

# Dickens Disappeared: Black Los Angeles and the Borderlands of Racial Memory

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“So what exactly is *our thing?*” asks the narrator of Paul Beatty’s satirical *The Sellout* (2015) in its closing pages.<sup>1</sup> The novel offers—and rejects—two prevalent renditions of race. On the one hand, it interrogates and discards a cohesive, essentialist, and apparitional notion of black community that may have political and affective utility, but it fails to accommodate the full scope and variety of black lives and experiences. On the other hand, it lambasts the fantasy of a postracial society wherein blackness is a feature of identity to be appreciated as part of multiculturalist appeals to respect diversity, which rhetorically sweep racism into the dustbin of history rather than acknowledge its persistence. The novel offers an alternative to both of these ideas about race via its focus on location. It construes blackness as a site of memory.

*The Sellout* is set in Southern California, and one of its major plot points is the reinscription of the borders that have shaped the racial order in metropolitan Los Angeles through processes such as black migration, urban renewal, redlining, and enforcement of restrictive covenants. Beatty’s depiction of place enables his dual-pronged critique of identity politics and postracialism and proposes simultaneously anti-identitarian and antiracist thinking. The particularities of Los Angeles with which Beatty engages—its borderland histories, constructed by U.S. imperialism, and its more contemporary reshaping by immigration—mean that the novel speaks not only to African American histories and literary genealogies but also to those more commonly associated with Chicana cultures. To approach race, place, and memory in the novel is necessarily a comparative,

historicized, and interdisciplinary endeavor, one that charts new directions in black western studies.

### Time, Space, Memory, and Place

While place has certainly been an important concept in African American studies, recent scholarship has addressed the notion of time. Work like Daylanne English's *Each Hour Redeem: Time and Justice in African American Literature* (2013) and Anthony Reed's *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (2014) serve as key examples. English concludes that "African American writers belong fully to their period even as they repeatedly represent African American people as inhabiting a distinct temporality."<sup>2</sup> For Reed, African American literature requires "reimagining the connections between race and history and stressing the importance of nonsynchronism in the present."<sup>3</sup> These racialized temporalities are evidence of stymied justice (think of Langston Hughes imploring "What happens to a dream deferred?" in "Harlem [2]" or Martin Luther King Jr.'s use of the maxim "justice too long delayed is justice denied" in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail") or the construction of "freedom time" through aesthetic practice that exists alongside continued racial oppression.<sup>4</sup>

Temporality has provided one answer to the question of black racialization epitomized by *The Sellout*'s query, "what exactly is *our thing*?" This question is similar to the one raised by Kenneth Warren's 2011 provocation *What Was African American Literature?* There, Warren argues that African American literature can be recognized as a cohesive body only when produced in response to Jim Crow and thus can be historicized from the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision to the legal challenges that dismantled Jim Crow in the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Brown v. Board* (1954). After that, he argues, "African American literature" no longer serves as a functional analytic. When he makes that claim, Warren emphatically insists that race-based inequality is not over. "Rather," he writes, "'color blindness' turns out to be a kind of blindness to the presentness of the past, a refusal to see that people can still be victimized by the past, and that the past can still be victimized by the present." It is "history or memory" that "bind our people together."<sup>5</sup>

Stuart Hall has theorized that blackness is constructed not by history as much as by memory—it is not created by the facticity of the past as much as by the way the past is rehearsed, represented, and retold. "Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity," he insists, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past."<sup>6</sup> Memory, then, provides multiple inroads to self-definition, avoiding the problem of fixity.

As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out, it is possible yet difficult to talk about time "without introducing the concept of space."<sup>7</sup> Place—which

Tuan defines as space imbued with human meanings—provides one way to make memory not individual but collective. Narratives of the past have been constituted partly by what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*: “sites of memory.” These are physical places (such as monuments or museums) or nonphysical actions (such as commemorative celebrations) in which “memory crystallizes and secretes itself” because “there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory.”<sup>8</sup>

Los Angeles is perhaps the ideal setting to explore whether and how sites of memory construct black identity, since the black spaces once wrought by racism—segregationist policies or gang turf wars, for example—have been increasingly compromised through complex forces as varied as immigration and gentrification. Many of the *milieux de mémoire* composing black Los Angeles have been imperiled in the twenty-first century, and the construction of *lieux de mémoire* have taken on a new urgency, one expressed by Beatty’s novel and by twenty-first century black expressive cultures more widely.

### **Making Black Los Angeles**

Los Angeles has seen many efforts to obfuscate its black past and to remake the “real environments of memory” that have had meaning to African Americans. In 2003, for example, the Los Angeles City Council renamed the region previously known as South Central to South Los Angeles in an effort to “erase a stigma that has dogged” the historically black section of the city, painting it as “depressed and crime-ridden.”<sup>9</sup> By that time, South Central had become, in many ways, a metonym for urban black America. This was a long process; South Los Angeles had not always been predominantly black space. When early twentieth-century black migrants arrived there, they became immersed in a location that, according to historian Douglas Flamming, was “quite possibly the most ethnically and racially diverse urban area in America.”<sup>10</sup> This diversity was maintained until after World War II, when the African American population of the city boomed due to employment opportunities afforded by the defense industry, where discrimination in hiring was newly prohibited by Executive Order 8802. By the 1950s, as historian Eric Avila, among others, has documented, urban renewal projects in Los Angeles, particularly freeway construction, made it increasingly attractive for those who could do so to move out of South Central (others were forced out by eminent domain), at which point African Americans, who could not relocate due to restrictive housing covenants and racism, remained in the area.<sup>11</sup>

Spatial changes in the city went hand in hand with racial restrictions. Development, renewal, and building and defunding of public housing projects divided communities racially. The Los Angeles metropolitan area was even one of the most notable sites where African Americans initiated legal challenges to restrictive covenants. As early as the 1940s, attorney and Harlem Renaissance affiliate Loren Miller won a series of court cases originating from the West

Adams neighborhood in today's South Los Angeles. His arguments, launched in partnership with Thurgood Marshall, provided the foundation for the 1948 *Shelley v. Kraemer* case, which found restrictive covenants to be a violation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, decades of black migration and white flight, violent resistance to black integration and discriminatory lending practices, meant that by the 1960s, as Flamming describes, even to the south of South Central, a separate municipality, Watts, became "virtually all black." At that point, the "Central Avenue district [and] Watts," he explains, "were effectively joined" as "a seven-mile stretch of African Americans locked between Main Street and Alameda."<sup>13</sup>

Black Angelenos, however, also took advantage of the region's sprawl. They settled in suburbs beyond Watts, like its southeastern neighbor, Compton, the city upon which Beatty bases the fictional Dickens in *The Sellout*. During the 1950s, despite vigorous white resistance, Compton became a 40 percent black, middle-class suburb; this distinguished it from Watts, which saw greater poverty and unemployment and was becoming a reputed ghetto.<sup>14</sup> Watts became one of the most notable sites of urban rebellion when it erupted in 1965—an event notable, as historian Josh Sides remarks, "not only because it was the most destructive racial clash since the Detroit riot of 1943 but also because it happened in Los Angeles, a city long considered uniquely hospitable to blacks."<sup>15</sup> By 1965, this reputation had changed—in no small part because of police harassment of and brutality toward black people, which had become a notorious problem throughout the Los Angeles region.<sup>16</sup>

The unrest in Watts dovetailed with other trends. Deindustrialization and resultant unemployment led to increasing crime rates as African Americans, particularly men, sought to make ends meet through extralegal economies. Sides records that "In Watts, where poverty had always been endemic, declining manufacturing work merely intensified old problems. But in the city of Compton, once the pride of Southern California's blue-collar middle class, the transformation was devastating."<sup>17</sup> By the 1980s, the crack epidemic was a public health crisis in black Los Angeles. It also "brought an unprecedented wave of violence to South Central and drove thousands of young black people into gangs."<sup>18</sup> This worsened the already-tense relationship between black communities and the Los Angeles Police Department. In 1992, the city exploded again after the acquittal of four police officers who brutalized Rodney King.

### **Imagining Black Los Angeles**

One outcome of these forces was that in the 1980s and 1990s, South Central—and its outlying black communities like Watts and Compton—became synonymous in the U.S. popular imagination with gangbanging, drugs, and crime. Although the 1992 Los Angeles rebellion was multiracial, as Lynn Mie Itagaki notes, black Angelenos in particular were depicted as lawless, participating in free-for-all looting and violence unmoored from political

protest.<sup>19</sup> Audiences who wanted to could also find this image in music, which offered rappers who could traffic in their place-based identities and checkered pasts—whether real or fabricated—inroads to another business, one that at times profited off prurient white fantasies of black urban life. In 1988, N.W.A. released their debut album *Straight Outta Compton*, which arguably brought the gangster rap genre to the mainstream by depicting both the hardships and the glamor of black Los Angeles.<sup>20</sup> N.W.A.'s Dr. Dre joined Suge Knight's Los Angeles-based Death Row Records in 1992 and released his first solo album, *The Chronic*, the same year.<sup>21</sup> *The Chronic* touted Dre's Compton roots but also transcended many of black Los Angeles's municipalities during the height of West Coast versus East Coast rivalries in hip-hop. As the lyrics of "Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang" note, "Compton and Long Beach," for example, were brought "together" when Dre fostered the career of figures like Snoop Dogg, whose inaugural *Doggystyle* was released by Death Row in 1993.<sup>22</sup>

When interviewed for the *New York Times* about his music, Snoop remarked on its emergence from his experiences of place: "My raps are incidents where either I saw it happen to one of my close homies or I know about it just from being in the ghetto. . . . It's only what I know and that's the streetlife."<sup>23</sup> As a result of turf wars, whether Los Angeles-area rappers were gang affiliates or not, place enabled them, particularly in the 1990s, to proclaim realism and authenticity, even as they were criticized for glorifying drugs, guns, and violence. At the same time, the nuances of gang territory could be lost on mainstream consumer audiences who simply aligned the "street cred" of West Coast artists with their representation of black California as the "wild, wild West," as it was called in 2Pac's anthem, "California Love." In this song, the hit single from his 1996 Death Row release *All Eyez on Me*, black Los Angeles was broadly represented by shout-outs to Watts, Compton, Inglewood, Los Angeles City, and Long Beach.<sup>24</sup>

With its very name, Death Row Records at least superficially presented black Los Angeles as a criminal environment, and rappers like 2Pac, Dre, and Snoop both boasted of their brushes with the law and pointed out its unequal application to African Americans. Cinema of the period—which sometimes starred rappers with crossover appeal like Tupac Shakur or Ice Cube—performed similar functions. Black Los Angeles was central in the crime drama *Colors* (1988), John Singleton's *Boyz in the Hood* (1991) and *Poetic Justice* (1993), and Allen and Albert Hughes's *Menace II Society* (1993).<sup>25</sup> Its image became overwrought enough to satirize in comedies like *CB4* (1993), *Friday* (1995), and *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* (1996).<sup>26</sup> In short, the street life of black Los Angeles was writ large in music, drama, and comedy so that by the time the City of Los Angeles sought to rebrand South Central in 2003, its reputation as a ghetto had become nearly indelible in the hegemonic U.S. imagination, so lodged there that virtually all of black Los Angeles became elided with South Central, despite the region's tremendous diversity. Furthermore, as anthropologist Dionne Bennett remarks,

media images of South Central Los Angeles . . . were generalized to represent all black people in any urban place where blacks resided. These images usually omitted the educational, social, and economic diversity of blacks not only in South Central but throughout Black Los Angeles and ultimately Black America.<sup>27</sup>

### Unmaking Black Los Angeles

In the wake of such representations, some black Angelenos welcomed investment in South Central. Others saw the new nomenclature of “South Los Angeles” as a signal of the coming threat of gentrification.<sup>28</sup> The slow-growth movements that guided development in Los Angeles County in the 1980s and 1990s had limited the expansion of affordable housing and continued to systematically disadvantage working-class people of color in efforts to keep suburbia suburban. But by September 2016, Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti declared in the *New York Times* that, finally, the “sprawl has hit the wall.”<sup>29</sup> Lack of space led to a new emphasis on density in Los Angeles’s development landscape. Unfortunately, this density also failed to create enough mixed-income and affordable housing. Instead, it led to the threat of gentrification, where lower- and middle-income people of color could be priced out of their longtime communities.

By the time South Los Angeles was born in 2003, the region was already home to public transit lines—which today are expanding—and historic housing stock, as well as the University of Southern California. These features all appealed to middle-class homebuyers, often white, who were themselves priced out of some of Los Angeles’s increasingly affluent neighborhoods. By 2006, *LA Weekly* published an article titled “Welcome to Gentrification City,” which announced that even stigmatized South Los Angeles had seen a “surge in real estate values” as the area became increasingly diverse, with neighborhoods like West Adams and Jefferson Park becoming, in the words of one real estate agent, popular among “mixed-ethnic, liberal-democrat, social-justice urbanists”—and fewer African Americans.<sup>30</sup> By 2018, white property ownership in Los Angeles neighborhoods that had until recently been predominantly black was common enough to become the premise of a network sitcom, CBS’s *The Neighborhood*.<sup>31</sup>

While one of the outgrowths of the real estate market has been the dissolution of communities of color, another has been, as journalist Sam Quinones documents, “impinging on gangs,” both black and Latinx, which had previously carved out territories so distinct and “self-contained” that they “resembled rural villages.” In recent years, he contends, the price of real estate in Southern California has risen so much that “even the toughest neighborhoods” have become “valuable,” and residents have sold their properties to “white hipsters or immigrants” and moved to far-flung locales like Redlands. New residents have “none of the history, or gang connections, of the departing families,” and

so today, in areas once notorious sites of violence, “street life is nil.”<sup>32</sup> Some have argued that gang injunctions (civil court orders, like restraining orders, that target individuals presumed to be gang members and prevent them from participating in “nuisance” activities such as staying out past a certain hour) have furthered gentrification.

As an example, in 2013, residents of Echo Park, a mostly Latinx neighborhood in central Los Angeles, erupted in fierce debate over the injunction that affected it. Activists argued the injunction legitimated police harassment of long-time residents, often working-class people of color, who were racially profiled and merely participating in the common activities of everyday life. This intimidation, activists asserted, had the effect of clearing the neighborhood for habitation by newer, wealthier, and whiter populations who would pay higher rental rates and drive up the costs of living. In 2018, a U.S. District Court ruling determined the enforcement of gang injunctions violated citizens’ civil liberties.<sup>33</sup> Whether viewed as for the better, as gang violence has been stemmed, or for the worse, as tightly knit communities of color have been diluted, undoubtedly the *milieux de mémoire* important to Los Angeles communities of color have been eroded by market forces.

Today South Los Angeles remains predominantly populated by people of color and houses some of the city’s poorest communities. Yet the demographics of the region have changed significantly. The decades since the unrest in Watts have seen a dramatic uptick in South Los Angeles’s Latinx population. Waves of immigration from Mexico and Central America, engendered by the North American Free Trade Agreement and civil wars in nations like El Salvador, have meant that areas like Boyle Heights, in the latter part of the twentieth century a predominately Latinx neighborhood abutting nearly entirely Latinx East Los Angeles, simply did not have the room to accommodate all these new arrivals. They subsequently flowed into nearby South Los Angeles. As a result, while in 1970 South Los Angeles was 80 percent black, by 2010 it was 64 percent Latinx.<sup>34</sup>

This was not only a result of immigration; it was also due to the departure of African Americans from these communities. Blacks who could do so often chose to move to suburbs and exurbs in Los Angeles County and beyond, which were both more affordable and had purportedly fewer issues with gangs and crime.<sup>35</sup> Although South Los Angeles remains the cultural heart of the black Angeleno community and home to the region’s largest concentration of African Americans, it is also home to a markedly smaller population than it was before—a change that both appeals to gentrification and elicits resistance to it. Sides points out that in the postwar years, “the difference between housing opportunities for Mexicans and blacks . . . was largely a reflection of white attitudes toward each group.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps similar attitudes can be found among white Angelenos involved in today’s gentrification controversies but playing out in the spatial obverse. Latinx Boyle Heights has, to be sure, become the most common location of anti-gentrification protests. Nonetheless, South Los

Angeles has organized around the displacement of lower-income people of color due to increasing development and rising costs of living.<sup>37</sup>

In 2015, the year *The Sellout* was published, a campaign was initiated to rebrand South Central again—this time to SOLA. One Los Angeles City councilmember, Bernard C. Parks, “said some of his constituents like the hip sound of SOLA.” “They see these other communities reinvigorated by these contemporary names,” he mused, and “wonder, at times, why their community is lagging behind.” Critics of such campaigns, however, like one South Los Angeles resident, point out that the “name is used to make outsiders feel safe,” but it is “the same place with the same people.” Another noted, “The fact that we keep changing the name of South-Central/South L.A. really points to the fact that we haven’t done enough to make it a different place. . . . To make it a place you want to go to . . . you got to change a lot more than the name.”<sup>38</sup> Poverty, discrimination, and inequity still affect the area, and SOLA creates a postracial illusion that they do not. This illusion merely furthers these problems. And due to it, the threat of gentrification, and palpable demographic change, there is a sense that black South Central, and black Los Angeles more generally, is being lost to history.

### **Blackness and the Borderlands of Memory**

Such historical and representational contexts—the construction and destruction of black *milieux de mémoire* in Los Angeles—elicit *The Sellout*’s central question: “So what exactly is *our thing*?” The Los Angeles—area community at the heart of the novel, Dickens, is transforming due to encroaching gentrification and neoliberal divestment, leading to a crisis of identity as the town literally disappears. Dickens is described by the narrator as a “ghetto community on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles.” As he explains, the “city’s original charter stipulated that ‘Dickens shall remain free of Chinamen, Spanish of all shades, dialects, and hats, Frenchmen, redheads, city slickers, and unskilled Jews,’” which harks to the racist policies that both created and exceeded black Los Angeles, a place that, the novel asserts, is being unmade through processes like those described earlier.<sup>39</sup>

By the time the narrative takes place, it has become impossible, Beatty writes, to “find Dickens, California on the map.” The city’s geographical borders

perished as part of a blatant conspiracy by the surrounding, increasingly affluent, two-car-garage communities to keep their property values up and blood pressures down. When the housing boom hit in the early part of the century, many moderate-income neighborhoods in Los Angeles County underwent real estate make-overs. Once pleasant working-class enclaves became rife with fake tits and fake graduation and crime rates, hair and tree transplants, lipo-

and cholosuctions. In the wee hours of the night, after the community boards, homeowner associations, and real estate moguls banded together and coined descriptive names for nondescript neighborhoods, someone would bolt a huge glittery Mediterranean-blue sign high up on a telephone pole. And when the fog lifted, the residents of the soon-to-be gentrified blocks awoke to find out they lived in Crest View, La Cienega Heights, or Westdale.<sup>40</sup>

This description clearly draws on the rebranding of 2003. When the Los Angeles City Council unanimously voted to rename South Central, its members awarded Helen Johnson, the 72-year-old resident of the Vermont Square neighborhood who suggested the change, a “large blue street sign that read ‘South Los Angeles.’”<sup>41</sup>

Beatty suggests that such efforts, which efface black *milieux de mémoire* in hopes, perhaps, of eliminating them, led to a loss not only of politicized identities and community cohesion but also, by extension, a sense of self. In the novel, Dickens is not merely rebranded. Instead, every trace of it is wiped away. “Dickens underwent a different type of transition,” Beatty writes.

One clear South Central morning, we awoke to find the city hadn’t been renamed but the signs that said WELCOME TO THE CITY OF DICKENS were gone. . . . The police and fire stations were closed down. . . . The autonomous school board dismantled. Internet searches turned up only references to ‘Dickens, Charles John Huffman’ and to a dust bowl county in Texas named after some unfortunate sap who may or may not have died at the Alamo.<sup>42</sup>

In the face of this erasure, treasured community members can no longer exist. Accordingly, some become nihilistic and suicidal.

If the loss of community means the loss of self, it makes sense of the narrator’s backstory. The reader never knows the narrator’s first name. Throughout the novel, he is addressed only by nicknames: “Bonbon” and, more derisively, the titular “Sellout.”<sup>43</sup> His last name, however, is “Me,” clearly indicating the importance of selfhood to the novel.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Bonbon’s single father is described as “the founder and . . . sole practitioner in the field of Liberation Psychology.”<sup>45</sup> He was called into service every time a community member “done lost they motherfucking mind.”<sup>46</sup> His success on these forays, he tells his son, rests on the premise that “basic person-centered therapeutics” focuses on “two questions, Who am I? And how may I become myself?” He admonishes Bonbon to “Remember that shit.”<sup>47</sup> Bonbon does—but when the community expects him to fill his father’s shoes after his death, he is at first a disappointment. Bonbon’s setting—both spatial and temporal—demands he

invent a new approach. He must address not just the self (the “me” of “Who am I? And how may I become myself?”) but also the collective (the “we” of “what exactly is *our thing*?”) that constitutes it. He does so by creating sites of memory, which undermine postracial fantasies by both recognizing the residues of the Jim Crow past in the present and creating community across differences.

After the disappearance of Dickens, the narrator opens *The Thomas Guide to Los Angeles County*, described as “the spiral-bound Sacagawea of any intrepid explorer trying to navigate this urban oasis-less sprawl.” He recollects how annually “my father used to bring the new *Thomas Guide* home, and the first thing I’d do was . . . approximate the location of the crib, 205 Bernard Avenue, on the map.” In a novel in which readers never even know the narrator’s first name, they learn his place with stunning specificity—suggesting this is what creates a sense of identity. Bonbon continues, “Finding my house in that giant tome grounded me somehow. Made me feel loved by the world.”<sup>48</sup> Elsewhere in the novel, he writes that “L.A. is about space, and here one’s self-worth comes from how one chooses to navigate that space.”<sup>49</sup> This comment specifically addresses how modes of transportation reflect class status, but it can be applied more broadly to the constitutive relationship of identity and place throughout the novel. When Dickens is erased, it makes it impossible for the narrator—and the rest of the community—to have any individual or collective sense of who they are.

Although “Dickens exists in our heads,” Bonbon acknowledges that “Real cities have borders. And signs.”<sup>50</sup> The erasure of Dickens as a *milieu de mémoire* requires its recognition as a *lieu de mémoire* in order to give community members back a sense of meaning and purpose. The creation of imagined communities, as Benedict Anderson suggests, requires signification. Even maps made by colonial states, he points out, “dialectically engendered the grammar of nationalisms that eventually arose to combat [them].”<sup>51</sup> Representation and rendering are required to create the “horizontal comradeship” of communities that, although imagined, are not depoliticized.<sup>52</sup> In *The Sellout*, the narrator remakes the borders initially made by redlining and restrictive covenants as a site of memory. In doing so, he remakes black identity, allowing for its multiplicity while recognizing the stubborn work of racism.

When Bonbon redraws the borders of Dickens, he explains, “I bought a shitload of white spray paint and a line-marking machine, the kind used to paint yardage markers and foul lines on ball fields. . . . I laid down the border.”<sup>53</sup> After he finishes this work, he continues,

I wasn’t sure what I’d accomplished, but it was fun to see kids spend their Saturdays circumnavigating the city by carefully tracing their steps, walking heel-to-toe on the line, making sure they’d left not even an inch untrod upon. Sometimes I’d chance across an elderly member of the community standing in the middle of the street, unable to cross the single white

line. Puzzled looks on their faces from asking themselves why they felt so strong about the Dickens side of the line as opposed to the other side. When there was just as much uncurbed dog shit over there as here. When the grass, what little of it there was, sure in the fuck wasn't any greener. . . . But I did like the line's artifice. The implication of solidarity and community it represented.<sup>54</sup>

The narrator manages to recreate a sense of community through a site of memory at the same time that he acknowledges that community's persistent underprivilege. To redraw the border enables the recognition of continued segregation and inequity in the present despite efforts like rebranding—and the attendant discourse of postracialism—that serve to obscure it. Bonbon muses,

I don't know what I expected from trying to restore Dickens to a glory that never existed. Even if Dickens were to one day be officially recognized, there'd be no fanfare or fireworks.... There'd be none of the head rush Jean Baptiste Point du Sable and William Overton must've felt when they planted their flags in Chicago and Portland. After all, it wouldn't be like I founded or discovered anything. I was just brushing the dirt off an artifact that had never really been buried.<sup>55</sup>

The “artifact” alluded to by the narrator is the history of Jim Crow, which he disinters in the face of a “post-racial world.”<sup>56</sup>

Bonbon's creation of community solidarity through sites of memory avoids the pitfalls of essentialist notions of blackness, because it literalizes the process of identity construction. It also attends to the multiracialism of contemporary “black” Los Angeles. Although when Bonbon marks the borders of Dickens he specifically redraws spaces wrought by Jim Crow practices, the population of Dickens is not always—or even mostly—black. Bonbon is well aware of this. If those who believe in racial essentialism would remove their “racial blinders,” he points out, they would find that Dickens is “no longer black but predominantly Latino.”<sup>57</sup> As the references to Point du Sable, Overton, Sacagawea, and the Alamo intimate, the borders wrought by antiblack racism demand to be placed in the context of more familiar plots of imperialism in the U.S. West, which have been more commonly associated with the histories of Native and Mexican Americans. To situate African Americans within these narratives not only raises questions about how blacks fit into the national imagination of the West but also how blacks disrupt that memory—in the case of *The Sellout*, by creating new sites for it. To frame blacks in both historical and mythical storylines of U.S. imperialism links African American experience to the robust border theories that have emerged from Chicana studies. After all, as the Wikipedia entry for

Dickens that appears in the novel after the town has been rebordered notes, it “Used to be all black, now there’s hella Mexicans.”<sup>58</sup>

Borders are not the only way in which the novel engages Chicana cultures while creating sites of memory. When the novel describes Dickens, it is an agrarian community. Bonbon explains that the city charter stipulated “the five hundred acres bordering the canal be forever zoned for something referred to as ‘residential architecture.’”<sup>59</sup> The agrarian setting of the novel, called “the Farms,” serves three purposes. It first creates a picture of the narrator as a western archetype, speaking to myths and histories of the West that African Americans have long been absented from and repurposing their archetypal images to new ends. For example, after his father’s death at the hands of police, the narrator placed “his [father’s] corpse on the rear end of my horse, facedown on the rump, like in the cowboy movies, his arms and legs dangling in the air.”<sup>60</sup> By creating scenes like this, the book suggests the western outlaw of U.S. popular culture is the precedent for black Los Angeles’s “streetlife,” but it finds nothing redemptive or glorifying in “regeneration through violence”—the lawlessness here is perpetuated by the state, with Bonbon, the lonely cowboy, a symbol of endurance in the face of its misconduct.<sup>61</sup>

Second, the novel’s emplacement enables *The Sellout* to dramatize the tension between preservation and development. Conflicts over development, as Krista Comer contends, are a quintessentially western narrative: “What more *western* story (either past or present),” she asks rhetorically, “can one think of than slow growth and raging development?”<sup>62</sup> In *The Sellout*, this western plotline is not the province of the “Valley,” where the slow-growth movement, according to Mike Davis, had the “ugly racial and ethnic overtones of an Anglo gerontocracy selfishly defending its privileges against the job and housing needs of young Latino and Asian populations,” but is rather the stake of communities of color under threat of dissolution by gentrification.<sup>63</sup>

Third, the Farms has a real-life precedent that illustrates demographic changes that have remade black Los Angeles: an area of Compton called Richland Farms, which was zoned for agriculture when Griffith Compton deeded it to Los Angeles County in 1888. In the middle of the twentieth century, when African Americans began to move to Compton, Richland Farms had special appeal to new migrants from the rural South who were interested in maintaining agricultural traditions, at least as hobbyists. While many African Americans still live in Richland Farms, like other black communities in greater Los Angeles, the area has become increasingly Latinx. This shift provides for one of the jokes in *The Sellout*, where “too many Mexicans,” the narrator asserts, is the one thing blacks, whites, and Native Americans can agree on.<sup>64</sup> In present-day Richland Farms, according to one news report, such transitions have “created some tension between the old-timers and newcomers” from rural Mexico who wish to cultivate crops and animals on larger scales than their African American neighbors. Some residents have suggested, however, that “the tension is more about a generational shift than a racial shift” and that

place ties the community together. “The soil is our common denominator,” one asserted.<sup>65</sup> By constructing sites of memory, *The Sellout* suggests something similar: it turns to place to retain black Los Angeles, but never in an essentialist manner and never at the expense of the Latinx cultures that have always been interwoven with it.

Throughout the novel, Bonbon contests an exclusively black identity politics. Dickens is populated not only by African Americans but by a range of disenfranchised people who are also consigned to the space due to histories of racism, including Jim Crow. When Bonbon redraws the borders of Dickens, the novel acknowledges—as it does with the city charter that excluded “Chinamen, Spanish of all shades . . . Frenchmen, redheads, city slickers, and unskilled Jews”—that racist policies and processes have shaped the experiences of many people and should be examined in dialogue with those specifically targeting African Americans. As a historical example, as special counsel of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Thurgood Marshall submitted the organization’s *amicus curiae* brief in the 1947 U.S. District Court case *Mendez v. Westminster*, which dismantled school segregation for Mexicans in California. This laid the groundwork for the arguments he used in *Brown v. Board* (1954), which eroded *Plessy v. Ferguson* on a national scale.<sup>66</sup> In *The Sellout*, sites of memory elucidate the manner in which Jim Crow histories like this one touched—and continue to touch—lives across racial lines.

For instance, the novel rehearses a satire of commemoration and reconciliation based on perhaps the most storied example of American memory and forgetting, the U.S. Civil War.<sup>67</sup> “Hood Day” is like “a Civil War reenactment,” Beatty writes, in which former gangbangers “meet at the sites of the great battles of the past, fire blanks and Roman candles at each other while innocent sidewalk café civilians duck and run for cover.” Then, like an updated veterans’ reunion, where the politics of reconciliation obscured the continued struggle for racial justice, they “meet up with friends and family at the rec center . . . and reaffirm the peace over a barbecue and beer.” Hood Day is a site of memory in the novel for Latinx communities affected by the same forces that displaced African Americans from South Los Angeles: “since the advent of the variable-rate home loan,” Beatty writes, “most of the [Venice Seaside Boys] have been priced out of their turf by wine bars, holistic medicine shops, and edgy movie stars.” To “defend their turf, they have to commute from faraway places,” and they are too “tired from fighting three hours of freeway traffic and road closures to pull the trigger.”<sup>68</sup> Left without a “real environment,” the gang members use commemoration in order to make meaning of their lives.

Hood Day provides another image of borders, one that brings together rival gangs in black and Latinx communities and illustrates—as well as undermines—the grammar of racial supremacy. Before the commemoration, the narrator notes, he posted “two signs” in “Polynesian Gardens.”<sup>69</sup> Polynesian Gardens is based on the small, predominantly Latinx city of Hawaiian Gardens in South Los Angeles County, the territory of the Varrio Hawaiian Gardens (VHG), best

known as a Mexican American “hate gang” that launched systematic attacks on African Americans in order to drive them out of Latinx neighborhoods. Yet the prototype for an organization like VHG was the Spook Hunters, a white gang that emerged in the 1940s and targeted blacks who exceeded the boundaries of the Central Avenue district in order to, in the words of scholar Alex Alonso, “fight integration and promote residential segregation” in areas like Compton, Huntington Park, and Inglewood. Black gangs in Los Angeles were first formed to provide community protection in response to white mob violence—and groups like the Crips and Bloods took shape after black self-defense groups like the Black Panther Party were weakened in the 1970s.<sup>70</sup>

When Bonbon confronts “Barrio P.G.” and “Varrío P.G.,” two rival gangs, with his signage, the novel gestures toward this complicated history of race and place, where white supremacy, black power, and Mexican American racialization are all connected to gang violence, often in discomfiting ways. While the novel’s allusion to VHG acknowledges antiblack violence perpetuated by Mexican American gangs, Bonbon’s sites of memory create new alliances. The “two signs” he posted were mounted on “telephone poles on opposite sides of Baker Street, where the rusted train tracks divided the neighborhood between Varrío and Barrio P.G.” They were

placed . . . in such a way that if folks on one side of the street wanted to know what the sign on their side said, they’d have to cross the tracks to read it. So they had to venture into enemy territory, only to discover that the sign on the north side of the street was exactly the same as the one on the south; they both read THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE TRACKS.<sup>71</sup>

Despite differences, the novel seems to suggest that Los Angeles’s communities of color share the threat of erasure and that sites of memory provide a new mode of community formation that exceeds prior racial divisions.

When Beatty’s novel uses borders as sites of memory, they are not those of the U.S. and Mexican nation-states, yet they speak to some larger conceptual problems and possibilities introduced by Chicana studies scholars. Mary Pat Brady, for example, has critiqued the “fungibility of borders,” the slippery metaphorical uses of the term that make it so attractive but “often dislocate it from any historically specific geopolitical referents.”<sup>72</sup> When Bonbon paints the borders of Dickens, it addresses this issue. To make borders visible is to expose the way the past affects the present, attending to both specific histories and contemporary realities: de jure and de facto segregation, gentrification and displacement, and white supremacist violence and postracial fantasy. As Bonbon remarks, “the problem with history” is “we like to think it’s a book—that we can turn the page and move the fuck on. But history isn’t the paper it’s printed on. . . . History is the things that stay with you.”<sup>73</sup> By unabstracting systemic racism through the creation of sites of memory, *The Sellout* reasserts historical

specificity in the present and proposes modes of consolidating identities that resist essentialism and exclusion.

### The Memory Moment in Black Los Angeles

In the face of its cutting satire, it would be difficult to call *The Sellout* nostalgic. But as a cultural text that ponders the loss of black Los Angeles, it exists among a recent spate of narratives that all hark back lovingly to the much-maligned 1980s and 1990s. The story of N.W.A. has been represented in the biopic *Straight Outta Compton* (2015).<sup>74</sup> *Dope* (2015), set in Inglewood, features a group of teenage nerds of color who lionize and imitate 1990s hip-hop, even while they suspiciously navigate the world of contemporary drug dealers who could have been its figureheads in its heyday.<sup>75</sup> The street dealer in the film is played by a rapper, A\$AP Rocky. In an interview, he calls his character as “a thug with an elegant, intelligent side,” who is “a product of his own environment.” He describes the film as a “hood classic” of the kind we “haven’t had . . . in years,” suggesting the affective power of sites of memory.<sup>76</sup> In HBO’s *Insecure*, Issa Dee’s Inglewood apartment complex also houses a “Thug Yoda,” whose commitment to the Bloods is more hilarious than dangerous, exemplified not only by his dialogue (like characters in *The Sellout*, he refuses to pronounce Cs when he speaks, because to do so would suggest Crips), but also by the wizened insights on the human condition that come from this ostensibly unlikely source.<sup>77</sup> Through allusion, *Dope* and *Insecure* both reimagine the black Los Angeles of the 1990s in the present and use it to disarm and disrupt notions of place-based black authenticity central to gangster rap. At the same time, these texts refuse to evacuate the legacies of the 1990s as they explore what it means to be black in the aftermath of postracial fantasies and threats to black space in Los Angeles. They both, like *The Sellout*, provide sites of memory.

Even reviews of *Straight Outta Compton* note that it melds the past and the present in a surprisingly sentimental way: “the film makes no apologies for drawing a correlation between events that transpired 30 years ago and the events we hear about today on almost a daily basis,” one remarks. It continues to assert the film “aims not only to raise your ire, but also to break your heart.”<sup>78</sup> The sense of the past in the present is heightened by the choice to cast Ice Cube’s son, O’Shea Jackson Jr., as the young Ice Cube, and the directorship of F. Gary Gray, who not only directed *Friday*, which starred Ice Cube in 1995, but also directed the Los Angeles-based *Set it Off* (1996).

After *Straight Outta Compton* hit cinemas nationwide, Dre released his purportedly final album, *Compton: A Soundtrack by Dr. Dre*, which was inspired by the film. It opens with a track that recreates the history of Compton in the present, a voiceover that resembles a news report. “Compton [was] ‘the Black American Dream,’” it narrates, where “with seventy-four percent of the population, black power is the fact of life.” “But the dream that many

blacks thought they were buying has turned sour,” with “forty-seven homicides last year.”<sup>79</sup> Although this album was released in 2015, the same year as *The Sellout*, the numbers presented in its intro more closely resemble those of the past. For example, the black population of Compton was approximately 75 percent in 1980 and has declined steadily since; the 2010 Census recorded a black population of only 33 percent.<sup>80</sup> In 2014, the year before *Compton* was released, there were 25 murders and nonnegligent manslaughters reported by the Compton Police Department—47 is more similar to the numbers reported in the late 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>81</sup> Despite evidence to the contrary, Dre’s insertion of the past in the present makes efforts at preservation, demonstrating the hope that—as he raps in the song “Loose Cannons”—“Shit will never change on the West Side.”<sup>82</sup>

The work of contemporary Compton rapper Kendrick Lamar also looks back longingly at the 1990s. A 2012 song titled “Poetic Justice” samples Janet Jackson’s 1993 “Any Time, Any Place,” which was included on the soundtrack to *Poetic Justice*, in which she starred along with Tupac Shakur (who is, in turn, sampled on Lamar’s 2015 *To Pimp a Butterfly*).<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, Lamar’s song titled “Compton” is an homage to Dre’s 1990s midwifery of gangster rap, including a cameo by Dre. Its last verse claims,

Now we can all celebrate  
 We can all harvest the rap artists of N.W.A. . . .  
 This was brought to you by Dre  
 Now every motherfucker in here say:  
 “Look who’s responsible  
 For taking Compton international.”<sup>84</sup>

Like Hood Day, as a call to “celebrate,” “Compton” is a commemoration—a site of memory. In an *XXL* interview in which he discussed *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, the album that contains both “Poetic Justice” and “Compton,” Lamar indicated that the link between memory and place was the album’s defining feature: “Going back to the neighborhood,” he said, “put me back in that same space where we used to be, bringing back them thoughts” and “reminiscing how I was feeling.”<sup>85</sup>

The excavation of the black past through engagement with the geographies of Los Angeles is also evident in the work of visual artist Mark Bradford. His massive “Deep Blue” (2018), for example, is a layered, multimedia composition. Its base is composed of street maps of Watts upon which layers of paint, caulk, and other materials are collaged. These layers were then dug back by the artist to selectively expose the street grid. The raised areas “signify properties destroyed during the city’s Watts riots in 1965”—in other words, the largest protrusions on the painting, the biggest presences, are black Los Angeles sites that have been made absent.<sup>86</sup>

## From Memory to Monument

The creation of sites of memory has been taken to its conclusion by South Los Angeles artist Lauren Halsey, whose “Prototype Column for tha Shaw (RIP the Honorable Ermias Nipsey Hussle Asghedom) I & II,” two 12-foot-high, 2-foot-wide carved plaster columns, were revealed as part of the Frieze art fair in New York. She sees these as a trial run for a larger public monument to black Los Angeles: “there would be 15 to 20 of these columns,” she explained, “30 feet tall and 5 to 6 feet in diameter—that would coexist with the permanent structure and that people would move through like a corridor.” The carvings in columns would be, at least partly, determined through community engagement; “people within the neighborhood” would be able to participate in the design and fabrication processes.<sup>87</sup> Halsey’s prototypes build on her long-standing interest in creating sites of memory for black Los Angeles in the face of concerns over development and gentrification. Her monuments are spatial—participants can move through them and experience their scale and emplacement—but they are imbued with archival meanings: “I want to build architecture from our hands to empower us and hold our narratives, as we are being deleted and shuffled around,” Halsey asserted in an interview.

I view history, cultural memory, and the archive . . . as tools that can . . . mobilize people towards liberation. . . I’m interested in drawing connections among multiple histories. . . I truly believe that the process of archiving a place and remixing the content back into that place can be empowering.<sup>88</sup>

Local conditions have elicited black Los Angeles’s memory moment, but the creation of sites of memory speaks to national problems. The most frequent public debate over racial memory has been over renewed calls to remove monuments to the Confederacy, which followed the 2015 murder of nine African Americans by a white supremacist at a Charleston, South Carolina, church. The deadly 2017 “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, was subsequently organized in response to the city’s vote to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee. To rally on behalf of a Jim Crow-era monument to the Confederacy elucidates white supremacists’ efforts to preserve racial difference—in particular, their eroded whiteness—while obscuring the history of black enslavement. It was unsurprising when Donald Trump implicitly supported the white supremacist and neo-Nazi rally by claiming there were “very fine people on both sides” of the protest; even his campaign promise to “make America great again” was an evocation of racial loss, with whiteness only gauzily veiled by the language of nation.<sup>89</sup>

Black Los Angeles mobilized in the face of these politics. In 2016, Compton rapper YG released what *Rolling Stone* called the “defining political protest song of our time”: “FDT,” the title shorthand for its pointed chorus, “Fuck

Donald Trump.”<sup>90</sup> The verses make a case that black Los Angeles can offer specific strategies for resistance: “Have a rally out in L.A., you know what’s up/Home of the Rodney King riot, we don’t give a fuck,” YG boasts, reminding listeners that the 1992 crisis and the cultures and histories that both elicited and arose from it were politically grounded. A verse by Crenshaw artist and activist Nipsey Hussle specifically addresses Trump’s anti-Mexican policies and calls for “horizontal comradeship”: “Hold up, I fuck with Mexicans/got a plug with Mexicans . . ./It wouldn’t be the U.S.A. without Mexicans/And if it’s time to team up, shit, let’s begin.” Alliances across gang affiliations provide a prototype for this place-based cross-racial solidarity in the face of Trumpism: “When me and Nip link, that’s Bloods and Crips/Where your L.A. rally?/We gon’ crash your shit,” YG taunts.<sup>91</sup> In the face of emboldened white supremacy, the sites of memory created by black Angelenos could not come at a more critical time. They wrest the affective and political power of commemoration from neo-Confederates and the larger alt-right and offer powerful counter-discourses centered on African American identities, communities, and affiliations.

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90. Danny Schwartz, "YG's Flexing, Taunting, '4REAL, 4REAL,' Doesn't Live Up to the Rapper's Previous High Standards," *Rolling Stone* (May 24, 2019), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/review-yg-4real-4real-839487/>.

91. YG featuring Nipsey Hussle, “FDT,” *Still Brazy* (400/CTE/Def Jam, 2016). Hussle was murdered March 31, 2019 and is alluded to in Halsey’s monument. Before his death, he had parlayed his professional success into social justice work in Crenshaw and elsewhere in black Los Angeles, including efforts to stem gang violence. He was also a partner on a project to create public art commemorating black Los Angeles titled “Destination Crenshaw”; Frances Anderton, “Destination Crenshaw was a Nipsey Hussle Dream,” *KCRW*, April 3, 2019, <https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/design-and-architecture/destination-crenshaw-was-a-nipsey-hussle-dream>.