodes. This is a significant aspect of all the episodes in which characters numerate their emotions: at no point does Erickson suggest this is an unusual tactic for dealing with emotional instability. Indeed the writing during all of the episodes being discussed suggests that this quantification is a perfectly natural response. This is an overall feature of the quantification by characters, and of Erickson’s writing, which will be discussed in more detail later.

Carl’s map-making begins one morning while he is struggling to write an act of his first play. The narrative explains that “stumped for the right bit of dialogue, Carl sat staring at the espresso and pad of paper for an hour, and began to draw a map of the play, which he hoped would reveal to him what the character wanted to say.”<sup>92</sup> This explanation of how Carl began making his maps is important to his need to map his emotional moments in order to make sense of them, particularly as this “led to another map, and then another.”<sup>93</sup> Carl’s map making was prompted by an inability to produce the next step of his writing, an act that in turn was stopping his life from progressing. The reason for the map was to reveal what to do next. When these two things are placed together it demonstrates that Carl made his first map, and all the subsequent maps, as a way of combating the inertia or uncertainty at various points in his life. Whereas the first map was a way of dealing with the pause and indecision in his writing, the following ones, as indicated by the types of maps listed earlier, simply demonstrate that this need has expanded to become part of his life.

This development is compounded by the fact that, as he gets older, the maps become increasingly concerned with emotional and irrational aspects of his life, such as “the Map of Unrequited Love.”<sup>94</sup> By the time he is in his mid-sixties the maps are all Carl has left, and again, the fact that it is the maps that he has kept, rather than other mementoes, is significant. He has become unable to exist without them, and although he hoped to be a playwright and had insisted that “I’m not obsessed with my maps [...] my maps are obsessed with me”<sup>95</sup> all this has changed and the maps have become so integral to his everyday life that he sleeps with them “up around him like a sheet [...] so that even in the dark he can immediately crisscross two lines into a point”<sup>96</sup> unable to be without their reassurance even whilst asleep. He is so obsessed with his maps that he is convinced that a random piece of paper he finds tacked to the wall of the condemned hotel he is squatting in is a coordinate, “he’s been making maps more than forty years so he God damned well

91 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 102.

92 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 102.

93 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 102.

94 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 173.

95 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 102.

96 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 183-184.

knows coordinates when he sees them." In fact the numbers are not a map location, but a date,<sup>97</sup> and yet Carl's obsession with maps blinds him to other possibilities.

Carl's need to constantly order his life through the use of maps means that he cannot discard the numbers on the paper he has found. Instead he must find a way of plotting them. It becomes such an issue that it begins "haunting him, it's commanding him from beyond the grave to solve the equation."<sup>98</sup> Similar to Seuroq whose calculations produce more emotion and chaos, Carl becomes "surrounded by scraps of paper on which he's made endless calculations for what seems like days"<sup>99</sup> and he is "so gripped [...] he hasn't slept at all"<sup>100</sup> and has even been reduced to feeling, "slightly delirious."<sup>101</sup> Carl cannot live without the maps because he believes they stabilise his life and bring order to it, however he has "worked himself into a myriad of postulations involving deranged charts and courses and plots and crisscrossing latitudes and plummeting longitudes, his brain mad with equations."<sup>102</sup> His frantic numeration doesn't actually help him to attain the order and answers he is searching for, instead it has produced more emotional uncertainty and confusion into his life. This instability is echoed in the surroundings he chooses to live in. The hotel in which Carl is squatting is in a state of severe disrepair in a region that is often struck by earthquakes. However, it is not the risk of being crushed by rubble that concerns Carl, but the possibility that he might die before figuring out the mystery of the coordinates. Whilst contemplating a slight tremor, Carl's prayer "whatever god or fate is listening"<sup>103</sup> is "just let me figure this one out,"<sup>104</sup> as if leaving it unsolved will carry his confusion and dissatisfaction beyond his death.

The earthquakes in the area where Carl lives bring the discussion to the connection between Carl's numeration and the landscape. Carl's cartography perfectly demonstrates the psychotopography of Erickson's novels because it is the literal bringing together of landscape and emotion: Carl's maps are the result of emotional occasions that occurred in certain places, or the connecting of emotions as if they are a landscape in themselves. The maps vary from connecting topographical points according to emotions and creating a landscape as a result of emotion. Therefore they represent clearly the reciprocal relationship between emotion and landscape.

The narrative explains that Carl was hired by the city of Los Angeles to "map the city's missing dreams."<sup>105</sup> What is interesting about this statement is that Carl recognises the absurdity of attempting to map something that is missing from the world. However, he doesn't question the fact that it is dreams that he has been asked to locate. This questioning of one thing and not the other appears contradictory, because

98 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 174.

99 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 171.

100 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 171.

101 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 171.

102 Erickson, S. 1993. p. 181.

103 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 172.

104 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 172.

105 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 179.

surely dreams are no less abstract and difficult to map when they are present than when they are missing? Nevertheless Carl is unconcerned about the notion of mapping dreams and begins “gathering together the information from all his dream maps”<sup>106</sup> in order to determine where the missing dreams of Los Angeles are located. Mapping things that are abstract or subjective is what Carl has come to specialize in. It began as an aspect of his personal life; his mapping obsession becoming a way to deal with illogical or uncontrollable emotional encounters. For example he created a “Map of Unrequited Love”<sup>107</sup> which is described as not only “his most subjectively conceived”<sup>108</sup> map, but equally a “cartographic triumph.”<sup>109</sup> This tendency to map unconventional and abstract subjects then becomes more evident in his work. Therefore his maps for New York on “nervous breakdowns and psychotic episodes and the mapping of religious hallucinations”<sup>110</sup> prepare him well for diagramming missing dreams, and it isn’t long before he has “determined the missing dreams were located in the back room of a twenty-four-hour convenience store.”<sup>111</sup> Unfortunately the Los Angeles authorities are clearly not prepared for such an exact answer and he is fired.<sup>112</sup>

Carl’s work in both New York and Los Angeles demonstrates that he believes that the abstract and subjective emotional landscape can be mapped literally and transcribed onto the actual cartography of a city. The fact that Erickson uses these two particular cities in his examples is significant because they are very different in terms of topography. New York is a city built on a grid pattern: it is logical and easy to map, understand and negotiate. Los Angeles on the other hand is a sprawling city with no determinable centre that is notoriously difficult to navigate, even by a local resident. By demonstrating that Carl is successfully able to make his quantifications in both of these cities Erickson illustrates that Carl’s need to create order out of his chaotic emotions is not dependent on how ordered are his literal surroundings. However, these maps do portray another aspect of psychotopography: the impact of emotions on landscape. Carl’s maps, which show emotional events plotted onto literal landscapes, change his relationships with the actual places, meaning they become defined by the emotional event. The result is that the landscape and the emotional event become inseparable and thus the literal topography becomes as chaotic as the psychic topography, meaning the maps become fundamental. Therefore, once the maps have been created it becomes impossible for Carl to negotiate his surroundings, both emotional and literal, without them. He becomes “consumed by the logic of maps”<sup>113</sup> despite the fact that they don’t make his emotions any more logical.

During an explanation of the maps Carl has made in New York the narrative comments that once Carl had mapped the obvious aspects of the city, such as the subways, power grids and water ducts, he

106 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 180.

107 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 173.

108 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 173.

109 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 173.

110 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 173.

111 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 180-181.

112 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 181.

113 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 181.



moves on to mapping “the true heart of the city.”<sup>114</sup> This “true heart” of New York is contained in the maps of graffiti, sexual rendezvous, mad women, religious hallucinations and psychotic episodes. These maps are referred to collectively as the “Maps of Real Life” and then later the “Maps of the Subconscious City.”<sup>115</sup> What is significant about this passage is that it suggests that the “real” or “true” city can only be mapped according to the abstract and subjective things and activities that take place within it; it is these things, not the street layouts and power grids, that show the actual topography of the city.

### **Conclusion**

The suggestion that a city’s topography can only be truly understood through the abstract and subjective elements that shape it, is at the core of psychotopography: it is the inhabitants and their emotions that supply, construct and reconstruct the cartography of the cities therefore making the connection between the inhabitants of a city and their emotions, in regard to landscape, a reciprocal relationship. This brings the discussion back to Jarvis’ suggestion that in order to successfully map landscapes that do not fit convention, challenges to the method need to be made; neutrality, objectivity and impartiality need to be accepted as inconclusive for the topographic consideration of these landscapes. The psychotopography that Erickson outlines presents an understanding both aware, and accepting, of the fact that emotional and cartographic landscapes are interrelated. Significantly, Erickson’s conclusions come as a result of direct experience with the landscape of Los Angeles, an example of the unconventional landscapes to which Jarvis is referring.

However, what Carl’s cartography demonstrates, along with the other characters examples, is that the numeration and quantification of emotions doesn’t necessarily make the psychotopography of their literal and emotional surroundings any easier to cope with. Indeed, in most cases it makes it even more confused and chaotic as the characters struggle to contain their obsessions with numbers, co-ordinates and formulae. Nor is it the characters failed quantification alone that makes the control of the landscape a difficult pursuit. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the landscape in the novels is constantly in a state of flux; themes and motifs of liquefaction and dissolution permeate the writing and these provide another way in which to explore the psychotopography.

114 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 173.

115 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 173.

## Chapter Seven: Liquidity.

*One may not doubt that, somehow  
Good Shall come of Water and of Mud;  
And sure, the reverent eye must see  
A purpose in Liquidity.*

*Rupert Brooke*

### Introduction

As Erickson himself has noted; “there’s water all over the place in all of the books.”<sup>1</sup> It is used in every novel in some way or another, and in *Our Ecstatic Days* water is so fundamental to the narrative that it becomes a character in its own right, its actions and reactions driving the plot progression. There are various instances where characters must cross or navigate bodies of water while storms and flooding are also a common motif throughout the novel. In some instances, specific buildings become flooded and so water is found where people live: it is literally in their homes and invades their lives, and thus Erickson creates another complex relationship with which characters must come to terms. However, it is not only through water that Erickson pursues his metaphors, for other elements take on the properties of water – most notably the sand in *Days Between Stations* – and motifs of flux and dissolution permeate the writing. This chapter examines the various forms of liquidity in the novels and the roles they play. The crux of this investigation lies in the interrelated topics of the emotions of the characters and the landscapes impacted by the liquidity: the emotional response of the characters to the affected landscape, and the metaphors these landscapes represent, underpin the psychotopography and are therefore fundamental to its understanding.

An obvious component of the liquidity Erickson uses is its apocalyptic nature. However this chapter will not deal with those aspects of the topic in detail. The sandstorms and flooding that are part of Erickson’s theme of liquidity are indeed apocalyptic, but they are by no means the only apocalyptic aspect found in the novels. Therefore notions of apocalypse and their meanings will be explored in a dedicated chapter.

### Los Angeles, flux, dissolution and liquidity

It is in the novels set almost exclusively in Los Angeles that Erickson uses extreme rainfall and flooding. In *Amnesiascope*, uncharacteristic heavy rains cause the hotel in which the protagonist is staying to flood. In *Rubicon Beach* an entire canal network has opened in Los Angeles and the currents create a music which dominates the city. In *Our Ecstatic Days*, the entire city is engulfed by an inexplicably rising lake, causing the buildings to flood and forcing the occupants to abandon their cars in favour of gondolas. The most prominent example of liquidity not referring to water is also set in Los Angeles, as it is here that the sandstorms in *Days Between Stations* occur. However, Los Angeles is not simply literally present in relation to liquidity: it is there

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Erickson by author. Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

metaphorically and this is seen most clearly in the underlying themes of flux and dissolution. The literal and metaphoric importance of the landscape of Los Angeles to liquidity cannot be underestimated, and the connection between the water-based destruction of the city and the problems arising from a lack of characters' emotional stability is fundamental.

As a city, Los Angeles has a complex relationship with liquidity and the metaphorical themes of flux and dissolution. Not only does Los Angeles rely on water taken from the Owens Valley, it presents a sprawling urban environment that has spread as if gradually leaking across the Californian landscape. Similarly, its multi-centered nature and complex freeway system lead to what Fine refers to as "an unstable physical geography" that collides with "an unstable human geography."<sup>2</sup> The result of these two phenomena, is a destabilised environment, both geographic and cultural. Although Fine suggests that ultimately the result is a landscape that "lends itself to both destruction and self-destruction,"<sup>3</sup> prior to which there is fluctuation and dissolution. In *Los Angeles in Fiction*, Fine explains how the sprawl of Los Angeles, "has lent an amorphous and ambiguous quality to the land that recurs in the fiction."<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this condition that is seen in Erickson's theme of liquidity. Lynch goes into more detail about the physically disorientating nature of Los Angeles, as expressed by the inhabitants to whom he spoke. His findings support Fine's notion of the city's amorphous qualities, and the prevalence of this amorphousness in people's experiences of the city support why it would come across so strongly in the fiction about the city. Lynch comments that "subjects used certain standard words: 'spread-out,' 'spacious,' 'formless,' 'without centers,'" and that this carried "overtones of weariness and disorientation."<sup>5</sup> Lynch follows up these comments with the observation that, "structure and identity seemed to be quite difficult [...] people spoke of being lost."<sup>6</sup> It is these feelings that Erickson's characters often display during their encounters with liquidity: they are either lost literally, in the sense of not being able to geographically or chronologically locate themselves; or they are lost emotionally.

There is, however, often an overriding sense of acceptance or excitement when the characters actually encounter liquidity, and once again this is something that Lynch encountered in his study. In his work, Lynch become aware that, "in Los Angeles, there is an impression that the fluidity of the environment and the absence of physical elements [...] are exciting *and* disturbing."<sup>7</sup> It is important to focus here on the fact that Lynch has found not only disturbance, but also exhilaration: the experience of the people Lynch spoke to was not simply negative, it also held positive aspects. Erickson's expression of this in the novels is understandably more subtle, yet still present; characters sometimes revel in the freedom liquidity provides, or use it as a form of escape.

2 Fine, D.. 2000 p. 234.

3 Fine, D.. 2000 p. 234.

4 Fine, D. *Los Angeles in Fiction: A collection of original essays*. New Mexico: New Mexico University Press, 1984. p. 10.

5 Lynch, K. p. 40.

6 Lynch, K. p. 41.

7 Lynch, K. p. 45. Italics mine.

The liquidity of the landscape itself is another theme that Erickson uses, and that can be understood as being linked directly to his own experience of Los Angeles. The landscape in Erickson's novels is seen to be fluid and shifting, and this is both a symptom, and a cause of the characters' instability. Once again, this is a trait that theorists examining the nature of Los Angeles and Southern California have noticed. McWilliams, writing as early as 1946, commented that the "lack of a sense of permanency [...] accounts for the unreal appearance of the region and the restless character of its population."<sup>8</sup> Starr also remarks on the what he calls the "disequilibrium" of the city, commenting that because of it the "good life [...] rested on such insubstantial foundations" and "at any moment all could be lost."<sup>9</sup> Once again the liquidity of the city, its insubstantial foundations and fluid nature, demonstrate how significant the link between landscape and the emotional and physical wellbeing of Erickson's characters is throughout the novels.

### ***Days Between Stations: the liquidity of sand***

Despite several encounters between characters and water in *Days Between Stations*, it is where water is not used that Erickson presents the significant example of liquidity. During the first third of the novel, when the emotional state of the protagonist is at its most tumultuous, the city of Los Angeles suffers from a prolonged period of sandstorms. It is this use of sand to drown the city that provides a prolonged example of a non-liquid element being used like water. It is not only that it is such a lingering symbol throughout the novel, that warrants attention, but the way that it is connected to the particular landscape of Los Angeles and the connection between this and the emotional state of Lauren, the main character.

The sandstorms follow the first conversation between Lauren and Michel, the man who will become her lover. Although having seen him around their apartment building, and having visited the nightclub he owns, it is a while before Lauren is in a situation that allows her to meet him. There is clearly a connection between them, as before the meeting the narrative comments of Lauren that "she knew him,"<sup>10</sup> and after having been at the club she lies awake at night going "back over and over all the places from which she might have known him, charting coordinates across her heart for tell-tale signs."<sup>11</sup> Similarly during their conversation, Michel asks about her ever having been in Paris, and appears to be trying to place her.<sup>12</sup> Although the two characters cannot recognise their connection, the reader knows that it is Michel that rescued Lauren from wandering the streets of Los Angeles in despair, years earlier when her husband Jason told her he must be at the birth of his illegitimate child, despite not having been around for the birth of their own son. During this episode Lauren had left their son, Jules, abandoned in their apartment in San Francisco. Although a neighbour had looked after him, and he was fine on her return, he later died and

8 McWilliams, C. p. 361.

9 Starr, K. 1996. p. 57.

10 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 43.

11 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 43.

12 Erickson, S. 1985. p.

Lauren blames herself, and her abandonment of him, on the “lost night”<sup>13</sup> she went to Los Angeles. The narrative explains that Jules’ first words were a stuttered goodbye and that Lauren realised that he was bidding her farewell, and when he did die, “it was the death he was supposed to die that night when she left him on the bed and went wherever she went.”<sup>14</sup>

Her having met Michel on her “lost night” explains her inexplicable tie to him: he is connected to the death of her son and so, without knowing it, she is destined to be with him in order to retain her link with Jules. After their first conversation “an answer came to her later and she couldn’t believe it.”<sup>15</sup> The implication is that Lauren has realised how she knows Michel, and so the emotions come flooding back and she cannot face them. The very next sentence in the narrative is: “then, the first of the sandstorms came.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore the connections between the relationship of Michel and Lauren, Lauren’s already fragile emotional state due to the death of her son, and the landscape that unites them all – Los Angeles – is made explicit by Erickson.

This first sandstorm is described as “a mild one, compared to the ones that would blow through the city later.”<sup>17</sup> This begins the direct relationship between the emotions felt by Lauren and Michel, and the liquidity of their environment: their first meeting, although arousing some feeling between them, was mostly about familiarity, rather than passion, and so the sandstorm that follows as a result is understandably mild. However, the more Lauren sits in the apartment and broods about Michel, pondering his connection to her, the harsher the storms become “the second and third storms came two weeks after the first, and they were worse.”<sup>18</sup> When the fourth storm occurs there is a return in the metaphor to the first encounter between Lauren and Michel, because Lauren, “saw from the window the clock stop”<sup>19</sup> just as when Michel first comes to their apartment looking for a fuse he comments that “the clocks have all stopped.”<sup>20</sup> It is as if time in the novel makes a dramatic pause in order to highlight the relationship between the storms and Lauren’s emotional state.

As the sandstorms become more frequent and their connection to Lauren’s emotions are made clear by Erickson, the relationship becomes less one-sided. The sandstorms are no longer seemingly triggered by Lauren’s emotions, but pre-empt them. The paragraph describing the fourth storm ends with the fact that it came with “no warning; the storm suddenly upon her; it was terrifying like that.”<sup>21</sup> This is immediately followed by a paragraph in which her husband leaves her again, without warning, to visit his other family, demonstrating that the previously described sandstorm is not only a metaphor for Lauren’s

13 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 39.

14 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 40.

15 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 46.

16 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 46.

17 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 46.

18 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 46.

19 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 46.

20 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 44.

21 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 46.

puzzlement about Michel, but a preemptive expression of the emotional turmoil her husband is about to cause her.

Once Erickson has demonstrated the sandstorm metaphor he is able to utilise it as a constant background presence in the narrative, signifying that Lauren's emotional confusion concerning both Michel and Jason is continuous. It is during these subtle presences of the sand that its liquidity is presented. At one of the most significant emotional points for Lauren, when she is rescued by Michel from a near-fatal ectopic pregnancy, Erickson describes the sand "dripping" from the trees beyond Lauren's window. This casual reference gives the sand the property of water: the ability to drip, rather than simple fall, from the tree branches. The gradual flow of the sand echoes Lauren's slow realizations about her physical and emotional connections to Michel. She is not only beginning to come to terms with how she knows him, but that she must be with him. This is not a sudden action, like that of a solid object falling to the ground, but a slow steady move towards a conclusion, like the flow of water smoothly over a surface. Hence the liquidity of the sand is essential.

The consummation of Lauren and Michel's relationship is also the climax of the sand metaphor: the emotions of the characters become frenzied and this is reflected in the images of the storm and its impact both on Lauren and the landscape. Los Angeles is hit by not one storm, but by a succession, each increasing in magnitude. The first storm "lasted thirty-six hours,"<sup>22</sup> and "blew high above the ground, leaving only a hiss on the rooftops."<sup>23</sup> This distanced storm preempts what is to come, it implies the underlying emotional conflict with which Lauren is dealing: she is married, and yet knows that she cannot resist Michel or the connection to her son he unconsciously represents for her. This first storm then makes way for the second, which "whilst wasn't as long as the first [...] bombarded everything violently."<sup>24</sup> Erickson, here, is directly mirroring the aggressive sexual consummation of Lauren and Michel's relationship, which is represented using violent language such as "wrestled," "prying," "driven," "clawing," and "frenzy."<sup>25</sup> It is at this point that the sand completely overwhelms the city, just as Lauren and Michel are overwhelmed by their desire.

The sand, driven from the desert into the city, has consumed Los Angeles. It is presented in the same way as the flooding that Erickson uses in his following books, rising up against the buildings and forcing the inhabitants to use new routes around the city.<sup>26</sup> The sand is described as "glistening,"<sup>27</sup> an attribute usually associated with a liquid, and in the same sentence Erickson also refers to the "blue out over the ocean"<sup>28</sup> and the seamless move between the two images demonstrates Erickson's implication of a

22 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 68.

23 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 68.

24 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 69.

25 Erickson, S. 1985. pp. 74-75.

26 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 69.

27 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 69.

28 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 69.

shared quality of the two: vast, expansive, all consuming, flowing and liquid. This simile of sand as sea is used again when Michel discovers Lauren; “he looked down and saw the seaweed [...] he felt stupid realizing it wasn’t seaweed at all, but human hair.”<sup>29</sup> She has been almost drowned by the sand, and by association, her emotions. It is Michel who rescues her: he digs her out of the sand. The consummation of their relationship, her recognition of the inevitability of their connection, is the end of the sandstorms.

The use of sandstorms by Erickson calls on the connection between sand and water and their specific relationship with the landscape of Los Angeles. Although situated on the Pacific coast of America, Los Angeles is primarily an arid landscape. It is a city that has spread in the desert, and the only reason this has been possible is due to taking fresh water from other sources. Erickson’s use of the sandstorms highlights the fact that, without these water sources, Los Angeles and Southern California would indeed be an uninhabitable desert just like that portrayed in parts of *Days Between Stations* when the sand has engulfed the city neighbourhoods. By depicting the emotional experiences of the characters through a metaphor of sandstorms, Erickson is directly connecting the emotional and psychic experiences of the characters to the landscape of the city. Emotional instability for the characters is portrayed using the topographic instability of the landscape: a slight problem with the water supply and Los Angeles would not survive.

Another connection between the sandstorms and the landscape of Los Angeles is seen through attempts to ignore or put off a problem that needs to be confronted. The sandstorms are the metaphorical emotional response to Lauren attempting to hide or ignore her emotions. She doesn’t want to deal with the fact that she no longer wants to be with her husband, and similarly tries not to confront the feeling that she betrayed and abandoned her son. These issues are brought to light only through the sandstorms. Similarly the chaos caused by the sandstorms in the novel, both topographic and emotional, is connected to the specific structure of the city. As McWilliams once suggested, the region is, “inclined to forget the desert, but the desert is always there, and it haunts the imagination of the region.”<sup>30</sup> The sandstorms are a reminder from Erickson, that although there is significant emotional chaos experienced by his characters, this is rooted in potential geographic instability. Also, the bleak desperation of the desert is similar to that of the desperations felt by Erickson’s characters when they are unable to cope with their emotions. The whole of the Southern Californian landscape offers a metaphor for Erickson: although it seems prosperous and offers up the American dream it holds the potential for flux at any moment. This is a theme that permeates not only all of the notions discussed in relation to liquidity, but also to those of apocalypse follow.

The most obvious connection between the emotions felt by Lauren, the sandstorms and the landscape of Los Angeles, is seen not in their presence, but their absence. The sandstorms are specific to Los Angeles, because when Lauren and Michel leave for Europe, although their emotional fluidity goes with

29 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 69.

30 McWilliams, C. p. 200.

them, the sandstorms do not. Once the narrative moves to Paris, the sandstorms no longer appear, instead the psychotopography is expressed in other ways. This clearly demonstrates that the sandstorms and the emotions that are triggered or pre-empted by them, are interrelated with the cartography of Los Angeles. The sandstorms cause constant changes and rearrangements of the landscape that Lauren knows, blocking streets and moving routes through the city,<sup>31</sup> just as her own emotions are in a constant state of confusion and flux. In Paris, however, where the psychotopography is seen in an unusually harsh winter, everything is in stasis, and Lauren's emotions too remain fixed in the gap between loving Michel and her loyalty to Jason – thus showing how the fluidity is specific to Los Angeles, and how Lauren feels when there. The liquidity of the sand is used by Erickson to express subtle, but clear meaning.

### ***Rubicon Beach: the city as liquid***

After *Days Between Stations*, Erickson focuses on water-based liquidity, and again these are Los Angeles based examples, once more drawing on the particular landscape of Los Angeles to extend his metaphors about emotional flux and chaos and make connections between the emotional landscape of his characters' psyche and the cartographic landscape of Southern California and their interrelation. *Rubicon Beach* provides one of the first examples of Erickson's use of water in the novels, particularly in relation to Los Angeles.

Water is a motif throughout the novel, representing a variety of states depending on the character that is experiencing the water at the time. There are many instances during which characters are confronted with water and so must decide whether to cross it or turn back, it is this metaphor that runs through the book, and which is tied to both the landscape and the characters' emotions. By confronting, or refusing to deal with, the landscape they encounter, characters are also facing or ignoring their emotions; how they deal with their landscape becomes how they deal with other things in their lives. Once again this is rooted in the emotional and literal experience of Los Angeles, and the most poignant example of liquidity in the book is related directly to the water in the city and is indicative of a character's mood, emotions and confusion.

Cale, the main protagonist in *Rubicon Beach*, is released from prison and brought to Los Angeles, where he will live in the library. He has not been freed; instead it has been recognised that he is the sort of man who, "takes his prison with him."<sup>32</sup> His arrival in the city is important for two reasons; firstly because he comes by sea, rather than over land; secondly because the Los Angeles he arrives in appears very different to the Los Angeles the reader might be expecting. Instead of being a glorious land of sunshine it is depicted as a ravaged, dark and flooded city, under which run a series of canals and waterways. Already, before the narrative has properly begun, the presence of water is pointed and significant. It represents for Cale, both a

31 Erickson, S. 1985. p. 69.

32 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 16.



prison and a potential route for freedom; however it will also become symbolic of his mental confusion, as Erickson will demonstrate.

The contradictory nature of the water in Los Angeles – that it is both a prison and a route for freedom – is recognised early on by Cale. He comments that, “it was possible [...] that someone could vanish into the cracks of Los Angeles and drop out of sight. But you still weren’t going anywhere. You still had to come out somewhere in Los Angeles.”<sup>33</sup> This statement echoes Cale’s realisation from earlier in the novel that the water he encounters holds two possibilities: to save him, or confound him. Whilst traveling on the boat to Los Angeles, Cale comments on why the boat keeps such a specific distance from the shore. However, as his understanding of the situation changes, so does his revelation about the water between him and the cliffs. Firstly, he comments that “I realized why we’d kept our distances from the peninsula, they figured I’d jump ship and swim to the cliffs, or maybe take a jump over the side, back in the swamps and make for one of the houses.”<sup>34</sup> However, as they reach the city, Cale re-assesses his situation and discovers “why we’d sailed as near to the cliffs as we had; I’d never have made it alive, but they wouldn’t have minded my trying.”<sup>35</sup> These quotations are indicative of two things that are found throughout the novel in relation to water: firstly that its purpose often appears ambiguous, changing according to Cale’s state of mind; secondly, it demonstrates the nature of flux that water represents, both in terms of its impact on the space of the city, and the emotional metaphor presented by Erickson.

Water is part of the emotional fabric of the city; the canals and waterways produce a sound that defines the city, a “bubbling music.” As Cale explains, “the sound was the sea, seeping in under the city and forming subterranean wells and rivers. The rivers made a sound that came up through the empty buildings, and the echoes of the buildings made a music that came out into the streets.”<sup>36</sup> This music is fundamental to how the city is understood and negotiated; it is distinct according to the building it is coming from, for, “ask someone how to get to this place or that and he’ll sing you the directions.”<sup>37</sup> When Cale begins to become emotionally unsettled by an incident he sees involving a girl cutting the throat of a man, the waterways become disrupted, subsequently affecting the music and thus the understanding of the city. Here Erickson uses the water and the emotions of the protagonist in direct relation so that when one affects the other it has a broader resonance across the urban landscape.

As in *Days Between Stations*, Erickson uses the liquidity in *Rubicon Beach* not only in response to Cale’s emotional state, but as a pre-emptive signal. Shortly before Cale leaves the library and sees the incident between the girl and the man that shapes the rest of the plot, there is an explosion in Los Angeles that changes the music of the city. The narrative explains that “the city music [...] was a different music, the

33 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 13.

34 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 11.

35 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 11.

36 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 13.

37 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 13.

sound of the buildings in the distance had changed.”<sup>38</sup> This is an indication by Erickson that not only is there about to be a shift in the plot, but that Cale is about to become emotionally unsettled, just as the city has.

It is following the explosion that changes the melody of the city that Cale decides to “betray a trust”<sup>39</sup> and explore the canals and where they could take him. At the beginning of this passage it seems to the reader that the water will offer Cale freedom. As Cale outlines, “the canal would come out on the coast near San Bernardino and then the boat would drift down to Riverside. If I were still alive the day after tomorrow I might then get another boat and slip into port somewhere near the Yuma-Sonora annex.”<sup>40</sup> However, this plan doesn’t come to pass, the boat rounds a corner and Cale witnesses another character, Catherine, beheading a man on the banks of the river, an image that haunts him for the rest of the narrative. As a result, the waterways become another form of prison: they hold him literally, as traveling them becomes a quest to discover the identities of the two people involved, rather than a mechanism of escape; and metaphorically, as their complexity and ambiguous nature become indicative of Cale’s emotional state.

Once again, Erickson highlights the emotional connection between Cale, water and Los Angeles with three explosions that change the sound of the city. These occur immediately after Cale’s encounter with Catherine on the banks of the river, and just as his emotions are in upheaval the explosions meant that “the symphony of the buildings went berserk.”<sup>41</sup> This time, however, the explosions have a more significant affect; the city is “shrieking” and it goes on “the next day and [...] night”<sup>42</sup> eventually continuing for five days. Soon after this event the beheading incident occurs again, this time within the library, and this time leaving blood, but no sign of either person. This is when Cale becomes obsessed with finding Catherine. He comes to believe that she will provide the redemption for the act that placed him in prison. He comments that, “I didn’t care if I was crazy or sane, or dreaming or awake, or alive or dead. Now I just wanted to see her again.”<sup>43</sup> Cale has become completely emotionally and psychically desperate by this point, like the shrieking city, and his response is once again to turn to the water, and hope it takes him to the girl. The connection made by Erickson here between Cale’s emotional state, the resolution of his anxiety and the water is implicit, and is in turn directly related to the landscape of Los Angeles that Cale inhabits: the ravaged city, littered with ambiguous waterways that may or may not lead to freedom and resolution both produce and compound Cale’s emotional instability.

When Cale desperately travels the waterways out of Los Angeles towards the lagoon where the deserted mansions lie, the extent of his blind searching becomes clear. The narrative explains that Cale “didn’t know the water”<sup>44</sup> and so cannot direct himself. He is attempting to navigate the waters of the city

38 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 15.

39 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 21.

40 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 21.

41 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 25.

42 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 26.

43 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 39.

44 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 66.

without direction, just as he cannot control his emotional response to Catherine's beheading of the man on the riverbank. All he can do is "meander aimlessly between currents."<sup>45</sup> At one point he is forced to abandon his boat and swim, completely immersing himself in the water. The act of doing this produces a vision that Cale describes: "I went back under, and for a moment I saw her in the sea, where blood knows no stain but only rivers."<sup>46</sup> Erickson equates the water with Cale's emotional state, and his complete immersion brings emotional visions.

When Cale finally reaches the building he has been aiming for the result is not redemption for his betrayal, but the movement into another space and time. He encounters a character from a different Los Angeles. This man is completely unaware of the lagoon that Cale has just crossed and starts talking about how he "should catch a cab into Beverly Hills"<sup>47</sup> a notion that is absurd to Cale who has just had to swim in order to reach the hotel. Once again Erickson is moving his characters to and fro between times and histories, and the water is fundamental: it is used as a passage between different chronologies and emphasises the fluidity of history that Erickson uses throughout his novels. With Cale, the water not only alludes to the confused fluidity of his emotions, but also to his need for escape and redemption. He explores the waterways of Los Angeles as a way of controlling his emotions – mapping the waters so as to negotiate his feelings – and hoping that they bring him freedom, both from the city and the betrayal that acts as an emotional prison.

Erickson does not abandon this notion of the connection between landscape and emotion, as linked and controlled by water, he returns to it with the character of Jack Mick Lake (JML), later in the narrative. After the death of his mother JML cannot bring himself to cross a wide river and head into the west. He recognises the significance of the river immediately, commenting that, "he should have come to this river about ten years earlier."<sup>48</sup> He knows that he needs to cross it in order to deal with his mother's death and yet cannot bring himself to do so. As a result, he spends his life searching for a missing number between nine and ten, the number that comes to represent the emotional stability that is missing from his life. His inability to cross the river, and the regret that grows from this decision is the connection between JML's emotions and the landscape of America. The water becomes for JML, as it does for Cale, a way of overcoming emotions, as well as something that perpetuates them. Finally at the close of the novel Cale comments to JML that he "should have crossed that river."<sup>49</sup> JML responds, "I know" and soon after this incident he gives in and attempts to cross the river. During the time that JML has tried to ignore his emotions the river has grown wider, and when he finally begins the journey across it by train he is traveling for days and still he doesn't come to the other side. He describes how, "I still could not see the end of the river. From

45 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 66.

46 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 68.

47 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 72.

48 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 247.

49 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 280.

both sides of the train I looked for it in vain."<sup>50</sup> The river has become so vast that he cannot make it across, just as his emotions are so embedded within himself and their connection, via his mother, to the landscape, that he cannot reconcile them. Erickson uses the river as a metaphor for all of these things, and JML cannot cross the river and reach the landscape of the west, that holds such hope, because he is not emotionally ready for it.

### ***Amnesiascope*: raining inside**

The connection between liquidity, landscape and the instability of emotions is set out clearly in Erickson's only novel to be fully narrated in the first person, *Amnesiascope*. Not only water, but also fire, feature throughout the narrative to emphasise the narrator's emotional and psychic flux, and once again the geographic focus of the novel is a post-apocalyptic Los Angeles. This choice, to again present the urban landscape of Los Angeles as desecrated by an event only alluded to, is a signifier of Erickson's psychotopography: the constant use of the reciprocal relationship between landscape and the individuals who inhabit it, and the breakdowns triggered in both.

The narrator of *Amnesiascope*, who is never named, is struggling with various emotional battles; he is haunted by his memories and although he argues that he has no social conscience, clearly feels guilt for a variety of acts in his past. His concern about these acts leaks into his everyday life, and so he is constantly questioning himself and his actions, leading to an uncertainty and inability to make decisions. These battles are then manifested in his struggle to negotiate the landscape of Los Angeles. Although he comments that "I love the ashes. I love the endless smoky twilight of Los Angeles,"<sup>51</sup> and revels in the near destruction of the city, he is also constantly confronted by the difficulties of the landscape: he experiences problems with finding addresses, his own hotel floods, a friend's house catches fire. All of these are symbols used by Erickson to demonstrate the fragile and fluid nature of both the narrator's psyche and the city that produces and echoes that psyche.

The sustained period of liquidity in the novel, both topographical and emotional, is contained within a series of incidents relating to unusual heavy rains that strike the city. Once again Erickson uses the rain as a preemptive symbol of the emotional problems to come, these problems then being defined and perpetuated by the rains themselves. When the rain starts, the protagonist and his girlfriend Viv decide to leave the city for a few days. They head across the desert towards Las Vegas. This getaway, designed to leave both the rain and the city behind, is also the protagonist attempting to leave behind his problems. However, he doesn't manage this. Instead, he has strange dreams and wakes "befuddled like an old man losing his mind."<sup>52</sup> The trip has not settled him, but has only confused him further and when they return to

50 Erickson, S. 1986. p. 290.

51 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 3.

52 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 158.

Los Angeles, “the same rain was still falling.”<sup>53</sup> Emphasising the extraordinary nature of the rain the protagonist comments that, “it was the kind of rain L.A. never has, one storm after another sweeping up from Mexico and in from the sea.”<sup>54</sup> The severity of the storms and their unusual nature is used by Erickson as pathetic fallacy for the narrator’s state of mind, reflecting the flux of emotions that he experiences and attempts to deal with. However, the storms begin to affect the city, which “bulged, pocked by footprints of water and rumbling with the sound of surging canals below.”<sup>55</sup> This in turn affects the narrator’s everyday life. Thus Erickson is using the rains to literally and metaphorically demonstrate the interrelated nature of emotions and landscape, as found in psychotopography.

The rain becomes so invasive that it actually overruns the protagonist’s home, and so he “woke one morning to find that not only was L.A raining but the Hotel Hamblin as well.”<sup>56</sup> The rain no longer only affects the narrator, but those around him. The passage continues with the description of how “the entryway [...] was leaking and the woman next door was virtually washed out, her mattress floating around her apartment like a soggy raft.”<sup>57</sup> The significant part of this passage is the response to the water by the protagonist. He is resigned to it, and openly comments that “of course there was nothing to do about this since anarchy now reigned.”<sup>58</sup> This acceptance of the situation is something that often occurs with Erickson’s characters, particularly in response to changes in their surroundings and will become more evident in the discussion of liquidity in *Our Ecstatic Days*. The response of the narrator of *Amnesiascope*, however, differs to that which will be seen in a the later novel because it not only relates to the shift and flux of the landscape of Los Angeles, but also to that of his emotions. Whereas in *Our Ecstatic Days* the shift in landscape provokes an emotional response that is proactive and attempts to change things, the shift in *Amnesiascope* affirms the protagonist’s doubts and so he becomes resigned to his emotional instability, rather than trying to change it. He seems to revel in the potential destruction the water – and his emotions – could cause.

The narrator confirms that “a sense of general crisis approached”<sup>59</sup> and that he “skidded and swerved around one disaster after another.”<sup>60</sup> Although these obstacles first manifest themselves in the landscape; “flooded intersections, broken water mains, cresting sewers, streets buried under mudslides, springs bubbling up from the subway rivers underground,”<sup>61</sup> they soon appear in his personal life. Whilst driving through the city the protagonist encounters a flash flood, during which he rescues a prostitute from drowning. Thinking he is doing a good deed he takes her back to his apartment so she can shower and

53 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 158.

54 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 158.

55 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 158.

56 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 159.

57 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 159.

58 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 159.

59 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 161.

60 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 161.

61 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 161.

recover.<sup>62</sup> However this incident signals the downfall of the protagonist, not only in terms of his relationship, but also his job, and his state of mind. Although the protagonist could take steps to avoid at least some of the problems approaching in his life, he doesn't, at times appearing to actively make things more difficult for himself. During the incident with the prostitute a friend asks him if he's told Viv, his girlfriend. He admits he hasn't, stumbling through excuses as to why, then finally giving in and admitting he should have: " 'can I ask why you haven't told her?' 'Well, she's been sick, and...Look, obviously I should have told her. I haven't done anything to feel guilty about, but by not telling her I've acted guilty, so now if I do tell her...[...] it will confirm her suspicions.'" <sup>63</sup> During this conversation the narrator is obviously aware of the mistakes he has made, and is able to outline them rationally, and yet he still made them. This demonstrates two things; firstly the fluidity of his thoughts, he moves seamlessly between irrational act and rational explanation; secondly, Erickson's deep-seated connections between his characters and the landscape they occupy: the narrator is resigned to the flux of the landscape around him, and even revels in the apocalyptic results, and his own psychic and emotional mannerisms appear to echo this. He accepts the destructive side of himself, the fluidity of his conscience, and carries on accordingly, failing to stop the reverberations it has on those around him.

The crux of all of this comes when Viv decides she needs to leave for Holland. It is the only way for her to stop her illness, and as she plans her trip she asks the narrator to go with her. His response during their conversation embodies the entirety of the psychotopography that Erickson depicts in the novel:

'Come with me,' she said.  
'I can't.'  
'Why?'  
'I don't know.'  
'It seems,' she said, 'like you should know.'  
'Yes, it does.'  
'But you don't. So you can't.'<sup>64</sup>

The protagonist's expression here that he cannot go with her, and yet does not know why this is the case, completely sums up the strange mix of rational and irrational emotions that are present throughout the novel, and which are present in the liquidity of the landscape: the rains are irrational, while the resulting change in the waterlogged city is rational.

Erickson's final use of liquidity in *Ampnesiascope* comes in a combination of water and fire, and it is at this point that the protagonist realises that something has to change, and so after the episode he leaves

62 Erickson, S. 1996. pp. 162-163.

63 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 171.

64 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 184.

L.A once more, hurtling through the desert – a significantly dry and barren landscape – in search of something to pull him back into reality.

Soon after Viv leaves, the narrator receives a call from a mutual friend. Her house has caught fire, and she is refusing to leave it. This episode represents the apotheosis of the narrator's emotional breakdown, and the city he travels through reflects this; "the city has never seemed so debased and deserted [...] the whole noisy night had turned itself inside out."<sup>65</sup> When he arrives at the house he is faced with a "ravine of flames"<sup>66</sup> and their only escape is to climb into the bathysphere in the center of the house and submerge themselves. This saves them, and they emerge the next morning unscathed into the desecration of the house. The overtones of baptism here, particularly due to the imagery of escaping fire through submersion in water, are strong, yet, given the complex nature of water and liquidity throughout the novel, and its propensity to suggest instability rather than constancy, the image is not one of an uncomplicated or successful rebirth.

Having left the house, the narrator travels away from the city and into the desert, a pointedly dry place, in order to confront his emotions. Whilst there, "everything came rushing back [...] the onslaught of memory and all [his] failures; and for the first time in [his] life [he] felt something that was unique to [him]: a loneliness to which [he] had vainly prided [himself] as being untouchable."<sup>67</sup> This realisation of loneliness and vulnerability comes to the protagonists whilst in the clarity of the desert, away from the confusion and flux of the city and the water. Here Erickson demonstrates that there is a connection between the surroundings of the individual and their state of mind: it is only when in the dry and remote desert that the narrator's thoughts are clear enough for him to make the judgments he needs to in order to reclaim the order in his life. Erickson ends the novel soon after this revelation, with the protagonist's return to Los Angeles, this time with a newly clarified psyche. The connection between landscape and state of mind is drawn more specifically at the close of the novel when the narrator refers to the "deep fault line that runs from my psyche through my brain [...] all the way from L.A."<sup>68</sup> This direct connection between the topography of Los Angeles, the topography of a character's emotion and the theme of water culminates in *Our Ecstatic Days*, where the water itself becomes a character, and its impact on the other characters and the city is the main feature of the novel.

#### ***Our Ecstatic Days*: water as a character.**

*Our Ecstatic Days* is Erickson's most dramatic example of water as a thematic and psychotopographic device. The connections between water, the landscape of Los Angeles, and the emotions of the characters are no longer simply alluded to, instead they drive the plot and are at the heart of the narrative, to such an

65 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 209.

66 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 211.

67 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 221.

68 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 224.

extent that in this novel water, in the form of the lake, can be considered another one of Erickson's characters: it influences the actions and reactions of individuals throughout the plot in the same way that characters do in other novels, and the protagonist's relationship with the lake is a changeable intimate one. However, the lake also remains a part of the landscape, thus the characters' relationship with the lake is one that directly relates to the topography of Los Angeles. It is in *Our Ecstatic Days* that Erickson's theme of apocalypse is expressed entirely in relation to water. Therefore not only will a discussion of the liquidity in this novel reveal more about the characters' emotional relationship with their surroundings, it will also begin to tie-in to the forthcoming chapter about notions of apocalypse in Erickson's writing.

Whereas in *Amnesiascope* the emotional and psychic apocalypse experienced by the narrator produces the rain that permeates not only the city but the second half of the book, in *Our Ecstatic Days* it is an unexplained lake rising and engulfing Los Angeles that triggers the emotional instability of Kristen, the main protagonist, and subsequently the events of the novel. What is significant about Kristen's reaction to the lake is that she is not disturbed by its sudden appearance in the city, rather she seems resigned to its emergence. What concerns Kristen, and thus causes the emotional instability that is the catalyst for all following events in the narrative, is her belief that the lake has come to take her son away. This understanding of the lake's intentions – and that it has intentions, as seen by Kristen, is what enhances its role as a character in the novel – does not come immediately with the materialization of the lake. In fact Kristen seems to enjoy having the lake in Los Angeles; she's certainly not afraid of it. She "used to sit watching it"<sup>69</sup> whilst feeding Kirk, and she explains that before he was born she "would sit watching the water, and, other than when I would sing to him [...] it was the only time he settled down inside me, mesmerized by the lake beyond my belly."<sup>70</sup> All of which indicates that she didn't feel the lake started out as threatening. Similarly she comments that when Kirk watches the lake he is "calm"<sup>71</sup> and so he isn't worried by it either.

The lake, however, is implicitly tied to Kirk from the outset. Kristen expresses her love for Kirk, a love that is so strong it scares her, by using a metaphor of the lake. She says, "all I know is he's the shore of the lake of my life."<sup>72</sup> She is suggesting that he is so important that they cannot be disconnected; without a lake there is no shore and vice versa. When Kristen talks to Kirk, whispering things to him while he sleeps, she uses language that is suggestive of water, explaining how she hopes what she tells him will "float up to the surface of his memory."<sup>73</sup> Later she talks of how he has "opened the floodgate to a vast sea of fear."<sup>74</sup> It is as if Kristen implicitly connects her child to the lake, even before she becomes conscious of a link between them.

69 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 7.

70 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 10.

71 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 10.

72 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 13.

73 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 36.

74 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 43.



This literal connection between the lake's appearance and Kirk come to Kristen in a dream. She describes a dream in which her waters break, bringing the birth not only of Kirk, but of his twin Bronte (Kristen had been told she was having twins, but when she gave birth she only had Kirk) who is lost in the tide of the broken water and "caught in an undertow that burps her up once at Zed's center before pulling her back down."<sup>75</sup> Kristen wakes and the "smell of birth and the lake is overpowering."<sup>76</sup> The dream not only intimately connects her child and the lake, but also signals the beginning of Kristen's belief that the lake has risen to take Kirk, like it has Bronte. Her irrational fear for her son's safety, that comes from her love for him, now has a manifestation that for Kristen is both real and rational. As a result of the dream she collects Kirk from his room and places her body, "like a barrier between him and the window with the lake beyond it."<sup>77</sup> She watches "the center of the lake waiting" and her "heart still pounds from [her] dream – but now it isn't a dream."<sup>78</sup> Her belief in this notion that "the lake is coming for him"<sup>79</sup> is so strong that it completely destabilizes Kristen both psychically and emotionally, and is the catalyst for all subsequent events in the novel.

When Kristen wakes from the dream it is as if the lake has responded to her fear. Overnight "the black waters of the lake have already pushed past [the] hotel." The language here is indicative of Kristen's fear, the lake has taken on an aggressive character, it is "black" making it seem sinister, and it has "pushed," an action that is not only potentially violent, but also gives the lake anthropomorphic qualities extending its character-like status in the narrative. Similarly, from the dream onwards, Kristen is constantly referring to the lake "coming" for Kirk – a hostile and active movement that suggests preemption. The psychotopographic meaning of the lake is made clear with Kristen's statement that "it's my fear made manifest that's coming for him,"<sup>80</sup> and she recognises that the lake is not simply a random body of water that has engulfed her city, but her fear in physical form, one that she can physically challenge and confront. Thus her emotional battle becomes one with the waterlogged landscape of Los Angeles – Erickson's psychotopography in its most tangible form.

In response to the lake coming for Kirk, Kristen reacts in a dramatic and seemingly irrational way: she rides out to the middle of the lake in a gondola, with Kirk, and then, leaving him in the boat, dives down in to the water.<sup>81</sup> At this point the narrative also shifts, changing perspective from first to third person. In a short space of narrative, five years pass in which Kristen, having emerged from the lake to find Kirk missing, becomes Lulu, and is haunted by visions, and the knowledge that she left her boy alone on the lake. Finally, comes the realisation that, "she was pulled through the opening from one lake to another just like it, just like

75 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 42.

76 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 42.

77 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 42.

78 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 42.

79 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 43.

80 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 45.

81 Erickson, S. 2005. pp. 47-48

it in every way, every way except one, and that one difference was that on this other lake, there was another silver gondola, just like on the first lake – except this was a gondola without her son.”<sup>82</sup> So Lulu/Kristen returns to the centre of the lake and dives down one more, hoping to emerge back in her original history, and to find Kirk waiting for her. Once again the narrative changes perspective and becomes first person. However Erickson then uses an interesting technique; the final sentence of this chapter, italicised, to represent the first person narrative, runs through the rest of the novel, cutting through the text on the other pages. It is as if Kristen must swim through the rest of the plot in order to return to Kirk. Now Kristen has become the liquidity of the novel because she flows through the narrative, and her travel through and connection with the lake is continuously apparent to the reader whilst reading.

This liquidity of text is a technique unique to *Our Ecstatic Days*, but not to the sentence; Erickson also uses it during another passage in the novel. Here the fluidity of the text shape on the page is used to heighten the description of a journey by a character through the hotel of thirteen losses.<sup>83</sup> As Doc travels through the hotel the text shows the shape of the rooms she encounters through its layout on the page; for example, as the corridors narrow, the text becomes a strip of four or five words across, and these strips of text don't appear in the centre of the page, but are near the right or left margin, or move according to journey.

The trip through the hotel takes Doc through ballrooms, corridors and secret passages, and finally ends in a tiny room, which Erickson expresses using only seven words arranged in a diamond slightly set apart from the rest of the text on the page. The transitions between these places allow various layouts of text to be used, and heightens the reader's sense of the journey. It also causes the incident to stand out more clearly, thus emphasising its importance to the overall themes of the novel as a whole.

This hotel of thirteen losses episode is highly significant for both the psychotopography of the novel and the liquidity. It is a voyage by Doc, a character who diagnoses sick buildings, through a hotel where each room or passage is the physical representation of a loss one might experience in life: like the lake it is emotion in a concrete physical form; this time expressed in architecture, rather than landscape. Liquidity is not only present in Erickson's layout of text on the page, but in the fact that in order to travel around the hotel, and be able to experience its representation of the losses, Doc must be on a gondola: the rooms and passages cannot be traversed other than by traveling on the lake. This all demonstrates the connections between the lake, the psychotopography and Kristen's loss of Kirk. The final room in the hotel is a “tiny closet”<sup>84</sup> which confirms these connections. It holds, “nothing but a hole, the birth canal down through which rushes the lake back to wherever it came [...] this is the loss of ones child.”<sup>85</sup> This finally ties together the appearance of the lake and the resulting changes in the landscape of Los Angeles with Kristen's fear of

82 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 69.

83 Erickson, S. 2005. pp. 143-156.

84 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 155.

85 Erickson, S. 2005. pp. 155-156.

losing Kirk: again Erickson is outlining a tangible connection between his character's emotions and the shifts in their surroundings.

There is a return to the change in text layout when Kristen emerges from the lake at the close of the novel. She swims up the metaphorical birth canal of the water and rises out of the lake – and out of the on-running sentence – to be met by Kirk. Once again here, Erickson signifies the space that Kristen must swim through, a space that is both literal, and to her, emotional, by having a thin column of text connect the paragraph in which she is in the water, with the one where she pulls herself to the surface. The sentence running through the book ends and the text becomes third person, yet italicised, as if to signal a coming together of the two Kristens – one from each lake's reality. This return, of Kristen and of the narrative to the structure that opened the novel, signals a restoration of Kristen's emotional stability. Although there is no suggestion that the lake, the manifestation of Kristen's fear, will recede, the implication is that Kristen's confrontation has tamed it: it shall remain as a reminder rather than a threat.

## **Conclusion**

The resolution of *Our Ecstatic Days* is a rare instance of a character successfully dealing with the psychotopography Erickson presents in the novels. Whereas in other examples characters have either struggled against their shifting surroundings, or become resigned to them, Kristen actively engages with it, and in doing so comes to a resolution that not only suits her, but also the landscape. It is as if in his final novel dealing with psychotopographic themes Erickson is suggesting that a compromise needs to be struck between emotions and landscape: rather than fear emotional and topographical apocalypse, there must be a middle ground.

The following chapter will explore the notions of apocalypse in Erickson's work, examining how characters cope with it, and what the constant destruction of landscape, and more specifically, the Los Angeles landscape, signifies for both Erickson and his characters. The discussion will explore not simply geographic apocalypses that Erickson depicts throughout his work, but the other forms of chaos and disaster, such as emotional and psychic, public and personal. It seems apt to leave the discussion of apocalypse until the final chapter, as it is the culmination for Erickson of the emotional and geographical tensions that lie at the heart of psychotopography.

## **Chapter Eight: Apocalypse.**

*What we call chaos is just patterns we haven't recognized*

*Chuck Palahnuik*

### **Introduction**

It is apocalypse that binds all of the previous themes in Erickson's writing: a character's emotion triggers, or is triggered by, a form of apocalypse; the search for happiness leads to, or is thwarted by apocalypse; numbers cannot help characters deal with apocalypse; and water is often at the heart of whatever apocalypse is taking place. It is as if all parts of Erickson's writing come back to notions and types of apocalypse. Thus, apocalypse must be the final theme discussed, bringing together all of the others. More crucially, this chapter can be used to draw out the fundamentals of Erickson's psychotopography so that conclusions about its nature, and potential broader application can then be made.

There are some important aspects of Erickson's specific understanding and application of apocalypse that should be outlined before embarking on a detailed discussion of its roles in the novels and within the other themes. Erickson is very clear that he sees apocalypse as being morally neutral. When talking about chaos, Erickson states that it is a "morally neutral force" that has nothing to do with either a god or devil.<sup>1</sup> This is an important distinction as it removes any sense of there being a higher being manipulating the characters or landscapes in Erickson's writing. Instead the onus is on the landscape and characters, and so the responsibility for the apocalypses that occur in the stories remain in some respects, tangible. It should also be acknowledged in connection to this idea that the etymology of the modern word apocalypse comes from the Greek, "apokalypses" which refers to an "uncovering" and that the term can also be used for a revelation or disclosure.<sup>2</sup> This is significant given the nature of the apocalypses that occur in the novels, and is something that shall be returned to in greater depth later, particularly in relation to perceptions about whether an apocalypse should be considered as positive or negative.

The apocalypses in Erickson's work are not simply expressed as natural disasters – although this does represent a large part of them – the characters experience psychic and emotional apocalypses. It is the cross-over and connections between the geographic and emotional collapses that lie at the heart of the ideas of apocalypse in Erickson's writing, and indeed psychotopography: it is here that the interrelationship between the characters and the landscape they inhabit is at its strongest.

### **Los Angeles: a love affair with disaster**

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Erickson by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles April 11th 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Onions, C.T. ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966. p. 42.

Despite having been seen throughout history as a utopian frontier, the epitome of the American dream and the site of a good life, Los Angeles is inseparable from chaos and disaster, and to some this identity includes a degree of revelation in its apocalyptic undertones. For example Davis discusses at length the ongoing relationship between Los Angeles and disaster. He suggests that “cataclysm has become virtually routine” in Los Angeles<sup>3</sup> to such an extent that he talks of the “dialectic of ordinary disaster,”<sup>4</sup> suggesting that it has become so normal in life in the city that it is no longer feared. Instead, disaster and the potential destruction of Los Angeles have become something to take pleasure in.<sup>5</sup> According to Davis, this embrace of the potentiality of the region comes from its topographical complexity: due to the unique geography of the region, its mix of dry desert and humid ocean regions, and the combination of this geography with the San Andreas fault, the area is more susceptible to a range of apocalyptic circumstances such as fire, flood and earthquakes than are other areas of the United States. Despite this, however, Los Angeles continues to attract new settlers who come in search of a utopian life in the sunshine.

Davis talks about the role of the arts in building a revelatory relationship with disaster and apocalypse and of cinema and literature in particular. He points out that between 1909 and 1998 “the destruction of Los Angeles has been a central theme or image in at least 138 novels and films,”<sup>6</sup> and goes on to explain that this means “the city and its suburbs have been destroyed on average three times per year.”<sup>7</sup> It is not simply that the apocalyptic image of Los Angeles is more likely to feature in fictional destruction, but that when it does “the entire world seems to be rooting for [it] to slide into the Pacific or be swallowed by the San Andreas fault,”<sup>8</sup> and there is a “pleasure such apocalypses provide to readers and movie audiences.”<sup>9</sup> Davis points to a variety of reasons for the “dark rapture”<sup>10</sup> that accompanies the destruction of Los Angeles, pointing most prominently to racial anxiety and the way in which “disaster fiction” holds “the urge to strike out and destroy, to wipe out an entire city and the untold thousands of its inhabitants,”<sup>11</sup> including the racial minorities. Davis recognises that the specific racial group that is targeted has changed over time – for example the Japanese during the Second World War, Hispanics in the 1950s and more recently African Americans – but the theme remains the same.<sup>12</sup>

Davis also suggests the notion that the destruction of the city can be seen as a “victory *for* civilization,”<sup>13</sup> and that there is a sense of “good riddance,” particularly amongst conservative groups who view the region as occupied by expendable groups such as hippies, new-agers and gay men. Davis quotes

3 Davis, M. 1998. p. 7.

4 Davis, M. 1998. p. 3.

5 Davis, M. 1998. p. 276.

6 Davis, M. 1998. p. 276.

7 Davis, M. 1998. p. 276.

8 Davis, M. 1998. pp. 276-7.

9 Davis, M. 1998. pp. 276-7

10 Davis, M. 1998. p. 277.

11 Davis, M. 1998. p. 281

12 Davis, M. 1998. p. 282.

13 Davis, M. 1998. p. 277. Italics original.

one of the advisors to presidential candidate Bob Dole, who commented about the film *Independence Day* “millions die, but they’re all liberal.”<sup>14</sup> Thus Davis argues that in addition to a racial or cultural aspect of revelling in disaster there are also political ones.

What Davis does not consider is that the victory for civilisation can, from one perspective, be viewed in a more positive manner. Despite the large-scale disasters that have already occurred in the Southern California region, the inhabitants have prevailed, and the success of the area’s reputation as a place that can offer anyone a new life continues regardless of the impending disaster of earthquake, fire or flood. Therefore, revelling in the fictional destruction of Los Angeles that is flaunted in literature and film becomes ironic: it is celebrated because it is seen as unrealistic because Los Angeles has already come up against these challenges, and has survived. This is of particular significance to the psychotopography of apocalypse in Erickson’s writing, because of the way in which his characters respond to the apocalypses that occur in the novels, and will be returned to in greater detail during the textual analysis.

Fine’s writing reiterates Davis’ notion that apocalypse has become almost ordinary in Los Angelean life, and particularly in its representation in literature. He comments that, “disaster is not rendered as sudden destruction but is woven into the fabric of everyday living.”<sup>15</sup> Fine attributes this situation to the fact that California is “positioned literally at the edge of the continent, a place where an unstable physical geography collided with an unstable human geography” and, as a result, “Los Angeles lends itself to destruction and self-destruction.”<sup>16</sup> This suggestion of a correlation between physical instability in the landscape, the instability of the inhabitants of that landscape, and the resulting notions of destruction, can be extended further to argue that physical instability can result in emotional instability, and thus lead to an expression of emotional destruction as well as a literal geographic one. This notion is fundamental to the theme of apocalypse, and how it is dealt with – physically and emotionally – in Erickson’s writing. As a more detailed analysis of the theme of apocalypse will demonstrate, there is a significant connection between physical and emotional landscapes in Erickson’s dealing with disaster. This is also intrinsically linked to Los Angeles, and so both Fine and Davis’ discussions about the specific relationship between apocalypse and Los Angeles are of considerable importance.

The belief that apocalypse has entered into the Los Angelean psyche and become “ordinary”<sup>17</sup> and “woven into the fabric of everyday living”<sup>18</sup> is one that is at the core of Erickson’s writing, not only in relation to his expression of the theme of apocalypse, but in how this then ties into the other themes and their resulting connection to landscape and emotion. One of the key affects of the acceptance of catastrophe, according to Davis, is that those writing about Los Angeles can draw on it to “shape fantastic physical and

14 Quoted in Davis, M. 1998. p. 277.

15 Fine, D. 2000. pp. 137-8

16 Fine, D. 2000. p. 234.

17 Davis, M. 1998. p. 3.

18 Fine, D. 2000. pp. 237-8

psychic landscapes,” and so create their own form of “magical realism” that seems so authentically unthreatening due to its basis in reality. Therefore the apocalyptic cities in Erickson’s writing might be considered “enchanted” rather than dangerous: apocalypse may be a constructive rather than destructive event.

The particular connection between the LA psyche and apocalypse is a significant component of the physical and emotional catastrophes that occur in Erickson’s writing. Indeed, Spinks goes further and argues that Erickson suggests that not simply Los Angelean identity, but American identity, is “always involved in a reciprocal relationship with apocalypse.”<sup>19</sup> The following detailed discussion of the nature and expression of apocalypse in Erickson’s writing will investigate these connections and explores the fundamentals of psychotopography and the impact it has on the individuals in Erickson’s novels.

### **The Sea Came In At Midnight: plotting the apocalypse from the psychic to the physical.**

The majority of this chapter explores the direct correlation between the theme of apocalypse and the landscape of Los Angeles in Erickson’s writing, and will use novels that are set in and depict an apocalyptic Los Angeles. However, in order to express the way in which apocalypse ceases to be a dramatic event in Erickson’s work, and is instead a way of life and a state of mind, it is important to first discuss a novel in which the theme of apocalypse is not directly related to landscape. Therefore this section will explore the manifestations of the theme of apocalypse in the *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, the protagonist of which is an “apocalyptologist,” whose obsession with cataclysm is inseparable from his notions of time and emotional experiences.

In *The Sea Came in at Midnight* the theme of apocalypse, whilst not apparent in the landscape, is still embedded within the plot, demonstrating that chaos and cataclysm exist on a variety of levels within Erickson’s writing. As discussed in the chapter exploring numbers and quantification in Erickson’s work, notions of chaos and how to deal with it are ongoing and underlying. The apocalyptic calendar built by the Occupant epitomises this; it encompasses all the instability and flux not only of apocalypse, but also of time and emotion. It also holds some of the other notions that occur within the broader theme of apocalypse, such as whether it is destructive or constructive, its role as a liberating force and its impact on time, emotion and identity.

As outlined in the chapter about numbers, the Occupant does not believe that the apocalypse is a single event that will come at a future date. Instead he believes that it has already occurred, and that it is ongoing: an “age of apocalypse.”<sup>20</sup> As an apocalyptologist, the Occupant attempts to plot this “modern apocalypse”<sup>21</sup> according to the events that define it; the meaningless acts conducted not irrationally, but with

19 Spinks, L.. p. 220.

20 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 46.

21 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 47.

“no rationale at all.”<sup>22</sup> This comment embodies one of the key aspects of Erickson’s theme of apocalypse: the idea not of irrationality, but of something that is “non-rational” or “outside of rationality.”<sup>23</sup> What is important about this idea of non-rationality is that it, like Erickson’s characterization of apocalypse, is hard to define as being either positive or negative. Thus it becomes part of the duality of order and chaos of which Erickson has spoken,<sup>24</sup> and his concept of the potential to be liberated by chaos.<sup>25</sup>

The idea of being liberated by chaos is one that underlies the Occupant’s entire project. He has completely immersed himself in the work on the apocalyptic calendar, and its series of supposedly unrelated and non-rational events as a way of coping with the emotional events that have occurred in his life: the shooting of his father and his desertion by his pregnant wife. The Occupant, even if he doesn’t recognise it as such, is using the chaos and apocalypse of the calendar as a way of liberating and redeeming himself. As Erickson has commented, it represents “a way of swimming toward the light, or trying to.”<sup>26</sup> Here, before apocalypse has even been seen as a physical event, it is being considered by Erickson as a potentially positive force: a way of a character dealing with the emotional events that have taken place in his life.

The calendar, and the incidents that construct it, shape both the Occupant’s relationships with other people and how he relates to places and time. The continuing mini-apocalypses, or explosions “of time in a void of meaning,”<sup>27</sup> have become so embedded in his psyche that he cannot relate to things without them. The narrative also explains that this significance of the chaotic non-rational events is something that the Occupant has carried with him since before the mapping of the calendar. While he was traveling and meeting people he would date them according to an event that would come to fit into the calendar’s scheme. In particular his most emotionally involved meetings, those with women, occur in this way, so that, years later, the women would introduce themselves to other people according to their corresponding date and event: “one of the other girls [...] said to her, I’m the third of October 1980, the bombing of a synagogue in Paris killing four.”<sup>28</sup> The fact that this way of labeling themselves has lasted indicates that the apocalypse that is part of the Occupant’s psyche is gradually becoming part of the people who surround him, to such an extent that they identify themselves according to it. That these women consider themselves in relation to the apocalyptic calendar is the beginning of the physicality of the apocalypse that runs through *The Sea Came in at Midnight*. The women have become physical representations of the apocalypse the Occupant has been carrying around in his head. The apocalypse is no longer simply emotional: it has begun to have a material presence beyond the Occupant.

22 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 47.

23 Interview with Erickson, by author. Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

24 Interview with Erickson, by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th, 2008.

25 Interview with Erickson, by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th, 2008.

26 Interview with Erickson, by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

27 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 47.

28 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 104.



The change in the way the Occupant relates to places and time takes place after he has begun his construction, and further understanding of the calendar. It is at this point that the apocalypses of the novel cease to be simply psychic or emotional; suddenly they are written on the walls of the Occupant's house, and soon on the body of his lover. This represents a shift from psychic to physical. As soon as the Occupant begins to relate to the incidents on the calendar in this way he realises that their relationship with time and place is incorrect. The incidents now exist as physical marks that can be shifted, and the Occupant surmises that if he believes that the modern apocalypse is about an "explosion of time in a void of meaning" then "all the routes and capitals of chaos on the Calendar are constantly, imperceptible rearranging themselves in relation to each other."<sup>29</sup> In other words, in order for his calendar, and thus the modern apocalypse, to be correct, the dates or "incidents" on it should be literally shifting in space and time. As a result the Occupant's relationship with his surroundings changes, and he becomes obsessed with where the dates on the calendar should be placed. He marks what he believes to be the central point of the calendar onto the body of his lover and physically moves her around, first in the house, then in the hills and canyons around it and finally into the desert.<sup>30</sup> He has turned his psychic obsession with apocalypse into a physical one. Erickson emphasises this shift from mental to actual with the language that is used to describe the calendar. The narrative no longer talks about "dates" and "timelines,"<sup>31</sup> instead the same things are referred to as "routes" and "capitals,"<sup>32</sup> words that carry connotations of physical constructions.

This shift from psychic to physical is an excellent example of the way that the apocalypses in Erickson's novels are more than just a single cataclysmic event. Instead they consume not only the landscape the characters inhabit, but their minds and emotions. What is different about the Occupant's experience of apocalypse is that it builds from his own very specific notions. The apocalypse is ordered and controlled on a calendar, and although the Occupant has difficulty coping with his emotions and the personal apocalypses that have occurred throughout his life, the manifestation of this in the rest of the book is highly constrained. This differs dramatically from the instances of apocalypse in the other novels. In Erickson's other writing it is hard to tell which triggers which, the actual or emotional apocalypse, or if indeed they happen simultaneously. These incidents also seem to be uncontrollable and chaotic, unlike the structured apocalypse of the Occupant's calendar. There is also a direct and yet organic, ever-changing, correlation between landscape and emotion in the other apocalypses that Erickson presents, as opposed to the more scientific connection prescribed by the Occupant. However, despite these differences, *The Sea Came in at Midnight* efficiently demonstrates the way in which the theme of apocalypse is present deep with the psyche of Erickson's characters, and in turn at the heart of both the novels and their psychotopography. Indeed, different as the Occupant's relationship with apocalypse, emotion and landscape may be, it remains present.

29 Erickson, S. 1999. pp. 50-51.

30 Erickson, S. 1999. pp. 52-55.

31 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 46.

32 Erickson, S. 1999. p. 51.

### ***Amnesiascope*: emotion, landscape and pericalypse**

*Amnesiascope*, provides the perfect example of how the theme of apocalypse is tied to the interrelationship of emotions and landscape, as well as the notion that apocalypse doesn't have to be one event – even if it appears that way at first – instead becoming embedded in a character's way of life. It is also the first of the novels that is set almost exclusively in Los Angeles, thus providing an example of the importance of the city of Los Angeles to Erickson's theme of apocalypse and how it is dealt with, not only in his writing and narratives, but by the characters within the novels.

The term pericalypse refers to an apocalypse that is either ongoing or has already come to pass. This notion is useful as a way of understanding the form of cataclysmic actions that take place throughout *Amnesiascope*, and indeed in the city before the narrative begins. The novel is set in a Los Angeles where there has already been some form of large-scale disaster. This is referred to as the "Quake" but the implication is that an earthquake is only part of what has caused the upheaval in the city. What is significant about this setting is that it is the backdrop, rather than the focus, of what takes place in the plot. The disaster has already happened, seemingly a while ago, and although the city has changed as a result, the inhabitants have learnt to adapt to the new way of life. Nor is this viewed as something difficult or unusual, they have just continued with their lives, in the "dying" city.<sup>33</sup> What is significant, however, is that a character from outside of the city, Carl, a friend of the narrator, calls throughout the narrative, becoming increasingly concerned that his friend continues to live there: "'Are you still there?' [Carl] says frantically, each time I answer the phone."<sup>34</sup> Inside the city everything is continuing as normal, outside the city the inhabitants are believed to be crazy to be staying-put. Another aspect of this is that Carl also tends to know what is going on in the city, whereas the narrator doesn't: "it was Carl who informed me when the city was under martial law."<sup>35</sup> However, as the narrator explains, it is not quite as simple as this, there is a subtle difference between those observing the city, and those living in it: "those outside of Los Angeles know what's *going on* here, while only those inside know what's really *happening*."<sup>36</sup> This is a crucial statement, not only in the context of *Amnesiascope*, but with reference to the importance and role of Los Angeles throughout Erickson's writing as it connects the inhabitants of the city directly not only to the landscape but to the emotional topography of the city – what is actually happening.

Erickson believes Los Angeles to be a blank slate, a "city of the mind" where people can come and "express through the city their dreams."<sup>37</sup> He goes on to comment that Los Angeles is the "ultimate

33 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 128.

34 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 126.

35 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 126.

36 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 126. Italics original.

37 Interview with Erickson, by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

American city<sup>38</sup> because it is the one place that people can go to and entirely “create their own myths.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed the narration in *Amnesiascope* confirms this, suggesting that the city of Los Angeles holds various Americas – “America the Delirious,” “America the Mean” – and that it has “collectivized American dark.”<sup>40</sup> Although these Americas might seem negative, the narrator is quick to explain that Los Angeles also holds “old America,” the America that held the promise and the ability to invent itself “all over from the ground up everyday,”<sup>41</sup> and which has now come “under siege.”<sup>42</sup> The narrator ends this monologue about the relationship between Los Angeles, America and the belief that one embodies the other, by proclaiming that the America in Los Angeles is “the America that was originally made for those who believed in nothing else, not because they believe there was nothing else, but because for them, without America, nothing else was worth believing.”<sup>43</sup> This intrinsic connection between America and Los Angeles, and the ideology that combines the two, is fundamental to Erickson’s writing, and as a result resides deep within psychotopography: notions of American identity are inseparable from landscape, and for Erickson the Los Angelean landscape and ideas that come from and with it are the epitome of the American dream and identity, and thus Erickson’s psychotopography is inevitably grounded within these ideas.

The significance of the connections between Los Angeles and America, the idea, (the emotion) and the United States, the place, (the landscape), and the role of these in Erickson’s psychotopography, only truly comes together when the theme of apocalypses arises. Apocalypse for Erickson is inherently connected to Los Angeles. As a result, it is also connected to his ideas both about American identity and psychotopography.

Thus, when the narrator of *Amnesiascope* comments that “those outside of Los Angeles know what’s *going on* here, while only those inside know what’s really *happening*,”<sup>44</sup> it is not simply a statement of his experience of the conflicting knowledge of himself and Carl, but a suggestion about the differing psychotopography of those who are within Los Angeles, and those who are viewing it from outside. It is also a statement that refers to the narrator’s personal experience of Los Angeles and the shifting geography and psychology of the city that make up the apocalyptic backdrop of the novel. It is the protagonist’s own cataclysms, both emotional and literal that produce the overarching apocalypse experienced throughout the novel. As Erickson has stated, the Los Angeles in *Amnesiascope* “approximates the emotional apocalypse that the character has lived with.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, the comment that “only those inside know what’s really *happening*”<sup>46</sup> is equally as applicable to his own situation as to that of the wider city; his friends view his

38 Interview with Erickson, by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

39 Interview with Erickson, by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

40 Erickson, S. 1996. p.p. 126-127.

41 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 127.

42 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 127.

43 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 127.

44 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 126. Italics original.

45 Koshikawa, K. 1993. np.

46 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 126. Italics original.

reactions to things in a certain way – such as being concerned that he hasn't left the city, in the case of Carl – without having the knowledge of what the narrator is going through from the "inside."

As Erickson has commented, the apocalypse that lies at the heart of *Amnesiascope* is not the perilyptic events of riots, earthquakes of flooding – although these have occurred, and continue to do so – but the emotional and psychological breakdown of the protagonist. The narrative is a mixture of present day events, memories, and reflections, all of which build to a climax of emotional and psychological apocalypse, during which the protagonist becomes entirely unsure of how to continue with his life. Throughout the course of these events shifts in the landscape and weather take place, wreaking havoc on the city and its navigation. In order to examine the psychotopography of the novel, and its specific links to the theme and notions of apocalypse, it is these instances of physical shift that need to be examined, along with the precursory, coincidental or subsequent, emotional incidents.

The "Quake" that has taken place before the narrative begins is the first example of a potential coincidence of emotional and geographic tension, building to cataclysmic proportions. Although the reader is aware of this event from the start of the novel, where the narrator mentions it in passing, it is a while before there is any discussion about the actual event, the period leading up to it, or the situation afterwards. When the narrator does mention the quake, he talks about wandering around abandoned apartments, looking at the "photos and letters, knickknacks and leftovers"<sup>47</sup> from "deserted lives."<sup>48</sup> At first this appears to be a statement about the devastation caused by the geographic shift and shaking of an earthquake. However, as the passage continues it becomes clear that the narrator's fascination with these abandoned spaces is drawn from his emotional circumstance, not his physical one: it is a mixture of unprocessed emotions concerning the breakdown of his marriage, and his meeting with a woman who will become his new partner. The emotional act of the desertion of his wife, which he sees as a form of betrayal, is echoed in his physical wandering around abandoned buildings, and in particularly his concentrated wandering around the Seacastle Hotel. This large deserted structure, perched precariously above the sea with the potential to pitch into the ocean at any moment, is an apt architectural metaphor for the narrators situation: the narrator is precariously tipping between emotional stability and breakdown, desperately wanting either at any moment. This is reinforced by the narrator's own comment that the waves breaking onto the base of the building are indiscernible from the quake aftershocks and that "one of the reasons [he] liked the Seacastle was you couldn't tell the difference."<sup>49</sup> Here, before the novel has even really begun, the protagonist is already physically and emotionally drawn to apocalypse.

The theme of revelling in apocalypse is another that asserts itself during the episode at Seacastle. As the above statement demonstrates the protagonist almost wishes for the disaster to occur, for the hotel to

47 Erickson, S. 1996. pp. 29-30.

48 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 29.

49 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 30.

crumble into the sea, just as his emotional stability is crumbling. He likes that there is no way of telling whether the shaking is the sea or another tremor. At the end of this episode the narrator sums up his feelings not only about the hotel, but about Los Angeles. He states that “it’s at night, on the other hand, that *my* Los Angeles, the dead city inside me, is especially beautiful.”<sup>50</sup> This comment demonstrates two ideas that run throughout the book; firstly that the protagonist and the city are inseparable, cementing the interrelationship of emotion and landscape that psychotopography relies upon; and secondly that there is a beauty to be found in the death and destruction of Los Angeles.

It is significant that it is whilst at Seacastle that the narrator finds the woman, Viv, who is to become his new lover. Whilst wandering around the ruins of the hotel he comes to realise that he has “been seeing her ever since [he] got [there], just out of the corner of [his] eye.”<sup>51</sup> She is immediately important because, unlike his wife, she is unable to be hidden by the darkness. She is pale and described as “glowing” in the moonlight.<sup>52</sup> This opposition of dark and light between his previous and new lover holds obvious metaphoric connotations of his previous relationship being negative, and this new potential lover being positive. However, as the plot continues it becomes clear that this distinction is not as clear cut it might appear, and the ruined backdrop of Seacastle provides a suggestion of this. The narrator meets Viv in the ruin of a hotel that is suspended on the brink of falling into the ocean, at a point where his emotions are also perilously balancing between stability and meltdown. This situates her in the middle of the narrator’s confusion, and connects her to the emotional and physical apocalypses of the book. The narrator openly admits, whilst reflecting on this instance, that he “never had an answer for her,”<sup>53</sup> implying that rather than solving his emotion problems she just becomes involved in them, even provoking them.

The following day, Viv has disappeared and the narrator leaves Seacastle because he doesn’t want to “live anymore amid its memories.”<sup>54</sup> His statement highlights another aspect of the physical and emotional apocalypses of *Ambiscope*: memory. The protagonist is unable to sufficiently cope with his own memories. He explains that, “it was one thing when all the memories belonged to others, another now that [he] had one of [his] own.”<sup>55</sup> The connection between memory and apocalypse is fundamental to the novel, as even the title suggests, and it is often memory that triggers emotion that in turn produces cataclysm. It should also be pointed out that Viv is at the heart of the relationship between memory and apocalypse, and indeed it is her “memoryscope” sculpture that sparks – literally – one of the apocalyptic events towards the end of the novel.

Towards the end of the novel there is a fire that is a result of the sun hitting the mirror in the centre of Viv’s memoryscope structure. The spark from this sets fire to the area surrounding the house of Jasper, a

50 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 32.

51 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 30.

52 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 30.

53 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 32.

54 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 32.

55 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 32.

character who has befriended Viv and the narrator. It transpires that Jasper is connected to the narrator's past through an exchange of sexual encounters via telephone when they were both living in Berlin. These encounters were supposed to culminate with an actual meeting, but a series of events meant that the narrator couldn't turn up, and someone happened to arrive in his place. Jasper, however, had no way of knowing that the man who turned up to her dark hotel room for the rendezvous wasn't the man she'd been speaking to over the phone. When the fire starts, Jasper calls the narrator, which results in him being "thrown back in memory by the sound of her breathing. [He] was in Berlin again, answering the phone in my hotel room in Savignyplatz."<sup>56</sup> Thus Erickson immediately links the fiery apocalypse that is taking place at Jasper's house to the narrator's emotions and memory. When the protagonist makes his way towards the house, Erickson connects the landscape he is traveling through to his state of mind. As the novel has progressed, the narrator has slowly been moving closer to a complete emotional and psychic breakdown. The loss of Viv, who travelled to Holland to erect the second Memoryscope, due to his failure to commit to going with her, begins his final breakdown. "Viv's smoke"<sup>57</sup> seems to trigger a change in both the protagonist and the landscape he travels through to reach the burning house. The narrator comments that "the city had never seemed so debased and deserted."<sup>58</sup> This feeling is enhanced by Erickson in a much longer passage describing the surroundings through which the narrator must travel:

The whole noisy night had turned itself inside out, the usual Cacophony of alarms and helicopters blotted up into emptiness and only the wind coming through the taxi window and the sounds of running footsteps and cries in the dark that sounded neither human nor animal [...] I could see shutters banging and windows being closed to keep the night out; through the windshield ahead of us the sky was red from fire.<sup>59</sup>

This passage is one of the most explicitly apocalyptic descriptions in the novel, with its images of strong winds, fire and strange noises. It is also extremely significant because the night is no longer beautiful or appealing to the narrator. This signals a serious shift in his experience of the city. It has ceased to be a place where the "dead city" is "beautiful,"<sup>60</sup> instead the strange decaying landscape has become threatening. The culmination of emotional, psychic and actual apocalypse with memories from the narrator's past has shifted the psychotopography from one to revel in, to one that should be feared.

The fire at Jasper's and the resulting shift in the nature of Los Angeles for the narrator, from beautiful to eerily threatening, is the culmination of a series of events the consequence of which is an actual

56 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 207.

57 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 211.

58 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 209.

59 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 209.

60 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 32.

emotional breakdown. The protagonist can no longer cope with his emotions and memories, or the city that contains them, and so he drives out of Los Angeles and into the desert, picking up one speeding ticket after another as if he is trying to outrun memories trying to catch up with him. When he stops in a hotel room he admits that, “at this particular moment I was losing my mind.”<sup>61</sup> Finally, away from the city he comes to terms with “the onslaught of memory and all [his] failures” realising too that he harbours “a loneliness” that he had previously thought was “untouchable.”<sup>62</sup> This incident suggests that when away from the chaos and apocalypse of the Los Angeles landscape the narrator is finally able to take stock of his emotional problems: in forcing a separation of his psyche and the apocalyptic landscape in which he is usually absorbed, he is able to assess the issues within each without the interference of another.

Having spent time in the desert, and come through his emotional collapse, the protagonist returns to the city in order to start again. Although there still exists a “deep fault line that runs from [his] psyche through [his] brain [...] from L.A [...] all the way from memory to the moment and back,”<sup>63</sup> meaning that he is still connected psychically to the city and cannot promise that this won’t still impact him emotionally “splitting [him] up the middle and leaving half of [him] on one side and half of [him] on the other,”<sup>64</sup> his awareness of this state has provided him with some perspective: he not only recognises the way that Los Angeles has affected him not only physically, but psychically and emotionally. The narrator’s realisation of this may lead to “something sensible” such as finding Viv, and enable him to “try one more time [...] And then, having tried one last time, perhaps [he] will try once more.”<sup>65</sup> He is going to try to be more aware of the connections between himself and the city and use this awareness of the chaos it brings in him to change how he responds both to the landscape around him, and the people in his life. Erickson connects the psychic situation of the character to the physical one, and the personal perspective gained is coupled with an image of a topographical perspective; during the final monologue about reflection and being able to see the broader outlook, the narrator is situated on a bluff above the city so he is able to have a “view of the whole bay, the smoking ruins of Malibu to the north and, to the south, the paramilitary outposts of Palos Verdes.”<sup>66</sup> With this finale Erickson suggests that although the narrator needed to escape the city to gain an understanding of his circumstances, it is not until he returns that he can use this understanding to progress. Once again the theme arises of apocalypse being a way of life, rather than a terminal event. What Erickson suggests with the protagonist of *Ampnesiascope* is that there is the need for balance; embracing chaos and catastrophe to the point of revelling in it is unsuccessful, and yet it must be accepted to a certain extent. This highlights Erickson’s notion of the need for a duality of chaos and order. The narrator of *Ampnesiascope* exists solely in chaos for the majority of the novel, and as a result cannot deal with the events that occur in

61 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 220.

62 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 221.

63 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 224.

64 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 224.

65 Erickson, S. 1996. pp. 224-225.

66 Erickson, S. 1996. p. 224.

his life. It isn't until he finds a balance between his emotions, memory, chaos and Los Angeles that he is able to gain a hold on his life and find the perspective he needs to piece it back together. It should also be mentioned that this duality, the balancing of apocalypse and order, is what finally has the potential to return happiness in the narrator's life: his recognition that he must balance the emotional and geographic apocalypse is what also makes him realise that he needs to find Viv, the one person he loves and feels will make him happy. This connection between the need for a duality of order and chaos, and potentially a calm acceptance of apocalypse, is a theme that figures heavily in *Our Ecstatic Days* the other novel that features a focus on the relationship between apocalypse, the landscape of Los Angeles, and the emotions of characters.

***Our Ecstatic Days: apocalypse, losing, searching, and finding.***

It is in *Our Ecstatic Days* that Erickson's theme of apocalypse, and its connection to not only the landscape of Los Angeles, but the other themes of the novels – emotions, happiness, numbers and liquidity – reach their apotheosis. It is also in this novel that Erickson explicitly uses the term “psychotopography.”<sup>67</sup> The word is used in relation to the lake that has inexplicably risen in Los Angeles and is gradually rising flooding a growing area of the city. The character of Wang comments that “from the beginning the lake has manifested its own psyche, altering the surrounding psychotopography.”<sup>68</sup> This statement demonstrates two important ideas that flow through the novel; firstly the anthropomorphism of the lake, its role as another character, which makes it a geographical feature that is also able to adapt and react like a human character, secondly; that the lakes “actions” affect not only the city and its topographical layout, but the way that characters relate to the city in its new form, and the emotional connections between the characters and the lake.

As with *Amnesiascope* there is a direct connection in *Our Ecstatic Days* between the apocalypse that Los Angeles experiences and the emotional experiences of the protagonist. These again shift and change throughout the novel as both the character and the lake adapt to, relate to and understand each other. It is the most explicit form of both apocalypse and psychotopography in Erickson's writing, and as a result it is the novel that should be discussed in greatest detail. Also, it is in the resolution of the events in *Our Ecstatic Days* Erickson's notion of duality is present, which will broaden the discussion from that of emotion and apocalypse, to mechanisms of coping and what Erickson is suggesting with his psychotopographic writing about the subject.

Another feature of the manifestation of apocalypse in *Our Ecstatic Days* is the way that Erickson uses the layout of the text on the page and the structure of sentences and paragraphs. As will be shown later, when the apocalypse in Erickson's writing reaches its zenith, with the entire city of Los Angeles being transformed, Erickson adapts his writing and narrative techniques accordingly. Erickson himself has

67 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 110.

68 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 110.



commented that, “the story or the material always dictates the story telling strategy. I didn’t set out to be weird in *Our Ecstatic Days*, but I got to this part of the novel where she swims down through the hole in the lake, and I got this idea of having her swim through the novel.”<sup>69</sup> The apocalyptic theme permeates the novel to such an extent that Erickson must adapt his writing to meet the needs of the subject. *Our Ecstatic Days* is an apocalyptic narrative in both content and style.

The inhabitants of Los Angeles in *Our Ecstatic Days* have a similar reaction to the apocalypse that engulfs the city to those in *Amnesiascope*, they adapt and continue with their everyday lives to the best of their ability. They become frustrated by the “disruption [the lake] caused [to] schedules and traffic and bus lines” and so “gondolas and rowboats came out” instead and a “makeshift harbor was built.”<sup>70</sup> The narrator also points out that “the first year everyone was kind of enchanted,”<sup>71</sup> once again disclosing the revelling in disaster and apocalypse that runs through Erickson’s writing. Similarly, although the city does “send boats out to the center of the lake, sending divers down to figure out where the lake was coming from,”<sup>72</sup> the concern about the lake seems limited, and rather than mass panic, there is a degree of acceptance. The narrator, Kristen, even comments that “since the city was in the middle of one of its usual droughts, a lake that appeared from nowhere and kept getting bigger ought to have been a little suspicious.”<sup>73</sup> In fact, there is “no one thinking anything about it” until it actually cuts off part of the city, and even then there is no panic, just a rise in the profile “when they tried to drain it.”<sup>74</sup> The level of acceptance of the lake in *Our Ecstatic Days*, not only by the inhabitants of Los Angeles but by Kristen, the character who is emotionally connected to it, is highly significant to Erickson’s overall approach to notions of order and chaos; geographical, emotional and psychic. It is tied in with his ideas not only about the importance of duality, but how this relates to psychotopography and identity, and will be discussed in greater detail towards the end of this chapter.

Although the majority of inhabitants in the flooded Los Angeles cope with, or even revel in, the existence of the lake, it is the response of the protagonist, Kristen, that is most important, and specifically how her response changes as her understanding of, and relationship to, the lake changes. The shift in her reaction to the lake comes when she starts to think that it has appeared in order to take her son away from her. She ceases to see the lake as a geographic apocalypse, and begins to think of it as a personal and emotional one. This change gradually emerges in the narrative. Kristen freely admits that having become a mother has made her afraid, even terrified, of something happening to Kirk. However, at the beginning of the novel the lake is not simply viewed by her as harmless, but rather as a source of comfort. At one point, when Kristen is feeling bad about having told Kirk off for misbehaving, she takes him down to the lake to comfort

69 Interview with Erickson, by author, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, April 11th 2008.

70 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 10.

71 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 10.

72 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 7.

73 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 6.

74 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 6.

him, as her way of saying sorry; “[t]hen, feeling shitty, I dressed him and we grabbed the bus to the San Vicente bridge, and crossed over to the other side and walked over to the lake [...] and just sat with him, our feet in the water.”<sup>75</sup> Indeed, one of the opening images of the book is of Kirk happily playing on the shore of the lake with another child; “[o]n weekends [...] the two kids go down to the lakeside where they play together,”<sup>76</sup> and some of Kirk’s first words are “big agua,” a phrase that followed Kristen’s description of him watching the lake with, “his eyes open and calm.”<sup>77</sup> All of these examples expressed a calmness from both Kristen and Kirk in relation to the lake at the beginning of the novel.

However, as the lake’s progress across the city increases, Kristen becomes not only more concerned, but more connected to it, both in the dreams she has and the language that Erickson uses in the narrative. The first indication of this comes when Kristen explains that “a few nights ago the lake reached the Hamblin,” the hotel where they are living, and that they “woke the next morning to find the water up the steps of the eastern entrance.”<sup>78</sup> This encroachment of the water into her personal space begins the dramatic change in the way Kristen relates to the apocalypse, and her recognition of it as not only having reached her geographically, but psychically and emotionally. It is at this point that Kirk’s emotions also begin to change, his “cries of ‘Mama’ in the night have turned into wails of ‘Mama where are you?’ desperate, wracked, forlorn”<sup>79</sup> and Kristen describes how, “[h]is insecurity has found a wider vocabulary” and insisting “I’m not going anywhere.”<sup>80</sup> Yet this moment preempts the events to come and foreshadows the dramatic change in the way that Kristen views the lake and its reason for flooding the city: Kirk will soon have reason for his insecurity as Kristen will soon disappear into the centre of the lake leaving Kirk behind in a gondola.

As the lake begins to literally close in on Kristen, her dreams become consumed by images of it; “the lake approaches like a swarm [...] everything explodes with water” and she becomes convinced that the lake has appeared in Los Angeles with the sole purpose of taking Kirk away from her: “the lake is coming for him.”<sup>81</sup> When Kristen reaches this conclusion she makes the decision to confront the lake. Unlike the narrator of *Amnesiascope* who attempts to live alongside the apocalypse he experiences all around him, Kristen chooses to challenge the geographic and emotional shift in her surroundings. It is this decision – to physically confront the literal and emotion apocalypse that looms in her life – which drives the rest of the novel.

When Kristen dives into the centre of the lake in the hope of finding some way to stop it coming for her son, the narrative shifts. Instead of focusing on a different character or place, Erickson chooses to depict an alternate time, depicting Kristen five years on from her decision to confront the lake. Her whole attitude

75 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 30.

76 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 12.

77 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 10.

78 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 34.

79 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 34.

80 Erickson, S. 2005. pp. 34-35.

81 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 43.

towards the lake has changed, “[a]nd now she sits by the lake in a state of truce,”<sup>82</sup> because in this version of her narrative she hasn’t managed to save her son, he has been taken by the lake and there is nothing she can do about it. As her relationship with the lake has changed to one of submission, so the narrative has become less personalised. It is no longer written in Kristen’s first person perspective, but the third person. The impact of this is to give a more general distanced approach. Erickson, by using third person narrative, demonstrates the emotional separation Kristen is now attempting.

With this distance the narrative is able to suggest to the reader some of the reasons behind the actions earlier, something that the first person narrative is unable to do because Kristen earlier in the novel was unable to see the connections that the more distanced perspective can provide. The narrative comments that Kristen “never understood how she was the agent of chaos” and that “[h]ad she been as self-aware as she thought she was, she might have noted how it was that on her return to Los Angeles a lake appeared [...] it was she who embodied the chaos of the coming age.”<sup>83</sup> These observations prove to the reader that Kristen was correct in her assumption that the lake that was gradually submerging the city was indeed linked to her, her son and her emotions. Erickson strengthens and plays on this by using language in his descriptions of Kristen that connect her to the watery apocalypse: “she feels hysteria *lapping* at her mind.”<sup>84</sup> This language not only continues to tie Kristen to the lake, it also bonds her to the chaos the lake has produced, both literally and emotionally: despite her supposed truce with the lake, her connection with its apocalypse is unbreakable. As the novel continues the lake, “[n]ow comes as ally, confessor, co-conspirator, savior” to Kristen and cements itself as a character within its own right.<sup>85</sup>

The connections between Kristen’s actions and emotional responses are almost always provoked by the lake, and echoed in the response of the lake itself. It is here that the strong psychotopographic nature of the novel really presents itself. As Kristen’s emotions wax and wane, so the lake moves, flooding or retreating. At the start of the novel, where Kristen doesn’t recognise the relationship between the arrival of the lake and the birth of Kirk, the lake continues to gradually rise towards the hotel where she is living. Erickson uses this as a demonstration of two things: firstly the growing love that Kristen feels for her child; and secondly the growing fear she has that something will happen to him. The more fearful Kristen becomes for Kirk’s safety, the more the lake seems to feed on that fear and swell to meet it. Kristen admits at the beginning of her narrative that the only change in her since the birth of Kirk is “all the new ways I’ve become afraid”<sup>86</sup> and she goes on to describe his impact on her using language that references the lake: “all I know is he’s the shore of the lake of my life.”<sup>87</sup> Only two pages after this admission Kristen reflects on the people

82 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 63.

83 Erickson, S. 2005. pp. 62-63

84 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 69. Italics mine.

85 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 77.

86 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 13.

87 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 13.

moving out of her building “[a]s the lake gets bigger,”<sup>88</sup> and later her wish to be “a tough chick again”<sup>89</sup> is immediately followed by the description of how “the lake reached the Hamblin.” These juxtapositions of Kristen’s emotions and the lake’s movements cannot be separated, and so, as her fear grows, the lake becomes more of a presence in her immediate surroundings: her emotions are directly affecting the geography in which she is situated.

The psychotopography in *Our Ecstatic Days* becomes more explicit during the narrative of the future Kristen who is shown five years after her original confrontation with the lake. This section of the narrative begins with the sentence “[e]very passing day, the edge of the water rots a little more the front porch of her little house,”<sup>90</sup> an image that acts as a metaphor for the way that Kristen’s guilt at having abandoned Kirk when she thought she was saving him, has eaten away at her over the past five years. It is also at this point that the “lake finally stopped rising.”<sup>91</sup> Kristen has given in to her failure, the lake has reached her, and now it has no need to continue flooding the city: both the lake and Kristen now exist in stasis. It is only when Kristen acts on an emotional impulse that this hiatus is broken. She suddenly decides that maybe if she swims back to the centre of the lake she will find Kirk. However, when she gets there and does indeed hear him calling from the lake, she loses her nerve and rows back to her house. Upon her return, she falls asleep and awakes to the smell of the smoke as her house burns. She is trapped inside, and suddenly the lake reacts, it:

comes up over the edge of the front porch, comes through  
the front door into the front room, comes into the hallway of  
ghosts and into the bedroom and rises up around her feet  
then her ankles lapping at the flaming walls around her.<sup>92</sup>

The lake has made a deliberate move to save Kristen, and now there is no denying that it is connected to her it is, “her private lake” that responds to her emotions.<sup>93</sup> This moment is significant, not only because it cements the direct connection between Kristen’s emotions and the apocalyptic lake that has risen in Los Angeles, but also because rather than being a destructive force, as expected, the lake helps Kristen.

This shift in the understanding of the lake is crucial and begins a change in the novel away from a negative response to the emotional and physical apocalypse, towards a positive one. The suggestion that a supposedly catastrophic and apocalyptic force could result in positive, as opposed to destructive, outcomes, is something that underlies Erickson’s notion of apocalypse throughout his writing, and is echoed in the psychotopography of the novels and the duality of order and chaos. The most dramatic example of this

88 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 15.

89 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 34.

90 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 51.

91 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 51.

92 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 77.

93 Erickson, S. 2005. p. 77.

embrace of chaos to produce order comes from Kristen's final acceptance of the lake. At the climax of the novel the Kristen of the future acknowledges that she should accept the lake as part of her psychic and literal geography, and thus embrace rather than fear it. When this realisation occurs she is finally able to return to the centre of the water, and dive back towards her son, thus returning only minutes after she left him in the gondola, and leaving behind the alternative history in which she abandons him forever.<sup>94</sup>

Erickson's apocalyptic narrative, and its reflection in his textual style, is brought together during Kristen's journey towards understanding the role of the lake in her own life and the acceptance of the apocalyptic nature of her surroundings as being potentially constructive rather than destructive. There are several aspects of Erickson's writing in *Our Ecstatic Days* which add to the apocalyptic feel of the novel, the most significant of which being how he chooses to deal with the page layout and the interrelationship of the text on the page with the occurrences in the plot. At the beginning of the novel, when Kristen expresses her new-found fear as a parent, the text is inconsistently laid out, and within it Erickson stops and starts sentences, interrupts, starts, or ends them, with an ellipsis. This presents a physical manifestation of Kristen's uncertainty on the page, just as the lake provides a geographic one in her life. Then, when Kristen succumbs to the lake and dives into it, swimming into an alternative history, Erickson has her "swim" through the rest of the novel by having an italicized sentence cutting through the text two thirds of the way down the following pages.<sup>95</sup>

This provides a problem for the reader, who is unsure whether to continue reading the narrative ignoring the sentence, to read the sentence and then return to the narrative where they left off, or to read the two simultaneously. This echoes the shifting focuses and chronologies that Erickson presents within the narrative in a tangible, textual form. The ongoing sentence is only finally brought back into the main body of the text when Kristen resurfaces from the lake and is reunited with Kirk: the apocalyptic nature of the text is only resolved when Kristen comes to understand and accept the apocalyptic nature of her surroundings, thus continuing the way in which the theme of apocalypse penetrates the entirety of *Our Ecstatic Days*.

## **Conclusion**

The acceptance of apocalypse is a common theme in Erickson's writing. His narratives suggest that in order for the characters to cope with both their literal and emotional surroundings they must acknowledge a degree of apocalypse. In *Amnesiascope*, the narrator must find a balance between the emotional and geographic chaos that surrounds him, and it is only through this that he will gain happiness. In *Our Ecstatic Days*, Kristen's response at the climax of the novel is to accept the chaos that the lake has brought, and to understand that although its existence is indeed linked to her child, it is not threatening. It is through this acknowledgement that a degree of apocalypse, both emotional (through the everyday fear she must now

94 Erickson, S. 2005. pp. 316-317.

95 Erickson, S. 2005, pg. 170-171

deal with being a parent) and literal (as seen in the changing landscape of Los Angeles), does not necessarily produce a negative or destructive end.

Both of these examples are linked directly to an understanding of apocalypse within the specific topographical context of Los Angeles. However, Erickson alludes to the need for a duality and balance of order and chaos throughout his writing. The Occupant in *The Sea Came in at Midnight*, must discover a balance between his emotional instability as a result of his wife leaving him and the death of his father and his obsession with mapping the modern apocalypse. Jefferson in *Arc d'X* is in search of a way of balancing his personal and his public persona and the ideologies that have arisen as a result. In *Tours of the Black Clock*, Banning Jainlight is constantly searching for a duality between his moral and emotional beliefs about his career as a pornographer, his place in, and influence on, history, and his own relationships with the women in his life. On a more basic level, Lauren from *Days Between Stations* is trying to work out how she feels about her husband, a figure who constantly betrays her for other women, and Michel, a man with whom she feels a strange connection and who becomes her lover.

As all of these examples disclose, the need for equilibrium between order and chaos lies underneath all of Erickson's other themes, and it is this that his psychotopography attempts to deal with. By forming connections between the emotions and the landscapes of the characters, Erickson demonstrates how both are fundamental to identity, and a duality of order and chaos within both the psyche and the topography is crucial.

## Conclusion

*Home again, his native land; he was born of it  
and his bones will sleep in it . . .*

*William Faulkner*

A.M. Holmes closes her book about Los Angeles with the confession that, “while I’ve come to know the city in a purely navigational and geographic sense, I still don’t have a clue as to the truth or heart of Los Angeles [...] I can’t begin to say I know Los Angeles.”<sup>1</sup> She goes on to remark that the one thing that has become clear for her is that, “each person makes his own reality.”<sup>2</sup> These two statements encapsulate the issue at the core of the psychotopographies that emerge from Erickson’s writing: it is not about *what* we know about a place, but *how* we know it. For Erickson, Los Angeles, and indeed America, should not be places ruled by geographic or topographic maps, but by an emotional cartography, and that this is essential to the comprehension of a place, and to the identities – individual and collective – that are constructed as a result. In order to understand places in this manner unquantifiable psychotopographies such as emotion, happiness, liquidity, numbers and apocalypse, should, in some manner, be quantified. The “unknowable” features of a place must become knowable so that the spaces can be (re)imagined according to this new cartography.

This conclusion will consider how the specific psychotopographies of Erickson’s work can be re-told in more general terms so as to provide new areas of knowledge and ways of thinking. It will begin with a critical reflection on the methodology used throughout the thesis, and then from this will reiterate the five psychotopographic states found in Erickson’s writing. Once these five topographic states have been outlined the discussion then moves towards the ways in which these notions can provide new areas of knowledge and ways of thinking.

### **A reflection on methodology**

Before moving on to discuss how psychotopography can be used to present an understanding of Los Angeles that is broader than that seen specifically in Erickson’s reimagining of the city, and then other potential areas, it is important to reflect on the methodology used in this study, as it is due to a close thematic reading of Erickson’s writing that this notion of psychotopography has been comprehended.

1 Holmes, A.M. p. 172.

2 Holmes, A.M. p. 172.

The features of psychotopography are difficult to separate from one another, each impacting upon the other. This is also seen in the way that rather than being noticeable at set points in Erickson's novels, psychotopography is intimately woven throughout them. As a result, a detailed and deliberate analysis was required in order to carefully analyse Erickson's text, not only in terms of his narratives and plots, but also in terms of the techniques used both in the writing of them and in typography. When dealing with literature, specifically fictional literature, the most suitable methodology to use is usually considered to be that of practical criticism, a close reading of the text. This study has used a slightly different version of this method. It takes the principles of close textual analysis, and applied them thematically, thus providing a close thematic reading of Erickson's work, that is rooted in an initial close read that highlights repeated images and motifs, as well as language. This technique provides an understanding not simply of the work itself, but the cultural context within which it is written and the themes that lie both within the novels, and in Erickson's overall concerns. The latter aspect of this method is particularly important to this study given that Erickson's work is deeply rooted in his experience of, and response to, the Los Angelean landscape, and his differentiation of the geography of the United States, and the ideology of America, and its impact on national identity.

The deliberate task of using a thematic practical criticism to provide a close reading of a text involves a detailed exploration not only of the themes and motifs used in a piece of writing, but the methods the writer has used in order to produce them. It is these things that are crucial to the drawing out of psychotopography in Erickson's work, both in relation to his own themes, and to the more generalised understanding of the topic. With psychotopography being so intricate, due to the interconnections of all the aspects that are part of it, a simple overview of a text or work is not enough. Instead all parts of a work that influence the underlying themes need to be considered, from the small mechanics, such as the use of ellipsis, to larger techniques such as the layout of text on a page, to the motifs of a theme, such as the presence of water, to the widest concerns of the creator, such as those of the American dream as seen in Erickson's writing. A move away from the practical criticism of Erickson's work and specific understanding of psychotopography, and towards the formulation of a wider comprehension of the topic, is due to a close thematic reading that opens up larger concepts.

It is of course important to recognise that the specific techniques of this study's version practical criticism, whilst suitable for textual work, may not be suited to all non-literary disciplines. However, the methodology of practical criticism can be carried from literature into other disciplines; the principles at its heart – close reading – can be applied to other forms; for example the deliberate and close examination of works can be used when looking at photography, film or art. Instead of looking at the way text is laid out on the page, or at literary techniques and language, the techniques of the particular discipline can be utilised. Rather than looking at words, look at light, contrast, dialogue, movement between scenes, exposure etc. Although the techniques are different, the principle of detailed examination, producing a close "reading" of



the work, in conjunction with the context within which it was made, is largely the same. It is through this very intricate, deliberate exploration of works that the psychotopographies can be drawn out.

### **A reinstatement of definition**

The thematic close reading of Erickson's work draws out the fundamental differences between psychotopography and psychogeography. It is important to make these differences as clear as possible, so as to understand how Erickson's work is specifically psychotopography, rather than being part of psychogeography.

The core difference between psychotopography and psychogeography is the way that they are experienced. Psychogeography is something deliberately entered into, and requires particular techniques in order for a psychogeographic experience of the urban environment to be carried out. It is a specific strategy to construct and reconstruct understandings of the urban environment, and is simultaneously a serious political movement, and a playful technique, both of which are structured. As Debord states, the situationists used to psychogeography to "undertake an organised collective labor [sic] [...to] build new settings."<sup>3</sup> He goes on to demonstrate that the "situationist game"<sup>4</sup> uses the *derive*, "the practice of a passionate uprooting through the hurried change of environments" which "construct situations"<sup>5</sup> that form part of the psychogeography and situationist psychology.<sup>6</sup> These explanations of the strategy and meaning of psychogeography demonstrate the way in which it is a clearly structured way of experiencing and re-interpreting the environment in order to find new meanings. This is distinctly different to psychotopography. Psychotopography is chaotic and unstructured. It cannot be entered into, or stepped out of, it is taking place constantly as emotions and landscape interact. The intricacies of this are demonstrated in the way that the psychotopographic elements of Erickson's novels are embedded within his themes, plots and techniques. They cannot be easily extracted, in the way that a *derive* is planned, instead individuals are surrounded by psychotopography: they cannot choose to take part, as the situationists can a psychogeographic *derive* around Paris.

In Erickson's work characters do not make the decision to enact psychotopographic experiences within their emotional and geographic landscapes. Instead they are enveloped by the possibility that at any moment there might be an "altering of the surrounding psychotopography."<sup>7</sup> It is this that makes Erickson's work psychotopographic, rather than psychogeographic. This is particularly demonstrated by the way that that it is usually the landscape that shifts or changes in Erickson's work, and this prompts changes in the characters psyche, rather than vice versa. The shift in landscape demonstrates that the character has no direct influence. Although their emotions are related to the topographies they inhabit the changes that occur

<sup>3</sup> Debord, G. 2004. p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> Debord, G. 2004. p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Debord, G. 2004. p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Debord, G. 2004. pp. 45-46.

<sup>7</sup> Erickson, S. 2005. p. 110.

in both the literal and psychic geographies are not deliberately brought about by a character choosing to experience their surroundings in a new way. Instead it is a subtle interrelation of landscape, emotion and psyche over which the character seemingly has no influence. This is illustrated by almost all encounters between Erickson's characters and shifts in landscape: Lauren and the sandstorms in Los Angeles, or the harsh winter in Paris, Cale and the canals, the narrator in *Amnesiascope* and the varying shifts in Los Angeles, Kristen and the lake. In all of these examples the characters had no control over what occurred, and when they assumed they had control, it was proved that this was not the case. For example, when Kristen challenged the lake in *Our Ecstatic Days* believing she could influence it and save her son, it was demonstrated that she could not.

It is this aspect of psychotopography, the fact that it is all encompassing and cannot be turned on and off, as a psychogeographic experience can, that makes it remarkable, and subsequently fundamental to the understanding of the interrelation of individuals, emotion and landscape.

### **Five psychotopographic states**

In order to draw out the way that psychotopography can be used to provide new ways of thinking and new areas of knowledge, it is useful to first reiterate the five topographic states found in Erickson's writing, and then transform these into more generalised terms which might be applied to other works or places.

The five psychotopographies seen in Erickson's reimagining of Los Angeles are: emotion, happiness, numbers, liquidity and apocalypse. Each of these psychotopographies hold its own particular traits; however, when abstracted and then combined these states show the core of psychotopography and begin to provide a series of psychotopographic tendencies that can be used for new areas of study and ways of understanding ourselves.

#### *Emotion*

Given that the interrelationship of emotion and landscape is at the heart of psychotopography, it is understandable that the topic of emotion provides many of the bases from which psychotopography can be expanded. During the discussion of the way that emotion is portrayed and used in Erickson's novels, various smaller themes became evident: loss, guilt, betrayal, desire and desperation. The exploration of these aspects of the emotion in Erickson's work highlighted psychotopographic elements, with the shifts in emotion directly resulting in chronologic, topographic or narrative shifts within the plot. Underlying the ways that the character's experience of things such a loss of freedom, or personal and political betrayal, caused changes in their surroundings and histories, are larger concerns that can now be identified as features not specific to Erickson's work, but to psychotopography as an overall notion: **loss of control**, shifts in (or unreliable) memory, and the action or movement towards things.

### *Happiness*

Happiness is not just an extension of the psychotopography of emotion in Erickson's fiction; instead it is a topic that extends beyond the emotional to the personal and political, individual and national, ideals and identity. It is this topic in Erickson's writing that is explicitly connected to his belief that there is a separation between the idea of "America" and the geography of "The United States" a delineation that lies at the heart of Erickson's re-working of the historical figure of Thomas Jefferson, and the way that Erickson's character of Thomas attempts to flee the **contradictions** between his personal and political ideas by heading west into new landscape. Bound up with the psychotopographic state of happiness are notions of **pursuit** and **possession**, with both Thomas and Sally in Erickson's work attempting to gain and own something: Thomas' in his need to possess Sally both as an object of lust, and simply an object, and Sally in her constant attempts to possess her own identity, rather than one defined by Thomas or America.

### *Numbers*

Throughout Erickson's work, characters try to make sense of the emotional and topographical shifts taking place around them using techniques of quantification. They make maps and produce co-ordinates, or they change the numeration of calendars, or attempt to prove that extra numbers exist. It is their way of trying to gain control over aspects of their lives that are fundamentally uncontrollable.

Within the theme of numbers a degree of fluidity is found. Not only does Erickson use a fluidity of chronology in his plots, changing dates and times and skipping between narratives, his characters also act in this way. The characters are pulled back and forth between histories depending on their emotional states, and also see numbers as fluid. JML in *Rubicon Beach*, for example, does not believe that the current number system should be static; instead he attempts to find a number between nine and ten, and believes that numbers exist for emotions or states of mind.

The numbers in Erickson's work might seem to be something that are only particular to his novels, however beneath the acts of numeration and the manipulation of numbers in Erickson's work several themes arise that can be understood as more broadly related to psychotopography. For example, the act of **attempting to quantify the seemingly unquantifiable** is one that runs not simply throughout Erickson's fiction, but psychotopography as a whole: it is a way of attempting to find control in situations that are inherently chaotic, such as a shifting landscape, or an unstable emotional state.

### *Liquidity*

Erickson employs various examples of liquidity in his work, often choosing to make non-liquid substances, such as sand, take on the properties of a liquid, as with the sandstorms in Los Angeles that appear to flood the city. There are obvious connections between fluidity and the watery apocalypses that arise in Erickson's fiction – and in his most liquid-filled novel, *Our Ecstatic Days*, the water becomes a character itself. Also,

water comes to symbolise obstacles that the characters must cross, both physically and emotionally. For example, in *Amnesiascope* the hotel where the narrator lives is flooded, this is used not only as a literal introduction of instability to the novel, but also symbolises an emotional turmoil that the character must face.

Although, again, these aspects are drawn specifically from Erickson's work, the notion of instability or **fluidity** is central to psychotopography and is often connected to other features of it, such as loss of control or **pursuit**.

### *Apocalypse*

The apocalypses that occur in Erickson's fiction are both literal and emotional, and always connected. Characters experience trouble in their lives, and as a result go through emotional difficulties that then trigger apocalyptic shifts in landscape or weather, or vice versa. Another aspect of the psychotopographic state of apocalypse in Erickson's work is that it is ongoing. It is not a climactic event; instead instances surrounding it occur and are in progress throughout the narratives.

The characters in Erickson's work also react unusually to the apocalypses they experience. Rather than being scared or unsettled, they remain calm and seem to accept the chaos that surrounds them, emotionally and topographically, a seemingly **contradictory** approach. The best example of this comes from *Our Ecstatic Days*, the novel in which a lake rises in Los Angeles. The inhabitants question its arrival, and yet adapt to its presence, until it becomes natural for the addresses of the city to change daily as buildings disappear underwater, and travelling by boat is the norm. There is an element of the characters being excited by the apocalypses they encounter, as if they are **thrilled** by the dramatic shifts in their surroundings.

### **Seven psychotopographic tendencies**

Although the above psychotopographic states are specifically found in Erickson's fiction, a recapitulation of these states begins to highlight psychotopographic tendencies that are more general features of psychotopography that could be explored in other areas or disciplines. These tendencies, when found in other places or creative works, indicate psychotopography. There are seven psychotopographic tendencies that can be abstracted from the work on Erickson's fiction, and these are: loss of control, pursuit, possession, quantifying the unquantifiable, fluidity, contradiction and thrill. The tendencies of psychotopography largely remain the same, but how they manifest themselves varies according to the place or work. Thus, in Erickson's work we see the tendencies of psychotopography – loss of control, pursuit, contradiction etc – produce the psychotopographic states of emotion, happiness, numbers, liquidity and apocalypse. The following section will explore these tendencies in more detail, first in terms of themselves, and then in relation to Los Angeles.

### *Loss of control*

Psychotopographic loss of control can be either emotional or topographic. What is particular about it however, is that, rather than sparking panic, it is either coped with, or anticipated and expected. It is as if the loss of control is surrendered to. Within this notion, it is also possible to see that of instability: loss of control is often triggered by instability of either landscape or emotion.

### *Pursuit*

This tendency is not necessarily about the acquiring of something (whether the thing being pursued is emotional – love, lust, stability – or literal – a person, place, object) but about the actions that are taken in order to gain it. For example, in Erickson's work the protagonist rarely gains what they are pursuing, and so it is the journey or process (emotional, geographic, moral) that takes on greater significance. However, this process would be nothing without the object of pursuit.

### *Possession*

The tendency of possession is heavily connected to that of pursuit, and again it is likely that it is the process by which possession is gained, or the reasons behind the desire to possess, that hold the significance. For Erickson, possession is bound up with the connection between landscape and identity, which are subsequently tied into the pursuit of the frontier, and the possession of the landscape that then begins to define both national and individual identity.

### *Quantifying the unquantifiable*

This is a particularly significant tendency of psychotopography as it is connected to loss of control, and provides a strategy for coping with emotional and topographic shifts. The attempt to quantify things that seemingly defy numerical quantification – such as love, guilt, desire, loss etc. – provides new ways of looking at, and dealing with, situations that would otherwise induce chaos and uncertainty.

### *Fluidity*

Fluidity is seen throughout Erickson's writing, not only in the watery apocalypses that occur, but in the narrative and literary techniques that are used to construct the novels. Chronology is fluid for Erickson, with dates and times constantly moving, and his characters literally shifting in time and space, as well as between fluid landscapes. Again this fluidity is a way of responding to uncertain emotions and landscapes, providing a way of navigating them. As the topography or psyche becomes unstable, then the mechanism for dealing with it should also maintain fluidity.

### *Contradiction*

Contradiction comes through the combination of loss of control, and the fact that this is dealt with using ways of accepting and making sense of chaotic emotions and landscapes, rather than attempting to get rid of this chaos altogether. Rather than viewing contradiction as a problematic feature of things, this psychotopographic tendency is about using contradictions as a successful way of identifying and dealing with uncertain or shifting circumstances,

### *Thrill*

Like contradiction, thrill is a psychotopographic tendency that suggests that situations, emotions or surroundings that appear difficult, frightening or harmful, also hold a degree of excitement, once it is accepted that they cannot be changed or influenced. As seen in Erickson's writing characters do not attempt to flee the apocalypses that they encounter, instead there is an underlying suggestion of excitement of exhilaration. Although the characters experience dramatic shifts in both their emotional and literal landscapes, and fail to control much of what goes on in their emotional lives – and by psychotopographic extension their literal surroundings – they rarely panic. Instead there is a degree of acceptance of the chaos that surrounds and follows them. This is fundamental to psychotopography as a whole: chaos isn't necessarily a negative thing; instead a lack of control may potentially lead to freedom or excitement.

### **The psychotopographic tendencies of Los Angeles**

Having identified the states of psychotopography as found in Erickson's work, and then the broader psychotopographic tendencies from which manifestation of these states arise, the questions becomes: How has this changed our view of Los Angeles? Eventually this question then expands to ask: Where does this take us next? The next two sections of this conclusion suggest answers to these questions.

### *Los Angeles' loss of control*

The constant expansion of Los Angeles, and its situation on the boundary of two tectonic plates means that the topography of California is unstable. Not only is the urban area of Los Angeles subject to change at any moment due to development, the landscape could shift dramatically during an earthquake. As a consequence of this, the inhabitants of the city live with the knowledge that their surroundings could differ in many ways overnight. This produces a degree of emotional instability for the inhabitant, who find their city not only fragmented in terms of the disjunctive urban layout, separated by freeways that travel across and over, rather than through, the city, but also subject to the definite possibility of topographic disaster without warning.

### *Los Angeles quantifies the unquantifiable*

The notion of attempting to quantify the unquantifiable can be seen as manifesting itself in various concrete forms in Los Angeles. The idea behind the wish to quantify the unquantifiable is that of trying to create order from chaos, using unorthodox methods. This is something that is seen throughout both the landscape and psyche of Los Angeles. As Banham pointed to in his writing on the four ecologies of Los Angeles, there are many ways that architects have tried to capture the unusual aspects of the city in their building. For example, he points to buildings built to look like the thing they are selling, such as restaurants in the shape of hamburgers, so that, "the building and the symbol are one and the same thing."<sup>8</sup> This is one way the architects in Los Angeles have attempted to take the chaos of the city and turn it into something understandable and immediately recognisable: they have taken control by removing ambiguity. Filmmakers, writers and artists on the other hand have dealt with this in different ways. Their way of quantifying the unquantifiable is to accept the chaos and embrace it, as is seen with Erickson's writing. Filmmakers in particular have taken the chaos of Los Angeles and made a living from it, creating films that control the chaos by blowing it out of proportion so as to make it ridiculous. This can be seen in films such as *Independence Day*<sup>9</sup> where aliens obliterate the city, and then again in the spoof *Mars Attacks!*<sup>10</sup> As Davis comments, audiences take great pleasure in these films<sup>11</sup> and as a result the potential apocalyptic chaos of Los Angeles is turned into entertainment. Control is taken by taking the unquantifiable – fear of the city's destruction – and making it quantifiable – having it done by aliens, or in such epic proportions it becomes unimaginable so that the fear is replaced by excitement or comedy.

#### *Los Angeles pursues and possesses*

Bound up within the contradictions of landscape and emotion in Los Angeles are issues of pursuit and possession. The pursuit of happiness and the American dream has not only lead people to settle in the city, it is also what has created the urban sprawl for which the city is famous. Los Angeles, during its settlement, embraced the notions of the frontier, and, by bringing water into the desert regions using vast aqueducts, was able to build in regions previously uninhabitable. There was an inherent desire to both pursue and possess that which seemed unattainable and in doing so demonstrate that California truly was the home of the American dream. This spirit, which was very much connected to the conquering of landscape, then carried into the psyche of those living in, or moving to, the region, and thus pursuit and possession became both physical and mental attributes of the area.

#### *Los Angeles is fluid*

8 Banham, R. p. 94.

9 Emmerich, R. Dir. *Independence Day*. 20th Century Fox, 1996.

10 Burton, T. Dir. *Mars Attacks!* Warner Bros. 1996.

11 Davis, M. 1998, pp. 276-277

There are several aspects of Los Angeles that make it fluid, both topographically and emotionally. Given its situation on the border of two tectonic plates, the landscape of Southern California is subject to potentially dramatic shifts, meaning that the landscape is literally fluid. The population of Los Angeles is fluid too, with the majority of inhabitants originating from outside of the state. The influx of people to the city and the promise of the American dream means that the population is shifting and changing constantly. As a result of this, the city itself changes shape as it expands to accommodate the growing population. There is another aspect of Los Angeles that suggests fluidity, and that is the lack of centre. Being made up of numerous different neighbourhoods, each with its own distinct personality, the overall identity of the city fluctuates depending on which area of the city is dominant at any given time. For example, in the 1960s surf and hippie culture was dominant, meaning that the beach areas such as Santa Monica and Venice Beach represented the identity of the city. In the 1980s however, the Watts riots were what the public identified with Los Angeles, and as a result the personality and focus changed again. Thus, Los Angeles is in a constant state of flux both topographically and emotionally.

#### *Los Angeles contradicts*

The obvious starting point for the psychotopography of Los Angeles is contradiction. There are numerous contradictions both within Los Angeles' geography and the emotional landscape of the city. Firstly, the elements that make up Los Angeles' landscape produce a city that is a desert fronted by a coastline, with mountains behind it. Thus, travelling across the city involves crossing numerous landscapes. However, with the gradual segregation of certain ethnic groups that has occurred in the city it is also possible that some inhabitants will live their entire lives in the city and only see one part of it, for example, living in the low-rise urban areas and never having reason or opportunity to visit the mountains or beaches. This highlights one of the emotional contradictions apparent in Los Angeles; it has come to be viewed as a place where the American dream can be realised and as a result individuals flock to the city in the hope of re-starting their lives aiming for fame and fortune. However, few people actually succeed in this manner, and in reality, many people live in poverty, and certain ethnic groups in particular suffer from social immobility.

#### *Los Angeles thrills*

There is, of course, a degree of thrill that arises as a result of the unusual Southern Californian landscape. The city planners of Los Angeles have managed to overcome the challenges of a desert landscape with huge irrigation projects, and they continue to develop despite the fear of natural disasters. As a result there is the feeling that California, and Los Angeles in particular, can withstand anything, and so an excitement arises at the possibilities the landscape still holds, and the ways that developers might overcome problems with new technologies. This thrill then carries into the general ambience of the city. Los Angeles remains, despite the threat of earthquakes, and the continuing problems with lack of water for a growing population,



the city where anything is possible. This is helped by Hollywood and the film industry that has thrived in the city, and that perpetuates the American dream.

### **Intention and application**

It is not enough, however, to simply outline psychotopography in Erickson's work, or in Los Angeles, Erickson's native city. Instead this study must demonstrate the intention of psychotopography as a method and then suggest ways in which other works might be read psychotopographically. In order to do this it must be first explained what the strengths and weaknesses of psychotopography as a theory, and this thesis in particular, might hold, before going on to present an extended study of how a work other than Erickson's might be approached using psychotopography, through a psychotopographic re-reading of a text already covered in this thesis.

It is clear that at this point the main weaknesses of psychotopography are rooted in its connection to fictional work. It is a term that has been extracted from Erickson's writing, and explored in relation to the characters and plots that are played out in his novels. Whilst this is the only way to investigate exactly what the phrase means, and what the facets that construct psychotopography might be, it does leave the theory open to the criticism that it is not applicable or relevant outside the realms of fictional work. Similarly, from this arises the possibility that it is only something that can impact fictional individuals, who can be shifted in time and space by an author, and is unable to be applied to literal interactions with landscape that is not subject to the changes in history or climate that Erickson uses. Finally, there are questions that arise in response to the method used to explore the psychotopography in Erickson's writing. A detailed thematic close reading, is not a method that is necessarily suitable for all studies, and it a technique that applies particularly well to textual works, especially those that are dense and non-linear, such as Erickson's.

These potential weaknesses are significant, as they are connected to aspects of psychotopography that are at the centre of the thesis – the exploration of the notion in Erickson's fictional work, and the method used to do this. However, when outlined so clearly, they help to provide a starting point to explore how the notion of psychotopography – now outlined and explained clearly due to the study of Erickson's work, and abstracted to demonstrate its underlying tendencies and states – can be expanded beyond fiction, and used as a theory that is applicable to existing histories and theories, or used to produce new ones. This, in turn, outlines the key strength of psychotopography: the potential for new understandings for not only our surroundings, and our interrelationship with them, but ourselves as individuals.

In order to demonstrate how psychotopography can be applicable beyond fictional writing, and how the tendencies and states can be seen in other writings, this study will now return to a history of Los Angeles referred to earlier in the work, and provide a re-reading of it using psychotopography. Following this will be a discussion of how future works might adopt different methods and techniques of writing in order to produce psychotopographic readings or histories of landscapes. The work in question for re-examining is Marc

Reisner's *A Dangerous Place: California's Unsettling Fate*.<sup>12</sup> The new reading of it will first outline how Reisner demonstrates the tendencies of psychotopography in his writing – loss of control, pursuit, possession, quantifying the unquantifiable, fluidity, contradiction, thrill – and how these produce the specific psychotopographic states of the work, it will also discuss particularly aspects of the work that make it an interesting psychotopographic text beyond the tendencies and states it displays.

The reason for choosing Reisner's work, which is different to other histories explored in the thesis due to its combination of non-fiction and fictional writing, is a deliberate one. *A Dangerous Place* is significant in that it attempts to marry objective and subjective histories, to provide a clearer view of the landscape he is exploring. This suggests at the outset a possible technique for producing more psychotopographic studies of landscapes. One of the issues with traditional writings about cities or landscapes, as outlined earlier in this study, is their reliance on objectivity. Their wish to provide objective, chronological studies often means that aspects of the individual interaction with the landscape are left out, generalised or objectified. Reisner's account, along with some others, such as Mike Davis', attempt to change this, and provide a more individual, emotional, perspective, one that could be considered as psychotopographic, as an exploration of psychotopographic tendencies in the work will aim to demonstrate.

#### *The psychotopography of Reisner*

As explained earlier in this study, Reisner's work *A Dangerous Place* is a study of the development of California, and in particular, how its growth has increased the possibility of catastrophe – specifically earthquakes – in the region. His work is in two parts; the first is a factual account of the area, with a focus on how the development of the area has impacted upon the geography particularly focusing on the water and earthquake issues in the region. The second part of his study is a first-person fictional account that speculates about what would happen if a large earthquake occurred in the San Francisco Bay Area. The following psychotopographic re-reading of Reisner's will examine the two parts of the work as a whole, with the exploration of the psychotopographic tendencies present treating each part of the work as the same, with no regard for whether it is non-fiction or fictional.

The first task when re-reading Reisner's work in a psychotopographic way is to highlight how and where the psychotopographic tendencies manifest in the work. This should be explored not simply thematically, but also with regard to language and literary techniques. One of the aspects of Reisner's writing that will become increasingly significant throughout this psychotopographic reading is the way in which his non-fiction and fictional writing are similar. He uses techniques in both that indicate a way of writing that is particularly useful for producing psychotopographic writing. It is one of the things that allows

<sup>12</sup> Reisner, M. 2004.

the non-fiction and fictional parts of his writing to be considered as a whole, especially when drawing out the psychotopographic tendencies and subsequently the states.

The tendency of trying to quantify the unquantifiable is the only psychotopographic tendency that is specifically consigned to one section of the book. It is seen specifically in his fictional account of an earthquake occurring in the Bay Area of San Francisco. The whole of this section of the work represents Reisner's way of trying to imagine the unthinkable results of a large-scale earthquake with an epicentre near to a densely populated area. This fictional account is his way of attempting to quantify the unquantifiable, and it is clear in his use of language. He uses words such as "dizzying," "careening," "unearthly," "speechless," "dazed" and "abstraction,"<sup>13</sup> all of which suggest his attempts make sense of the situation, whilst also implying that it is too difficult to deal with.

The other psychotopographic tendencies are clear throughout Reisner's writing. Since his discussion focuses on the development of the region, and this impact this has had on water supplies and earthquake potential the issues of pursuit, possession are present openly throughout the writing. As in Erickson's work the notions of pursuit and possession appear in tandem: Reisner highlights that developers relentless desire to built more and bring more people into the state, pushed their need to possess not only land, but water from other areas, even states, in order to irrigate that land. When talking about the pursuit of greater land and opportunities Reisner uses words such as: "outlandish,"<sup>14</sup> "frenzy"<sup>15</sup> and "preposterous"<sup>16</sup> When talking about the possession of water Reisner uses language such as "capture,"<sup>17</sup> "greed"<sup>18</sup> and "tactics."<sup>19</sup> This specific focus on use of language is something that will be crucial later as all of these words highlight both a key technique in Reisner's work that demonstrates a fundamental aspect of psychotopographic accounts, but also the psychotopographic states that arise from his presentation of the tendencies.

Reisner opens the work with a discussion of the contrary nature of California. He talks of how the inhabitants of the state "have settled, and will continue to settle, where they shouldn't have."<sup>20</sup> That it is an arid landscape, situated on tectonic faults, and yet, "Greater Los Angeles alone has more inhabitants than the ten other western states *combined*."<sup>21</sup> Reisner also points out that it is not simply the landscape that makes Los Angeles contradictory, it is what occurs there. He is quick to point out that:

[d]espite the disappearance of almost two hundred  
thousand defence-related jobs, despite racial polarization

<sup>13</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. pp. 103-180.

<sup>14</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 50.

<sup>18</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 54.

<sup>20</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 4 *Italics original*.

and a creepily pervasive criminal violence, despite the departure, in the mid-1990s, of *both* its National Football League teams, Los Angeles remains one of the three wealthiest urban economies in the world.<sup>22</sup>

To Reisner these issues, when combined with all the problems that the landscape bring, make Los Angeles, and California an unimaginable place to settle. However, the contradictions that Reisner highlights here are not the ones he is primarily concerned with. The further through the discussion of earthquakes and water rights Reisner progresses, the clearer it becomes that his real concern is with the authorities. This is suggested towards the end of his non-fictional account, and is then focused on during his fictional one. What Reisner is so concerned with is that whilst the general public can be forgiven for not knowing or understanding the true extent of the problems that California faces, the authorities cannot, and it is their duty to both inform the public, and make changes, to ensure that catastrophes such as earthquakes, when they happen, do not have such a potentially apocalyptic affect. He talks specifically about the way that when the mayor of San Francisco was approached to put more money and resources into the Fire Department, he declined. The language Reisner uses here is typical of his descriptions throughout his book. He describes the mayor as having, “other fish to fry, or nests to feather.”<sup>23</sup> Reisner is deliberately scathing, even mocking of the authorities. This also occurs earlier in the work, when Reisner is outlining the history of the region. He often chooses public figures and uses their stories as a way of presenting the larger cultural and social decisions that were being taken at the time. Again in these descriptions Reisner is deliberately over the top, almost inflammatory in his remarks. For example, when describing Harrison Gray Otis, the publisher of the Los Angeles Times, he exaggerates his characteristics, portraying him as “a walrus – he [is] big and blubbery.” Reisner then continues his description saying “[h]e was vituperative, choleric, hard-hearted and self-righteous”<sup>24</sup> all of which presents Otis as a caricature. This use of language, similar to the other examples already touched on, are both deliberate and fundamental to Reisner’s work, and particularly its psychotopography, which will be illustrated in the discussion of the psychotopographic states Reisner’s work suggests, and the use of language and literary technique that presents these states.

It is Reisner’s writing about contradictions, combined with the tendencies of pursuit and possession, that begin to highlight not only the key psychotopographic states in his work, but also the techniques in which he puts these across. It is these aspects of his work that are fundamental to this re-reading as they demonstrate how future psychotopographic studies or readings of places might be carried out.

<sup>22</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 4.

<sup>23</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 71.

<sup>24</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 31.

One of the important things about *A Dangerous Place* is that despite the second part of it being a fictional account, the work can, and should, be treated as one piece of writing. The reason behind this is that the writing style between the two sections doesn't change. Reisner employs the same techniques in his fictional writing as during the non-fictional section: strongly emotional language, with anecdotes and personal accounts interspersed with facts and figures. This can be illustrated with a series of extracts. Firstly looking at emotional language:

The peacable kingdom was vanishing; orchards, were being razed;  
Los Angeles and its satellite towns rushed at one another in a  
suburbanising blur. Smog alerts were just a generation away.<sup>25</sup>

This first extract is found during Reisner's history of California, and yet the language reads like novel. The following extract is from the fictional account:

All over the Bay Area, seismograph needles, careening over  
phlegmatic cylinders, etch a dizzying graphic record of  
needlepoint peaks and abject troughs.<sup>26</sup>

These two sentences clearly emphasise the way that the factual and fictional writing in Reisner's work is almost interchangeable. His emotional and fast-paced language is a significant tool in producing a psychotopographic text. It allows Reisner to write a factual account of the history and then potential future of California that is also highly emotional and subjective and thus able to present a work about the region that draws on the both the collective and individual response to landscape.

Another way that this is demonstrated is the way that Reisner employs quantitative research not only to support his non-fictional work, but also to heighten his fiction. The following extracts demonstrate this. The first is from the historical section of the novel:

The fire had swept through 520 square blocks, and incinerated  
close to 30,000 structures. [...] two hundred and fifty thousand  
people were instantly homeless.<sup>27</sup>

These figures relate to a fire that swept through San Francisco after a large-scale earthquake. The following extract is from Reisner's fictional account and again is part of the description of the potential earthquake:

<sup>25</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 103.

<sup>27</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 72.

The initial energy wave, the P or primary wave, broadcasts from the hypocenter at roughly fifteen thousand mile and hour. The trailing wave, the secondary, or S wave, follows at up to half that speed.<sup>28</sup>

This use of facts helps to make the fiction not only more believable, but grounded in reality that the conditions and the landscape would provide. This is key to a psychotopographic text, that although it should be more open to more subjective understandings, it should be true to the facts of the landscape. The use of personal and anecdotal accounts that Reisner uses throughout *A Dangerous Place* underscores this. It provides a view of the topography of California that is subjective, and yet factual, as the facts are individual, whilst being rooted in the literal response to the landscape.

The above techniques all help to indicate the psychotopographic states that are indicated by Reisner's work, and present in both his history and fiction: fear, excess, frustration, despair, humour and acceptance. The history of California begins to highlight these states, with Reisner expressing through his use of language, choice of anecdotes and statistics, that the excess of California's development has lead to both a fear of what damage this might have done to the landscape, and an acceptance of living with this fear. He also expresses this through not only his frustration, but also that of the tectonic specialists, and the public, and the potential despair this could lead to should the inevitable large-scale earthquake occur. Finally, there is an element of humour within Reisner's work, which suggests that this is perhaps a strategy for dealing with the other psychotopographic states.

As this re-reading of Reisner's work demonstrates, it is possible to produce a psychotopographic account of a landscape that doesn't rely entirely on fiction. Although Reisner has chosen to include a fiction account in his work, that his writing style is consistent throughout *A Dangerous Place*, whether Reisner is using non-fiction or fiction illustrates that a reliance on fiction is not a psychotopographic requirement. Instead, it is about approaching writing about landscape in a way that is both subjective and objective in the same account, one that can produce histories or readings of places that reflect both the individual and the collective psychotopography of a place.

### **Where does psychotopography go now?**

So now we have a series of psychotopographic tendencies, and have seen how they can be applied to Los Angeles, and indeed how this has produced the psychotopographic states that manifest not only in Erickson's writing, but also in other works. But where do we take psychotopography next? The answer is to take the psychotopographic tendencies to new areas. Psychotopography is about emotions, not facts,

<sup>28</sup> Reisner, M. 2004. p. 104.

situations, not places, and so its expansion should go beyond simply exploring new city spaces, it should instead be aiming to find new ways to discover ourselves.

### *Cities*

Cities can provide great psychotopographic sites; for the first time in history more people live in urban environments than rural ones. But the cities used for exploration need to hold more than just a population in order to be psychotopographic areas. All cities are interesting places, but think of the psychotopographic potential of places such as Berlin and New York, cities that have suffered from unusual cartographic and emotional shifts: Berlin, a city that has been literally and emotionally divided; New York, a city whose identity was defined by a skyline, first by the presence of two buildings, and now by their absence. Then there are cities such as Dubai, Beijing and Tokyo, which are in constant flux, forging towards a technologically defined future, and yet holding ancient histories at the core of their identity and cartography. It is sites like these that beg for psychotopographic exploration.

### *Landscapes*

However, urban areas should not dominate new psychotopographic investigation, as other landscapes offer just as much promise. Deserts are an excellent example, a constantly shifting landscape, vast expanses of which remain uninhabited due to the harsh conditions, and yet, particularly in the Eastern deserts, nomadic people still occupy the landscape. Oceans and waterways offer similar sites. But the discussion of landscapes should not only include the macro, but also the micro. What might a psychotopographic study of the domestic landscape reveal, or indeed of officescapes, allotments or public toilets?

### *Time*

Since psychotopography is about emotions and situations, further study needs to be pushed out of easily quantifiable or mapped spaces into those of uncertainty and fluctuation. The move away from landscapes and cities and into aspects like time is an obvious starting point. But again, this should not be viewed so literally as the time on the clock, but the time of memory, the time of senses, the virtual time, such as that produced by spaces such as the internet, and online gaming. These examples are from the time of experience and emotion, and thus the time of psychotopography.

### *Sound*

Like time, sound offers numerous possibilities for psychotopographic study, and is present in various guises. There are noises that are chosen by individuals such as music or conversation, and then beyond this is the more general white noise that surrounds individuals in urban environments: traffic, construction, mobile phones, the hum of machines. Then there are the differences in noise – both natural and manmade – across

spaces and landscapes. All of which have the potential to demonstrate the psychotopographic tendencies and produce varying psychotopographic states.

### *Light*

Over a period of twenty-four hours any landscape experiences constant changes in both natural and artificial light. Each cloud movement changes the way the sun is experienced, and every movement by an individual means they both cause and experiences subtle changes in the light around them. Then there are the multitudes of different experiences that come from artificial light: lamps in homes and on streets, electronic advertising, headlights, etc. Again, each of these slightly change the understanding of an individual or a place and the emotional response to it.

### *Text and image*

If psychotopography is going to expand its “where,” it also needs to expand its “how.” Psychotopographic study should not be limited to novels, but instead needs to demonstrate the potential for the exploration of many forms of creative production, bringing with it the study of how individuals use and relate to them. Texts and images surround individuals, not only in forms such as novels, poetry, essays, sculpture, photography and painting, but also in magazines, adverts, websites, packaging. Often text and image are combined in these forms, with graphic novels providing a classic example. Psychotopography should explore new areas using examination of all sorts of creative production.

### *Ourselves*

Erickson’s work is only the beginning, it provides us with the notion of psychotopography, and presents ways in which it can manifest itself, and through the need for close reading suggests the most suitable way to separate the intricate palimpsests that the psychotopographic tendencies hold. From here, however, the possibilities can only expand. As the combination of the psychotopographic tendencies and the new areas of potential study demonstrate, there is huge potential for ongoing psychotopographic study to teach us not only new ways of mapping landscapes, but of understanding ourselves.

As this exploration of Erickson’s fiction has demonstrated, we are all subject to psychotopographic conditions and are therefore also subject to the tendencies of loss of control, pursuit, possession, quantifying the unquantifiable, fluidity, contradiction and thrill, all of which will then manifest themselves in states such as the emotions, happiness, numbers, liquidity and apocalypse found in Erickson’s work.

However, psychotopography is, fundamentally, not simply a condition of landscape, architecture or space, nor simply a condition of individuals or people, but of the dynamic interrelationship of the two. It is here, in this interrelationship, therefore, that we can begin to learn more about ourselves and the ways in



which we interact with the city, and the identities that arise as a result. Psychotopography provides one way in which to engage with this interrelationship.

## Appendix A: Extended summaries of novels discussed

### *Days between Stations (1985)*

The narrative begins by focusing on the character of Lauren, a woman from Kansas who has just married Jason, her childhood sweetheart and a professional cyclist. They move to San Francisco, and then later to Los Angeles, where Lauren waits for the return of Jason from his races and training, whilst trying to ignore his infidelity, and cope with the birth and then sudden death of their son Jules. Between these sections of narrative the story of Michel is interjected; a character who appears to have no memory. He gradually attempts to piece his identity together, a project that is ongoing for the whole of the novel. The final story that is interwoven around the other two, and which will finally bring them all together, follows the life of Adolphe Sarre, a French orphan brought up in a brothel, who will eventually become the director of the legendary film *La Mort de Marat* that is never completed.

Gradually, as the story progresses, the connections between each narrative become clearer. Lauren and Michel live in the same building in Los Angeles, and struggle with the feeling that they have met or known each other before (which stems from him having rescued her one night in Los Angeles after Jason calls to say he should be at the birth of his illegitimate son, despite having missed that of Jules). Soon they become involved with each other, Los Angeles becomes swamped in sandstorms and the three narratives become two. At this point the narrative shifts again to focus on Sarre. He grew up in a secret room in a brothel in Paris, which he believed held a particular light that no lamp or candle could produce. His implicit understanding of light, shadows and screens leads him to filmmaking, and soon he has convinced a studio to let him direct *Marat*. In it he casts the woman he loves as the lead, Janine, a girl from the brothel he was led to believe was his sister. Eventually, when funding for the film runs out, he betrays Janine and sells her to another man, an act from which he never recovers and so the film is apparently never completed and Sarre falls into obscurity.

Later, when Sarre is in his eighties, a young man named Fletcher approaches him. Fletcher has spent his whole life reassembling the film which now only lacks the ending. Sarre insists it doesn't exist, and yet Fletcher manages to track it down, trading a film he finds in a trunk in Sarre's room with Michel for a piece of film showing a woman in a room of a house in the French village of Wyndeaux. This event brings the two narratives almost completely together.

The final stage of combining the narratives and revealing their connections takes place with a return to Lauren's story. Having found herself with Michel in a freezing Paris that is almost as apocalyptic as Los Angeles, she befriends an old man on a canal boat, whilst waiting for word from Jason in Venice. She is given a bottle by him which contains two bright blue blinking eyes, (the same artifact that is given to Janine in a bar of sailors in Wyndeaux whilst filming *Marat*) and becomes convinced they are those of her dead son. As Paris begins to thaw, Lauren loses the bottle over the side of the boat and decides to follow its course and travel to Venice with Bateaux Billy to meet with Jason. Meanwhile Michel travels by train to also be in Venice when she arrives, at which point she must choose between them. Again, the landscape Lauren encounters during her journey is in a process of shift, the waters are receding, a situation that becomes more dramatic the further south she travels, until by the time she has reached Venice the canals are empty.

Again Erickson suddenly moves the focus away from Lauren and chooses to follow Michel's train journey. His trip seems to take forever, and along the way he experiences visions or situations that may be part of his past. The journey's emotional and temporal impact is such that when he arrives in Venice his hair has turned white and his eyes are ancient. In a Venice drained of water and filled with fog Lauren makes her decision to stay with Jason. They return to Los Angeles, where Lauren is given a letter by her landlord that never reached Michel. It is a letter from his grandfather Adolphe Sarre, explaining the nature of his identity, a letter that never reaches him. When Jason is killed in an accident, Lauren finally returns to Kansas, where she mourns not Jason's death, but Michel's silence. Erickson draws the narrative to its conclusion with a geographically illogical, yet emotionally logical ending, when Kara, a girl Lauren looks after, looks across the Kansan desert and thinks she has found a star, she runs to it and is disappointed to find a bottle with two old nearly blind eyes within it.

### ***Rubicon Beach (1986)***

The narrative opens with the voice of Cale, a man who has recently been released from prison. Cale's release is the result of him betraying a fellow inmate by accidentally telling a joke that incriminated him: a joke and betrayal that will stay with him for the rest of his life. He is taken to Los Angeles, although, as often encountered in Erickson's work, it is a slightly different formulation of the actual city, made up of canals and filled with music which seems to come from the waters. Cale is set up in the downtown library, which, it soon becomes clear, is simply another version of prison. Here he must live and work, filing manuscripts and deciding their importance. Soon after his occupation of the library begins he discovers that radios are contraband as they conflict with the natural music of the city.

Cale soon realises that he is able to leave the library and walk around the city and can quite easily escape the notice of those following him. He takes a boat trip down a canal and out of the city. During this

trip he witnesses what he believes is a murder on a beach, a girl kneeling over a man and cutting his throat, the blade distinctively flashing as it is caught in the moonlight. He wakes up abruptly after this event surrounded by police and Wade, who informs him that although he may have believed he saw a murder, there is no body, no blood and no knife. Cale soon sees this murder take place again, this time in the library, but again there is no evidence left behind despite him having recognised the man as Ben Jarry, a man supposedly hung in prison as a result of Cale's betrayal. He is certain it isn't a dream, but has no way of convincing anyone else of this. It is after his second vision that Cale's narrative shifts to tell the story of how he came to be in prison and to betray Ben Jarry. It is at this point that the notion of "America One" and "American Two" is introduced. It is a concept that is never explained, and yet highlights that Cale and Wade exist in a differing political geography to that of the contemporary United States.

Cale begins writing poetry about the girl he has seen commit the murder, he also wanders around the bars of Los Angeles. Here he meets Janet Dart or Dash (he seems uncertain of her surname and cannot settle on one option.) She is a photographer who was in the library the night of the second vision. She has been trying to capture a face that holds its own light, only to produce photos composed almost entirely of black spots. She too saw the girl in the library that night, confirming to Cale that his vision wasn't a dream. Cale decides to go looking for the girl, who he thinks is Spanish or Indian, across the waters in the old almost submerged hotels that now serve as brothels. His only way of getting there is by gaining the help of someone who knows the waters, and then swimming the rest of the way. When he reaches the decaying hotel he can't find the girl he is looking for, instead he meets an old man called Richard who is expecting not Cale, but another man called Lee. He leaves the man, wanders to the kitchen, where he comes across the body of the murdered Ben Jarry, and falls asleep guarding it. He is woken by Wade and is pleased to discover the body is still there, finally giving Wade physical proof, yet leading to his arrest.

In his jail cell he encounters the girl who seems to have appeared from nowhere. She won't speak, but he manages to hold her to comfort her. Meanwhile Mallory, Wade's assistant arrives, is alarmed by the sight of a girl in the cell that was locked containing only Cale when he left. Mallory leaves to get Wade, and the girl pushes the locked cell door open and leaves. Neither Mallory nor Cale can explain the incident to Wade when he arrives, and so Cale is placed under house arrest, and informed that the body found in the hotel kitchen was his own, the circumstances and sense of which no-one can explain.

At this point the narrative shifts. It begins to tell the story of Catherine, who it soon becomes clear, is the girl in Cale's visions. The narrative begins with her in a Malibu hospital dreaming of a shipwreck and immediately moves to tell this story from the beginning. It explains how she came from a village in the South American forests, of her speechless beauty and how she didn't know her reflection, but believed it to be a pet that followed her around and lived in the waters that surrounded the maze of trees. The story describes

the light that came from her eyes and how one night she uses this to save a ship from crashing on the coast by their village by tying herself to a tree with her hair and having her eyes in the way of a lighthouse. When the ship crashes further down the coast, the surviving sailor arrives in the village. He ends up cheating the villagers at gambling, winning Catherine from them and killing her father as he makes his escape with her. This is the beginning of her voyage towards "America."

When she is finally told she has made it to "America", which is actually Los Angeles, she is rescued by a failing actor called Richard who passes her onto his friend Lee Edgar, a writer, to be a housekeeper. She happily accepts the work, and yet one day breaks a large mirror as she suddenly comes to recognise that the image in it is her face, that she feels have betrayed her. The story breaks at this point to describe the circumstances by which Lee, or Llewellyn Edgar, came to be in Los Angeles. His failing career as a poet, subsequent trip to Los Angeles to follow the campaign of Bobby Kennedy, and his default decision to stay after the assassination. Suddenly one day he sees Catherine's face and his whole world stops. He refuses to let his wife get rid of her, and becomes obsessed. He writes poems about her and eventually hires a photographer to capture her face. As the situation begins to tear his family apart he goes to a cocktail party with her as his escort. Things get out of hand, losing Catherine in the fight that ensues between himself and the photographer, he finally agrees to let the images of her be used in magazines.

Catherine calmly walks away from the chaos and slowly begins haunting the neighbourhood. Watching through people's windows and then breaking them as she encounters her reflection. During this time Edgar's house seems to be changing shape in Lee's perception and so he begins to pay builders to shift the windows, doors and walls back to their "original" positions, causing the house to become completely torn apart and disjunctive. During her wandering, Catherine attempts to find Richard in his hotel, and upon locating him, finds him dead. She returns to the ballroom and bumps into Lee who is also wandering around trying to find her, and tries to kill him with a candle subsequently setting the hotel on fire. It is after this that she is placed in the Malibu hospital where her narrative began. When an inspector returns to question her, she has disappeared, as it turns out, into the other narrative, a completely different geographic and temporal version of Los Angeles.

Here, to complicate the novel further, the focus shifts again, this time to Jack Mick Lake, a part American-Indian man who sees and hears numbers in everything. He becomes convinced there is a number between nine and ten, not a fraction, but a number that has been missing and eluded mathematicians until now. His mother dies on the railway tracks and Lake fails to have the courage to cross the river he finds from which he sees and hears numbers. Instead he heads to Chicago to go to college. After a failed relationship with Leigh, a girl who is part of the communist party, her death, and a failed job with the government, and the death of his father, he reinvents himself and moves to England as John Lake. While he

is there he encounters another American, an old man living on his own in a cottage by the coast. When Lake comments that he is also from America the old man asks whether it is in America One or America Two. One night they travel out to the lighthouse in a storm at the old mans request, and although Lake is convinced the trip is futile, when they arrive Catherine is there tied by her hair to the light with her eyes held open directing the ships away from the coast.

At this point the perspective moves back to Cale (the old man) who explains the strange way that he and Catherine came to be in a post-World War Two Britain. He talks of how they moved from one beach to another seemingly without traveling, and then one day headed down a tunnel and he ended up washed up on the English coast with no sign of Catherine, convinced she must have followed him somehow.

Lake too falls for Catherine, although she seems only to be aware of Cale. When he dies, Catherine mysteriously disappears and Lake is left to return to America to cross the river he didn't dare cross following his mother's death. He embarks on a train that leaves at indefinite times for a destination described only as the West. It begins to cross the river, and continues to cross it, with no end in sight. The train pauses at a station situated in a large tree in the middle of the never-ending river. Lake leaves the train and inadvertently gets left behind. After waiting months for the trains departure he is devastated when it leaves without him, its only passenger. However, this event returns the numbers to his head. Finally Lake gives in and begins to walk along the tracks, during his journey he encounters Catherine and finally seduces and sleeps with her, the climax of which seems to end both of them, and then the novel.

### ***Tours of the Black Clock (1989)***

The book opens with a section from William L Shirer's *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. It outlines the relationship between Adolph Hitler and his niece Geli, describing how he fell in love with her, her subsequent death – ruled suicide, but somewhat suspicious – and the impact it had on him. After this short passage the novel itself begins, not in Germany as the reader might expect but the island of Davenhall. The narrative focuses on Marc, a young man with white hair who has just taken over the ferry between the island and the mainland. It describes how there is a moment during the crossing when neither the mainland or island are visible. Strangely this moment doesn't occur at the same time each crossing, it varies, yet always happens. Marc grew up on the island with his mother in a hotel empty of anyone but them. During the night, however, he often heard footsteps of someone very big in the hotel with them. One night when he is nineteen he sees a stranger lying dead at the feet of his mother, and that is the day he decides to leave the island. Yet, he only gets as far as the ferry, and for some reason can't bring himself to set foot on the mainland. So he continues crossing back and forth until Zeno, the boatman with a long blue coat, offers him a job. He and

Zeno watch silver buffalo on the plains, and Marc questions him about the fire at the house on wooden pillars over the water. Zeno refuses, like the other villagers, to talk about it.

Soon after Marc takes the job, Zeno dies and so Marc becomes the official ferryman, perpetually crossing back and forth to the island, but never returning to his mother, or leaving for the mainland. Gradually he begins sleeping with the girls who use the ferry, until one day, after fifteen years on the boat, a girl in a blue dress, Kara, changes everything for him as she too notices the moment where everything disappears. It is this girl that finally makes him set foot on the island again. He searches but can't find her anywhere, and finally the only place left to look is back at the hotel in his mother's room, and so the inevitable confrontation occurs. It is at this point that it becomes clear that the narrative is being told by someone involved in, but oddly outside of the story. Indeed in the next section (the novel is split into numbered sections, that are too short to really be considered chapters, some lasting a few pages, some only a few lines or words) Banning Jainlight introduces himself, implying that it was him all along that hovered ghost-like over the halls of the hotel in Davenhall, and who lay dead at the feet of Marc's mother. Thus the story is being narrated posthumously by Jainlight. It is at this point that the narrative moves to his story.

Jainlight describes growing up on a ranch near the Ohio border in the late 1920s. He is aware, even early in his childhood, of what he calls his bigness. He is clumsy and doesn't fit in with his family, with his size often eclipsing his intelligence. He tells of a strange phenomena by which, through the nine windows of his bedroom, he watches the Twentieth Century.

He has begun writing erotic stories that shock his family, and so, when Jainlight is sixteen, his brothers take him to where the Indian's live and try and persuade him to sleep with a woman there to make him a man. However Jainlight suddenly realises that the woman is actually his mother, and the truth about the circumstances has been kept from him. This prompts him to kill one brother, injure the other and then head back to the ranch where he kills the woman he had been brought up to believe as his mother and paralyses his father. He then he begins catching trains east until he reaches New York. It's now the 1930s and it is difficult to find work, but soon he manages to land a job with John "Doggie" Hanks, a gangster who is now trying to go legitimate. Jainlight's intelligence surprises Hanks and so he takes him on as the doorman for his club, citing the need for someone who is intelligent and yet doesn't show it because of his build. Alongside this work Jainlight manages to sell his pulp stories to magazines to make some extra money, and is soon writing longer pieces that are passed on by a man called Kronehelm to a private client. When his past catches up with him, Kronehelm speeds up plans to get Jainlight to Europe and closer to the person for whom he is actually writing the stories. Jainlight eludes Johnson and Blaine, the two men sent to arrest him for the crimes against his family, and finds himself on boat to a Europe edging towards another World War, of which he generally appears oblivious. He travels through Europe by train meeting a man

called Carl along the way. The train is bound for Vienna, a fact which Carl, an American Jew, despairs at, having thought he was heading for Venice.

Jainlight is now in Vienna writing specifically for a client known only to him as X. Feeling stifled living with Kronehelm and the translator Petyr, he moves out to live with Carl and a group of Spanish girls. One day while he is walking around the city and suffering from an ongoing writers block, he happens across a riot, during which he looks up and in a window, also watching what is going on, he spots a girl, who is struck by a stone that has been thrown and so retreats from view. This girl becomes the new girl in his pornography. Alongside his job, Jainlight is now able to enjoy the social life in Vienna and becomes involved with an English woman called Megan. He falls in love with her and they have a daughter. However his "relationship" with the girl in his pornography, which he writes at night in a separate flat elsewhere in the city, begins to pervade his life. It is increasingly described as if his encounters with her occur not on the pages of his work, but in actuality.

Meanwhile he is visited by a Colonel called Holtz, who has come from Berlin especially to see him. He explains how important Jainlight's writing has become, and suggests some changes to the description of the girl, which Jainlight must take on-board. It is increasingly clear that the pornography is being received by a client who is very important in Germany. Jainlight is now writing specifically for a Client Z, a man who serves at the pleasure of history. All around Jainlight, Europe is being slowly invaded by the Client, but the most important event for Jainlight occurs in 1938 when his daughter is born. Holtz comes to Jainlight again and begs him to stop writing, it is distracting Z and the German cabinet ministers and generals fear it will affect the outcome of a vital move into Russia. Jainlight refuses, and his decision changes the outcome of the war. Jainlight returns to his flat one night to discover Megan and his daughter gone. He is taken to the Hotel Imperial which is serving as the headquarters for the Germany officials in Vienna. Here he finds his family held by the man who is Client X. In the episode that follows X throws Jainlight's daughter out of the window, and Megan, refusing to let her die alone, throws herself out to catch her and so they fall to their deaths together. Jainlight's response is to kill X.

Suddenly the narrative changes again, and focuses on the life of Dania, Marc's mother. Dania grew up on the edge of a crater in East Sudan, where her father had taken refuge apparently hiding a blueprint of a strange house from whoever is searching for him. One night a silver buffalo charge through their village and kill the majority of its inhabitants, including Dania's mother and brother, and so she and her father decide to move to Vienna, to hide right under their noses. One day there is a riot in the street below her window and as she watches she is struck by a stone. That night Dania wakes to the feeling that there is someone else in the room with her. He is both there and yet not there, and he rapes her. She wakes almost not believing it, and yet she is covered in the blood and semen from the act. Soon this figure visits her more



and more frequently. It is soon after this that she discovers that the blueprint her father has been trying to hide from the authorities is that of the Twentieth Century, within which exists a secret room that her father has been searching for the whole time he has owned the map.

Dania has her own particular way of dancing in which she creates her own structures and forms, which has captured the attention of Joaquin, a lead dancer for a Vienna ballet company, who eventually choreographs a special dance that fits her type of movement. After she discovers the nature of the blueprint that her father has been protected, Joaquin, who has fled to Holland, writes and asks her to join him. She decides to go. She finds him living on a houseboat and when he fails to consummate their relationship upon learning she isn't a virgin and is wracked with his inability, she leaves him and returns to Vienna. At which point her father is killed whilst someone tries to steal the blueprint. She defends him, kills his attacker and keeps the blueprint for herself. She then moves to New York by way of London, as part of Joaquin's dance company, dancing the piece he wrote for her. When she dances men die.

In New York she feels like she is being followed, this time not by her phantom lover and his companion, but another man. It turns out to be Blaine, who has been hired to follow her by someone else, but ends up in love with her himself, and investigating why men die when she dances. One day she disappears, forgetting the blueprint, and he follows her tracks across the country until he comes to the island of Davenhall, At which point he confronts her about the link between men dancing and her dying, to which she responds that it may not be that she dances and they die, but that they die when he watches her dance. It is after this confrontation, which occurs in a house that sits on wooden pillars in the water, that Zeno sets light to the building, killing Blaine, mistaking his bigness for that of Jainlight, who has been haunting Dania as her lover.

Soon after this Dania discovers, that somewhat miraculously, she is pregnant, and the narrative returns to Jainlight who explains that he has given her a child as a way of punishing Z. Jainlight is writing personally for Z, who is now an old man, living in a tower with Jainlight in a city hidden beneath canopy of a false sky that makes it seem, from above, as if it is just another section of the sea. Jainlight wants to put all of Z's evil into the child and then kill it as a way of redeeming his acts. However, Dania feels differently and decides to battle for her child using the only weapon she knows: love. The child is born, and is not a monster as Jainlight had hoped, but Marc, a boy born with completely white hair.

A few days after the birth Jainlight makes his escape from the tower across the sea, taking Z with him. Somehow they make it across Europe unscathed, with perhaps some subtle help from the authorities, and soon they have made it into America, and eventually to New York city, although Jainlight knows that it's not the same New York City. He takes Z to the room where he once lived and wrote his first pulp stories.

Upon arriving it becomes clear it was the room from where Blaine watched Dania, and there he discovers the blueprint that she left behind. As he looks at it, he noticed a room that has appeared as the document has aged, a secret room in the basement, and suddenly Jainlight realises Z is dead. He follows Blaine's journey west until he too comes to Davenhall, where he asks for Dania's forgiveness and dies at her feet, soon after which she dies too. After which, Marc finally leaves the island in search of Kara. He sees her briefly, spends one night with her, only to lose her again. He spends the next seven years migrating with the silver buffalo searching for her, until finally he follows them into a cave and having exited the century at one end and entered it at another he comes to a village in northern Asia and spends the rest of his years drifting on the ice.

### ***Arc d'X (1993)***

The novel begins with the story of Thomas Jefferson, or rather, Erickson's version of him. Following the death of his wife, Thomas travels to Paris with his elder daughter. Here they settle, amidst the throes of revolution, and so he sends for his younger daughter Polly to join them, traveling with whichever female slave seems suitable. Sally Hemings is the girl who is chosen, much to the concern of those around Thomas, due to her obvious beauty. Indeed, soon after her arrival, Thomas rapes her, and then they become lovers. The result is that Sally learns that she wants Thomas as much as needs her and so must make a vital decision that will not only affect both of their lives, but consequently the construction of the country and idea of "America." She must choose whether to remain in Paris, where she could live a free woman, or return to Virginia, to forever be the property of Thomas. One night, while Sally struggles with the knowledge that she has come to need Thomas, and thus may be fated to return to Virginia as a slave, she pulls a knife she has hidden by her bed and brings it down next to her. Believing she hears the death of Thomas, she runs out of their house into the rising riots on the street. Thomas, standing on the balcony, not in the bed, watches her go. She makes it out of Paris, and the next morning finds herself on the ridge of a mountain's crater, upon which is a small house. She knocks on the door to ask for water only to find it opened by a person she believes to be herself, the spell of which is broken by a voice behind the woman in the doorway addressing her as Polly. The voice is not Thomas', as the man who appears at the door has black hair mixed with white and grey, not the fiery red of Thomas', and is wearing thick glasses. Sally's response to this encounter is to flee, running back across the plains until at some point a van picks her up and takes her back to Paris. Here she stumbles across Thomas in the street, and giving him certain conditions agrees to return to Virginia.

Back in the United States, Thomas, who struggles with the notion of wanting to free his slaves, but wanting to keep Sally, is elected president. Soon after which he disappears. After three years, Sally sets off to find him, eventually coming across him in an Indian village. Exhausted from her journeying she falls asleep and dreams of Paris and the night she “killed” Thomas. As the knife in her dream falls from her fingers she wakes to hear it hitting the floor, and the word “America” issuing forth from her lips. Upon waking she discovers herself lying in a hotel room next to the bloodied dead body of Thomas, and policemen Wade and Mallory. Next to the bed is a mysterious door that the hotel manager claims has been shut up as long as he’s been there. Wade opens it to find a wall of dirt, and the suggestion that it had recently been opened.

It soon becomes clear that this part of the narrative is taking place in both a completely different time and place to what has occurred previously. The city where the hotel is located seems to be split into different zones and restrictions such as “Humiliation” and “Ambivalence” and is watched over by an authority called the Primacy. Sally is arrested, and confesses to the crime, as she believes it was indeed her who has finally managed to kill Thomas. Although it soon becomes clear that his murder is due to a blunt head wound, rather than a stabbing in the chest. Sally can’t be the killer.

Within the city is a zone officially called “Redemption” which most people refer to as “Desire.” Here there is a strange maze-like neighbourhood constructed of lofts, and caves called the Arboretum, an area over which the governing body, the Primacy have little control. Soon after the body of Thomas is discovered and Sally’s arrest, Wade is sent to Fleurs d’X, a strip club within the Arboretum to investigate another suspicious death, this time of a shaven headed young man covered with tattoos. Whilst investigating, Wade makes a trip to an alley he frequently visits as on the wall there is a piece of graffiti that is constantly changing. It isn’t washed away and replaced, instead it seems to replace itself somehow. At this point the wall reads “The Pursuit of Happiness.”

The situation with Sally Hemings and the changing graffiti seems to be having an effect on Wade, who beings visiting Fleurs d’X only to watch Mona, the girl who discovered the dead skinhead, dance. Soon he becomes lost with the Arboretum and begins living with Mona. In her room he finds a piece of stone on which is scribbled “the pursuit of happiness.” It is after this that he becomes completely lost in the Arboretum and his fantasies about Mona and Sally, time becomes irrelevant since there is no day inside, and so years slip away. One night, whilst wandering along the corridors, he comes across someone he believes is Sally. He calls her name and she responds that Sally was her mother, she is Polly.

Suddenly the narrative shifts to Lauren in Kansas and the girl she looks after, Kara. When Lauren dies, essentially of a broken heart, Kara leaves, travels west and becomes a stargazer at an observatory. Here the story tells of the man that falls in love with her, who turns out to be Etcher, a man with black hair

and thick glasses. When his love affair with Kara ends, he leaves his village and his parents and travels south, pausing in a city to become the chief archivist for the Church Central. Here he settles and marries. Whilst working in the archives he becomes aware of a small locked vault to which only the priests have access, an opportunity arises to steal a key to this room and so he takes it, and discovers behind the door the "Unexpurgated Volumes of Unconscious History." Soon after attention is drawn to this a woman walks into the archives with her daughter and asks him about information concerning a man called Madison Hemings. Mallory can only reply that the archives aren't open to the public. That night Etcher goes into the vault and takes one of the books hidden there home with him. He doesn't find an entry for Madison Hemings, only for Sally, a slave girl and mistress to a man of whom he has never heard.

Etcher goes to Sally to tell her about this, and the encounter starts an affair between them, with Etcher eventually leaving his wife for her, despite Sally not leaving her husband. Soon after the affair begins, Sally becomes mysteriously ill with a strange fever. During this period Etcher is discovered by the priests as having the key to the vault, at which point he becomes both more powerful and dangerous. He refuses to return the volumes and makes a deal with the Primacy that he will gradually return the Volumes a few pages at a time in return for things he wants or needs. The priests are in no position to argue and so must succumb to Etcher's terms. At the height of Sally's illness a black bird breaks free from her body, at which point she begins to get better.

As Sally gets better she admits to Etcher that she is in love with another man, Thomas. Of course Etcher assumes she is having an affair, when actually the nature of her love is much more complicated. However, Etcher's love for Sally means that he will still do anything for her, and so manages to obtain a visa for her, her husband Gann and Polly, allowing them to leave the city. Etcher struggles to cope with the loss of Sally, and goes to the Fleurs d'X club in order to lose himself. Here he becomes intrigued by a dancer called Mona, who is still being hounded by Wade, and who suggests to Etcher that they leave the city by way of a secret passage in the depths of the Arboretum. Their escape is initially successful and they end up in a boat rowing away from the city. However a wave tips Mona overboard and Etcher is once again on his own. He journey's to Sally, and arrives at her house on the ice plains north of the city to find her desperately ill again. This time there is nothing Etcher can do, and the mysterious illness kills her.

Here the narrative shifts back to Paris, but a different time than that occupied by Thomas and Sally earlier in the novel. The narrative focuses on a physicist, Seuroq, who is convinced he has discovered that time is not just subject to the perspective of motion, but to the heart, and as a result of this he has found the missing day between December 31<sup>st</sup> and January 1<sup>st</sup>, and so the millennium had begun earlier than everyone suspected. This day becomes known as Day-X. Again the story changes focus, this time to a writer called Erickson in Berlin in 1998. He has traveled there because every crucial moment in the

Twentieth Century had sooner or later expressed itself there, and so that's where he should be for the beginning of the next century. Whilst wandering around the city he comes across a young man called Georgie, a neo-nazi covered in unusual tattoos. One night Erickson is killed by Georgie who takes his passport and hotel room key and decides to use Erickson's identity in order to travel to America, a country he has been searching for and wanting to be part of his whole life. Before leaving Berlin he returns to his room where he sprays graffiti on part of the Berlin Wall that he has hanging there, and waits for it's inevitable disappearance. It is on this occasion that he chooses to write "The Pursuit of Happiness."

Georgie arrives in the United States and travels across an increasingly apocalyptic landscape as the days gradually count down to Day-X, searching for America. He reaches a gorge on the far west coast and climbs down it to the remains of what appears to be a devastated city. Whilst climbing around the ruins he finds a door and at 11.59 on Day-X he opens and steps through it. He finds himself in a hotel room with an old man sitting in a chair and someone sleeping in the bed. He asks the man who he is and when the response he gets is "America" as the man moves to the bed Georgie, disgusted with his answer, calls him a liar and kills him, hitting him over the head with a piece of the Berlin Wall with "The Pursuit of Happiness" written on one side. He then leaves the old man on the bed with the woman and walks out of the room off into the city. Whilst sitting in the Fleurs d'X strip club he looks down and believes his tattoos are shifting and changing. He tries to claw them off, killing himself in the process.

The story shifts again, to that of Polly, Sally's daughter, who wanders the Arboretum looking for Etcher, stumbling across the figure of Wade who mistakes her for her mother. Eventually, Polly finds Etcher in a small house near the crater of a volcano, where he works on the Unexpurgated Volumes of Unconscious History, writing them out and changing them slightly, before returning them in small batches to the Primacy in exchange for enough food and wine to keep him going. One day, when Polly is still with him in the house there is a knock at the door. Polly opens it to effectively see her reflection, the fourteen year old Sally having run all the way from nineteenth century Paris. The narrative follows Sally back to Paris again, and into the arms of Thomas. This time, which seems to be not a second occasion, but an alternative to the first, Sally decides not to return with Thomas, and disappears into the crowd in Paris. Thomas then returns to his estate in Virginia to live in a strange state of master and slave, bound in chains, yet issuing orders to his servants. The novel ends with a return to Etcher, now in prison, holding out only to see Polly, and cell mates with Wade who has subsequently been arrested by Mallory. Etcher finally dies, and when he does Wade goes through his possessions to discover, hidden in a wooden box, the fragments of a rock that when pieced together spell out "The Pursuit of Happiness."

### ***Amnesiascope (1996)***

The novel opens with the narrator moving suites in the run-down Hotel Hamblin where he is living, from a small apartment to a suite on the top floor with windows that look out across almost every direction of the city. While this is taking place the narrator explains how the devastation of the city matches, or possibly changes according to his emotional and psychic state.

The character of the narrators girlfriend Viv is introduced during an incident when they try and kidnap a stripper, during which it becomes apparent that Los Angeles has been split into a variety of times zones across which people travel gaining or losing the odd minute here and there depending on which street they are traversing. The narrator confesses that he has begun talking to himself again and from this stems the explanation of how he has, since childhood, had a very bad stutter, something that has overshadowed his life since and gradually becomes a more implicit aspect of the narrative. It is after this that the character of Ventura<sup>1</sup> begins to feature. The narrator and Ventura met because they work on the same newspaper. The main aspect of their friendship revolves around their continued struggle to cope with the various women in their lives. Some of the other members of the staff on the newspaper also feature in his narrative, particularly Freud N Johnson, and Dr Billy O'Forte, who when combined with the narrator and Ventura form The Cabal, a group that the rest of the staff are convinced are actually in control of what is going on at the paper. At one point early in the plot the narrator writes a film review of *The Death of Marat* by Adolph Sarre for the paper. It is one of the best pieces he has ever written – however, the joke is that the film he reviews doesn't exist, he makes it up. He is sure that the piece won't get past the editors and fact-checkers and that the joke will eventually be discovered. However, this is not the case and the review runs. The joke then comes back to haunt him, as all over LA while he is having lunch or sitting in bars he hears people discussing the film, including scenes that he didn't mention in the review. He comes to believe that his joke has been turned around onto him and that all of Los Angeles is in on it.

The narrative often switches between the narrator's present and his memories or anecdotes of past events, including a trip to Berlin, and his childhood experience of going to Stutter School. Most of his anecdotes, however, relate to the various women with whom he has had relationships, and how he has dealt with them, and their repercussions. His current relationship with Viv, however, appears relatively strong, and this and the events that occur as a result form the core of the novel. At one point Viv persuades the narrator to write "White Whisper", the art-house porn film she is going to produce and direct. Whilst searching for inspiration, he meets a woman named Jasper in a bar, who will become not only the central role in the film, but also an important figure later in the plot.

After the success of the film Viv hosts a party for those involved. Jasper turns up and ends up getting Viv and the narrator to leave the party and return to her own house. It is a strange place designed and built by a man she first refers to as her step-father and then later as her father. In the middle of the house is a strange series of water tunnels which hold a Bathysphere. Jasper ends up telling Viv her tragic life story, which involves a strange phone-sex encounter with a man in Berlin. Soon after this Viv begins building a large sculpture called the "Memoryscope" that she erects near the moat that surrounds Jasper's house. As soon as it is finished, Viv becomes inexplicably ill and Los Angeles experiences extreme rains and floods. During one of the flash floods the narrator is driving through the city and rescues a young prostitute from drowning. He takes her back to his apartment to let her dry off and can't seem to get rid of her. The Princess, as she becomes known, then is passed back and forth between the care and apartments of the narrator and Ventura as they frantically try and come up with ways of getting rid of her without their girlfriends finding out. Finally the situation solves itself, as one day when crossing the hallway between the two apartments the ceiling of the Hamblin caves in under the weight of the water and she is washed away.

One day, Viv wakes from her illness knowing she has to erect another Memoryscope at the precise coordinates to which the first is pointing, and so she decides to leave for Amsterdam, which is where she has dreamed the site will be. She asks the narrator to go with her, but for some reason he is both unable to go and unable to give her a good reason why he should stay. So she leaves without him. The next day, Freud N Johnson, the editor of the paper, is fired and so Ventura, Dr. Billy O'Forte and the narrator chose to resign as a matter of principle. It is at this point, with Viv having left, Ventura deciding he will return to Texas and having given up his job that the narrator really begins to unravel. All of which is compounded by the discovery that the only piece of his that was ever published in the paper, despite all his years there, is the review of *The Death of Marat*, a film he believes he made up. On top of this he then has his car stolen from right under his nose at a car wash.

One night he receives a phone call from Jasper to say that her house is on fire and can he come to her. When arrives at the house it is indeed on fire, the cause of which seems to have been a flash of light from the Memoryscope as the sun went down. Jasper can't bring herself to leave and so they both climb into the Bathysphere where they are discovered later by the police and fire brigade. At this point a policeman asks the narrator if his car was stolen and reports that it has been found, although not in very good condition and with all his personal items missing from it.

He drives the car away from the police lot and for some reason just keeps on driving out of the city and into the desert heading for Las Vegas where he hopes he can meet Ventura. Upon arriving he is told by a private detective that Ventura can't make it, and so he continues out to Idaho as he has an invite to the Craters of the Moon festival where *The Death of Marat* is being shown and Adolphe Sarre is giving a talk.

After the screening the narrator confronts the director telling him everything has fallen apart and that he has driven from Los Angeles specifically so Sarre can tell him what to do. To which Sarre replies for him to embarrass himself. After which point the narrator gets in his car and drives straight back to Los Angeles.

### ***The Sea Came in at Midnight (1999)***

The story begins in Japan with the character of Kristen, who is a young woman living and working in a Tokyo hotel as a memory girl, where she trades in memories rather than sex. The narrative establishes that it has been a little over four months since Kristen left home, and that the journey that has ended in Tokyo has been an eventful one.

On the morning that Kirsten's narration begins, she goes down to meet with her client, an old Japanese doctor, only to discover that he has died whilst waiting. She can't bring herself to leave the body while the ambulance arrives and so decides that she will tell him her memories anyway. She begins in first person, but the narrative soon slips into third person, breaking back to first at a few points where Kirsten seems to cut into her own story to qualify events.

She opens her narrative by explaining that she has never had a dream, and so one night she went looking for one. Whilst walking away from her hometown of Davenhall, she somehow gets picked up by a cult, a group of 1,999 women lead by male priests who need woman number 2,000 before they can perform their sacrifice of making them walk off a cliff into the sea to mark the beginning of the millennium. At the last minute, Kristen works out what is happening and makes a run for it. She escapes, only later to be picked up by two strange women in car on the highway. These women take her to San Francisco where they get her some food and put her up in the hotel where they are staying. Kirsten begins to think there is something not quite right about where they are staying, believing that they have come to have the room by suspicious circumstances and that they women might be planning to do her some harm. One night after the women have passed out drunk Kristen takes their money, the room key and leaves.

Kristen uses the remaining money to get a bus ticket to Los Angeles, and a bed in a hotel for three nights, after which she is reduced to wandering around the city. It is soon after this that she discovers the personal ad in a newspaper asking for someone at the end of their rope, lashed to the mast of his dreams. Kirsten is desperate at this point and so responds to the advert and a day and a half later she meets the man she will only come to know as The Occupant. She is taken by him, blindfolded, back to where he is living, to begin her strange life with him as part sex-slave part companion.

She slowly learns bits and pieces about him from various items in the house and encounters with him. There are left-over female toiletries in the bathroom, and a crib in the bedroom where she is staying



which indicate the remnants of a family life. The Occupant suffers from severe headaches which often incapacitate him for hours or days at a time, with seemingly nothing soothing them, even Kristen's rubbing of his temples. She is often left in the house alone, and one day, whilst standing on the balcony she notices that the satellite dishes on the hills surrounding the house have all been painted black during the night, and in the morning a Japanese boy always arrives to replace the painted ones with new white ones.

One day The Occupant notices the clipping next to Kirsten's bed about the events of the 31<sup>st</sup> of December and strikes up a conversation with her about it, during which she finally finds out what he is; an apocalypticologist. Soon after this she discovers the small room on the ground floor of the house which holds the Apocalyptic Calendar, a project The Occupant has been obsessively working on for years. The calendar takes up the whole room, walls ceiling and floor. When he discovers Kirsten in the room he explains to her that the apocalypse is something that is ongoing and that the millennium and the true Age of the Apocalypse isn't something that started on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1999, but on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1968 at 3.02 in the morning. Marked on the calendar are a series of dates upon which irrational tragic events that have occurred, which then correspond to a certain "year" of the Apocalyptic Calendar. The Occupant explains that there needs to be a shifting centre of the Calendar and so he marks, just above her spleen, the date 29.4.85, and she becomes the moving point integral to the Calendar. From now on he is constantly moving her around, not only in the Calendar room, but also the house and soon the surrounding neighbourhood. Leaving her standing naked in a place while he goes back to the Calendar and checks the impact her move has had on the other coordinates.

Suddenly, after one night when Kirsten tries to force The Occupant to look at her whilst having sex, the narrative changes to his perspective and to first person. He explains how his father was an American poet who dragged the family from one place to the next until one day they settle in Paris, a place that his half-French, half-Russian mother claimed as home. One night during his childhood in Paris The Occupant is awakened by a shot. It is the early hours of May 7<sup>th</sup> 1968 and the shot has killed a girl lying in his father's bed in their apartment. The Occupant, runs away from the arms of his mother into the street and the riot. His mother disappears and his father is imprisoned and so he spends the rest of his childhood passed around from one family friend to another.

Later, as a student in New York, he meets a Stalinist called Jenna and falls in love with her. He becomes obsessed and in order to curb his stalking decides to leave the county altogether, returning to Europe. A month after doing so he hears from Jenna, who is going to be in Madrid, and immediately sets off to meet her. While he is there he finally realises that the one person Jenna is waiting for is Marx, and so he finally leaves her for good. He goes back to New York where he becomes absorbed by the emerging punk scene. He becomes involved with female singer Maxxi Maraschino, staying in her apartment until one day

he finds himself locked in her spare room. Here she keeps him, slipping food and drink through the door when he is asleep. During this time the roar he has been hearing in his head is getting louder and his headaches worse. The suddenly one night, seven months later someone unlocks the door while he is dozing. He slips out and discovers the door to be marked with the sign saying “occupied.”

He decides for some reason to return to Paris and it is here that one day he randomly meets Angie in a café, and the next day she moves in with him, their only agreement being not to talk too much about the past. Interestingly one of Angie’s traits is that instead of expressing emotion she labels it. Rather than laugh she will say “haha” and instead of crying she will announce “sob.” Soon The Occupant has to return to New York and Angie is reluctant to go with him, New York being part of the past she doesn’t want to discuss. However she does eventually follow him six months after his having left. When they’ve been in the city a year Angie gets a letter informing her that her mother has died. That night The Occupant first dreams of the Apocalyptic Calendar. The narrative moves back into third person suddenly whilst describing the night that Angie leaves him, carrying their child, and how she saved his life more than he ever saved hers.

Here, the narrative shifts again to outline the story of Angie, which begins with her returning to visit her father after having left The Occupant. It transpires that her labeling of emotion, rather than expression, comes from her father having hung signs on her bedroom door as a child that expressed in a single word what he thought of her, starting with things such as “excellent” and “ambitious” and gradually sinking into fatherly disapproval with word like “lazy” or “disappointing.” The narration tells how she ran away from home at sixteen and worked as a waitress and dancer at a club downtown. Whilst working here an investment analyst falls for her and upon discovering her talent for the piano tells her that he can get her an audition in New York’s Carnegie Hall. She travels to New York, checks into the hotel room he has arranged for her, only to discover that he was only trying to take advantage of her. After a failed attempt to overdose, she decides to get herself a job at one of the strip joints near Times Square, and ends up living with Maxxi Maraschino. When she finally gets enough money together, she moves out. One day when she returns to pick up some stuff she had left behind she notices an “occupied” sign on one of the doors. There is clearly someone inside, and she waits for a while until they are quiet and then soundlessly unlocks the door and leaves.

After leaving Maxxi’s care, Angie becomes involved with an aspiring playwright called Carl who is also obsessed with maps. However his maps are not conventional geographic signifiers, but maps of emotions and events, such as maps of nervous breakdowns and religious hallucinations. Angie leaves him precisely because she can’t bear to think that one day she will become a marker on one of his maps. One day Angie is hired to make a film, but when she arrives at the shoot she is warned off by a woman waiting at

the door. Angie ignores the advice only to find herself about to be part of a snuff film. She runs out of the door just in time to escape, and heads to Paris, where nine months later she meets the Occupant.

Here the narrative switches again to tell the story of the woman outside the studio who warns Angie off taking part in the shoot. She is Louise Blumenthal, who was once married to Mitch, the man who is making the snuff films. The plot explains how they were once a couple who worked together, under the names Mitch and Lulu Blu directing pornographic films and who made the first fake snuff film, which was done so well that it in turn led other directors to make actual snuff movies. While the advent of this disgusts Louise, Mitch has become an active part of the snuff scene and so she has separated from him. However, later, when she meets Mitch again they end up sleeping together, the result of which being Louise getting pregnant. She can't bring herself to keep the child, believing Mitch to be such a horrid person, and the child being part of him, and so she passes her daughter on to her brother and his wife (incidentally the girl from the fake snuff film they made) who live in a small town called Davenhall.

After this episode, and determined to do some good, Louise begins a mission to find all the copies of the fake snuff movie that was made and burn them. It is during this period, on December 31<sup>st</sup> 1999, that she finally decides that she must track down her daughter. Louise has been taking the ashes from the burnt films and uses them to paint the satellite dishes on the hills of Los Angeles black, while she does this the hills are deserted, except for the naked figure of a girl who watches her from the window of a house at the top of the canyon.

The novel now switches back to Kristen, who has suddenly decided that she will leave the Occupant. She runs out of the house in the rain with nothing but his long blue coat to cover her and flags down the passing truck belonging to the Japanese boy who has been replacing the defaced dishes. He pulls over and picks her up and they begin driving downtown. They drive to Black Clock park where peoples time capsules are buried as he digs them up and sends them to Japan where there is a strong market for other peoples memories. While digging up capsules he tries to make a move on her and is hit by lightning, thrown across the park and killed. Kristen takes the keys to his van and the Occupant's time capsule which he had just unearthed and drives away. She goes through his glove compartment and finds his wallet, apartment key and a one way ticket to Tokyo. Figuring she has nowhere else to stay she goes to his apartment. While she is sleeping there his friends turn up, and finding him gone, but not discovering her, they pillage his place and take all the capsules, including the Occupant's, the injustice of which is too much for Kristen, who finally believes that everything around her is caving in.

She opts to return to the Occupants place, and finds it empty, and with food lying around, and her bed rumpled as if it has been slept in. She find a blue dress in the closet and puts it on, discarding the

Occupant's blue coat. She also finds her own clothes and takes them too. When she leaves and walks back down the hill she finds the satellite dishes newly painted black and an old Camero parked nearby frantically trying to start the engine. Kristen knocks on the window of Louise's car and offers to help, suggesting they return to the house. When they do, Kristen can't resist showing Louise the Calendar room and explaining it. They decide the Occupant is unlikely to return that night and so Louise asks to sleep on the sofa. She explains that she would tell Kristen "sweet dreams," but never, having had any, she wouldn't know. Kristen's retort of "I wouldn't either" baffles her. Louise wakes to find Kristen gone and the keys to the truck on the table. She takes them and the key marked "P" for penthouse and drives away.

Again the narrative takes a dramatic shift, not only in terms of viewpoint, but also chronology as it moves twenty years into the future and focuses on Carl, the map obsessive. He is living in a place that is run down, and it soon becomes clear there has been some sort of earthquake. The walls of the penthouse in which he is living are covered in all sorts of maps, as well as calculations he has been making ever since he discovered a scrap of paper that appeared one day in a crack in the wall. On it are a series of numbers that he is convinced are a co-ordinate. It doesn't occur to him that it could be a date.

Suddenly, after this brief interlude, the story moves back to the Occupant. It follows the time just before his daughter is born, when he and Angie are living together in the house in Los Angeles. He begins having conversations with his unborn daughter, seemingly watching her as she grows up, in his mind's eye, before it has happened. One night, the voice he has been listening to whispers goodbye, and it is this night that he wakes to find Angie gone from the bed beside him. He tries to follow her, not knowing where she has gone, but the search is fruitless. So the story moves back to when Kristen too left him. After which he begins visiting a brothel with the intention not of sleeping with the girls, but of rescuing them. He manages this in LA and then flies to Paris where he begins to search out and rescue the prostitute on the streets of Saint Germaine.

Finally, the narrative returns to Kristen who has used the one way ticket to Tokyo. She has begun working as a memory girl, has discovered she is pregnant and has managed to track down where the time capsules from America are sent. She travels to where they are stored, is given a ticket and then a randomly selected capsule. Soon after being given it there is an explosion and the building, including the huge water filled wall that the capsules are stored in, is reduced to rubble. She comes to, grabs her time capsule and makes her way back to where she is staying, only to be wracked with pain and apparently have a miscarriage. When the pain and shock subside she glances across the room to discover, by strange coincidence, that the capsule she has been given is the one once belonging to the Occupant. She knows that when she opens it she will be linked to the Occupant forever, and when she does she is so shocked by what is inside that she places it back and reseals it. The novel ends with Kirsten suddenly realising that she

is having a dream, and that upon waking she is aware of a presence in her womb again, her miscarriage somehow not having come to pass.

### ***Our Ecstatic Days (2005)***

The story in *Our Ecstatic Days* picks up approximately four years after the end of *The Sea Came in at Midnight* and the birth of Kristen's son Kierkegaard. They are living in the Hotel Hamblin in a Los Angeles that has been transformed by a lake that one day just rose up and slowly began engulfing the city.

Kristen begins the narrative once again with first person, describing how much she has become afraid since the birth of her son, and that this is the only change she has seen in herself as a result of parenthood. She also explains that when she first returned to LA from Tokyo the doctor who gave her the scan thought that she was carrying twins, and yet the day of the birth only Kirk was delivered and so the doctors concluded they must have been wrong. However Kristen describes how every now and then she feels Kirk's little sister Bronte inside her.

She explains how, as the lake rises, more people move out of the buildings and away from the centre of the city, and that since the lake has appeared a new address system has had to be put in place that situates places according to their distance in relation to the centre and the perimeter of the lake. Kristen has started getting letters address to a "Kristen B." When she first opened one it became clear that they were not meant for her, and yet she can't help but read them and slowly piece together the torn bits of photograph that each one holds. Each letter becomes more despairing that the woman being written to hasn't replied and has deserted the writer. It takes Kristen about fifteen or twenty letters to realise that they have been coming to her because the address is a few digits out. When she discovers this she looks across the lake and sees a building parallel to hers with a light flickering in one of the rooms where the woman still seems to be waiting for whoever is writing the letters.

After this, the character of Doc is introduced, a woman who diagnoses sick buildings. She travels to them, spends time in them and is able to come to conclusions about what is wrong with them. Kristen assists her by taking atmospheric readings and handing Doc her instruments. One day they are visiting a building and Doc pronounces that it is dying, explaining that like people houses can die from all sorts of things, such as old age, or not being able to stand the secrets within it anymore. Since the lake appeared there has been an epidemic of dying houses, Kristen describes it as an urbanological mourning. She also describes the way that one day whilst she and Kirk are down walking by the lake's shore they hear music coming out of it. The sound seems to be coming from "melody snakes" that live and swim in the water.

One day, curiosity gets the better of Kristen and she manages to persuade Doc to go with her to find the room of Kristen B. When they finally do track it down they discover that it looks almost exactly the same as Kristen's, with articles tacked up on the walls and the same philosophy and poetry books, and there in the centre is the photograph, this time complete, of her lover standing in front of the tanks in Tiananmen Square. For some reason the building and the room has a huge impact on Doc and she breaks down. When Kirsten looks into her eyes she sees that they have suddenly become ancient, and the Doc refuses to speak to her about why she is reacting in this way.

Kirsten somehow comes to the conclusion that the lake is coming for Kirk, and that she must somehow do something to stop this. She puts herself, Kirk and his favourite toy, Kulk the red monkey, into a gondola and rows it out to the centre of the lake. She lowers herself over the side of the boat, seemingly convinced that if she can challenge the lake and make it to the bottom of the centre she will defy it and save Kirk. So making him lie very still in the boat and promising she will only be gone a moment she dives underwater in search of the bottom of the lake.

The narrative suddenly shifts forward five years and seems to still be following the story of Kristen. She is now older and living in an old run down cottage at the edge of the lake, which has stopped rising as inexplicably as it once started. She reflects on the day when she rose from the water and looked over the edge of the boat only to discover Kirk not there. She hears his cry of "Mama" far away and looks up to see him disappearing in the distance in the clutches of one of the owls that had appeared Los Angeles around the same time as the lake.

She has changed her name to Lulu Blu and has begun to receive visions from the lake that she endlessly tries to decipher. Sometimes they are of an older man she doesn't recognise, with a black beard and a long blue coat, other times they are of Kirk trying to tell her things. After having a vision of Kirk flying with the owls Lulu goes down to Port Justine. Here she is helped out of her boat by a Chinese man with a piece of clear rounded glass in the centre of one of his palms. She climbs to the top of the huge billboard that is at the centre of Port Justine and waits. Whilst there her hysteria recedes and the realisation of what happened five years ago stays with her. She returns to her house and that night there is a storm during which she insists on standing outside lashed to her porch. In the morning she gets into her boat and rows to try and find the centre of the lake, all of the time listening for Kirk on the Other Lake on the Other Side. However, when she arrives at the spot, she can't bring herself to do anything and frantically rowing back. Yet she is wracked with guilt and so decides to try a second time, determined not to fail again. She reaches the centre of the water and slips out of the boat into the lake once again. Here, interestingly the type become italicized and the narrative slips into first person, one sentence of which then permeates the text throughout the rest of the novel, literally cutting through the paragraphs on the subsequent pages.

As this sentence begins to cut through the text there is a shift in the narrative. It moves to 2017 and begins to focus on Wang who is dreaming about the previously mentioned woman Kirsten B. It becomes clear that this is the man who was writing all the letters, the one who protested before the tanks at Tiananmen Square. He seems to be living in some kind of military base in the Los Angeles that is engulfed by the lake, doing some kind of work to find out the nature of the lake and the music that seems to echo across it on certain nights. He is also visiting a dominatrix who lives in the of the old hotels now surrounded by the water.

Wang and those he is working for record the song that is broadcast over the lake and attempt to make some sense of it. They seem to think it is connected to why the lake is there, as no one has manage to establish yet why or how it suddenly appeared. Whilst in a meeting about the lake one of the advisors comments that they have discovered that just as suddenly as the lake started rising, it has started retreating, again with seemingly no explanation. Around the time that this draining began to occur a cult that had sprung up called the Order of the Red began to move inland from one of the hotels in the lagoon. This was also around the time that the broadcasts began. The military have uncovered a red toy monkey which they believe is a religious icon, and they explain that the cult is centered around the story of a women called Kristen (or Saint Kristen to the believers) who one morning, after a stormy night during which the lake inexplicably rose and fell several feet, slipped into the lake and never returned, her body never recovered. According to regional legend, this woman abandoned her son on the lake several years before at the exact place that she appeared to have drowned.

Wang ends the meeting somewhat prematurely because he must make it to the dominatrix in time for his appointment. He takes with him the small monkey icon and an extra copy of the broadcast. It is during his pondering about the lake that he comments about the lake affecting the psychotopography of the area.

Wang is taken by a young boatman across the lake to the Chateau X hotel of the dominatrix. While he is getting ready he hangs his coat up and doesn't notice that the toy monkey falls from his pocket onto the floor. He goes to the Mistress with the money for the session and the extra copy of the broadcast. After having rested following the session they sit down together to discuss the last broadcast. The women turns out to be Lulu, and she finds it hard to believe that Wang doesn't remember from the night out at Port Justine when he helped her tie up the boat. She is shocked when he tells her that the lake is dying, retreating, draining. He leaves and is picked up by the boatman, who know calls himself Kuul, a name rescued from the memory of his childhood. He collects food, milk and wine in payment for his services to Wang and uses them to care for an old woman he found on Hamblin Island.

Once Wang is gone, Lulu goes down to the vault of the hotel where she stores the CD recordings of the broadcasts and the disks from all the melody snakes she has managed to capture and charm over the years. Months ago, she discovered that every full moon, the day of Wang's visit, her vault was being raided, and that a full moon later the disk would reappear. On this night a certain disk is missing that Lulu dreads, the shock and dismay at which causes her to break down into tears. On the island of the hotel Hamblin that night Kuul puts a CD into the machine and as it begins to play he too is reduced to tears, without knowing why, and at this point he decides there will be no more broadcasts. He gathers up the old woman and puts both of them into the boat and sails them out to an old hotel, not far from the Hamblin, for her to diagnose and read its mysteries.

As they sail through the hotel, which Doc recognises as the hotel of the thirteen losses, in which each room represents a different type of loss, Erickson changes the text formatting so that they layout echoes the shape of the rooms and the passages between them as Doc and Kuul make their journey through the hotel. At the end of the visit Kuul looks down and realises that Doc is dead. He rows to the shore and unsure of how to go about burying her, decides instead to cast her out onto the lake in the boat. He is now alone, with no boat on the edge of the lake, unsure of what to do, and so he begins to make his way up the hillside.

Again here there is a break in the narrative signified by pages in the novel the only thing on which is the ever-present sentence permeating the text. The story jumps ahead again, this time to 2028 and the perspective becomes a first person narrative given by Lulu. She explains that her duties as a dominatrix have now mostly been taken over by Bronte, a girl who appeared up out of the lake one day onto the steps of the Chateau X and who Lulu believes may well be her long lost (unborn) daughter, the younger twin sister to Kirk. She also explains how she has become addicted to the drug Lapsinthe and that she uses it every night in order to drown out her memories. She describes how she might overdose on amnesia.

Whilst Lulu tells of the story of how Bronte arrived, the narrative slips suddenly back into third person, and then back to first, this time the perspective of Bronte, who has no notion of possibly being Lulu's daughter at all. However she does become the new Mistress at the hotel. One night, she gets an impromptu visit from a man who wants to be a client. He doesn't really have enough money, but she allows him a session anyway. He introduces himself as Kale. She finds him strange though because he doesn't seem the type to be either dominant or submissive. He seems beyond enslavement.

Following the incident with Kale, another man comes to the hotel and asks for her services. He wants her to come and do her session with people on the shore of the lake. She doesn't like the feel of it, but they offer a huge sum of money and so she agrees. She goes to the house on the shore and finds a strange



situation with a group who try to force her to drink Lapsinthe and want her to perform in a room full of a mixture of men and women, the situation of which she is unsure. Somehow the evening takes a turn for the worst and Bronte ends up being chased out of the house by the clients henchmen. They are following her down the hill to the lake shooting at her, when suddenly she is rescued by Kale who rows her back to the Chateau. She is confused about whether Kale is in love with her, and so she has to explain to him that she isn't interested in boys, but somehow there is a connection between them, not as lovers, but in another way that she can't quite put her finger on. When she returns to Lulu they sit to talk and Lulu confesses that she is slowly dying and that she doesn't want to die on the lake, and so they conspire to leave. When Kale returns to find them gone he is devastated, the loss compounding the loneliness he has felt all his life.

Here again there is a break in the book, and when it begins again the dates given are both explicit and ambiguous, with Erickson designating the next section of the novel as occurring between 2000 and 2089. Also the layout of the text has changed again, with the sentences from which the paragraphs are constructed being aligned in the centre surrounding a date. The first paragraph echoes almost exactly that of the beginning of *Rubicon Beach*, telling of a man who has just been let out of prison and taken down to Los Angeles. It is dated 2037. The next two paragraphs follow on and it is indeed revealed to be Cale from the earlier novel. Then the story moves to 2001 and two women traveling on a train together. One of the women is in her fifties, the other a lot younger. They are lovers who are having a quarrel, and at every break in the argument, they get off the train and onto another one, their destination being the end of the argument, the argument seeming about Sara, the older woman, wanting to have a child.

They get off the train and come to a square in which there is a large tower. The younger woman says that she wants to go to the top, explaining she knows a man who will take them. Whilst looking for this man the girl notices Sara running her fingers across a building and listening to it, and despairs of her insistence that buildings can be sick as well as people. The girl decides to go up the tower, but Sara won't, and so she goes without her, with a man she calls the Emperor of Elevators. It transpires that he has come into the library where she works and asked her to locate a song he heard once, with only a few lyrics to help her search. He also has a strange piece of glass in the palm of one of his hands.

The narrative and dates change once again. This time it's 2029-2031. The focus is on two women on a train, this time Lulu and Bronte. They are forced to get off the train at an obscure stop in the desert, despite having been led to believe the last stop would be Chicago. They stay in a strange hotel whilst waiting indefinitely for the station to re-open and another train to come through. The only other inhabitants of the hotel are the proprietor and his wife, Roy and Wanda, the maid Barbrasita and a strange male guest called Rollin. It is clear that Rollin is having a sexual relationship with Barbrasita, but as soon as Bronte appears, his desires wander. One night during a storm, Rollin and Barbrasita have an argument and Rollin

runs out of the hotel into the desert never to return, while Barbrasita looks on. It becomes clear that she is pregnant, and when she gives birth to the child she doesn't seem to want anything to do with it, so much so that one night she too walks out into a storm to never return, and so Bronte is reduced to looking after both it and the bed-stricken dying Lulu. Bronte, holding the child, wakes Lulu from her stupor one day, and she turns to Bronte and explains she must go back to the lake.

Another break in narrative, and the dates seem to be becoming gradually obsolete, with these paragraphs marked 2018 (2004-2089). It returns to Wang, who this time is tying up Tapshaw, one of the military commanders, and threatening him, trying to get him to understand that the broadcasts were meaningless. It is during this encounter that is suddenly occurs to Wang that perhaps the silence of Kristen B was because she never got his letters. The narrative then goes into a flashback of the relationship between Wang and the woman he used to address as K. It explains how he and K and her son Kim moved away from the lake. Years later Kim meets and married Saki, a part Japanese girl orphaned by her mother (Angie, an ex-stripper) and her estranged father who once constructed a strange blue calendar that charted history according to the apocalypse. Saki becomes pregnant and gives birth to a daughter who she decides to name Angie. Upon discovering that Kim is having an affair, Saki decides to reveal this to Angie by walking in on Kim and his mistress, an incident that has a profound effect on Angie, and one which causes her to hate and blame her mother more than her father.

Angie goes to university where she emerges herself in mathematics and music, since the two are intrinsically linked, looking for the melody contained within freedom and desire. She then continues to spend her entire life searching for this helix. As she approaches her fiftieth birthday she suddenly finds herself wishing for a child. Adoption proves seemingly impossible, and so once again she plunges herself into her search for the helix. Then one day she is called to an excavation site in Los Angeles. It seems to be a hotel, but according to the records there was no hotel on the site, it is also the place that the lake appears to have originated from. It is the hotel of the thirteen losses. In which they have found a melody snake which suddenly disappears when it is gripped by Angie's forceps. The workmen, terrified, leave the site. Soon after which Angie discovers the room which holds the loss of ones child, and then she has a vision of a child on a lake and then suddenly vanishes along with everything around her.

Here the story comes back to Bronte and Lulu's return to the Chateau. Kuul immediately visits them, is shocked by the baby with them, but not as shocked as Bronte when he explains he is not there to see her, but Lulu. So the narrative moves back to Lulu's perspective again and is dated 2031. Her narrative is somewhat disjointed, and she seems to be rambling and unsure of herself. When her soliloquy is over, there is another break and this time Erickson labels it 2XXX, outlining how arbitrary the dates seem to have become. In this section of the novel, the text is italicised and the focus is on an unidentified character. It

becomes clear that it is a woman traveling to New York to deal with things following the death of her father. He has left a manuscript behind which identifies himself as Banning Jainlight, a failed novelist, with the same name as the man Kristen was working for in Los Angeles at the beginning of the novel.

She leaves New York by train, with the manuscript being the only thing she takes of her fathers possessions. She reaches the end of the line, which is a little outside Los Angeles and then hitches a ride to the edge of the lake. There she stands and raises her hand in a wave as Kristen emerges not only from the centre of the lake, but also from the sentence running through the novel. Here it joins the main text again, as does the narrative of Kristen. She reaches over the side of the boat, not daring to open her eyes, but merely listening, and then she hears, "No Big Agua for Mama."<sup>2</sup> Relief floods over her and she climbs into the boat, explaining to Kirk that his toy monkey hasn't returned from the lake because he has his own boat now. Kirk then points to the woman standing waving on the shoreline and directs Kristen to row them over, which she begins to do, and thus ends the novel.

## Appendix B: Steve Erickson interview: Los Angeles, April 11<sup>th</sup> 2008.

The following interview took place between the author and Steve Erickson in Santa Monica, Los Angeles, on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2008.

Rebecca Litchfield: I guess the point to start with is psychotopography:

Steve Erickson: Well, Los Angeles in particular seemed to lend itself to the idea of a psychic landscape. And, in part because it's so undefined in conventional urban terms. And it is so much a city of the mind to a certain extent, and a city where people come to make, to try and express through the city their dreams. I mean, I think that's true of other cities as well, but LA is almost about that by definition. So, at some point, you know I grew up out in the San Fernando valley, and when I was growing up there was very rural, I don't know if you've seen Chinatown? It wasn't a suburbia yet, and it became that when I was a kid, the landscape changed very quickly. And I sort of became used to that and so at some point in my fiction, and I didn't get published until relatively late, I was in my mid thirties, and I had written quite a bit before I got published, but at some point in the novel I was writing, it made sense to have a sand storm blow in and bury the city. And it just sort of makes sense to me in my writing for Los Angeles to be constantly transformationalised. And often configuring itself in accord with what was going on with the characters.

RL: It seems to me when reading the novel that you take that aspect of Los Angeles and write about other cities with that in the background. Berlin isn't quite like Berlin, Paris suffers from similar things...

SE: Right, that's true. Yeah, I mean you're completely right, but I'm not sure what it means, y'know? I'm not sure I know what a lot of what I do means.

RL: Which is strange, because it comes across in your writing as you being quite self-aware.

SE: Well, yeah, because I do think there's one side of at least my creativity and maybe myself that's pretty disciplined, pretty controlled, and then there's this more anarchic side. And so in that senses there's this kind of left-brain, right-brain writing. I think that, to talk about the process a little bit, when I'm starting to, when I'm originally writing something, I do believe in following my instincts and I am a big believer in the subconscious expressing itself in the work. And so I kind of give that free range, I get it down there and I don't try to figure it out. Later on I go back and I try to, if not figure it out in a very literal way, find some shape to all of it that makes sense. Yeah, I guess there is enough LA in me that it bleeds into Venice and Berlin, Tokyo when I write about those places.

RL: Control is quite an interesting thing. You say you're very disciplined, one of the chapters I'm planning to write is about your use of numbers and your expression of people attempting to control things and numerise things that they don't necessarily have control over, like in *Arc D'x* where he's creating a formula.

SE: Right, or the guy in *The Sea Came in at Midnight* who makes maps?

RL: Yeah, that kind of mapping of things that shouldn't necessarily be mapped...

SE: Trying to quantify the unquantifiable.

RL: Yeah. Because I think that comes through in everything you write. I'm fascinated by that.

SE: Yeah. I was good at math.

RL: I wondered, that was one of my questions.

SE: And I do have a fascination with numbers. I'm not a numerologist or anything, but, I have a fascination with, I mean, I do try to achieve a certain symmetry in the novels, even if it's a symmetry that only I really see. Yeah, characters trying to take what's illusive and put it in a concrete empirical form.

RL: I wondering if that ties back to the landscape you've experienced, in that it's quite disorganized and chaotic and in your writing you're trying to quantify that unquantifiable, and form order out of chaos.

SE: I'm sure that's true, I have to, when I'm writing, if the sink is full of dirty dishes, it bothers me, and I have to wash them before I can deal with the chaos of my head. So it's a matter of trying to put in some order everything around me, so I can deal with. There's that push-me-pull-you I think between chaos and order that goes on a lot. Even as I'm kind of attracted to chaos it also freaks me out. There is that duality.

RL: It seems that there's a chaotic driving force. A lot of the stuff is so non-linear and you've said in interviews before that you're so influenced by Faulkner, who everyone said didn't know how to structure, but his structures are really complicated and work so well with the themes he's writing about. And that I think comes through in your writing.

SE: Right. Obviously, as in the case with any writer, there's a lot of this that has more to do with me than anything else. I long ago resigned myself to the fact that I'm better off not trying to figure it out too much. But I think that tension between the chaos and the order has to do with me personally, it does have to do with, as you say, the landscape I grew up in, it has to do with the times I grew up in. I'm sort of a product of the sixties, although just removed enough to have a sort of skepticism about them. So, I think that's true.

RL: I talked quite a lot, when I was first giving the novels to my supervisor, who had never encountered them, and he thinks they're quite complicated to read. I talked to him about my experience of reading and about how I'd come up with this idea that you have to read with a blurred mind? I don't know if that makes sense?

SE: Totally, it makes total sense.

RL: That you sort of, almost have to blur yourself to it, and just let it sort of take you where it's going.

SE: It makes complete sense. I've told people before that they give me too much credit. They trying to figure, they're trying to decode what I write, whereas if you took it all on face value it makes a lot more sense (laughs). Because I don't mean to be difficult, and I think that people try too hard. So the blurred mind is a great way to put it and I completely understand.

RL: It made sense to me when I was reading it, and I was saying to people, it's not about deconstructing it.

SE: It's just about going with it! And the people who like my novels are people like you who've figured that out. Which I think just means that the novels attract a certain kind of reader. Because there are people who just find that difficult, to just go with it.

RL: I also, wonder, a lot of the people that I give your work to say it's incredible serious, and I can see that. But in one of your Japanese interviews you're talking about the humour in your novels, and I see that coming through more and more in your more recent stuff.

SE: Yeah. I think it's there in all the books in varying degrees. But sometimes the context is so dark or weird that people don't get it and the humour tends to be fairly dry. I mean the two novels that people seem to have figured out were funny were *Amnesiascope* and the new novel [Zeroville].

RL: I think there are aspects of the new novel which are hilarious.

SE: Good, thank you.

R: At times, laugh out loud. And it's juxtaposed with that total seriousness at the same time.

SL: Yeah, with the new novel people have finally figured that out. The reviewers finally saw it. So that's because there's more of it. I think the fact that the storytelling is more conventional in the new novel than in any of the others, makes it easier for people to see certain things that they couldn't see before.

RL: One of the comments I got from my supervisor about the new one was that it's so much more different to the previous ones, and yet the base is still the same. There seems to be a move towards slightly more linear, which I thought was interesting because *Our Ecstatic Days* is completely the opposite. You wouldn't have expected one to follow the other.

SE: And yet, that's kind of what happened. With *Our Ecstatic Days* I'd kind of gone as far as I can go at this point, as far as I am capable of going, and the story or the material always dictates the story telling strategy. I didn't set out to be weird in *Our Ecstatic Days*, but I got to this part of the novel where she swims down through the hole in the lake, and I got this idea of having her swim through the novel. I didn't start the book with that idea, at all, it came to me at the point. And the truth is I'm pretty skeptical, I'm a little wary of all that textual stuff. Coming up with that idea, which I instantly thought was a good idea, gave me permission to do

other things. As long as I could be true to the material. I couldn't do stuff to just fuck around, it had to be true to the story I was telling. In the case of *Zeroville*, I had written this short story for McSweeney's and I wrote it very soon after finishing *Our Ecstatic Days* and I was really in that head. The story was kind of denser and when I wrote the novel I thought, Y'know, I don't want to write a novel like this, it should have the energy of a movie.

RL: Yeah, it's very fast, I read it in pretty much one sitting.

SE: And I think that kind of speed, is important for this book. It seemed to me that like a movie it should all be in the present tense, it should happen in a linear way, it should tell as much of the story as it could in dialogue and action, like a movie does. Don Delillo called me up and said "it reads really fast, but it's a really good book". (laughs), The *but* is the key word there. Y'know?! It almost moves too fast to be a good book.

RL: I think, even more so than some of the others, benefits from a second read, because you almost read it too quickly. And obviously there's so many references in it, it's easier to catch them the second time around, because you get so tied up in what's going on, that you don't see them the first time round.

SE: I liked it. I like writing fast. I wrote it fast, I wrote it faster than any novel I've ever written. I wrote it almost as fast as it reads. *Our Ecstatic Days* was such a mountain, I mean, I spent the better part of three years on it, it was a struggle. The first third of it took a year and a half and the second third took eight months and the last third I wrote in three weeks. So it got faster, but it really took a lot out of me that book. Whereas *Zeroville* was fun. I'd like to do that again sometime, write a novel that's fun. Maybe even the next one. Cause it was kinda getting back to the basics of just telling a story.

RL: It's quite different from the short story as well.

SE: Yeah. That was a conscious decision. Besides the fact that by the time I got to the novel the main character had become different and was much more interesting, to me.

RL: It seems to be one of the few novels where all of the action is from the male character.

SE: And again in contrast to *Our Ecstatic Days*, which is a very female book, and was meant to be.

RL: Because I think, even in *Amnesiascope*, where it's narrated by a male narrator, it's all about the women in it, which drive what's going on.

SE: I think that's true of most of the novels. The key character in most of them, the catalytic character, that makes things happen usually is the female character. And the women are more interesting. I think women are more interesting in general. I think they're more complicated.

RL: To return to the connections between film and your writing. Obviously your work is incredible cinematic. One of the things that strikes me when reading is the light in the novels. There's a sense of light in the

novels and I wondered if that comes from you having studied film? There's a lot of focus on light and the novels seem to have their own particular light running through them. The places in the novels seem to be lit in a particular way, Sarre's thing about light and shadows.

SE: That's a really great observation, and you're probably right. I don't know how aware of that I was. I'm aware that when I write the novels, they're very visual in my head and I'm trying to get that down on paper. And at some point I realised, maybe to much to the exclusion of other senses, at some point in one novel or another, maybe around *The Sea Came in at Midnight* I said to myself, people hear things, people smells things, people taste things and I kind of become a little more conscious of those things that I worried were getting left out too much because it was all too visual. And I would imagine it is the influence of film.

RL: Another one of the things I am looking at in your writing is liquidity; water and the things that take on the qualities of water.

SE: That I was aware of. I mean, there's water all over the place in all of the books. That's probably one of the things I shouldn't psychoanalyze.

RL: You use the colour blue a lot as well. I assume that you have to be aware of that?

SE: Yeah, even to the point of, in the case of *TSCIAM*, telling the publisher it's got to be a blue jacket. It's true.

RL: It's there all the way through, and other things taking the quality of water, the sand in *DBS*, seems like it almost ought to be water.

SE: To the point that I think I ought to lay off it for a while. (laughing) No more water for a while. With *OED*, that was enough.

RL: In one of your recent interviews about *Zeroville* you were talking about needing to write in an urban setting.

SE: Yeah, I get some spark off an urban setting. I like cities. I don't live in one now. I live in Topanga Canyon, it's very rural, and it's a hard place to write in unless I'm already in a certain groove, and then it doesn't matter where I am. *OED* I wound up going to this writers colony a couple of times, and that was pretty rural. But generally speaking there's something about cities that's just more electric for me. And with *Zeroville* I jump started the book by checking into a hotel in Hollywood, with Hollywood Boulevard right out the window.

RL: Incredibly urban; noise, busy. Which kind of suits the book.

SE: Yeah, I can write with the white noise and the white chaos. I could sit here and write [we're in a café in the centre of Santa Monica, lots of people, music, background noise, lots going on]. I've gone to malls and



sat in the middle of malls to write. Sitting in my house with two kids bouncing off the walls, that's just impossible.

RL: Different sort of noise.

SE: Exactly.

RL: Jefferson, and the ideas that have come out of Jefferson's politics, resonate throughout all of the novels. And yet he's such an eastern character. In terms of geography; based in Virginia

SE: Yeah, but he sent Lewis and Clarke west. If there had been a west he might have been there. He was a very rural character, he didn't like cities much at all. Although he loved Paris, but that's because he could chase women about and drink wine. Jefferson, he's the great contradiction that embodies the country. The guy who was writing anti-slaver causes into the Declaration of Independence, as he owned slaves. I think that he's a fascinating character for me, and I think he's the kind of quintessentially American character, in all the good and flawed ways. The idealist whose own life fell short.

RL: I really like the end of Jefferson in Arc D'x where he meets Georgie, who says to him, you can't be America. I really like that meeting of Europe and America – you're not the dream, how can you be, you don't fit. I see the America that crops up in what you're writing, like the LA, as a sort of blank slate: the American dream is epitomized not by one thing, but by what everyone wants, because of that change that Jefferson made, from not the pursuit of property, but the pursuit of happiness. Happiness for each of the characters in the novel is something totally different and they pursue it in different ways. I like the connection between that and LA, that people come to it to create their own myths.

SE: I think LA is regarded as this aberration, whereas philosophically it's the ultimate American city. It is as far as America could go before it ran out of geography and metaphors. That hedonistic streak that ran through Jefferson that was informed by his ideals and the ideals informed the sensual side of the personality that's another one of the contradictions I find interesting about him. Because America is at once very committed to fun, even as it's very self-righteous about it. That pivot between Cotton Mather and Tom Paine, the radicalism and the extreme religiosity. And America's never worked that out, just like it's still working out what white people did to black people, and will go on working it out and may never get it out of its system, it's too much a part of the DNA. And Jefferson embodies all of that, as much as anyone I can think of.

RL: I see him as a character, who even when he doesn't appear in the novels

SE: Is there,

RL: Yeah

SE: The man behind the curtain.

RL: He's the ghost in the novels.

SE: He was a piece of work, Jefferson.

RL: And I think he works in a totally different way to Hitler in TOTBC. Who haunts that novel in a very different way.

SE: My memory of him [Hitler] from that novel is of an old man on a bus in a baseball cap. Something about Hitler needs to be reduced to his most pathetic as well as his most evil. I do believe that politics are defined by the personal, as least as much as the other way around, and maybe more so. That Hitler is obsessed with his niece, so fifteen years later he decides not to invade Russia. Jefferson seems to at least believe abolitionism, even if he doesn't practice it, until he takes on a fifteen-year-old black mistress. And so, I'm fascinated by the way I think the psyche shapes politics as much as politics shapes the psyche.

RL: The chapter that I'm just about to finish explore the various catalytic emotions or action that occur, and one of the things I've been writing about it how the personal and social, and personal and political can never be separated. That one always informs the other, no matter what the emotion or emotional response it.

SE: When I was younger and was still in school, Marxism treated history as a scientific process. The product of social forces driven by very discernable needs. The idea that the messiness of emotions, psychology and sex might have some bearing on it was anathema.

RL: All of the emotions I have picked out are negative, which plays interestingly against the humour that we were talking about earlier. I wondered what you thought about the notion that as a reader things are responded to because of negative emotions. Or whether you even seen the emotions expressed in the novels as negative.

SE: Well, I think that in some cases they're kind of double-edged. In Jefferson's case for instance, from what we can tell, he probably really cared about Sally Hemings, he may have even loved her, and that was not all negative. In the case of Viktor in the new novel, his response to movies is very double edged. He tends to respond to movies that have a particularly rapturous undertow. Because his reaction is so fundamentally irrational, or non-rational, I don't mean rationality, out side of rationality, it's almost hard to characterize those responses as positive or negative. In TOTBC or TSCIAM by the end Jainlight and The Occupant are looking for ways to redeem themselves. I'd be the first to admit they're pretty dark fucking books. But my tendency, it says something about me, I guess, they sort of swimming toward the light, or trying to.

RL: You've talked before about the notion of being liberated by the abyss. And being liberated by chaos, and that suits the striving to get through the chaos to get to that, you have to embrace the chaos to do it.

SE: In a way that's me flattering myself, because I believe that aesthetically, but I don't handle chaos that well in my life. So again, one of those things I shouldn't try to figure out, but certainly in the books yeah,

there's this idea that chaos can ultimately be as constructive, even if in small but important ways, as destructive. And more often it's neutral. The books don't believe in the devil, they believe in chaos, Chaos is the antithesis of God, or whatever you want to call God. And chaos is a kind of morally neutral force. As opposed to a satanic one.

RL: You talk about your influences as being Faulkner, Miller, Dylan, people like that, but I wondered who you're reading now?

SE: I'm reading a lot of student papers. And a lot of manuscripts submitted for this magazine [black clock]. I never have time to read all the novels that people recommend to me. And there's, I need to say this very carefully – contemporary writing only holds so much interest for me. That's not to say there aren't a lot of great contemporary writers, but between processing words for the writing I do and processing the words that I'm reading all the time, in my free moment I watch TV and read British music magazines, I read Mojo.

RL: Is the journalism you do an escape or a distraction?

SE: It's a distraction, and it pays the bills. On the other hand, if I hadn't been functioning as a film critic for the last eight years maybe I wouldn't have written the last novel. But I could stand to write less. I feel very burned out.

RL: I sometimes find when I'm writing, that writing something else allows your brain to process what you're doing on another project.

SE: Yeah, I can understand that. There are times when I can almost treat the journalism as a laboratory to work out certain things that are more important to me than what I'm actually writing. With the fiction I've learned to let it incubate for a long time. That doesn't mean when I start writing I've figured it all out, but it means that I've built up this head of steam and I'm ready to go. I need that impetus and I have to wait for it, and I'm better off to wait a little too long, than not long enough.

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