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MIGRATION AND IDENTITY

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THE CALIFORNIAN EXOPOLIS

HECTOR TOBAR'S AND TIM Z. HERNANDEZ'S LITERARY INTERVENTIONS

Introduction: California as the Paradise That Never Was

In the present essay, I focus on the literary portrayals of California's underrepresented communities and the places their members inhabit and move through. These places are often zones of disruption of the historical and cultural discourses that traditionally portray California as a paradise and a migrant's dream, even if increasingly so the dream proves compromised, if not corrupted. I offer a reading of Hector Tobar's *The Barbarian Nurseries* (2011), and Tim Z. Hernandez's *Mañana Means Heaven* (2013), two novels which in varying ways show spaces of resistance to the globalizing impulses. Tobar's novel focuses on a migrant's experience of a city's labyrinth, providing an alternative reading of the cityscape; while Hernandez's novel portrays the valley where constant vacillation across the border and between cultures is a crucial part of the field workers' experience. Both novels complicate the possible triumphant reading of the land- and cityscape as an all-inclusive actualization of the multicultural dream, as they portray local cultures as being simultaneously shaped and occluded by the larger national and transnational forces. I see these novels as interventions in the discussion about the state's past and its identity, as they give voice to the cultural and social agents who are traditionally silenced in the narratives of the state's – and the nation's – history.

The narratives presented in Tobar's and Hernandez's novels can be read as signs of the processes that Edward W. Soja analyzes as the development of the "Exopolis." It is a twofold process, simultaneously describing the emergence of "Outer Cities" and "Edge Cities" as well as other formations falling under the category of "the rather oxymoronic urbanization of suburbia"; and at the same time indicating a drastic restructuring of the Inner City happening under the influence of an outflow of the local populace and an inflow of the migrants from the "Third World" countries. Thus, Soja concludes, "The social and spatial organization of the postmetropolis seems as a result to be turning inside-out and outside-in at the same time, creating havoc with our traditional ways of defining what is urban, suburban, exurban, nor urban, etc." (7). The two-way, or rather, multiple-way traffic changes not only the face of the urban landscape, but also our understanding of what "urban" might mean. Tobar's and Hernandez's novels both point in the direction of the renewed understanding of these spaces as they document the movement – and immobility – of the representatives of the communities whose emergence disrupts the easy binaries of the urban and the suburban. In my essay, I point to the subversive quality of the Exopolis that both analyzed novels expose, in a reference to what Soja specifies as the "provocative double meaning" of the term "exopolis": "exo-referring both to the city growing 'outside' the traditional urban nucleus, and to the city 'without', the city that no longer conveys the traditional qualities of cityness" (8). It is precisely this challenging potential that *The Barbarian Nurseries* and *Mañana Means Heaven* display that I wish to explore in my essay.

Both novels unavoidably hint at the traditional representation of California as paradise or the Garden of Eden, both also revisit the traditional narrative, in which California is first deemed to be the fulfillment of the promise of westward expansion and the ideals of freedom and unencumbered growth, only to be subsequently pronounced the ultimate disappointment of the corrupted ideal.

The moment when California enters written history takes us back a long way: the name is first mentioned well before those parts of the world become known to the Europeans, in an early 16th century Spanish romance *The Deeds of Esplandián*, and the land itself, imagined as an island inhabited by valiant women warriors, is said to be rich in precious metal and full of wonders. Some elements of the myth proved extremely durable, but, as Joan Didion puts it, “a good deal of California does not, on its own preferred terms, add up” (19) – the Californian landscapes include not only the garden, but the desert; not just the beaches and the sea, but the mountains and snows; they remain a contradiction in and of themselves.

The myth of California as the Garden of Eden functions within the parameters of what we may see as a nostalgic landscape: the term indirectly refers to John Brinckerhoff Jackson’s distinction between the “official” and the “vernacular” landscape. When discussing the latter type of landscape, Jackson tells us that “The commonplace aspects of the contemporary landscape, the streets and houses and fields and places of work, could teach us a great deal not only about American history and American society but also ourselves and how we relate to the world. It is a matter of learning how to see” (43). Thus, Jackson places didactic importance upon the landscape, at the same time reminding the viewers that what they look at is in a way a reflection of their character. The landscape they see is, in fact, themselves in relation to the world. Yet, the knowledge gained from the observation of the American landscape is by no means an easy task. It requires taking a step back and inquiring into our own involvement in the world. Thus, I would like to propose a reintroduction of the idea of California as the Garden of Eden, since it signals an importance placed on the landscape which emerges out of the interaction between various groups of humans, but also with the land itself (and the non-human animals inhabiting it). “Learning to see” California as an Edenic landscape had the potential of an inclusive, heterogeneous vision for the state.

Michael J. McDowell adds to Jackson’s landscapes “another more romantic official landscape,” gaining in popularity, which he describes as “a nostalgic landscape of national forests still filled with trees, undammed wild and scenic rivers, unplowed national grassland, and ungrazed and undrilled federal wildlife refuges, all of it nearly peopleless, as the majority of Americans have liked to think the land was before the Euro-American settlement” (382). McDowell’s nostalgic landscape can be seen as a much needed act of resistance to the binarism suggested by the distinction between the official versus the vernacular. In the Californian context, this nostalgic landscape takes on a local variation: even if not of forests, but a semi-arid desert, it is the landscape before highways and the omnipresent cement. As David Wyatt claims, “California has always been a place no sooner had than lost,” and he adds, “every family has its paved garden” (15). The suggestion that the Californian garden has been lost to paved roads is possibly a nostalgic expression of the fear that California has never been the paradise it was supposed to be; it is only the loss that is real.

The Ethnic Garden and the Logic of Exclusion

The nostalgic garden is the central image in Tobar’s *The Barbarian Nurseries*, where the conflict over one family’s piece of paradise and its loss motivate the narrative’s progression, which mirrors the central character’s movement through a variety of landscapes. These landscapes are organized along the axis of the garden and the desert, and the distinction between the two is reflected in a series of differentiating features, such as: the use of language, either Spanish or English; understanding art or disregard for it; and individualism or a collective spirit. These binarisms, however, are broken up by the ideas of movement and liminality, embodied by the character who is an agent of artistic dissent.

The Barbarian Nurseries focuses on a family whose hyphenated last name suggests a mixed ethnic background, Maureen and Scott Thompson-Torres, and their Mexican maid, an illegal immigrant, Araceli. Undergoing financial difficulties, the family let the gardener go, which triggers the rapid deterioration

of their landscaped surroundings and is an apt reflection of the disruption in the family dynamics. Maureen's decision to remove the tropical garden and install a desert landscape is extremely costly: in a subsequent squabble over financial matters, the couple decides to take some time off, neither bothering to inform the maid. Left to her resources and with food supplies running low, Araceli decides to take the two boys left in her care to their grandfather. Their trip from a gated Orange County hilltop community to the heart of Los Angeles, when seen from the perspective of one of the boys, a precocious, highly imaginative 11-year old Brandon, is presented in terms of a fabulous journey to the heart of darkness; and when represented in Araceli's adult terms, it seems like the Grand Tour for an artist that the maid is. When the parents eventually return, they realize the boys and the maid are gone, and because of a lack of communication and misconstrued motifs, Araceli becomes a kidnapper on the run, hunted by the police, the social services, and the media alike. The parents are not willing to admit their guilt in abandoning their family, but eventually they come clean, which leads to Araceli's release. The unfolding of the events gives Tobar an excuse to comment on the social mechanisms at play and to expose deep chasms in the bilingual, bi-ethnic Californian households, with the garden serving as a befitting metaphor for the many identities of California.

This multiplicity is reflected in the naming: the Thompson-Torres call it "la petite rain forest" (11); this mixture of French and English signals their upper-class status and distances them from the Spanish-speaking people who actually take care of the garden's maintenance. When they have to let the gardener Pepe go, Scott muses, "It seemed to him it would take a village of Mexicans to keep that thing alive, a platoon of men in straw hats, wading with bare feet into the faux stream that ran through the middle of it" (15). In fact, only one person was maintaining the place, so Scott's musings are a fantasy of the superhuman strength and abilities that distinguish his gardener from himself. The conclusion shows the contrast starkly: "Pepe. . . was a village unto himself, apparently. Scott wasn't a village" (15). A hint at the American individualism, this comment also serves to draw the line between the upper middle class employers and their Mexican working class employees, with the duality extending to the sense of communality versus individualism, regulated legal status versus unprotected illegal standing, down to the language they employ.

Araceli, the maid, is the character straddling these oppositions, as she is a former art student in Mexico City, forced by economic circumstances to seek a job as a nanny on the other side of the border. In her memories, we are presented with yet another opposition influencing the characters' sense of identity: she is a city dweller, navigating the crowded streets between art galleries and cafes, transplanted to the land of suburbs stretching to the horizon. The difference between these spaces is captured by Soja, who uses the term "postmetropolis" in order to "accentuate the differences between contemporary urban regions and those that consolidated in the middle decades of the twentieth century" (1). Araceli then is an agent moving not only between various modes of spatial organization and their social and cultural consequences, but it seems she also moves between temporal planes, equally influencing the identifications of the agents.

Needless to say, among the important facets of identification is the language, and the Californian characters in Tobar's novel are well aware of the different status of the two languages; as Araceli says, "it was obvious to her that the two languages did not carry equal weight" (250). The grasp of a language proves important when Araceli is asked by her employer, Maureen, about her opinion on the reconstituted garden: "She really didn't possess the words in English to communicate what the tropical garden and this new desert garden made her feel. How did you say in English that something was too still, that you preferred plants that you could feel breathing around you?" (106). The two languages parallel the approach to the two versions of the landscape, which in turn translates into differing ranks in the hierarchy of social standing and power of the Californian characters. The preference for the desert

garden might suggest ossified structures and stiff divisions in the strata of society; but a more optimistic reading might also hint at a turn to native plants and species as an attempt at a rehabilitation of a previous arrogant, exploitative treatment of the land.

The character of Araceli displays a very different approach to the landscape. Her liminal position between the worlds of English and Spanish, between high art and middle-class mediocrity, and between city dwelling and the suburbs is represented in her response to the places Marc Augé calls non-places of supermodernity, the places of transit, rushed through, places of solitude. Araceli, a post-modern heir to flaneurs of the past, understands such spaces and appreciates them for what they are. Seen from a train, the railway tract seems oddly appealing: "There was a spare beauty to all this decay, it was the empty and harsh landscape of an unsettling dream; these were spaces you were not meant to see.... Her aesthetic lived in barren places like this, and she missed them. *Here the wind, rain, and sun are free to shape and cook the steel and cement into sculptures that celebrate forgetfulness*" (164). The dream-like quality of California is mentioned here, but it is not the golden dream promoted by Hollywood; far from it. It is by no means a manicured lawn of the suburban variety, or a characterless city park. The landscape is recognized as a dynamic art form in itself. The celebration of forgetfulness, not of history or identity, is the central function of art here, which possibly signals an attempt to resist any curbing of artistic freedom and pinning down of a homogeneous identity.

Araceli, the free agent, finds herself in non-places as she is forced by circumstance to flee the danger of deportation and prison. When she disregards the "No Trespassing" sign, she ventures into a place that resists definition:

She was entering a kind of urban wilderness, a nursery of odd flora sprouting up through the mustard grass. A cypress tree, its canopy shaped like a large wing. Sickly rosebushes without buds. Strawberry plants clinging to a patch of loam. Bamboo grasses and a stunted palm with thin leaves that sprouted, fountainlike, from its trunk, and the wide, tall bouquet of a nopal cactus. She had stumbled into the back closet of California gardens, the place where seedlings of plants discarded and abandoned came to scratch their roots into the dry native soil. If she hadn't been on the run, she might have stopped to admire this freakish landscape. (259)

It takes an artist's eye to transform the place into an object of contemplation; but the wild place on the borders between city and wilderness is represented as the originator of the carefully maintained middle-class yards and their nursery. The plants that survive in this marginal space later thrive in suburban gardens thanks to the work of those who remain as unacknowledged and as invisible as the liminal nursery. Araceli's preference for the wild versus the cultivated is a sign of her cultural identification. In her vision of California there is a place for wildness and for art; it is an inclusive, multilingual, heterogeneous space of contact and interaction.

Such a perception must be contrasted with that of her employers'. Their California is the place of the past that they are desperately trying to recreate: "California was a paradise of open land and sea breezes, the sliver of Eden between the desert and the sea" (304); it is a paradoxical place, at the same time elusive, yet with clearly demarcated borders. One character, a mouthpiece for xenophobic views, describes California of the past in terms of a "playground," which suggests a controlled space with utilitarian function. The nostalgia for that place corresponds to a falsified vision of history that feeds the fearful xenophobia of the present. It is only with a realization of the need for a non-exclusive identification of California that the falsified vision may be dispelled.

The ending of the novel presents such a recognition in the form of a self-imposed expulsion from paradise. Realizing her guilt, Maureen decides they will move to a smaller house: "They would leave their Eden, and that would be a fair punishment" (389). The expulsion means that the paradise must be

redefined, its borders expanded, and the sense of entitlement – re-visited. Yet for a white middle-class character such as Maureen the suburbs delimit her movements; in contrast, Araceli, the illegal Mexican worker and an artist, is the agent of dissent who leaves the suburbs and through her movement illustrates the possibility of the challenging potential of the Californian Exopolis.

The City and the Return to the Ethnic Paradise

Liminality and mobility are the twenty-first century possibilities for a non-white character; a Mexican artist figure, even though it remains a provocative proposal in today's prose, half a century ago remained an oxymoron, with the distinction between a white artist and a Mexican laborer very much in place. The second text I discuss here, Tim Z. Hernandez's 2013 novel *Mañana Means Heaven*, destabilizes this distinction and celebrates ethnic diversity, not allowing for identity appropriation by a white, mobile narrator.

In *Mañana Means Heaven*, paradise is also part of the stock images to conceptualize California, but a much more prominent referent is Jack Kerouac's 1957 classic *On the Road*. One episode concerns Terry, a Mexican woman with whom Kerouac's narrator has an intimate relationship; and it is this figure and the events centered around her that provide an impulse for Hernandez's novel. In a mixture of fact and fiction, Hernandez recounts the story of romance with the young writer, Jack, from the perspective of the woman, Bea. California provides a vivid backdrop against which the events unfold, while also accounting for the characters' motivation and explaining their perspective.

The moments in history when the two novels were conceived represent two important points of reference in the history of California, as they exposed the social rift and unrest, violently erupting in the streets of the multiethnic metropolis. In the words of Edward Soja, "Between the Watts riots of 1965 and what are now called the Rodney King or Justice Riots of 1992, the urban region of Los Angeles experienced one of the most dramatic transformations of any comparable region of the world" (1). Thus, even though Kerouac and Hernandez both set their narratives in 1930s California, Kerouac's text represents a very different Los Angeles and California than the one seen from the vantage point of a twenty-first century text, with a different understanding of the city's dynamics which Soja calls "the socio-spatial dialectic" (2). The awareness of this difference is evidenced by Hernandez's narrator's words, "Strains of resentment were still crusted in the cracks of the sidewalks, from Watts all the way up to Santa Monica Boulevard, and there wasn't enough rain in the entire Pacific Coast to wash it off of L.A. that easy. The blackouts too seemed like only yesterday. The whirring propellers of low-spying zeppelins, yesterday. The Zoot Suit beatings, yesterday" (37). For Kerouac's narrator, Sal Paradise, California is devoid of the socio-political dimension in favor of the mythical; it is "the ragged promised land, the fantastic end of America" (50), and it is there that he hears the Spanish word that he chooses not to translate: "It was always *mañana*. For the next week that was all I heard – *mañana*, a lovely word and one that probably means heaven" (56). Sal uses a strategy here that various critics analyze under different names: Marianna Torgovnick describes it as "primitivism" and Graham Huggan deems "exoticising"; both mean a fascination with the Other to the point of appropriation and commodification, with no respect for the insiders' perspective on the cultural issue that is being seized.

Hernandez's novel, written in the twenty first century, cannot afford Sal's naivety. With an awareness of the past century's conflicts and delicate and complex identity politics behind them, Hernandez's text responds to the pronounced sentimentality of Kerouac's narrator. In a remark about a singer who is passing for a Mexican, Bea (Kerouac's "Mexican girl" Terry) says: "'You actually buy all that *Mañana*, *mañana* junk? I mean, she ain't even Mexican, and...oh, it just makes me sick" (122). The comment not only demystifies the romantic approach of *On the Road*; it also makes it clear that claiming Mexicanness and exoticizing it must not be taken lightly. Sal Paradise presents himself as one of the workers in

the Valley when he says, “They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am” (98), but such identification is conditioned upon his mobility and freedom to assume other cultural positions, whereas for his “Mexican girl” mobility and freedom of movement cannot be taken for granted. Their differing interpretations of the land they pass through or inhabit depend on their positioning as free or bound agents. When Augé reminds us that: “Travel...constructs a fictional relationship between gaze and landscape” (69), we have to take his pronouncement to see Bea as unable to assume the relationship with the landscape equal to Sal’s, as she is conditioned by socio-economic factors beyond her control. Sal, however, is well aware of his relationship to the landscape: in a characteristically anti-intellectual gesture he reveals his awareness when he says, “I had a book with me I stole...but I preferred reading the American landscape as we went along” (207).

In *Mañana Means Heaven* we are presented with a rather clear-cut division between the two zones, the valley with punishing working conditions, and the city, an ambiguous and exciting space of artistic freedom, further divided by the availability of the city spaces to the agents of varying economic status. Bea, the primary focalizer in the story, presents the valley in terms of hard labor that it means for the menial workers; to her, “Returning to the great San Joaquin meant a backache” (23). When the couple decides to take the job picking grapes, she displays the practical knowledge that derives from years of experience. Bea assures Jack that “the body, no matter how many days or months or years, never gets used to fieldwork” (129). The damning effects of the hard work are most recognizable on the children who work in the fields: “Every last one of them wore a defeated mask” (142). Even though at one time Bea admits that living in the camp amounts to a simpler, healthier existence, reminiscent of camping as a form of leisure, it is Jack who holds romantic illusions about such a life. He expresses such views saying, “I know plenty of city folks who’d kill for a little bit of quiet like this. A little room to stretch your legs. Buy your own chunk of land, set things on fire when you want” (120). His fantasy of freedom and empty land evokes the Frontier Thesis and the ideals of Manifest Destiny, which only exposes Jack’s position as an outsider and a passer-by, unaffected by the landscape to which no communal value is attached.

For Bea, the fantasy of freedom and unobstructed movement results in a sense of frustration: she feels “trapped in the campo” which prompts her to say, “This must be what purgatory is like” (183). Bea’s and Jack’s differing responses to the landscape in the valley parallel their economic position which conditions their mobility.

Just as the valley with its camps of workers picking up fruit represents unchangeability and stagnation, the city lures with its dynamism:

The soundscape was punctuated with raw music: the scream of an engine, the sizzle of hot grease from an open window, a fed-up neighbor threatening to call cops on the hoodlums who lurked in the alleyways. Across the street, a band was loading up a car with chrome and brass musical instruments, their shirttails untucked and hats cocked, faces ragged after an all-nighter. Cars hummed past, and the noon hour buzzed with working stiffs tending to the incessant nag of life. (37)

The characters see themselves as momentarily released from the constraints of the mundane; the city invigorates them with its chaotic energy. It is the landscape that creates music out of chaos and that feeds their creative energies. The city unites the lovers and allows them to see themselves similarly freed by it. They create an enclave in the bustling chaos, with the two of them against the rest of the world:

Off and on, maybe once an hour, or every other hour, they peeked out of the window, only to remind themselves that the world outside, the stiff and utterly square world, didn’t apply to them. Not its rules or contradictions, not its streetlights or crosswalks, not its arbitrary neighborhoods quartered off by highways and byways, bridges and barrios. Deep into the afternoon, at the pearl hour, buzzing with invincibility, Bea stuck her head out the window and spread her arms as if embracing the sky. She blurted out, ‘Goddamn you L.A.!', A voice greeted her back, ‘Shut up!’ (53)

Just as for Bea, the valley is a landscape that she understands and is able to represent, the city, described as the “stiff and square world”, is represented from Jack’s perspective. When Bea makes the gesture trying to embrace the city, even as she simultaneously denounces it, the city rejects and silences her. Bea’s approach to the cityscape is dictated by her economic position. She contrasts the city where “there was a heap of money waiting to be made” with the valley, “that miserable campo, that sad den of discarded prayers” (72), yet in the end she must go back there. The novel presents a sense of reconciliation at the end, when Bea realizes her limited freedom which nevertheless rests on the liberty of choice: “It had nothing to do with leaving, and everything to do with returning” (214).

In contrast, *On the Road* does not offer a similar resolution. Sal reminisces about his Mexican lover with a sense of regret:

At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching...feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough light...I wished I were a Denver Mexican,...anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disilluminated. All my life I’d had white ambitions; that was why I’d abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley. (105)

Sal’s musings, however, are played out against the backdrop of a cityscape in which he moves about freely, even as he mourns the lack of euphoric excess in his life. He presents his regret in racial and ethnic terms, and however naive to the point of recklessness his identifications are, they are nevertheless shaped by the landscapes he inhabits. Rachel Ligairi discusses the question of race in *On the Road* and, as she points to the wide range of critical assessment of Kerouac’s racial dynamics, from perceiving it as simple naivety to dismissing it as a sign of colonial domination, she concludes that Kerouac’s treatment of the issue is “a choice that suggests a larger Beat refusal to see racial Others as fellow questers rather than stepping stones toward the authentic” (153). Sal Paradise situates himself on the margin of social life, but he does it precisely because he can afford to do so, as a white man endowed with mobility. For Terry / Bea, as well as for her co-workers, mobility as an option may not present itself for many years to come. It is only for the character placed in a twenty-first-century context, such as Araceli, that mobility – moving through the landscape and reading it – becomes a real choice.

Conclusion

The idea presented at the beginning, the reading of the landscape as “a matter of learning how to see”, now becomes a political responsibility, and both *The Barbarian Nurseries* and *Mañana Means Heaven* undertake this responsibility with a reference to the traditional, idealized representation of California as an edenic space. The former novel presents the garden as a liminal space which disrupts an easy distinction between an urban and a suburban space, while simultaneously questioning the notion of the garden itself. In the latter novel, the garden is a purgatory rather than paradise, yet it plays an important function: that of epitomizing the experience of an undocumented laborer limited in her mobility.

Set in different historical moments, the two novels display very different approaches to the landscape, yet both represent necessary interventions into a renewed comprehension of Californian spaces. In the words of Soja, “Understanding the postmetropolis requires a creative recombination of micro and macro perspectives, views from above and from below, a new critical synthesis that rejects the rigidities of either/or choices for the radical openness of the both/and also” (4). *The Barbarian Nurseries* and *Mañana Means Heaven* represent precisely this radicality of options.

In the two novels, Californian landscapes are represented in a series of binaries, broken up and complicated by a free agent of dissent: in *The Barbarian Nurseries*, the division between the city and the suburb is challenged by the artist able to transform the refuse of the city into an object of contemplation,

at the same time showing the points of convergence between the seemingly irreconcilable, discordant zones and their interrelatedness. In *Mañana Means Heaven*, the distinction between the valley and the city is subverted through the intertextual play that suggests a different network of meanings attributed to places, resulting from the complex identifications of the dwellers, passers-by, and interpreters of these spaces. Finally, the two novels present California's non-places reinvented, whose meanings, context-dependent and reliant on other vectors of cultural interpretation, are celebrated in their ambiguous and chaotic complexity.

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