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California: State of Light

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**Abstract**

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From the dominance of a benign and benevolent climate a specific California metaphysics emerged that I call California immateriality. Drawing on current discussions in material culture studies, I use the term “immaterial” to refer to the world of things that are physically imperceptible, as that which needs to undergo processes of transformation and time in order to be perceived, such as: surf and sand dunes, earth quake lights and after-shocks, desert varnish and mid century architecture, traffic and speed, mountain clouds and weather, fossilization and ancient tree rings, metaphoric and historic gold, light and movies, and (cultural) erosion, thus shifting the focus from the dominant mode in material culture studies, from the tangible to processes of oscillation and weightlessness. Changing the focus from matter to energy does not suggest that materiality is unimportant. Rather, the object becomes less important than the idea, the yearning for material transcendence. The actual object, and whether it exists or not is trivial,

as materiality is less an unchanging and stable form, and more a process of becoming and dynamism (immateriality is not to be taken literally, but lightly).

This dissertation traces the rise of the immaterial in California from the Gold Rush to today, looking at California through a glass brightly. In California, potentiality and promise are the immaterial conditions of life. Geographic metaphors are my focal points—places that express liminal boundaries between hard reality and dreams. Places that materialize the immaterial, and immaterialize the material. The main focus is Southern California, where Hollywood projected the California as the American dream to the rest of the nation, casting California itself as a star—as a place of perpetual fresh starts and the best weather in the world. Given the cinematic nature of the state of light, this narrative is framed as a screenplay, with voice-overs, speech bubbles, stage directions, and the like. Chapters are divided along recent fault lines, of recent calls to split the state into more or less 5 manageable states: BAY, SIERRA, CENTRAL CALIFORNIA, WEST CALIFORNIA, SOUTH CALIFORNIA.

In terms of methodology, this work hovers between literary criticism and personal narrative, fiction and creative non-fiction, constructing knowledge by engaging source materials directly and indirectly: California is/as a source. Stylistically and formally, this dissertation re-imagines the disciplinary spaces where the academy and academic rules of discourse can be transgressed and transformed—where objective, western traditional scholarship in its current form is challenged to include the mutual and interdependent significance of story and science, history and observation, theory and change. This work employs an eco-critical theory of narrative interaction, placing texts and their criticism at work in context—showing the parts they play in a

changing and interconnected world. Thinking of narrative as a form of interaction acknowledges that narrative is shaped by and within unique environments and contexts. As such, I locate myself as critical observer/actor, employing narrative to make connections between experience, perception, and critique, thereby drawing attention to the social, political and environmental impacts of narrative/narration and human action

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STATE.....

.....of.....

.....LIGHT...

## COMMERCIALS:

California is America, only more so—Wallace Stegner

I loved the aura of sunshine which just mentioning Southern California seemed to radiate—

Diane Wakoski

There are no real Californians. There are only people who live there and people who don't—Laura Kalpakian, *Steps and Exes*

God will break California from the surface of the continent like someone breaking off a piece of chocolate. It will become its own floating paradise of underweight movie stars and dot-commers, like a fat-free Atlantis with superfast Wi-Fi— Laura Ruby, *Bad Apple*

Dean's California--wild, sweaty, important, the land of lonely and exiled and eccentric lovers come to forgather like birds, and the land where everybody somehow looked like broken-down, handsome, decadent movie actors—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Best way to live in California is to be from somewheres else—Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men*

California weather is worth all the geniuses in New York—Marty Rubin

California and Italy are about the same size. They extend over a long distance from north to south, and each has an extensive coastline. Each produces citrus and other fruits, olives, wine, and raisins. The climate is about the same, although California's is superior. Rome lies in about the same latitude as San Francisco. Our state is one of the richest and most fertile of all the United States—Jerome Hart, *Argonaut Letters*

1954. Smog prevents airplanes from landing and ships from docking for three days—James Frey

Things are tough all over, cupcake, an' it rains on the just an' the unjust alike...except in California—Alan Moore, *Watchmen*

## **FADE OUT: MAIN TITLE AND COMMERCIALS**

### **FLIGHT 1: VOICE OVER: OPENING SCENE:**

**Immaterial:** of no matter/consequence; that doesn't matter, or has no physical substance.

This narrative is concerned with the rise of the immaterial in California from the Gold Rush to today, looking at California through a glass brightly. To define the material real, scientific materialism recognizes reality as matter, whereas the immaterial is the conversion of matter to energy, and vice versa. Physics asserts that matter consists of discrete packets of energy—there's no such thing as matter per se, only energy exists. Changing the focus from matter to energy does not suggest that materiality is unimportant; rather, objects and things become less important than the idea, the yearning for material transcendence. The actual object, and whether it exists or not is trivial, as materiality is less an unchanging and stable form, and more a process of becoming and dynamism (immateriality is not to be taken literally, but lightly). In this work, the material world is built from a hidden immaterialism, from the accretion and de-accretion of matter and energy. This is witnessed in sea cliff retreat, where beach sediment is produced and distributed alongshore by wave-driven sediment transport as new sand.

This story line explores the rise of California as a state of light and energy, where there is a constant accretion and decretion between cultural materialism and energy. In Spinozan metaphysics the immaterial is extension and thought. In California, golden haired dreams, potentiality and promise, are the immaterial conditions of life. Materializing the immaterial, and immaterializing the material, Californians go out on a limb on a redwood tree, build clouds that are castles in the air, and climb transcendent places: mountains, redwoods, and the Hollywood

sign. But, the immaterial is not only found in the incandescent light of day reflecting on the mind's eye. Geographic metaphors are my focal points. These places express the otherworldly—the impossible measured in light, microscopic sand, tree rings, ancient tar and mountainous heights. But there are also shadows and nightmares: the horror of the great San Francisco earthquake, falling redwoods, being trapped on Shasta's summit, or the fear of going caveman.

My focus is more on SoCal, as Hollywood projected the California dream to the rest of the world, casting California itself as a star—as a place of perpetual fresh starts and the best weather the world over. From time to time I venture into northern California and the Central valley, and I divide chapters along recent fault lines, of recent calls to split the state into more or less 5 states: BAY, SIERRA, CENTRAL CALIFORNIA, WEST CALIFORNIA, SOUTH CALIFORNIA. In my car I explore the state while driving south to north (taking the 5 to avoid the scary cliff side drive of route 101, all the while stopping to get out and to admire the views). The landscape gets way better traveling south to north because you're headed toward the most scenic parts of the state—the coastal redwoods. I know there are varying opinions on this, and I welcome any reader advice from those with more experience of these roads (the 5 and the 101). As someone who has travelled north to south, I can tell you it sucks ending up in LA traffic after a long scenic trip to climb Shastina. I also like to triangulate the exact angle of the sun as I travel, preferring the ride in June to capture the sun at its apex in the sky. As the sun sets later, you actually drive into the setting sun going from south to north. Its all good unless you find yourself driving past 8pm in the evening.

This dissertation is filmed on location, in places like Mt. Shasta, The La Brea Tar Pits, Death Valley, Santa Monica Beach and the northern Redwoods, all of which are the backdrop to countless Hollywood films (think *Beach Blanket Bingo*, *Greed*, or *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*). Given the cinematic nature of the state of light, this narrative is framed as a screenplay, with voice-overs, speech bubbles, stage directions, and the like. Inside, you will find visionary beings who create and do things in the material realm, and vice versa—Californians who solve the interaction problem between matter and energy. Epicurus denied the existence of an immaterial world—only the material world existed. The intangible world was made of another substance, the name of which has come down to us through Hollywood like a mirage in Death Valley. In terms of methodology, this work hovers between literary criticism and personal narrative, constructing knowledge by engaging source materials directly: California is/as a source. I explore the California history of why things happened the way they did, how they influence how things are, and possibly the future. Indeed, if California didn't exist we would probably have to invent it.

Most people form their opinions about California solely on what they see in Los Angeles or San Francisco, depending on which city they think rules the west. But LA and San Francisco are not stand-ins for the whole state. I can't help noticing that most people who complain about our superior west coast ways have never been to the central valley, the desert communities, or northern California—they have only been to the well-heeled areas of L.A and San Francisco like Rodeo Drive, West Hollywood or Presidio Heights and Sea Cliff. But attitudes are shifting, now that more tourists are going into Northern California, which is not always sunny and most people are not snobby or materialistic—they're perfectly normal. With an enduring drought changing

attitudes about the state, my own quest for an attitude and standpoint on California has led me to something more mercurial, dazzling, and amorphous as sunlight itself. My stance is shifting and aleatory, diffuse, oppositional, contradictory—much like California itself, this narrative invents and reinvents itself and its subject. California will never go under, but it may go up—into the future, the stratosphere, the immaterial.

***WEST CALIFORNIA:***

**FLIGHT 2: PYLONS OF LIGHT**

**CHARACTERS:**

**JOHN**

**MOM**

**FILM CUT:** The long morning shadows of the trees across Santa Monica beach.

**WIDER ANGLE:** Stretch of Santa Monica Pier.

***DISSOLVE IN***

**ESTABLISHING SHOT:** Early morning, the sun just beginning to shine on the water and the picturesque stretch of Santa Monica beach near LAX airport.



Figure 1

**EXT. THE PIER - DAY - AERIAL SHOT**

**CUT TO:** Heads look up to a 747 AIRPLANE FLYING OVERHEAD. When you fly into LAX you go over the water near Malibu before turning east on the downwind for LAX. Flights out of LAX are the same: you go over the water on departure over Santa Monica Bay till the right turn north is made. An incoming plane drops onto the runway like a great prehistoric bird from the La Brea Tar Pits. I deplane and walk quickly through the terminal looking like a young wannabe Hollywood actor.

**ZOOM IN: LAX Arrivals:** A museum poster on the inside corridor wall: *Left-Coast Living 1930-1965: Living in a Modern Way*, now at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is the first major museum survey of 20th-century California design inspired by light. Featuring more than 350 items from the fields of design, fashion, film, ceramics, jewelry and photography. Traditional craft, like Edith Heath's pottery or Sam Maloof's furniture, is displayed alongside Modernist industrial designs using innovative postwar materials. The exhibition's showstopper is a re-creation of the living room of Charles and Ray Eames's house, Case Study House No. 8, for which the Eames Foundation has lent hundreds of objects, providing a glimpse into the designing couple's private world.

**CLOSE-UP:** A look of surprise on my face: Is this really the first major exhibit given the state's role in shaping material culture?

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** These brilliant pillars of light have personally welcomed me back to LAX for the last fourteen years and were a news item back in the day. Apparently, they were originally intended for the city of West Hollywood. Their rainbow (get it) lights were supposed to be installed in the grassy median strip of Santa Monica Boulevard. West Hollywood thought it

was a bit tacky and rejected them, so they were crated off to downtown Los Angeles for the 2000 Democratic Convention. Ranging in height from 25 to 110 feet, the translucent pylons of LAX International Gateway are visible to airline passengers at 3,000 feet. The LED pylons are sun



**Figure 2**  
**EXT. AIRPORT - LONG SHOT OF LIGHT PILLARS**

flaring, announcing that the sun never sets on California civilization. They are like an electrified Hollywood sign (like the original was meant to be) with a series of dynamic light shows for visitors. If the high sign of Hollywood announces “*This is a place where magic is possible, where dreams<sup>i</sup> can come true,*” then the pylons are the immaterial<sup>ii</sup> equivalent. Instead of forty-five foot tall letters of coated steel and braces, the pylons are digital plastic, glass filters, and colored gels. The sun pillars, costing millions, show that Angelinos, happy as light, take light seriously, and not so seriously. In front of 61 million passengers/viewers a year, the pylons show light as a highly controllable medium in the sunshine state, with custom-designed, color-changing effects, like a patriotic sequence of red, white and blue, eco-friendly green, or sun

soaked shades of gold. The president of the Pylons project highlights his state's obsession with de-materializing: "We have enhanced the visual impact while decreasing concerns of the past." These sun-driven volumes are measured in color; classically, the pillars of civilization become luminosities. Full of meaning, full of light, they fulfill official immaterial intentions: they welcome, invite, say hi, ask you to return. They put-on, light-up, turn-on the limelight. According to pylon's artist Paul Tzanetopoulos, in their glow they cast you as a star.

**LETTING MY THOUGHT BUBBLE BURST:** Sadly, the columns look like factory smoke



Figure 3

stacks during the day. Once, trapped on the tarmac at LAX, I was sitting there watching the pillars change color for hours...I think I've seen every color in the LAX pylon repertoire at least a thousand times. That said, if my mood was linked with the LAX lights right now? The color would probably be BLUE. The pylon lights at LAX are currently shining purple through Friday in support of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Heritage Month. When I left the airport I looked back

from a vantage point in Venice Beach—the pillars looked like the Aurora Australis (or the southern lights)

**PARTING SHOT:** Looking toward the entrance of the airport, I first saw the pillars when I arrived from Ohio on a two-week vacation. I never went back. The sun worshipping pillars are the point of departure for understanding California's relation to light and the immaterial, a bright metaphor for the state of light.

### **SUN COMPELLED AND AWAKENED, OBEY THE SUMMONS**

In California there are just as many words for sun as there are for snow. The sun scorches, hazes, thaws, blisters and blinds, thickens, traps, dazzles, flecks, flushes, glares and glints, defies and entices, steaks and licks. Cars are sun charged, people sun-compelled, and bodies sun scrubbed. The sun has powerful agency—it compels you out-of-doors. In the literature of California, light is a force to be reckoned with: golden sunsets pound the water into mirrored planks. If most of the country runs on DC, SoCal is pure AC current: its people move over long distances; energy and cultural life rotates, reverses direction, varies with time; and socializing electrons switch directions. In the longest 20<sup>th</sup> century the California sun is described as palpable: mornings full of light effect a sun-cure, compelling the weary to smell the fresh air—to run into nature. In Michael Henry's "Tijuana Brass," "The American couple who'd come for their daughter the year before now the mother's every pore was open for a cure and the father still saw mornings full of light..." Here and elsewhere, the sun is portrayed across genres as a positive force of energy in the form of heat, light, and force. But the sun is also a willful antagonist that threatens to burn and scorch as well as to inspire.

### **CLOSE-UP: READING A TRACT ON HELIOTHERAPY AT SANTA MONICA BEACH**

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century people came to the golden coast expressly for "heliotherapy" (sunbaths), for the treatment of all sorts of complaints, like TB. The effects of solar radiation on the body did

not, however, become a major concern until the late 1920s. During the turn of the century, Europeans experimented with generating artificial sunlight (e.g. quartz, mercury, and carbon arc lamps), which demonstrated some curative effects, supposedly improving patients' powers of healing and performance. Doctors of the time believed that sunlight had a chemical action on the organs and that the skin, like the lungs, was an organ for cleansing the blood. Although medical opinion regarding the effectiveness of sunlight in the treatment of specific ailments was divided, the use of sunbaths in the treatment of TB was fully recommended in places like San Luis Obispo. Then, in the 1930's Hollywood movies turned techni-color: blond hair, bronzed bodies and rosy-cheeks hit the screen. Pool parties with Hollywood starlets playing in the water became the new California image, inspiring millions to take to the sun for informal sun cures. The suntan became a status symbol of luxury long with fun in the sun—the word cancer was first whispered in the 1930's.

**SPEECH BUBBLE:**

Recognizing our entanglement with things can prompt a greater sense of the interconnectedness between the human and non-human world. To develop this affinity Thoreau recommended “the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen.” Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* asserts “an immanent or incipient significance in the living body [which] extends to the whole sensible world.” In this, sight is an encounter between eye and world that mobilizes engagement. This entanglement affects our sense of indoor/outdoor, dissolving the boundaries delineated by Western dualities—between real/not real, body/spirit, self-other. In Karl Jay Shapiro's “California Winter,” light breaks down the separation between the public and private spheres, amid the domestic and outdoors.

It is winter in California, and outside  
Is like the interior of a florist shop:  
By noon the fog is burnt off by the sun  
And the world's immensest sky opens a page  
For the exercises of a future age...

California's Mediterranean winter creates representational instabilities between interiors and exteriors. If the walls of the poem were older, one would think of Rome, if the land were stonier, Spain. That California is compared to an indoor tropical florist shop creates a surrogate home space out-of-doors, domesticizing the exterior as safe and comfortable, lush and green. The interiority of inside is further bridged with outdoor movement and exteriority. Clear California light disrupts accepted ways of seeing—boundary crossing light energy alters notions of seeing and being through the embodiment of an alternative, contradictory way of constituting the domestic and the public, identity, being, and the "real." This theme is picked up by Charles Wright in "California Spring," where light disrupts notions of embodiment, so that the soul—feeling, force, mind—is turned open-aired in California, alfresco, over there, at a distance from the self.

At dawn the dove croons. A hawk hangs over the field.  
The liquidambar rinses its hundred hands.  
What if the soul indeed is outside the body,  
a little rainfall of light moistening our every step,  
prismatic, apotheosizic? And the light comes on in the pepper trees.

And most perceptibly, in Al Young's "Lemons, Lemons," light becomes form, and lemons are liminal objects in which light is photosynthesized and captured.

Hanging from fresh trees  
in a soft blaze of afternoon  
in some of these California towns  
Hung that way filled up with sunlight  
like myself ripe with light  
brown with light & ripe with shadow  
the apple red & gold & green with it  
sun-loving cows Sweet goldenness of light  
& life itself sunny at the core  
lasting all day long into night into sleep  
in hasty praise of lemon light

In these works the immateriality of light becomes materialized, and vice versa: light has both substance and force, revelation and hardness. In the literature of California light is projected as solid, direct and clear, reflecting the fact that light is both a particle and a wave. But it is also immaterial: full of the intangible quality of richness. It reveals merely what is, no more and no less. It is candid, accurate, and hard. In physics light is immaterial/material: it has no mass but is part of the physical universe. Einstein's equation shows that energy and mass are the same concept, so in a way, light is matter, as a photon has no rest mass but has energy, which can be

converted into mass. It is potential matter. Light is also an adjective that describes so much of California. With their light, slender trunks, Palm trees seemingly defy gravity, floating upward. With people gazing up, Nathanael West once called the palm tree “the Sargasso of the imagination.” Neil Diamond sang of Los Angeles as a place where

Palm trees grow and rents are low.

It’s been years, of course, since L.A. rents were low.

And now the palm trees are starting to go

**SPEECH BUBBLE:** As a native Angeleno, my mother says with great authority that palms are part of the iconic L.A. look. She thinks we need more, not less. She says that any city can have shade trees. But the real deal is palm trees, and only LA can plant them in mile long lines. She says they look like plumed knights announcing that we are the best city anywhere. I think they're great on the Eastside, where they're older, taller and line many of the boulevards as they were planted in a beautification effort for the 1932 Olympics (back when 10th St. was renamed Olympic). Canon Dr. heading south is the most common of the streets that movie and TV productions use for that classic palm tree lined street look. Even though LA is known as the land of palm trees only one species is native to the city (the California fan palm), with most of the palms being planted in the early 20th century. Now, thousands of these iconic palms are dying from old age or a fatal fungus. As a result, the city is planting drought friendly shade trees



Figure 4

like scrub oak. This could make California look like California again, back when it was chaparral interspersed with scrub oak strands. My mother doesn't understand why locals would prefer to plant oaks. She says she doesn't mind it when she gets dings in her car from falling fronds. She says that the city just needs to keep the palms properly trimmed, or just spray them to kill the fungus—allowing them to still make the statement they do architecturally, and maybe plant shade focused trees in between. I like palms as trees and I like them as our iconic tree. For residential purposes and shade purposes they don't make a lot of sense. And, one of my most fearful moments was on a street in West Hollywood during a heavy storm. Those fronds were dropping right and left, like giant razors—I was hit on the head and my face was scratched up.



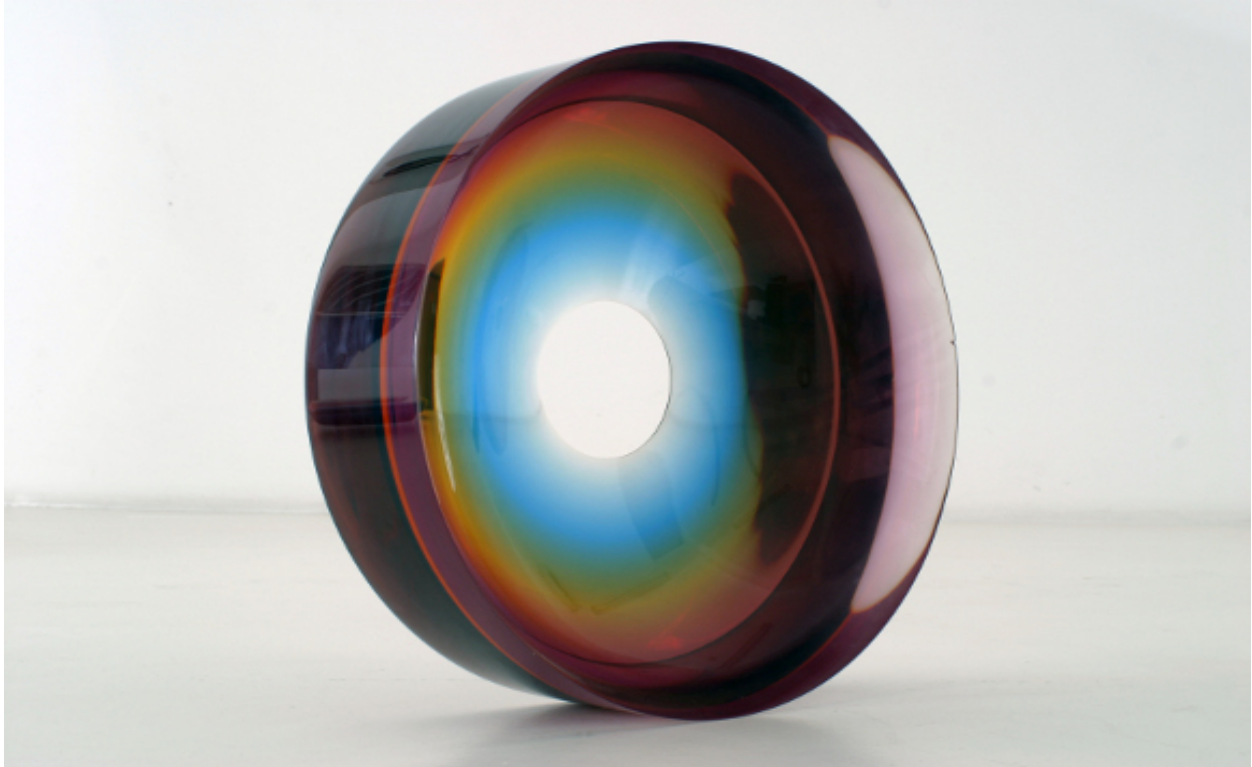
Figure 5

Urban theorist Mike Davis argues that the cultural productions of California reflect the ethics, morality and folkways of the state. In the California imaginary, light equals purity, truth and mental and physical health. Instead of hard reality, this is the place where your dreams of becoming a reality TV star can come true. One of the many visions of the golden state was to create a rapidly accelerating society with no clouds on the horizon, no cultural downfall; no heavy materialism or sense of heavy history. Not even death. Residents of the state of light found their own utopia in the modernist lifestyle which is all about natural light, translucence, glass walls, open expanses, speeding on the 405, 420 friendliness, and sunshiny optimism about the future. Utopia, from the Greek meaning nowhere, i.e. a dream or a vision, translated to a California promise of a future of lightness, luxury and speed. The significance of utopias to the grand 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century dream of a better society can't be overestimated.

But, Californians are not really interested in the grand political agenda of modernism per se, although they believed in physical liberation and anti-establishment sentiment, seeking to create

a more ideal society through social awareness, sexual liberation, technological progress, especially through cheap everyday objects and kitsch. California light and space artists gave form to these popular ideas: light was to disperse the darkness, making it possible to step out of the past and into the modern era. In this way light represents a continuation of the modernist's utopia of total illumination and transparency. These artists gave this idea form through formlessness. They expressed speed and distance in their work through light, atmospheric materials, and by experimenting with water, light and glass. Through light, they delved into the very being of light as color and energy, the significance of shade, and transitions of light and brightness. For California modernists like Helen Pashgian, James Turrell, and De Wain Valentine, light equaled purity, truth and mental and physical health. Pashgian's works in resin collapse inside and surface, as light shines in, through, and around, her acrylic crystal balls and lenses. Writes Pashgian:

I was always primarily interested in form alone, but then to make a form, you have to make it out of something. So color seemed a natural material to use, because color is abstract....an important thought behind this is that all things are essentially mental - that matter, while quite real on the one hand, is on the other hand composed of energy, and in turn, of pure thought.



**Figure 6**

As Artus Zajonc suggests, light is the central player in perception and cognition. Solar deities have been worshipped throughout human history. And sun worship is alive and well. Cultural critic Mark Berninger explains our heliocentric culture, or lack of it, in this way: “Our culture revolves around the sun, we base our day to day activities on whether or not the sun is out. We take drugs to supplement the lack of vitamin D in the wintertime, shoot there is even a diagnosable disorder called Seasonal Affective Disorder.” Many California light and space artists attempted to suspend and capture light. Larry Bell’s glass cubes hold light; James turrell “white blindness” disperses with figure and ground; Robert Irwin’s scrim blurs light into a visual experience of nothingness, merging the material with the immaterial. Peter Alexander’s “Orange Wedge” is a de-materialized work that captures immediate experience. According to art critic Catharine Grenier, Alexander’s work is “an art of experience,” of immediate sense perception.



Figure 7

His prismatic piece of light resin is both reflective and transparent: that contradictory LA state of being—what the LAX pillars don't advertise. As more than just being something to which things happen (light can be reflected, refracted, filtered, switched on), light provokes things to happen. It is something just to sit in the sun and reflect—to soak up the rays. Light makes visible, animates, cures, but it also fades, ages, and damages. It provokes Vitamin D, as well as tryptamines, endorphins, and

prevents and provokes cancers. The California sun has force and effect, as various writers and cultural commentators depict a glaring sun that flogs rocks, bakes mountains, rots hills, and creates shadowy tensions. For Charles Olson, the California sun outshines material life on earth, shining “beyond the speed of life.” In the quest to understand how life began on Earth, Cal Tech scientists have discovered that a burst of ultraviolet light probably triggered the chemical creation of guanine, one of four building blocks of life. If light begat life, then we can begin to understand light more as an active force in both material and immaterial<sup>iii</sup> social relations, as a form of immaterial culture that, according to critic Roberta Gilchrist “far from merely reflecting society can be seen to construct, maintain, control and transform social identities and relations.”

### *DISSOLVE OUT*

## *DISSOLVE IN*

### **FLIGHT 3: SUNSHINE NOIR**

Living in California, everyone learns to adapt their actor or actress within

—Courtney Carola, *Where We Belong*

But I am still the

California Girl,

who grew up thinking life was the movies—*Diane Wakoski*

### **CHARACTERS:**

**JOHN**

**CARLA**

The Hollywood Sign is an American cultural icon and the best place to view America from. I



**Figure 8**

always wanted to make my way up to the Hollywood sign. There are a few different hikes you

can take to see the sign, but I chose to follow the Holly-ridge Trail. The trail is also used by horseback riders. You know what that means? The GPS on my iPhone took me the windy way. I had no idea you had to make your way through a residential area and then find this trail that leads up to most of the way. The residents at the entrance head don't really like tourists coming and walking "their" streets, and they place misleading signs to keep tourists away. It seems like there are a lot of secret trails up and if you aren't careful or don't know the area much, you'll end up on a hillside on narrow rocky trails that you will potentially slip and fall off of. Supposedly it's a dog friendly trail, but you and your dog should be in good shape—it's a tough hike up.



**Figure 9**

It's definitely more of a hike and less of a scene than, say, Runyon Canyon. On a warm spring day me and my sister made it all the way to the cell tower on top in thirty minutes. You can't touch the sign and you actually can't go anywhere near it. There's a fence between you and the sign, and no one shall pass (unless you're on a movie and you've got the money for that stuff). It is ridiculous that you cannot get near the sign. They really need to figure that one out. We need

some better urban planning where you can live the dream by walking amongst the letters. And don't even try to jump the fence or approach the sign in any way. Despite everything else going on in Los Angeles these days, the LAPD places a high priority on this sign. But it's an amazing



**Figure 10**

view of the city. Being up that high really puts things in perspective sometimes. It was absolutely breathtaking indeed, well, minus the LA smog. But other than the sign, there's really nothing really there—it really is only a sign on the mountains. Don't trust Google maps. Useless. We ended up lost even after asking many people how to find the sign, and no one really knew how to get there (yes, I know many may wonder how you cannot find such a big sign). It's a nice view, and like the mystical allure of Hollywood itself, it's cool to approach it from all angles, yet never to be able to possess it absolutely. Regardless, many come to the sign to try to grasp the dream. California was (and still kinda is) where you went to be free—free of the past and history altogether for a Hollywood view of things: a place to start again, life unhindered by the

responsibilities and expectations of previous generations and memories of wars. The landscape



Figure 11

and weather supports this clean break: the light is always bright, the sand pillowy and soft; the waves break endlessly and the bathing suits are suggestively skimpier and shorter every summer. Hollywood inspired a cultural taste for these ephemeral and fluctuating effects—effects as non-objects—inspired by the fluctuation of light and the fact that cinema itself is a medium of light.

**POINT-OF-VIEW SHOT:** When I first came to Hollywood it was raining very hard—oh, it rained for weeks—very unusual—and I was looking for a commercial gig but couldn't find one. I guess I was one of those thousands of wannabe actors who came to LA following a dream about making it big and striking gold. Once I was stranded on a Hollywood street corner trying to find a basement acting class. I was always having fights on the phone with my agent. He expected me to be attractive and act, as well. The movies which always gave me the most satisfaction

were the ones with normal looking people, but I also like the ones that show people at their most attractive movie star best. Watching movies gave me a parallel universe where I could live a different life than what I was destined for. The life where my rugged father loved me and did not go away.

**ANGLE ON ME: HEADSHOT:** This was my first professional headshot taken for acting



Figure 12

gigs. I was the typical American who grew up thinking life was like the movies.

**ROOM SHOT:** In a Hollywood hotel watching a documentary on Tinsel Town. During electricity shortages during the war, the ample bright sunshine of California convinced many early filmmakers to move the film industry from New York to the sunny side of the nation<sup>iv</sup>, with films being shot on location or on the roof to maximize

good shooting light. Filmed on location,

films like *Boomerang* (1947) and *Call Northside 777* (1948) projected natural light as an ethereal state of being, as both embodiment and disembodiment, revealing a contradiction: as an immaterial substance, light is both attached to and removed from the material world. In Hollywood there is too much sun that film-makers hang sheets to block it. John Allman records this tension between shade and brightness in “D. W. Griffith Filming.”

...He tells Bixter to separate white sheets

strung on the line, let in  
more sun; the roofless set open to sky,  
dust of unpaved roads; indoor actors filmed in a sheen, as if  
lifting their faces to the moon...

Moving its base to the sun-side of the nation, cinema and its effects have infiltrated not only descriptions of California light, but also technologies and expressions of vision and perceiving light. Long range and close-up devices grant us the pleasure to be voyeurs, entering into the intimate space of others, without their acknowledging gaze. Making visible the high contrast of black and white, Film producer D.W. Griffith used pre-noir lighting techniques to highlight hidden emotions, zooming in on individual body parts to reveal emotion intensified as light. In noir, everything becomes light and shadow—the material world is polarized into brightness or dusk. People become beings of light or shady villains that vanish into the shadows. As beings of light, heroes and heroines contend with the penumbra of the soul. This is a world where when you ask “Who's there,” a shadow freezes. A world where everyone is shadowed, prompting the viewer to ask: whose shadowing me. Filmmakers like Fritz Lang cast our latent fears about American dreaming inside the chiaroscuro of noir. This is a genre where everyone is shady and shadowed. Characters vanish softly into the dense shadow of buildings and in between spaces. But today, nothing can hide from the power of Hollywood Drones—not even noir—they use the same technology that the CIA uses overseas. On the modern movie set, they take shots from above, capturing different angled scene shots. Sometimes unmanned aircraft used by filmmakers do not stay on the movie set—they wander off to capture things out of the line-of-sight, like me in my Hollywood apartment.

In Richard Quine's *PushOver*, light and shadow flits across the face of femme fatale Kim Novak as she succumbs to the temptation of stealing 200,000 with her newly corrupt-cop paramour. A



Figure 13

shadow of remorse is visible in her eyes while the shadow of defeat crosses her lover's face as he dies in a final police shoot out. But it is the face of Dorothy Malone that shines transcendent when she is vindicated as the ingénue heroine. Like God, Noir always separates light from darkness. This cinematic world is a battle between murkiness and morality, with darkness perpetually overshadowing and darkening the frame. A world of light consumed by darkness. In these films a moral blackout consume all. The *Salt of the Earth* starts with the long shadow of a man running, followed with the shadow of a plane passing across a building. Even the natural world is polarized: the slanting rays of the late afternoon sun throw the silhouettes of cactus and yucca into bold relief in one film. These cinematic plants exist through their shadow, their negation of light. In noir thrillers like Jacques Tourneur's *Nightfall* and Irving Lerner's

*City of Fear*, venetian blinds cast dramatic slashes of light, making distinctive areas of Stygian darkness, good and bad, while ceiling fans spin lazily in every room.



Figure 14

**CLOSEUP:** I was inspired to create my own venetian blind film noir vignette using a glass



Figure 15

and my own venetian blinds.

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** Of course, being a Southern Californian, I can't decide whether noir represent a utopian or dystopian view of the shape of things to come (you know, that sunshine-noir thing). Personally, I think noir is influenced by the Zoroastrianism of Ancient Persia—light versus dark, spiritual versus material, and eventually good versus evil. And

while Zoroastrians usually pray in front of some form of fire (or any source of light like a TV screen), Californians just play in the sun. I had a noir moment when I dated a closeted Hollywood actor. Apparently for a leading man, its hard for an audience to identify with a gay man kissing women on screen. Apparently, leading men are sex symbols for female fans. I guess this goes back to Rock Hudson and Montgomery Clift and James Dean.

**CUT TO: VENICE BEACH.** In Venice Beach the air is so full of mist filled with light that you cannot read the exit signs, you must go round them one more time before floating off down Abbot Kinney. Here, Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen designed the binoculars building that serves as an oversized, Pop art portal to greater L.A. Cars can drive through the binoculars into a garage. The building is an architectural metaphor for how Hollywood has influenced



Figure 16

the binocular building with binoculars. It's a thing.

vision. The city is dominated by this sense of binocular optics, by seeing and looking, by being in the picture, by concentrating light gathered by objective lenses into a beam, thus using light to form an image. Binoculars are more convenient for observing small phenomena by reflected light. When you come to LA, especially the Hollywood Bowl, be sure to bring your binoculars.

**FLASHBACK:** Many people pose in front of

## **FADE BACK TO HOLLYWOOD**

Movie watching is a passive, hypnotic experience thanks to the music and light show. Hollywood distorts our sense of being, presenting the human body in its most acceptable forms. We disregard or disbelieve in our own mortality to such a degree that the role of cinema in identity is primary: the talking picture of the screen frames our vision, so that the all-powerful eye/I is the site of perception, reflection, and memory (the Lacanian screen as memory)<sup>v</sup>. For Lacan, the self depends on surfaces for a sense of self, as the silver screen illumines objects: "an object veiled from sight by an over-intense light can be discerned only if a screen is interposed which partially obscures the light and/or the observing subject."

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** I always wondered why people love to watch movies so much, and how movies make people different.

The difference between eye and I is the difference between seeing and identity. In Carl Rakoski's "Come, great city," a Klieg light (an intense carbon arc lamp used in filmmaking), represents the experience of vision, which is filtered through the Hollywood cinematic, resulting in a synthetic and cinematic experience of light and perception. In the poem, the subject struggles to avoid being captured by a look.

In the season of Romain effects  
and synthetic American lights  
she drove into a California suburb  
in a high-compression gull-line Suiza

rolling her Klieg eyes.

Practitioners of early 20<sup>th</sup> century technologies of vision held up the objective camera eye over the human eye. Today television purports to capture truth. Before reality T.V. the camera lens was the machine that could be perfected to grasp the world in its entirety and organize visual chaos into a coherent, objective picture. It alone could capture truth with a capital T. Revolutionary filmmaker Dziga Vertov epitomized the view of film as the vehicle to perfect man. "In the face of the machine we are ashamed of man's inability to control himself." This is the dark side of film, when humans are judged unfavorably to perfect seeming machines by a mechanizing culture, a thought which propels our contemporary cyborg mentality. "I am an eye. I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, I am showing you a world, the likes of which only I can see."

Truly we are in the seeing century notes art critic Wendy Everett, a modern world that privileges sight as the main form of access to not only ourselves, but the wider world around us. Seeing comes first. I'll be seeing you reveals that being is visual. It establishes our place in the surrounding world. While we explain the world within words, words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded with the world beyond us. The relationship between what we see and what we know is thus never settled. In a world where seeing is being/believing, life is a moving picture, a silver screen, a picture show, where things are measured in footage and wattage and star power. In the image capital of the universe, the studio gate (like heaven's gate) separates the earthly from the eternal. In David Meltzer's "Roll light into the roller," the immaterial becomes material and vice versa as light is captured through sound, expression, and word.

In Hollywood

Roll light into the roller. Type darkness.

Roll light. Bite into it

Coffee, black. Red Star cigarette.

We hide words in light. To make light real on the page.

For writers like Tom Clark the Left Coast landscape of light is inherently cinematic—it inspired Hollywood to be Hollywood with its flashing sunset shooting out over the ocean and crashing into the sea in full Hollywood glory.

The sun shoots high out over  
the ocean to the west and when  
it goes down into the cold water  
at night it lights up the under  
sides of the cirro-cumulus clouds  
with bands of pink that go  
over into gold and rosy yellow  
against the great deepening blue  
Hollywood baroque glory

In a different light, Hollywood both charms and condemns. It may light up the screen with romance, but to do so it must darken, cloud, and complicate. In “Zurburan,” Diane Wakoski

writes that “It is light which defines the real world.” But, light is two-edged, neither neutral nor indifferent:

I should have learned from my Southern California childhood  
that lights both flatter and reveal every wrinkle.  
Hollywood puts the flood lights on love,  
but against a background of dark secrets  
and human failures, the stars twist and turn like the  
hanged man,  
glinting in the orange grove.

California Writers like Wakoski reflected on a silver screen that was too polished, too burnished to be true. If pleasure and complacency snuggle up in the movie theater, then the hard light of day is a glaring, undistorted mirror of discontent. In an attempt to use light as the universal criterion of reality, light is conceived of as immediate, unobtrusive—a familiar aspect of experience/existence. This begs the question: what kind of light defines the real world; is Hollywood a sin against the light as moral reformers put it? In “Talking to Marilyn,” Allison Joseph’s protagonist is blindsided by the light of day:

Strong as the harsh glaring light  
that hits whenever I leave a movie's dark comfort,  
trying to make sense of day.

Noir captured light and its underside—it cast graphic shadows on film from 1941 to 1958, during a period of American social unrest—when even Hollywood itself fell into noir disrepair for a time. If the American dream had carte blanche to glorify itself, then the genre had carte noir to visualize anxiety, paranoia, instability, and obsession. These shadowy years eclipsed even California dreaming. In the umbrage of the war, noir shrouded optimism with threats of the Cold War, the omb a changing urban landscape, and even more alarming, changing gender roles Films



Figure 17

that show a desolate and noir view of California are *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Strange Love of Martha Ivers* (1946), *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948). These films beclouded the sunny American dream of prosperity, ironically bringing to light narratives left out of the cinema of the national imaginary. Noir itself was a private eye, spying on how the nation should and, more precisely, should not be represented, through shady representations of race and ethnicity, and gender and sexuality. But the genre both subverted and was reproductive of standard myths of women as noire or rouge femme fatales. If Hollywood captured the light side,

noir reflected the dark side of American dreaming. In the *Maltese Falcon*, characters chase after a statuette they believe to be a gold and jewel-encrusted figure of a falcon, but which ultimately is revealed to be made of lead. Like most dreams. As we will see, the source of this fake gold myth was profoundly Californian in origin.

***DISSOLVE OUT***

*DISSOLVE IN*

**FLIGHT 4: RIGHT/ LEFT COAST**

But light of course, in both places. Though, such different light—Diane Wakoski

**CHARACTERS:**

**JOHN**

The benevolent and pacific climate and endless light of California called for a conceptual sea change among Americans new to the sunshine state, who donned California Eldorado: a legendary place of perfect climate, clime, light and other riches. California, the legendary Eldorado, city of gold, is where Hollywood defined the American dream on the silver screen, where SoCal invented itself as a place where leisure was not part of a one week vacation, but rather, a way of life, producing an approach to materialism that floats in dreamy light and air. This vision of carefree living was packaged and marketed by Hollywood mythmakers to the world.

In Ambrose Bierce's "A vision of climate," a personified climate breaks its silence:

The Finest Climate in the World am I,  
From Siskiyou to San Diego  
The zone called semi-tropical I've pulled about  
And placed it where it does most good, I trust.  
I shake my never-failing bounty out Alike upon the just and the unjust.

The speaker acknowledges the spirit of California's boon to the state, but gives a snappy comeback:

That's very true, said I, but when 'tis shaken

My share by the unjust is ever taken.

In SoCal you must season yourself to a surfeit of natural light. A surplus snarl-up of the senses as well as an overdose of overdevelopment. Whereas electric light is an embodiment of electricity contained within a physical form of bulbs, fixtures, wires, and houses, natural light possesses more ephemeral qualities: it lacks form and brings the outside in. The state's abundance of natural light has affected perception and our filiation to things. Let me bring to light open air markets, outdoor malls à la the Grove, and Mexican style courtyards. In a perpetual summer land of SoCal sun, life is experienced more as open-air energy and motion than stay at home stasis and stuffy east coast parlors with dusty Brussels carpets.

On the East coast, the feeling of light and the out-of-doors was expressed differently. Luminism prefigured the west coast love of radiance. John I. H. Baur described a particular mid-19c. landscape mode of capturing the dying light as American luminism. In luminism's approach to nature, light suggests the harmony and divine presence perceived in American pastoral landscape. Luminist painters like Martin Johnson Heade sought to capture the intricacies of light, often at peak times like day break or sunset—a pictorial liminal ground between perception and materialism, self and other. In *Seascape: Sunset*, date unknown, Heade captures the fading light

of an East coast sunset. These landscapes united opposites: realistic, objective yet intimate, mundane but poetic. Luminism, as an art theory and practice, exemplified classic order, linearity, and radiant atmosphere. As such, luminist landscapes were viewed through Emersonian eyes, as being "Mind" or "Oversoul," as light filled symbols of God's work in nature. Luminist-like landscapes also appear in Thoreau's writings as well. A luminist artist, Thoreau created word pictures of sublime contemplation. Synesthesia was also a common technique, even a theme, in much luminist work, where a field of imagery and perception captured an emotional response to color and imagery.



Figure 18

These works sought to synesthetically arouse the viewer with portrayals of sense-experiences like creaking light and dawn. In these still moments in nature, space, reflections, and light unite to evoke the infinite and eternal. In works like *A Week* and *Walden*, luminist landscapes were the ideal form by which to realize the ideal in the real. Verily Hudson River and luminist paintings provided stylistic models for light loving California impressionists to follow, creating

an early American vision of the light flooded land as a metaphor for strength, vitality and spirit. Yet, artists in California would give us a heightened sense of light itself as a medium, or creating new mediums that let light pass through, such as high tech plastics. New England writers rarely linger on or praise the specific light of the East coast woodlands. Not in the same way as their California counterparts. Rather, New England light was best expressed through seasonal tropes. Frances Sargent Locke (1811-1850) extols not the abundant bright light of New England, but a regional specialty: leafing and leaf peeping. For Locke, light is filtered through and illumines the foliage, so that leaves not only peak, they catch and filter light, reflecting a bright chlorophyll beam that is chartreuse. Not chaparral. Instead of an unobstructed sky of sunshine, New Englanders experiences light as partially shaped and shaded by leafy and cloudy materialism. Leaves: nature's window dressing to a view. New England writers described brilliant leaves that layer and skin, coat and fold, vein light, giving it form. In "New England," Locke exemplified this trend by extoling the foliage as radiant as the sunlight shines through green sugar maple leaves:

In the azure air veiling the mountain,  
Far off, with its own robe of light,  
In the gleam and the foam of the fountain,  
In the foliage so gorgeously bright,---  
Again through the woodlands I wander,  
Where autumn trees, lofty and bold,  
Are stealing from bright clouds above them  
Their wealth of deep crimson and gold.

Here, the foliage is luminous, absorbing—it steals light from the sky and re-emits it as bright reflection, as filtered glare. For Locke, the power of light makes visible a “soul-waking scene.” In *The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter*, Jane Bennett turns the phrase “thing power” to describe the force that non-human actors have upon us. For Bennett, there are “energetic forces that course through humans and cultures without being exhausted by them...[which] perform actions, produce effects, and alter situations.” But this concept is nothing new. Think of Thoreau’s otherness or wildness as forces that have the power to perturb and readjust our cognition and perception. If an appreciation of the vitality of natural forces doesn’t earn our appreciation, then perhaps our fear will be invoked by their recalcitrance and truculence. In “Autumn Tints” Thoreau lauds the importance of contrast: the evergreens against the autumn foliage are more striking, more forceful. For the bard of the woods the phenomenon of changing light involved synthesis, but not merely of the eye. Thoreau’s synesthesia detects changes in light and color through non-visual means: “already the crickets chirp to the moon a different strain.” Nature, for Thoreau, was “a living thing, like himself, which he want[ed] to respond to with his whole being.” Looking at nature in this way conjures a “sensual revolution,” where sensory ways of seeing the world (and social ideologies conveyed through sensory values) are upended, so that “to question the sensory model is to question the nature of reality.” For Bennett, the senses<sup>vi</sup> were shaped by cultural and technological means, not biology, a fact that historicizes perception. And so, surfers in Santa Monica report hearing the noise of the sun while catching a killer wave. Cowabunga!

Considering the presence of less light and a colder climate on the East coast, is it any wonder that people tended to cluster around fires and artificial light sources<sup>vii</sup>, what little there was.

Scenes of families and others huddled around fireplaces and candlesticks is a common visual theme in east coast fiction. Consider Hawthorne’s short story “The Ambitious Guest,” where a family huddles around the fireside spinning yarns. Little do they know that a slab avalanche is racing towards them at 230 m.p.h. In John Greenleaf Whittier’s “Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl,” the light from the fireside replaces the sun with human warmth and domestic comfort, which



Figure 18

augments the light of heaven. Whittier opens *Snow-Bound* with a line from Agrippa’s *Occult Philosophy*.

As the Spirits of Darkness be stronger in the dark, so Good Spirits, which be Angels of Light, are augmented not only by the Divine light of the Sun, but also by our common Wood Fire: and as the Celestial Fire drives away dark spirits, so also this our Fire of Wood doth the same.

In the opening of the poem the fireside light is like a multi-spectrum high-pressured sodium plant light that causes the room to affectively open, to burst into bloom:

We watched the first red blaze appear,  
Heard the sharp crackle, caught the gleam  
On whitewashed wall and sagging beam,  
Until the old, rude-furnished room  
Burst, flower-like, into rosy bloom;  
Our own warm hearth seemed blazing free.

Unlike the un-warming light of the winter sun and moon, by firelight conversation thrives, hearts open up, faces glow, eyes sparkle and sentiments bud:

We sat the clean-winged hearth about,  
Content to let the north-wind roar  
In baffled rage at pane and door,  
While the red logs before us beat  
The frost-line back with tropic heat;  
And ever, when a louder blast  
Shook beam and rafter as it passed,  
The merrier up its roaring draught  
The great throat of the chimney laughed;

The house-dog on his paws outspread  
Laid to the fire his drowsy head,  
The cat's dark silhouette on the wall  
A couchant tiger's seemed to fall;  
And, for the winter fireside meet,  
Between the andirons' straddling feet,  
The mug of cider simmered slow,  
The apples sputtered in a row,  
And, close at hand, the basket stood  
With nuts from brown October's wood.

In this intimate, cosy world, shut away from the harsh world without, animals cuddle up, the chimney produces chummy feelings, and the hearth makes hearty food. For Whittier, the New England hearth outshone the SoCal sun, and its radiance bordered on worship. While the California night brings darkness, the New England night brings warmth and radiance. But on the other coast, the relatively mild weather encouraged people to stay outdoors later, and plentiful bright light shortened the experience of night's darkness, lengthened the day, and empowered a redesign of the basic schedule and feeling of everyday life. As much as gasoline and the automobile reshaped American lives outside the home, access to profuse natural light reshaped life inside/out the California home. Non-electrified life not only had a different look than electric



Figure 9

life, but it also had a different rhythm, feel, touch, sensation, even aroma. Outside the domain of electricity, where natural sunlight was plentiful, Californian's took up a different approach to things because light was packaged and sold exclusively to them. Even more strangely, lacking profuse outdoor sunshine, the East Coast turned inward and indoors to celebrate every connection to the immaterial world. Plumbing the intersection of photography and the supernatural in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, East Coast photographers created portraits of humans sitting with the alleged ghosts of deceased friends and family members. Apocryphal as they seem today, "spirit photographs" were a cultural craze just a century ago, thanks to the era's obsession with mediums and séances, coupled with emerging technologies of vision like X-rays and newly discovered forms of radiation. These turn-of-the-century spirit artists included the lights of John Beattie, Frederick Hudson and William Mumler—credited with fueling the belief

that communication with the immaterial world of the dead was possible by capturing the photomatic body using fin de siècle science. I don't think these strange images are just lens flare.



Figure 10

Among his photographs is this famous portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln sitting with the spirit of her dead husband, President Lincoln. Leaving the indoors behind, the heliotropic quest for outdoor light lent inspiration to the great migration west (light plays a starring role in go West novels like James F. Rusling's *The Great West and Pacific Coast; or, Fifteen Thousand Miles by Stage-Coach, Ambulance, Horseback, Railroad, and Steamer* (1877), as well as *Up and down California in 1860-1864*;

*the journal of William H. Brewer* (1930). Thom Gunn records this impulse in his poem "The Discovery of the Pacific."

[they] watched the sun, Westward of their West, Fall to the ocean.

Where it led they went. Kansas to California. Day by day

They travelled emptier of the things they knew.

They improvised new habits on the way,

But lost the occasions, and then lost them too.

For Jefferson, Hector St. John de Crevecoeur and their Romantic successors, America was Eden. But with the closing of the frontier and the coming of the urban revolution, the vision of America as perfectable ceased to be tenable, except in the Sunshine state, which changed son to sun, so that Adam sinned not by munching on a Golden Delicious but by eating anything but light. While the pastoral impulse had as an expiration date the closing of the frontier, the urge for harmony with nature and utopian idealism merely migrated west of the west: Hollywood wool gathering in which fanciful film recasts the Horatio Alger myth. Many late 19<sup>th</sup> century writers favorably compared California to myths of Eldorado, Zion, or New Cannan. As early New Englanders became more worldly, Sacvan Bercovitch's notion of "the myth of America" began to change, from New England as sacred place to California as potential space. Or, as poet Effie Waller Smith called California: that "Summerland, land of pleasant clime of never-ceasing summer-time." In a sun-following culture, light was worshipped at mythic proportions. As depicted in many a travel narrative, the golden state existed in a golden age, where sun-fed denizens left the plough and quit the loom, gorging on celestial manna. The myth continues in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in "Crocus," where Diane Wakoski casts Ms. California in the starring role of Persephone. As the personification of endless spring, Persephone is abducted and taken to a mythical place, Arcadia, California, northeast of downtown LA.

Persephone is a girl I know  
who calls herself Cynthia. And in California  
which is like Greece with its thick whitewashed walls  
and its bougainvillea. Yes, Persephone's an Eastern girl  
who lives now in California. Hades, that tall dark

computer wizard who brought her from the East

and has abandoned her and haunted her Arcadian house---

Here Hades is recast as a silicon-valley tech geek, and the poem pits a wintery underworld against an Arcadian summer. Silicon Valley is all about alleged discoveries of new golden tech innovations. As a version of pseudo-paradise, California is where you are dumped, where ex-nymphs and dryads frolic in swim-suits on Zuma Beach, where lusty satyrs like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jack LaLane develop mythic physiques on muscle beach. In myth, Arcadia is where life is lived naturally, uncorrupted by civilization. At Arcadia, LA, urban pastoralism is where the natural and artificial collide. In *Urban Pastoral* Tim Gray levels “heuristic binaries” like city and country, preferring instead a union of impulses. LA is an urban wilderness where nature is not an absentee landowner—it is transformed in destructive and generative ways. Pastoral oppositions abound at the heart of American culture—country/city, farm/factory, agriculture/industry. These oppositions conceal the problems of the Valley countryside, its increasing dominance by industrial agriculture. In the literature of California the Central Valley exposes the limits of Edenic myth. Here, Farmer’s daughters stare at the turboprop engines of crop dusters and dream of taking an airplane away, going somewhere, anywhere. California was advertised as a dazzling Eldorado or a blazing Zion, bright images that ideologically subsidized a well-lit rationale for American westward migration/conquest. Such a sunny mandate helped overcome feelings of reluctance to moving, to relinquishing ties and pulling up family stakes, pulling up pedigree and Mayflower ancestry. A sleepy hollow headed hesitancy for change. But a dragging economy can spur even the most sluggish. Down east economic lows of the period were represented as dim and dire, the past overcast by slavery, economic woes and immigration debates—gloomy storm clouds that cast a pall over the Eastland and the nation’s future. And so

the East coast was characterized in texts like *Life in the Iron Mills*, *Ruth Hall* and *Hope Leslie* as darkened, grave, and weighted, whereas California was promoted with sunshiny optimism, opportunity, and rainless happiness—the dream coast promised a sunlit and job rich future. One 1888 promotional booster tract, titled: “Merced County Small Scale Farming,” envisaged the San Joaquin Valley as a idyllic place with a

Climate in which laborers work in the fields, mechanics and others ply their vocation in the open air, ladies visit and children play...in which all the evenings, nights and mornings in summer are deliciously cool, and the languidness of summer heat is never felt...the flower garden will flourish a bouquet every day in the year without a single exception, in which the vegetable garden may be harvested and replanted in some part every month...



Figure 11

**LONG SHOT** – I hated the stuffy winters of New England and the Midwest. I didn't like being

a shut-in by the fireplace with nothing to do or nowhere to go. I always wanted to live in an open floor plan Charles and Ray Eames house<sup>viii</sup>, preferably perched on the edge of a hill, with huge glass windows and panels overlooking the Sunset Strip and the lights below. In California there is no end to this urge to immaterialize. To taper off and abstract, to slenderize, minimize materialism through light and glass. In Venice beach they glass everything, especially architecture: there are cantilevered glass-treaded staircases, glass plate floors that defy gravity, multi-story window walls, glass guard rails, floor to ceiling glass bays, retractable glass walls, glass roll up garages. Certainly time breaks his glass in Venice. Glass houses capture the Californian dream that is expressed today through architecture firms like Craig Ellwood, where glass offers an escape from mundanity and confining views. Ellwood & co. create transparent, sun-filled architecture in an aesthetic derived in part from Rudolf Schindler and Richard Neutra—Viennese emigres who came to California during the first world war and saw the sunshine state as the land of light and hope. Their lightweight buildings took hold within sight and sound of the Pacific Ocean—a far cry from the darkness and muddy carnage of the battle fields of Western Europe. Or, for that matter, the dustbowl of the postwar Midwest. Mid-century modernist houses by Richard Neutra, Pierre Koenig, John Lautner and the like architecturally advertised life in sunny, cosmopolitan and forward-looking Los Angeles through light energy, clean architectural lines and smooth surfaces, with an edge of voyeurism. Indeed, this was an architecturally inspired Edenic paradise of outside living spaces and open interiors. Houses like Neutra's 1939 McIntosh house and Koenig's Case Study House No. 22, a structure that cantilevers out from a hillside above Hollywood, celebrates the California climate and a sense of

gravity free living. Art and aerospace technology combined to allow reflective glass architecture on a large-scale. Architects like Cesar Pelli and Anthony Lumsden created glass skin buildings, creating a regional vernacular of "de-architecturisation." This urge to replace heavy materialism with glass, light and air is a California ethos based on light: where light itself is exceptional—spectral measurements in California show a qualitative difference in light: shorter waves (violet, blue, green) create a golden cast and imparts a white light to coastal daylight.

**FLASHBACK:** I was walking down Ocean Front Walk in Venice Beach and saw the David Hertz Panel House. I saw two people inside who looked like a pair of models sitting in the glass-enclosed living room. I don't think there were any interior walls, and giant windows reflected the palm trees and water like a giant mirror. The house was all reflection—no introspection. Very



Figure 12

LA. In Diane Wakoski's "Remembering the Pacific," the ocean is a giant mirror image, reflecting, abstracting, copying, and enabling self-observation on the nature of appearances:

The mirror in the living room with pink flamingos painted

at its

edges, also told us about our inadequacies.

But mirrors were unnecessary

because we had the ocean

.....

Oh the mirror

Only added to the gleam of truth

That water represented in our lives.

Water which I imagine

As the Pacific Ocean.

**EXTREME WIDE SHOT OF OCEAN:** When the wind dies (usually in the afternoon), it causes the water to become very smooth or glassy slick, to glass-off.

For all that many New England writers rejected California as Eldorado, less convinced of the superiority of natural light and the budding west coast ethos—they championed the light of the traditional fireside, the indoor coziness of human habitation. Critiquing California as a pale dream, in “California Winter” Edward Rowland Sill (1841-1887) lauds seasons as absolutely necessary for cultural and personal rebirth, a phenomenon the golden state lacks. Sill kicks up a fuss, attacking a winterless Eldorado:

This is not winter: where is the crisp air,  
And snow upon the roof, and frozen ponds,  
It is a land without a fireside.  
Far is the old home, where, even this very night,  
Roars the great chimney with its glorious fire,  
And old friends look into each other's eyes  
Quietly, for each knows the other's trust.

Sill takes as gospel that seasons are required for the regenerate congregation, who are expected to observe the liturgical year (autumn is actually the beginning of the cycle). Stripped of seasons, California was bereft of Christmas and Easter. No salvation. No redemption. For Sill, in want of seasons Angelinos can never understand impermanence, hence their contradictory sense of materialism/immaterialism. Sill proscribes that a proper discerning of the seasons (times) fosters an accurate interpretation of exactly what “the good way” is. Without the ability to discern the times (seasons), Angelinos followed false leadings, and thus seek harvest in winter.

### **NEW ENGLAND STRIKES BACK**

In retaliation the East Coast launched a conceptual counter attack on California exceptionalism at the level of color and spirit, not light, which they conceded to California. In Kenneth Rexroth’s “Autumn in California,” the émigré from California vilifies the Southern California landscape as ashy and washed out, a drab dessert that lacks the bloom and blush of spring, and especially the legendary autumnal palette of crimson reds and yellowy russets. In Vermont, color is measured not in light, but in the blooming of spring and the color of the seasons. While in the golden state:

Autumn is unperceived, undistinguished is a mild  
And anonymous season, hills and valleys  
Are colorless then, only the sooty green Eucalyptus,  
Deep into the haze;  
There are no flowers, the herbage is brittle.

Much the same, in “California Hills in August,” Dana Gioia surveys the Cali-chaparral through an Easterner’s eyes:

I can imagine someone who found these fields unbearable,  
An Easterner especially, who would scorn the meagerness of summer,  
a landscape August has already drained of green.  
One who would hurry  
And hate the bright stillness of the noon,  
without wind, without motion,  
in the blinding, sunlit blue.

Germinating landscapes are celebrated for their activity, their unfolding maturation. Not so the Mediterranean landscape, with its pacific and seemingly stationary weather, minus color, moisture, or movement. This is a world interpreted as static, unfinished and unfruitful, an allegory of wild aridity to the rich growth spurt of the East Coast summer. California is gauged exhausted, a finished landscape, whereas New England is renewed seasonally. Omitting these

exceptions, New Englanders and Midwesterners generally become sun-drunk when they alight on golden shores. In Diane Wakoski's "Maple light," west coast light transforms the senses, which have become ice-covered, clapboarded, and dulled by New England winters. Indeed, in Wakoski, you too can squander the gold of your days in the Midwest.

Just my Michigan eyes, I guess, converted  
from Southern California eyes shaded with dark lenses.  
I see Maples in autumn, not as syrup,  
like leaves to be raked,  
but as light. Lighted hands,  
waving at me from the back yard.  
The light of the desert,  
the light of autumn, the light  
before I pack my bags and return to some other place.

Perception that was toughened and hardened in Michigan is softened and salvaged in California. The reader's senses are freshly polished and absorb energy directly from the poem's environment. The senses of this poem come alive to the vividness of the world—all is luminous. If California is portrayed as light and smooth, then New England is described as materially rough, abrasive, material: not the polished mirror of the Pacific. Roughness draws attention to its own materiality while the immaterial erases its materiality. Many Down East writers<sup>ix</sup> lamented their coarse coast as too rough and rocky, the soil too sterile, with much toil required to order and level it. The snow was equally unpleasant. Being snowed under weighed you down. The winter

was inherently sharp and brought on an excess of materialism to protect oneself from the chapped cold. Winter made one bristly, bearded, woolly. Hauling wood and scraping snow was backbreaking work. But if winter snows you the sun enchants you: while watching the snow, more than one New Englander dreamed of San Diego sizzling far away in the sun, or a polished plot in Pasadena.

The New England winter conjures its counterpart, the Midwest, which is not immaterial: storms mass, winds twist, oaks are suddenly covered with a glacier. And double decker and split level living is clad in heavy clapboard and shingle roofs, not glass. Darkness is a time of year. The black sky a blanket. But there are extenuating circumstances. The vast grid of the American Midwest is square flat land. An abstract idea/ideal of order. The early American government embraced surveying techniques developed on the British Isles to impose order, erasing Native American land claims by imposing geometric spatial order on the built landscape. These grids were based on principles and policies of speed, communications, and mechanization through the urban grid system. The physical ordering of the built environment that began in the Midwest during the second and third great migration was perfected on the west coast, where new American spatialities and subjectivities of motion and mapping were laid out.

Unlike mid-west weather, testing endurance, the sun tests pleasure. In Karl Jay Shapiro's "Flight from Chicago" Midwesterners flee Chicago for the Gold Coast:

Under its permanent umbrella of travail, Chicago swirls in grit. All is charred, all is furred with dirt, the sky winter and summer streaked like the sky-light of the grandest

railroad station. But now we take leave forever by car, driving in early morning south, miraculously out from under the soiled umbrella, south and more south in the dead blue winter light south and west in the snow-light, till the snow rots in Arkansas, then west again, the holy direction. There is a rise (where is it on the map?), on one side America and on the other, California. There you look down on promised advertisements of green come true

Instead of the feculence of Chicago, the poem's passengers make a break for Eldorado, pure and holy. Chicago's light is impaired by the presence of earth: the city is covered with soil, dirt, and dust. Beyond question the Midwest is described in earthly terms, while the Golden State is figured in terms of light and sky. While the refugees in this poem are sun-struck with their destination, the poem delivers a wry estimation of their California Dream: Filthy lucre. From the Latin word umbra, meaning shade, Chicago is spatially under an umbrella of gloom. If Chicago is beneath the weather in a position of endurance, then rival LA sits not beneath or covered by bad weather: but within good weather, in with the light, in it, joining in, taking part. If Chicago is in for a storm, then Cali is in on it. The weather feels positively in-doorsy. You can come in to San Diego. Weather is a warm place, an indoor-out-of-doors home. Please come in. From the Latin word papare, to prepare, and sol/sun, Cali weather is the perfect parasol. Less protection against the weather, less a weighty sun shield than a personal awning, the parasol is more of a put-on than a necessity, an accessory to provide slight shade, not heavy shelter.

**CLOSE-UP OF ACTRESS<sup>x</sup>: PLAYING CARDS**, Laguna Beach.



Figure 13

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** On the East coast (and in the Midwest) the Norman Rockwell and Currier and Ives view of life dominates, with pictures of happy families sitting around the fire serving as the lithographic litmus test of the ideal, in which our real lives always come up wanting. If we have no family, or a dysfunctional family, the lack is striking. Writers like Sill believed that firelight is best because it is produced by humans, controlled and contained in a hearth. In the mid-

nineteenth century the fireside hearth was heart and soul to a New England household. As a warm, fuzzy domestic symbol, the hearth was the domestic gathering space. Since ancient Rome the fireplace has long stood at the center of the home, a symbol of domestic work, stability and duty, as well as warmth and transformation. On the East coast the hearth retained its status as a symbol of harmonious and traditional family life. Yet some men dreaded staying at home, preferring the office or alien travel to settled, domestic bliss. In a letter to William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens captures his need to turn inward toward domestic isolation, to:

Keep the fire-place burning  
and the music-box churning  
and the wheels of the baby's chariot turning

During the building boom of post war California, the fireplace was the keystone element of the bungalow, a popular home style in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that did much to transform living spaces through its open floor plan. But with the advent of central heating the fireplace became less a stable fixture and more of a decorative choice, an artful backdrop to home kitsch. Later, the function and importance of the bungalow fireplace further changed as the meaning of the California home changed, from built hearth and shelter to a more imagined, immaterial set. No longer a mere built phenomenon, the California modern home transcended the physical aspects of a domicile, changing its relationship to its surroundings through the use of glass architectural details, indoor/outdoor spaces, and an interior layout that focused more on interaction with the outdoors.

#### **DISSOLVE THRU TO FIREPLACE**



Figure 14

For instance, in the work of California architect Patrick Killen, concrete countertops project through glass kitchen walls, thrusting the kitchen outdoors terminating in a fountainhead. While still burning as a symbol, the fireplace merely migrated to the back yard as fire-pit, barbecuing entertainment. With that the hearth, symbol of home, moved out-of-doors and into the light. The old bulky fireplace turned elegant piece of art—a piece of landscape, an abstract design, a set piece.

Walt Whitman preferred fire pits. He was quintessentially New York yet loved the outdoors. Writing against the stuffy interiors of East Coast homes as confining, for him fresh air and light were spiritually edifying and freeing. East Coast writers in his camp celebrated not only the dynamism and uncertainty of the world of nature, they championed the outdoors as superior to the stagnant parlors and meeting places where indoor life moldered on, year after year. Their recommendations of light and sunshine predated their California counterparts, who later sold the world on sunshine, sand and sea. This focus on light, plasticity<sup>xi</sup> and mutability was not a west coast invention: what began on the east coast merely reached its zenith on the west coast, a place where east coast theories of migrating materialism found fulfillment in the abundance of fluid waves, bright lights and setting suns.

With the sun setting on an Eastland empire in a state of decline and decay, civilization was booming and roaring out west. Whitman was the self-proclaimed bard of the open road, placing California at the heart of the new American experience in terms of robust love (or just wanderlust for some strapping stevedores). California was the promontory for looking for and beyond America, ever westward toward the future. Whitman's California was the Dream

Coast<sup>xii</sup>, the pioneering home of the next new thing. A Wild West where you could re-invent yourself, the Golden state has always stood for the future, for change. And so in his 1949 history: *California: the Great Exception*, Carey McWilliams proclaims that “California is not another American state, it’s a revolution within states.” New England was always portrayed as sun-forgotten but after Whitman it speedily became the shadow side of California. Whitman took to the open road to explore the byways and back roads of the self. His symbol for freedom and independence, he walked the cobblestones and crossroads of the everyday, fleeing the parking lots of polish and progress. In Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road,” the indoors are dark, sterile, and the Whitmanian fresh air adventurer was:

Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,  
Strong and content I travel the open road.  
I think heroic deeds were all conceiv’d in the open air.  
Philosophies and religions,  
They may prove well in lecture-rooms,  
yet not prove at all under the spacious clouds and along  
the landscape and flowing currents.

Equating a truly happy Republic with the open road, the courage of the human spirit thrived out-of-doors, in bright light, not shut up in a dusty study. The Whitmanian guardian of nature dismissed the stifling, shut-in aesthetic for a love of outdoor nature and humanity. In Whitman we see a love of light and the outdoors which reaches its apotheosis in the Dream Coast crossing of inside and countryside. “Starting from Paumanok” is Walt’s poetic manifesto where he

imaginatively journeys from Paumanok (the First Nations name for Long Island), the place of his birth, to the West. Roving geographically and poetically, his aim is to “strike up for a New World,” losing himself in the crucible of American life and modern America, best epitomized in California as mythic home to the American spirit of progress and exploration<sup>xiii</sup>. With his poetry conceived of as the next great awakening, Whitman makes “A Promise to California,” (a pledge he never made good on), in which he declares:

Soon I travel toward you, to remain, to teach robust American love,  
For I know very well that I and robust love belong among you...  
and along the Western sea.

Facing west from California’s shores,  
I nquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound.  
Thomas Cole Hudson Valley School....

In Hart Crane’s “The Bridge,” the new road west spans the country as a metaphorical and literal bridge from New York to California.

Macadam, gun-grey as the tunny's belt,  
Leaps from Far Rockaway to Golden Gate:  
Streets spread  
Listen! the miles a hurdy-gurdy grinds—  
Down gold arpeggios mile on mile unwinds.

*DISSOLVE OUT*

*DISSOLVE IN*

**FLIGHT 5: FREE WHEELING**

Like so many named places in California it was less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts--census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway—Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

The city by the freeway by the sea—Adam Mann

That world of reality..is..Love, and its highway—the great orientating path—E. Herman

**ME:**

I'm on the road...I'll be there in five minutes....

**CARLA:**

Me, too.... If I can make the freeway, I'll have a chance. Bye

**CHARACTERS:**

**ME**

**CARLA**

**ABOVE HOLLYWOOD–NIGHT.** I glide down from the stars, over the lights of Hollywood toward the darkness of the hills and the Hollywood Sign. My car is sent hurtling down the off ramp at break neck speed.

## **MUSIC UP: THE BEACH BOYS: “I Get Around”**

**Free wheeling:** To proceed without exertion or engagement, or without outside control; to move or act without restraint or concern; to fly. Space or freedom to pass without impediment; unrestricted access. Also: a free, unpredictable, or spontaneous person.

There is almost a sub-genre of on-the-wing works that float over the Golden state, surveying the land with an extended range of perception, in a car, plane, or even in a balloon. California is a gravity anomaly: there is a need to be carried along, to be buoyant—flying was never a mere method of transportation, but a state of mind—an aesthetics of mobility and lightness. In Quincy Troupe’s “CHORUSES,” the freeway is a free wheeling place that unifies and extends into space, with drivers whizzing around like astronauts above our heads:

...like a concrete pretzel claiming its own place as it curls into space,  
lifts off in the shape of interwoven, interlocking freeway ribbons carrying cars &  
speech above our heads on conveyer belts as motors screaming high speed octane,  
zooming around curves like crazed vagabonds  
hitting moments of sweet need, as music fills the air with magical incantations  
wrapped in voices that track down sound, then double back blue as terror

**CLOSE UP ON** my face, giddy as I clear the skyscrapers, flying without restraint over the city. I glide over the roof-tops of the city on the overhead freeway. Driving on the 405 with the sun-

roof open. I slip in a cassette of the Beach Boys and turn onto the 101 freeway west and angle past a monstrous traffic jam going east. Overhead and beneath are columns of concrete. I turn up the volume of the front and back speakers. I pull down the leather sunshade to screen my face. An AMBULANCE speeds by below, lights flashing, SIREN screaming. I can see over the backyard of a house, a barbeque is going on. I soar toward the stars, free wheeling.



Figure 15

**MONTAGE:** Moving, moving, moving—the cars all free-wheeling past BILLBOARDS. All the POVS from fast-moving CARS travelling with the desire to leave the surface of Earth. California drivers dream of going 7 miles per second, or over 25,000 miles per hour, to enter orbit. Achieving escape velocity is the biggest challenge facing California drivers today. In your car you can float along on the freeway, high up, then descend to the free movement of traffic. Mile after mile of smooth, five or six-

lane roads, unbroken by intersections, traffic lights, or the impedimenta of materialism. The freeway is streamlined, a place of free passage—but not safe passage. Time and space are immaterialized on the freeway, where everything is just an off ramp away. The 405 is long and flat, almost its own horizon, where the road meets the sky, and where you can watch the sun sinking down like a big orange ball on your way home from work. The freeway possesses a beautiful simplicity, connection, and picturesque effect which may be seen on the many bridges and overpasses across the city. Richard Diebenkorn's landscapes of the 50's and 60's show the

hazy geography of California, revealing an abstract geometry of roadwork, medians, over and under passes, water conduits, highway lines, commuter routes and road ramps. Color and space erase boundaries while a transient nomadic sprawl is barely noticeable in canary yellow. In Diebenkorn, the freeway is unified by color. In Robert Kelly's "The Mill of Particulars," the freeway is a self-sustaining space that unites a divided city. Instead of obstructing and blocking, the freeway reveals by opening up and bridging worlds:

the highway that feeds  
onto the Hollywood Freeway  
is itself fed  
(everything moving from right to left)  
& it's all  
made one  
by light,  
interconnecting,  
city,  
a masque of energy.  
but this whole  
freeway linked  
to the space  
it seemed to  
violate  
but in fact

revealed.

**SPEECH BUBBLE:** LA and San Diego are pillars of freeway overpasses across a concrete plain. I often drive on the Santa Monica Freeway as it heads east from the ocean. In seconds, I have reached the interchange with the San Diego Freeway and must bank my body to the left, following the lighted curve of road below. The freeway tests not only our maneuverability, but our materiality as well, as I feel and shift my way across the freeway, zooming through the high



Figure 16

towers of Century City with ease. Driving around these concrete jungles, I have found many little shortcuts that go places even faster, like tiny trans-warp conduits, slipstream, or wormholes. A group from California is even designing a new super sports utility vehicle—a jet-powered flying car. I’ve spent decades waiting for this car, ever since watching *Back to the Future*. A sleek cross between a business jet with a luxury automobile, the GF7 drives on electric motors while on the ground, then can extend wings and use a 3,500-lb thrust jet engine to fly to 38,000

ft. (12,000 m) and speeds of 550 mph (885 km/h). But materialism can intrude on any highway: the other day while I was driving a yellow couch fell from a very fast-moving truck, and I laid on the horn. Personally, I only engage in high-speed freeway chases with people I want to get it on with. But the couch made a car with a boat swerve to miss it, and the freeway became a mass of SCREECHING, sliding and CRASHING, creating an enormous traffic jam destined to make one spend an hour waiting, like it or not.

**WARNING:** Three car collision on the San Diego Freeway north of National Boulevard, only one lane open. I just pulled off the road whenever I saw a car coming behind me and gave them the road. But there is no rule of the road here, just honking horns.

**In the road:** To be in a person's road is to be in a person's way, to cause obstruction or inconvenience. I try to give a person the road, allowing them to pass. But many drivers don't give way and give no road. As a kid I used to be clumsy and in the road of everybody, bumping and tripping people up.

Almost everybody in Los Angeles has some pet plan for rebuilding large swaths of the city and opening up new and faster lanes. The freeways are dematerializing: they pave their way across cities and suburbs, chewing-out mountain passes and consuming scenery and homes. Many apartments now offer an unobstructed view of just the freeway--its become a selling point. The long awaited freeway connecting the central Los Angeles area to the foothills has moved over fifty thousand residents to other locations. And there are calls for still wider concrete roads, with no crossing delays. Many homes, apartments and businesses in the route have been moved or

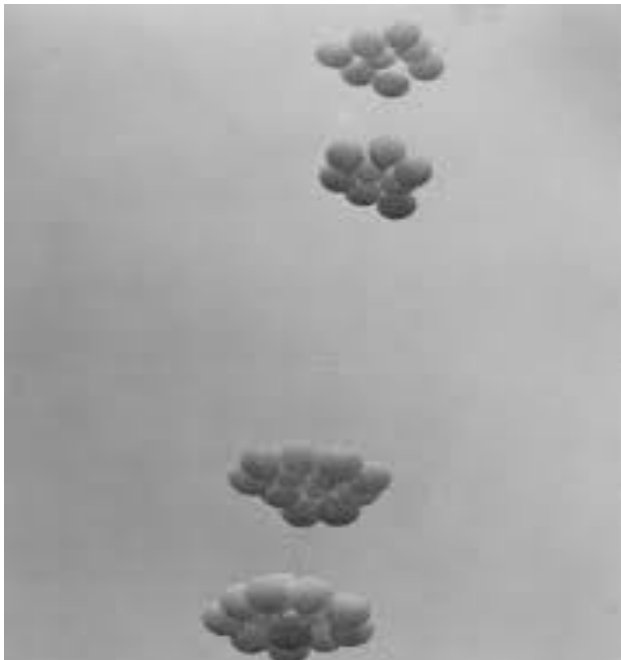
pulverized according to official figures. Extend that same 10-lane highway to 100 lanes and you might never see traffic again (or the city). A large number of the restored churches were pulled down to make way for road widening schemes like this. I think the roads themselves cause traffic. If we lay more road, won't people want to travel even more. The freeway let's us move around, and if you expand the freeway, we will probably just do more of it, living farther away. I hope the state is not on the highway to ruin. In Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "WILD DREAMS OF A NEW BEGINNING," the freeway is a place of anxiety and expectation, a place of waiting for the coming storm. The free way is everything that's wrong with the human world: a place both empty and emptying. But there's hope: nature in the form of a giant tidal wave promises to sink the city, destroying the massive city in favor of a smaller human presence:

empty meetings, where  
There's a breathless hush on the freeway tonight  
Beyond the ledges of concrete  
restaurants fall into dreams  
with candlelight couples  
Lost Alexandria still burns  
in a billion light bulbs  
Lives cross lives  
Idling  
.....  
Beyond the cloverleaf turnoffs  
There's a deathless hush

on the freeway tonight  
as a Pacific tidal wave a mile high  
sweeps in Los Angeles breathes its last gas  
and sinks into the sea like the Titanic all lights lit

Cars aren't the only thing that fly off into the sunset. In Tennessee Reed's "Airborne," the speaker flies from her native San Luis Obispo into the threshold crossing light, with the rising and setting of the sun creating a feeling of solar expansiveness:

...I prefer flying at night  
and also at sunrise and sunset  
because I feel more part of the solar system  
even though I'm still in Earth's atmosphere  
I like airlines that have a lot of extra leg room  
I have flown as close as San Luis Obispo  
to as far as Tokyo



When you're a little kid and you're holding a helium balloon, flying has to cross your mind. Lawn chair Larry was a native Angelino who strapped 45 weather balloons to his patio chair, dubbed it Inspritaion 1, and soared 16000 feet into busy Los Angeles airspace. Travelling light-wards, he left<sup>xiv</sup> the crushing weight of

matter, human presence, and inertia behind, describing the flight as mostly peaceful and serene, with occasional turbulence. He couldn't just sit around. I was at school when I saw my first real flying machine. Since then I have had an obsession with being carried away. Sometimes I think about attaching weather balloons to my mid-century modern lawn chair and taking off. Off the ground, these sun-clear works and stunts make the claim that the lay of the land is better seen from above than from below. If cloud nine is beyond the range of gravity and matter, then perhaps California is best seen from above, sun-hot and sun-defying, where it always wants to be, sun-haired and sun descended.

**CLOSE SHOT. EXT. PARKING LOT - MOMENTS LATER**

**EXT:** Driving my sister's car into the famous California sunset.



Figure 18

**FADE OUT**

*FADE IN*

**FLIGHT 6: TAR NOIR: LA BREA WOMAN**

**CHARACTERS:**

**JOHN**

**MOM**

**DAD**

**MARIO**

**BILLY**

**JOHN:**

Our back yard is like the La Brea tar pits.

**MOM:**

Careful or you'll get stuck in it like one of those the fossils you see in the Page  
museum.

**Dematerialize**, *v.* To deprive of material character or qualities; to render immaterial; to turn into myth and history.

**EXT: LA BREA AT NOON**

**FLASHBACK:**

When I was eighteen I went on my first date with a boy named Mario to the La Brea Tar pits on our way to LACMA. We had a very romantic walk past the adjacent pits, and came upon a tour of the pits. Several people posed for selfies while the tour guide explained the history of the life-sized replica of a mammoth trapped in the tar. Behind the fence a baby and adult male Mammoth watch helplessly as the mother sinks into the tar. The museum made the models look just as they

had done before dematerializing.



**Figure 19**

Now, for those of you that don't know, the La Brea Tar Pits are primordial pits of petroleum goo, an immaterial black hole to times past, and the collective skeleton in LA's closet. They have been around since time immemorial—or at least since my class field trip in the fourth grade to the pits. For tens of thousands of years, prehistoric beasts, mega flora and fauna, cavemen, and plastic bags have all fallen into these pits—supposedly sucked to the center of the earth where they are completely dematerialized by the scorching hot iron core. A feeling of eternity pervades the scene as we pondered all of those beasts and cavemen who were trapped in the tar thousands of years ago. Those beings were just like us—until they got stuck in the quicksand that formed over the tar. Much like black holes result from the gravitational collapse of an over-compact mass, the pits contain the missing matter of entire eons, whole forests and mega-fauna condensed into tar, the transformed remains of long dead organisms. As more mass was added life collapsed into an intense gravitational field that closed in on itself forming a gooey black hole that both

attracts and repels.

La Brea is a place of beginnings and ends. In *Miracle Mile* (a 1988 nuclear apocalypse film) a young couple fall in love at La Brea (just like me and Mario), only to die in a helicopter crash into the Tar Pits (not like me and Mario). While the copter cabin fills with tar, Harry attempts to comfort Julie by saying that, eons later, they will become carbonized diamonds or pit people from the past in some future museum.

### **DAY: SOMEWHERE UP LA BREA IN LOS ANGELES**

A sun drenched field at noon. A swelter of high power wires, telephone poles, and oil derricks in



**Figure 20**

the distance. The smell of gas and oil saturates the air. This area sprang up in the 1860s, after an oil prospector, Major Henry Hancock, took over Rancho La Brea, a Mexican hacienda with large underground deposits of crude tar.

The site became the richest late Pleistocene site in North America because of the forms of petroleum welling up from below the surface. Petroleum from the once-massive under-ground oil fields oozed to the surface over the millenniums, forming bogs that trapped and killed unsuspecting plants and animals, preserving their skeletons. Many of these tar pits in the Rancho La Brea area were drained for fuel, paved, or covertly covered over to sell off as conventional acres of land to greedy real estate developers. Many houses that were built over these active tar pits later sank into the ground, or lack of ground, to the horror of their homeowners, as abrupt dematerializations caused suburb houses to sink into the underworld as houses of Hades.



Figure 21

### MOM

I'm trapped in a marriage with your father constantly breathing down my neck.

I think that the large animals such as mammoths in our backyard wandered into the sticky asphalt

by mistake, because it was covered with a layer of leaves or vegetation. Their frantic cries probably attracted predators, who then also became trapped in a quicksand of tar and sticky oil. Apparently, an inch of the natural asphalt was enough to trap animals the size of a horse. Natural asphalt is extremely sticky and acts as a superb preservative—this is why the tar preserved so many fossils.



Figure 22

**DAD**

Marriage is very sticky, son.

**HISTORY LESSON:**

"Brea" means tar in Spanish, but the slick black liquid in the pits is more properly called heavy oil. Lighter compounds evaporate off the heavy oil accounting for the gas station-type odor of the pits; natural asphalt is the heavier stuff left behind. The pits contain various pools of goo in which prehistoric animals were trapped. In a great number of places, flammable fluid leaked



Figure 23  
from the ground as oil mixed with tar, often igniting (due to its high levels of stored chemical



Figure 24

energy). As a pit into the past, and as a site where energy leaks across boundaries, the tar pits are immaterial. They are so old in fact that they contain no measurable amounts of radiocarbon, the material normally used for carbon dating. When bones are excavated, completely soaked with tar, the lack of carbon-14 in the tar skews measurements of how much carbon is left in the bones themselves, making it hard to determine when a given animal died and decomposed. The only day lighted tar pits are now located in an attractive park in the Miracle Mile district. Many fossils of prehistoric animals are found in the pits, including saber-toothed cats, dire wolves, giant sloths, woolly mammoths, mastodons and more inside the Page Museum next to the tar pit. My favorite gallery is one of the least visited—the Hall of Fossil Fishes. I also like the dioramas, dinosaur bones and the darkened hall of gems that sparkles like Aladdin's cave. Downtown La Brea is busy with antiques stores, touristy shops and inviting little restaurants. We used to live off La Brea Ave.



**Figure 25**  
**CLOSE-UP OF TAR BUBBLE IN MY BACK YARD**

On our street, and in our back yard, natural tar used to ooze from between the grass. A large



**Figure 26**

deposit of fossils from the last ice age was found in what might seem the unlikelyst of places—under my mom’s garden. She was furious our house was built on shaky ground, blaming the tar for the fundamentally shaky foundation of her marriage to my father. But our back yard became a paleontological treasure chest of what life was like 10,000 to 40,000 years ago in the Los Angeles Basin. It is now a protected site. Mom says that during the Pleistocene Ice Age, the ice advanced southwards over our property four, maybe five times. Between each advance, the ice retreated during a warmer period called an interglacial.

### **DAD**

Your mother is a cold person with no hopes of an interglacial.

Years ago bones dating back 1.8 million years were discovered when my mom was digging bulbs in the garden. All work in the area was immediately halted. She found a Saber tooth tiger

skull that she donated to the Hall of Geological Wonders. The exhibits in the hall are focused on the geologic and paleontological wonders of Southern California. Dad used the leftover tar from mom's pit to reseal our driveway, just like the Chumash, who used the tar to seal their canoes. There's nothing really special about using tar to make asphalt: take some carbon, add a little hydrogen, sulfur, oxygen, nitrogen and a few trace elements, and you have the same sticky ooze



Figure 27

you find in the pits. Combine it with a mixture of stones, sand, and other stuff and you have the pavement that covers most of the city streets and is a quick patch for the broken concrete on freeways. Often it goes down in just one layer, no more than 4 inches thick. Compactors follow, squeezing out pockets of air, and the work is traffic-ready in less than 24 hours. In California tar paving has been used to some extent for footways since 1881. Now everything is made of grey and white concrete. Over the years our pit yielded woolly mammoths, saber-tooth cats, a condor-like bird known as Merriam's Teratorn and petrified wood from the coastal redwood trees. I have found bones, shells, trunks and leaves from some 600 kinds of animal and plants from the last

Ice Age; the fossils range in age from 11,000 to 40,000 years old. Among my chief finds was a piece of a Columbian mammoth: I named him Jake. He is my prize discovery because few mammoth bones have been found in the other tar pits. But in my haste to find prized animal bones, I threw out bits and pieces of crucial information about the period, like the smaller fossils of tree trunks, clams, fish, and even mats of oak leaves. Mom says La Brea is a shadowy black hole that preserved whole worlds and ecosystems. It wasn't just big animals falling into the tar, she said, you've got leaves and twigs, bugs and mice, and ground squirrels, all the way up the great chain of being to mammoths and mastodons and saber-toothed cats.

Mom said that individual fossil deposits in the area generally cover time spans of about 2,000 years, but that deposits just a few feet apart can be separated in time by thousands of years. Just like the distance between me and your father, she would say. She once confided that the fossils hold clues to our future. I used to think that anything dug out of the earth was a fossil. But mom says that fossils are the hard parts, such as bones, teeth, shells, or wood, which have been rapidly buried in sediment. This is followed by the re-crystallization of mineral components as the surrounding material turns to rock. Rarely are entire organisms preserved frozen, or embedded in amber or tar. Conventionally, the term fossil refers to remains older than 10,000 years, i.e. dating from before the end of the last glacial period. Later remains are designated sub-fossils. Fossils provide important evidence for the accurate dating of rock strata, and they provide most of the information upon which we understand present divisions of the geological timescale.

### **MOM**

When a thing is old or out of date, or when a person has lost the capacity for emotion or personal change, they are a superseded fossil. Just like your father.

## CLOSE-UP OF DAD AS A MAMMOTH IDIOT, ACCORDING TO MOM



Figure 28

While mom looked for a North American lion in her tar pit, Dad hunted for big game fossils. But, he was particularly obsessed with finding a La Brea cavewoman, an ancient skeleton of a Native American woman, like the one now preserved at the San Diego Natural History Museum. God only knows what he would have done with it if he had found one, mom used to say. I hope donate it. He and mom got into several shouting matches about his obsession, as his nocturnal diggings made him frequently late for dinner, and mom hated going through the motions of making dinner only to serve it cold. Revenge is a dish best served cold, she would say under her breath. In anger she would dematerialize backwards into the kitchen and, later, her separate room. Eventually, the fossil-bearing pits in our neighborhood became totally “worked out.” Though he never found La Brea woman, he did find some fossils belonging to a saber tooth tiger—he even let state archeologists make an animatronic model from them.

**EXT: SHOT OF MUSEUM STAFF WALKING AN ANIMATRONIC CAT ACROSS WILSHIRE BLVD**



**Figure 29**

After archeologists removed all the mammal bones from mom's garden, I began to form a collection of tiny marine fossils that they had missed. Fossilization is a paradox: a mineralizing operation that immaterializes the material. Large living organisms of former geological times become mere impressions or traces, burros or footprints, ghost remnants of the living. Entire forests fossilize into features. Mom said her marriage was a form of dematerialization when she realized her marriage was not real anymore. I wonder what few, if any, relics from our present will survive. In the movie *Volcano* (1997) a super volcano beneath La Brea explodes, sending a river of lava and tar streaming down Wilshire Boulevard, preserving the city, much like Pompei and Herculaneum. Many critics of the region assume that LA will not fossilize well since it lacks substance. But LA is not necessarily condemned to a barren cultural materialism. Perhaps when it has fully de-materialized as a state of light will it will fully be appreciated. But at La

Brea, the stratified past is fossilized in, and as, LA collective memory. In Glyn Maxwell's "La Brea," the tar pits are the central, fixed feature of LA, with the city's cultural landscape merely a flashing moment. For the speaker, the ever lasting is not a city etched in stone or set in concrete, but eons settled in tar.

Los Angeles. So just  
guess what I saw: not the dust  
or the wide jammed road, not that. And not  
the park where enormous playthings eat  
  
the shouting children. No, and the glass white  
televised cathedral?---that  
was a sight seen for the single  
flashed moment, and gone.

I saw the tar-pits at La Brea,  
where a dark endowed museum squats, and where  
the thick blots of lake are watched,  
and the haired replicas stroked and touched  
  
by kiddies. There's a tour:  
the intelligible stone, the Short-Faced Bear,  
the Dire Wolf, American Lion and Mastodon,

and Man with not much brain.

Well they did all make a dumb  
choice that day! But my day was warm  
and fascinating. Try to see these  
tar-pits, in La Brea, in Los Angeles.

What LA lacks in cultural history: the Titians and Rembrandts, it makes up in natural history: the largest fossil grave in North America. For sure, the microscopic processes of fossilization can be more psychic than physical, a kind of gradual dematerialization of the ghosts of time. Fossils are chimerical presences that take us to an imaginary world of cavemen and mastodons. In *The Boys Next Door* (a 1985 neo-noir crime film), Bo and Roy, two high school graduates "go caveman" after visiting the tar pits and proceed to break every societal rule, including murder. In the movie, La Brea is an alien, gaseous world, where the smell of asphalt clogs the air. Similarly, in Peter Kane "Trash," the tar pits are a Pandora's box containing all of humanity's collective wrongs, everything we can't bare remembering or repeating:

Stuff unbecoming or im-  
politic or un-  
bearable to remember. Stuff

we thought we were rid of but  
here it is still in the dig

of deep sleep. Sometimes  
not so deep, either. Sometimes  
not asleep, even: the dream

thrusting up into sunlight—one  
corner, at least, like an iceberg's,  
or a tusk from a tar-pit,  
or a damning memorandum. . .

The fossils at La Brea are so immaterial that they are extinct. Many fossil fishes and organisms, which no longer have any living representative, existed only in those primitive times when the earth and sea were still warm, in an alternative LA. Playing with fossils I used to wonder how creatures through the eons adapted or failed as their environments changed. Spectral and shadowy, they were reminders of a world that was. In the literature of La Brea the pits represent the permeability of history, and the permeability of energy and mass, as eons are converted to fossil fuel and Id energy. La Brea is LA's sticky shadow. This unwelcome world is a disembodied, subterranean world of secrets, and extinction, a nightmarish phantasmagoria, a psyche sinking into uncivilized barbarity. It is the sleep of reason and the antithesis of sunshine: darkness. Most recently, from the tar pits police recovered multiple items from a cold homicide case. In William Everson's "The Tar Pits," La Brea is the dark, violent underbelly of LA, where a mysterious atavism lurks just below the surface. The tar pits summon strange recurrences to a primitive past, where talons and gaping jaws enable carnivores (like us) to seize prey. The tar

activates the herd instinct, of clinging together to the sinking raft of humanity. In Everson, the herd instinct has two divisions, the fear and the aggression instinct.

Smashed locked jaws: in the alligator deeps  
tentacular, the uncouth stuprations,  
flesh grappled on darkneses,  
savagery of teeth-gluttings  
champing gristle or bone  
dog-darkness, the baleful  
eyes, the watchful, slaving  
rapacities....

Yes,  
great carnivores of the heart  
immense glutinous passions,  
atavistic totalities....

But even barbarians like us can fall into fear and disorder. When not fighting with our teeth, like carnivores, we look at the soft boggy tar and fear getting trapped. In Wanda Coleman, "All About a Humbug...*La Brea*," we can't extract ourselves from the tar of history, and our fear sends us back the long way up and down the evolutionary spiral, to the utter extinction of everything we love.

attempted wade thru the pits

extract myself? it sucks and pulls  
my flesh. splatters, splotches  
i'm burnt  
fears crawl out

La Brea is a dark mirror in which we fear losing what we love. In the film *My Girl 2*, Nick barbarically pretends to drop Vada's ring, a gift from Thomas J. (Macaulay Culkin's character), into the tar. In Jack Spicer's "[II [At the La Brea Tar Pits]]," the oldest light in the universe was created within moments of the Big Bang. In the night sky we see this ghostly fossil light as starlight. The tar pits are a black hole of secrets, with a fossilized skeleton in every house. In the poem La Brea is a living memento mori where the only thing with enough escape velocity is the ghost of a kiss. Here, the whole human world has dematerialized into memory, an amiable ghost. For the speaker, few things return, and, even if they do, you still go on alone.

At the La Brea Tar Pits

There is a sheer drop then twenty feet of stars. I

Believe this occasionally.

The white skeletons

Jammed in there in the black tar

Don't come back

Can't

Come back

No ghosts

Only occasionally

Ronnie.

According to Sharon Olds, in “Love Fossil,” La Brea uncovers both our reptilian self but also our sense of mammalian compassion.

He was dark as a reptile and splashed with mud like an old Chevy,  
he was souped-up and stunned and cruel. He taught me to love  
what was stuck, what couldn't help itself,  
what went down mute into time like tar, like anger.  
He was in up to the soft waist,  
wrapped in his brontosaurus suite like an old bathrobe.  
Love rose in me, a storm of mosquitoes  
hovering over La Brea.

Carnivore that I was, I watched him  
flounder and sink slowly as if he intended it.  
Carnivore that I was I watched his  
bare white shoulder and I went hungry.

La Brea is a throwback to caveman times, even if we don't as easily go caveman anymore, since La Brea's pull on us is more of a tug than a hold. Instead of a carnivore pile-up, we love what is stuck, what can't help itself. But we've lost something: the caveman in us is no longer prepared

physically or mentally for any emergency. Today, the tar pits still entrap animals, though no longer saber-toothed cats and mammoths. These days, it's mostly insects, pigeons and the occasional off-leash dog, like our dog Billy. Quite the irresistible cave-dog.

**CLOSE-UP: BILLY COVERED IN TAR**



Figure 30

**FADE-OUT:**

**A DOG BARKS SOMEWHERE OFF IN THE DISTANCE:** The sound gradually dematerializes, and fades away like gasoline vapor.

*DISSOLVE OUT*

*DISSOLVE IN*

**SOUTH CALIFORNIA**

**FLIGHT 7: DESERT POLISH**

I've been through the desert on a horse with no name it felt good to be out of the rain. In the desert you can remember your name 'cause there ain't no one for to give you no pain.

--A horse with no name—America

--I mean, whatever happened to cartoons?

**CHARACTERS:**

**ROADRUNNER**

**JOHN**

**CARLA**

**MARK**

**ROBERT (THE TOUR GUIDE)**

**CUT TO:** CLOSE UP of TV--A Looney Tunes cartoon comes on. The Roadrunner is tearing down a desert highway.

*ROADRUNNER:* Meep-meep!

*UP AHEAD,* Wile E. Coyote stands perched on a bluff, ready to unleash an avalanche of boulders onto the Roadrunner. Suddenly, the roadrunner appears in the middle of the road...

**FLASHBACK:** On our way to Palm Springs a Road Runner ran out in front of our car and looked up at us, meeping and mugging for the camera just like the cartoons. The Road Runner and Speedy Gonzalez (The Fastest Mouse in all of Mexico) are both proto-typical American speed demons: they speed, further and forever onward through the desert. Cartoon versions of American progress, they travel the great western road: the speedway to prosperity. In the desert, everything happens like a speeded up movie. Or a speeded-up film of a desert cactus flower opening and closing. In the desert there is no sluggish materialism—vehicles skyrocket through,



**Figure 31**  
more speed than mass. And then he dashed off...leaving just an empty desert highway behind him. In Diane Wakoski's "RIDING IN THE NEW TRUCK," the desert licenses speed:



Figure 32

Take us to the desert  
where our blue-as-a-storm-sky car has previously rolled:  
bring us, like the Argonauts to the California gold rush,  
chiming in  
desert Moonflower light,  
speeding past yucca-belled Joshua trees,  
blue-belled, ringing  
our way West.

The sand wilderness is the home of the immediate and instantaneous, with little excess materialism to slow down vision or speed. The landscape is a speedway and towns are barely given names: they are more spaces to pass through than actual places to stay. In these bad-



Figure 33

lands you fly with nothing to obstruct speeding and acceleration; in the space of nowhere, there is a get-there mentality. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari posit the desert as smooth nomadic space, free from walls, enclosures, and roads.

But smooth space itself, desert, steppe, sea or ice, is a multiplicity of this type, nonmetric, acentric...Even the lamellae of the desert slide over each other, producing an inimitable sound.

In Michael McClure's fast moving poem "Mexico Seen from the Moving Car," the desert landscape south of San Diego is seen through a car window, with the desert a vast blank screen for projected memories, Hollywood style—big as billboards:

The mind drifts through

dreaming dead friends: Tom, Emmet, Bill  
like billboards their huge faces droop  
and stretch on the walls,  
on the walls of the cliffs out there

Here, the desert landscape is a motion picture, and memory is experienced as a visual screen; friends can be mega-cinematic blockbusters or average B-movie stars (a staging of the sublime versus the vernacular). Movement through desert space is captured on a movie set that reflects fragility, ephemerality, and the passage of time. The focus on cinematic vision in the poem is both celebrated and suspect. That sight/spectatorship dominate ways of knowing in the modern era has its roots in the nineteenth century, where, according to cultural geographer Gregory Derek, "European ways of knowing render[ed] things as objects to be viewed." If visual distance can separate the observer from the observed (a main strain of post-modernity), then the cinematic has taken over the world of the poem, but, the absence of a bodily dimension is reaffirmed in the tactile lines:

my mind is fingers holding a pen  
hawks with pale bellies  
perch on the cactus, their bodies are portholes  
to other dimensions

In *The Poetics and Politics of the Desert: Landscape and the Construction of America*, Catrin Gersdorf asserts that the American desert was imagined as the antithesis of landscape: it was a

barren wasteland lacking picturesque contrasts. This image of the desert as impediment to progress (or a proving ground on the way) would later be projected onto the deserts of California, and LA itself would be summed up as one ginormous cultural wasteland to work through. Just because Los Angeles brings in water from hundreds of miles away does not make it a desert. According to the widely used Koppen climate classification system, LA and its coastal basin are actually humid, a Mediterranean climate of winter rains and warm summers. With a mean annual temperature of 65 degrees, to qualify as a desert under the Koppen system LA's yearly rainfall would have to average below 7.22 inches. This has occurred less than ten times in the past 125 years. With around 15 inches of rain yearly, the city would have to have a mean annual temperature of 100 degrees to qualify as desert (cultural desert jokes notwithstanding).

#### **AERIAL SHOT – DAY: THE GREAT AMERICAN DESERT**

Camera angle encompasses a section of the sky at 30,000 feet—a fleecy tapestry of brilliant white clouds against the celestial blue of the noonday sky. The ANGLE SLOWLY TILTS DOWN toward the flat, parched, interminable stretch of prairie desert that occupies much of the distance between Los Angeles and Chicago.

In 1836, based on a brief tour he took of the prairies, Washington Irving wrote:

This region which resembles one of the ancient steppes of Asia has not inaptly been termed 'The Great American Desert.' It spreads forth into undulating and treeless plains and desolate sandy wastes, wearisome to the eye from their extent and monotony. It is a

land where no man permanently abides, for at certain seasons of the year there is no food for the hunter or his steed.



Figure 34

During the preceding decades, the Great American Desert would be characterized as the greatest barrier to western expansion from the Mississippi to the Rockies. The image of the west as desert filled the expedition reports of Zebulon Pike and Edwin James, and the go-west narratives of James Fenimore Cooper and Washington Irving. In the cultural imaginary, it was empty space. Albert Pike, in his *Narrative of a Journey*, describes the immaterial nature of the American desert:

Imagine standing in a plain in which your eye can see no bounds. Not a tree, not a bush, not a shrub, not a tall weed lifts its head above the barren grandeur of the ground; not a stone is to be seen on the hard beaten surface; no undulation, no abruptness, no break to relieve the monotony; This was the great American desert. Broad, level, gray, and barren,

it was an immense desert which extended westward almost to the shadow of the mountains.

The literature of the desert also has a strong post-exodus tradition. Descriptions of the Great American Desert contained frequent biblical references that described the severity and effects of judgment on the new American Israel by God. Imagery of dryness and dessication described redemption as a herculean task, in which God's people experience turmoil and travail on a new continent. For critic Sacvan Bercovitch the Puritans laid this scriptural and aesthetic basis for the myth of America. In Mark Wilks Call's 19<sup>th</sup> century poem "CALIFORNIA," to reach the golden paradise you first had to pass through the "empty" desert by emptying yourself of materialism. But, at the end of the journey in the golden foothills of California, faith in the material progress of man failed—the halcyon dream of California deserted you:

You must pass through a desert to reached the promised/promising land  
Amid red rock and desert sand,  
The Golden Country lies before us,  
Famine and Hunger hand-in-hand,  
Behind us Death, the judgment o'er us,  
The Golden Country gleams before us.  
Ah! this is not the land we sought,  
No Golden Country gleams before us.

But John Charles Frémont painted a different portrait in a report to Congress. Based on his factual expedition to the South Pass he used “topographic geology,” as well as the aesthetic of the picturesque to remove the image of the west as desert; instead, he painted a narrative landscape of beautiful contrasts: hills, mountains and scenery, not some great monotonous grassland. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the left coast was isolated from the East and Midwest by not only rhetorical barriers, but by real mountain barriers, deserts, and “barren wastes.” Until the transcontinental railroad (1867), the fastest route was to sail a ship around South America rather than an inland journey. In the literature the Great American Desert and the great depression were inherently linked, with the desert taking the geophysical form of the depression: shrinking ownership, retreating land, dust, want, and the collapse of civilization itself (with parallels made to Roman and Egyptian wheat supply failure). Indeed, the desert was an unstoppable juggernaut creeping ever northward like the barbarians at the gate of ancient Rome. This increasing desertification of land and culture (the apotheosis supposedly being LA) was fictionalized in the *Grapes of Wrath*, in which Steinbeck mythologized Route 66 as “The road of flight.” In the desert, the heat and sun erode, breaking down the material to leave a rock bottom materialism. Writing from Yucca Loma Ranch, California, in 1925, Carman Bliss in “Sanctuary” captures the power of the desert to erode materialism, leveling matter to a common mean.

Sun fades the rosiest plaster,  
Sand wears the sill away,  
But the building of the Master  
Must stand till Judgment Day.

The sky shall roof my chancel,  
The desert be its floor—  
Years ago some desperate farmers  
took this land away from the desert,  
and every summer  
the desert tries to get it back.  
In the heat everything stops moving...

Here, Christian idealism is mixed with environmental realism; a desert of sand and sun are relentless juggernauts, assaulting the material landscape. Indeed, desert forces are conceived of as pure entropy that must be continually fought back in a constant war of attrition. Beneath every building, every block, a desert. In the cultural imaginary, without water the sand would rise up and cover southern California as though it never existed—and then the world. The desert melts materialism, leveling everything to the elemental. In the literature of the desert, the Sonora and Mojave are conceived of as the floor of the earth, the cellar of civilization, where the upper crust is exposed. Where directionally meets domesticity; if the upstairs is a forest of buildings and high reaching material objects, the nadir is the desert, where materialism flattens and pans out. As a vast floor or foundation, whereupon the buildings and makings of the material world are set, the Mojave and Sonora bring Californians to the ground floor of materialism where everything levels out. In Ginsberg's "Highway Poesy: L.A.-Albuquerque-Texas-Wichita," the Sonora is a terra under-firma of pure abstract space:

A wall, a wall, a Mesa Wall, There's desert  
flat mountain shadows  
miles along the pale pink floor  
---Indio in space.

This may seem the opposite of Lawn Chair Larry reaching towards the heavens, but in the doctrine of the transcendent, the immaterial is either floored upon a firmament, or placed in the upper air. In Robinson Jeffer's "Thurso's Landing," the desert digests rock and sucks in the physical world, making things intangible. If desert sand is finely divided rock and mineral particles, then the desert digests the perceptible into particles, the weight of the world into mere ounces, into atoms that stream through your hands, into the principles of the immaterial.

In the desert at the foot of sun-rotted hills  
A row of wooden cabins flanks a gaunt building  
Squatted on marbly terraces of its own excrement,  
Digested rock from which the metal has been sucked,  
Drying in the rage of the sun.  
The wood of their doors and walls was worn to the look of sea-drift by the desert  
sand-scour.  
He found the timer  
Choked up with drift of the desert...

Here, the wild desert is quick sand that swallows up the physical world, like shark infested sand dunes. An abstracted materialism of minerals, in the poetry of the desert, the desert is abstracted and reduced to minerals, an elemental zone of primary building blocks. Not complex ecosystems or biomes, but native rock, crystal, gold, silver: the pure geologic. Accordingly, the world is divided into two regions: the celestial and elemental. Minerals and elements are (hypothetically) pure conditions, as opposed to gravid, heterogeneous materialism. In California alchemy, the elemental is pure, uncompounded, lying at the base of other substances.

Writes Baudrillard on the Mohave:

I sought the finished form of the future catastrophe of the social in geology, in that upturning of depth that can be seen in the striated spaces, the reliefs of salt and stone, the canyons where the fossil river flows down, the immemorial abyss of slowness that shows itself in erosion and geology.

Geologically, the desert is a place of reliefs: striated, mineralized, de-materialized into constituent parts; atomized into ore, crystals, and immaterial atoms. Mineralization has many meanings. In geology, metals combine with rock; in biology, organic substance are transformed into inorganic ones. In the desert, elements can transcend the material world by not mixing, merging, or becoming impure admixtures of matter. Here, the elemental occupies a material/immaterial middle ground, as crystals and gems are an outer reflection of a perfect inner arrangement of uncompromised atoms.

## **FLASHBACK:**

I drove US Route 66 in reverse, all the way from Los Angeles to Chicago. I passed through the demanding Mojave Desert east of Amboy Crater. This part of the desert makes you really hot and lonely. Make sure you carry a big plastic cooler filled with bags of convenient store ice. That's the best kind of ice for some reason. Keep dipping your hat in the icy water and wear it on your head. That's what I had to do. Driving through the Mojave I found that California seasons are marked by desert bloom, which can be more colorful than Vermont leaf peeping. In James Laughlin's "*The Desert in Bloom*," every spring the desert pinkens and reddens, rouges, and blooms:

Desert that was so harsh all the  
Rest of the year, rocks and gray  
Sand, had suddenly burst into  
Bloom

The California wildflower season is to Southern California deserts what fall's changing leaves are to the Midwest or New England, only less predictable and more intense. In places like Sunshine Canyon, there are glimpses of pale yellow ghost flowers and the orange tufts of fairy dusters.



Figure 35

LA is desert looking—Angelinos see desertification as the material future (or anti-future, in movies like *Apocalypse, CA, and Damnation Alley*). For Baudrillard, the desert is another America, an estranging other, the counterpoint to the American cultural system. Writes Baudrillard:

I went in search of astral [sidereal] America, not social and cultural America, but the America of the empty, absolute freedom of the freeways, not the deep America of mores and mentalities, but the America of desert speed, of motels and mineral surfaces...the desert is a form of culture, America's secret truth, its destiny. The desert is no longer a landscape. It is a pure form produced by the abstraction of all others.

Of course California's deserts acquired the cultural baggage of the Great American Desert: not unique places but interchangeable spaces. Indeed, many films shot in the California desert were

stand-in locations for other desert plots: *Salome* (1918), *The Sheik* (1921), *Sahara* (1943), *A Night in Casablanca* (1946), *The Veils of Bagdad* (1953). Notwithstanding, the Sonora and Colorado Desert have never been easy places to live. One Franciscan friar declared the Sonora a “deadly place,” leading his missionaries northward past the desert. Naturalist John James Audubon declared the Imperial Valley “most melancholy.” In *McTeague*, Frank Harris portrays the desert as a barren, double-crossing place, where life literally deserts you. In the novel, McTeague attempts to escape his fate after deserting then killing Trina by crossing Death Valley. Fearful of the desert, the posse hunting McTeague skirt the desert to avoid crossing it. The journey across the desert is extremely demanding, and McTeague is punished by the void. Eventually, McTeague’s bounty hunter follows his trail through the desert where they struggle over the stolen gold of the California dream. Seduced deeper and deeper into the desert by broken promises, bounty and gold, they both die, betrayed by the glittering mirages. The end of the book is like one of those mirage dreams which lure the gambler to his doom:

There was no change in the character of the desert. Always the same measureless leagues of white-hot alkali stretched away toward the horizon on every hand. Here and there the flat, dazzling surface of the desert broke and raised into long low mounds, from the summit of which McTeague could look for miles and miles over its horrible desolation. No shade was in sight. Not a rock, not a stone broke the monotony of the ground. Again and again he ascended the low unevenness, looking for a camping place, shading his eyes from the glitter of sand and sky.

Southern California video artist Bill Viola creates visual mirages on location in the dry lake-beds

of the Mojave Desert. These mirages cause our dreams to shimmer, as the American dream is particularly miraged in the peculiar atmosphere of the desert. In this miraging air and heat, the



Figure 36

California dream looks like a trick of heat and light. These deceptive images of distant objects are formed by light that is refracted as it passes through air of varying temperature, giving the appearance of what looks like a distant sheet of water in the desert or people coming towards you. If the air closer to the ground is much colder than the air above, objects like palm trees seem to be elevated or floating in the air. LA continues to be for many a mirage city, a promised land of plenty. It lies beyond the horizon of the every-day world, becoming visible only when the mirage of fantasy lifts dreamers up. In *Mirage series: Ancestors* (2012), *The Encounter* (2012), *Walking on the Edge* (2012) and *Inner Passage* (2013), figures appear from a distant, distorting haze, or from a miraculous mirage of a beach shoreline. The figures increasingly become corporeal as they head towards the camera through desert heat distortions. The myth that



Figure 37

Los Angeles is a vast deserted wasteland is still firmly entrenched. A recent editorial in the LA Times, "It's Still a Desert," confirms a continuing cultural disregard for the reality and nuances of



Figure 38

the city's climate and ecology. Over the years the "Los Angeles is a desert" theme has appeared regularly in The Times. A quarter century ago a columnist penned: "Los Angeles is by far the largest city ever built in a desert." Indeed, despite being the global capital of the entertainment industry, or because of it, the city is still perceived as a cultural wasteland.

**Desert polish** *n.* a smooth, shiny, sparkly surface imparted to rocks of desert regions by the friction of the windblown sand of the desert. Desert Polish is also a kind of nail polish that I used to wear to the white party in Palm Springs, painting my nails in Fiery Cumin, Blue Oasis, and Pink Pepper.

***CLOSE-UP OF ROCKS WITH DESERT POLISH:***



**Figure 39**

In the California Desert, surfaces of hard materials like chalcedony are etched into furrows and grooves, acquiring a characteristic patina of desert-polish. This desert varnish is actually a dark-colored film composed of several minerals: iron and manganese oxides, usually with some silica,

which is deposited on exposed rocks and polished to shine by wind abrasion. As the desert scours the landscape it lightens, buffs up, and burnishes the darkness and dullness of heavy materialism. In arid regions the hardened film has frequently been smoothed by the wind-blown sand, brandishing a polished, mirror-like surface. Capillary rise is even associated with the chemical breakdown of the interior of large desert boulders in Joshua Tree, with the rock crust developing a shimmering varnish on the surface. Luminous colors are formed when loose salts are blown away, so that oxides of iron, accompanied by traces of manganese and other similar oxides remain, forming a red, brown, or black varnish. Many surfaces of long-exposed California rocks and pebbles acquire this glitzy desert varnish.

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** Sometimes I forget whether southern California is in South America or North America?

In the vast Sonoran Desert, the rate of desert varnish and polish formation is exceptional. Generally, it is thought to take about 2,000 years for it to form in arid areas, coating artifacts and natural objects alike; but, it has formed in less than 50 years in the Mojave Desert, making the Mohave more luminous and reflective than any other desert. Dumortierite, the main mineral of desert polish, is widely found in the Sonora Desert. This multi-colored mineral is composed of small quartz grains that form in clear bands of networks of minute crystals; this mineralization imparts a dark reddish sparkle to the rock. In the literature of Southern California, the desert is an immaterial place that shines: the Mohave has a polish to it, a glaze, a luster, a luminosity, a lightness; it grows reflective with a sand-burnished enamel. In the Sonora, heaviness and dullness are striped and buffed away. This varnish further de-materializes, becoming mirror like. There is

also a man made patina now. Across the desert of Southeastern California, dozens of solar power companies have placed reflective solar mirrors on more than a million acres of desert land, making the land reflectively bright.

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** Mark and I were inspired by the colors of the desert and wanted to



Figure 40

reproduce it in our living room. We tried to find the right paint color to give our house that desert sparkle. James Gibson takes an ecological approach to visual perception, triangulating the world into medium, substance, and surface. The medium we are most familiar with is air, which transmits smells and sounds, movement and perception. Alternatively, substances are more concrete: rock, stone, wood. These form the material

structure and base of reality; they are things

that we cannot see through, but stand upon. On the other hand, surfaces are an intermediary, they reflect and absorb energy and heat. Surfaces are where we touch reality: where our bodies come into contact with sandy substances. They are, according to Gibson, “where most of the action is.” In Diane Wakoski’s “Roller Skate Jazz,” the desert is not broken by irregular materiality: it is luminous, polished, a glassy plane. The desert is all reflective surface, and desert polish increases its reflectivity:

Road is as smooth as desert sand looks from a distance.

It is an ocean of smooth pavement, cresting occasionally, as

we surf

its black shining surface, smooth as pianos, sparkle

**DESERT- PANNING SHOT-** encompasses a boulder-strewn landscape, harsh and forbidding as the surface of the moon. The viewer stares out at the vast, forbidding desert. A robot wheels into view.

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** I wonder: do Martian rocks have desert polish?

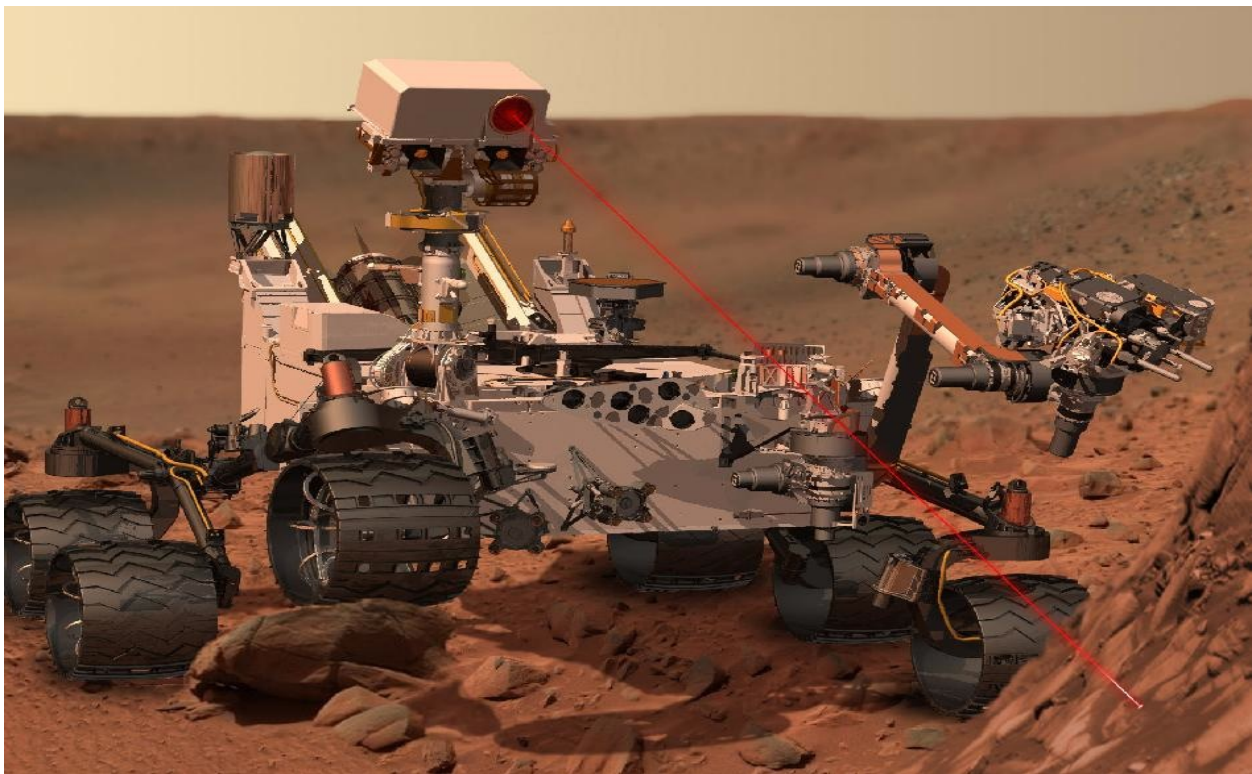


Figure 41

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:**

If space travelers wanted to pick the best landing spot to explore and study Mars, they would very likely consider the Mohave Desert. As a kid I wanted to build a long-term space presence, so my parents sent me to NASA Camp in Southern California, a pre-Astronaut leadership

experience camp that exposed me to the challenges of human survival on a distant planet. While looking at the astounding “Martian surface” I explored unknown valleys and collected geological samples. While on Mars I learned the leadership, team building and communication skills required to conduct complex missions. Skills training was not only for Martian landings—it was also designed to teach young astronauts like me about geology, so that I could understand what I saw on my future missions. But the desert does not conform to typical landscape conventions of the physical world: there are few roads to take, few tracks to follow, few craters to land in. The contours edge and angle off; the sand piles in drifts, the badlands are bad, not New England good; the flats are too flat; the border ranges. The American desert was not conceived of as



Figure 42

national landscape: more abstract space than place. When Sen. Dianne Feinstein tried to introduce legislation to establish two national monuments on roughly 1 million acres of Mojave Desert outback (home to desert tortoises, extinct volcanoes, sand dunes and ancient petroglyphs),

Congress excluded millions of acres of California desert from National Landscape status on technical grounds—the word "national" isn't in its title (California Desert Conservation Area). Really it doesn't qualify for national status on cultural grounds: the desert is not considered canonical western landscape: neither liberating, spacious nor joyous, exponents of cultural nationalism never claimed the desert as their own: it was too Mexican, too Native American, too extremely fragile, easily scarred; or, in Mary Austin, too futuristic: an alternative West where Native American values of communalism reigned. But LA is not a Martian desert, cultural desert jokes aside. The Mojave and Sonora have one thing in common with the Great American Desert though—the desert cracks and crumbles, lightens, polishes, and burnishes, making things into light. The emigrants passing through the Great American Desert lightened their load, shedding materialism and breaking up and abandoning their bulk along the way. They gave up armoires and tables, rocking chairs and mirrors. The heaviness of things could not make it across the desert. They shucked their keepsakes and burned furniture like kindling to lighten their load. This is why modernism took root in places like Palm Springs, where architects reached for the sky, for rectangles of steel and glitz, which erupted at the edge of the sandpaper-flat landscape.

Palm Springs and mid-century modern-everything has basically become synonymous, as well as gay life—it has seven times the national average population. My love all of all things mid century surfaced after inheriting a couple pieces of my very fashionable grandmother's MCM furniture. I'd always loved clean lines, the use of glass, natural and manmade materials, as well as a sense of elegant informality. I even love the sunken round fireplaces that my grandmother called conversation pits. After inheriting her Broyhill Brasilia furniture, I became obsessed. I have been to Palm Springs before, but had not fully engaged with the city's renowned

midcentury modern architecture. I specifically wanted to see homes designed by the leading lights of desert modernism: Richard Neutra and Albert Frey. Their homes defined mid-century desert modernism by defying gravity with butterfly-roof lines, post-and-beam structures, space-age appliances, minimalist graphics and backlighted starbursts. I took my sister on a desert modern architecture tour not because I am a nut job for this look, but because I thought she might like it too. On our tour we saw hidden masterpieces, heard stories about who lived where, and learned about the talented architects, designers and builders who contributed to the city's modernist legacy. We did the tour with Robert in November 2014.

### **Robert**

In the middle years of the 20th century the mountains and desert sands of the Coachella Valley inspired an aesthetic that would become known as Desert Modernism.

Robert is like the Yoda of Palm Springs architecture, but far more charming. He leads an insiders' tour of modern Palm Springs, and along the way we also met several locals who were out enjoying the sun. The tour was a great peek into the way sun-loving Southern Californians lived and played in the 1940s, 50s and 60s. I knew Southern California was known for its Spanish architecture but had no idea how much modern architecture was in Palm Springs. Seeing how residents have been true (or not true) to restoration efforts makes me appreciate what these houses looked like in their heyday, and has me thinking about what I can do to help with preserving this architecture in my own city.



Figure 43

Our first stop was John Lautner's iconic desert hideaway, built in 1947, it hangs breathlessly.



Figure 44

There were only 6 of us on the trip. My sister wasn't convinced 3 hours in a van was going to be



Figure 45

worth it but she changed her tune. She especially loved the steel houses, like this one by Richard Neutra, complete with playing puppy. Neutra is one of the most important examples of International Style architecture in the US. This house was up for sale when we saw it. It is a five-bedroom, five-bathroom vacation house with large sliding glass walls that open the living spaces. The major outdoor rooms are enclosed by a row of movable vertical fins that offer flexible protection against sandstorms and intense heat. That's what the realtor said, anyways. It was listed for sale at \$12.95 million. My only wish is that more of the interiors could have been viewed as well, but you can't just knock on doors and barge in, I guess. Although I did sneak away from the official tour sometimes to poke around the properties, albeit while watching out for rattlesnakes. But the Albert Frey house was the real standout on the tour. It was built into the mountainside with the rock protruding into the home, blurring the boundary between indoor-outdoor living.



**Figure 46**  
**INT. PALM SPRINGS HOME – DAY:**

Carla fell in love with the built-in furnishings and said it was a love letter to compact living.

How can you not agree? After the Frey house we looked at two residences by William Krisel,



Figure 47

who helped popularize desert modernism for the masses by bringing an immaterial ethos to affordable housing for the middle class. This house was my favorite because of the interesting color blocked landscaping. The last stop on the tour was “The Elrod House,” designed by John Lautner. Carla said this house changed her experience of space. The 60’-wide circular living is topped with a conical dome that fans out into nine petals as the clerestory angles up to bring in light. Retractable curved glass curtain walls open the entire living room and pool terrace to panoramic views of Mount San Jacinto, Mount San Gorgonio and the full sweep of the valley below and mountain ranges beyond. The very rock of the ridge is incorporated throughout the home. The master suite is a world unto itself. Of course I snuck off to see the view from the large viewing and entertaining deck. I had to surreptitiously traipse up a spiral staircase to get there.

Robert said the home was featured in the classic (1971) James Bond movie, “Diamonds Are Forever.” The property has been on the market since November 2009, with a last known price



Figure 48

tag of \$13.89 million. As much as I would love to buy it I can't. After 3 hours on the tour we felt inspired and engaged and full of new appreciation for some of the houses we might have once thought of as strange. Not only did we leave knowing the key architects of the last century and their impact on Palm Springs, but we also learned a lot about how Palm Springs grew, and of course we got some celebrity gossip, too.

#### **FLASBACK:**

Since the 1920's Palm Springs has been the desert playground of the stars. I used to go there with Mark during winter vacations. The legendary "Two-Hour Rule" of Hollywood studios put Palm Springs on the map as a perfect getaway. Actors under contract had to be available within two-hours from the studio just in case last minute film/photo shoots had to occur. Mark was also under a two-hour rule as a LA doctor, and we had to run home several times so he could attend

to a patient. While we were in the Springs, we went to several pool parties at mid century hotels like the Saguaro or the Ace. We usually booked a king sized pool-view room with a balcony. We observed that many of the guests would jump into the pool and make faces, pretending they were Marilyn Monroe or Elizabeth Taylor. The Saguaro had an inviting pool surrounded by marina blue turf-carpeting, this is the first thing that catches your eye. I'm certain that if the pool could talk, it would only tell epic stories. The outdoor communal fireplaces were very nice at night, and the photo booth in the lobby was endless fun. There were two pools, and they are open late. None of that "pool closes at 10pm" nonsense around here. I was often found floating on a little cactus inflatable raft with Mark, staring up into the most beautiful night sky, watching stars and soaking in the relaxation somewhere around 2 a.m. With DJs knocking out some beats for the pool party scene, I can't think of a better way to spend a beautiful night than laying poolside, music in my ears. My favorite part was poolside coffee and breakfast in the morning.

**EXT. PALM SPRINGS – EVENING WE GO PAST SEVERAL** expensive Palm Springs homes.

In a romantic update of the desert as a place of wandering, Diane Wakoski writes:

My car pointed west

.....

we are traveling to Southern California

To the pacific

.....

wandering in the desert, looking for someone to love.

Similar, in *A Star is Born* (1976), Esther pulls down John Norman, enveloping him, laughing. They kiss, and he slowly sets her down on the desert and they begin to make love, alone in the immensity of the desert in the outlines of their house-to-be. On our way to Mexico we passed through southeastern California and saw the Algodones Dunes (a large sand dune-field). This part of the desert is a shifty landscape, not your usual stable eastern woodlands. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security can't fence in the leaky desert because of shifting sands that render barriers ineffective. But the government has erected a new type of fortification, a fence that floats. The floating fence is designed to not be swallowed up by the desert. At 15 feet high and stretching nearly 7 miles long, the steel rod fence separates the U.S. from Mexico. But, unlike other border fences, this one moves—it can just be picked up and placed back down when it starts to sink into the dunes. The concept is simple, really. As sand piles up along the edges, sections of the mobile fence are lifted by a machine and placed atop the sand, so the fence never loses its un-scalable height.

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:**

The Border Patrol must be really impressed—an adaptable fence that never loses integrity and can be easily resettled on a landscape that is constantly shifting in contours. It meets their vision perfectly of a dynamic border that can react to and meet the demands of a changing battlefield.

But, lately, the fence has veered much further off course than anticipated. In fact, it has



Figure 49

completely redrawn the border ever so slightly in favor of expanding American territory into Mexico. But the border patrol has simply left it, despite the historical irony: “We didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us.” Me and Mark had never seen a fence like this and think we should just let the fence do its floating thing in the sand. I’m just curious to see where it would end up decades from now. Would it be buried only to resurface again, over and over, like a mole? Where would the fence end up in, say, 1000 years? Will there be anyone left who needs to cross it then? Will the earth just find a way to completely absorb it? Or, would the dunes eventually spit it out somewhere on the outskirts of San Diego? The floating fence reminds me of Christo and Jeanne-Claude’s “Running Fence.” Their immaterial fence was a fabric curtain twenty-four and one-half miles long and eighteen feet high that ran through Sonoma and Marin



Figure 50

Counties for two weeks. And, much like the border fence, “Running Fence” also runs into the



Figure 51

sea. After we saw the sand dunes Mark and I went to Death Valley looking for old mines. We followed an old map to find holes in the ground, yawning chasms in the desert crust. Miners

once moved like beetles over this area, blasting and boring their way through sand and rock, taking the immaterial/material: uranium, silver, talc, borax, gold. When the earth stopped yielding its treasures, the miners moved on, leaving crater sized holes in their wake. It doesn't take long to find these old mines. We followed a trail that led to an old silver and gold mine, despite signs warning visitors not to enter. Many curious people do. The floor was decayed planks of wood that could have easily collapsed, and people have found all sorts of things inside. Mark found something that looked like dynamite buried in the tunnels—highly unstable.

**CUT TO: CLOSE SHOT: SIGNS AT THE END OF AN OLD MINING ROAD:** Old, sun-blistered signs, sagging sideways on stakes, reads in faded letters: GOLD



Figure 52  
**FADE OUT**

*FADE IN*

**FLIGHT 8: SAND/CASTLES IN THE SKY**

The Eastern sea shall hush his waves to hear Pacific's surf-beat answer Freedom's cheer—John Greenleaf Whittier

**Characters**

**Mom**

**John**

**Mario**

**CUT TO: SANTA MONICA BEACH:** The surf crashes onto the shore.

**BEACH:** The shore of the sea, on which waves break, the strand; the strip of sand alternately covered and laid bare by the rise and fall of tidal movements. A physical but ephemeral place.

**CLOSE UP on SAND CASTLE**

Early on we moved from the Bible belt to the sand belt.



I grew up on Santa Monica beach building ephemeral sand castles like this one. Back then I had nothing better to do than to understand the sea. My mother thought the beach was more dangerous than playing in the street. It was very hard to toe the sand-line with her. Until I was ten she would literally draw a line in the sand that I could not stray beyond.



Figure 54

It was a thin boundary but very weighty. This confused some beachgoers, who thought the beach was literally “closed.”

**Beach bum**, a boy who doesn't work or go to school, just hangs around the beach all day and surfs and dreams frivolous dreams.

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** Me and Mario used to camp at Laguna Beach. We spent most of our time building dreamy castles that never came true. Wherever we went we carried our beach towels with us like flags from some aquatic country. He liked good quality linen, too. As we walked through the crowded boardwalks of Venice Beach, our glamorous beach towels thrown serape-style over our shoulders, we were quite a sensation. Well, he was, anyways. For Halloween one year he took me to Santa Monica Beach, where surfers compete in flimsy Halloween costumes. It was definitely a sight to behold. Surfers took to the ocean dressed as film

stars, marine life, aliens, super heroes—and my favorite—Wonder Woman.



**Figure 55**

My mom was usually there in her beach-gown. She was good at grabbing a bit of beachhead. She was an x-Marine, back before women could carry guns. She said she felt like a Marine again when she seized a substantial beachhead for us. If she was still a marine I felt like an imaginary character in some beach-book thriller by Dean Koontz. Mario said beach books were nothing but escapist reading. Once I tried to hold his hand but he pushed me into the ocean. It was not immaterial, I almost drowned.

**OMIT ENSUING FIGHT SCENE:** Sequence omitted from script.

Years later I saw a man get up from a table in cafe Intelligentsia like Nero wearing only short shorts and beach sandals. He was flanked by a flock of tanned beach birds—It was Mario. He took me to a volleyball game on the beach where the competitors assaulted each other's chiseled



Figure 56  
torsos with beach balls. Later we rode away in an airy beach buggy, one of those low,



Figure 57  
wide-wheeled motor vehicles designed or adapted for recreational driving on sand. Mario was

saving his money for a new flying dune buggy—which I told him looks like some alien grey metallic bug. Mario lived in a beach shack in Venice off Pacific Ave. Once, he took me to a party wearing only a speedo and leather beach sandals. Apparently this is normal party attire in Venice. The party was in a cool Mexican beach house of vivid yellows and palm-woven walls. We spent the night there, leaving our big beach towels to dry on the wooden porch.

In the early to mid twentieth century, developers used to see the beach as a sand-waste, an unprofitable, building free zone. All that part between Highway 101 and the sea was once just one mass of empty desert. Now this shack goes for 150K. The immaterial became material over night.

#### **EXT: BEACH HOUSE- DAY**



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Figure 58

LA is a contemporary castle built upon the sand. During the turn of the century, LA and the greater west coast development was criticized by the older, more established cities of the east as

mere schemes of sand. It was taken for fact that the city's foundation was built upon flimsy sand. The sands pits of LA were compared with the solid rock of the churches and towns of New England. It was called a foundational error—the sand



Figure 59

on which the future crumbling megalopolis was to be built. New England and Midwest reformers compared LA to the sand-buried cities of the Middle East or Egypt, among other sand-buried archeological sites. Reformers warned those travelling west about the western sand-sea: upon arrival you would get stuck and have to carry everything out on your back. They made the sand-sea sound so scary that the mere sound of it would drive off the sand people from Star Wars. Apparently the journey was akin to being taken to the Sand Dune Sea and cast into the Pit of Carkoon, the nesting place of the slow-eating sand-monster Sarlacc from Star Wars. The inviting sands of the Pacific thus induced terror in some, and delight in others. D.W. Griffith's (1916) *Intolerance* was filmed on location in the California desert, which was considered the perfect stand-in for ancient Babylon and Mesopotamia, or the desert planet Tatooine. The film flopped.

With no money left to dismantle the set, it was simply swallowed up by the desert, becoming an actual (not a cinematic) ruin, much like Sarlacc swallowing its victims in his gaping tentacled maw. But the set was mostly torn down in 1919. But pieces remain. The immaterial has always been measured in sand, marking the threshold

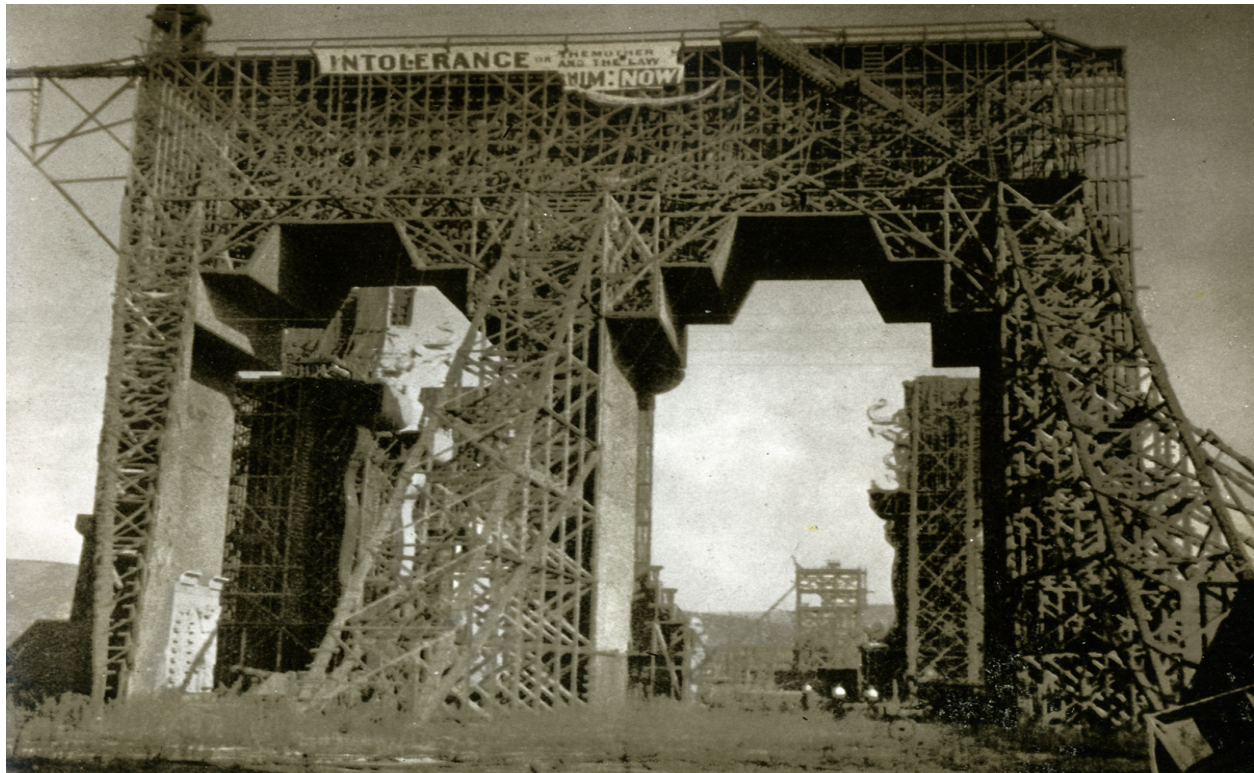


Figure 60

of the visible. These are particles whose sizes fall within a specified range. The products of physical weathering are usually large on the particle size scale; that is, they are stone, gravel, or sand size. Sand, a soil particle between 0.05 and 2.0 mm in diameter, miniaturizes our sense of scale, of materialism. Sand is the material consisting of comminuted fragments and water-worn particles of rocks. It is the material world broken down, simplified, silicated. Think of the sand-obliterated cities of ancient Sumeria and Babylon. It is also the main ingredient of cities like LA: mortar and sand. Sand is just



**Figure 61**  
above the microscopic; the last things we can see with the unaided eye. In the boundary



**Figure 62**  
between the visible and the invisible, sand is the scale of perfection. It is also where we get our

word for visual graininess, our understanding of gritty and raw, or conversely, dreamy and impressionistic. The different particles are designated according to size as follows: very coarse sand 2·0 to 1·0 millimeters. Very fine sand 0·1 to 0·05 millimeter. Finest Sand 20–22 (1/180) mm. The United States Bureau of Soils recognizes the following classes (of soil) based on size of soil particles. There are three size gradients: sand, silt and clay. I think this makes it possible to subdivide the material world from a sedimentological point of view into two components: (1) material of sand size, and (2) the microscopic. We measure the immaterial in the sands of an hourglass. When I hit 30, I thought the sands of my life were numbered. Now, my sands are almost run. As a rule both gravel and sand consist chiefly of the substance called silica, which is very round in shape. I told Mario that every grain of sand is a part of the seashore. He wasn't impressed.

**Mario:**

It is merely the form of the wave, and not the actual water that travels.

I think we went west looking for beaches with warmer waves. Waves are a rolling movement, an intermittent series of movements, of something passing over or on a surface or through the air. Again, LA is about surface. When we went to Catalina Island on a day trip we got above the sandy zone, and into the wave region of the state, where the surface is extremely curved. The waves displayed an immaterialized movement: the great waves of the ocean constitute the tide, and should be considered an undulation



**Figure 63**

of the entire ocean. On the boat back the wave-heads crested here and there with light, and the amount of buoyancy in the wave-water varied according to speed and velocity, i.e. energy. From the shore surfers watched dolphins hiding in the waves and pelicans gliding low over the surf break. The material is built from the immaterial, from the accretion and de-accretion of matter and energy. As sea cliffs retreat and are eaten away by waves, beach sediment is produced and distributed alongshore by wave-driven sediment transport. Thus, sand bars and beaches grow by accretion as more debris is thrown up from the sea cliffs. Waves and sand reformulation have shaped ancient shorelines, sand dunes, and other landforms through leveling the geographic means. According to AP Young, LIDAR analysis indicates that “sea cliff sediment contributions are a significant sediment source of beach-sand in the Oceanside Littoral Cell” of the LA basin. This happens on a massive scale: meteorite accretion formed the earth’s core, early crust and atmosphere. In Robert Creeley’s “SEA,” saltwater transforms, deconstructs and reconstitutes the world.

Salt and water,  
beach sloped form,  
wind and water,  
it all comes home.

Waves inspire the nonmaterial. Think of the wave-particle dualism in light of Louis de Broglie's 1925 hypothesis that light is both a particle and wave. But metaphysicians have always realized that the immaterial is simply "that which is." In truth, the immaterial is an objectless object with or without a body. Nothing binds immensity better than passive matter or immaterials. I wonder if animals have senses of intangibles that differ from that of mankind's. I trust that some future meta-physician will establish our knowledge of the materials or immaterials of perception beyond all suspicion of doubt. In Charles Olson poem "December 22," set in California's Half Moon Bay, not his usual New England, terra firma melts and the ground breaks like terra cotta into the sea:

The sea  
is right up against the skin of the shore with a tide  
as high  
as this one, the rocks  
stretched, Half Moon Beach  
swallowed (to its bank), Shag Rock  
now by itself away from...  
the Island, the Island

Buddhism, fullness and  
pertinax, sharp drawn  
lessons, the rocks  
melting  
into the sea, the forests,  
behind, transparent  
from the light snow showing  
lost rocks and hills  
which one doesn't, ordinarily,  
know, all the sea  
calm and waiting, having  
come so far

Waves and sand have a unique phenomenology among the surf-showered rocks. Think of sand buried bodies in a surf-worn cave. The waves batter and beat the elements, breaking down and building back up. I used to walk across surf-worn sheets of rock to meet Mario. We would climb large surf-battered basalt boulders of different sizes. Once we fell from a crumbling bank where the high tides had crunched the earth away. We barely made it out alive to his sand-cleaned doorstep. Similarly, the solar system, instead of contracting into its present condition, was formed by a process of accretion, due to the in drawing of great flights of meteoric and cometic matter. Sand is the mutable building blocks of the universe (carbon), made by the accretion of many very hard particles within the Earth, accumulated and then deposited by water, gravity and time.

For a while I refused to go west of La Cienega for the lack of clear boundaries, between people, elements, and landscapes. Now I appreciate the messiness of the surf zone as a marginal zone where hard white sand meets green herbage. The beach is truly the common shore where you can sit in the surf or loll on the pebbly beach for free. The area of water lying between the shore and the surf line is characterized by white foamy water produced by breaking waves. At the surf zone, the sound of our laughter is transformed, lost in the cacophony of surf thunder. The surf zone de-materializes boundaries and borders, nation from state, fact from fiction. The latest incidents are a surge in maritime smuggling attempts as traffickers avoid increased enforcement on land. The smugglers have a saying: the waves on the beach run faster than you can swim. Last month, while we were swimming, eight bales of marijuana weighing 200 pounds floated ashore at Del Mar beach. It was not an immaterial find. Some boats also slip through. In recent months, several abandoned vessels, with life jackets scattered nearby, have been discovered on beaches along the San Diego County coastline. Immigrants once destined for treacherous land and desert crossings are now smuggled through isolated beaches. Immigrants pay as much as \$4,000 for the crossing, says Immigration and Customs Enforcement. At the shore the line of demarcation is washed away by surf. Instead of edges and walls there is fluidic space, instead of borders, a horizon. Power needs a place to lay a foundation. From Playas de Tijuana beach Mario took me to the place where the US border fence reaches the Pacific. I had lots of questions.

**JOHN**

Can't you just swim around it?

**MARIO**

No, he said, pointing to some poles on the other side with cameras mounted.

**JOHN**

Is that a patrol boat,” I asked, as something came within visual and hearing range.

**MARIO**

Yes. And see those cameras? The Border Patrol will see you right away. For the protection of her coasts, America spends a lot on technology.

**JOHN**

I see them, I said. There were three men with backpacks sitting on the bluff nearby. One of them had binoculars and was watching us from a distance. I noticed that most of the tourists saw the wall mostly as a geographical curiosity. But that steel barrier cut an unnaturally straight line across a river, a canyon and a hillside or two before cutting into the water.



Figure 64

**Mario**

The mere size of the muro fronterizo makes a personal statement—the way it

seems to disappear into the Pacific and over a mountaintop, as far as the eye can see.

In *The Birth Mark*, Susan Howe describes a Thoreauvian sand bar or “mole” as an interface between land and sea, language and silence. I think the border fence is a type of “mole” that speaks volumes about borders and boundaries:

In English /mole/ can mean, aside from a burrowing mammal, a mound or massive work formed of masonry and large stones or earth laid in the sea as a pier or breakwater. Thoreau calls a pier a "noble mole" because the sea is silent but as waves wash against and around it they sound and sound is language.

Charles Olson, in “La Torre,” describes how the fluidity of the sea bends rules and boundaries:

Let him who knows not how to pray  
go to sea

Where there are no walls  
there are no laws, forms, sounds, odors  
to grab hold of

Let the tower fall!  
Where space is born

man has a beach to ground on

We have taken too little note of this:

the sound of a hammer on a nail can be as clear as

the blood a knife can make spurt from a round taut belly

Mario likes to like to build Aztec sand castles. He built one near the steel wall as a statement to the border patrol—that the border crossed him. He likes to recreate the old Aztec ciudades y templos that his bisabuela told him about. He set his temple upon a mound of beach stones, and even built a flight of rough stone steps to the summit.

**MUSIC: AZTEC**, like an Aztec priest raising up the beating heart of his sacrifice.

**EXT:** an Aztec sandcastle on the beach.



**Figure 65**

Recently, the material/immaterial carcass of a 70-foot blue whale gently rolled in on the

incoming waves at a beach about 10 miles north of Ventura. Blue whales, the largest animal on Earth, pass through the Santa Barbara Channel off the Southern California coast. The titan beached less than 100 feet from the Old Pacific Coast Highway and scientists from as far as Santa Cruz rushed to the scene of this natural crime to study the cause of death of this fugitive, half-fabulous whale. They extracted tissue and examined its vast body to see how it died, and how its body drifted into the rocks. I can't recall a blue whale dying and ever washing ashore on the Ventura County coastline. We have come there in the past looking only to have one whale of a time. In fact, I was swimming out there last week, and if that thing had passed me in the water, well, oh, my god. The distance between the material whale's body and its immaterial size takes away our sense of proportion. There is a definite sympathy existing between the immaterial and the material. Between energy and body. The materialness of the whale is hidden by the immaterialness of its titanic size—the body of the god is screened behind his soul. Much like Jonah sojourned in the womb of a whale for three days and three nights, the ocean is a place of permeability and transformation. And this boundary is best breached at the shoreline, where shore becomes sand. For Elizabeth Bishop in "The Sandpiper," the ocean barges in at the shoreline, where our sense of the permanent and stable is disturbed; the waves cut off the normal boundaries between things, between solid and liquid; here, hard materialism breaks off and breaks down, mixing into grains of sand—the numerical sublime, into the spaces in and between sand, into infinity:

The roaring alongside he takes for granted,  
and that every so often the world is bound to shake.  
He runs, he runs to the south, finical, awkward,

in a state of controlled panic, a student of Blake.

The beach hisses like fat. On his left, a sheet  
of interrupting water comes and goes  
and glazes over his dark and brittle feet.

He runs, he runs straight through it, watching his toes.

Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them  
where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains  
rapidly backwards and downwards. As he runs,  
he stares at the dragging grains.

The world is a mist. And then the world is  
minute and vast and clear. The tide  
is higher or lower. He couldn't tell you which.

His beak is focused; he is preoccupied,  
looking for something, something, something.

Poor bird, he is obsessed!

The millions of grains are black, white, tan, and gray  
mixed with quartz grains, rose and amethyst.

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** I wanted the whale to wake up and fly home like Jonah's whale on his way to paradise.



Figure 66

***FADE OUT***

The bulk of the large, blue whale floats to the surface of the ocean foreground. He spouts and breaches as the scene DISSOLVES into sea mist.

*FADE IN*

**BAY:**

**FLIGHT 9: EARTHQUAKE LIGHTS**

**GLORIA**

Here's the thing I don't understand about people who live in LA. Maybe you can explain it to me. Since everybody knows that there's a huge earthquake coming--like a really huge one, to make all other earthquakes look like speed-bumps--why doesn't everybody move away?

**ZERO**

That's a good question.

**GLORIA**

When I was in LA, it seemed like such a lonely town. Everybody driving around in their cars. Nobody talks to each other. Do you think it's a really bad place to be single?

*This makes Zero uncomfortable, and he shifts a little--*

**ZERO**

I guess I've never thought about it, to tell you the truth.

*--Zero Effect (1997): Shooting script.*

**Characters:**

**CARLA**

**JOHN**

**GRANDPARENTS**

**MOM**

**Earthquake lights.** A visible atmospheric phenomenon thought to be caused by an earthquake, typically similar in appearance to an aurora or rainbow halo.



Figure 67

### **AWAY TO: LOS ANGELES SKYLINE-MORNING**

I had never heard of earthquake lights until my sister told me about them, even though for centuries people have reported seeing a wide range of light effects appear in the sky just before and during major tremblers. Apparently, earthquakes can be accompanied by ball lightning, stroke lightning and sheet lightning, in addition to rainbow lights. The only causal connection that seems possible is that the seismic strains of the earthquake somehow project an electric field into the air. But the origin of these lights have always perplexed scientists—and eyewitnesses like my parents—but a new study seems to have found an explanation (one that doesn't involve supernatural forces). Apparently, this transgressive light show takes place along vertical geological faults. The electric charges sparked by grinding rocks travel upward to the earth's atmosphere, producing charged ions of light. Once these charged particles hit the atmosphere, things go all kinds of luminous. There are things that we still don't understand about the earth, so

why not accept that light harmonic emissions from the ground is just one of them. Apparently this is a type of radiant energy or radiance. Every hot body radiates its energy through the space around it, imparting energy to the ether. Earthquakes and their lights take the form of waves of electric energy, an amount equal to that which the ground loses. Maybe if more folks are aware of what to look for, the terrestrial radiance could be used as an early warning that the earth is beginning to move. In “OLD TRANE, SAN DIEGO,” Al Young writes of this phenomenon:

...when I talked to her of earthquake skies.  
She might've been remembering Mexico City  
the year the whole mountainside trembled  
and it all caved in.

**Earthquake weather** *n.* weather conditions of a type popularly believed to precede an earthquake, typically characterized as being warm and still.

Southern Californians turn everything into weather, into ambience and temperature and atmospheric conditions conducive to sunshine. In the Golden State earthquakes are a type of weather that weathers you to the immaterial within the material. Recently a magnitude 6.0 earthquake struck Napa Valley, California, on Sunday, August 24, 2014. Of course it was a lovely morning, still and warm like proper earthquake weather. Before a temblor the atmosphere usually gives warning, just as it warns New England sailors of storms. My Grandfather made Los Angeles in time to catch the quake of '33. As I'm writing this from San Francisco, you better believe that I had been keeping my eyes out for strange flashes in the sky. I was awake when the

Napa earthquake hit. It felt like a big tidal wave. Don't ask me why I was awake. I just was. It was my third earthquake, but right away I knew what was happening. The house didn't fall down, so I just went back to sleep. My grandparents live in Napa and they lost everything in their china cabinet. It all fell out onto the floor and just shattered like eggs.

### **INT: MY MOTHER'S HOUSE**

**Earthquake-gown** n. a woman's nightgown designed to be worn outside during an earthquake. After the earthquake my mother started wearing an earthquake-gown—really her old light green and blue Muumuu with big green pom-pom flowers on it. She said it's something warm she could wear comfortably—and properly—in public if the house starts rocking and rolling again. After the quake she found several other dresses in storage from the 60's that she used to sit out of doors in. She said that back in the day, everyone wore earthquake gowns, though they called



Figure 68

them something else. Everybody felt the earthquake but my sister Carla was the only one who captured the rainbow flashes of light in the sky. She calls them earthquake auras, and said they looked like clouds of rainbow-colored spray. She took several photos of them over a period of several minutes. She said nature switched on a battery in the Earth's crust—turning rock into energy. This was the first photo she took.

### **EXT- SKY OVER ECHO PARK- DAY**



Figure 69

She has no idea how much energy is released when solids are crushed or rubbed together. This was the second photo she took. Apparently, Carla says that when you remove the stress, the



Figure 70

the charge just goes back into the ground. Five minutes after the quake, the lights faded.



Figure 71

**Earthquake-proof** v. trans. to make (a building or other structure) earthquake-proof. Designed



or modified to withstand the effects of an earthquake.

### **CUT TO: EARTHQUAKE-RAVAGED SAN FRANCISCO**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of April, 1906, the people of San Francisco documented faint rainbows of light appearing just before and after the great quake struck the region. People saw lights that “flashed quickly by.” They described them as giant camera flashes of light. That is, as cinematic energy: vibrations and light waves. It seems some rocks have special electrical properties that are activated under extreme stress. Does this prove that something as docile as rocks have a level of energy contained within them? Could this energy be extracted, transferred and used? After the great quake the Governor set up a commission of scientists to study the phenomenon. In the poem “In The Harbor...” Robert Hass notes that the 1906 earthquake emptied the city of material/ism.



Figure 72

In the poem, the city is ground zero for an absent material culture. This event created a California paradox: at once immaterial and materially obsessed with having enough, as thousands of California refugees waited in bread lines to access the common store.

The back of telegraph hill was not always so steep. At the time of the earthquake, building materials was scarce, so coastal ships made a good thing of hauling lumber down from the northwest.

Notwithstanding, thousands of San Franciscans married in the weeks after the quake in a show of optimism and realism (couples engaged prior to the quake wanted to shore up their material security through marriage). On official forms, newlyweds declared: “I don’t live anywhere...I used to live in San Francisco.” The earthquake brought Californians down from their natural heliocentricity, making them more earthly minded, if only temporarily. San Franciscans had no intention of compromising with the earth, with their earthquake-haunted, earthquake-smitten region. After the earthquake, Californians invented an idea: they would not only build trembler-proof buildings, they would make an earth-proof society. The San Francisco Chronicle (April 22, 1906) reported California hope and optimism:

The business of San Francisco has not been destroyed, but merely the business equipment. The location remains. The good will remains—possibly increased by the goodwill of mankind. The next few months will be the busiest times that San Francisco has ever known, and the work will go on heartily and cheerfully in the confident assurance that the new San Francisco which we are about to build shall be,

architecturally, financially, commercially, and morally far greater in power, influence, beauty and the respect of mankind than the old city in whose ashes we shall lay its foundation.

Thus arose a heliocentric civilization, one in which earthquakes were folded into regional myth: quakes were a random act (of the sun) god, and as such they were considered mere energy: vibrations, waves, light. In earthquake country, mass and energy are equivalent, and mass is regarded in a sense as a concentrated source of energy. According to the San Francisco Chronicle (April 22, 1906):

This earthquake is a typical circular wave disturbance and from the scientific experience of 100 years, this statement can be made, the earthquake at San Francisco is a thing of the past and a closed incident. Earthquakes have been studied scientifically during a century or more. From the research it may be deduced that after the first great shock, others follow in rapidly decreasing intensity until they become almost imperceptible and cease. We now are at the close of the series.

There was surprisingly little moralizing about the quake: Californians saw it as an act of nature, not of god. In contrast, on the east coast the 1727 New England quake, as well as later quakes, shook the stability of the Puritan/biblical worldview. There was no place for earthquakes in New England regional myth, and godly visions of New England excluded immaterial anomalies and catastrophism. Men of the cloth attempted to explain away quakes in purely religious terms: God was the first mover & shaker. But they bickered over the divine reasoning, or lack of reasoning, behind such a shove. Relying on natural philosophy, Benjamin Colman and John Barnard

proposed an early wave theory of earthquakes based on the theory of gradualism that set in motion a cultural quake that resulted in an act of god becoming an act of nature. Notwithstanding, tremors would continue to disrupt sacred narratives of the stability of god's city upon a hill. On the west coast, however, California myth and regional narrative made space for seismic shifts: accepting such things as luck, chance, and sudden, violent events. Los Angeles and San Francisco are twin poles of an earthquake-haunted state, with the mental after-shocks of the 1906 quake in part, responsible for the present state of light's obsession with light and antimatter. Immediately after the quake the city rebuilt the capitol building as a gilded sun palace in defiance of the earth. And, like my mother, San Franciscans began flaunting earthquake gowns to sit out-of-doors, since most buildings were flattened—the inside officially came out. They wore their warm nightgowns in public, defying the ground to start rocking and rolling. They didn't care—the sun was their friend, not the earth. After the great quake the city rebuilt itself into a city of the sun. Vachel Lindsay records this sun loving, un-repenting spirit in “THE CITY THAT WILL NOT REPENT:”

Climbing the heights of Berkeley

Nightly I watch the West.

There lies new San Francisco,

Sea-maid in purple dressed,

Wearing a dancer's girdle

All to inflame desire:

Scorning her days of sackcloth,

Scorning her cleansing fire.

See, like a burning city  
Sets now the red sun's dome.  
See, mystic firebrands sparkle  
There on each store and home.  
See how the golden gateway  
Burns with the day to be---  
Torch-bearing fiends of portent  
Loom o'er the earth and sea.  
Not by the earthquake daunted

**Earthquake-proof** *adj.* (of a building or other structure) designed or modified to withstand the effects of an earthquake. Most houses built nowadays are earthquake proof, being composed entirely of lath-work; or, if of stone and lime, supported inside by strong posts and beams.

**FLASHBACK:**

My sister's house lies within a major fault zone. The previous owner failed to mention this.  
When you sell your house in California, state law requires you to disclose earthquake



Figure 73

weaknesses. Now, California has two shaking zones: 4 and 3. Zone 4 is located nearest to active earthquake faults and obviously poses greater hazard than Zone 3. Carla lives in Zone 4. This means her building was constructed of unreinforced masonry and has not yet been retrofitted in accordance with adopted hazardous building ordinance or mitigation programs. If you own a building in zone 4, you must post a sign in a conspicuous place at the entrance of the building, no less than 8"× 10" with the first two words of earthquake warning printed in 50-point bold type (and the remaining words in at least 30-point type).

### **SKY-SHOT SHOWING SAN ANDREAS FAULT**

**earthquake fault** *n. Geol.* a fault formed as a result of crustal fracturing during an earthquake (and along which earthquakes might be expected to occur in the future). Faults are fractures between two blocks of rock that form the Earth's crust. There are several hundred known faults in the state and others that are not known. Because state law prohibits new construction on faults,

my sister Carla can't even build a shed unless she conducts her own underground seismic testing, which is the only definitive way to locate a fault. Since there is no engineering solution to resist the movement of the earth in opposite directions, she says she will just live with the risk.



Figure 74

Unfortunately, unlike many other faults, the southern San Andreas Fault passes right under her living room floor, and produces no small earthquakes. When the big one finally hits, she says her brittle chimney will be the first thing to go—the bricks will become deadly projectiles. These faults point toward their opposite: heliocentric perfection. California is obsessed with immaterial states and hypotheticals, in part, because of its unique nature and destiny: scientists have long prognosticated a 7.8-magnitude earthquake along the San Andreas fault. *Spoilers*. The immaterial includes potential, static, radiant energy, or latent mechanical energy, an energy of position, i.e. the power of doing work possessed by a body in virtue of the stresses which result from its position relatively to other bodies. My sister, and many Californians like her, live in an immaterial state of mind, a place of foreshadow and prognostication. A place of horoscopes and

crystal balls. Residents of the state of light are compelled to consider spoilers, to be time travelers: if this were a headline, it would read: Californians Must Think About Things (Disasters) Before They Happen. Californians by nature prefer the future to the past—so that my sister says that in the future, Southern Californians will have the opportunity to finally work together to write this ending.

**Earthquake-pendulum-microphone** *n. Obs.* an instrument for detecting seismic movements.

In California Earthquakes have a soundtrack: scientists have recorded sounds issuing from the ground that sound like the popping of popcorn, millennial fireworks, haunted murmuring, or booming artillery sounds. These sounds are converted into entertainment, with Hollywood transmitting earth-moving messages via cinema. In 1985 I saw the movie *Earthquake*. The movie was presented in something called Sensurround—a puzzling portmanteau combined of two words: Sense and Surround—and that was indeed what it was. Sensurround was a low frequency noise generator in the theater that added simulated rumble and vibrations to the movie, so intense and powerful that not only could it be heard, but also felt during the film! It was a very convincing tangible illusion when everything vibrated, especially with Ava Gardner and Charlton Heston on screen. As a very young theater-goer, I thought Hollywood was a cinema of light and sound, of energy and vibration (speakers) that could re/produce earthquakes. SENSURROUND left a lasting impression on me, and, as the ads described it, it was AN EVENT which I have never truly forgotten. Short of a 35mm test film for “Midway,” “Earthquake” has remained the only film I ever saw in



Figure 75  
SENSUROUND. Converting shaking to sound and light, earthquakes convert matter into energy,



Figure 76

thus informing me and the state of light about the law of mass-energy equivalence. Now, Geologists treat quakes like future rock stars, capturing their every sound through earthquake-pendulum-microphones that detect every seismic sound and syllable. These consist of a length of carbon suspended vertically, connected to a telephone receiver so that the relative movement of the two lengths of carbon produce a sound in the receiver.

Bob Kaufman, in “WEST COAST SOUNDS,”

records the sound properties behind all appearances:

San Fran, hipster land,  
Jazz sounds, wig sounds,  
Earthquake sounds, others...

If shocks turn the city into sound vibrations and energy, Californians further convert this energy between states of light. In Bret Harte's *IN THE MISSION GARDEN*, quakes are channeled into a vintage year of wine, distilled, transformed into another substance

You like the wine? It is some at the Mission,  
Made from the grape of the year eighteen hundred;  
All the same time when the earth-quake he come to  
San Juan Bautista.

Further converting between states, in William Everson's: "THE CITY DOES NOT DIE: Commemorating the San Francisco Earthquake, The Civic Center, April 18, 1969," the earth is a giant squeezed into a ball. Imprisoned in earthly chains, the giant yearns to be free, spacious, to unravel in the open air. This yearning of earth to be energy, to be free, is at the heart of the inexorable flux of matter:

Below us earth sleeps;  
The cracked-bone giant dreams easily now,  
Untroubled by nightmare.

Moment by moment the elements, cramped in titanic impasse,  
Relentlessly contracted: the inexorable  
Dictum of the wedge.  
For deep in the earth the long rift,  
The slip and shuff of vast geological epochs,  
Fractures the coast. Like a cracked bell  
It hangs athwart the hemispheric verge,  
Fluxed with transition. Whatever the stroke,  
Whether the trampling somber-thudded Pacific,  
Or the oppressively pendent bosom of the air,  
Each exacts of that ancient injury  
The resonance of pain. Then the vaster tide,  
The throb from outer space,  
Sends through the whole mould of its metal  
The clangor of the spheres. Twice,  
Perhaps thrice in a century, these forces converge,  
The solar energy, stored in the moon's belly,  
Projected itself through the nerves of the system,  
And the wrenched bell rang.

Towards the end of the poem, the combined gravity of the sun and moon pull the crust of the earth, creating an alignment of three celestial bodies in a line. In a state of light, the solar system is an open system, in which matter and solar energy are exchanged and converted freely with

surroundings celestial bodies. Heliocentric Californians by nature understand the first law of thermodynamics: that energy cannot be created or destroyed, though it can be converted from one form to another—from material to immaterial. This transgressive energy of the planets makes Earth a central player: it shares energy that maintains the heavenly bodies in their motions, and vice versa. Considering that all things are in flux: fire, earthquakes, ocean waves, the state of light is ever-changing, fluctuating, variable. In “California,” Hayden Carruth writes:

To be reconciled after so long,  
In sunshine, among Latino voices. A. showed me  
where earthquakes two years ago had changed Santa Cruz  
and how the people were rebuilding, making it better. Had she  
been frightened? Of course. Would she move away?  
Never. Here earth itself gives us the paradigm...of flux and courage  
and eternity.

There are two sorts of eternity: the past and present forwards. Residents of the state of light imagine a world in which destroying quakes do not reach, save once or twice an eternity or so. Eternity: a permanent NOW.

**Earthquake sensitive**, a person who possesses an ability to predict earthquakes.

**INT. CARLA'S HOUSE/LIVING ROOM- NIGHT:** CAMERA DOES A 180 AROUND THE MAIN PART OF THE HOUSE, LANDS THE ANGLE WITH CARLA. She's sitting on the couch, cat across her lap, watching TV.

My sister can predict earthquakes. Apparently Carla's immersion into matters seismic as a child has brought forth a previously unrecognized "sensitivity." Obviously thought or mental action is another distinct form of energy. On the morning on 8/23/14, she heard a five-second right-ear tone. She said it had a distinct metallic quality to it, and felt that this sound belonged to South Napa, California. She said her hair dryer stopped working right before the tremor. This is consistent with reported malfunctioning of radios, TVs, and air-conditioners that come before a quake due to intense pulsed electric fields. She had never heard a sound like that for Napa before, so she wasn't sure what the highest magnitude might be. She set it at 5.8 and issued a public prediction at noon. The resulting earthquake was the long-awaited 6.0 occurring on 8/24/14 at 3:20 am, 13 hours after she made her prediction. This earthquake was expected for 30 years by scientists, and not one of their instruments detected anything prior to the earthquake. To date, she has not received credit from any scientists for doing what they could not do with a state earthquake budget in excess of \$40 million and decades of research. Carla says you can survive an earthquake if you know how. She feels a responsibility to try to save the thousands of potential victims before a quake strikes. Afterwards comes a sense of guilt. Even my family has started to believe in her predictions when they achieved a 89% accuracy rate. They ask her if she is picking up anything for certain locations, particularly if it happens to be a vacation destination they are traveling to, such as Baja California or Santa Barbara. During the Napa quake, she had this dizzy feeling of being pushed hard from the north, which pointed to Napa. She heard a very

loud, highly electrical sound, much like one might imagine sound traveling through a fiber optic wire. I continue to marvel at the human body in how it can react to stimuli: is it just a machine for converting actual energy into potential energy, or vice versa? Recently, Carla has not slept well for weeks. She says she can feel the floor subtly vibrate underneath her feet, and can feel herself falling down or being hit by falling objects that haven't fallen yet.

**Carla:**

Wait -- listen -- wait --

(John stops):

Was that an earthquake?

**John:**

I don't think so. I didn't feel anything.

**Carla:**

You sure? Carla looks at John in questioning alarm. It's an earthquake!

## **GENERAL SAFETY RULES AFTER AN EARTHQUAKE**

REMAIN CALM AND DO NOT PANIC

DO NOT RUSH OUTSIDE

DO NOT LIGHT MATCHES, CIGARETTES OR TURN ON ANY ELECTRICAL SWITCHES

PROTECT YOUR HANDS AND FEET IN ALL AREAS NEAR DEBRIS OR BROKEN

GLASS



Figure 77

WAIT FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS

**FADE OUT**

## FLIGHT 10: THE CENTRAL VALLEY

### CHARACTERS:

ME

### *DISSOLVE IN*

Fresno, California's eighth largest city, is the financial headquarters for San Joaquin Valley agribusiness. Its roots are firmly planted in the rich soil of history, which makes for an interesting visit—Robertson McCarta, California

### AIRPLANE SHOT OF STATE



Figure 78

I took this photo of the San Joaquin Valley from my window seat on Virgin Air. I always request a window seat. The valley is an enormous fruit and vegetable garden.

**SHOT OF ME DRIVING THROUGH THE VALLEY:** on Interstate 5 on my way to Fresno, which means "ash tree" in Spanish. I get out of the car and am hit by what feels like a giant hairdryer blowing 120-degree, manure-scented air. I crank up the booming norteño (an accordion-driven genre of Mexican folk music). If you have the time, exit often for bushels of the freshest produce on earth in the most agriculturally productive places in the world—though the profits often go to agribusiness shareholders. The San Joaquin provides water to California's Central Valley, which grows 40% of the fruits and vegetables produced in the US. It's a forgotten but important part of the state. I met farm workers who were unemployed because the river doesn't carry enough water for everyone. I also went to the Community Water Center to learn about drinking water issues in the Central Valley. Although the land is scarred by roads and electric lines, I imagine what it looked like 150 years ago. Because of all the mega-dairies and feedlots I had to carry Visine. I am no Rappaccini's daughter.

**STOPOVER AT THE VALLEY INFORMATION CENTER:** The Valley, i.e. the San Joaquin Valley of California; also known as the Central Valley. It lies between California's two great mountain ranges, the Coast Range to the west and the Sierra Nevada to the east. On the south, it is bounded by the Tehachapis, a lesser range. Irrigation of the arid southern half of the Valley and the long growing season, which often begins as early as February, has made farming highly profitable. The economy of the region is based on agriculture and related business and industry, food-processing, the manufacture of farm equipment, and the like. Its principal crops include raisins, almonds, figs, cotton, barley, and citrus fruits. The Valley is not the most fertile farming area in the world. It is the richest. In Sherley Anne Williams "The Valley" is the

material reality of the state, containing 40% of the food for the entire country. For Williams, the Valley is the kernel, the root, the materialization of the California dream: bounty and excess.



Figure 79

Indeed, the valley is creation, where everything comes from and goes to: growth, harvest, bloom:

Interstate 5 climbs steeply from the floor of the San Fernando Valley into the Tehachapi Mountains. The winds up there are treacherous, the curves and grades deceptive, and I'd almost hold my breath until that spot in the Grapevine, just before the highway makes its final curving descent to the Valley. The world seems to be spread out before you: orange and lemon groves, peach and apricot orchards, grape and cotton fields; the land is onions and alfalfa, sweet melons and packing sheds. The oil derricks to the west aren't visible; neither are the turkey farms and feed lots just over almost any horizon, but I know where they are.

In Lawson Fusao Inada's "Fresno," the valley is ignored by tourists because it is a working landscape, uninspiring and unexceptional. As an ordinary material place, tourists do not see the immaterial in the material. Unable to see the extraordinary in the everyday, tourists see only a non-place on their way to someplace more interesting. The importance of the material bounty of the valley, and the very real labor that produced it, are ignored and merely consumed by the cities.

Fresno. What does it mean? What is the meaning of Fresno? Well, There is also some sort of wheeled contraption used in highway construction called a "Fresno." Or, for tourists, Fresno is a place in the "middle of nowhere," a place to go through on the way to somewhere--- San Francisco, Los Angeles, Yo-semite, Kings Canyon, Sequoia National Park.

.....

Young men feeling under the skin the long muscles knot up the flesh,  
Old men feeling the tendons wince, the vertebrae grind, ruptures give signal.  
We work, and the heavy wealth of this yielding earth is heaped for the cities.

In Kenneth Rexroth, "TIME IS THE MERCY OF ETERNITY," the valley is throbbing with life and struggle, a dynamic borderland between work and comfort, anxiety and joy. The vibrant life of the valley is a counter measure to the cities to the west, where the agonized writhing of the city is contrasted with the healthy pulsation of the valley. As such, the real is found in both places, but the real has been reduced, commodified to objects and things in the cities.

The pulsating heat, the flat  
Lands of the San Joaquin Valley,  
Boiling with life and trouble.  
The pale new green leaves twinkle  
In the rising air. A blue  
Black, sharp-beaked, sharp-crested jay  
Rests for a moment amongst

Them and then plunges off, down  
Through the hazy June afternoon.  
Far away the writhing city  
Burns in a fire of transcendence  
And commodities. The bowels  
Of men are wrung between the poles  
Of meaningless antithesis.  
The holiness of the real  
Is always there, accessible  
In total immanence.

**SPEECH BUBBLE:** In Fresno County, the smell of pesticides was so overpowering—is that how we get perfect looking peaches, oranges, grapes, olives, and walnuts? I saw entire groves of almond trees looking yellow and wan because of the drought. After seeing the valley, my concept of California expanded to include the world I saw 100 miles away from my home in LA.

*DISSOLVE OUT*

**NORTH CALIFORNIA:**

**FLIGHT 11: CITY UPON THE MOUNT: SHASTA OF OUR IMAGINATION**

**CHARACTERS:**

**JOHN**

**CARLA**

**CLIMBERS**

If one has ever seen Mt. Shasta, for instance, the image of that giant will be imprinted forever upon the mind—William Everson (*CANTO FIVE: THE BLOOD OF THE POET*)

Mount Shasta, a compound strato-volcano rising 3,500 meters above its base to an elevation of 4,317



**Figure 80**

meters, towers over the landscape of northern California. It is the locus standi and summit for the California imagination. I sketched this image on my first trip to the mountain on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

The largest strato-volcano of the Cascade chain at approximately 350 cubic kilometers, it compares in volume to such well know massive strato-volcanoes as Fuji-san (Japan) and Cotopaxi (Ecuador). Mt. Shasta hosts five glaciers, including the Whitney Glacier, the largest in California. Shastina is a large subsidiary cone that rises to 3,758 meters on the west flank of the compound volcano. Mt. Shasta is part of The Sierra Madre range of mountains, which comes up to us from Mexico. It passes northward until it melts into and blends in with the Sierra Nevada Mountains—its northern sister mountains of snow. Mt. Shasta has continued to erupt at least once every 600-800 years for the past 10,000 years. Its most recent eruption probably was in 1786. Considered dormant by the U.S. Geologic Survey, but not extinct, future eruptions are considered imminent.

## **CUT TO**

**Most Recent Eruption:** 200-300 years ago

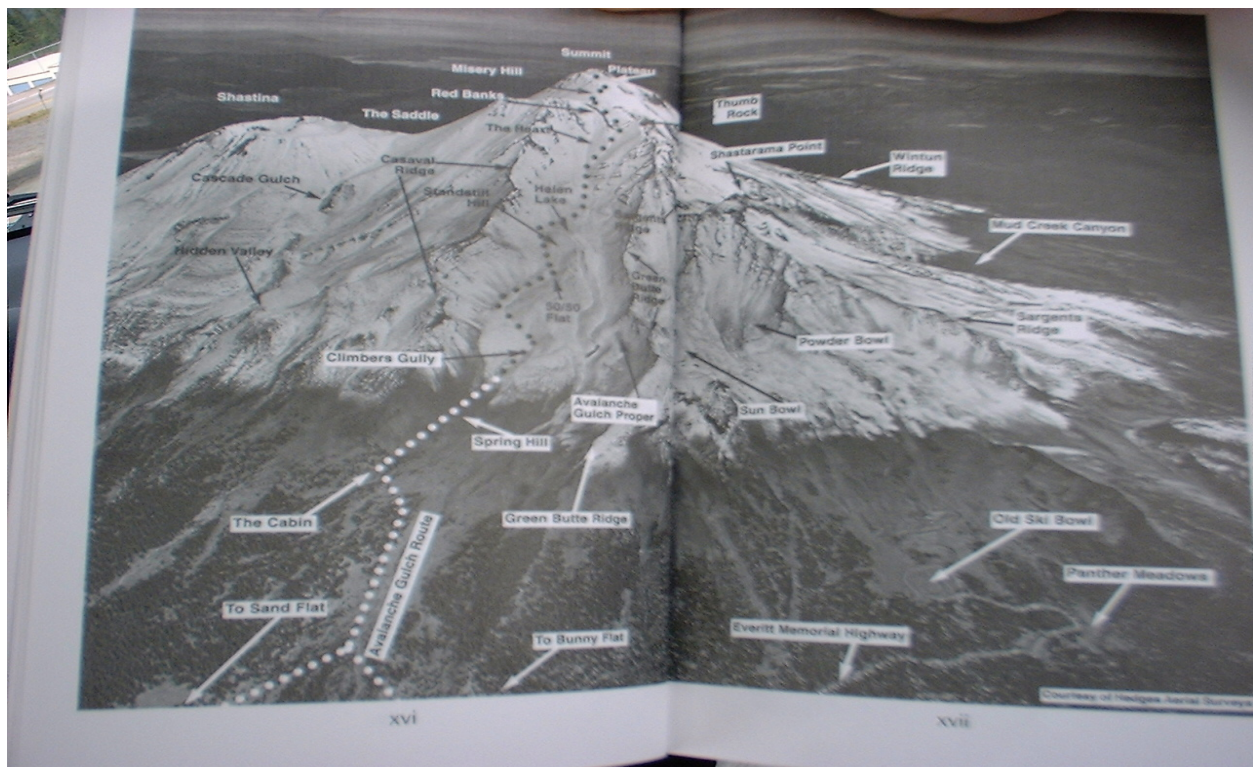
**Threat Potential:** Very High

People come to the mountain every year just to get away from city influences, but the first time I came I wanted to see the most beautiful peak in the Sierras. Climbing Mt Shasta is a great adventure and most of those who put in the hard work that it takes to reach the summit count it as one of the greatest experiences of their life. At last, the highest point on the mountain has been conquered, and the summit bid is complete. You will find the views are fantastic. Last time I came with friends from the city. We hiked up the Bunny Flat to Hotlam Glacier on the north-east side of Mt. Shasta. You should always travel with a buddy. On our way to the mountain we listened to an audio book narration of Mt. Shasta's history.

## AUDIO BOOK

Literally, Sierra means series, or saw-teeth of snow. Mount Shasta (Chasti), so called by the French, marked the northernmost limits of the Spanish empire. Both the Spanish and Portuguese explorers sailing up the Oregon River gave this range of mountains coming up from Mexico the same name: Sierra, with the majestic appellation: Grande del Nord. The mountain range is finally lost in Canada and Alaska. If you want to speak of any one of these particular divisions you say Sierra this or Sierra that. But the custom, which has become almost a law, is to say the Sierras when you want to speak of these mountains as a body.

Designed to be listened to on a drive up Mt. Shasta's Everitt Memorial Highway, the book consists in



**Figure 81** large part of a dramatization of Mt. Shasta stories by John Muir. Other topics include: theories of the Shasta name, history, geology of a dormant volcano, and the 1786 possible eruption. It came with an accompanying black and white terrain map. In the car we studied the names of Shasta's ridges, gully's,

canyons, points, glaciers, and bowls. The State Department of Commerce ran a year-long media campaign in 1987 to promote tourism in California. "Shasta-Cascade" was the name given to all of northeastern California, thus continuing a long Californian project of immaterial mountain making. Orogenesis means mountain-making, but the term refers only to the production of mountain structure, not to the impulse to smooth, stretch, surmount, polish, or dissolve mountain topography, mountain materiality, mountain-ness. California is the promise to move mountains, to achieve something very difficult or miraculous. To raise your dreams up into mountains. In the course of their mountain-journey, Californians are immaterial mountain climbers with Shasta both an immaterial and material presence in the California imagination. Materially, and more urgently, California's mountains have been uplifted as much as 15 millimeters (about 0.6 inches) in the past 18 months because the massive amount of water lost in the four year drought is no longer weighing down the land. Mount originally meant the mountain, and later is became a chiefly poetic description to describe the sublimity of Shasta. During a northward 1888 train ride, travel writer Abby Johnson Woodman (the Johnson sisters were cousins to John Greenleaf Whittier), saw Shasta not as a concrete entity or material reality, but as an ideal.

Still farther on in the valley we came to a place on our way where Mount Shasta, the Shasta of our imagination, that which we have all the while been hoping to see, stood full before us. Its awful height, its immaculate whiteness, its strength and immeasurable magnitude, and the broad, far stretch of its massive base...That Mount Shasta is sublime and majestic, far above all others that I have seen in California, I feel and know.

Longing to travel up the west coast, Abby and her sister Caroline left their native New Hampshire behind, seeking an idea. West coasters were not immune to ideation, either. Joaquin Miller literally

wrote the book on Mt. Shasta, as well as novels, poems, diaries, and plays. From 1854-1857 he lived in Siskiyou and Shasta Counties. Miller and his mount were inextricably linked in the popular press after the 1873 publication of his *Life Amongst the Modocs: Unwritten History*. Believing he should be an improver, a world-betterer, with one foot in the future, he lived among First Nations at the foot of Shasta, fathered a Native American daughter, Juanita, and defended Indian Rights. He also taught spiritual sermons on silence and nature. For Miller and many nineteenth century readers, Mount Shasta was not just a material mountain—it was a spiritual test or metaphor akin to *Pilgrim's Progress*, where the material snares of life beleaguer and accost unsuspecting travelers on the mountain-road path of life:

It takes the shrewdest mountaineer to keep even so much as  
for one day's journey along the backbone without  
once being led aside down the spurs into the nets  
of chaparral, or above the impassable crags and  
precipices...

But with us there was no going back.

### **Alert Level: Normal**

Miller viewed Shasta as an immaterial bridge to brighter worlds. In his writings he followed the gleams of a remoter world to meet the inhabitants of an invisible, better place, free from injustice: “Above the woods, above the clouds, almost above the snow, it looked like the first approach of land to another world.” Miller had no doubts about the world-altering potential of hard work and simple love. Love was the summit of all virtue, and humility was taught by contemplating the majesty of the mountain. One

just had to listen. In the history of California Mt. Shasta was always a metaphor not just for spiritual progress, but for law and order as well. Lawlessness and transgression were mired in earthly bodies. Truth was transcendent and atmospheric. Writes John Rollin Ridge, “And well this Golden State shall thrive, if like its own Mount Shasta, Sovereign Law shall lift itself in pure atmosphere—so high.” Often viewed as an ideal, with more or less of personification, the law here is implanted by nature in the human mind, and is capable of being demonstrated by reason. Lindsay Vachel picks up this strain of the mountain cure when she makes the mountain an immaterial metaphor for state victory. In “THE CITY THAT WILL NOT REPENT,” Shasta is the mountainous measure of Californian pride and defeat:

‘Frisco would ten times rise!  
Not till her last tower crumbles,  
Not till her last rose dies,  
Not till the coast sinks seaward,  
Not till the cold tides beat  
Over the high white Shasta,  
‘Frisco will cry defeat.

In the visual arts, these ideas were picked up by Juan Buckingham Wandes-forde in an 1863 Watercolor, called “Mount Shasta.” In this painting the summit is a beautiful knife-edge block of volcanic rock encrusted with snow and ice—the point of a polyhedron where three or more faces meet, forming a perfect angle. In the painting you can see Mt Lassen to the right (even though its supposed to be seventy three miles away). On a clear day to the north, you can see clear into the State of Oregon and to the east you can see all the way to the State of Nevada.



Figure 82

In “Blandeur,” California Poet Kay Ryan unmakes her own mountains, describing the California impulse to flatten materialism, to un-mountain a mountain.

If it please God,  
let less happen.  
Even out Earth's  
rondure, flatten  
Eiger, blanden  
the Grand Canyon.  
Make valleys  
slightly higher,  
widen fissures  
to arable land,

remand your  
terrible glaciers  
and silence  
their calving,  
halving or doubling  
all geographical features  
toward the mean.  
Unlean against our hearts.  
Withdraw your grandeur  
from these parts.

Tongue in cheek, Ryan bulldozes gravity and greatness. She would have fewer material laws, favoring the imperceptible, the not too many, the few and far between. For her, the material world is too complex, too...material. Normally, the fundamental principles behind mountain-making and mountain ranges are born from intense upward displacement of the earth's crust, folding, thrust faulting, and other compressional processes (especially by the upward displacement of ejecta). In a state of light, the process of mountain formation is a socio-geologic process, whereby geological features are metaphors that personify, slenderize, and weatherize.

Once you attain the Summit of Mt Shasta, you are more than 5,000 feet above its tallest neighbor and more than 10,000 feet above its base elevation. In *Silverado Squatters: Sketches from a Californian mountain*," Robert Louis Stevenson described Shasta as an anthropomorphic giant from which the proud summit figure looked down. As such, Shasta was the biomorphic head of the entire body of California, a

god, with “the white head of Shasta looking down on Oregon” and the rest of the world. From this height you can peer down the northern slopes of this magnificent peak and see the beautiful glacial ice that cloaks its sides. With a base diameter of more than 17 miles Shasta has the greatest volume of all the Cascade Peaks. Indeed, glittering far away, Shasta is a god that mediates between human and heaven, or, the place where heaven and earth meet.

## CUT TO

**Neighboring towns:** Weed, Mount Shasta, Edgewood, Dunsmuir

In the town of Mt Shasta City, signs read: *Where Heaven And Earth Meet.*



**Figure 83**

Many writers located Shasta not in this world, but beyond. Edward Rowland Sill writes: “And lo! in heaven—as pure as very snow...” As a heavenly object, James George Wharton (1858-1923), in “California: Romantic and Beautiful,” writes, “Shasta lifts up men's hearts to the sun-lit sky, to the serenity of the stars, to the pure blue of the atmosphere...” In the literature of the California dream,

Shasta is an Earth spirit that travels from heaven to earth, range to range, Shasta to Katahdin. In Philip Lamantia's "Shasta," the mountain stands for a metaphysical California geography of dreams, secrets, and spiritual mystery.

Shasta great Shasta

Lemurian dream island, perhaps Atlantis, scallop on the sierra,  
Hopi sovereign of animate dream, oceanic claw: Alta California  
climbs into view.

Shasta great Shasta

geography in a mystic state later pruned by seers.



Figure 84

Lemuria was a hypothetical continent stretching from Africa to south-east Asia, formerly supposed to have existed in the Jurassic period. In "Shasta," the speaker claims that to have set foot in Lemuria-

Shasta is to be close to the mysterious sources of existence. This spiritual sentiment is manifested across Californian writing. Jones Very, in “Mt. Shasta: A Painting, by H. O. Young,” writes:

How, like a spiritual Presence, dost thou rise,  
O lonely mountain, spotless, pure, and white!  
While far beneath, in shade, the prairie lies,  
Thy snowy peak reflects the morning light!  
Thy base is hidden from our searching gaze,  
As if no earthly mountain thou might'st be;  
But a creation of the sun's bright rays,  
A spiritual mount, a mystery.  
So have I seen a cloud, in summer's day,  
Piercing with its white peak the azure sky;  
Calling men's thoughts from earth and sense away,  
Teaching man's spirit, through the outward eye,  
To hold communion with the Mind, that made  
Nature's forms, alike in all displayed.

In Very, the unearthly Mt. rarifies thought through the senses, returning the subject to a state of original mind. Not unlike Very, Walt Whitman, in “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” writes that in Shasta’s nature the viewer is absorbed, dispersed, and finally dissipated:

In them these skies and airs, these mountain peaks, Shasta,

Nevadas,

These huge precipitous cliffs, this amplitude, these valleys, far

Yosemite,

To be in them absorb'd, assimilated .

At Shasta, material boundaries are blurred in defiance of material laws—the mount was included in the 1992 Guinness Book of World Records for the greatest snowfall ever recorded from a single storm (the storm date was February 13-19, 1959). Material forces on Shasta are so extreme that Shasta has become the site of study for the material forces of the laws of nature. Studies on Mt. Shasta include petrology, glaciation, mineralogy, magnetization, ancient avalanches, mud slides, volcanic hazard potentials, soils, geothermal activity, earthquakes, gravity, radiometric dating of the rocks, water resources, and so on. Volcanic activity prediction is of course an important topic, but many of the studies relate more to basic questions of science, such as how plate tectonics work, or how Mt. Shasta lavas give clues to the composition of the inner earth.

**CUT TO: COMPOSTION OF CORE:** andesite, dacite. Visible signs of an eruption like clouds of white or gray steam and smoke rising above the volcano tell us about the composition of the core, making Shasta a conduit to the core of the material world. It is also the most voluminous of all the Cascade Range volcanoes, and the towns of Weed, Mt Shasta City, and McCloud lie in the shadow of the ice-clad edifice, which also holds the headwaters of the Upper Sacramento River. In Arna Wendell Bontemp's "Golgotha is a mountain," Shasta's magnitude was less a metaphor than a "blurring on the



Figure 85

borders of the sky,” as Shasta’s cloud formations often blur mountain materialism, or vice versa. My sister took this picture of a mountain cloud-eclipse. As an extension of earth and sky, Shasta lacks defined edging—its center radiates outward. Standing by itself in the atmosphere, there is nothing anywhere near its height for over a hundred miles. It blurs the boundary line between places, heaven and earth, up/down. Shasta transgresses borders and frontiers. In Joaquin Miller’s *Unwritten History: Life amongst the Modocs*,” Shasta’s summit was the highest point or degree, “With whom the cloud holds converse, and the storm / Rests there, and stills its tempest into snow.” It was also the point for the entire state where the intersections of the world converge, bending space-time:

But merge all these, mixed and made mellow in a far and tender light—snow and sun, and sun and snow, and stars, and blue and purple skies all blended all these in splendid, confused, indescribable glory, suffusing the hoary summit, centering there, gathering there, resting a

moment—then radiating, going to the sea, to broad and burning plains to the south, to the boundless forests of fir to the north.

This borders on the immaterial. In the literature of California, Shasta is a blank wall, dividing, detaching, offering freedom and escape. It is less a defensive structure enclosing a city, castle, and more a form of division, breaking down reality, screening off, or offering release. In Miller, Shasta does not enclose, it opens:

Mount Shasta starts up sudden and solitary from the heart of the great black forests of northern California; you would say rather that it is the great white tower of some ancient and eternal wall....

For many, Shasta opens up time. Anyone who comes to Shasta walks on the borders of eternity. On the mountain you can also experience the timelessness of rock and ice, the dormant volcanic energy of a sleeping giant, and cold eternity. In his *Western Journal*, Thomas Wolfe described Shasta as ageless:

Mount Shasta--pine lands, canyons, sweeps and rises, the naked crateric hills and the volcanic lava masses and then Mount Shasta omnipresent--Mount Shasta all the time--always Mount Shasta.

**CUT TO: Cloud Elevation:** 4,317 (m) 14,163 (f)

**Cloud Type:** Lenticular

For Lawson Fusao Inada, Shasta is at the border of weather and material laws. In Inada's "At the stronghold," Shasta is a weather-god presiding over the whole atmosphere.

As all clouds  
Form at Shasta  
And return there.

As mountain god Shasta controls the atoms of weather, forming vapor, previously unseen, to make the appearance of clouds, or mist, or fog, to make itself disappear in a curtain of clouds. As such, it generates its own clouds and other phenomena, controlling whatever falls from the sky. Shasta is also far above its weather, both weather-battered and weather-withstanding. But ultimately, the weather god controls the condition of the atmosphere (at any given place and time) with respect to heat or cold, quantity of sunshine, presence or absence of rain, hail, snow, thunder, fog, etc., violence or gentleness of the winds. Everything is subject to Shasta's vicissitudes. It can even create cloud-dispersing winds. In Robert Duncan's "THE MOON PASSAGES," the mountain floats like an untethered cloud. "Mount Shasta in snowy reverie / floats." Shasta's visible mass is thus condensed into mere watery vapor, floating in the air at some considerable height above the general surface of the ground. Generally, orographic clouds forming over land come to rest at the tops of mountains—they are literally made by mountains. Clouds that hang around mountain peaks are called cloud caps, but the official name for it is a lenticular cloud. These clouds form when moist air moving with the prevailing wind flow runs into the mountain surface, and is forced upwards until it cools enough for condensation to occur, causing the cloud to form around the mountain top. Pilots and mountaineers know lenticular clouds only form when

there are hazardous winds at altitude, and it's no time to be anywhere close to them, flying or climbing, as they indicate areas of severe turbulence to be avoided. When slopes are rugged, lenticular clouds form. That's why they often have a smooth and rounded shape and take on almost other-worldly forms. My sister is always taking pictures of clouds. She was inspired by a series of cloud photographs by Alfred Stieglitz called "Equivalents," in which he searched for patterns of light and dark, form and formlessness. I guess you could say she is a cloudscape photographer. She says that the sky is the single most abstract and dynamic canvas that a photographer has at her disposal. She says that most people



**Figure 86**

unintentionally overexpose clouds, and that you have to reduce your shutter speed by a few stops to capture their ephemerality. It sounds a little strange to say it, but clouds have emotions, according to Carla. Fluffy clouds remind us of happy times, and big ominous storm clouds tell us what's



Figure 87

headed our way. She titled her most recent photograph “A cloud of suspicion.” But she captures them all



Figure 100

nonetheless. Sometimes she isn't satisfied with a few clouds and has to get the entire horizon into the

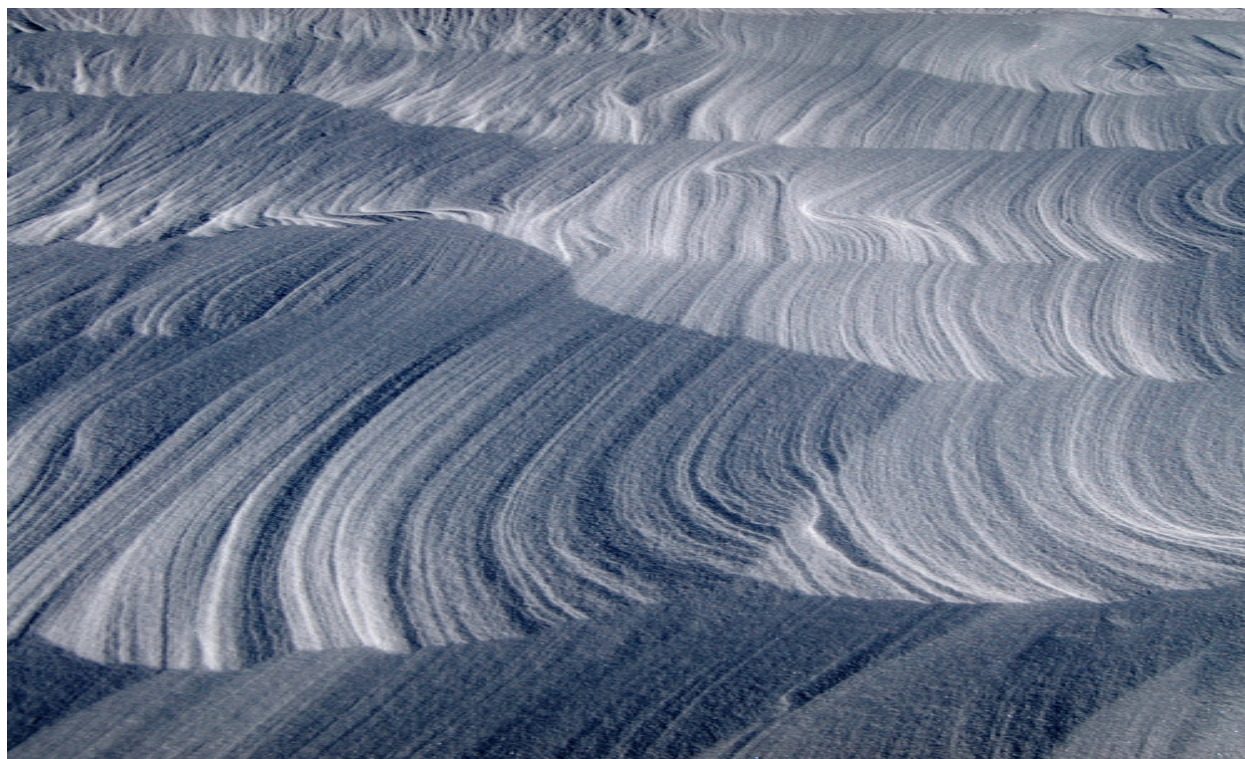
shot by zooming out as much as she can. But her favorite clouds to shoot are lenticular. She calls them cloud monsters or cloud-bergs, and says that they are frozen, as if in suspended animation. Only occasionally do they drift eastward. Lenticular clouds often will be the only clouds in an otherwise clear, blue sky. Carla says these fascinating structures look like hovering UFO's. They form in really stable air that would otherwise not create clouds. Lenticular clouds will stand still for hours despite wind shearing forces at 100 mph or more. Unlike most clouds, which are carried along by the wind, lenticular clouds at the crest of each standing wave appear to be fixed in space, remaining where they have formed, apparently locked in position relative to the ground below. Most clouds are carried along briskly by the wind, so that its speed of movement is a good indicator of the wind speed at that level. But altocumulus lenticularis defies material laws: as the 19th-century meteorologist J.F. Daniels wrote: "The apparent permanency and stationary aspect of a cloud is often an optical deception, arising from the solution of vapor on the one side of a given point, while it is precipitated on the other." My sister captured this stasis best in her National Geographic photo of the year. Some accused her of photo-shopping it, a practice she abhors. In Edward Rowland Sill, "ON A PICTURE OF MT. SHASTA BY KEITH," Californians are cloud-ascending who live more like on a cloud-field, than a continent of firm-land and facts.

Blue-hazy, dense with pines to the verge of snow,  
Up into cloud. Suddenly parts the cloud,  
And lo! in heaven---as pure as very snow,  
Uplifted like a solitary world---  
A star, grown all at once distinct and clear,---  
The white earth-spirit, Shasta! Calm, alone,

Silent it stands, cold in the crystal air,  
White-bosomed sister of the stainless dawn,  
With whom the cloud holds converse, and the storm  
Rests there, and stills its tempest into snow.

Californians are masters of clouds. Back in Los Angeles (July 1950), a cloud-seeding pilot was credited with helping put out a 12,000-acre forest fire. Since then many cities have come to rely on cloud-seeding to augment municipal water supplies. Pacific Gas and Electric Co. in California have even installed seven propane-burning cloud seed "generators" that disperse silver iodide particles into the air from ridges atop Siskiyou and Shasta counties. Besides its unique cloud formations, it is common (especially in low snow years) for the north side of Mount Shasta to be covered in blue ice. This blue ice is old, highly transformed snow that is clear and extremely hard and brittle. It can require a fair amount of technique to place specialized ice-climbing tools from a good stance into blue ice. Carla likes to take close-ups of the blue ice. She says it reminds her of Superman's Fortress of Solitude. Or Jupiter's ice moons Ganymede. Though she's never been there, of course. Because of its size Shasta creates a lot of unique wind, ice and cloud conditions. Especially during the winter, spring and early summer, the snow-covered mountain provides very little friction for accelerating winds bending around and over this topographic anomaly. Winds over 100 mph at tree line (8000 ft.) are common. This wind is a force of nature that etches impossible patterns and groves into the snow. Carla says that some old Zen master, living in some in-accessible hut on the mountain somewhere, rakes the snow to attain the sensory realm of nothingness. I agree with her. At those heights it's anyone's guess as to the exact winds strength at

14,000 ft. when instruments measure 150 mph winds 6000 ft. lower down on the mountain. Winds of 40



**Figure 101**

mph can easily knock you off balance. Winds of 60-70 mph can force you to crawl. Hurricane strength winds (>74 mph) can make it nearly impossible to stand and will shred your well-anchored REI tent. The strongest winds occur with big pressure and temperature gradients in the atmosphere, and tend to occur in front of, and behind, storms. The lowest winds occur when the center of a high pressure is over the Mt. Shasta area. You have to take this seriously as wind has resulted in search and rescues, injuries and fatalities. I know this from first hand experience having tried (and failed) climbing just the mountain base. The area I climbed turned into a wind-tunnel as we found ourselves suddenly trapped *in* a lenticular cloud. My face was cut by ice crystals and the wind knocked me off my feet and threw me into a snow bank. John Muir did a solo climb of Shasta in the fall of 1874 and the spring of 1875 and also encountered physics defying weather. His 1875 notebook contains details of the great storm of April 28, 1875 (the barometric readings were off the chart), that trapped him and his climbing partner Jerome Fay on the summit of Mt. Shasta in a deadly overnight ordeal. He must have left it out of the

journal, but my climbing friends know that Muir had to have improvised and built a snow cave to wait

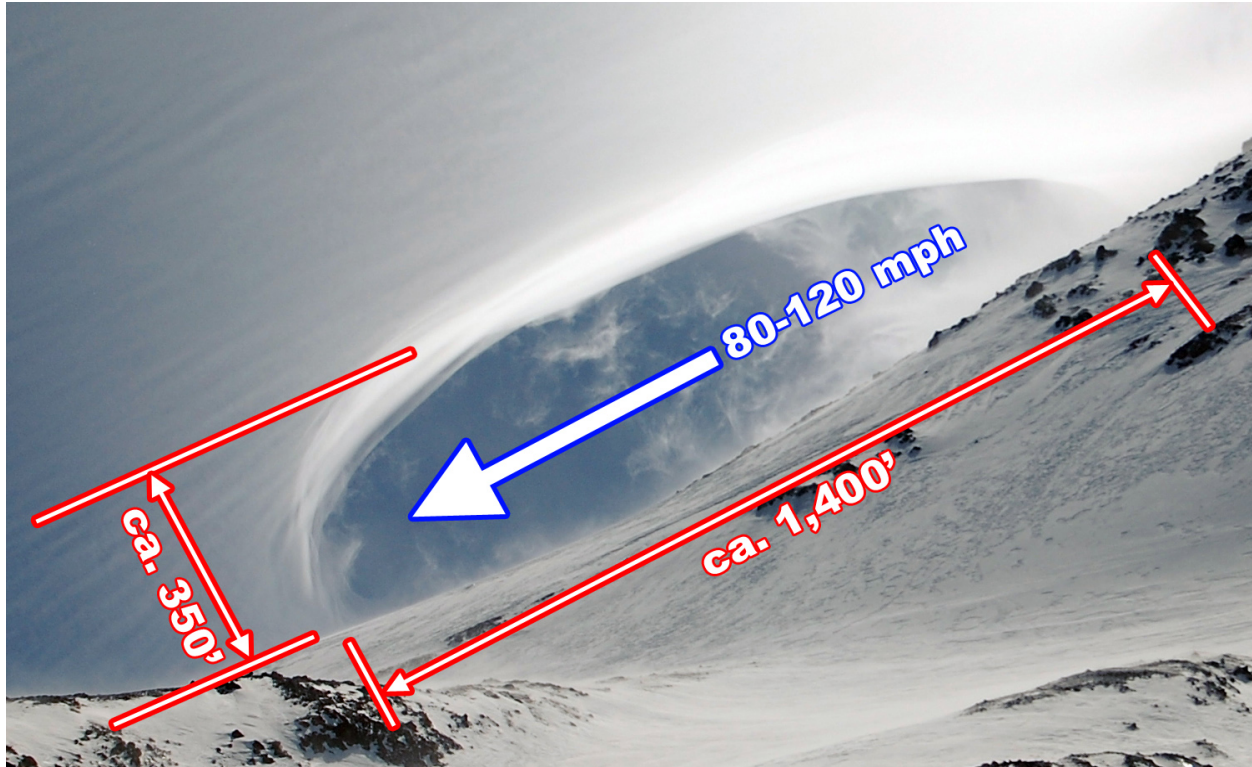


Figure 102

out the storm. How else would he have survived the elements at nine thousand feet? Personally, I lack John Muir's exceptional mental and physical stamina, and I couldn't even begin to rigorously explore California's mountains as he did. I was ill-prepared for the im/materiality of the mountain, seeing only the glittering Shasta of the imagination. But Shasta is a paradox: both the material anchor and jumping off point for the state. Thinking only the later, I didn't think I would end up terribly alone on the mountain, caught in an ordeal beyond my ability. I should have watched the film "Climb an Angry Mountain," starring Fess Parker, to have psychologically prepared myself for what was to come. The film follows an escapee who seeks absolution by climbing Mount Shasta amidst a blizzard. At the end of the day I'm glad I didn't need Fess Parker to pilot a helicopter to save me, as the material world came crashing down upon me in the form of one rock after another whistling past me. I didn't make it anywhere near the top, and almost passed out on a glacier when my sister saved me.



**Figure 103**

That was in 2000. There wasn't anything up there on Shasta then. They probably have a Wendy's up there now. Before my climb, I thought I could as easily move a mountain by an effort of my will. After, I'm not so sure.

### **PAN OUT**

The camera angle gets wider and wider revealing a breathtaking background panorama of Mt. Shasta in full winter whiteness glory.

**JOHN:**

Ever been to Switzerland?

**CARLA:**

No.

**JOHN:**

I wonder what its like?

**CARLA:**

Kinda like Shasta I imagine



**Figure 104**

**SHOT:** ME with a Shasta bottle in my hand mixing myself a Scotch and soda. After my last climb I made this drawing of Shasta. I stick to drawings now.

***FADE OUT***

***FADE IN***

**FLIGHT 12: A FUCKIN GOLD MINE**

To glory, I lumbered for gold—James Dickey

I've got all of California right here in this pan!— Phyllis Flanders Dorset, *The New*

*Eldorado: The Story of Colorado's Gold and Silver Rushes*

These gold hills. Everywhere there is money—Wallace, Ronald “AT HALF-MOON  
BAY”

**CHARACTERS:**

**JOHN**

**EXT. GOLDEN STATE FREEWAY- EARLY EVENING:** The sun setting on a golden slab of California.

**GOLD:** The most precious metal, characterized by a beautiful yellow color, regarded as a valuable possession or employed as a medium of exchange; with allusion to brilliancy, beauty, and transcendent preciousness.

**MOVING SHOT:** Me panning for gold with my family, circa 1985. I first panned for gold with my family on vacation in California. My first gold pan was a Stouffer pie tin that my mom saved for me. Gold pans are cheap and easy to find today. I saw some the other day at a Cabella's store. Only a fraction of the gold on the surface has been gotten. And more washes out of the Earth every day. The gold rushes were a funny thing. They boomed up and quickly died out as rumors

of new richer ground came up. The East coast stopped mining gold during the Civil war after free slave labor ended. Then mining picked up after the great depression. Only to be stopped by WWII by a dramatic loss of workers. The price of gold prevented another gold rush until recently. I can go right now and pan a nugget or 2 in a few minutes at a creek that has been heavily mined. I could dredge an ounce in a week from this same played out creek. Some of my best gold was found where there shouldn't be any. While panning you might want to avoid unfortunate finds, like Uranium, which is very heavy too, although you'd normally only find it as ore rather than metal...you may be panning in among (natural) low-level radioactivity. If the idea of going out gold panning doesn't get you—the price of gold is over \$1800 an ounce. So if by chance you just get beginners luck and end up with a gold nugget near an ounce...that's a pretty good days work versus what you would have to do all week long at work. Its been more than a hundred years after the Gold Rush, but the eyes of America still gaze toward the golden West. The history of California's relation to light is singular, and many early writers rhapsodized about the goldenness of the halcyon country. They were fixated on the way light moved gradually west as the earth rolled towards the sun, making golden light linger in California. Images of moving light dominated the works of Arthur Peterson and his contemporaries. In his "Recollections of Mare Island, California," he puts into words his generation's obsession:

I bask in sunshine—sunshine known

To this auriferous land alone.

Almost certainly light and its representation was perceived through the state's relationship with gold, so that golden slopes cast light as sun-gold. As conquistadors sailed north along the coast

of the “other sea” looking for gold, the taste for gold migrated northward. In 1850, at the beginning of the gold rush, the iconic stanzas of Jesse Hutchinson’s “Ho! For California—” were heartily sung by settlers and immigrants on their way west.

Then ho, boys, ho! To California go  
There's plenty of gold in the world.  
The gold is there almost anywhere,  
Filling our pockets with a dozen of pounds.

The gold-rush introduced many unruly spirits to California in search of gold. In the gold rush literature gold-mouthed poets sang of a golden country situated on a gold coast, with a gold winged guardian angel. Gold fever coursed through every vein and gilded every sphere: in sentimental literature women were depicted as gold hearted, and in the medical literature doctors proscribed gold therapy for nervous complaints. In economics, gold hungry men paid in solid gold-notes and washed their hands and faces in a gold-pan. Chryss Yost tracks down contemporary California through a legacy of gold fever and a shady mining past. Yost shows how the dream of riches has simply been updated into the generic American dream, broadcast by Hollywood. In Yost, the consuming taste for gold possesses the miners who “grab the river with both hands and search, sift, sink deep in California.” For the miners, the myth-makers of the past, California was one big nugget to grab. For this mythic miner, everything was perceived and weighed in gold: “Now I hear the ocean through these hills / the river in my mouth, this taste of gold.”

From the earliest accounts (1808) California was pictured as a sunny earthly paradise in the hands of an “undeserving, dark racial other,” who were often identified with the dusty chaparral landscape. While historians locate the gold rush within broader narratives of American discovery and exploration, they admit that simple gold rush travel literature shaped early American responses to the American dream. Lansford Warren Hastings' *The Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California* (1845) contained a seductive vision of the sunshine state's future prospects. The narrative identifies the shimmering hopes and aspirations of not only the forty-niners, but all social diggers and climbers. Surprisingly, those flocking to the golden state mixed middle class respectability with desire, blending class and gender while tolerating ethnic differences in a transitional modern marketplace. Charlotte Perkins Gilman was the most explicit at divulging this golden romance, breaking the silence in her poem “State Sovereignty” by saying that the country was “Established in auriferous temptation.” That the age of discovery and its gold worshipping conquistadors sought the gold rich kingdoms of the Americas stuck gold at the center of the American myth of discovery, turning sunbaked, yellowish sands and platinum into symbolic treasure troves. Mark Twain found mock gold in a publicity stunt, coining the gilded age not for its glittering surface but for its corrupt underbelly. Few politicians proved gold proof to corruption in the progressive era. In Frank Norris's *The Octopus*, gold-breathing railroad barons, monster corporations and corrupt officials all seek to suppress government reform. Gold also shines in Frank Norris's *McTeague*, where a gold tooth sign is the touchstone for success. From early on California exceptionalism was joined with gold. Known as the land of light and gold, many writers and artists wrote of the golden coast in superlatives: it was the most loved, the last, the best. The speaker in Robert Conquest's “Coming Across” avers that the quality of

goldenness is more thoroughly seen here than anywhere else. The vistas are vaster, the culture more latitudinous, the air anticipative.

We head again westward  
To the waiting Pacific,  
Santa Monica's beaches  
Broader, more golden  
Than the Floridan edge  
Of the almost forgotten  
Ancient Atlantic...

Gold has always been linked in the west with sun-worship and sun myths, to immortality: it is shiny and golden like the sun. Apollo, the Golden calf of the Bible, Akhenaten, The Golden Rule. In a state of de-materialization, a golden nugget is replaced by a golden glow/globe. Naturally, Californians are a sun-descended race, with bodies of burnished gold. The state's heliocentric quest questions what it is to be human, to be alive, to be immortal. Californians quest to live forever crosses boundaries between life, death, and self-transformation. In *Vigil in the Night* by San Franciscan director Fred Guiol, the human body is a King Midas full of hidden gold, greed and gilded desire: "I bet when they open Bowley up, he'll be solid gold inside."

Through the quest for sun and surf, and abstraction, non-and-immaterial California bodies deny the most fundamental phenomenological experiences of corporeality, and the visceral. Ultimately, heliocentric culture confirms that only the immaterial is bearable, a concept divorced from Western metaphysical traditions, challenging many assumptions regarding objectivity, the

body, and identity, providing a valuable reflection on the human and the post-human condition, in which the body is more incidental, or more immortal than mortal. Here, the subject is porous and emergent, following the dissolution of the boundaries of the body.

For decades at fire-festivals on Baker beach in San Francisco, locals have propitiated the golden god of the sun by burning 9-foot tall wooden men. This sun charm is intuitively intended to ensure a proper supply of sunshine, thus assisting the sun in a ritual that preceded and begat burning man—the national fire worshipping festival. At UC San Diego Niki de Saint Phalle's “Sun God,” a colorful deity honors the southern California campus. “I will alight there,” said the Sun God, pointing one of its psychedelic wings toward the fledgling campus on the mesa. The exuberantly colored, fourteen-foot sky bird with a distinctive golden crown is perched atop a fifteen-foot concrete arch on a grassy area between the Faculty Club and Mandeville Auditorium. The fiberglass Sun God has become a unique feature on the UCSD campus, intended to provoke the meaning of home: the roof over head: the sky. Your stomping ground: soaring air. The roof: roost. Pied-à-sol. In the presence of the statue, I saw many ambitious young USC students, all demanding, in their own way, permission to guide the solar chariot for one day, to prove themselves the undoubted progeny of the Sun-god.



Figure 105

**FLASHBACK TO MY COLLEGE DAYS:** This was the statue<sup>xv</sup> I passed by at least weekly for four years at UCSD. I once embellished the statue with giant sunglasses. During your time at UCSD, you're supposed to walk under the statue only ONCE and make a wish under it. Legend has it that if you do this, your wish will come true.

If gold looks like light that's because it is—explosive light. Unlike common elements like carbon or lead, gold cannot be created within a simple star. Rather, it must be born in a cataclysmic event—or by Hollywood magic. Images snapped by the Hubble Space Telescope suggest that gold is generated by violent neutron star collisions. Astrophysicists at UCSD believe that a crash between two neutron stars released many moon masses of gold—quite a lot of bling. The gold craze in California set off an immaterialized taste for all things golden and sunny. It is this sun worship that artificially turns a boy from Ohio into a suntanned teenager with peroxide golden surfer hair. The Oscar: a golden laurel. Tinsel town: a glittery movie venture. In his



Figure 106

memoirs, California architect John C. Frémont proclaimed, "To this Gate I gave the name of "Chrysopylae," or "Golden Gate." The Golden Gate is the North American strait that connects San Francisco Bay to the Pacific Ocean, and the subsequent bridge was imagined by Vachel Lindsay as a bridge of light, "A solid gold beam that soars up to Heaven. / And the biggest ocean in the world." The Golden Gate bridges the material/immaterial by spanning the tangible and intangible, heaven and earth, dreams and substance<sup>xvi</sup>. In "California," Louis Aston Marantz Simpson immaterializes the golden gate by bridging metaphysics: "Today, there is an angel in the gate." Granting that gold is a heavy stockpile of atoms, measured in chunks, nuggets, and rock, immaterial gold rises above nuggets, beams, and bridges. It outshines. It is the bronzed god and golden sunset soaring into the metaphysical. Neither metal nor ore, but color and light: glittering, gold, bleached hair on a tinsel afternoon. The emphasis on aura over object, on destination, is highlighted in the quintessential Californication object/idea: blond hair. In Southern California the sun-licked are also the sun-crowned: blonde hair is a halo of light that

inspires others to escape from their collar bound bodies, to light up the night like only a blonde can shine. Jack Spicer celebrates the California sun god in his “Imaginary Elegies,” who, it turns out, is a handsome youth:

When I praise the sun or any bronze god derived from it  
Don't think I wouldn't rather praise the very tall blond boy  
Who ate all of my potato-chips at the Red Lizard.  
It's just that I won't see him when I open my eyes  
And I will see the sun.

**EXT: GOLDEN SUNSET NIGHT**

***FADE OUT***

### **FLIGHT 13: THE REDWOOD FORESTS OF ENDOR**

Not very far away are Death Valley, and Yosemite, and Sequoia Forest with its giant trees which were growing long before the Parthenon was built; they are the oldest living things in the world. One should visit such places often, and be conscious, in the midst of the city, of their surrounding presence. For this is the real nature of California and the secret of its fascination; this untamed, undomesticated, aloof, prehistoric landscape which relentlessly reminds the traveller of his human condition and the circumstances of his tenure upon the earth—Christopher Isherwood, *Exhumations*

#### **CHARACTERS:**

**JOHN**

**GREG**

**SPEECH BUBBLE:** I've always wanted to see the Redwood trees. Ever since I went on a



Figure 107

school trip to the Natural History Museum and saw this diorama.

**RED-WOOD**, the name given to the reddish, or dark-colored wood; the immaterial, incorruptible wood found in the heart of trees.



Figure 108

***FLASHBACK:***

Driving up from California to the north-west, I reveled in the greatness of the mighty redwood groves along the highway. In the best stands, the redwoods average anywhere from 225ft. to 350ft. in height. One tree, named “Iron-John” for its great solidity, reminded me of James Broughton’s poem “Two Adams in a Sonoma Wood,” despite the fact that I was alone. In the poem, two lovers take cover under the wind song of an ancient redwood. They cling together, renewing their Adam-ness under the trees where “nipples shone from riper torsos [and] loins opened into full bloom...” This is the poem Walt Whitman should have written. A poem that establishes a primitive and arboreal basis to gay love. Here the sequoia is not stock timber, but the softwood found in hearts. Where family trees mix lineages with the lineaments of men’s

muscled bodies, the woods break down all boundaries between bodies and beings, matter and energy. In JV Cunningham “*A Sequence of Short Poems*,” the speaker locates himself between twin extremities, the heights of modernism and nature: “The glass walls, /And redwood, are my utmost being.”

**CUT TO: AN ANCIENT REDWOOD FOREST AT SONOMA**



Figure 109

The redwoods are not easy to photograph given their immense size and the challenging deep forest light, but they are an absolute pleasure to see.

**CUT TO FANTASY DREAM SEQUENCE:** After watching *Return of the Jedi* I yearned to fall in love with a brave, handsome Ewok and live happily ever after in his tree-house, where we would amuse ourselves by playing drums on old Storm trooper helmets. At Muir Woods many people like to pose like Ewoks.



Figure 110

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** I think the poem would do equally well if it were titled “Two Eyes in a

Sonoma Wood.” In Ethelwyn Wetherald “Point Defiance Park1,” Redwoods are guardian angels that lends support and solidity to humanity:

Defiance! How that name arouses me!

Her redwood trees, like guardian angels

great

And giant-hearted, weave above her gate

The splendour of their leafy canopy.

In their encircling arms upstandeth she,

And breathes defiance to the harshest fate

**PAN SKYWARD:** *GIANT REDWOODS* looming skyward. It's DAYTIME in Muir woods. I

WALK toward a display of a cross cut section of a redwood tree.

**INT: CLOSE-UP: inside the visitor center:** HERE'S a cross section of one of the old trees that's been cut down.

**ZOOM IN** on the lines of the tree marked, with cards that say, "BIRTH OF CHRIST", "DISCOVERY OF AMERICA", "MAGNA CARTA SIGNED" "1066 -- BATTLE OF HASTINGS", and "1930 TREE CUT DOWN". ME pointing, saying with profound melancholy: somewhere about here I was born. And here's where I'll probably die, pointing at a broken ring.



Figure 111

If SoCal is luminous then NorCal is vertical. Soaring up through the misty understory to the canopy, the redwoods are a sky/light into the emergent layer. In NorCal, mammoth Sequoias rise to enormous proportions—a standing room only that spreads into space. In the literature of the Redwoods, the trees are a cultural compass pointing north, to higher, immaterial ground. The trees are also a genealogical grounding point.

### **ZOOM IN: ON HISTORY PANEL**

In the history of northern California, glacial bedrock laid down over six million years ago later became a broad swamp where Redwoods flourished, as well as ginkgo and palm trees. In the northern reaches of the state are some of the biggest trees in the world, where the lumber-men couldn't reach them. A few miles west of Eureka I met this really great guy at the park named Greg. He showed me the center of the universe in the rings of a redwood stump: the rings became eons that crossed the chasm of time. He made Bonsai for a hobby, and showed me a picture of his beautiful Bonsai version of the tallest tree species in the world, the Coast Redwood. His "Redwood bonsai" almost seemed like an oxymoron. But he won a lot of prizes at Bonsai shows, although I wouldn't want to spend 100 years torturing a tree for fun. Well, if you can't get to the redwoods for a hike, why not bring the forest home?



Figure 112

**GREG:**

Did you know that Redwood trees live in families? They have very shallow roots, but redwood trees are connected to each other through their root system. When you see a group of redwood trees, often they are all part of the same roots, and they feed one another that way.

**JOHN**

I'm still looking for my real family.

The Redwoods have been around since time immemorial. Writes Robinson Jeffers in "Pelicans,"

The cone that the oldest redwood dropped from, the tilting of continents,

The dinosaur's day, the lift of new

**High-descended** *adj.* of lofty or noble descent. From the rings as well as their sheer verticality, Californians trace their high-descended ancestry, as well as their high-climbing spirits. These are family trees where immaterial blood/sap/lines run deep. For Lance Jeffers, future generations “will redwood from my genes.” Here, every logger fantasizes about felling the forests of the mind. The redwoods represent a California genealogy of the immaterial, tracing family descent down through time immemorial. In “MY ROOTS CLAIM AMERICAN EARTH,” Lance Jeffers writes

My roots claim American earth:  
thick as redwood trunks, they suck the juice of American  
soil: the whole of American history enters my veins

Here, the Redwoods stand for true American substance, pith, and essence, all that can be absorbed into the material self and imagination. Every other origin is derivative. Rising straight up 350 feet, these genealogical trees don’t record the relation of ancestors to descendants under the form of a tree with spreading branches; rather, through their sheer age and verticality they record the descent of Californians from immaterial, sky high, and ascending origins. In Kenneth McClane’s “GOING,” residents of the state of light fear nothing less than greatness:

I have  
a fear that  
I am smaller than the word  
used to describe

a redwood

These trees float upward and reveal, revel in, and remind of light. They upend the laws of nature, skyscraping, soaring into the stratosphere like the California dream. In Tom Clark's "Tree Talk," the redwoods travel from the stratosphere into subterranean depths, both grounding and soaring:

Tree talk is the party line of the intelligent listening forest  
Whether the smooth voiceless no breeze whisper rustling  
Inside green upper tiers of a fogbound blue spruce  
Or the deep aether growth song stirring way  
Down in each tender quiet working sub-earth redwood shoot

In Thom Gunn's "Lights Among Redwood," the redwoods look after and watch over light on earth; as interface between earth and sky, the tallest trees hold onto, filter, and transmit light, letting some escape as visible luminosity to sightseers down below. Here, light is inflected through a material world of moss, leaves and bark—it becomes color and space, feeling, cast and shade. Filtered through the redwood's canopy, light is made tangible so that viewers can perceive pure light made visible through a material cast. Or, as Emily Dickinson wrote: "The truth must dazzle gradually. / Or every man be blind." Paradoxically, there is often more light in the canopy, as sunlight is reflected and intensified by numerous reflective green surfaces. Thus, with Gunn, only the great height of a redwood can get hold of the pure light, giving it form:

And the streams here, ledge to ledge,  
take care of light. Only to  
the pale green ribs of young ferns  
tangling above the creek's edge  
it may sometimes escape, though  
in quick diffusing patterns.

Elsewhere it has become tone,  
pure and ratified; at most  
a muted dimness coloured  
with moss-green, charred grey, leaf-brown.  
Calm shadow! Then we at last  
remember to look upward  
constant, to laws of size and  
age the thick forms hold, though gashed  
through with Indian fires. At once  
tone is forgotten: we stand  
and stare---mindless, diminished---  
at their rosy immanence.

*of Muir Woods*



Figure 113

In fact, even on cloudy days misty forests like Muir actually see more light than sunny days.

According to one plant physiologist: “Sometimes it's brighter than complete sunlight...because some of the filtered light scatters off the *clouds* and is combined with direct sunlight before reaching the leaves.” In “Decade,” Nicholas Samara’s redwood canopy is the point of departure into light and energy, with strands of sequoias standing at the threshold of the immaterial.

...the redwood walls,  
learning their sturdiness.  
From the threshold, I stare  
into ocean and light  
until my eyes hold icons.  
Until there is nothing of me  
but reflection.

In the same woody vein, in Tom Clark's "Inside the Redwood," the canopy is the point where materialism de-materializes into "Floating tiers and worlds." In the canopy, earth drops out of



Figure 114

sight, as the material melts away into a world of air and light. For Robinson Jeffers, the "Summit Redwood" is a transcendent place where heaven meets earth; where leaf melts into sky, sky into space.

The fire from heaven; it has felt the earth's too

Roaring up hill in autumn, thorned oak-leaves tossing their bright ruin to the bitter laurel-leaves, and all

Its under-forest has died and died, and lives to be burnt; the redwood has lived.

Though the fire entered,

It cored the trunk while the sapwood increased. The trunk is a tower, the bole of

the trunk is a black cavern,

The mast of the trunk with its green boughs the mountain stars are strained

through

Is like the helmet-spike on the highest head of an army; black on lit blue or hidden

in cloud

It is like the hill's finger in heaven. And when the cloud hides it, though in barren

summer, the boughs

Make their own rain.

In 1997 a young woman named Julia Butterfly Hill climbed a 200-foot redwood dubbed Luna (like Jack who climbed the magic beanstalk) to protect a copse of redwoods from logging. For two years her feet did not touch the Earth. In her tree she adapted to immaterial living, never washing the sticky sap from the tree off of her feet. It helped her to walk on the tree branches. The wind and cold almost knocked her out of the tree but she did not fall. Her friends visited her two times every week to send up what she needed through a pulley system of ropes. Once, they even sent her a chocolate birthday cake. In "December 12, 1998," Wrote Hill from the canopy:

Time is lost here

A day, a week, and now a month is turning two...

Immense and soaring highs

Painfully aching lows

I have crested snow-capped mountains  
And wept upon the fallen valley,  
Everything in between carries me, pushes me,  
onward, upward, outward



Figure 115

Ever skyward, Luna was a cedar calendar—dateless, deathless. The natural becomes supernatural, as the tree pushes perception toward the outside, moving beyond normal materialism. The Redwood’s immortality is a form of the immaterial—the material is reborn through energy. Hibernating in rotting redwood logs, many loggers recounted stories of bringing Redwood logs indoors to burn and mysteriously seeing salamanders appear from the flames, as if renewing themselves. That these trees are incorruptible by fire or age makes the material immaterial. In truth, the immaterial is no object because it lacks a body—the redwood has an

incorruptible heartwood. The tree is a finger pointing past the tangible, past death; obscured only by clouds. Weather is also an experience of light, and the Redwood reaches past the limits of



Figure 116

materiality, of substance, and the medium of weather: rain and clouds. The medium through which we see becomes immaterial. David Meltzer picks up this theme in “Tree reminds of light.”

Tree reminds of light.

Itself between it.

Branchings. Splendor. Victory. Mercy.

Kingdom. Foundation. Beauty. Geburah.

To look up to the end of a redwood. Sunlight blinds.

Start with 10. End with 10.

Let the zeros couple into infinity.

You're left with two ones.

From a firm inner center. Spilt forth all the sun &  
starlight I could master.

...They say my eyes opened three weeks later. The first  
thing I asked for was for more

Bolinas,

1971

Here the immaterial is mental: Splendor. Victory. Mercy. But you cannot see light itself.

Merleau-Ponty thought that the sky, far from being just surface, was the world of light itself,



Figure 117

where viewers open themselves up to vision and perception: “As I contemplate the blue of the sky, I am not set over against it as an a-cosmic subject...” Simply put: to see the sky is to be the sky. If sunlight blinds, then to experience the firmament in full luminosity fully impact one’s visual perception of the sky as the experience of light as energy. What’s more, a direct experience of sunlight takes one out of this world into space, into a universe of abstraction and limitless potentialities: the

world of science fiction. Fantasy. Such a vision leaves the viewer wanting more. In Walt Whitman’s “SONG OF THE REDWOOD-TREE,” over the sound of axes chomping wood, the voice of a dying redwood tree delivers a terrifying prophecy of the future. Indeed, Whitman

located progress from the crow's nest of a redwood: "from its lofty top rising two hundred feet high," the white race gains purchase, a foothold on the sublime.

**THOUGHT BUBBLE:** Whenever I think of loggers I think of the quintessential strapping logger: Paul Bunyon and his trusty blue side kick Babe. In Whitman's prophecy, the redwoods, mythic kings of the forest, abdicate to the "superber race" of white dream seekers flooding the woods, assimilating everything within the purview of the redwood:

*skies and airs, these mountain peaks, Shasta, Nevadas,*

*These huge precipitous cliffs, this amplitude, these valleys far Yosemite,*

*To be in them absorb'd, assimilated.*

*Here may he hardy, sweet, gigantic grow, here tower proportionate to Nature,*

*Here climb the vast pure spaces unconfined, uncheck'd by wall or roof,*

*Here laugh with storm or sun, here joy, here patiently inure*

Contrary to Walt's vision of white imperial conquest, I hope the Ewoks (furry guardians of the forest) win the day. But in the poem, assimilating the sweep and stretch of the tree, the settlers



Figure 118

take in pride and ecstasy, becoming the new deities of the West. As such they are released from the shackles of the material, from the confines of wall or roof. In a sublime state of nature, the settlers appropriate history and nature, cutting down not just native trees, but the Big Bens of the forest that commemorate and concentric-ate the deep past in and through their rings. Taking the place of the redwoods, the settlers create a new society, copying the reach of the trees and substituting their own

reach and ambition. The red woods are high principled symbols soaring and pointing beyond; a soaring Plymouth Rock, the place of cultural beginning that is larger and more original: conjuring genealogical and geologic time. According to Whitman, the settlers assimilate the trees, their stand and reach, thus becoming natives of the place by owning the natural history and genealogy of the place.

The new society at last, proportionate to Nature,  
In man of you, more than your mountain peaks or stalwart trees imperial,  
In woman more, far more, than all your gold or vines, or even vital air.  
Clearing the ground for broad humanity, the true America, heir of the past so

grand,

To build a grander future.

**FLASHBACK:**

After reading this poem I had a scary stereoscopic dream of the logging past—I hope it doesn't come true.



Figure 119

**FLASHFORWARD:** Climate scientists who have decoded Redwood tree rings like secret decoder rings have concluded that a sustained drought like our present misery hasn't occurred in the last 1,200 years. The rings have also been decoded to show how fire and flood have affected the redwoods' growth across time. But redwood rings are notorious for being difficult to decode—there are anomalous readings, gaps, and “missing” rings. The first step is simply determining the correct date for each ring-year. Through tree ring analysis, the redwoods

throughout California are showing us how to adapt to current conditions, how to respond to climate, not just in past centuries, but millennia from now.

**MUSIC UP:** "A Day in the Life of a Tree"

## **FLIGHT 14:**

### **THE END OF HISTORY**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century fascination with light, speed and movement attained its apotheosis in California, which perfected a civilization housed in glass architecture, moved along by the mass highway freeway system, and inspired by the wool gathering of Hollywood. The state best epitomizes the sense of restlessness and demands of a society for scale, luminosity, intensity and rapid (I) movement. The golden state has its own sunny utopia in mind, and California dreaming is all about liberating man by removing physical and geographical borders, by abolishing the forces of gravity and weighty materialism, as well as cloudiness and the weight of history. Even the immaterial has become immaterial. As an aggregate of past events history is freighted with materialism. In a state of light we may be witnessing is not just the end of historical materialism, or the passing of a particular period of history, but the end of history as such. This end-of-history transforms history into light energy, elevation, vast timescales, and space, and is best experienced in a flying car speeding to the next frontier, the next faraway place, the next speedway, the next planet called California. In the California imagination, history is more or less bunk. If history is bunk, modern Californians love and live to debunk it.

**MUSIC UP:** BEACH BOYS "And Your Dream Comes True"

**MONTAGE:** of the photographs taken throughout the journey

***FADE OUT***

**THE END**

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Figure 83. *Scientists Observe Ball Lightning In Nature For The First Time Ever*. Digital image. N.p., n.d. Web. Mar. 2014. <<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/56576539043117531/>>. earthquake light

Figure 84. *Phoenix from the Flames Reinvigoration through Catastrophe*. Digital image. N.p., June 2013. Web. Jan. 2015. <<http://www.risk.jbs.cam.ac.uk/news/events/risksummits/downloads/pdfs/2013/scawthorne.pdf>>. San Francisco 1906

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Figure 116. *Salamander in the Redwoods in Northern California.jpg*. Digital image. Wiki. Wiki Commons, 2014. Web. Dec. 2014.  
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Figure 117. *California Outing 01/ Redwood Forest*. Digital image. N.p., 2012. Web. Apr. 2014.  
<<http://ad-chemistry.com/2012/06/12/california-outing-01-redwood-forest/>>. Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox.

Figure 118. *Random Toy Pic(s) :: Takin' out the Trash*. Digital image. N.p., 2012. Web. Apr. 2013. <[http://toyriffic.blogspot.com/2012\\_08\\_01\\_archive.html](http://toyriffic.blogspot.com/2012_08_01_archive.html)>. Ewok toy

Figure 119. *John Muir at Mirror Lake, Yosemite National Park, Ca. 1902*. Digital image. Library of Congress, n.d. Web. Oct. 2013.  
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## FLIGHT 16: NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Throughout most of the twentieth century, California best epitomized the American dream—The land of milk and honey, where Gadgetry, Monodogma, Virtual, Frankie and Ann, by invoking the immaterial I am not referencing the virtual—those congeries of intangibles and abstractions, potentials and virtualities. Virtuality designates historical techno-objects as well as states which exist but are not tangible. Whereas the virtual is locked in a main frame of servers and plastic, the immaterial has the capacity to be actualized through longing and dreams. A return to the real, not an escape from. Theorists use several terms to define slippery materiality, such as “immateriality,” “de-materialization” and “hyper-materiality.” According to Theodore Adorno: materiality is located in its resistance to human concepts, but it is spiritual insofar as it is a dark or vague promise of an absolute-to-come. I will exclusively use “immateriality” as it is considered more precise in discussing the de-creation of matter. But, the concept “immaterial” should not be taken literally, as all things possess a material form; I am invoking that which is more than the object’s form: the inanimate, including fantasy, aura, effect, and process. Unlike a tree, the ocean doesn’t have a core; light lacks substance but has force; waves have mass but surf boards float; beefcakes have thick frames but float free weights; That is, things like weather and speed do not reside in material entities, but in the interaction between people and their environment. I will use the ideas of art theorists like John Chandler and Lucy Lippard’s; their work “The dematerialization of the art object” will guide my thinking on the concept of energy, extending the idea that energy is as an inherent element in art as well as daily life in California, as the sun and its animating energy permeates all. Within immaterial culture, things and objects (and consumer items) shed their normal meaning, become de-materialized, abstracted and vacated, ready to be filled with new meanings depending on shifting processes and contexts. Within California material/immaterial culture, intangible sensation and experience reign; objects become wild, free-floating signs/signifiers. But, immateriality is not mere emptiness; it can be considered a new, indeterminate state of matter. Jean-François Lyotard declared that the

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immaterial is matter—that matter is subject to interaction and change. According to Lyotard, immateriality is symptomatic of energy. Similarly, art theorists Chandler and Lippard state that “matter has been transformed into energy.” For Lyotard, this concept is nothing new: matter as energy is the a-priori condition of all objects. Likewise, physics asserts that matter consists of discrete packets of energy—asserting that there’s no such thing as matter per se, only energy exists.

<sup>iii</sup> Seminal books in the field, like *Material culture studies in America*, or the *Handbook of material culture*, to cite a few representative examples, generally focus on cultural stuff that is made and exchanged, and its effect on subject-object relations. While these show how we are ensnared by material forms and embodiment in a human body and the senses, I consider more ephemeral connections, processes and transformations, like our tenuous connection with sunshine, color, and breezes.

<sup>v</sup> See Stephen Heath, "Anata mo," *Screen* (Winter 1976), 17 (4) :49-66, for the Lacanian distinction between "the real" and "reality" in the context of film theory.

<sup>vi</sup> See also Howes, David. *Empire of the senses: the sensual culture reader*. New York: Berg Publishers, 2005.

<sup>vii</sup> Yankees seem to only come to life in artificial light. Author.

<sup>viii</sup> See UW Image Bank Case Study House no. 8 (Charles and Ray Eames House)

<sup>ix</sup> William Ellery Channing / Selima Hill’s “Brueghel's Helicopter.”

<sup>x</sup> See J. Willis Sayre Collection of Theatrical Photographs film actress

<sup>xi</sup> As an east coast invention, in comics, anything imaginable could be drawn, and comics anticipated a more elastic, pliable boundary between the material and immaterial: in comics, the form of a comic body is able to spring back to life like plastic man or Spiderman. New immigrants arriving in America imagined superheroes as enforcers of equal access to the American dream. Jewish immigrants Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster wanted their Superman to have a positive influence on children. Besides good intentions, action comics were a plastic art form that navigated the nation's encounter with the slipperiness of modernity. Who better than Plastic man could personify this new plasticity, not only of the genre, but of American modernism and materialism. Indeed, the plasticity of the drawn image espoused a non-Euclidean and non-western perspective that would be picked up again in California plastic art and its approach to plasticity in the arts; in works of resin, polymer, light bulb, and polyurethane. Mikhail Bakhtin described comics as a hybridized construction that combines two languages: the word/image dichotomy. Visually representing voices, comics are an evolving liminal, in between language.

<sup>xii</sup> See “Dream Coast,” Louis Aston Marantz.

<sup>xiii</sup> In Jackson Turner’s “Frontier Thesis,” the west and western progress are always receding, just out of reach: “The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.” In the history of the west California was unique: as “the distinctive frontier of the period [was] found in California, where the gold discoveries had sent a sudden tide of adventurous miners.” According to Turner, the frontier impulse requires adaption and change to renew the vital human spirit. With the closing of the frontier, Turner saw that the expansive power of the American spirit would require a new western frontier: “the demand for land and the love of wilderness freedom

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[would] draw the frontier ever onward. Thus wave after wave is rolling westward; the real Eldorado is still farther on.” With Turner, we see the drifting, nomadic and unsettled myth of the American dream. In California, this myth/non myth still plays out as the western edge of the myth, where thousands still go to make it rich, to find happiness, to “win a wilderness.”

<sup>xiv</sup> In James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture*, “Culture is an idea which has passed its prime.” That is, what we are looking for isn’t there: our culture desires to escape from itself, but escape is problematic. Instead, the symptoms of modern culture: mobility, communication and exchange have brought us to a “syncretic, post cultural” 20th century. In place of culture today, we have “collages” that are surreal juxtapositions of disparate elements.

<sup>xv</sup> See <http://images.sdentertainer.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/ewen-and-donabel.jpg>

<sup>xvi</sup> See B. G. DeSylva (1895–1950) “Open up that Golden Gate, California, here I come—“