



Copyright © 1999 Ohio University School of Film. All rights reserved.

Wide Angle 20.3 (1998) 157-181

[Muse](#) [Search](#) [Journals](#) [This Journal](#) [Contents](#)

Access provided by Claremont College

Replacing L.A.: *Mi Familia*, *Devil In a Blue Dress*, and Screening the Other Los Angeles

[Karen Voss *](#)

[Figures](#)

A type of narrative about Los Angeles that seems to grow increasingly familiar within the mainstream is the "history of Los Angeles narrative." Moving back from *L.A. Confidential*, a significant roster of contemporary films straddling crime and historiographic genres could be assembled that use a fictive cover to make truth claims about the history of the city. ¹ The "authenticity" of a particular old L.A. is typically generated through movie studios' own publicity machinery, but occasionally a truth effect about the filmed landscape enjoys an after-life, as with some scholars' conclusions that *Chinatown* continues to serve as a crucial source for popular understanding of L.A.'s civic history. ² As Paul Skenazy speculates in "History as Mystery, or Who Killed L.A.?" a marked tendency of contemporary detective fiction set in Los Angeles includes self-conscious attempts at historical reanalysis and a certain vigor for "redirecting low-brow genres to high purpose." ³ If we were to inflect Skenazy's suggestion along spatial lines, contemporary "history of L.A." films from *Chinatown* to *L.A. Confidential* represent a key field of inquiry for analyzing how mainstream film works to construct popular urban history dependent upon reconstructing the physical structure of the city and the spatial norms governing who lives where. These L.A. "near-histories" dovetail with a parallel trend in historiographic writing on L.A. which openly acknowledges the fictive as a means to gauging components of popular consensus about the city, within such formats as the noir city myth, the touristic, or the docu-fable. ⁴ **[End Page 157]**



These L.A. histories also function in the realm of urban commemoration, bathing specific (often lost) built forms, urban social relations and mobility (literal and metaphoric) with nostalgia; this spatialized nostalgia deserves further attention, especially in the case of *Mi Familia* and *Devil In A Blue Dress*, two recent films that reconstitute the racial landscape of Los Angeles prior to the 'hood. In attempting an intervention in both the narrow range of

popular histories of L.A. and the prevailing criminalization attached to contemporary representations of the inner city, these films offer the opportunity to examine the terms of inclusion within mainstream historical imaging of Los Angeles. While both films ultimately succumb to reductive narrative closure, they both attempt an overt remapping of popular urban history, pointing to the crucial role that constituting and re-coding spatial distinctions play in articulating the terms of L.A.'s diversity.

While Edward Soja's oft-cited call for a "spatialization of the critical imagination," which has otherwise lagged within "a [modernist] critical hermeneutic still enveloped in a temporal master-narrative, in a historical but not yet comparably geographic imagination," proves invigorating, what this can mean in terms of a specific reading protocol for film remains somewhat unclear.⁵ For my purposes here, I will capitalize on both the literal and more metaphoric connotations of "space," arguing that we can best read the "other" L.A. constructed by both of these films by assuming that the films' topographies are going to resonate on several spatial levels: in making thematic valuations of narrative spaces; in mobilizing a certain "imageability" that may reinforce or challenge L.A.'s stereotypical visual lexicon;⁶ and finally, in constructing what Michel de Certeau terms an "erotics of knowledge" about the city space, encompassing the power relationships involved in providing and consuming a particular panorama of urban space.⁷



In reconstituting a lost L.A. spatiality (an innocent, sunny inner city) both films apply certain tactics of domestication to remove these spaces from current associations of criminalized ghettos. The phenomenally warmly-lit historic mise-en-scenes of both films stand in direct opposition to contemporary cinematic palettes of urban decay. In emphasizing the communal vibrancy of these past ethnic enclaves against the city's maintenance of rigid racial and economic borders, both films work to expose state mechanisms of spatial confinement and expulsion, problematizing cherished narratives about access to **[End Page 158]** the American Dream (as it is most routinely spatialized in property ownership) and fixing the originating moment of the "color line." Both films are also centrally concerned with mobility across space: in terms of access to the entire city, the accusation of migrancy, as well as "making it." These friendly corrective sites, dedicated to counteracting both an invisibility in the official record and the criminality of culturally installed ideas about the 'hood, become highly ambivalent, hovering between what is docile enough to gain entry in the mainstream and what is exotic enough to enforce new terms of "otherness." Subsequently, how each film locates Latino and African American populations in the city grid as well as how each locates an acceptable mainstream space within the cinematic imaginary comprise dual localizing functions operating in the films. Against a backdrop of xenophobic hysteria over maintenance of borders that accompanied California's passage of Proposition 187, these films' strategies of spatial inclusion become highly loaded examples of attempts to displace negative spatialities often attached to diversity. It is subsequently imperative to gauge the politics of these parallel worlds.

A certain poetics of the split city have, perhaps, structured much of urban representation and American crime genres in particular, but in considering the common imaging of Los Angeles as sprawl, horizontally fragmented and lacking coherency across sites, the city is

increasingly split according to rigid identity categories (as opposed to the vertical/moral bifurcations of the "normal" world versus the underworld typically expressed in the East Coast city). ⁸ To offer a **[End Page 159]** context (albeit brief) for the discussion that follows, it is useful to consider that within contemporary mainstream cinematic narration, for those consigned to Los Angeles barrio and 'hood spaces, the most common way out is a spectacular death (*American Me* [1992] and *Menace II Society* [1993] stand as key examples, where barrio and 'hood space are explicitly linked to prison space/rape and a warscape respectively. ⁹) Images of greater access across the city, and by extension, upward American mobility are few. Latino access to the greater urban system from the L.A. barrio finds definition in "based on a true story" films *La Bamba* (1987) and *Stand and Deliver* (1988), where Advanced Placement Calculus and rock and roll, respectively, open prospective paths from the barrio to institutional assimilation. (Although, tellingly, both narratives end without following through on this prospect: we only know that the Garfield High School students in *Stand and Deliver* pass the Advanced Placement Calculus Test, but not whether any of them ultimately go to college or anywhere for that matter; *La Bamba's* Richie Valens dies in what the narrative structures as a mystically "predestined" airplane crash just as his music is crossing over with English hits, sadly suggesting his death as linked to (inappropriate?) assimilation and success. ¹⁰) L.A. 'hood films (or the aura of a 'hood heritage) almost entirely eclipse contemporary representations of African Americans within mainstream film about L.A. ¹¹

The 'hood, in cinematic as well as rap incarnations of Compton and South Central, has been theorized within cultural criticism as a highly ambivalent and evocative space, at times capable of systemic critique, especially when considered with its metaphorical allegiances to the revered legacy of the gangster, ¹² and at others, as merely a nihilistic (and exclusively masculine) response to the rancid decay of urban infrastructure. What is clear in either case is that the problem of responding to urban squalor falls almost entirely upon the shoulders of minority groups. Other minority populations in L.A. are essentially unacknowledged within mainstream cinema except to signal a sinister, polycultural landscape which, to borrow from Lisa Lowe's discussion on the production of multiculturalism in L.A., "construct[s] the white citizen against the background of a multicultural dystopia." ¹³ Against these mediascapes *Mi Familia* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* attempt to re-code East L.A. and South Central. **[End Page 160]**

***Mi Familia* and Bridging the East Los Angeles Barrio**

In considering L.A. from a Mexican-American literary perspective, one begins with a fundamental fact: L.A. has been, since the mid-nineteenth century, a city uneasy about its Mexican-ness. ¹⁴

Mi Familia, marketed as a "Mexican Godfather" depicting authentic East L.A. barrios, immediately strove to capitalize on its status as a hybrid object, both generically and historically authentic. A generational epic spanning three essential time periods (the thirties, the fifties and the present), the narrative also announced a certain pedigree in its opening credits, "Francis Ford Coppola presents in association with Majestic Films and American Playhouse Theatrical Films." The film was directed by Gregory Nava, who also

directed *El Norte* (1983), a film about siblings fleeing political persecution in Guatemala for the imagined paradise of Los Angeles, and *Selena* (1997), a biography about the slain *tejana* singer. Marketing photos for *Mi Familia* centered on sentimental wedding and family portraits, signaling the operation of the film's "history" at levels removed from "objectivity." Edward James Olmos's voice-over smoothes the narrative's large temporal leaps and provides a point of familiarity for an American mainstream audience, just as Olmos's performances have articulated the Los Angeles Latino persona across films such as *Stand and Deliver*, *American Me*, and *Blade Runner*. The locus of action occurs in the domestic space and environs of a tight-knit barrio in East Los Angeles, combining codes of documentary, memoir, autobiography, and melodrama in order to convey the familial spirit and historic struggle of East Los Angeles as separate yet capable of integration within the official record.

Barrio space, as with the Little Italy sector of the *The Godfather's* New York, strives here for the status of ethnic enclave, where individuals negotiate the tensions between preserving Mexican roots against the demands of assimilating in a hostile climate, in terms, of course, amenable to mainstream expectations surrounding "the immigrant story" cherished in national ideology. *Mi Familia's* strategy, then, could be characterized as working to convert a history that the power structure considers migrant into immigrant. While the film promises this narrative trajectory, the film's spatial logic remains much more troubling, invoking social contradictions that it cannot entirely resolve. **[End Page 161]**



The film charts the movement of Jose Sanchez from a small town in Mexico to the home of El Californio, a distant relative living in East L.A. just prior to the Depression. There he joins the Mexican workforce that keeps monied L.A.'s elaborate yards and homes immaculate. He marries and begins a family; his pregnant wife, Maria, is illegally deported to central Mexico during the Depression (despite her cries that she is a citizen) and delivers her baby as she attempts to return on foot to her home in East L.A. The film constructs the fifties as the most duplicitous moment in American culture for Mexican-American assimilation; the oldest son, Chucho, is shot by police outside the house as the family huddles around the TV inside to watch "I Love Lucy." The remaining children of the Sanchez family represent the range of responses (radicalized and not) to their racially segregated and economically disadvantaged barrio childhood.

The film sets up a number of spatial echoes to "explain" the economic imperatives of immigration. The border between Mexico and California is initially just "a line in the dirt"; in subsequent decades its maintenance sanctions intense state invasion into Latino privacy. Maria's illegal deportation in the thirties is echoed by the eighties threat of deportation for Isabelle, a political refugee from San Salvador who marries the youngest Sanchez son, Jimmy, to avoid getting sent back, signaling the film's effort to address the wider geopolitics of immigration. ¹⁵ Tensions surrounding the implications of cultural and economic segregation are made spatially manifest primarily through the highly loaded landmark of the bridge that crosses the Los Angeles River. Joining East Los Angeles to wealthy, white Los Angeles, the bridge functions along the lines of Kevin Lynch's formulations of the symbolic shorthand that urban inhabitants adopt to map their position

in the city. [16](#) It becomes the primary image of orientation in the film, structuring racial divisions as a partner to the city's economic underpinnings and dependence on immigrant labor. When Paco (Edward James Olmos) explains in voice-over early in the narrative that his father, Jose, necessarily **[End Page 162]** joined the workforce crossing from the barrio to do the city's work, he also emphasizes that none of the city's elite cross the bridge into the barrio. As other family members cross the bridge in subsequent decades, the film makes it clear that they are accepting the racial and economic divides that structure Los Angeles. Significantly, the oldest son, Chucho, who opts for gang culture over assimilation, is shot by police under the bridge and summarily dismissed by the narrative. Access to the city for Latinos is defined as a sort of plantation arrangement, as a spatial montage elaborates the gardening and domestic positions that define Latino access to the city.



The film articulates a number of spatial injustices in L.A.'s history, including the massive deportation of Mexican-American citizens during the Depression years, the police brutality aimed at the Zoot Suiters during the forties and fifties, and the substandard city infrastructure of the eighties that results in the barrio's decay and unequal distribution of civic services. Yet, these incidents **[End Page 163]** are brief punctuations to what is otherwise the narrative's main impetus to mobilize sentiment around the Latino family that merely wants to maintain private property in a city where Latino citizenship and maintenance of space is often suspected to be illegal. As opposed to most mainstream narrative spatial drives--the masculine drive to conquer the landscape--the narrative drive of *Mi Familia* is in most ways a struggle to stay put and to maintain property against forces actively working to expel the family. Despite the narrative's willingness to touch on aspects of the history of overt and massive civic injustice, the real emotional investment of the film is in reconfiguring barrio space as domestic space of quiet, warmly-lit Catholic devotion. This site, while performing the important geographic work of constituting some version of the shadow-culture of Latino Los Angeles (in the range of mainstream cinema), does so in a highly conflicted way.



To place the appropriateness of Mexicanness within the history of Los Angeles represents the film's central narrative and spatial goal. This goal as a **[End Page 164]** fundamentally pedagogic one for a mainstream (presumably white) audience was underscored in the bulk of press reviews accompanying the film's release, one going so far as to claim that the film was useful to teach your kids about how similar East Los Angeles is to Mexico, conflating differences between Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, and relegating both to the realm of spatial spectacle. How spatial tropes became attached to Mexican-American identity played out in one review as follows:

...the slices of life over the years offer interesting tidbits about Mexican American culture as well as a historical look at East Los Angeles. We learn, for instance, about the belief of some immigrants that California remains part of Mexico and how myths are summoned to explain tragedy. We see a fifties dance that resembles the old El Monte Legion Stadium, and ramshackle living near the L.A. River, where no one is concerned whether you grow corn or bury your deceased relatives in the back yard. [17](#)

East L.A. barrio space, then, becomes an exotic quadrant, embraced within a **[End Page 165]** historical tourism that maintains its eccentric otherness. The emphasis on "exotic" beliefs that Mexico and California remain connected and the "ramshackle" living antithetical to the suburban ideal suggest that the operation of this kind of nostalgia depends equally upon "normalizing" the heritage of the "other" into familiar narratives while retaining the spectacle of exotic terrain. L.A. "others," and this is also true with *Devil In A Blue Dress*, stubbornly retain a "rural" mindset as the rest of the city modernizes. The Sanchez family is romanticized precisely because they reject progress. Another way the film retains a sense of pedagogy and spectacle is by bringing the white family (clearly a surrogate for the audience) into the barrio under the cover of locating "common ground." When the most assimilated son, Guillermo ("Memo"), who has attended UCLA and become a lawyer, brings his white fiancé, Karen, and her wealthy Bel Aire family to meet his family in East Los Angeles, the film vacillates between where it wants to assign comic excess. Putting the white family in the Mexican-American home resonates throughout the film's mode of address, and at first it is the ignorance of the white family that governs the scene. The earlier suggestion in the film that Memo has "sold out" his culture in some respects (he insists on the English translation of his name and wears a UCLA cap and sweatshirt throughout most of the film) redirects the comedy towards watching him serve as liaison between the two cultures. Karen's family is obviously frightened and ignorant about Latino culture, but struggling to understand it. The Sanchez family tries, for the sake of the son, to appear "normal," although anecdotes that other family members offer to ease the tense silence point to everything non-white about their home and everyday life. Luckily someone suggests tacquitos, quelling the cultural confusion momentarily. Memo's continual reinterpretations of his family's anecdotes into "safer" renditions for Karen's family translates Latino culture into palatable white terms in microcosm, just as the film at large is trying to do for a mainstream audience.

While the film wants to suggest the literal border between Mexico and California to be arbitrary in some ways, the metaphoric borders between Mexican- and Anglo-Americans remain irrevocably rigid. The Sanchez house, sepia-toned and warmly depicted as unplanned and overgrown with errant corn serves as the antithesis to the manicured and highly engineered rose gardens of wealthy, white **[End Page 166]** L.A. The comic excess of this space enables it to accommodate the cultural signifiers of both Mexican and American culture, most emphatically in the street scenes where Mexican-American youth play baseball, polish low-riders, and dance the mambo, while parents watch "I Love Lucy" (with the consummate assimilated Latin, Desi Arnaz) indoors. Street scenes within the barrio work to mark this space as one of incorporation, but finally as one of confinement. While the Sanchez home never loses its rosy glow, the surrounding neighborhood, sinking into a dereliction the film ascribes to civic neglect, threatens to invade the domestic space. In the subsequent effort to maintain the sanctity of the East L.A. private home and suppress the signifiers of criminality the film wants to disavow, the film's greatest contradictions occur.

In the eighties, when Jimmy marries Isabelle, a political refugee of El Salvador, solely so that she can gain legal residency, the film pits the values of the mother against her more progressive children who want to "use the system," oddly blaming and simultaneously revering the "old-fashioned," religious ideas of the Latina mother. The quiet, Catholic

devotion of the family's earlier decades in the barrio becomes more radicalized in Toni, the daughter who leaves her convent to facilitate immigration for legally unsavory candidates. When the mother sees how Toni, Jimmy, and Isabelle trespass legal boundaries with regards to immigration and marriage, her rage at this travesty is given more emotional weight in the film, as if to assure audiences that the film would not be endorsing any radical confrontations with the legal machinery of maintaining boundaries. The scene also resonates extradiegetically in that the actor who plays the adult Jimmy, Jimmy Smits, is best known for his tenure on the TV series "LA Law" and "NYPD Blue" and as an impeccable, morally upright agent of the legal machinery, perhaps offering another level of assurance. ¹⁸ The choice to reduce the older, slain son's (Chucho's) previous participation in *pachuco* culture in the fifties to cultural "color" (obsessing over his clothes, fighting at a neighborhood dance with a rival gang member à la *West Side Story*, and teaching youngsters to dance the Mambo in the sunny, sunny street) indicates the film's consistent concentration of nostalgia toward reinforcing the contained, domestic otherness of East L.A. as opposed to the illicit response to systemic inequity located by *American Me* and *Zoot Suit* in the figure of the forties zoot suiter. ¹⁹ This is amplified at the film's rather Capraesque ending when the mother and father **[End Page 167]** declare that despite all the struggle, they've had a great life, instantly diffusing the systemic critique evoked earlier in the film's geography. Because the film earnestly wants to disavow the cinematic equation of barrio space with prison space, and yet can not quite envision an alternative, the reconfiguration of historical East L.A. becomes a space dedicated, finally, to a compliance with the terms of segregated communities.

Relocating Suburban L.A. in *Devil In A Blue Dress*

The Los Angeles of Easy Rawlins is the humble parallel universe to the one inhabited by Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Instead of Wilshire, Pico and Sixth Street's Miracle Mile as glittering landmarks, Avalon, Central and Florence--the streets of Watts--lead into a trilogy of stories detailing mid-century black urban life. ²⁰



In her book chronicling the African-American experience in Los Angeles, Lynell George argues that Walter Mosley's hardboiled detective series set in late-forties Los Angeles (including the novel on which the film is based, *Devil In A Blue Dress*) has far greater significance as social history than hardboiled fiction. ²¹ Indeed, popular critical attention on the film generally fell into two camps: either the film was blandly evaluated as a "Black" *Chinatown* or the film was enthusiastically praised for its recreation of the circa-1948 thriving black business district and jazz culture along Central Avenue. The importance of reconstituting this lost space emerged in popular discourse surrounding the film, which tended to pivot on descriptions of the difficulties production designer Gary Frutkoff experienced in attempting an accurate re-creation of the milieu along with reviews of the film. Lamenting the scanty information available on the area, Frutkoff explained that many personal photo collections chronicling the area were lost in the uprisings of 1965 and 1992, gaps in the photographic registry the film would work to fill. ²² Director Carl Franklin stated that because of the unavailability of photos, he organized a lunch at the venerable Harold & Belle's restaurant on Jefferson

Avenue with a group of older jazz musicians whose memories of the space and its cultural dynamic provided much information that assisted in the reconstruction of the district during filming. ²³ That codes of ethnographic accuracy, or a sort of cultural archeology, were **[End Page 168]** attached to the discursive circulation of the film indicates a more complex historical dialectic involved in reconstituting this community.



The novel and film have been taken up in a nexus of interest generated in rediscovering the historical importance of Central Avenue, installed, perhaps, when in the preceding months before Bill Clinton took office and the press worked to catalogue all his favorite things, it was discovered that Walter Mosley was Clinton's favorite writer; this, according to Franklin, secured funding from Tristar for the film. ²⁴ Two recent books of ethnomusicology since the film, *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles* and *California Soul: Music of African Americans in the West* specifically emphasize the importance of the area as a thriving African American business, social and cultural mecca; as one of the only integrated social settings in L.A. during the forties, "all races and classes gathered, [including] longshoremen and pullman porters to Humphry Bogart, Ava Gardner and Howard Hughes." ²⁵ The success of the district would be **[End Page 169]** imperiled by "wall[s] of white resistance" incarnated in restrictive housing covenants and LA Police Department chief William H. Parker's obsessive sweeps of the jazz clubs and bars to prevent "race mixing." ²⁶ When the promise of defense industry jobs through the forties spurred the African American population in Los Angeles to grow from around 70,000 to nearly 200,000 through the decade, ²⁷ housing shortages quickly followed that were exacerbated by racist restrictive housing covenants banning African Americans from purchasing homes on the West Side, among other areas. The result was densely populated concentrations of African American communities boxed in by specific spatial coordinates. The shortage and containment was severe; growing populations, especially around Central Avenue had nowhere to expand, as borders were squeezed by hostile populations in the north and the Ku Klux Klan in the southern suburbs; housing shortages eased somewhat when residents of Little Tokyo were forced into internment camps during World War II. ²⁸ The reconstitution of the district's cultural and economic success within current historiographic projects comprises a direct attempt to rewrite popular urban history, and in locating the ethos of the district in a warm, communal, culturally-rich and pedestrian-friendly space, the film's revisionist space also speaks to contemporary local anxieties surrounding L.A.'s "absent" downtown and themed redevelopment attempts. ²⁹ This is not to say that *Devil* is a fictionalized treatise of the complex history of Central Avenue's thriving jazz clubs and performers, but in its subtle yet consistent references to this urban history, though it may not necessarily get the history "right" it nonetheless gets it started.



While *Devil In A Blue Dress* shares on a basic level with *Mi Familia* a project of recuperating a historical moment and geographical milieu in order to problematize racial stereotypes, *Devil* is a more pointed critique not only of genre, but the American Dream as it is most routinely spatialized in the paradigm of the privately-owned home and the suburban neighborhood. The schism between **[End Page 170]** this ideology's circulation as color-blind, encouraging African American migration to California, and the eventual impossibility of achievement for African Americans in Los

Angeles is dramatized in Ezekial "Easy" Rawlins' attachment to his house and the difficulties he faces keeping it in a racist economy. While much important feminist work has pointed to the suburban and domestic spheres as feminized spaces of containment reinforced in media representations, what is particularly riveting about *Devil* is how the suburban house becomes recoded as a space crucial to masculinity, specifically in terms of access for African Americans to the American Dream cast as property ownership. [30](#) The film's insistent framing of Easy standing in front of his house--like the visual rhetoric of a "first home" snapshot with proud family on the front porch that permeates American photo albums--again situates the narrative drive, as with *Mi Familia*, in terms of maintaining space imperiled from the outside.

Devil begins with Ezekial ("Easy") Rawlins expressing in typical film noir voice-over his recent job loss and urgent fear of not meeting his mortgage and **[End Page 171]** losing his house; saving his house becomes the primary motivating factor for later investigations of the spaces of L.A. criminality. Throughout the narrative Easy expresses his attachment to his house, and many scenes focus on simple domestic pleasures such as Easy tending to his house, planting trees and flowers in the yard in an African American middle-class community bathed in sunlight. While relishing simple domestic pleasures is generally associated with the feminine sphere in mainstream cinema, *Devil* complicates the figures of the house and suburban neighborhood in terms of post-World War II economics. Easy, a war veteran, becomes a property owner after the GI Bill allows him to follow the economic promise of defense industry jobs and move from Texas to California. That keeping his house becomes a heroic accomplishment for Easy in the geographical terrain of post-World War II Los Angeles complicates typical American ideological bifurcations of space--that is, typical binaries such as urban (masculine) space vs. suburban (feminine) space --in terms of the African American experience. His milieu is similarly shown to include many African Americans drawn to Los Angeles by the promises of jobs and affordable housing. This is hardly utopia, however, for Easy quickly encounters discrimination and is fired from his job. This domestic, well-kept spatial milieu is clearly meant to be read against contemporary cinema's insistence on the place of African American masculinity as the criminalized terrain of the 'hood, actively working to displace the space of criminality to white Los Angeles.



As with *Mi Familia*, *Devil* subtly conveys the economics of segregated space in past Los Angeles and references the history of civic spatial injustices. The sunny success of the African American neighborhood and vibrant Central Avenue environs are continually threatened by white invasion, beginning with Dewitt Albright's (who is actually morally all dark) initial entrance into Joppy's bar, subsequent white attempts to cruise Central Avenue bars and Easy perpetually coming home only to be accosted by whites on both sides of the law. Finally the film invokes the decisive backlash the burgeoning post-war African-American middle-class would suffer in a latter scene when Easy's friend Odell casually reads a newspaper on Easy's porch that reads, "Negroes Angered by New Property Restrictions," invoking the restrictive housing covenants that would shape the spatial coordinates of confinement for the Los Angeles African American population. As a police car creeps stealthily by, Easy and the cops **[End Page 172]** exchange glances in a moment allusive of the impending police surveillance that will characterize the contemporary urban land scape, literally and in its

subsequent cinematic figurations. Emphasizing invasion and confinement as the primary historical precedents for contemporary inner-city L.A. reconfigures the parameters of the noir city.

This spatial dynamic is underscored as a certain American duplicity of invasion in the novel which links war and homefront invasions explicitly:

I was surprised to see a white man walk into Joppy's bar. It's not just that he was white but he wore an off-white linen suit and shirt with a Panama straw hat and bone shoes over flashing white silk socks. His skin was smooth and pale with just a few freckles. One lick of strawberry-blond hair escaped the band of his hat. He stopped in the doorway, filling it with his large frame, and surveyed the room with pale eyes; not a color I'd ever seen in a man's eyes. When he looked at me I felt a thrill of fear, but that went away quickly because I was used to white people by 1948. I had spent five years with white men, and women, from Africa to Italy, through Paris, and into the Fatherland itself. I ate with them and slept with them, and I killed enough blue-eyed young men to know that they were just as afraid to die as I was. ³¹



The film, however, eventually shifts the structuring concept of invasion to the possibility of integration within L.A., a structuring concept that works on several levels. Most obviously, Daphne's biracial status and the viability of her relationship with a powerful white politician symbolize the possibility of integration of African American and white L.A. Easy's movement through the terrain of L.A., tracing a cartography of impediments in the places he cannot inhabit without incident, emphatically names the streets, the hotels, and the exact coordinates of segregation. When Easy concludes at the end of the film that integration is impossible for Los Angeles even in the most economically amendable circumstances, that after the war in Europe L.A. still maintained a color **[End Page 173]** line even the richest man in town wouldn't cross, the film's noir components remain something of a ruse for engaging a troubling civic history.

Though dramatizing Easy's problematic access to the city and understanding the flow of power is central to the narrative, only Easy is of the "right persuasion" to go looking for Daphne Monet. Race becomes the key to decoding the city. In what could be considered a reorganization of Reyner Banham's ecologies of L.A. from the African-American perspective, the film renders forties Los Angeles as an apartheid-like segregated space with Easy on a forced tour. Banham, credited with solidifying "the cult of the L.A. vernacular" in his 1971 *Los Angeles: the Architecture of Four Ecologies*, dissected the city into a beaches (Surfurbia), Foothills, Plains of Id, Autopia schema, punctuated by exotic and whimsical architecture and linked by the "transportation palimpsest," the freeway system. As urban preservation theorist Dolores Hayden remarks, this vernacular L.A. has colonized the city's imageability for the mainstream, summarily dismissing Central L.A. from downtown to Watts (though he does note **[End Page 174]** that Watts is a trouble spot lacking transportation). Banham celebrates the car as the key to unlocking the city, but "it never occurred to him that Spanish, Chinese and Japanese might unlock parts of the city, or that South Central, East LA, Chinatown and Little Tokyo might demonstrate cultural differences expressed in urban form." ³² *Devil* reworks the city grid

in terms of the segregated subject. From South Central Easy maps the spaces of white debauchery through the beaches of Malibu, the posh Ambassador Hotel, a foothills' Laurel Canyon retreat and back to Central Avenue, symbolically negating the possibility of western expansion along with re-imagining tropes of the auto-enabled city investigation figured in the fiction of Raymond Chandler and L.A. noir such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and, of course, *Chinatown* (1974).



Dark places, from the standpoint of morality and lighting, become the white sectors of L.A. Whites are figured as the transients, roaming the city by night engaging in debased couplings and violence, embodied by political candidate and pedophile Turell, who fondles a child as he discusses a prospective job **[End Page 175]** for Easy in the back of his limo. Whites cannot penetrate the African American community, a trope with obvious allegorical significance. *Devil's* allegiances with *Chinatown* are worth pursuing here. Both films evoke nostalgia for a past Los Angeles depicted in the hardboiled/noir generic forms by reworking the color of the landscape. John Cawelti's influential "*Chinatown* and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films" identified *Chinatown's* colorization of the (imagined pre-despoliation thirties) noir-scape bathed in warm sepia tones as key to its reorganization of the meanings of urban space typified in the generic myth that links gradations of dark and light to morality. [33](#) Less remembered about *Chinatown* is its willingness to portray, albeit briefly, some of the racial and class boundaries dividing white and "other" L.A., as Chinese-American servants and gardeners tend the Mulwray estate and provide one of the conspiracy's key clues in identifying what's "bad for the glass." As what has been cited as the "Ur-text for L.A. political history [that] obscures as much as it clarifies," *Chinatown* triangulates sexuality, diversity and ecology in constituting the city's key literal and metaphoric location, as well as pointing to the suppleness of a noir format for transmitting popular urban history. [34](#) *Devil* also pivots on "improper" sexuality and diversity, but locates civic aberrance in the maintenance of racist borders. As *Chinatown* was an indictment of the city's refusal to accept L.A.'s real identity as a desert, *Devil* is also an indictment of unnatural civic structuring and the masking of its real identity as postwar private-home mecca. *L.A. Confidential*, incidentally, also rehearses this melange of underground sex, a tour of the spaces of diversity that structure the city and the corrupt white power structure that maintains a breach between the city-as-promotion and the city as lived by its inhabitants. The revisionist noir format increasingly becomes the ritualistic arena where we consume the city's discursive breach.

That white Los Angeles clearly becomes the morally askew, unreadable terrain makes for some interesting collisions in the narrative. *Devil*, in complicating the usual gendering of space (and morality) in the cityscape of noir, redirects the interrogation of the (im-)morality of the woman as primary narrative drive of much noir to an enlightened understanding of the segregated spaces and property restrictions of historical L.A. The discovery of the narrative "secret" in *Devil* --the biracial status of Daphne Monet--ultimately matters less than understanding the racist social dynamics that maintain a segregated city. **[End Page 176]** Easy's voice-over within the narrative approaches the ethnographic; what the film inevitably shows us is the territory and cultural space of Central Avenue along with a vibrant African American middle-class community, exuding a topographic turbulence and historic dialectic more complex than *Mi Familia*. [35](#)

Conclusion: Domesticating Local Diversity

In analyzing the politics of creating a national heritage, Michael Bommers and Patrick Wright emphasize that particular versions of the past are produced, privileged and rendered objects of consensus largely through manipulating images of the landscape and the built environment. A national heritage functions by excluding traditions it cannot incorporate, and often quells political contradiction under a celebratory display of "local diversity."³⁶ While the tactics of both *Mi Familia* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* are ultimately tamed within the constraints of mainstream cinema, they nonetheless attempt an act of urban commemoration zealous to locate the contours of inner city space prior to the disease of ghettoization--to locate the primary infection. And, as Dolores Hayden argues, it is crucial for all modes of public urban preservation and commemoration to claim what she terms "the ethnic vernacular" within the "grand" tradition of establishing architectural canons and city-building titans.³⁷

Exploring exactly how these films' good intentions necessarily get caught among competing narrative agendas--trying to fit the history of "other" L.A. into the ideological framework of the immigrant story, a neo-mission ideal or as counterpart to L.A. noir--indicate a desire to engage with the segregated disparity of L.A.'s history and present, but also point to the limitations of mainstream heritage displays. Cinema's rendering of old L.A. is relevant to these frameworks of heritage-building, and as L.A. continues to take shape as a constellation of many parallel universes, the political implications of the borders and connections drawn among them through low-brow genres remains imperative. As Steve Neale has suggested, low-brow genres might be better approached if we retain a sense of the complex development of regimes of verisimilitude (that is, the changing systems of expectation and plausibility) that accompany them, as opposed to thinking of contemporary genre films as merely decayed [End Page 177] versions of a classical ideal.³⁸ In these films' insistent recoveries of the lost landscapes of Los Angeles' diversity, popular civic history is being contested and circulated, its historical social formations as well as its architecture and costuming exotica. And while the terms of engagement with these "other" L.A.-scapes fall prey to the universalizing pull of romantic nostalgia and mainstream narrative generally, that low-brow L.A. cinematic histories continue to invade public consensus about the city signals the need to gauge how region, spatial norms, and identity are inextricably linked.

[Karen Voss](#), a Ph.D. candidate in the Critical Studies Department at the University of Southern California, is currently completing a dissertation examining contemporary representations of Los Angeles, Las Vegas and changing conceptions of American West. She has recently edited a special issue of USC's media journal, *Spectator*, devoted to urban representation and teaches in USC's New Literacy Program, piloting multimedia curricula.

Notes

* For very thoughtful readings of earlier drafts of this paper I am grateful to David James,

Clark Arnwine, Marita Sturken, and Todd Boyd, and for very fruitful discussions surrounding these issues, thanks to Scott Bukatman.

1. A tentative list (and this is far from exhaustive) illustrating the range of contemporary films that register this L.A. historiographic impulse could include *Chinatown* (1974) *The Two Jakes* (1990), *True Confessions* (1981), *The Doors* (1991), *Ed Wood* (1994), *The Grifters* (1990), *Mulholland Falls* (1996), *Zoot Suit* (1981), *La Bamba* (1987), *Stand and Deliver* (1988), *Dead Again* (1991), *Helter Skelter* (1976), and *Big Wednesday* (1978). Of interest also are films featuring a historical preamble to their narrative presents that try to contextualize contemporary L.A. as product of a particular urban history as in *Menace II Society* (1993) and *American Me* (1992).

2. See, for example, Norman Klein's *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London and New York: Verso, 1997), 247.

3. Paul Skenazy, "History As Mystery, or Who Killed L.A.?" in *Los Angeles in Fiction*, ed. David Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 223-41.

4. Mike Davis's crucial chapter "Sunshine and Noir" from *City of Quartz* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 15-97, and Norman Klein's elaboration of noir as historiographic template, often embracing an anti-tourism of the city that caters to white panic about control of urban space in *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London and New York: Verso, 1997) both examine the ways that cinematic imagery constitutes and reinforces L.A.'s mythology, which in turn informs urban planning decisions.

5. Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 11-12.

6. The term imageability comes from Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1960), 1-13, where he locates an urban design priority in rendering the cityscape visually memorable. Such memorable imaging is key, Lynch argues, to inhabitants' ability to map their position within the city, and urban planners have a responsibility to conceptualize legible visual systems of orientation sensitive to "not just the city as a thing in itself, but the city being perceived by its inhabitants." Fredric Jameson has extrapolated Lynch's conceptions of imageability and "cognitive mapping" to theorizing how subjects might locate their "position" within the titanic flux of global capital. See "Cognitive Mapping" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988). Though I don't want to suggest that these films deliver in Jameson's sense of cognitive mapping, I do want to use "imageability" as a means of recognizing different visual systems of orientation for the city, of which film is one, and look at the political implications of ordering L.A.'s cityscape according to a relatively narrow visual lexicon of sites.

7. Michel de Certeau's chapter "Walking the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92, uses the phrase to differentiate between the concept city (the product of technologies of urban visualization) and the fact city (how individuals negotiate the city which may or may not be in keeping

with prescribed uses of city spaces as engineered in the concept city).

[8.](#) I am indebted to Vivian Sobchak's investigation of a trajectory of urban aestheticizations in "Cities on the Edge of Time: The Urban Science Fiction Film," *East-West Journal* 3, no. 1 (December 1988): 4-19 that has informed my thinking across genres where the urban is performed.

[9.](#) I realize that to some extent I am conflating, as Hollywood does, crucial differences between the histories of Latinos and African Americans. My object of inquiry is the operation of mainstream inclusion, as narratives offering certain spatial parameters and, in the case of *Mi Familia* and *Devil In A Blue Dress* specifically, as narratives attempting to spatialize the history of discrimination in L.A. for a wide audience.

[10.](#) Though not a film set in Los Angeles, *Selena* also features the narrative trope of dying at the point of crossing over.

[11.](#) Even in films not centrally about the 'hood nor exclusively about African Americans, such as the *Lethal Weapon* series (1987, 1989, and 1992), *Grand Canyon* (1991), *White Men Can't Jump* (1992), and *Rising Sun* (1993), for example, the African American character accompanies a white man's quest to greater facility over urban space.

[12.](#) See Todd Boyd's *Am I Black Enough For Your? Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) and "A Small Introduction to the G Funk Era: Gangsta Rap and Black Masculinity in Contemporary Los Angeles" in *Rethinking Los Angeles*, eds. Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, Greg Hise (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1996), 127-46 for a thorough examination of the development of the gangsta as well as the cultural significance of the 'hood (including the growing importance of West Coast locales like Compton and South Central) in recent cinema and rap. Both works examine the cultural context that produces and consumes the imagery of urban blight and violent ("hard") African American masculinity. Analysis of specific music (e.g., Ice Cube and Dr. Dre) and L.A. hood films such as *Boyz N The Hood* vs. *Menace II Society* (the first proposes Atlanta as viable escape from L.A. while the latter refuses that possibility) establishes a continuum of societal defiance and nihilism and furthering African American oral tradition in a culture that maintains narrow parameters for receiving Blackness.

[13.](#) Lisa Lowe, "Imagining Los Angeles in the Production of Multiculturalism," in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 85.

[14.](#) Raymund A. Paredes, "Los Angeles from the Barrio: Oscar Zeta Acosta's *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*," in *Los Angeles Fiction*, ed. David Fine (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 209.

[15.](#) I am grateful to David James for bringing this to my attention.

[16.](#) In his elaboration of imageability as an urban design imperative, Kevin Lynch endorses urban legibility in forms that communicate distinct patterns, are memorable or

holdable and invoke for inhabitants a sense of the whole system: the urban landscape as a "functional unity." This seems to have useful application for reading how media images establish a city's functional unity--what sites are selected to typify the urban system as well as what sites are repressed in this process. Lynch, 1-13.

[17.](#) Lynn Smith, "My Family Offers Different Perspective," *Los Angeles Times* 11 May 1995: E3.

[18.](#) My thanks to Catherine Jurca for bringing this to my attention when an early draft of this paper was presented at the Society for Cinema Studies Conference May, 1997 in Ottawa, Canada.

[19.](#) *Mi Familia* departs significantly from many films' insistence that the crucial moment of racial strife and onset of urban deterioration for Latino L.A. occurred in tandem with the forties zoot suiter. Two articles that analyze the symbolic circulation of the zoot suit figure in *American Me* and *Zoot Suit*, respectively, are Kathleen Newman, "Reterritorialization in Recent Chicano Cinema: Edward James Olmos's *American Me* (1992)," in *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, eds. Chon A. Noriega, Ana M. Lopez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 95-106, and Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Zoot Suit: The Return to the Beginning," in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, eds. John King, Ana M. Lopez, Manuel Alvarado (London: British Film Institute, 1993), 269-78. The zoot suit, as Stuart Cosgrove argues, "is a bearer of a complex and contradictory history." (3) Emerging as a component of urban jazz culture in the late thirties, especially in Harlem, the zoot suit became an emblem of "pachuco" culture in Los Angeles in the forties. Cosgrove elaborates on pachuco culture as a defiant Latino youth subculture caught in an ambivalent position between Mexican and American heritages, disenfranchised to some extent from both and "embodying all the characteristics of second generation working-class immigrants." (7) Against a backdrop of severe wartime fabric rationing, the embrace of the zoot suit by pachuco youth of Los Angeles was seen as effrontery to the system and the war effort. In June of 1943 rioting broke out between servicemen on shore leave and zoot-suited pachuco youth which included ritualistic stripping of the zoot suit. See Stuart Cosgrove's "The Zoot Suit and Style Warfare," in *Zoot Suits and Second Hand Dresses*, ed. Angela McRobbie (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, Inc., 1988), 3-22 and Mauricio Mazon's *The Zoot-Suit Riots: The Psychology of Symbolic Annihilation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984) for thorough historical background and interpretation of the cultural significance of the 1943 rioting, press reporting, the ritualistic stripping of the zoot suit, and the legacy of the zoot suit's symbolic power.

[20.](#) Lynell George, *No Crystal Stair: African-Americans in the City of Angels* (London and New York: Verso, 1992), 191.

[21.](#) *Ibid.*, 194.

[22.](#) Anne Bergman, "Capturing the Central Ave. Easy Feeling," *Los Angeles Times* 26 June 1994: 7.

[23.](#) In a multi-article spread on different facets of re-creating *Devil's* circa-1948 Central

Avenue, the promotional promise was Los Angeles as co-star, "the streets of Los Angeles as you've never seen." Sean Mitchell, "The 'Devil' Is in the Details," *Los Angeles Times* 26 June 1994: 6.

[24.](#) Ibid., 7.

[25.](#) The Central Avenue Sounds Editorial Committee, *Central Avenue Sounds: Jazz in Los Angeles*, eds. Clara Bryant, Buddy Collette, William Green, Steven Isoardi, Jack Kelson, Horace Tapscott, Gerald Wilson, Marl Young (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 6.

[26.](#) Ibid., 309.

[27.](#) Susan Anderson, "A City Called Heaven: Black Enchantment and Despair in Los Angeles" in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 342-43.

[28.](#) The Central Avenue Sounds Editorial Committee, 201.

[29.](#) Seemingly at least once a week the *Los Angeles Times* runs a lengthy opinion piece bemoaning L.A.'s absent downtown culture or declaring an emerging building such as the Walt Disney Concert Hall an undeniable sign that L.A.'s downtown "culture corridor" is on the rise. Locating L.A.'s downtown, or at least locating the moment where it was lost, seems a more frequent subtext of L.A. media. One of the latest discussions of why L.A. doesn't have a "classic" downtown, and why, in fact, it wouldn't want one is Eric Monkkonen's "A Tale of Two Downtowns," *Los Angeles Times* 12 July 1998: M1.

[30.](#) Lynn Spigel's work on the ideology of the suburbs accompanying the installation of television into fifties daily life is absolutely key. See "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955," in *Private Screenings*, eds. Lynn Spigel, Denise Mann (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 3-38, and *Make Room for TV Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

[31.](#) Walter Mosley, *Devil In A Blue Dress* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc.), 1.

[32.](#) Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 85-7.

[33.](#) John Cawelti, "Chinatown and Generic Transformation," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, Leo Braudy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 498-511.

[34.](#) Klein, 247.

[35.](#) In fact, Paula Massood argues that a key level of legibility in the film resonates in the figuration of "passing"--in Daphne Monet's ability to pass as white, the tradition of the tragic mulatto narrative, and the interesting difference between the novel's Daphne (a

Rita Hayworth look-alike) and the film's Daphne (Jennifer Beals, whose biracial status is apparent to the audience). "She Likes... Dark Meat: Race, Geography and Genre in *Devil In A Blue Dress*," Society For Cinema Studies Conference (April 1998) San Diego, California.

[36.](#) "Charms of Residence: The Public and the Past," in *Making Histories: Studies in History-Writing and Politics*, eds. Richard Johnson, Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwartz, David Sutton (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies: University of Birmingham, 1982), 256.

[37.](#) Hayden, 35.

[38.](#) Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre," *Screen* 31 Number 1 (Spring 1990): 45-66.

Muse	Search	Journals	This Journal	Contents	Top
----------------------	------------------------	--------------------------	------------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------