

URBAN FERVOR:  
LOS ANGELES LITERATURE AND ALTERNATIVE RELIGION

by

CHRISTINE M. DALEY

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New  
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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
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Abstract

URBAN FERVOR:

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by

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Using alternative religion and other dynamics within the spiritual life of Los Angeles opens up the city's literary canon; employing religion as a critical lens illuminates the conjunction of history, literature, and urban growth that characterizes Los Angeles culture. This is especially relevant in a setting where, according to a 1941 guide to the city, "the multiplicity and diversity of faiths that flourish in the aptly named City of Angels probably cannot be duplicated in any other city on earth." It is apparent, however, that the specific social phenomena of abundant sects in this urban space can provide keys to understanding the region's culture. While religion plays a part in the history of Los Angeles from the city's inception, its role becomes more complex, fragmentary, and pervasive in the twentieth century as the city undergoes rapid development. This project examines the role alternative religion plays in Los Angeles literature written between 1910 and 1960 and provides an overview of the spiritual culture of the city.

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## *Chapter One*

### *Urban Fervor: An Introduction*

The literature of Los Angeles is underrepresented in critical theory, especially considering its ideal placement to provide important regional signs in further developing a complete American literary identity. The figure of the acolyte is a key to expanding the borders of this body of literature. Whether one pictures Nathanael West's unruly mob, Aldous Huxley's devotees of Belial, or Gore Vidal's messiah, in the background one will inevitably find a palm tree and a film studio. From the earnest to the absurd, unconventional belief systems create their own rhetoric, ripe for dissection and translation. Does the landscape of Los Angeles draw the fervid? Or does it create them?

#### **I.**

If you ask a random selection of readers what text comes to mind when they hear the phrase "Los Angeles literature," they will almost invariably mention Nathanael West's 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*. The tragic tale of Hollywood dreams dashed seems to be the entry point into the city's literature, and as we will see in Chapter Five, it is a bleak and violent entrance. In his characteristically cynical style, West provides various portraits of alternative religion in Los Angeles: miracle solvents, Dr. Know-All Pierce-All, the Church of Christ Physical, the Church Invisible, the Tabernacle of the Third Coming, the crusade against salt, Temple Moderne, brain-breathing, and "a crazy jumble of dietary rules, economics, and

Biblical threats” (141). During my initiation to Los Angeles literature through *The Day of the Locust*, I was under the impression that this frantic bounty of religion was part of West’s feverish nightmare rather than an essential element of Los Angeles culture. As I expanded my reading, I discovered that time and time again, writing in Los Angeles about Los Angeles echoed West’s portrayals of this religious fecundity.

Surprisingly, there appeared to be a glaring lack of critical discussion about this constant theme running through the bulk of Los Angeles literature in the twentieth century: an obsession with alternative religion and its role in this particular urban culture. This is remarkable since scholars now agree that “[nothing] better illustrates the modern West’s evolution from a colonial region – looking elsewhere for its cultural cues – into a pacemaking, trendsetting, postregional culture than does California, with its diverse, chaotic, always invigorating panopoly of religious denominations, associations, sects, and cults” (Malone & Etulain quoted in Ernst 45). What discussion did exist during the first half of the twentieth century was dismissive and derisive: the “quacks and charlatans” school of criticism, if you will.

The proliferation of religious alternatives was not explored with any depth by the earliest critics of the urban scene. In a 1926 article for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, it seemed as if H.L. Mencken were going to tackle the reason why so many Americans were drawn to the spirituality of Southern California in his study of popular evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson.<sup>1</sup> Alas, we are not so lucky as to receive any critical thinking on the subject:

What brought this commonplace and transparent mountebank to her present high estate, with thousands crowding her tabernacle daily and money flowing

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the literary life of Aimee Semple McPherson, see Chapter Three: “Hot Gospel.”

in upon her from whole regiments of eager dupes? The answer, it seems to me, is as plain as mud. For years she has been wandering about the West, first as a side-show wriggler, then as a faith healer, and finally as a cow-town evangelist. One day, inspired by God, she decided to try her fortune in Los Angeles. Instantly she was a roaring success. And why? For the plain reason that there were more morons collected in Los Angeles than in any other place on earth – because it was a pasture foreordained for evangelists, and she was the first comer to give it anything low enough for its taste and comprehension (65).

Mencken was not alone in his condescension and superficial analysis. Bruce Bliven also uses a cattle metaphor to describe Los Angeles in an article for *The New Republic* in 1927: “Here is the world’s prize collection of cranks, semi-cranks, placid creatures whose bovine expression shows that each of them is studying, without much hope of success, to be a high-grade moron, angry or ecstatic exponents of food fads, sun-bathing, ancient Greek costumes, diaphragm breathing and the imminent second coming of Christ” (xv). In his 1932 autobiography *Laughing in the Jungle*, Slovenian anarchist and immigrant Louis Adamic provides a tally of his L.A. periodical reading:

On Saturdays, I saw church advertisements in the *Times* and the *Examiner* announcing sermons apparently by the leading preachers in the city on such topics as “What Would Jesus Do if He Were a Great Movie Director Like Cecil de Mille?” or “– If He Were President of the Advertising Club?” One minister was self-described as an “ex-gambler, now a mighty hunter before the Lord,” and his subject one Sunday was “Who Killed the Dead Sea?” An

evangelist advertised himself as “a drunkard, gambler, pimp, and outcast for twenty years; five times around the world as a hobo; now a miracle of grace.” Still another contended that “millions now living will never die” and that the Second Coming would soon occur in southern California “because here the climate is just like that in the Holy Land” (208).

Why did these writers not ask themselves, if there were thousands of people desperately seeking *something* in Los Angeles every day, what might this say about America? What might this say about the twentieth century? What might this say about Los Angeles?

## II.

This project was conceived with three separate (though sometimes overlapping) audiences in mind. The first audience includes some literary critics and scholars as well as your average reader. It is the group who, when presented with the idea of Los Angeles literature, asks, “There’s literature in Los Angeles?” As snide as both the question and its citation here may be, it is remarkable how often I’ve heard this comment since beginning my research. In spite of and in service to the untutored, this project was devised to call attention to the cultural significance of the city’s literature and religious history. Outside of Los Angeles, you would rarely, if ever, find an academic course offering on what I hope to show is a rich field for inquiry and an important facet of American studies.

The second audience was revealed a little further into my research. After reading the work of writers and critics I much admire – such as Mike Davis and

David Fine, who are responsible for some of the most important contemporary commentary on the city's literary culture – I was left with the impression that all we need to know about L.A. literature can be found within the pages of *noir* classics and the occasional Hollywood novel. This project seeks to reach the audience of these eminent writers, those readers who acknowledge the merit of literary scholarship on Los Angeles. However, we need to take this scholarship further.

The third audience is comprised of people like me: readers who know that a city of over three million people can produce and has produced literature of varying styles and strengths that goes beyond what has been studied thus far. In fact, opening the canon this way brings in so many writers that there was a need to focus the project in some way.

Writers such as Davis, Fine, Kevin Starr, and David Reid have tackled the subject of Los Angeles literature – looking at the common, almost entirely male, canon of literature and film that has been produced in Southern California. The hard-boiled detective, the Hollywood cast-off, the booster, and the surfer are familiar stock characters in the drama of Los Angeles, with only the severed body of the Black Dahlia demonstrating that women other than starlets populated the urban landscape prior to the Second World War. In addition to this narrow focus, very little attention is paid to the constant presence of religion in the literature. As religious historian Michael E. Engh, S.J. points out: “Most published histories of the city...even those by Mike Davis and Kevin Starr, offer no analysis of religion as a social force in Los Angeles between 1890 and 1940” (463-4).

Using alternative religion and other dynamics of L.A.'s spiritual life opens up the canon; employing religion as a critical lens illuminates the history, literature, and urban growth that characterizes Los Angeles culture. This is especially relevant in a setting where, according to a 1941 guide to the city, "the multiplicity and diversity of faiths that flourish in the aptly named City of Angels probably cannot be duplicated in any other city on earth" (The L.A. County Board of Supervisors 67). What happens to a region's ability to produce identity when it is definitionally comprised of citizens from elsewhere? Can religion be used to produce culture? The growing need for religion's consolation is not limited to California during the twentieth century, but instead reflects a focus that goes back to the roots of the American republic. It is apparent, however, that the specific social phenomena of abundant sects in this urban space can provide keys to understanding the region's culture.

### III.

In the year 2006, Los Angeles turned 225 years old: a very young city in a very young country. Yet Los Angeles has imprinted its identity through film, its primary export, on more of the world than any other city. If citizens of the global marketplace imagine what America looks like, it quite possibly looks very much like Los Angeles. In 1926, Louis Adamic wrote, "And Los Angeles is America. A jungle. Los Angeles grew up suddenly, *planlessly*, under the stimuli of the adventurous spirit of millions of people and the profit motive. It is still growing" (54).

Los Angeles did not immediately enter its growth spurt, however. "El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula" was established in 1781

and, by 1844, only had a population of 3,000 in the area from the present-day San Fernando Valley to Orange County. California entered the union in 1850 and shortly thereafter, Los Angeles was incorporated as a U.S. city. The population of the city tripled in one decade alone – the 1880s – due to railroad expansion, and 1.25 million people lived there by the 1920s (Ulin xiii). This demographic increase was also accompanied by exponential growth in religious affiliation. “The population of Los Angeles rose from 50,395 residents in 1890 to 1,497,000 in 1940. Members of religious congregations grew from 18,229 in 1890 to 427,348 by 1936, the last year the federal government conducted a religious census” (Engh 464).

In accounts of Los Angeles in the first few decades of the twentieth century, like many frontier towns, the city had the atmosphere of a tourist town and circus spectacle. The variety of religious offerings that sprang up here could easily feed on the traveler’s tolerance and the desire for and acceptance of extravagant curiosities. One of the reasons Los Angeles differs from other regions with a history of religious fervor – New York City, Boston, the South – was that it offered little else to the popular imagination, besides film. David Reid recounts, “The early rise of Los Angeles was bracketed by the closing of the frontier and the arrival of the movies – a fateful symmetry, as Norman Mailer once observed, and one that has shaped and shadowed the region’s entire development.” The dreams invested in the frontier were re-routed into the star system and Hollywood fantasy.

However, even before the film studios came along to solidify the city’s primary industry, Los Angeles was largely concerned with making a myth of itself. As David Ulin notes in the introduction to *Writing Los Angeles*: “If L.A. has often

seemed like a city without history, it is perhaps because so much of its past has been recycled into myth....The thousands who flocked to L.A...saw it as a place where they would find whatever they were looking for, and where in turn they could reinvent themselves, leaving the past behind" (xiii-xiv). While Ulin refers to the successive boom periods and rapid commercial development that characterized the attraction of Los Angeles, the idea of finding what one seeks and leaving behind what one no longer desires to be is as much the appeal of religion as it is the promise of any American city.

The *noir* fiction of Raymond Chandler is held responsible for so much of the mythologizing of Los Angeles that it is often difficult to get away from his voice when analyzing the city's literature. Going back as far as Helen Hunt Jackson, writing in the late nineteenth century and most well-known for her 1884 California mission novel *Ramona*, the literary imagery of Los Angeles has been embroiled with religion. Even the name of the city has religious connotations. In Jackson's case, it was the Mexican Catholicism of the pueblo, but identification with religion was a significant aspect of Los Angeles's historical construction. Los Angeles novelist Carolyn See equates the frontier with a sense of spiritual estrangement: "Southern California bespeaks alienation. The West Coast is the end of the road for the American Dream. We're up against a blank wall out here, and we can't go any farther. So even if you get what you want, then what?" The 'what', as we can see in work after work of Los Angeles literature, is religion. The wide variety of alternative religions makes it that much easier for someone at the wall, which is not blank but inscribed with a list of dogmatic dictates and eternal promises, to choose the ideal creed.

#### IV.

What makes a religion alternative? Religious scholar Timothy Miller provides a comprehensive breakdown of the terminology used around new religious movements:

Classically, a “sect” was a splinter group, one that split off from a well-established parent tradition, often in the name of returning to a pristine purity from which the parent tradition, in its organizational evolution, was held to have departed. A “cult” (the word, related to “cultivation,” originally had to do with farming) was a religious movement not rooted in an existing mainstream religion; it might be a form of a world religion present in the United States mainly in ethnic communities (such as Hinduism or Buddhism), or it might be the creation of a recent, even living, prophet (“Religious Movements” ¶ 4).

The alternative religions discussed here will fall primarily into the latter category, but as Miller points out, once the anti-cult movement got under way in the 1960s, the word “cult” became a term of opprobrium. To avoid the derogatory implications, the designations “marginal religion,” “new religious movement,” and “alternative religion” have been used in its place. All of these terms refer to both sects and cults, which is why the subtitle of this work is “Los Angeles Literature and Alternative Religion” in order to encompass both a “sect” like Pentecostalism and a “cult” like The Mighty I AM movement. In choosing to use the term “alternative,” my reasoning was that “marginal religions” seemed somewhat limiting politically and

“new religious movements” was constraining by the nature of what defines “new” and when.

Pioneering American religion historian Sydney Ahlstrom’s definitions reinforce the meaning of a sect as deviation from tradition and a cult as extreme novelty: “...one may use the term sect to designate a restoration or intensification of certain emphases in an older or larger tradition. The term cult, on the contrary, refers to more radical departures, often virtually new religions with new doctrines and new grounds for authority, including new scriptures and even new messiahs” (1063). For my purposes here, the term “alternative religion” will represent several primary characteristics.

For the most part, I have focused on religions that a) have a limited membership in comparison to mainstream religions like Christianity, Judaism, and Islam; b) introduce a heterodox dogma of some sort that distinguishes it from religions that have preceded it; c) are formed under the auspices of one individual or small group that is responsible for spreading its influence; d) originate or assume a new form in the twentieth century; and e) find inspiration in Los Angeles. Some alternative religions got their start in the city, such as the Branch Davidians or the International Society of Krishna Consciousness. Some religions began elsewhere, but they either relocated entirely or were represented by an important sect, such as Theosophy or the Foursquare Gospel. Some religions developed fully formed identities in other locations, only to see their leaders retire to California, such as Pentecostalism’s Kathryn Kulhman or the Seventh-Day Adventists’ Ellen White.

For the purposes of this project, I am mostly limiting my discussion of religion in literary Los Angeles to a period of approximately 50 years: 1910-1960. The earliest text to be included, after necessary mention of Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona*, is Stewart Edward White's 1910 novel *The Rules of the Game*. For the most part, the texts and religions discussed thereafter were published or operating in the intervening years between *The Rules of the Game* and Gore Vidal's 1954 novel *Messiah*. One notable exception from 1987 is Carolyn See's novel *Golden Days*; this work, along with *Messiah*, will demonstrate the apocalyptic through-line that begins with *The Day of the Locust*. While the influx of alternative religion to Los Angeles starts in the nineteenth century, its manifestations continue into the twenty-first. I am choosing to restrict the texts studied to this more limited era because of the changing nature of religion as well as literature in Los Angeles at this time.

Before the mass migration to Los Angeles in the first few decades of the twentieth century, the region was still bonded strongly to its Catholic Mexican past, and the spiritual landscape only erupted into a bastion of heterodoxy with the arrival of millions of immigrants from across the U.S. and abroad. Through the successive decades and into the 1950s, Los Angeles saw the development of many alternative religions that generally promised a sense of belonging or community to any newcomer acutely experiencing a sense of isolation.

In the 1960s, however, the rise of counterculture ideology led to an emphasis on youth and, with the anti-cult movement and the 1969 murders by the Manson Family, an emphasis on danger. Stephen Stein observes that "[the] 1960s was a decade of social, political, and religious turmoil, a time when many Americans

celebrated the unconventional, the alternative, and the radical...[they] were inseparable from one another” (129). At the same time, many Americans united in an effort to publicize and squelch the alleged threat of new religious movements. While this project will focus on Los Angeles culture before the supposed ideological shift occurred, it should become apparent that spiritual experimentation and radical religion were around long before the 1960s.

## V.

So why was Los Angeles such fertile soil for alternative religion? Both the landscape and the citizenry have much to do with the proliferation of spiritual alternatives. In the mythos of the frontier, California was the end of the line. A helpful metaphor may be the pioneer hitting a wall – in this case, the Pacific Ocean – a full stop that represented the final destination where dreams may be realized and spiritual searching fulfilled. The force and flow of this cultural search, however, would not simply dissipate at the obstacle. Instead, this manifest destiny turned backward and inward; the exploration would now continue within the individual. In *Hollywood Utopia*, Justine Brown asks:

What happens at the farthest edge of the continent, when our civilization’s westward drift meets the Pacific, when space runs out? With its cinema, its many forms of mysticism, its psychedelia and computer realms, from Southern California to British Columbia the West Coast has long given rise to fantastical landscapes – no-place terrains of limitless possibility. Hollywood, sects and cults, drug culture, and now cyberspace: has the termination of new

frontiers at the far western edge of the continent produced a turn to inner space? Has the literal reading of utopia (a good place) been opened to the figurative (no place) (8)?

In answer to Brown's questions, I would argue that if her no place equates to inner space – for example, individual space where the sacred is turned inward – the development of countless new religious movements is evidence of this turn.

Robert Bellah describes how the individual spiritual quest supplanted communal religious ties in the twentieth century, and this can be seen most noticeably in Los Angeles. Los Angeles was populated practically overnight with migrants from all directions who spread out across the vast landscape of the metropolis. As like will find like, small communities of similarly affiliated citizens gathered in various locations, but never to the extent found in the locations from which they came. This dislocation and geographical novelty allowed and encouraged new identifications and spiritual associations. Those immigrants who left behind communities with strong religious ties naturally sought kinship in their new home, but the freedom and innovation associated with the California coast inspired risk-taking and new identity formations. At the same time, the anxiety of displacement, the hardship of the Depression, and the allure of well-crafted promises from a wide variety of sects drew lonely and ailing people to invest, both emotionally and financially, in new spiritual enterprises. The film industry also created a spectacle of unreality throughout the city that made the drama and pageantry of many alternative religions acceptably attractive.

The advent of the “talkie” film brought many writers to Los Angeles, who then went on to chronicle the lives of the new migrants in their novels and non-fiction.<sup>2</sup> The following chapters will discuss a number of texts that approach the subject of the acolyte in the city in various ways. However, I would argue that when it comes to the analysis of Los Angeles narratives, the religious tenets developed with such originality and generous proportions in the city deserve recognition for their contribution to the creation and exportation of Los Angeles culture. While we are familiar with the narrative function of literature, each alternative religion that was formed in or imported to Los Angeles had developed an often complex story to which adherents responded by the thousands. We can learn as much about the culture of the city from these narratives as we can from the novels and essays included here.

Evaluating religious writing as Los Angeles narrative also allows the inclusion of additional texts by women, such as the memoirs and sermons crafted by Aimee Semple McPherson and discussed in Chapter Three. Originally, I had planned to include a chapter in this project entitled “Where Are the Women Who Wrote Los Angeles?” Unfortunately, they are quite hard to find in the years 1910-1960. Women were indeed writing in the city, but the domestic novel reigned supreme, with the majority of the action taking place within walls of a home that could have been located in any U.S. town. In terms of readily available novels written by women, impressively catalogued in Anthony Slide’s critical guide to the Hollywood novel, the city of Los Angeles served primarily as a convenient backdrop to film industry drama

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<sup>2</sup> The dearth of poetry written during this time in Los Angeles is a subject for more exploration in another project. The work of Bertolt Brecht during his time in the city is an exception, including his poem “Contemplating Hell,” which contains the lines: “Contemplating Hell, as I once heard it/My brother Shelley found it to be a place/Much like the city of London. I/Who do not live in London, but in Los Angeles/Find, contemplating Hell, that it/ Must be even more like Los Angeles.”

or as a romanticized setting for historical fiction. Images of alternative religion and urban life at large were virtually nonexistent. It was not until the cultural upheaval of the 1960s that slowly shifting publishing practices began to recognize different forms and themes in the work of women writers in Los Angeles. It is then that we begin to find the work of more contemporary women writers of the city. These texts merit further attention in another project and include the work of Kate Braverman, Wanda Coleman, Joan Didion, Amy Gerstler, A.M. Homes, Cynthia Kadohata, Carol Muske, Carolyn See, Anna Deavere Smith, and Helena Maria Viramontes, just to name a few from a selection of different genres.

## VI.

The literary history of Los Angeles, while coming of age in the past few decades with increased scholarship and contemporary media attention, is still a subject rich for mining. This is not to say that there aren't obstacles to its study and the acceptance of Los Angeles as a center for "serious" writing. David Ulin's 2002 anthology *Writing Los Angeles* went a long way toward rectifying the myth that only screenplays, not literature, were written in the city. Ulin, however, sees Los Angeles as contributing to its own reputation problems:

L.A. has a big chip on its shoulder about other people taking it seriously. But if L.A. would just relax and take itself seriously and not worry so much about what other cities thought, it would be less of an issue. It's impossible for me to imagine that a city like San Francisco or New York or Chicago would have

these kinds of public debates. Is there a New York literature? It's a moot point (quoted in Appleford).

In many ways, Ulin is right: a majority of the scholars and writers living and working in Los Angeles throughout the time period of this project were not chronicling the urban developments around them. Considering the fact that Los Angeles boasts some of the most impressive library collections in the U.S., one would imagine that writers would have expressed more interest in the city.<sup>3</sup> Instead, one of the most helpful historical surveys of the city, *Los Angeles: A Guide to the City and Its Environs*, was compiled by employees of the Work Projects Administration in Southern California and published in New York in 1941. Even in this volume, however, the chip was in evidence: "The aim has been to present Los Angeles truthfully and objectively, neither glorifying it nor vilifying it. For many decades the city has suffered from journalistic superficiality; it has been lashed as a city of sin and cranks; it has also been strangled beneath a damp blanket of unrestrained eulogy" (v). The dramatic rhetoric of the journalistic suffering and the blanket strangling evoke the myth vs. anti-myth dichotomy under which Los Angeles sought to form a comprehensive identity.

Mike Davis is well-known for token chapters on L.A. literary history in his urban theory texts, *City of Quartz* and *Ecology of Fear*. In the former, he has a chapter dedicated to Los Angeles intellectuals titled "Sunshine or *Noir*?" and in the latter, he devotes a chapter to "The Literary Destruction of Los Angeles." However, David Fine has done some of the most meticulous work in gathering and defining Los

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Southern Californian library holdings, see *The World from Here: Treasures of the Great Libraries of Los Angeles* (Getty Trust Publications, 2002).

Angeles literature. He followed up his 1984 edited collection *Los Angeles in Fiction* with the 2000 monograph *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction*, where we see him also bristle with injustice at the state of Los Angeles literary scholarship:

Surprisingly, given the fact that Los Angeles has emerged as a major twentieth-century literary center, arguably *the* late twentieth-century American literary city, scant critical attention has been given to the extensive body of fiction produced in and about it. Franklin Walker's *A Literary History of Southern California*, the only full-length study, is now a half-century old and covers essentially the nineteenth century, barely getting into the twentieth. Walker leaves off with a few pages on the 1920s and 1930s – the very decades when Los Angeles fiction had its real beginnings (ix).

Unfortunately, Fine's work focuses on somewhat hackneyed ground, as seen in *Imagining Los Angeles* chapter titles such as "View from the Back Room: The Hard-Boiled Thirties" and "Down These Mean Streets: The Tough-Guy Detective Story." While I much admire Fine's scholarship, one of the aims of this project is to move away from *noir* fiction toward literary and cultural movements that reveal something new about the Southern California heritage. Leonard and Dale Pitt write that "[fiction] about Los Angeles per se can be divided into three groups: the detective novel, the Hollywood novel, and general works on a wide variety of themes having to do with Los Angeles" (147). While the next chapter will examine alternative religion in the Hollywood novel, I am much more interested in this fuzzy third category. While Fine does not explore the following idea, he does acknowledge the significant role of alternative religion in the literature of Los Angeles: "One would be hard-

pressed to find a Los Angeles novel written between the 1920s and the 1960s without the inclusion of a bizarre cult, spiritualist, prophet, or medical quack....their centrality to the city's fiction cannot be denied" (*Imagining Los Angeles* 14).

## VII.

California is a relative newcomer to the study of religion in America. Either considered as an unremarkable facet of the general U.S. spiritual tradition or as a marginal fringe that was too odd and unconventional to contribute analysis on the rest of the nation, California and Los Angeles have only recently begun to figure in religious scholarship. In his 2001 essay "The Emergence of California in American Religious Historiography," Eldon G. Ernst reports on the lack of religious study concerning the state and remarks that "the conventional narrative of American religious history might be enriched, embellished, even altered by the inclusion of California" (32). He notes that the historic inclusion of California usually focused on two time periods: the nineteenth-century mission system or the counterculture movements of the 1960s. During this latter time, however, historians began to recognize the importance of regional studies in contextualizing religious developments, especially when they took the form of "intense religiosity within an ethos of secularity" (35). However, the first significant higher educational institution dedicated to the topic was not established until 1977, when The Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley inaugurated its Program for the Study of New Religious Movements in America (Needleman ix).

The shift toward the idea of regionalism and alternative religion with its wealth of perspective informs *Urban Fervor* significantly. In fact, Philip Jenkins, author of *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History*, in a 2003 book proposal for a new volume focused on Philadelphia, declared that “no case-study presently exists of alternative religions in a particular region, state or city. There is presently no cross-sectional approach of the whole range of such movements in a particular era” (“Occult City” ¶ 15). Religion in general hasn’t been included to the extent it should be in studies of California: “How religion powerfully affected the city, and the city, in turn, profoundly influenced the religious life of its residents remains to be integrated into histories of this metropolis and of other cities in the Far West” (Engh 490). Opening this discussion further and also examining how alternative religion has contributed to the formation of American society is crucial in seeing not only fragmentation but growth. Stephen Stein points out that alternative religions “provide their members coherent ways to find meaning in life, organize relationships, structure ethical and ritual systems, and affirm the existence of transcendent realities,” while also keeping the “constitutional system honest” through free exercise (145). These relationships, systems, and realities merit further study.

### **VIII.**

Throughout studies of alternative religion, including those that consider Los Angeles, the inclusion of minority populations is minimal. Some of this absence, no doubt, is due to a deficiency of multicultural scholarship, but another contributing factor could be a lack of documentation and historical records available to the

academy. Michael Engh's 1997 essay "A Multiplicity and Diversity of Faiths': Religion's Impact on Los Angeles and the Urban West, 1890-1940" provides an impressively thorough overview of scholarship in this area. Engh echoes the idea that "[little] is known, of the same era in Los Angeles [1890-1940], about the activities of African Americans and their impact on churches and racial relations" (465). Sydney Ahlstrom, in his important volume *A Religious History of the American People*, remarks on the presence of cults in black communities: "Whether or not 'Jack-leg preachers,' sensational 'healers,' purveyors of spiritualistic frauds, and other types of religious showmen have found more avid constituencies among blacks or whites would be hard to say" (1061). He cites evidence that according to students of black religion, cults had an appeal for three reasons: their appeal to the poor and culturally disenfranchised, the need of migrants for community, and the existence of a realm in which charismatic leaders could exercise organizational and entrepreneurial skills (1065). Ahlstrom also designates the rise of black nationalism and the Black Muslims in the 1960s as a form of "protest cult," leading to the 1965 Watts riot among other events that year.

There are other reasons, however, why a study of alternative religion may not include as much minority involvement. As Leonard and Dale Pitt point out in *Los Angeles: A to Z*, the pursuit of spiritual alternatives was often a function of leisure. In the economically disenfranchised Mexican and black communities of Los Angeles, belief systems like Theosophy that emphasized a universal equality not evident in their lives would not have held much appeal. Middle-class white immigrants, who had left behind roots in the Midwest, were seeking a sense of artificial community in

many alternative religions that they could not find otherwise in Los Angeles. In a city whose policies of segregation are troubling to this day, racial geography often provided a sense of community of its own to non-white citizens. More mainstream religions, like Catholicism and the Baptist Church, also had strong footholds in these communities from the start. Michael Engh claims that there was not much spiritual experimentation on the part of minorities because mainstream religion was often used as “a vehicle of assimilation and cultural identity,” especially among Hispanic immigrants, although they were attracted to smaller evangelical churches when branching off from Catholicism (470). Asian immigrants, however, did reconstruct the religions they exported from home countries as a way to assist in adaptation to their new lives in America.

## **IX.**

Following this introduction, Chapter Two will take a larger view of the city’s literature in the first half of the twentieth century, with central focus on the genre of the “Hollywood novel” and the role of the cult in this genre’s establishment. This chapter will further examine the use of the acolyte in other popular Los Angeles novels written during this era of migration and exile. While religion plays a part in the history of Los Angeles from the city’s inception, its role becomes more complex, fragmentary, and pervasive in the twentieth century as the city undergoes rapid development. Early outside observers were fascinated and repulsed by the glut of spiritual offerings, and writers living in Los Angeles began to employ religious metaphors to portray a variety of urban institutions, from boosterism (as seen in

Stewart Edward White's 1910 novel *The Rules of the Game*, Upton Sinclair's 1917 book-length essay *The Profits of Religion: An Essay in Economic Interpretation*, and Mark Lee Luther's 1923 novel *The Boosters*) to the film industry (as seen in Budd Schulberg's 1943 novel *What Makes Sammy Run?*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1941 novel *The Last Tycoon*, and Carl Van Vechten's 1928 novel *Spider-Boy, a Scenario for a Moving Picture*). In addition to American authors of the Hollywood novel, I will examine the use of unorthodox spirituality in the Hollywood novels of English literary exiles. Texts such as Aldous Huxley's two Hollywood novels – *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* and *Ape and Essence* – and Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One, an Anglo-American Tragedy*, as well as Christopher Isherwood's *My Guru and His Disciples*, employ images of the cult and the acolyte to engage in a distinct critique of American society. From embracing to repudiating faith and religious identity in this urban context, these writers contributed in various ways to the construction of Los Angeles culture.

The third chapter will consider the “truth” behind the various fictions of the cult leader and analyze the rise to power of Aimee Semple McPherson, a female evangelist who ran one of the most vital religious sects in the Los Angeles area. This section will look into the attraction to alternative religion alongside the lure of feminine charisma and its relation to gender politics. In addition to the historical background of McPherson's rise to power, we will examine the use of McPherson's persona in a variety of texts written around the time of the alleged kidnapping scandal that almost ruined her career. In novels such as Don Ryan's *Angel's Flight* (1927), Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927), Myron Brinig's *The Flutter of an Eyelid* (1933), and

Eric Knight's *You Play the Black and the Red Turns Up* (1935), Sister Aimee appears in various guises that highlight the attraction to and/or detraction from her brand of alternative religion, and the role such spiritual heterodoxy played in Los Angeles literature of the 1920s and 1930s.

Chapter Four will function as a historical survey of alternative religion in Los Angeles that situates the spiritual life of the city in a larger context of the history of American religion. In looking at such varied movements as spiritualism and Scientology, Theosophy and the Church of the Nazarene, The Vedanta Society and Pentecostalism, the Self-Realization Fellowship and the Seventh-Day Adventists, and Kabbalah and The Jesus People, we can see that the spiritual landscape of Los Angeles was both a forerunner and a response to religious changes occurring across the nation. As Charles A. Fracchia observed, "California is the laboratory – the 'great crucible,' so to speak, where new religious forms are being forged" (quoted in Ernst 32). The forms being forged in this crucible, to mix metaphors, were not being created in a vacuum. Incorporating the cultural and religious history of Los Angeles more extensively into American studies curricula would benefit the scholarship of both areas.

I will conclude with a discussion of the 1939 classic Los Angeles novel, Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, which serves as an entrance to the urban ethos that spawned L.A.'s proliferation of alternative religions. This chapter will explore the demographic changes that sculpted mid-century Los Angeles and posit theories as to why the development of heterodoxies was both attractive and necessary in forming civic identity during this era. Nathanael West is an effective starting point

for an examination of the role of alternative religion in the literature of Los Angeles, anchoring the function of spiritualism in the city's mythology through the prototypical Hollywood novel. *The Day of the Locust* also sets a precedent of widespread religious and apocalyptic imagery throughout the canon of Los Angeles literature. I will examine two other examples of the genre that imagine an apocalyptic ending to Los Angeles and the world: via a death cult in Gore Vidal's 1954 novel *Messiah* and via nuclear holocaust in Carolyn See's 1987 novel *Golden Days*.

## X.

In a January 7, 2005 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled "One University, Under God?", literary critic Stanley Fish recounts a story of being interviewed following the death of Jacques Derrida: "I was called by a reporter who wanted know what would succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy. I answered like a shot: religion." In many ways, Los Angeles provides all three of these "centers of intellectual energy," none of which has been explored fully. Postmodern theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, Edward Soja, and Michael Dear, have spent many pages analyzing the complex simulacrum that is Los Angeles, but there is still much work to be done. As the model of urban multiculturalism for the twenty-first century, there is yet a great deal to be learned from the intersection of race and class in this ever-expanding metropolis. If Fish is correct, however, and religion will supplant these pursuits, I hope to show that Los Angeles is the place to begin.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Be Sure to Call Me Something: Alternative Religion and the Hollywood Novel*

Religion has played a role in the consciousness of Los Angeles since its early history. When El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora La Reina de Los Angeles de Porciúncula was first “discovered” by Spanish settlers (displacing the “pagan” Native American inhabitants), the voyage was led by a military officer and a priest, as was the custom for conquistador expeditions. In Harry Carr’s cultural history published in 1935, *Los Angeles: City of Dreams*, he writes,

It became obvious that if the King of Spain intended to hold California, he would have to put up stakes on his claims. It was not possible to smear a map with the Spanish colors and tell the other royal boys and girls: ‘This place belongs to me; keep out.’...The land expedition had two leaders. Father Junípero Serra was the spiritual head; his mission was to carry the Cross to the pagan Indians and erect churches to the glory of God and the gentle San Francisco – head of his priestly order (18).

The elaborate naming of the pueblo marked its inception on August 1, 1769, the Jubilee of Our Lady of Angels of Porciúncula, a high holy day in the Catholic calendar. The presence of priests in the 23 missions, founded a day’s walk apart throughout the area that is now Los Angeles, insured that its annals were well-documented. Carr refers to Father Juan Crespi’s diaries as “the most delightful chapter in the long literary history of the West” (22). The Catholicism of the Spanish settlers, and especially the proprietary erudition of its priests, guaranteed that religion

would be an important element in early accounts of Los Angeles. As we shall see, these pious portraits and all kinds of associations with the subsequent Mexican settlement became integral to the boosterism of the city upon its incorporation a hundred years later. Subsequently, unabashed faith extended beyond boosterism, and the religious proliferation within Los Angeles rapidly joined the sprawl of its landscape. The city that began with the displacement of Native American spiritual traditions by the Catholicism of the early Californios eventually became a breeding ground for explorations of the sacred.

### **L.A. Frontiers: You Get What You Want, Then What?**

Once southern California became a destination for Americans moving west in the nineteenth century, the conception and reality of the frontier was also instrumental in encouraging religious fervor in Los Angeles. Many prospectors and other settlers left behind family and roots to strike out to the golden land. Their lives became quests, and as writer Carolyn See points out in reference to the frontier's termination at the Pacific: "You get what you want, then what?" (quoted in Ulin, *Writing Los Angeles*, xvii). ~~The~~if you are one of millions of immigrants to California, you look to travel inside to some kind of spiritual frontier, and religion is there to provide a path.

Many immigrants from both within and without the U.S. left behind religious ritual as well as a sense of community, and any yearning for spiritual practice would need to be filled upon their arrival. This would include the participants in northern migrations from Mexico and eastern migrations from Japan and China. Edwin S.

Gaustad and Leigh E. Schmidt describe this phenomenon, from the Civil War through World War I, in their 2002 study, *The Religious History of America*:

In the tumult of transplanting, religion often provided both personal security and ethnic cohesion. In a new land and generally faced with a new language, far removed from ancestral homes and former national identities, uncertain immigrants turned hungrily toward synagogue, church, temple, and shrine for the comfort of the familiar. When so much had been so abruptly interrupted, religion stood ready to offer the assurance of some continuity (209).

However, not all new residents of Los Angeles were looking for the comfort of the familiar. Many were looking to erase the past and reinvent themselves in a less restrictive environment than the one they had left. What many seekers found in the variety of religions offered in L.A. was a choice of prescribed recipes for transformation. For the immigrant at the end of the frontier, reinvention was the one remaining direction of limitless possibility.

As discussed in the introduction, the immigrants who fell into this latter category and sought comfort in alternative religion were primarily white Midwesterners who migrated in the first few decades of the twentieth century. This time period was the culmination of Los Angeles boosterism and its push to become the new Aryan capital of the U.S. through the reoccurring power of the quest, this time in the form of real-estate speculation. Booster pamphlets distributed throughout the country and local journalism advertised L.A. as the climax of Anglo-Saxon civilization: “[F]ortune-telling about Los Angeles commonly equated the promise of the twentieth century with Anglo-Saxon ascendancy and white ethnocentrism”

(Deverell 4). In *City of Quartz*, urban critic-historian Mike Davis writes, “Unlike other American cities that maximized their comparative advantages as crossroads, capitals, seaports, or manufacturing centers, Los Angeles was first and above all the creature of real-estate capitalism: the culminating speculation, in fact, of the generations of boosters and promoters who had subdivided and sold the West from the Cumberland Gap to the Pacific” (25). Much of this speculation was based on the draw of Los Angeles as a new center for whiteness, while at the same time, boosters appropriated the Mexican past as a marketing tool of picturesque nostalgia and exoticism. This conflagration of perspectives can be seen in a statement from Oliver Carlson’s *A Mirror for Californians*, published in 1941: “Though Spanish in name, and Spanish in the name of hundreds of its streets, Los Angeles is an American city – perhaps the most American of all our great cities” (quoted in Reid xxxii). “American” here is to be read as “Anglo.” Harry Carr also plays into the rhetoric of the new great white hope of a homeland: “Los Angeles is an epic – one of the greatest and most significant migrations in the long saga of the Aryan race” (5). Emphasis was placed on “the power of sunshine to reinvigorate the racial energies of the Anglo-Saxons” (Davis, *City of Quartz*, 27). Yet while whiteness was part of the promotion of the city, the other slant was the use of a Mexican past to make L.A. seem more the product of a rich history, albeit a borrowed and, at times, fabricated history.

The 1884 publication of *Ramona*, Helen Hunt Jackson’s propaganda novel of L.A.’s mission past and the struggle of Native Americans, is credited by many California historians as the beginning of “this process of symbolic appropriation of Hispanic culture” as “American California began to search about for a usable past”

(Starr, *Material Dreams*, 252). In many ways, this appropriation also initiated the city's process of what historian Kenneth Starr calls "a myth in search of a reality." As Mike Davis points out, "The mission literature depicted the history of race relations as a pastoral ritual of obedience and paternalism...Any intimation of the brutality inherent in the forced labor system of the missions and haciendas, not to speak of the racial terrorism and lynchings that made early Anglo-ruled Los Angeles the most violent town in the West during the 1860s and 1870s, was suppressed" (26). *Ramona* went into almost constant re-issue and remains in print to this day, with a new edition released as recently as 2002. Historian and activist Carey McWilliams believed that "with the publication of *Ramona*, the Spanish background began to be rediscovered, with the same false emphasis and from the same crass motives that had characterized the rediscovery of the Indian. Both rediscoveries...occurred between 1883 and 1888, at precisely the period when the great real-estate promotion of Southern California was being organized" (9). By the early twentieth century, when the population had soared from 50,000 in 1890 to 577,000 in 1920, the myths of the Catholic mission past had been fully woven into the city's self-perception, right alongside such a variety of alternative religions that local historian Christopher Rand observed in 1967 that "there are probably more religions in Los Angeles than in the whole previous history of mankind." However, Carey McWilliams notes that as "a curious postscript to the growth of this amazing legend [referring to 'the Helen Hunt Jackson version of the Indians, the Spanish dons, and the Franciscans'], it should be pointed out that the Catholic Church played virtually no role whatever in the *Ramona*-Mission revival in

Southern California, which, from its inception, was a strictly Protestant promotion” (11).<sup>4</sup>

The role of religion at this time is fairly complex. On one hand, the bounty of religious options was a clear detriment to marketing ploys to conservative Midwestern Protestants, who may have been looking for the Aryan paradise advertised to them in booster pamphlets, where religion was in service to conformity rather than self-exploration. On the other hand, these same newcomers, whom Louis Adamic referred to as the “Folks” in his scathing descriptions of Los Angeles in *Laughing in the Jungle*, were ripe for the healing they often sought in venturing west:

Then there are the Folks – oh, the *dear* Folks! They are the retired farmers, grocers, Ford agents, hardware merchants, and shoe merchants from the Middle West and other parts of these United States, thousands and tens of thousands of them. They are coming in by trains and automobiles. They have money. They made it during the war. Not that they are not entitled to it. Most of them worked harder than any one should work through their best years.... No doubt they swindled a little, but they always prayed a little, too, or maybe a great deal....They brought with them their preachers, evangelists, and Sunday-school superintendents. They are half-educated, materially prosperous but spiritually and mentally starving. They are retired; they have nothing to do all day; they are a bit exhilarated by climate – and so they follow any fake who possesses personality and looks in any way strange and impressive and can say words which they don’t understand in a thrilling voice (218-19).

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<sup>4</sup> William Deverell’s 2004 publication *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* is a contemporary exploration of the complicated relationship between the city of Los Angeles and its Mexican past.

The Folks described so ungenerously by Adamic are affiliated with the proliferation of alternative religion in three very different texts from booster-era Los Angeles: Stewart Edward White's 1910 novel *The Rules of the Game*, Upton Sinclair's 1917 book-length essay *The Profits of Religion: An Essay in Economic Interpretation*, and Mark Lee Luther's 1923 novel *The Boosters*.

By 1910, when *The Rules of the Game* was published, the blight of the cult was already upon the booster scheme. Detractors were already ridiculing what Carey McWilliams captured in his oft-repeated description of early L.A. as "a circus without a tent." Yet, the Folks, who made up the majority of those buying into the city, were wild about California's spiritual promise, despite the financial cost. It is understandable that the boosters and the "quack" class might clash, because the money that went to various spiritual guides and faith healers was money not invested in real estate. White's narrator depicts the freedom with which alternative religions operated in L.A.: "Bob was struck by the numbers of clairvoyants, palm readers, Hindu frauds, crazy cults, fake healers, Chinese doctors, and the like thus lavishly advertised. The class that elsewhere is pressed by necessity to the inexpensive dinginess of back streets, here blossomed forth in truly tropical luxuriance" (137). The religious opportunities distress newcomer Bob because of their fecundity, inspiring him to evoke the exotic tropical climate of the land, so different from the Midwestern origins of the Folks. We see the voracious fertility of the land in Mark Lee Luther's novel *The Boosters*:

Night and morning and nearly every hour between Los Angeles plied the hose. The thirst of his charges amazed George. The grass lifted its myriad

mouths, the date palms demanded their share, the acacias theirs; the bougainvillea, though he scorned it, could no more be denied than the poinsettia whose flaming scarlet would quarrel with it by and by; while besides these toppers, there ran from curb to alley a hedge of hard-drinking geraniums (44).

The chaos and spiritual thirst of the frontier is highlighted by the parade of heterodoxy. In *The Rules of the Game*, White implies that this religious advertisement is as much about the promotion of the individual as it is about his powers or his promise. A dentist assumes the role of miracle-maker in order to sell his product, Oxodyne, an anesthetic: “You can call me quack, you may call me fakir, you may call me charlatan – but be sure to call me SOMETHING!” (140). The dentist, however, does not compare to Sunny Larue, “inventor of the Unlimited Life,” a “mulatto” who charges \$50 a head for the privilege of three or four prunes for breakfast and then “going forth to the high places...[to] hold steadfast the thought of Love” (142-3). The earliest texts to deal with the Booster ideal are probably most revealing of how the multiculturalism of these varied religions and practices was a significant threat to the Aryan mission. The inclusion of Chinese doctors in “the class” described by White is an example of the rampant anti-Chinese sentiment resulting from labor and commerce disputes beginning in the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The mixed race cult leader is atypical of the leaders of most religions that appealed to the Folks, but here his race is used to underscore his corruption.

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<sup>5</sup> The Los Angeles City Council was constantly passing legislation to limit the livelihood of Chinese immigrants. In the 1870s alone, they levied Chinese vegetable vendors with a \$5 license tax, forbade the acceptance of bids for irrigation projects that used Chinese laborers, and voted (98% to 2%) to put an end to all Chinese immigration. The Chinese were excluded from all city contracts in the 1880s, and then the U.S. Congress followed suit and passed The Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.

In his treatise *The Profits of Religion: An Essay in Economic Interpretation*, Upton Sinclair does not fall into any race-baiting, but he does find himself fascinated and repelled by the copious religions he sees around him that are able to remain economically viable. He finds this a particularly vigorous venture in California:

Nature has given us a virgin continent, a clean slate upon which to write what we will. And what are we writing? What is our intellectual life? I came to the far West, which I had been taught by novelists and poets to think of as a place of freedom. I came, because I like freedom; I am staying because I like the climate. I find that what freedom means in the West is the ability of ignorant and fanatical persons to start some new, fantastical quirk of scriptural interpretation, to build a new cult around it, and earn a living out of it (126).

Sinclair's general proposition is that religion has become a sham, with thousands of incompatible doctrines and beliefs rising up in contest with one another, all based in fear in the service of fundraising. In the era of speculation that drove Los Angeles boosterism, alternative religions were surely at an advantage with fear on their side. The use of spectacle to convey this fear made the subject of religion an attractive one for writers settling in Los Angeles. Sinclair describes a meeting of one sect, "The Holy Rollers":

The "Holy Rollers," who call themselves the "Apostolic Church," have a meeting place here in Pasadena, and any Sunday evening at nine o'clock you may see the Spirit of the Lord taking possession of the worshippers, causing moans and shrieks and convulsions; you may see a woman holding her hands aloft for seventeen minutes by the watch, making chattering sounds like an

ape. This is called “talking in tongues” and is a sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit. If you come back at eleven in the evening, you will find the entire congregation, men and women, prostrate on the floor, or hanging over the benches; and maybe a child moaning in terror, having a devil cast out (128).

Sinclair’s essay is a fairly thorough dissection of a vast array of religions falling under his rubric of phobia and profit. He later uses some of these ideas to build the characters of Eli Watkins and Tom Pooper in his 1926 novel *Oil!*, of which we will see more in Chapter Three. Sinclair is concerned with the dilution of true faith through the hodgepodge of ideologies employed by any one sect. In *The Profits of Religion*, he provides a portrait of “a seer by the name of Dr. Otoman Prince of Adusht Ha'nish, prophet of the Sun God, Prince of Peace, Manthra Magi of Temple El Katman, Kalantar of Zoroastrian Breathing and Envoy of Mazdaznan living, Viceroy-Elect and International Head of Master-Thot” who was previously a Chicago grocer’s assistant named Otto Hanisch. According to Sinclair, Ha’nish wound up in Los Angeles and was eventually charged with improper conduct with young boys in a hotel. He writes,

I have dipped into Ha'nish's revelations, which are a farrago of every kind of ancient mysticism--paper and binding from the Bible, illustrations from the Egyptian, names from the Zoroastrian, health rules from the Hindoos, laws from the Confucians—price ten dollars per volume. Would you like to discover your seventeen senses, to develop them according to the GaLlama principle, and to share the “expansion of the magnetic circles”? Here is the way to do it (133).

This extensive cataloguing of edicts and dogmas is a common trait in the descriptions of alternative religions found in Los Angeles texts. The inventory seems designed both to impress the reader with the absurdity of what the writer has observed, and to call attention to the sheer abundance of belief systems found in the city.

The narrator of *The Boosters* is also driven to itemize the interests of the “walking encyclopedias of medical knowledge” George Hammond finds in Westlake Park during his excursions: “Allopathy, homeopathy, osteopathy, chiropractic, faith healing and Christian science, vegetarianism and unfired food, the bacillus bulgaricus and the internal bath had each its disciples and propagandists” (48). However, these “earnest souls” are not half as fervent as the true believers of this novel: the Boosters themselves. Luther may not have intended to depict the City of Los Angeles advocates as disciples of an alternative religion, but they have too much in common with the acolytes around them to be ignored. *The Boosters* even includes a climactic outdoor revival in worship of their God, Los Angeles.

The city is repeatedly referred to as “God’s country” throughout the novel, as early as page three, before the Hammonds have even arrived in Los Angeles. The citizens of “God’s country” are described as “boosters every minute they’re awake,” subscribing endlessly to the rigid mantra: “Don’t Knock – Boost” (9, 35). George Hammond’s brother-in-law, Spencer Ward, is the exemplary apostle. He ominously predicts George will “fall in line yet...The boosting spirit is in the air you breathe. It’s infectious, it’s dynamic, it’s what put Los Angeles on the map” (35). Of course, the occasional religious fanatic appears, such as the man claiming to be John the Baptist, but for the most part, Boosterism is the savior of choice. “California will put meat on

your bones,' said the contractor. 'She makes the lean fat, the fat lean and performs more miracles than all the moth-eaten shrines in Europe lumped together'"(59). While George is repeatedly instructed to let the spirit move him, he is slow to accept Southern California as his salvation, but by the end of the novel, he is well on his way to being a booster. As he and his wife travel around in the automobile that California commerce has afforded him, they come across a "state society picnic" that is held under the same outdoor conditions as many of the religious revivals described in other texts. Among "these celebrants [who] had journeyed to the Promised Land," George "wondered whether, after all, California by some chemistry of her own was not triumphantly blending the races into a single type" (345-6). That type, of course, is the fully converted Los Angeles Booster. Heterodoxy takes many forms in the spiritual landscape of southern California.

### **The Silver Screen as Instrument of Human Redemption**

The term "Hollywood novel" generally refers to novels written in Hollywood, and about Hollywood, in the first half of the twentieth century. Eventually, the Hollywood novel expanded its subject matter beyond the film industry, and the genre came to be termed the Los Angeles novel. However, Los Angeles found its place on the literary map through portraits by East Coast writers of their new lives, writing for motion pictures. In 1927, *The Jazz Singer* debuted, the first "talkie" film ever produced by a major Hollywood studio.<sup>6</sup> Few suspected the revolution this would cause in Los Angeles literature, not to mention the film industry itself. In the 1930

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<sup>6</sup> Cleverly, the first words spoken in a film were "Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain't heard nothin' yet!"

novel *Queer People*, Carroll and Garrett Graham describe what they refer to as the “talkie panic”:

[The] blight of talking pictures descended upon Hollywood just at this period, and turned the town into more of a maniac colony than ever...An experiment with the new invention meant large investments for equipment, and even larger investments to wire theaters with transmitting devices. It meant, moreover, a period of unsettlement, experimentation, and woe....Hollywood and Culver City are still trembling from the ensuing earthquakes. Voice culture schools sprang up, as thick as bootleggers. Dubious technical “experts” arrived from nowhere, and were engaged by studios at fat salaries. Broken down playwrights and dialogue writers leaped from every westbound passenger and freight train....Scenario writers whose culture and literary ability had handicapped them for years, came into their own....Fortunes were dissipated. Fortunes were made. The business was in a chaos, the town in a panic. One could no more control the future than one could control the winds that whistle through Cahuenga Pass (193-5).

Once writers, rather than photoplaywrights, were needed to compose convincing dialogue to be spoken by stars and heard by millions, many well-known authors flocked to Hollywood for the promise of easy money. In the Coen Brothers’ 1991 film *Barton Fink*, they provide a classic portrayal of the East Coast or European writer drawn almost unwillingly to the land of the silver screen. *Barton Fink* opens in New York City in 1941, where we see Barton unveiling his latest play, “Bare Ruined Choir: Triumph of the Common Man,” to rave reviews. He then immediately

receives an offer to move to Los Angeles to write a screenplay. Before Barton leaves New York, his agent assures him that the “common man” will still be there upon his return: “They may even have one or two of ‘em right in Hollywood.”

There were, in fact, verging on 1.25 million common men and women by 1930, and not a few talented writers (U.S. Census Bureau).<sup>7</sup> Many of these writers, constrained artistically by the screenplay formula, sought expression outside of studio servitude and reflected on the new home they had adopted. Thus was born the Hollywood novel. Most of the novels that originated the genre were tales that chronicled and often mocked life inside the studio system. These books have been described as employing “much ironic contrast between appearance and reality and between the claims of art and those of profit” (Harmon, 251). In addition to *The Day of the Locust* and *Queer People*, the most frequently cited founders of the genre include Budd Schulberg’s *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1943) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Last Tycoon* (1941). Writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten also contributed a lesser-known work to this genre: *Spider-Boy, a Scenario for a Moving Picture* (1928).

The Hollywood novel grew up beside the *noir* genre, which is distinguished from the former by its setting outside of the studios and its flagrant embrace of the “anti-myth” of Los Angeles. In *Los Angeles in Fiction*, David Fine writes,

...rather than probing into sociological causes for the collapse of the West Coast dream, [the *noir* writers] show us, instead, concrete instances of it, metaphors for disaster and dissolution drawn from a manmade and natural landscape of flimsy makeshift architecture, highways that go nowhere,

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A for a list of writers who came to California during the period 1920-1950.

claustrophobic dance halls, glaring sunlight, destructive winds, and the ever-present ocean. Where the continent comes to an abrupt end against the cliffs bordering the Pacific, the road, and with it the dream, comes to an end as well (44).

Because dreams are considered dead in *noir* and the focus on material reality is more prominent, there is little room for the occurrence, much less exploration, of the kind of religious aspiration or symbolism we find in other L.A. fiction. Mike Davis explains that “1940s *noir* was more typically concerned with gangster underclasses and official corruption than with the pathology of the middle class” (*City of Quartz* 41). However, David L. Ulin sees the *noir* genre and the Hollywood novel as “cousins” united in their “fatalistic cynicism” (xviii). He also credits *Queer People* as pioneering the Hollywood novel genre. In the beginning of this novel, the Graham brothers provide a twist on the imagination disclaimer usually found in the front matter of a novel.

The authors desire to assure the readers that all the characters (except for the liberties jocosely taken with prominent personages who are named) and events in this book are entirely imaginary. If resemblances to well-known figures in Hollywood life occur in certain passages, it is only because America’s fifth greatest industry has become so completely standardized that everybody resembles everybody else.

On the one hand, this proviso is a comically convenient way to bash the conformity of Hollywood and the studio system, but perhaps unintentionally, it is a comment on the genre of the Hollywood novel itself. Just as the Victorian novel often features

governesses and repressed desire, and the contemporary police drama often features mismatched buddies and charismatic crime lords, so does the genre of the Hollywood novel have its formula. Of course, a Hollywood novel would not be complete without the stars and starlets required to enact its dramas, either serving in principal roles or acting as a foil to characters of substance. Everyone must drink a lot and engage in one or more inebriated scenes, this as much a comment on Prohibition in the early years of the genre as its setting. People will describe hangovers in exaggerated noir language, such as “I have a taste in my mouth like a bag on a vacuum cleaner” or “the vague notion came to him that a complete printing press had been installed inside his skull while he slept” (Grahams 23, 25). There must be characters transplanted from the Midwest who serve as fresh eyes on the locale. People will make sarcastic remarks about the sunshine. Everyone will have an impressive car, unless forced to walk everywhere like Arturo Bandini in John Fante’s novels or Ambrose Deacon in *Spider-Boy*, in which case such pedestrian ways will inevitably lead to trouble. There is often a scene taking place on Hollywood Boulevard, either within or outside of an elaborate movie theater. Male characters will often take refuge at some point in a local brothel, and female characters will often find employment there. Studio executives will welcome people to their homes in architecturally schizophrenic neighborhoods, and the guests will be greeted by an Asian servant. Of course, the studio executive or those working close with him will be Jewish, and the novels themselves, sometimes even if written by Jewish authors, will often reflect the anti-Semitism prevalent in Hollywood at the time.

These novels have one more element in common: an underlying sense that there is some kind of spiritual enchantment occurring as films are distributed nationwide, and then worldwide.<sup>8</sup> Sometimes the portrayal of this power takes the form of a satirical deification of the studio head; sometimes it takes the form of a critique of the intelligence of the average moviegoer; and sometimes it takes the form of a true conviction in the power of Hollywood production. Eccentric young poet and evangelist Vachel Lindsay came to Los Angeles in 1912, where he witnessed the early days of the burgeoning film industry and found an outlet for his spiritual belief that mankind could be redeemed through art. David Ulin refers to him as “the proponent of a visionary populism of near-messianic proportions” (*Writing Los Angeles* 47). Lindsay is thought to have pioneered film criticism with the 1915 publication of *The Art of the Moving Picture*, a work that explores changing human perceptions and envisions movies as a new language: “And the great weapon of the art museums of all the land should be the hieroglyphic of the future, the truly artistic photoplay” (17). Lindsay argues that the photoplay of Hollywood is about to rise to the same prominence as the literature of Boston, yet with more vitality because, in California, the artistic and the spiritual traditions are developing in tandem. “Edison is the new Gutenberg. He has invented the new printing. The state that realizes this may lead the soul of America, day after tomorrow” (149).<sup>9</sup> Aside from some strict admonishments that photoplaywrights and producers need to follow a higher path

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<sup>8</sup> The French originally referred to moving pictures as *magie blanche* or “white magic” (Brown, 30).

<sup>9</sup> Edison may have been the new Gutenberg, but with the tactics of a mob boss. Justine Brown writes, “Edison insisted that his invention was being pirated by the small film companies in New York and New Jersey. So started what is known as the Patents War. In addition to pelting the other companies with lawsuits, Edison hired gangsters to go round and smash their cameras to bits during production. Rooftop shooting was frequently interrupted by the arrival of thugs who busted up the cameras and scared the actors. Often the gangsters torched the studios as well” (32).

than they might be apt to choose, Lindsay saw much promise in delivering religion “through the eye” (177):

Scenario writers, producers, photoplay actors, endowers of exquisite films, sects using special motion pictures for a predetermined end, all you who are taking the work as a sacred trust, I bid you God-speed. Let us resolve that whatever America’s tomorrow may be, she shall have a day that is beautiful and not crass, spiritual, not material. Let us resolve that she shall dream dreams deeper than the sea and higher than the clouds of heaven, that she shall come forth crowned and transfigured with her statesman and wizards and saints and sages about her, with magic behind her and miracle before her (186).<sup>10</sup>

In Lindsay’s vision, the film industry could serve as the bridge between science and spirit, between mysticism and manifest destiny.

Lindsay was not alone in seeing film as a medium to unite the world on a heretofore unseen higher plane. D.W. Griffith, perhaps the first famous director most well-known for the film *The Birth of a Nation*, was so impressed by Lindsay’s insights that he invited the poet to be a special guest at the premiere of his film *Intolerance*. The director himself believed that film was the Universal Language that could “restore mankind to its prelapsarian state.” In *Hollywood Utopia*, critic Justine Brown explains Griffith’s theories:

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<sup>10</sup> Lindsay also saw the film industry as the perfect temperance tool: “The entrance of the motion picture house into the arena is indeed striking, the first enemy of King Alcohol with real power where that king has deepest hold. If every one of those saloon doors is nailed up by the Chautauqua orators, the photoplay archway will remain open. The people will have a shelter where they can readjust themselves, that offers a substitute for many of the lines of pleasure in the groggery. And a whole evening costs but a dime apiece” (143).

He argued that moving pictures were potentially an instrument of human redemption, and many of his followers – including the similarly quixotic Russian director Sergei Eisenstein – agreed. Words limited and distorted communication, whereas moving Pictures were truly universal. Words were subjective and therefore ambiguous; images were objective. And unlike Esperanto, which never successfully escaped the ivory tower, movies had mass appeal (80).

Brown describes how other Hollywood icons jumped on the bandwagon of the Universal Language. Lillian Gish became the most outspoken proponent of the movement, claiming D.W. Griffith taught “that we were taking the first tiny steps in a new medium that had been predicted in the Bible and called the Universal Language. That when it could be brought to its full power, it would bring about the millennium. Since it broke down the barriers that many languages create...properly used it could bring peace to the world.” Griffith himself was known to chastise insufficiently serious actors by yelling, “We’ve gone beyond Babel, beyond words. We’ve found a universal language – a power that can make men brothers and end war forever. Remember that!” (quoted in Brown 40-2). By the time novels were written about the studio system, the idealism of the moving pictures project had dwindled, but the deification of the studio head remains in various forms.

While the Graham Brothers’ novel *Queer People* includes many corrupt and lecherous studio executives, it accords a strange reverence to the character of Jacob Schmalz, president of Colossal Pictures. Aside from the play inherent in his name, Schmalz is depicted as some kind of benign aberration in Hollywood:

[Whitey] was to learn there never had been a kindlier nor a more generous figure in the film industry than Jacob Schmalz. In a business manned and operated by rapacious dollar bloodhounds, Schmalz amounted to almost a miracle....He filled his payroll with incompetent relatives, and even placed them in positions of importance, yet his studio prospered. He hired and fired General Managers so often that his organization was in a perpetual state of chaos, yet his studio prospered. He squandered tremendous sums on stories no other producer would have considered, yet his studio prospered. In an industry without a spark of loyalty, where a word of honor is almost an unknown quantity, he was intensely loyal to those in whom he believed, and even fellow producers accepted his word....The career of Jacob Schmalz was a living proof of the Biblical assertion that the meek shall inherit the Earth (61-2).

Not only is Jacob Schmalz described as “almost a miracle,” his virtue is literally rewarded with cash. The portrait of Schmalz is either the most muted irony employed by the Graham Brothers – a subtlety not found elsewhere in the novel – or Schmalz was created within the studio head mystique that promises the wonders championed by Griffith. One scene in *Queer People* evokes the kind of worship usually reserved for the appearance of gurus in the Hollywood novel. As protagonist Whitey dines in the studio commissary, the arrival of Jacob Schmalz creates a massive display of sycophancy:

A new diversion presented itself. A hush fell over the room – a momentary one. Then came more bedlam than ever. People were springing from their

chairs and rushing toward the doors...His host leaped up and joined the jam at the entrance...Out of this milling mass emerged, at length, a tiny man, bewildered by all the confusion, but smiling and pushing people from him, repeating over and over again, “Ja, Ja, Ja,” with no apparent idea of what he was Ja-ing...Whitey started to ask what might be the occasion for the excitement...Later he came to find that there was no occasion for it. It was the customary reception (40-1).

Despite the crass taint of money that accompanies the studio head, the rare visionary (at least as characterized by his disciples) rises above the fray. This same kind of veneration can be found in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s 1941 novel, *The Love of the Last Tycoon*, a portrait of Hollywood mogul Monroe Stahr, widely accepted to be a stand-in for Irving Thalberg, who became head of production at MGM at the age of 25. Stahr is described by narrator Cecilia, the daughter of a film producer who admires him from afar, as an angelic incarnation come to live among the lowly:

He had flown up very high to see, on strong wings when he was young. And while he was up there he had looked on all the kingdoms, with the kind of eyes that can stare straight into the sun. Beating his wings tenaciously – finally frantically – and keeping on beating them he had stayed up there longer than most of us, and then, remembering all he had seen from his great height of how things were, he had settled gradually to earth (20).

Stahr is not immune to his deification, and he is not above using it to his advantage. When a husband-and-wife team of playwrights come to Hollywood and discover they will be part of an ensemble of writers, Stahr foresees that this will upset their sense of

the unity of a story. When asked what will provide cohesion among the team of writers, Stahr answers, "I'm the unity," echoing Griffith's theory of film's universality (58).

Budd Schulberg, son of former Paramount chief B.P. Schulberg, was almost blacklisted in Hollywood upon the 1941 publication of his novel, *What Makes Sammy Run?* The novel satirizes the studio system, and while many welcomed the subject matter, many readers were appalled. "They attacked it not only as a slander on Hollywood, but on the human race, and I found myself denounced as a sensationalist, a falsifier, and even...a Fascist!" writes Schulberg in the introduction to the 1952 Modern Library Edition. However, even Schulberg is not impervious to the depiction of studio head as possessing mysterious powers. Sammy Glick may be an unscrupulous bully, but he remains an object of fascination and disagreeable esteem for Al, the narrator, with the question "What makes Sammy run?" reverberating endlessly in his mind. Sammy's powers are not those of virtue, but darkness, a Lucifer to Stahr's Christ. Sammy is, in Al's view, the personification of a diabolical historical force:

Now Sammy's career meteored through my mind in all its destructive brilliance, his blitzkrieg against his fellow men. My mind skipped from conquest to conquest, like the scrapbook on his exploits I had been keeping ever since that memorable birthday party at the Algonquin. It was a terrifying and wonderful document, the record of where Sammy ran, and if you looked behind the picture and between the lines you might even discover what made him run. And some day I would like to see it published, as a blueprint of a

way of life that was paying dividends in America in the first half of the twentieth century (276).

In his scrapbook, Al has essentially assembled the gospel according to Sammy Glick, representing the universality of a distinctly American form of exaltation, that of revenue and ambition.

The studio heads in Carl Van Vechten's less widely known studio novel, *Spider-Boy, A Scenario for a Moving Picture*, take two symbolic forms, although they are unsurprisingly given very similar names: Schwarzstein and Griesheimer. Van Vechten's novel opens with the New York success of timorous bumbler Ambrose Deacon's play, "The Stafford Will Case." His public reticence is mistaken by the local press for a brand of mysticism:

He had not *intended*, in the beginning, to write a play. He had written a play by accident. To these interviewers then, who were bent on probing into his workshop, he was so completely inarticulate, so unsatisfactory in explanation, that their ensuing articles hinted in some instances at mysticism – The New Mystic Realist was the engaging title of one of these (11).

The playwright is ripe for a transplant to California. In order to escape his own notoriety, Deacon boards a train for Santa Fe, only to be waylaid by a Hollywood starlet and her producer, who drag him to Los Angeles to write for the film industry. Thus ensues a bidding war between Schwarzstein and Griesheimer for Deacon's much-hyped talents. Deacon realizes that "whatever he did apparently made no difference to these strange occidental gods who inexplicably had marked him as a human sacrifice to their splendour" (178). Schwarzstein takes the form of the *deus ex*

*machina*, with whom it is impossible to secure a face-to-face meeting but who is responsible for all the machinations of the Invincible Film Company. “He never appears,” Deacon is told by a female star. “Nobody ever sees him. Sometimes I wonder if he exists” (191). Griesheimer, on the other hand, resembles the Los Angeles evangelists of the early twentieth century, loudly spouting their own scriptures: “I wonder if you know, Mr. Deacon, that this is America’s fourth largest industry and probably will be, I say, the greatest of the world’s arts. Why, we’re working in raw material we don’t know about ourselves yet, it’s so vast, it’s so great, it’s so unprecedented...” (128). Griesheimer falls into the Griffiths/Lindsay camp of boosting the film industry as the second coming.

Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* and the Graham Brothers’ *Queer People* are each valid candidates for the Hollywood novel prototype, specifically because they both provide a view inside the studios and out. Tod and Whitey, the respective protagonists of the two novels, both work intermittently in various aspects of film production, but they also spend a great deal of their time down and out in Hollywood proper. This exploration of Los Angeles as an urban space, rather than a dream machine, complements portraits of the film industry in order to provide a more complete representation of the city.

### **Outsider Religion: The Art of the Exiles**

The preceding sections have examined the work of American writers reflecting on Los Angeles. With the exception of Budd Schulberg, most of these novelists were transplants from elsewhere in the United States, an identity that

allowed them to take a position external to the Hollywood environment even as they worked within it.<sup>11</sup> Another group of writers, however, were placed in a position of doubled outsider status, that of immigrant and exile. A number of prominent writers and artists, mostly English, German, and Austrian, fled Europe over the period of the two world wars and came to Los Angeles. Certain German intellectuals, such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in Los Angeles during the Second World War, influenced the worldview of the city as a major contributor to the “Culture Industry,” later feeding into the society of simulacrum described by theorists Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard. Mike Davis refers to this group as the Weimar diaspora, preceded by such other Central European writers as Egon Erwin Kisch and Anton Wagner in the 1920s and 1930s, who saw Los Angeles as “counterfeit urbanity” (*City of Quartz* 48-50). However, this same focus on the city was not found in the German novelists, playwrights, and poets. While Herman Broch, Alfred Döblin, Lion Feuchtwanger, Heinrich and Thomas Mann, Robert Musil, Anna Seghers, Franz Werfel, and Stefan Zweig all lived and wrote in Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s, they did not write about Los Angeles itself. Bertholt Brecht was one exception, writing poems such as “On Thinking About Hell” about his adopted city. As Ehrhard Behr explained during a 1984 UCLA seminar with novelist Carolyn See on “Literary Exiles and Refugees in Los Angeles,” “The German exile writers never became an integral part of California’s culture because, while living in Los Angeles, they kept their eyes fixed principally on

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<sup>11</sup> In *Writing Los Angeles*, David L. Ulin reports, “[*What Makes Sammy Run?*] stirred up such strong feelings in the film establishment that Louis B. Mayer wanted [Budd Schulberg] run out of town, a suggestion to which Schulberg’s father [Paramount boss B.P. Schulberg] is said to have responded, ‘For Christ’s sake, Louie, he’s the only novelist who ever came from Hollywood. Where the hell are you going to deport him, Catalina Island?’”

Germany...The majority of German exile writers chose American topics or protagonists only after they had returned to Europe” (21).

In contrast, the English writers who came to Los Angeles became enamored of, or at least fascinated by, their exile in paradise. This group included Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Gerald Heard, and Evelyn Waugh, primarily “a ‘Bloomsbury’ set of expatriate pacifists” who “relished precisely those qualities of the local landscape that the Germans most despised” (Davis, *City of Quartz*, 50-51). In an introduction to Behr and See’s seminar proceedings, film critic and author Kenneth Turan writes:

If the Germans used Los Angeles to become more entrenched versions of their European selves, the English (with the notable exception of Evelyn Waugh, who was Brecht’s match and then some in the L.A.-bashing department) used it in just the opposite way, as fertile subject matter that enabled them to release parts of themselves that had been straitjacketed back home (ix).

At the 2005 *Los Angeles Times* Festival of Books, Heyday Books founder Malcolm Margolin attributed the proliferation of religion in Los Angeles to the fact that it was 3,000 miles further away from Europe. Geographical distance allowed the British exiles to tackle subject matter that differed from that they may have explored in England, and one of the most prominent themes is the role of alternative religion in the life of Los Angeles, whether it be indiscreet allegiance to an advice columnist and the business of non-sectarian clergy (*The Loved One*), a secular conglomeration of Eastern religions (*After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*), worship of the anti-Christ (*Ape & Essence*), or devotion to a Hindu swami (*My Guru and His Disciple*). Carolyn

See believes that the expatriate exploration is due to the city's "uncanny ability to reflect, to serve up docilely the artist's vision...Los Angeles was Los Angeles, a tabula rasa between desert and ocean, an Aix-en-Provence before Van Gogh got to it, a city waiting to be seen, a place to project dreams" (32, 34). The dreams of Los Angeles often took the form of a cathartic salvation, whether through literary eminence or spiritual seeking.

Evelyn Waugh is thought to be responsible for the internationalization of the Hollywood novel with the 1948 publication of *The Loved One* (Wells 199). There is little of the hope of salvation associated with the afterlife in this skewering of the Hollywood funeral industry (a trope first initiated by Aldous Huxley in *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*). For all the "loved ones" buried in Whispering Glades (if human) or in the Happier Hunting Ground (if animal), the main concern is for the pleasing appearance of the dead in order to pacify the living. The promise of some celestial plane offered in various sects around Hollywood or cherished in the Folks' hearts is revealed here to be nothing but a matter of cosmetics and commerce. Waugh's Los Angeles is "the ultimate dumping ground, the cemetery of civilization" (Fine 167).

Waugh's novel chronicles the experience of a few Englishmen in California, standing in for the "numberless fellow countrymen exiled in the barbarous regions of the world" (3-4). Dennis Barlow, a poet who had come to Hollywood to write a life of Shelley for the screen, finds other employment at the "Happy Hunting Ground," a pet cemetery, where he presides over "ritualistic, almost orgiastic cremation(s)" (24). When compatriot Sir Francis Hinsley takes his own life because his contract with a

studio was not renewed, Barlow is able to expand his knowledge of the funeral industry to Whispering Glades, a fictional surrogate for L.A.'s famous Forest Lawn Cemetery. While handling the funeral arrangements, Barlow learns that "Liturgy in Hollywood is the concern of the Stage rather than of the Clergy" (62). Waugh continually conflates the corporeal and the religious in his descriptions of the machinations of Whispering Glades. The corpse cosmetician Aimée Thanatogenos (whose name alludes to Los Angeles evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson and the Greek word for death) "worked like a nun, intently, serenely, methodically," as she prepared Sir Francis's body. The reason Aimée Thanatogenos has had to learn her trade is that her father was wiped out financially by Aimee Semple McPherson's Foursquare Gospel church. Before beginning her employment, she had never ventured into Whispering Glades because her mother had taken up "New Thought" and no longer believed in death.

*The Loved One* is rife with Waugh's mockery of Los Angeles's variety of alternative religions. He describes an advice column whose name was changed from "Aunt Lydia's Post Bag" to "The Wisdom of the Guru Brahmin" when fashion dictated, "adorned with the photograph of a bearded and almost naked sage" (100). Aimée's attraction to Dennis Barlow drives her to seek the counsel of the Guru Brahmin, especially because she fears Barlow's Englishness had made him "cynical at things which should be sacred" and he may not have religion (102). Waugh reveals the expected hypocrisy behind the Guru Brahmin's omnipotent sagacity:

The Guru Brahmin was two gloomy men and a bright young secretary. One gloomy man wrote the column, the other, a Mr. Slump, dealt with the letters

which required private answers. By the time they came to work the secretary had sorted the letters on their respective desks. Mr. Slump, who was a survival from the days of Aunt Lydia and retained her style, usually had the smaller pile, for most of the Guru Brahmin's correspondents liked to have their difficulties exposed to the public (117).

In Waugh's view, the denizens of Hollywood create their own false gods, but their whims are capricious. A Mr. Bartholomew explains to Barlow how one goes about becoming "non-sectarian clergyman" if one hears the Call. Bartholomew details how ready the banks are to finance non-sectarian clergymen, even if they "stop at nothing – not even at psychiatry and table-turning," because "[t]here is a very deep respect in the American heart for ministers of religion." He cautions, however, that "[t]he competition gets hotter every year, especially in Los Angeles" (122-3). This does not deter Barlow from seeing the prospects in such a venture, especially as far as it would go in wooing Aimée. He tells her, "I have the makings of a great preacher – something in the metaphysical seventeenth-century manner, appealing to the intellect rather than to crude emotion. Something Laudian – ceremonious, verbose, ingenious and doctrinally quite free of prejudice. I have been thinking a good deal about my costume, full sleeves, I think" (141). Liturgy is a concern of the Stage, after all. However, Barlow does not convince Aimée that her future with him is her chosen spiritual path, and by the end of the novel, she has taken her own life in order to fulfill her higher destiny.

Of the English expatriates who came to Los Angeles, Waugh, by far, was the most superficially cynical of the lot. Alternative religion to him was a sure sign of

American folly and vanity. The other two major British writers who used Los Angeles as inspiration, Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood, did not take such a dismissive view of the role religion played in the landscape of the city, each exploring it in fiction and in their personal lives. Aldous Huxley has two well-known novels that take place in Los Angeles: *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939) and *Ape and Essence* (1948). While both books similarly package dogma wrapped in plot, in other ways, they could not be more disparate, a difference mostly seen in the spokesperson Huxley chose to expound his views on religion and politics.

*After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* was an inspiration for Orson Welles's film *Citizen Kane*, both portraits of wealthy men (or more specifically, fictionalized portraits of one wealthy man, William Randolph Hearst) intent on purchasing civilization.<sup>12</sup> Once again, the outside observer is an Englishman, Jeremy Pordage, who has come to the California castle of Hearst proxy, Jo Stoyte, to work on recently purchased documents accumulated by generations of a titled English family. As Pordage is chauffeured from the train station, he is assaulted by billboard after billboard offering salvation and spiritual guidance: "ASTROLOGY, NUMEROLOGY, PSYCHIC READINGS....JESUS SAVES....GO TO CHURCH AND FEEL BETTER ALL THE WEEK....JESUS IS COMING SOON....SPIRITUAL HELPING AND COLONIC IRRIGATION...." (5-12). Before he even reaches Stoyte's castle, the chauffeur stops to give a ride to William Propter, a scholar whom Pordage had admired in England, a neighbor of Jo Stoyte's, and Huxley's philosophical mouthpiece. They exchange academic pleasantries, and Propter exits

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly enough, while living for a time in the high desert, Aldous Huxley once purchased a vacuum cleaner from future music icon Captain Beefheart (See, 40).

from the narrative, later to return full force to expound on the novel's didactic morality.

Jo Stoyte is a hypochondriac captain of industry, living in a mansion filled with art objects and artifacts he has collected without knowing, or wanting to know, their significance. Pordage's presence is a product of this collection instinct, even though Stoyte is too preoccupied with his personal dramas to notice him, worried instead about repeating the phrase "God Is Love" to calm his explosive temper. Stoyte's castle-mates include his young "Baby," Virginia Maunciple, his physician Dr. Obispo (who conducts longevity experiments when not romancing The Baby), the doctor's assistant Pete Boone, and sundry other servants and employees. Pete is used by most of the characters in various ways, but he is used most often by Huxley himself, as the interlocutor for Propter's opinions on religion and politics. The novel has been described as marking "Huxley's turbulent passage from satirist to mystic," and it is Propter who outlines the divine way (Brown 138).

Both *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* and *Ape and Essence* employ the same form: a sensationalistic set-up, bursting with crisis, intrigue, and titillation, interrupted full-force by a lengthy homily disguised as a kind of Platonic dialogue. After the reader has been drawn in by the drama of the novel's love quadrangle, it is time to visit Mr. Propter, "sitting on a bench under the largest of eucalyptus trees," pondering the question "What is man?" (70). When Pordage and Pete arrive, their discussion of the young scientist's research opens up the floodgates to Huxley's philosophies, which are, in essence, a secular, idiosyncratic version of Buddhism: time and craving are the raw materials of evil; good exists on the level below the

human and the level above it; individual personality is the denial of God; language distances us from the spirit; the most characteristic features of the enlightened person's experience are serenity and disinterestedness; the kingdom of heaven is within. According to Walter Wells, "Propter embodies the theories of Ralph Borsodi, whose School for Living in Suffern, New York, Huxley had visited shortly before returning to Los Angeles" in 1938 (190). Huxley found no better place to relocate his invention of a mystic than Southern California. In her book *Hollywood Utopia*, Justine Brown devotes a chapter to Huxley, echoing Carolyn See's questioning of what happens at the end of the frontier:

Huxley was increasingly certain that the only answer for man lay in the ancient practices of prayer, trance, and meditation...The coast itself embodies the question: now what? It makes the problem concrete. When geography runs out, when modernity's lavish promises culminate in the turning of technology to evil ends – in more and better weapons, in corpses – now what? That was the question that Huxley wanted to tackle, and California seemed always to be posing it. At the end of the West's trajectory, at the edge of the continent, literal space is replaced by figurative space; physical space gives way to the imaginary (150-1).

Brown's reference to more and better weapons points to a main difference between *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* and *Ape and Essence*: the former was written before World War II, the latter composed in its aftermath. Once the Holocaust was made public, the idea of following one man's dogma did not appear so innocuous. Huxley's talking head in *Ape and Essence* is no longer a secular humanist

seeking the plane of eternity, but the Arch-Vicar of a post-apocalyptic cult of devil worshippers. Mike Davis observes that *Ape and Essence* “prefigured the postwar fantastic novel...that exploited Southern California’s unsure boundary between reality and science fiction” (*City of Quartz* 41).

In the novel, two studio executives retrieve a film scenario from the garbage that tells a horrifying tale: after a worldwide nuclear war, a team of New Zealand botanists sail to Los Angeles on a scientific mission and discover the city has become a nightmare of mutation, misogyny, and homicidal sacrifice. The framing device of the discarded script is quickly abandoned and the script itself comprises the bulk of the novel. Dr. Alfred Poole, a repressed English scientist, is kidnapped by the Belial cult, just in time to participate in the annual Belial Day ritual, in which deformed babies are murdered in the name of evil and the citizens are allowed to fornicate wildly in a once-a-year orgy. This is the only time sex with women is allowed because they are “vessels of the Unholy Spirit,” much to the dismay of Dr. Poole, who has become smitten with a young woman named Loola.

Dr. Poole’s promise to assist the cult with their measly crop production accords him special status. He witnesses the sacrament that precedes the orgy, where the masses recite the catechism of Belial.

Question: What is the chief end of Man?

Answer: The chief end of Man is to propitiate Belial, deprecate His enmity and avoid destruction for as long as possible...

Question: To what fate is Man predestined?

Answer: Belial has, out of his mere good Pleasure, from all eternity elected all now living to everlasting perdition...Belial has perverted and corrupted us in all the parts of our being. Therefore, we are, merely on account of that corruption, deservedly condemned by Belial (93-5).

As a result of his convenient position, Dr. Poole is welcomed into the fold of “His Eminence the Arch-Vicar of Belial, Lord of the Earth, Primate of California, Servant of the Proletariat, Bishop of Hollywood,” who launches into a sermon on the pre-history of Belial worship (104). Before the nuclear holocaust, humans had become slaves to technology, creating an insatiable hunger for modernity that led to the two primary causes of their downfall: progress and nationalism. In looking at the chronicles of Man, it was obvious, according to the Arch-Vicar, that only Belial, the prime source of evil, could have inspired such exquisite destruction. The cult of Belial developed as a procrastination tool of destiny. “Then why,” asks Dr. Poole, do you go on worshipping Him?” The Arch-Vicar answers, “Why do you throw food to a growling tiger? To buy yourself some breathing space. To put off the horror of the inevitable, if only for a few minutes” (133). William Propter and the Arch-Vicar share a rational method of discourse, but the similarity stops there. Hope, goodness, and eternity have been completely evacuated, and Huxley paints a bleak picture of the future of Los Angeles religion and its accompanying spiritual pursuits. *Ape and Essence* fully surpasses the cynicism of *The Loved One*, but in his life outside of his fiction, Huxley is well-known for exploring a number of different avenues, spiritual and pharmaceutical, in his California quests to open the doors of perception.

Christopher Isherwood, another fellow English expatriate, also explored the varieties of religious experience California had to offer him. Like Huxley, he was interested in finding ways to provide meaning to existence. He felt America as a location and his role as an exile were ideal for this pursuit: “Actually, in my sane moments, I love this country. I love it just because I *don’t* belong. Because I’m not involved in its traditions, not born under the curse of its history. I feel free here. I’m on my own. My life will be what I make of it” (cited in Ulin 240). Isherwood used the text of fellow exile Huxley’s *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* in his 1964 novel *A Single Man* as a way for the title character, a gay English professor who has recently lost his partner, to reach his university students. Single man George is “continually starting...self-improvement projects,” settling comfortably into the popular California pastime. He even casts his literature curriculum in a spiritual light:

And somewhere, in the midst of their servitude to the must-be, the mad might-be whispers to them to live, know, experience – what? *Marvels!* The Season in Hell, the Journey to the End of the Night, the Seven Pillars of Wisdom, the Clear Light of the Void...Will any of them make it? Oh, sure. One, at least.... Here in their midst, George feels a sort of vertigo. Oh God, what will become of them all? What chance have they? Ought I to yell out to them, right now, here, that it’s hopeless? But George knows he can’t do that. Because absurdly, inadequately, in spite of himself, almost, he is a representative of the hope. And the hope is not false (47-8).

While George is teaching *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, one of the students describes Huxley’s novel as a “wonderful spiritual sermon,” but his opinion is

countermanded by the class's curiosity about Pordage's and Propter's sex lives. What the students are most interested in is whether you can see God by taking LSD. *A Single Man* ends with the possible death of the professor, after he has determined to live and love in the here and now. David Fine writes, "This belief in the possibilities of the renewal of self in a place where friends are dying or dead, in a landscape perched at the edge of the ocean – up against hills capable of crushing him in an earthquake, or bursting into flame, or pouring down tsunamis of mud – is enough for him to go on...George is rooted to a landscape, a home territory in an unstable land that offers both terror and beauty" (*Imagining Los Angeles* 243). In the last pages of the novel, Isherwood invites the reader into a hypothetical merging of George's spirit with that of the universe, a worldview no doubt influenced by Isherwood's involvement with the Swami Prabhavananda.

Isherwood first met Swami Prabhavananda in 1939, and the novelist chronicles his relationship with the spiritual leader in *My Guru and His Disciple*, published in 1980. The memoir relates Isherwood's joyful struggle to find enlightenment while studying with the guru in Los Angeles. He describes the transformation of his pacifism, cultivated throughout the 1940s, into a more transcendent spirituality with the assistance of Swami Prabhavananda. Initially, Isherwood is reluctant to explore what he sees as California fads: "I knew, from somewhat vague gossip, that [Gerald] Heard and Huxley had become involved in the cult of Yoga, or Hinduism, or Vedanta – I was still contemptuously unwilling to bother to find out exactly what these terms meant. To me, all this Oriental stuff was distasteful in the extreme" (7). Heard's explication of the history of mysticism and his

distinction between the “soul” and the “ego-personality” began to nudge Isherwood toward opening his mind. When he began meditating and finally met Swami Prabhavananda, he was unprepared for the enthusiasm with which he would embrace the guru’s teachings. Isherwood described meditation as being “in a kind of front-line trench, actively engaged in spiritual combat” (quoted in See, “The Mirrored Ball” 37). While his full-fledged commitment to the guru was intermittent in the decades that followed, as he tried with success and failure to live up to a certain spiritual ideal and witnessed the very tangible deaths of friends, Isherwood felt Swami Prabhavananda set a supreme sacred example. In December 1970, he wrote:

I have always felt, since I first knew him, how hard it must be for him, here in this alien land, and I suppose I thought it possible that he wouldn’t be able to bear it and would go back to India one day. But he’s still here – an old man and all alone – for, however much we love him, we can none of us be really close companions. And yet, lo and behold, his faith has grown and grown and is its own reward. What else need any of us do but meditate on his achievement? (300)

In this diary entry, Isherwood touches upon the attraction of any spiritual path to the hundreds of thousands of immigrants to Los Angeles in the first half of the twentieth century: a way to make sense of exile, displacement, and the common human condition.

### *Chapter Three*

#### *Hot Gospel: The Literary Life of Aimee Semple McPherson*

The slate of Hollywood novels discussed in Chapter Two demonstrates the attraction to and fascination with religion in Los Angeles. Each author, responding to the general proliferation of religion in the city, found a different element on which to focus his critical eye. However, one figure in Los Angeles's spiritual culture brought together a wide variety of writers as they sought to understand and/or parody her: the evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson of The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Sister Aimee and her Angelus Temple have come to epitomize the chicanery that marked L.A. religion 1920s-style. In her heyday, McPherson held multiple services daily delivered to thousands of parishioners, complete with an illustrated sermon/spectacle on Sundays, in one of the most vibrant businesses in Los Angeles at the time. In some ways, Sister Aimee has become the anecdotes that survive her. In the early days of the automobile, Charles H. Lippy describes how McPherson "purchased a car that she dubbed the 'Gospel Auto' and drove from town to town on her evangelistic rounds" (178). Other accounts have McPherson riding into a chapel on a motorbike, proclaiming a sermon on the futility of seeing salvation as a one-way street.<sup>13</sup> When McPherson was accused of faking her own kidnapping in 1926 to run away with an employee in her radio station, she was caught up in the histrionics of newspaper headlines and the Los Angeles court system, and she virtually never

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<sup>13</sup> This is a widely believed exaggeration. McPherson did walk a motorcycle out on to the stage of the Angelus Temple for this particular sermon, but she did not race up the aisle. She was, however, dressed as a motorcycle cop, complete with hand siren, and delivered a sermon on "speeding" and being too busy for God.

emerged until her death in 1944. McPherson captured the popular imagination with her eccentric approach to traditional religious worship, and while we shall see her actual biography is much more complex than widespread opinion dictates, she came to represent the power and calamity of religion that strays from convention.

McPherson effectively practiced a mainstream religion – Protestant Christianity – but her choice to practice outside of the tenets of her more traditional brethren, her sensational approach to observance, and her reputation as an embodiment of the liberties Los Angeles took with religious custom all contribute to her importance in a discussion of the city’s alternative religions. Raised as a soldier for The Salvation Army in Canada, Aimee Kennedy embraced Pentecostalism upon her marriage to handsome young evangelist Robert Semple. Founded by Charles Parkham in 1901, modern Pentecostalism was based on the belief that “all Christians should have an empowering religious experience...called the baptism with the Holy Spirit” (Blumhofer, 69). Evangelism was employed to reach as many Christians as possible, and their empowerment could take the form of the “four major charismata, or gifts of the spirit, as defined by the Pentecostalists: glossolalia (speaking in tongues), prophecy, interpretation of tongues – and the power of healing” (Epstein, 57). Pentecostalism itself was an alternative version of Christianity, and while McPherson can be placed within the American revival tradition, she did not fit neatly or permanently into any denomination.

Denominational loyalties were lightly held in those days, especially in Holiness and pentecostal circles. It comes as no surprise, then that while Aimee had credentials with the AG [Assemblies of God], because of her

popularity she was granted credentials by others even when she did not seek them herself. In December 1920, for instance, she received membership in the Philadelphia based C.C. Hancock Memorial Church of the Methodist Episcopal Church....on March 27, 1922, she was ordained by the First Baptist Church in San Jose, again at their encouragement (Burgess, 857).

Essentially, McPherson did not truly “belong” to any denomination until she founded her own church within the Angelus Temple, The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Here, she was able to concentrate her energies, those not drained by court appearances and financial infighting, on the very specific sect of Sister Aimee. “The power of McPhersonism resides in the personality of Mrs. McPherson,” one observer commented in 1928. “The woman is everything, the evangel nothing.” (Blumhofer, 385). The cult of personality was very much at play here, and the performative nature of her sermons drew in thousands of parishioners, while distinguishing McPherson from her fellow preachers.

After an initial evangelical journey to Asia following her marriage to Robert Semple in 1908 (the site of Semple’s premature death in 1910, one month before the birth of their daughter Roberta), Sister Aimee began traveling throughout the U.S. and Canada, conducting religious revivals wherever people would have her. Eventually expanding her scope to Europe and Australia as well, McPherson spent the years from 1911 through 1923 (the year she set up shop in the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles) on constant tour, becoming known throughout the world for her healing powers. Tens of thousands of sick and disabled visitors to her tents claim to have been cured under the hands of the evangelist. Once she settled down at the Angelus

Temple, McPherson was trying to focus more intently on conversion rather than healing, and to do so, she employed every theatrical trick in her repertoire.

In addition to relentless proselytizing, publishing, radio broadcasts, social services, and lectures at the Angelus Temple's L.I.F.E. Bible College, McPherson also put on one of the most regularly attended dramatic performances in the city each Sunday. In 1927, Sarah Comstock of *Harper's Monthly* referred to it as "the most perennially successful show in the United States" (cited in Blumhofer, 260). The "illustrated sermons" would use fairy tales, popular movies, biblical tales, and various other scenarios, change the text to send a spiritual message, transform the temple stage into a detailed set depicting the narrative, and find Sister Aimee dressed up in the costume of L'il Bo Peep one day, the Virgin Mary the next. Starlets like Mary Pickford, Clara Bow, and Jean Harlow would attend the sermons and study McPherson's techniques. Whether the location of the Angelus Temple in Los Angeles was an intended correlation or a fortunate coincidence, there was a powerful connection between the Foursquare Gospel and the silver screen:

Her years on the tent-show circuit had taught her that a religious service is sacred drama, a species of nonfictional theater, pure and simple. The problem with denominational churches, said Aimee, was that they had given in to their profane competitors – vaudeville, movies, and "legitimate theater" – and thereby had lost the attention of their congregations, who took their excitement wherever they could find it (Epstein, 252).

McPherson's approach to marketing was unusual in 1920s America, but perhaps not quite as unusual in 1920s Los Angeles. However, her immense popularity thrust her

into a spotlight, under which her unorthodox methods were judged and satirized, especially after her alleged kidnapping. As we shall see, she captured the imagination of many literary figures of the time who used her in their explorations of Los Angeles and alternative religion.

### **Headlines and Hokum: McPherson's Attractions and Detractors**

James Malloy, the main character of John O'Hara's 1938 novel *Hope of Heaven*, is working in his studio office as the story begins, but he is fired by page seven. The rest of the novel involves Malloy's pursuit of a woman whose estranged father has returned to town with deadly results. Malloy's romantic rival, Herbert, describes the local impulse to start writing fiction about the city that no longer deals with the film industry: he is writing a book "about Los Angeles, present-day Los Angeles. The Angelus temple. This fellow that killed his wife with the box of rattlesnakes. The neon signs. The health people. No movie stuff. I'm going to ignore the movies" (52). O'Hara doesn't exactly follow this prescription, but he does pick up on an important move away from the isolated setting of the studios into the streets of Hollywood.

When Los Angeles writers (and writers visiting Los Angeles) turned from the topic of the movies to cultural events in the city at large, the topic that garnered the most attention was the young female evangelist, Aimee Semple McPherson. In fact, she was often the reason that writers like H.L. Mencken were visiting the city in order to report back to their Eastern periodicals about the latest Hollywood scandal, made more culturally relevant by McPherson's occupation. She was not a mere starlet in

trouble, but a religious and commercial force. By the time McPherson began to appear in the city's literature, her reputation had already been irreparably damaged by the kidnapping incident and subsequent trial for corruption of morals and obstruction of justice. In novels such as Don Ryan's *Angel's Flight* (1927), Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927), Myron Brinig's *The Flutter of an Eyelid* (1933), and Eric Knight's *You Play the Black and the Red Turns Up* (1935), Sister Aimee appears in various guises, but in each, she is thoroughly identifiable, even when dressed up in drag, as in Sinclair's novel.

In 1926, H.L. Mencken traveled to Los Angeles for the purpose of writing an article on Aimee Semple McPherson for the *Baltimore Evening Sun*. McPherson's trial was underway, but she was still delivering sermons at the Angelus Temple. As Mencken observed, "the whisper had gone around that Aimee was heated up by the effort to jail her, and would give a gaudy show" (128). Mencken is disappointed in what he finds and describes it as "an orthodox Methodist revival, with a few trimmings borrowed from the Baptists and the Holy Rollers" (128). The only thing that separates McPherson from other evangelists, in Mencken's view, is her wealth, but he does not credit the showmanship and allure that has led to these riches. He gives the *Evening Sun* readers a glimpse into the set-up of the Angelus Temple and the outlines of McPherson's sermon, but most of his article is focused on his impression of the evangelist as "the madame of a fancy-house on a busy Saturday night" (cited in Ulin, 65).<sup>14</sup> As discussed earlier, Mencken goes on to ascribe Sister Aimee's eminence to the fact that "there were more morons collected in Los Angeles than in any other place on earth," hardly a profound analysis of America's most

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<sup>14</sup> This quote was excised from the 2002 reprint in *On Religion*.

popular religious figure at the time (130). Mencken pigeonholes Iowans as stereotypical of those most susceptible to McPherson's charms: "The Iowans longed for something they could get their teeth into. They wanted magic and noise. They wanted an excuse to whoop" (130). However, Mencken doesn't explore what it might be about this particular California phenomenon that draws the average American in droves. He wraps up the article by saying he placed a bet on the outcome of McPherson's trial. "It will be a hard job, indeed, to find twelve men and true to send her to the hoosegow. Unless I err grievously, God is with her" (131).

Mencken exhibits the common dismissive attitude found in many of his Eastern intellectual contemporaries. In his 1933 essay "Paradise," Annapolis-born James M. Cain derides the sound of McPherson's voice within his argument that "good English" is the authentic dialect of Southern California. He blames Sister Aimee's "dreadful twang" on the fact she comes from Canada (cited in Ulin 108). He also observes that "[the] whole place is overrun with nutty religions, which are merely the effort of these people to inject some sort of point into their lives; if not on earth, then in the stars, in numbers, in vibrations, or whatever their fancy hits on....[They] are more like pastimes than the religions you are probably accustomed to" (cited in Ulin, 122). Cain claims that the religious pastimes provide a relief from boredom and are easily interchangeable. While Sister Aimee may take up columns in the newspaper, he personally has never met anyone who's seen her.

However, not all journalists at the time were as flippant in their coverage of Sister Aimee. In his 1931 essay "The City of Our Lady The Queen of Angels," Edmund Wilson focuses his indignation on McPherson's mortal enemy, the Reverend

Bob Shuler, and his corrupt involvement with the local government. Before delving into this story, Wilson devotes a few words to McPherson's radio personality, an aspect of her evangelism that also interested Mencken. In a section on Los Angeles's "gorgeous business cathedrals," Wilson writes, "And there is Aimee Semple McPherson's wonderful temple, where good-natured but thrilling native angels guard the big red radio-tower love-wand and see to it that not a tittle or vibration of their mistress's kind warm voice goes astray as it speeds to you in your sitting-room and tells you how sweet Jesus has been to her and all the marvelous things she has found in Him" (379). He compares another of Shuler's rivals (and former right-hand man), Dr. Gustav A. Briegleb, a less appealing and more staid evangelist, to McPherson and her magnetism: "[She] enchants her enormous audience by her beaming inexhaustible sunshine and her friendly erotic voice. She writes them operas in which ancient oratorios and modern Italian opera are mingled with popular songs and tunes from musical comedies....They adore her and hand her their money. They feel good about their neighbor and themselves" (395-6). In Wilson's view, there is something redemptive about McPherson's ministry.

California historian Carey McWilliams examined the plight of Sister Aimee in 1946, two years after her death from an overdose of sleeping pills. "[Not] so much a woman as a scintillant assault," McPherson arrived in Los Angeles as a single mother with two children, \$100 in cash, and the infamous "gospel auto" in 1922 (Brinig, 73 as quoted in *Fool's Paradise*, 31). Within three years, she had accumulated more than \$1 million and, especially impressive for a woman, she owned \$250,000 worth of property. While McWilliams acknowledges that McPherson never recovered from the

kidnapping incident and her subsequent return, which garnered 95,000 words of media copy in a single day, he does believe she delivered a positive service to her congregants:

Although I heard her speak many times, I never heard her attack any individual or any group, and I am thoroughly convinced that her followers felt that they had received full value in exchange for their liberal donations. She made migrants feel at home in Los Angeles; she gave them a chance to meet other people; and she exorcised the nameless fears which so many of them had acquired from the fire-and-brimstone theology of the Middle West (33).

McWilliams felt that the fact McPherson was able to recover at all from the kidnapping kerfuffle infuriated the middle-class residents of Los Angeles. The resilience of the evangelist in the face of such scandal may also have irritated those who sought to see her as a caricature of the typical charlatan. It is definitely this latter portrayal that we see most often in the contemporary novels in which she was depicted and parodied.

### **She Had Crazy Ideas Anyhow: Sister Aimee's Life in Literature**

Whether it is Aimee Semple McPherson's spiritual promises and self-promotion (*Flutter of an Eyelid*), her fundraising abilities and civic power (*You Play the Black and the Red Turns Up*), her self-improvement strategies (*Angel's Flight*), or the scandalous events of her history (*Oil!*), the four authors pick up on various aspects of Sister Aimee's ministry and personality and use her to advance their narratives. All of the novels were published within the decade following the kidnapping scenario,

during which McPherson was trying desperately to rebuild her reputation after having charges against her dismissed in January 1927. Shortly after the charges were dropped, she embarked on her “Vindication Tour” and later in the year, she published her book *In the Service of the King*. Within a few years, however, McPherson suffered a nervous breakdown and then entered into a disastrous marriage with singer David Hutton. Meanwhile, her life and character were being employed throughout Los Angeles literature.

In his 1927 novel *Angel's Flight*, possibly written before the kidnapping incident, Don Ryan opens his story in a mission “that provided soup in the name of Jesus,” conducting outreach in the tradition of the Angelus Temple (13). According to Daniel Mark Epstein’s biography *Sister Aimee*, when an earthquake devastated Santa Barbara in June 1925, McPherson’s fleet was first to arrive on the scene with supplies, long before the Red Cross even met to discuss aid strategies. In Ryan’s novel, the down and out of downtown L.A. appreciate the handouts but not the message: “A sneer twists [a vagrant’s] lips over widely spaced teeth as he listens to the promises which the mission folk hold forth. Thwarted by circumstance, hunted by oppression, dogged by the law, he has listened in jail and bull-pen and flop-house to the promise of eternal life. His brain, which is clear, has analyzed the elements of religion and discarded the promise” (15). Not all Los Angeles residents at the time felt that religion was the answer to all their problems, and Ryan’s protagonist is one such cynic. He refers to the mission band as “those miserable beings who find an antidote for their inferiority by ministering to those more miserable even than themselves” (18).

Will Pence, former newspaper reporter, has hit the skids when the novel opens and finds himself briefly involved in a life of crime. Like much of the plot of *Angel's Flight*, his narrow escape and return to respectability are never fully explained or questioned. Pence gets work writing features for a small newspaper, chronicling "the greatest sideshow on earth" (44):

Enriched by post-war food prices, the American peasantry with money to spend flocking to Los Angeles as to a country fair. Hither likewise came the variegated hordes to prey upon them....Swamis stalked the streets wrapped in meditation and bedticks. Famous bunco men honored the city with permanent residence. Cults and creeds that had lain dormant since the time of Pythagoras springing to life to bloom exotically in semi-tropic air. An alchemist hung out his sign on Sunset Boulevard, advertising to perform physical and spiritual transmutation. Holy men from the hills, barefooted, hairy, bearded in simulation of the Nazarene, selling postcards on the corners (62).

One of the characters created by Ryan to fall prey to the variegated hordes is Galens, an unemployed victim of age discrimination who attends motivational speaker Elsie Lincoln Benedict's course of lectures on "Personality – the Key to Success" in an attempt to give himself an edge in the marketplace. Ryan's description of the lecture course and of Elsie Lincoln Benedict sounds strikingly similar to the self-improvement allure of Aimee Semple McPherson, albeit on a more secular and fiscal plane. Pence attends a meeting and sees "row upon row of sallow, hopeful, middle-aged faces turned up in pathetic expectancy towards an illuminated rostrum on which a dazzling woman in a scarlet evening gown was telling them how they could become

young again....Their weary, disappointed faces turned up towards this high priestess of their cult” (81-2). Pence recalls Mencken’s description of the *boobus Americanus*, a sitting duck for Inspiration and Optimism. Elsie Benedict shills her course of lessons (“how to stay young above the neck”) and guarantees that all takers will have their “one big question” answered, evoking images of Sister Aimee in her private chambers after a sermon, meeting for hours on end with parishioners who would wait in long lines for one answer from the evangelist.

Pence makes the acquaintance of Galens at Benedict’s lecture and soon thereafter, perhaps inspired by a renewed feeling of optimism thanks to Elsie Benedict, Galens turns up at Pence’s office, looking to sell him some life insurance. Pence’s time in the Army has provided for his life insurance needs, and when Galens tries to sell him on more coverage, Pence argues that he’d prefer a policy with no suicide clause. Despite Galens’s protestations that if Pence waited a year to take his life, he’d be covered under the policy he was selling, Pence is not interested. He finally uses Elsie Benedict to get rid of the ineffectual salesman: “Look at my head, Galens. Remember what Elsie told you. Size me up phrenologically. Get my number” (89). Galens leaves empty-handed. Under the pressures of a few more failures, his sick wife, and his adulterous longings, Galens eventually takes his own life instead. Pence quits his position as a reporter when the paper is sold to Hearst, gets a job as an actor in a film production, and then is hired to write titles for the film in New York, where he is reunited with the illegitimate daughter he didn’t know existed.

Of the four characters to be considered here, Elsie Benedict is possibly the most cynical version of the Aimee Semple McPherson type: there is nothing

humanistic, spiritual, or powerful about her beyond the fact she has figured out a way to play on the anxieties of the aging. Ryan frames his description of Benedict in ways that call to mind something deeper than vanity and greed – the faces turned up toward the high priestess – but in the end, youth is something that cannot be granted, even by the most prolific twentieth-century healers. Arthritis? Tumors? Blindness? Aimee Semple McPherson was believed to have cured all of these ailments. Aging? Not even in Hollywood.

Eric Mowbray Knight, most well-known for his creation of star canine Lassie, published *You Play the Black and the Red Turns Up* in 1935 under the pseudonym Richard Hallas. The novel tells the tale of Dick, a young husband from Texas who rides the rails to Los Angeles in pursuit of his estranged wife, an aspiring actress. He is caught up in an unhappy second marriage, a passionate affair, and eventually a murder charge from which he is miraculously saved by a notorious scapegrace and movie director named Quentin Genter. Early on in his acquaintance with Genter, Dick and his future wife Mamie, along with Mamie's best friend Patsy, retire to Genter's mansion in the hills after a night out at the Nude Eel Café. Patsy and Genter leave the main room for a time and when they return, Genter declares Patsy is the new prophet. Dick observes, "[Genter] was that way – the minute you started talking to that fellow you seemed to tell him your life's history. Pat had been talking to him. She had crazy ideas, anyhow" (35).

Patsy reveals her plan to bolster the economy by having the State give everyone five dollars that they are required to spend by the end of the week. The

following week, they will receive six dollars with the same requirement, and so on, while the sales tax will also increase exponentially.

“It’s Armageddon,” Genter kept saying....“It’s Armageddon!” The funny thing was that when he got excited he yelled, but his voice only came out like a whisper. He yelled in a whisper.

“Well, try and start it,” I told her.

“She will,” Genter said. “I’ve given her my word she has a miraculous sociological plan that beats anything any hitherto blasted economist has dared to dream of. All it needs is a little injection of showmanship....”

“I have it!” he shouted after a while. “The religious touch. You’ll lead everyone to the new economic Canaan. We’ll call it the Ecanaanomic Party. That’s it! The Ecanaanomic Party – Riches For All! And we’ll make it a religion” (36).

In 1935, when the nation was in the middle of The Great Depression, there was more tolerance for any economic plan that might work, and more need for theatrics and spirit to make one particular economic plan stand out above the myriad others. Patsy’s Ecanaanomic Party can be seen as a fictionalized combination of two movements occurring at the time *They Play the Black and the Red Comes Up* was written. On the economic end, we can look to Upton Sinclair’s run for governor of California in 1934 on the EPIC (End Poverty in California) platform.<sup>15</sup> Sinclair

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<sup>15</sup> Sinclair put forth his argument in a 1934 issue of *The Literary Digest*: “I am telling the people of America that we have ten million unemployed who will never work again while the present system endures. For the past year I have been telling the people of California that the burden of supporting their permanently unemployed million-and-a-quarter is driving cities, counties, and State directly into bankruptcy. I have told them that in some hundred and fifty mass meetings, attended by from one thousand to fifteen thousand persons. I have told them in some three hundred thousand pamphlets and

proposed a system of state-supported productive labor and bartering, funded by a tax on property valued above \$100,000. On the religious end, we can look to the showmanship and theatrics of Aimee Semple McPherson. Genter envisions a future for the Ecanaanomic Party that reads like a hyperbolic description of one of McPherson's services at the Angelus Temple (or at least the way her detractors imagined it):

Then he went on about how they'd build a temple and Pat should be the high priestess and wear robes of white samite and sandals. And he said they'd have a choir of a thousand voices and seven bronzed boys at the seven corners of a temple swinging censers of frankincense and myrrh, and girls would be garbed in golden sandals and kirtles of floating white silk, and forty virgins with jasper chain-belts would be acolytes at the altar....

"I'll have Togomi design the costumes," he yelled. It's Armageddon, I tell you – Armageddon!" (36-7).

Knight's description of the new god of Ecanaanomics is ridiculous at first, especially coming from Genter, and casts a disparaging light on the combination of religion and melodrama epitomized by The Foursquare Gospel. McPherson often worked "with the support of a two-hundred-voice choir and an orchestra of horns and violins" (Epstein, 220). However, as the story progresses and Dick finds himself in more and more trouble, the religion of Ecanaanomics gains more and more civic power, once again echoing Sister Aimee's role in Los Angeles life.

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some five million copies of weekly newspapers. And in August some four hundred and fifty thousand of them went to the polls and said that they agreed with me."

Patsy fully embraces her role as a prophet, having “fallen like Niagara for this crazy idea Genter had cooked up” (63). She wears her robes everywhere she goes, begins to collect followers, and eventually starts fundraising to “spread the seed.” Dick remarks that “the goofier the plan the more quickly people seem to fall for it in California,” blaming it on the climate that affects people as soon as they come West over the mountains (66, 71). Descriptions of Patsy on-stage are reminiscent of Aimee Semple McPherson, especially in the way lighting and costume would be used to the evangelist’s advantage. In *Sister Aimee*, Daniel Mark Epstein relates a story in which McPherson entered a boxing ring at a match in San Diego to advertise a service the following day:

Under the shaded glare of the overhead light Aimee struggled to see faces through the smoke. They could hardly believe what they were seeing: this round-cheeked, bosomy cherub with hair piled on her head, eyes flashing, smile reaching out to the raucous crowd. And when the woman in white began to talk in her trombone voice, delivering a river of words about Jesus and love and His precious blood as she eyed the real blood on the canvas, what they really wanted to do was laugh. But something about Aimee kept them from laughing (206).

McPherson’s threat to knock out the Devil filled the arena to capacity, and acolytes discovered where she was staying and sought her out for the remainder of her visit. In Knight’s novel, once the Ecanaanomic Party is in full swing, Dick describes Patsy making similar use of stagecraft.

Then you could see something in the middle of the dark stage. It grew lighter and lighter, and sort of bluish, and you began to get the creeps....Then, all of a sudden, you could see what it was. It was Patsy in her white robe and gold sandals....She was standing stock still with her arms stretched out...like she was Christ on the cross. She just stood still, not moving, and they started opening up golden-yellow lights from the back of her, making her all blue but her hair and robe like it was outlined in fire (107).

Patsy's appropriation of McPherson's theatrics gets the movement rapidly underway. They have almost 100 "encampments" in California within months and expansion to Iowa and Nevada as well as Patsy's version of McPherson's publication *The Bridal Call*, called the *P.E.P Paper*. Mamie takes a position as Patsy's press representative, proud of a mention in an L.A. newspaper describing Patsy as "a voice crying alone in the wilderness," which leaves Dick more time to pursue his new love interest, Sheila (101). When Sheila plunges to her death from the water-chute concession at the pier where Dick works, he is charged with her murder. Because Dick is still married to Mamie, the Ecanaanomic Party flexes its newly acquired political muscle in his defense. They hold prayer meetings for his release and raise over \$3,000 for a defense fund, another tactic employed by McPherson in her own defense during the kidnapping scandal. Dick is saved when Genter commits suicide and leaves a full confession of the crime. Dick tries to refute Genter's claims, but he is talked out of it in the interest of The Ecanaanomic Party, which goes on to recruit hundreds of thousands of new members as a result of the publicity. *You Play the Black and the Red Comes Up* and the marketing strategies of The Ecanaanomic Party owe much of

their imagery to Aimee Semple McPherson's development of the Foursquare Gospel. While Patsy possesses some of the self-promotion seen in Elsie Benedict, Patsy's cause is more noble (if not more feasible), and Knight's portrait of the kind of civic power a woman-run organization could achieve in Los Angeles is accurate and historically-based.

Myron Brinig's 1933 novel *The Flutter of an Eyelid*, on the other hand, paints an unreservedly acerbic picture of the evangelist in the form of Sister Angela Flower. *The Flutter of an Eyelid* is a thoroughly bizarre tale of an uptight New England writer named Caslon Roanoke who has come to California to "write a novel different from any he had written before, peopled by characters who were motes in the sun, driven this way and that by vagrant breezes from the Pacific, without the austerity and discipline that had marked his books up to this time" (4). *The Flutter of an Eyelid* is both his story and his creation. As Caslon composes his novel, he discovers that the characters he has met in real life, who also appear in his narrative, begin to be controlled by the words Caslon himself writes. The line between Caslon the observer and Caslon the author blurs to the point of indistinction.

Caslon's impression of southern California before he came was "as a huge, cement motion-picture factory surrounded by tabernacles given over to the practice of strange cults and womanish religions" (4). The writer initially encounters Sister Angela Flower at a garden party at which all of the major players first appear. Fellow partygoer Dwight Preston is shocked to discover Caslon has never heard of the Ten Million Dollar Heavenly Temple where Sister Angela preaches the Golden Rule Gospel. (In fact, Carey McWilliams puts the cost of McPherson's Angelus Temple at

\$1.5 million.) Caslon is told that the evangelist “was constantly in the biggest, blackest headlines....It was said that she had healed hundreds of the sick and maimed, simply by placing her hand upon them” (17). Sister Angela’s arrival at the party is heralded by many blessings and the shock of her bright pink attire. As Cain described McPherson’s “twang,” Caslon recoils from Angela’s voice “that could be described as nothing less than hideous....He could not remember ever having seen such a monstrously blatant woman, her obviousness not only a matter of appearance, but also of mood and gesture” (29-30). Caslon’s love interest, Sylvia Prowse, has a horror of the evangelist and describes her in unflattering terms, also evoking the common characteristics of the parishioners Louis Adamic described as “The Folks”:

She lives, breathes, and shouts sex, without ever quite knowing it. Aside from that aspect of her, she’s an extremely shrewd show-woman, a kind of Sarah Bernhardt of aggressive evangelism. She’s made lots of money out of her Heavenly Temple. People just flock there, and in order to get a seat, you’ve got to wait in line for hours. Her greatest appeal is to the Middle-Westerners who are drifting about in the futile paradoxes of California; sex-starved, rheumatic Iowans, Nebraskans, Kansans. The very sound of her whinnying voice is a psychological orgasm to those people (31-32).

Angela Flower’s character is initially suspect, but this is nothing compared to the antics in which she engages for the remainder of the novel.

As Caslon seeks to explore “the mystic, the elusive, the profound, the inaccessible,” he joins the garden party crew of “comical characters embalmed in the curious, fantastic fluids of their own personalities” aboard the boat of Chinese tea

merchant Yang Kuo-Chung (36, 56). Sister Angela remarks that Jesus is present in sex and her Scotch before beginning a conversation with the tea merchant about how her savior would have been so much more at home among the Chinese because He is “too meek and mild for the Western races” who try to make him into a militant figure (62). After Angela is described as “one of the ugliest women in America” who “for some obscure reason...gave an impression of tremendous physical brilliance,” her attention is absorbed by a seaman scrubbing the deck whom she claims to believe is Jesus Christ himself (73). In fact, the man is named Milton, and he unquestioningly assumes the mantle of redeemer.

Milton, the ordinary seaman, had always believed, vaguely, that he was the Supreme Being, and under the fascinating magnetism of Angela’s personality, the wavering idea had become certain and fixed within a few minutes of time....

“No one would believe me when I told them I was Jesus. But I am Jesus, ain’t I? You just said I was....”

“Hallelujah!” repeated Milton. “But before we go, Ma’am, mightn’t I have just another small spot of rum? Not that I need it. I got plenty of confidence. I learned confidence from a correspondence school....” (75-6).

Sister Angela is astir with the publicity possibilities of having found her Lord, and she immediately begins Milton’s makeover into the proper savior. We next see her cavorting naked on the beach while Milton has been left at home to memorize the New Testament.

The Lord's appearance at the Temple causes great consternation among the congregants. Brinig paints the parishioners as a sexually promiscuous, uncivilized rabble:

[W]omen gave themselves to men they had never seen before, in a terrible ecstasy of belief, and certain other men and women, carried away by the extraordinary news that Jesus was back at last, butted one another like goats. Still others leapt from their seats in the balcony, catching hold of the chandelier and pillars, and swung back and forth like monkeys (129).

Jesus' return is said to forecast an economic upturn, and even East Coast writers flock to the scene. Some of the visiting journalists take a familiar disparaging attitude, one even going so far as to spit on Milton, who turns the saliva into a flower. When initial interest in the seaman wanes – “they could not even accept a Savior without the embellishments of the freakish” – Sister Angela comes up with an idea (135). Brinig takes Aimee Semple McPherson's assumed drowning, before her alleged kidnapping was discovered, as a plot device for the premature demise of Milton. If Jesus walked on water, surely Milton can, especially considering his previous work aboard the tea merchant's boat. At first, he is successful, traversing the ocean before the large crowd gathered on the beach, but he is done in by a very unholy instinct. When he catches sight of the lovely Sylvia swimming naked in the sea, he sinks beneath the waves, never to be seen again. Just as many would-be rescuers lost their lives in the search for Sister Aimee, hundreds are crushed and drowned in the mad dash to save Milton.

Brinig's appropriation of McPherson's public persona and media headlines is a caustic revision of the preacher's life story. However, the majority of the other

characters in *The Flutter of an Eyelid* are also subjected to derisive treatment in this tale of abusive relationships, fatal poisoning, sadomasochistic pleasures, and unrequited love. Caslon is eventually freed from the lure of the West Coast, just in time to escape certain death as the entire state of California is torn asunder and, like Milton, sinks to the bottom of the sea. Sister Angela is last seen as she is swallowed by a whale that proceeds to spit her back out; she dies dreaming of the money that would fill the Temple once she told her congregants that she had seen Jonah.

Upton Sinclair also uses Aimee Semple McPherson's life history in creating the character of Eli Watkins in his 1927 novel *Oil!*, but unlike Brinig, Sinclair doesn't lampoon the evangelist. Eli Watkins is far from the most righteous of religious figures, but he does possess a humanity not found in Angela Flower. Of course, Sinclair makes the interesting authorial choice of transforming Sister Aimee into Brother Eli. This gender switch does not add anything to the narrative, except perhaps to distance Sinclair's evangelist from McPherson, an unnecessary mask since it is apparent from biographical details that Watkins is a male version of Sister Aimee. Judging by the other female characters in the novel, who are either spoiled debutantes or nurturing socialists, it is quite possible that Sinclair was not up to the task of addressing the complexity of a character like McPherson. Making her a man granted a simplicity not found in the genuine article.

In his foreword to the 1997 edition of *Oil!*, Jules Tygiel relates that H.L. Mencken thought Sinclair suffered from a "credulity complex," due to the number of causes, belief systems, and speculations in which Sinclair was interested throughout his lifetime. Tygiel claims Mencken said that "Sinclair had believed, at one time or

another, in more things than any other man in the world” (vii). *Oil!* is not the only book by Sinclair that deals with religion in southern California. In his 1922 novel *They Call Me Carpenter*, Jesus pays a visit to Los Angeles. *Oil!* chronicles the business enterprise of J. Arnold Ross and the increasing Bolshevick sympathies aroused in his son, Bunny, as a result of the mining strikes he witnesses and his admiration for the strike leader, Paul Watkins. Bunny and his father meet the Watkins family when they buy the family’s land in the hopes of oil prospects. Bunny had previously made the acquaintance of Paul, the eldest son, who is on the run from his family in the beginning of the novel, trying to escape their religious influences. Bunny is fascinated by Paul’s description of his father’s fervor in the church of Aimee Semple McPherson.

“What does he believe?”

“The Old Time Religion. It’s called the Four Square Gospel. It’s the Apostolic Church. They jump.”

“*Jump!*”

“The Holy Spirit comes down to you, see, and makes you jump. Sometimes it makes you roll, and sometimes you talk in tongues.”

“What is that?”

“Why, you make noises, fast, like you was talkin’ in some foreign language; and maybe it is – Pap says it’s the language of the arch-angels, but I don’t know. I can’t understand it, and I hate it” (44).

When the Watkins patriarch tries to convert “Dad” (as J. Arnold Ross is called throughout the novel), Bunny’s father invents a religion of their own (The Church of

the True Word) to avoid Watkins's preaching. At first, Dad won't explain it on doctrinal grounds, but he finds it useful later when he can employ it to convince Watkins to stop beating his family. When the Watkins land has been bought (and christened "Paradise"), Dad sets the terms of payment to ensure the family is protected from the Foursquare Gospel. Dad once again uses The Church of the True Word to manipulate the Watkinses into not giving money to missionaries.

In Paul's absence, his brother Eli has been exploring his healing powers among his neighbors. Like Aimee Semple McPherson, Eli became known locally for his curative abilities before turning to evangelism. When southern California is hit by an earthquake, Eli blames the Holy Spirit "growing weary of fornications and drunkenness and lying in the world" (92). Bunny's father also tries to use his imaginary religion to reconcile Paul with his family by claiming he has been chosen by The Church of the True Word. At this suggestion, Eli revolts:

...but here was Eli, transformed into a prophet of the Lord, and blazing after a fashion not unknown to prophets, with a white flame of jealousy! 'I am him who the Holy Spirit has blessed! I am him who the Lord hath chosen to show the signs! Look at me, I say – look at me! Ain't my hair fair and my eyes blue? Ain't my face grave and my voice deep?' – and sure enough, Eli's voice had gone down again, and Eli was a grown man, a seer of visions and pronouncer of dooms (117).

Almost immediately, Eli begins preaching at the "holy jumpers" church in Paradise, using the dogma of the fictional Church of the True Word. Eli calls his ministry the Third Revelation, and when the money starts to pour in, his family doesn't see any of

it. Sinclair uses Eli's evangelism to comment on the vulnerability of the masses in the face of spiritual promises:

Eli was a lunatic and a dangerous one, but a kind that you couldn't put in an asylum because he used the phrases of religion. He hadn't wits enough to make up anything for himself, he had jist [sic] enough to see what could be done with the phrases Dad had given him; so now there was a new religion turned loose to plague the poor and ignorant, and the Almighty himself couldn't stop it (120).

The next time we see Eli, he is dressed in finery and being chauffeured in a limo. During the war, Eli preaches against the Hun, "telling how the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that the enemy would be routed before the year was by, and promising eternal salvation to all who died in this cause of the Lord – provided, of course, that they had not rejected their chance to be saved by Eli" (215). Eli then gathers believers to pray for rain at the front and "the floodgates of heaven were opened" on the Huns but not the Allies (216). Dad gives Eli money for the Temple when Eli's power has grown to the point that he might be helpful to the oil baron. Eli's "Bible Marathon" gets press and financing for the Temple, which "opened amid such glory to the Lord as had never been witnessed in this part of the world" (421).

Eli's ministry is based closely on many aspects of Aimee Semple McPherson's Foursquare Gospel, including the "tarrying rooms" she offered to those seeking a more extended spiritual immersion. Sinclair incorporates McPherson's nemesis, the Reverend Bob Shuler, in the character Tom Poober. Sinclair is also drawn to Sister Aimee's drowning incident, and he plays on the lascivious rumors

about the evangelist absconding with her engineer by having Eli sighted at a beachfront hotel with a “handsome woman” (439). Eli’s drowning is a replica of McPherson’s in many ways, including the green bathing suit, the loss of life incurred through her attempted rescue, and the names of the alleged kidnappers, although here they are transformed into angels. As much of a mockery as was made of McPherson’s explanation, Eli’s survival story is ten times more ludicrous.

The story he told was that, finding himself being carried out to sea, he had prayed to the Lord, and the Lord had heard his prayer, and had sent three angels to hold him up in the water. The name of one of these angels was Steve, and the second was a lady angel, whose name was Rosie, and the third was a Mexican angel, and his name was Felipe. These angels had taken turns holding onto the shoulder-straps of Eli’s green bathing suit; and when he grew faint, one of them would fly away and bring him food (458).

After a protracted battle with the devil, Eli returns to the shore. He claims to have found a feather in his bathing suit and his story is bought wholesale by his adoring public. One of the last appearances of Eli in the novel is as a disembodied voice spreading his gospel over the radio, Sister Aimee’s transmission of choice.

Sinclair’s narrator connects Eli’s popularity to the specific locale of southern California. Because the area is populated by Midwestern farmers who come to California to die (evoking Nathanael West’s characterizations in *The Day of the Locust*), they want to die happy, “with the assurance of sunshine and flowers beyond” (421). Therefore, Los Angeles (called “Angel City” in *Oil!*) is the home of “more weird cults and doctrines” than one can imagine: “Wherever three or more were

gathered together in the name of Jesus or Buddha or Zoroaster, or Truth or Light or Love, or New Thought or Spiritualism or Psychic Science – there was the beginning of a new revelation, with mystical, inner states of bliss and esoteric ways of salvation” (422). Aimee Semple McPherson’s crusade was one of the most popular and powerful of these revelations, and her presence in the contemporary literature of her time was as much a testament to her personality as it was to her proselytizing. When David Reid wrote his essay “The Possessed” for the 1992 collection *Sex, Death, and God in L.A.*, the Angelus Temple had become what Reid describes as “the Norma Desmond of Los Angeles churches” (179). McPherson had died 50 years before, and while the Church of the Foursquare Gospel continues to exist under the direction of her son Rolf (with 17,000 churches in sixty countries in 1993), the heyday of the ministry was fueled by the evangelist’s charisma.

### **Aimee Semple McPherson: A Reconsideration**

As the four novels discussed illustrate, Aimee Semple McPherson was a literary touchstone for contemporary writers attracted to the scandals surrounding the evangelist. Due to her presence in the media and in literature, McPherson’s legacy is rife with details of indignity and sensationalism. However, the image that exists in the popular imagination is not the full story of the evangelist’s life. In fact, McPherson’s contributions to the role of women in American culture are quite substantial and commonly overlooked. Emphasis on the more salacious elements of her history clouds her accomplishments – a state of affairs that may have much to do with her gender.

Let's take a look at some facts, remembering that women did not even receive the right to vote in the U.S. until 1920 and many did not work outside the home until World War II. The features of McPherson's life discussed below have been collected from three primary biographies of Aimee Semple McPherson (listed in order of frequency of use): Daniel Mark Epstein's *Sister Aimee: The Life of Aimee Semple McPherson* (1993), Edith L. Blumhofer's *Aimee Semple McPherson: Everybody's Sister* (1993), and Lately Thomas's *Storming Heaven: The Lives and Turmoils of Minnie Kennedy and Aimee Semple McPherson* (1970). Thomas's biography, a sequel to an earlier volume dedicated to the kidnapping affair, was the most thorough discussion of the evangelist until the dual publications in 1993, not counting posthumous publications by McPherson herself.<sup>16</sup> The details below begin to provide a glimpse into how much more there was to the evangelist beyond the grandstanding and criminal trials.

Aimee Semple McPherson is credited with an impressive number of firsts. She is thought to be the first woman to cross America in an automobile without a man's help. She was the first woman to lead a religious service in London's Royal Albert Hall, the first woman to preach a sermon over the "wireless telephone," and the first woman to receive a commercial license from the FCC. She founded the first religious broadcasting station, KFSG (Kall Foursquare Gospel), preaching to hundreds of thousands of people daily. McPherson was the first evangelist to bring revivalism into large-scale commercial stadiums, and Daniel Mark Epstein claims, "No one has ever been credited by secular witnesses with anywhere near the number

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<sup>16</sup> The most recent biography to be published – Robert Bahr's *Least of All Saints: The Story of Aimee Semple McPherson* (2001) – paints the portrait of "a poor small-town girl who wanted to be a great actress and became, instead, the greatest evangelist of her time."

of healings attributed to Sister Aimee from 1919 to 1922” (185). She preached in more than 100 cities and towns from 1917 to 1923 and later alleged that she gave more sermons than any preacher who ever lived. The evangelist was even made an honorary colonel by the U.S. Army.

When McPherson began her religious career, female evangelists were rare and not necessarily welcomed by parishioners. She was fortunate in that she was raised within the Salvation Army community, an organization that was made up of a majority of female soldiers. Edith L. Blumhofer writes, “The prominence of women in the corps – as well as visits of female evangelists to local Methodist churches – accustomed the child [young Aimee] to the notion that in the normal course of things women preached, taught, testified, and sang” (48). However, in Canada – where McPherson was born – and elsewhere, the women of the Salvation Army were subject to sexual assault and prison sentences for disturbing the peace. So while the young evangelist may have had models of women in religious service, she also witnessed their persecution firsthand. This did not deter her, and she went on to provide a precedent for the female religious leaders that followed her (as we shall see in Chapter Five).

As Lately Thomas described (with slight exaggeration), McPherson arrived in Los Angeles “with ten dollars and a tambourine,” only to build one of the most powerful organizations in the city within four years (20). As the evangelist herself asked, “Who ever heard of a woman without earthly backing...undertaking the raising of funds and the erection of such a building?” (quoted in Epstein, 203). Sister Aimee delivered 20 or more services a week (in addition to her KFSG broadcasts),

and rarely repeated a sermon, while simultaneously writing books and photoplays. She composed three lengthy memoirs – *This Is That* (1919), *In the Service of the King* (1927), and the posthumously published *The Story of My Life* (1951) – as well as *Give Me My Own God* (1936), a text chronicling the universal subjection of women she witnessed during her world travels. Her first memoir was self-published by The Echo Park Evangelistic Association. Carey McWilliams noted, “Mrs. McPherson founded a magazine *The Bridal Call*, and established two hundred and forty ‘lighthouses,’ or local churches, affiliated with Angelus Temple. By 1929, she had a following of twelve thousand devoted members in Los Angeles and thirty thousand in the outlying communities” (*Fool’s Paradise*, 32). A corps of volunteers prayed round the clock in the Prayer Tower in two-hour shifts, surrounded by telephones and taking requests for prayer recipients. The Angelus Temple’s commissary became the greatest welfare agency in Los Angeles during the Depression, providing services as varied as feeding the poor and helping pregnant runaways. Actor Anthony Quinn credited McPherson with keeping the city’s Mexican community alive for five years. In fact, the church’s “defiance of racial barriers and social class is one of the most remarkable features of Sister Aimee’s early ministry” (Epstein, 128).

McPherson believed Los Angeles would be the perfect home for her ministry, and one cannot argue she found great success – despite the scandal – in her adopted city. As we’ve seen, Los Angeles was an ideal locale for a burgeoning religious interest. In 1924 alone, 62 new churches opened, not counting missions and independent congregations (Blumhofer, 240). The epigraph for McPherson’s chapter in *This Is That* on traveling to Los Angeles for the first time reads: “Shout: for the

Lord hath given you the city. Jos. 6:16” (160). She used this text as the basis for her first sermon in Los Angeles. Blumhofer discusses the connection between McPherson’s accomplishments and her choice for the Angelus Temple location:

The thousands of new arrivals in need of religious institutions made the state a laboratory for evangelism....Southern California in the early decades of the twentieth century (as now) was at once a land of promise and a place that threatened traditional morality. Technological and media revolutions seemed to open limitless opportunities in Hollywood in the 1920s for those with the courage to follow their dreams....As a female evangelistic celebrity, she ably blended nostalgia for the past with the taste of the masses for the modern” (137, 387).

Los Angeles was revealed to be a perfect setting for the rise and subsequent fall of the Canadian evangelist. Unfortunately for Sister Aimee, the masses have as strong a taste for the maudlin as they do for the modern. As we’ve seen in the contemporary novels, sex and scandal sell in ways the groundbreaking cultural accomplishments of one woman will not. McPherson’s notoriety may have as much to do with the public’s discomfort with a single woman who has accumulated a great deal of power as they do with any actual dishonor. Despite the sensational rumors that are attached to the legacy of Aimee Semple McPherson, it would be unjust to not also recognize her triumphs.

## *Chapter Four*

### *Reveling in the Applause of the Faithful: A Religious Survey of Los Angeles*

While Los Angeles is known for its proliferation of esoteric sects, there are a number of religions that have more extensively contributed to the view of the city as “a circus without a tent.” These spiritual organizations, while each offering its own specific version of enlightenment, can be placed within loose categories that illuminate general themes of religious pursuit in the West. Analysis of these currents reveals histories of the development and frequent demise of numerous religions – religions that reflect a larger narrative of spiritual history in America. Some well-known and/or infamous religions got their start in Los Angeles (e.g., the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, the Branch Davidians, and Pentecostalism), while others found a new ability to grow and transform themselves to meet the needs of their acolytes (e.g., the Theosophical Society, Seventh-Day Adventism, and Vedanta). Because of the character of religious pluralism in the city, new religious movements often had to distinguish themselves through extreme narratives of salvation or demonstrate their marked reinterpretation of the established religion from which they originated. A study of the history of alternative religion in Los Angeles can provide access to the trends and tendencies of spiritual identity formation that developed alongside swift urban expansion.

Whether the following religions customized a relationship with known religious figures, such as Jesus Christ or Buddha, or created an entirely new dogma to entice their followers, we can credit them with contributing to the formation of the

spiritual landscape of Los Angeles. For the purposes of this survey, the primary focus will be on the formative years of 1900-1960, the time before the word “cult” and the anti-cult movement oversimplified the discourse on alternative religion. During this period, new religious movements developed along several trajectories that illuminate the culture of the city.

### **Spiritualism: Science Meets Soul**

One of the first alternative explorations that swept Los Angeles was imported from the East Coast and Europe: spiritualism. One might conjure images of the Fox Sisters, listening for raps beneath their hard oak tables in the cold winters of upstate New York, or Dr. Mesmer, from beyond the grave, touting the health benefits of being in touch with your inner universal fluid. Although today spiritualism is often discussed synonymously with hypnotism, it is not correct to conflate the doctrine of direct divine contact with the treatment many now use to quit smoking or lose weight. Spiritualism, as practiced in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is the belief in the ability of certain mediums to communicate with spirits in the afterlife. Millions of people were followers of the spiritualist movement in its heyday. Like other pioneers, spiritualism made the trip west and found a home next to the Pacific.

The first meeting of the Spiritualists of Southern California was held in Santa Monica in 1895, followed by a six-day Spiritualists Congress. The Spiritualists then set up shop in the Los Angeles Theatre and formed the Harmonial Spiritualists Association, through which mediums contacted the early pioneers – one would imagine both geographic and spiritual – in order to gain wisdom and guidance. In an

1896 article titled “A Review of the Progress of Spiritualism,” Julia Schlesinger wrote:

Many of our noble pioneers have passed on leaving no written record of noble deeds and unselfish lives. Such are remembered only by the influence they exerted for good upon the lives of others which, however, is permanent, and lasting as the stars....All have done good in their own way and awakened an interest in the grand truths of Spiritualism that will some day bear fruit and bless humanity, even though the pioneers who sowed the seed amid persecution and misrepresentation may have passed away, and their names be forgotten among men. In the land of souls they will live and be loved for their unselfish deeds, their devotion to truth, and fidelity to an unpopular cause, which the present generation cannot understand.

It is unclear whether Schlesinger harkened back to the early Quaker supporters of spiritualism or the Declaration of Independence, but it is apparent that the Spiritualists were being set up as the wave of the future, a movement for which death was not an obstacle to communication. Beyond the Harmonial Spiritualists Association, Dr. James Peebles did much to contribute to the popularity and legitimization of spiritualism by founding the Peebles College of Science and Philosophy in Los Angeles in 1914. After Peebles died in 1922, he reportedly continued communication with mediums, and his messages were reported in major newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*(Pendleton).

Many spiritual fascinations in Los Angeles gain popularity through their endorsement by the celebrities who inhabit the city and its film industry. Like

Scientology and Kabbalah today, hypnotism became an obsession of Hollywood stars such as Sal Mineo, Tony Curtis, and Shirley MacLaine, but it is the unconventional Mae West who was one of the most recognized adherents of spiritualism in the traditional sense.<sup>17</sup> In Jill Watts's biography of West, *An Icon in Black and White*, she details the actor's search for salvation within the spiritualist movement. In 1941, Jack Kelly, a touring minister lecturing on extrasensory perception, originally attracted West, and she became both his student and his patron. Eventually, however, Kelly's instruction proved limited:

Still seeking assurance of eternal life, West became determined to develop her own psychic abilities. She solicited assistance from the Reverend Mae M. Taylor of the Spiritualist Science Church of Hollywood, who instructed her on communicating directly with the spirit world. West worked diligently to achieve a meditative state; for three weeks she sequestered herself each day in a darkened room, striving to cleanse her mind and seeking a connection with the spiritual realm (Watts, 259).

In the solitude of her darkened room, the star sought to take the spotlight that was habitually on her and turn it on the spiritual world. According to West, her persistence paid off when she began to have communication with several spirit voices, including her dead mother, who eventually badgered her so often, she was forced to request they cease and desist. As Watts observes, religious alternatives like spiritualism allowed women – especially unconventional women like Mae West – the opportunity to “rebel against the mainstream male-dominated religious hierarchy” (260).

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<sup>17</sup> Possibly the celebrity most devoted to spiritualism was Sherlock Holmes creator, Arthur Conan Doyle. Doyle frequently clashed with Harry Houdini after spiritualism fell out of favor with the escape artist, and Houdini tried to dissuade Doyle from his beliefs.

Stephen Stein observes that while women had limited opportunity in mainstream religion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, alternative religions “often provided women possessing special knowledge and understanding, or insight and wisdom, opportunities to exert authority and influence” (Stein, 93). Stein sees the spiritualist movement as the first evidence of this trend. Many mediums also embraced radical thought, such as free love and women’s rights, using their power and magnetism to advance a social agenda. This progress within ideas of equality and freedom appears as an underpinning of many heterodox religions formed in early twentieth-century Los Angeles, and many of the leaders of these spiritual organizations were women, such as the triumvirate of women who contributed to the development and nationwide expansion of theosophy.

### **Theosophy: From Which All People of Faith Drink**

Fast on the heels of spiritualism came New Thought, a belief that all people share in a universal generative energy. While Christian Science was being developed on the East Coast by a woman (Mary Baker Eddy), Theosophy was branching out to the West Coast through the work of a woman named Katherine Tingley, after having been developed by two other women, Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant. Theosophy began as a reform movement within nineteenth-century American spiritualism. Different scholars claim that the philosophy has roots in Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Pythagoreanism, Neoplatonism, Kabbalah, Gnosticism, Manichaeism, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism; however, it eventually

developed into the idea of “one common and secret source of primeval wisdom from which all people of faith drink” (Marty *EARH* 664).

The Theosophical Society was founded in New York in 1875 by “Madame” Helena Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, the same year Mary Baker Eddy published the central text of Christian Science, *Science and Health*. Blavatsky truly led the charge, especially with the best-selling publication of *Isis Unveiled* in 1877, a text which she claimed was produced while she was unconscious and guided by spirits. This book and her 1888 publication *The Secret Doctrine* form the canon of theosophy. Robert Todd Carroll, author of *The Skeptic’s Dictionary*, describes the founder in a manner that echoes the ambivalent truth of many leaders of alternative religion:

Her harshest critics consider Madame Blavatsky to be “one of most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting impostors in history.” Her devoted followers consider her to be a saint and a genius. [They claim she discovered the true nature of light either by clairvoyance or intuition alone, without any need for scientific training or communication with other scientists.] Since these characteristics are not contradictory, it is possible she was both a fraud and a saintly genius.

Carroll’s emphasis on the non-exclusive properties of chicanery and a seemingly supernatural relationship with the divine is crucial to an understanding of attraction to unconventional spiritualities.

After the deaths of Blavatsky and Olcott, Annie Besant assumed leadership of The Theosophical Society in 1907 and devoted her energy to supporting the

movement for Indian Home Rule and advocating the use of birth control in the U.S. Meanwhile, the Theosophical Society in America had split off from the New York-based Theosophical Society in 1895 and formed headquarters at Point Loma, California. In 1909, a second schism led to the formation in Los Angeles of the United Lodge of Theosophists. The Point Loma branch still maintained theosophy's two core concerns: the belief that all religions are one and "the esoteric interest in investigating spiritual phenomena and discovering the occult laws undergirding them" (Marty *EARH* 664). Secret truths were passed down through an occult brotherhood of Mahatmas who had the ability to commune with the dead. Stephen Stein claims, "The Theosophical Society was a genuine occult alternative because of its focus on hidden spiritual principles that were revealed through insightful teachers" (108).

Katherine Tingley, one of the "insightful teachers" also known as the "Purple Mother," led the society at Point Loma. She initiated a move away from the more Eastern focus on Buddhism and Hinduism favored by Blavatsky and Besant, toward a more universal application – with America, and specifically California, at its heart. Like Annie Besant before her, who believed that "a freshly evolved form of humanity had arisen in California, with specific skull formations and enhanced powers of intuition," Tingley sought to reveal the destiny of Theosophy's new location (Brown 18). In Justine Brown's analysis of the Point Loma community in *Hollywood Utopia*, she chronicles the development of "Lomaland" and focuses on its metaphorical relationship to the Land of Oz, using L. Frank Baum's involvement in the colony and the confluence of utopian fantasies as evidence.

Tingley's work at Point Loma primarily concentrated on child rearing and education. She believed that the texts and philosophy of Theosophy could not only raise better children, but also reform convicts. The Point Loma colony featured everything from an elaborate irrigation system allowing innovative horticultural experiments to a well-attended school "based on the idea of a perfect balance between physical, mental, and spiritual faculties" (Brown 21). Like other religions under the microscope of the writers and critics cobbling together a Los Angeles culture, the Theosophical Society also attracted attention. In Upton Sinclair's treatise *The Profits of Religion*, he does not spare the Point Loma outpost:

Here in California is Madame Tingley, with a colony and a host of followers in a miniature paradise. Men work at money-lending or manufacturing sporting-goods, and when they get old and tired they make the thrilling discovery that they have souls; the theosophists cultivate these souls and they leave their money to the soul-cause, and there are lawsuits and exposes in the newspapers. For, you see, there is ferocious rivalry in the game of cultivating millionaire souls; there are slanders and feuds, just as in soulless affairs. "Don't have anything to do with Madame Tingley," whispers a Theosophist lady to my wife; and when my wife in all innocence inquires, "Why not?" the awe-stricken answer comes, "She practices black magic!" (135).

Whether through black magic or good old-fashioned American industry, Tingley imagined all of this self-improvement would fuel a larger purpose of making California a modern-day Oz, free of poverty, illness, and even death through the promise of reincarnation. Tingley didn't stop at theory; she desired practical

confirmation of the locale's eminence: "Tingley wanted to send archaeologists from Point Loma to excavate Mayan and Aztec cities and prove that America was the oldest civilization of all. America would be at once the oldest and newest of cultures, combining depth and authority with youthful glamour, force, and possibility. California would rule the world" (Brown 18). Unfortunately, two events intervened to interrupt the progress of the Point Loma ascendancy. In 1929, the Purple Mother was killed in a car accident, and the following decade of Depression drained the coffers of the colony. As we shall see, however, Annie Besant's influence was felt elsewhere in the city due to her close involvement with J. Krishnamurti.

### **East from the West**

It's somewhat odd to discuss "Eastern" religions coming to Los Angeles, because many of the spiritual principles that found new form in the city traveled east from countries directly to the west, across the Pacific. Many other American forms of Eastern spirituality also traveled west to Los Angeles from origins on the East Coast. Los Angeles essentially sat in the middle of two oppositional currents and received the stimuli of both influences. Hinduism and Buddhism were the primary inspirations for many spiritual developments in the city that followed an Eastern path.

Hinduism first made its presence known in American culture with Cotton Mather's 1721 publication *India Christiana* and then gained more popularity with late eighteenth-century translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Laws of Manu* (Marty *EARH* 288). Hinduism attracted both the transcendentalists and the theosophists, who sought to incorporate some of the Hindu beliefs into their theories of primeval

wisdom. The theosophists were early adopters of what would become Hinduism's widespread popularity in the 1960s, partly due to Indian independence in 1947, which encouraged the freedom of alternative religion both at home and abroad.

In 1909, a 14-year-old boy by the name of Jiddu Krishnamurti was visiting an Indian beach and met traveling Theosophist C.W. Leadbeater. Leadbeater read the boy's aura and determined him to be completely free of selfishness.<sup>18</sup> By 1920, Annie Besant had embraced Krishnamurti as "the future World Teacher" of the Theosophical Society, "destined to be possessed by the same divine spirit that had formerly been incarnated in Jesus Christ and, two thousand years before that, as the lute-playing Hindu god Krishna" (Reid 187). After a makeover worthy of Krishnamurti's impending celebrity, the young man was trotted out worldwide, spreading the Theosophist belief in an imminent Second Coming and gaining notoriety in the international media as the "New Messiah in Tennis Flannels" (Reid 189). Krishnamurti was initially reluctant to embrace his role as World Teacher, but after a series of seizures interpreted as possessions by a divine spirit and the death of his brother, he began to take advantage of his position. His first public talk in the U.S. took place at the Hollywood Bowl in 1926 in front of a crowd of 16,000 spectators. It was only a few years, however – years of potential film deals and exclusive seminars in Ojai, California – before Krishnamurti tired of his station and disbanded the Order of the Star, an international organization dedicated to his deification, in 1928.

After the Theosophical Society of America was established at Point Loma, Katherine Tingley – well within the bounds of theosophical doctrine that did not

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<sup>18</sup> C.W. Leadbeater had recently been forced to resign his position within the Theosophical Society administration for teaching masturbation to young boys (Washington 121). His reinstatement coincides with the discovery of Krishnamurti.

discriminate between divine energies – turned her attention away from Hinduism toward Buddhism, the religion embraced by Blavatsky and Olcott before Annie Besant assumed leadership of the theosophists, and toward the idea of a singularly American spirituality. This move may also have been a way to distance herself from the Krishnamurti media spectacle, since she had never acknowledged or believed that he was the awaited Messiah. The *Encyclopedia of American Religious History* credits Henry David Thoreau’s 1844 translation from the French of the *Lotus Sutra* by Eugene Burnouf with allowing the distinction in U.S. culture between Buddhism and “other ‘heathen’ religions” (87). By the time the Theosophists arrived in Los Angeles, there was already a burgeoning interest in and acceptance of the Eastern religion. While Buddhism in California primarily took root farther up the coast, the first Nichiren Buddhist Temple in North America was established in Los Angeles in 1914. However, the forced internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II caused the temple to shut down for the duration of the conflict. By the next decade, however, Buddhism was on the rise again, with the establishment of a major Zen center in Los Angeles in 1956. Eldon Ernst observes that “[more] than one hundred distinct types of Buddhism have come to Los Angeles since the late 1980s....where 40 percent of the nation’s estimated 1.5 million Buddhists now live” (45).

Swami Vivekananda founded The Vedanta Society in New York in 1894, based on a branch of Hindu philosophy that practices disciplines of wisdom and devotion drawn primarily from the Upanishads. Vedanta disciples believe in an impersonal absolute indistinguishable from individual soul (Marty *EARH* 698). The teachings of Vedanta are based on the philosophy of an Indian holy man named

Ramakrishna, who so strongly identified with the Hindu goddess Kali that he was often mistaken for a woman (Ellwood & Partin 185). Vivekananda, however, is primarily responsible for circulating Ramakrishna's message through the West. Many writers that came to Hollywood, especially those like Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood who were seeking a freedom not found in the U.K., became adherents of Vedanta. Isherwood found some renown with his 1945 publication *Vedanta for the Western World*.<sup>19</sup>

Following his immigration to Los Angeles from India sometime after 1920, Hindu missionary Swami Paramahansa Yogananda established the Self-Realization Fellowship. The Fellowship "aims to teach the principles of Hinduism's Yoga Sutras and the techniques of *kriya yoga*, a tantric discipline in which gurus instruct students how to achieve God-realization by directing their spiritual power or *kundalini*. Like the Vedanta Society, the Self-Realization Fellowship emphasizes commonalities rather than differences between Hinduism and Christianity" (Marty *EARH* 291). The Worldwide Prayer Circle, a subsidiary of the Fellowship, is an international network of groups and individuals dedicated to prayer for peace and those in need of spiritual aid. When Yogananda died in 1952, his body supposedly resisted decay for 20 days: "A notarized statement signed by the Director of Forest Lawn Memorial-Park testified: 'No physical disintegration was visible in his body even twenty days after death....This state of perfect preservation of a body is, so far as we know from mortuary annals, an unparalleled one....Yogananda's body was apparently in a phenomenal state of immutability'" ("The Life" ¶14). A nun named Faye Wright –

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<sup>19</sup> For a more extensive discussion of Isherwood's Vedanta history and the 1980 publication *My Guru and His Disciple*, see Chapter Two.

also known as Sri Daya Mata or “Mother of Compassion” – assumed leadership of the Fellowship in 1955, marking possibly the first time a woman had taken the reins of a Hindu spiritual organization. She still presides over the Fellowship today.

More often a sign of the danger rather than the promise of Eastern religion, the Hare Krishna movement also began in Los Angeles. In 1966, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was created by A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (a businessman who became an ascetic in 1959) to worship one particular Hindu god, Lord Krishna. Prabhupada arrived in Los Angeles in 1965 and began to attract followers with his doctrine that stressed one central act: chanting a mantra to Krishna. The Hare Krishna converts were instantly recognizable, distinguished by their appearance, diet, and aggressive recruitment style. ISKCON became one of the most familiar targets of the 1970s anti-cult movement.

Like many of the religious movements that originated in Southeast Asia, the broad reach of ISKCON was primarily the responsibility of one man. In each of these sects that gained such popularity in Los Angeles and across the U.S., a central figure stepped into the role of mystical Other to captivate and enlighten Westerners with Eastern philosophies and spiritual techniques. As Los Angeles began to assume its identity as America’s capital on the Pacific Rim, all things “Eastern” entered the cultural marketplace, and organizations like ISKCON, Vedanta, and the Self-Realization Fellowship offered popular spiritual currency.

## **Judaism & Kabbalah**

A brief look at Judaism can give us a clue as to how more traditional, established mainstream religions in the U.S. handled the move westward. While followers of generally orthodox religions like Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam joined the migration to Southern California, they primarily did nothing significant to alter the dogma of their faiths upon arrival. On the other hand, leaders of these religions who made the move were often considered unnecessarily radical. According to Deborah Dash Moore, East Coast Jews would joke that the only rabbis who would be attracted to Los Angeles were those with either one lung or two wives (396). Regardless of the resistance and mockery, rabbis and their followers continued to relocate, eventually making Los Angeles the site of the second largest Jewish population in the U.S.

Beginning around the 1850s with the migration of such pioneers as Harris Newmark, who began building the economic infrastructure of the city long before the arrival of subsequently well-known magnates like Harrison Gray Otis and Charles Fletcher Lummis, the Jewish settlers contributed a great deal to the community in which they lived. The Hebrew Benevolent Society was created in 1854 (with the Ladies HBS following shortly thereafter in 1870), and the first synagogue in the city was established in 1862. Grand immigration followed, as within all of the Los Angeles communities, so that by 1900, there were an estimated 2500 Jews living in the city and by 1927, the number had grown to 65,000 (Wilson 73).

Most of the Jews who moved to Los Angeles, unlike the population in New York, were not transplants from Europe but rather American Jews who decided to

follow the sun out west. Because of the nature of the new residents, the community was not united by the need to learn a new language or customs, and therefore as the population grew and spread out within the city, there was an increasing sense of division. The Orthodox community made a brief attempt in 1919-20 to establish a central rabbi for the city, but this move was not successful in gathering the tribes. After World War II, in the loose structure of the Los Angeles Jewish community, “those seeking religious roots necessarily engaged in an individual, personal quest, not a collective endeavor” (Moore 375). This individual quest reflects the same spiritual searching carried out by adherents of varied religious organizations springing up anew almost daily in Los Angeles. Although the focus on personal rather than community-based Judaism was a trend not exclusive to the west coast, Los Angeles gained a reputation as something of an experiment in reform. This led to the sense of a “Jewish frontier setting,” drawing rabbis “willing to take risks and to innovate in order to pull newcomers to the cities into their synagogues” (Moore 393). However, in Judaism – like other mainstream religions – the innovations and risks were not significant enough to constitute a true alternative within the establishment.

Interestingly enough, this long-established religion has spawned one of the more popular “cults” of the twenty-first century. Celebrities have helped make Kabbalah, a deviation from orthodox Judaism that focuses on mystic messages within the Torah, practically synonymous with Hollywood. Kabbalah is an ancient belief system within Judaism that espouses the idea that each Hebrew letter contains hidden meaning and that this meaning can be decrypted through various, semi-secret methods. Like many fundamentalist religions that spring from a more mainstream

source, those who believe in Kabbalah see it as the true theology of Judaism, and one of the key texts was supposedly transmitted to Adam after his expulsion from Eden. So how did this form of mysticism, practiced at least as far back as the twelfth century, become the spiritual darling of Hollywood celebrities?

Like other alternative religions in Los Angeles, the lure of this particular set of beliefs has been intensified through the charisma of its leader, Rabbi Philip S. Berg of the Kabbalah Centre of Los Angeles. Although the Kabbalah Centre, like Scientology, has come to power a bit later than the timeframe we've been considering, its overweening presence in the popular media and its stereotypical formation merit some attention. While Berg claims to be "the greatest Kabbalist in the world," critics claim he is generally ignorant of the intellectually demanding Hebrew texts on which the Centre is focused. The *Canadian Daily News* reports that most of the students and teachers at the Centre don't even read Hebrew, much less boast the ability to interpret the mystic messages behind the letters. According to a 1995 report from the Los Angeles-based Task Force on Cults and Missionaries, Berg uses intimidation, fear, and threats of litigation – in a similar manner to that of the Scientologists – both to recruit members to the Centre and prevent his detractors from exercising their right to free expression. He has sued an orthodox rabbi – an act forbidden by Jewish law – and frequently uses horoscopes and astrology – also taboo – to counsel those interested in the Centre ("The Truth About the Kabbalah Centre"). Many prominent Jewish leaders have condemned Berg and his Kabbalah Centre, but that didn't stop Madonna from plastering the Hebrew letters for God above the stage during her 2004 "Reinvention" tour. Similar to many religions that gain widespread

popularity, the complex doctrinal origins of Kabbalah have been shaped into a pretty package in order to recruit more followers. In the next section, we'll see how variants on Christianity have been marketed to willing believers.

### **Jesus as Savior**

As seen in Chapter Three, unorthodox forms of Christianity also flourished in the city named after angels, a symbol of the Christian divine. The First Congregational Church, the oldest continually functioning Protestant church in the U.S., was founded in Los Angeles in 1867, long before the city underwent its boom. However, once the metropolis began to grow at the turn of the century, so did the assortment of religions being offered to fresh residents of Los Angeles. Many of these new religions took Jesus Christ as their savior, but they strayed from the doctrinal tenets of Christianity for various reasons.

One of the earliest sect leaders to establish himself in Los Angeles was William Money – also known as “Bishop Money” – who was the first leader of the Reformed New Testament Church of the Faith of Jesus Christ, the first Los Angeles metaphysical cult founded in 1849 (Writers' Program 68). The Catholic clergy considered him “the most obstinate heretic on earth” (Pitt 329). In addition to his duties to the Reformed Church, he also practiced medicine without a license and was one of the first local authors, publishing *The Reform of the New Testament Church* in English and *A Treatise on the Mysteries of the Physical System and the Methods of Treating Diseases by Proper Remedies* in Spanish (Pitt 329). Money angered the local Catholic establishment by declaring, “Miracles are for the ignorant and

barbarous, who cannot be enlightened by arguments" (Rasmussen 1). Money's many claims included the belief he could rise from the grave – although his nerve failed when he was actually nailed into a coffin to prove his power – and the prediction that San Francisco would fall into the sea in punishment for its sins.<sup>20</sup>

The Church of the Nazarene was the largest product of the nineteenth century Holiness movement, based on John Wesley's principle that a true believer could achieve freedom from sin (perfection) in this life. In 1895, Phineas Bresee was a Methodist minister in Los Angeles. When he invited members of the National Holiness Association to visit his church, Bresee underwent sanctification and began conducting revivals. The Methodist bishop did not approve, leading Bresee to separate from his ministry and launch the quite popular Church of the Nazarene. In 1908, the eastern Association of Pentecostal Churches joined with Bresee to spread the Church of the Nazarene nationally, however without the glossolalia (speaking in tongues) that characterized many other forms of Pentecostalism. Instead, the church focused on Wesley's moral ideas – helping the needy and avoiding indulgence of all kinds (Marty *EARH* 130-1).

While Pentecostalism was a nationwide development, many fundamental figures of the movement started their campaigns in Los Angeles. Aimee Semple McPherson, a bastion of Pentecostalism in the city, was not alone in her pursuit of prophecy, healing, and glossolalia. The Angelus Temple received the most press, often in conjunction with events such as the baptism of Marilyn Monroe, but the Foursquare Gospel was not the only, nor the first, branch of Pentecostalism popular in

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<sup>20</sup> William Money was not the only family member to gain notoriety in the city. His daughter Lastania shot her "seducer" in public in 1881 and was acquitted at trial with a defense of "menstrual madness" (Rasmussen 1).

the city. In fact, before Aimee Semple McPherson emerged on the scene, Pentecostalism already had a strong and historic hold in the form of the Azusa Street Mission.

In 1906, Holiness minister William Seymour, the son of former slaves, initiated the revival around Azusa Street that saw thousands of acolytes embracing Los Angeles as the center of Pentecostalism. Many inspired at 312 Azusa Street took the message back home, spreading the word nationally. Glossolalia was the primary indicator that the penitent had been sanctified (released from sin). Of all the burgeoning religions in the city, Pentecostalism drew the most interracial congregations, seen also in McPherson's Angelus Temple. In an interesting comment on the vagaries of multiculturalism in Los Angeles, some believed this integration of the races revealed special favor in the eyes of God, while others used their bigotry to malign the Azusa Street church (Marty *EARH* 48). The fleeting existence of the revival – reaching its peak for about three years before dwindling into eventual demolition of the site in 1931 – was typical of the burn bright, burn out nature of many new religions in Los Angeles.

Another variant of Pentecostalism – the charismatic movement that reached its culmination in the 1960s – got an early start in Los Angeles when Demos Shakarian founded the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship in 1951. As seen in this organization, made up of successful L.A. businessmen, the charismatic movement often had white, middle-class congregants whereas Pentecostalism had become increasingly a faith of African-Americans. *The Encyclopedia of American Religious History* also makes the distinction that charismatics often continued to belong to their

Catholic and Protestant churches, forming side organizations like Shakarian's to explore their belief in spiritual healing, prophecy, and glossolalia (110-111). The transition was not always so easy-going: in 1960, Rev. Dennis Bennett of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys claimed to possess the gift of speaking in tongues and was removed from his post, however not before splitting the church in two.

The public spectacle involved in the dramatic act of glossolalia fits perfectly within the ethos of Los Angeles's foremost enterprise, the Hollywood film industry. This culture may have contributed to the acceptance and popularity of unconventional ritual and the veneration of individuals at the head of various congregations. Grant Wacker offers a metaphor from the theater to explain the dual roles of primitivism and pragmatism in pentecostal culture:

By this reckoning the primitive invariably stood front and center stage, carrying the burden of the plot, reveling in the applause of the faithful and, of course, bravely bearing the jeers of the faithless. The pragmatic, on the other and, normally served as the stage manager, standing behind the curtains, orchestrating all of the moves – but with the cash till never far from mind (Wacker 429).

As demonstrated by the relevant example of Aimee Semple McPherson and her mother/manager Mimi Kennedy (explored further in Chapter Three), the most successful religions in Los Angeles practiced a blend of carefully handled celebrity and well-executed business savvy.

### **God's Girls: The Lure of Feminine Charisma**

Part of the reason for the national popularity of Pentecostalism is undeniably the charisma of its female evangelists. Aimee Semple McPherson was not alone in drawing the crowds to revivals and commanding impressive collections of wealth and power. Even outside of Pentecostalism, women like Katherine Tingley, Edna Ballard, Faye Wright, and Ellen White assumed leadership roles in newly formed religious organizations. The women of Pentecostalism, however, passed a torch of spiritual power and often found a home in Los Angeles. From Maria Woodworth-Etter to Aimee Semple McPherson to Rheba Crawford to Uldine Utley to Kathryn Kuhlman, these evangelists are primarily responsible for one of the most charismatic and rapidly expanding American religious movements of the twentieth century.<sup>21</sup>

A brief discussion of how women were able to achieve this level of power provides a glimpse into gender roles in both mainstream and marginal religions. In the introduction to the collection *Women's Leadership in Marginal Religions*, Catherine Wessinger delineates the characteristics of religions that provide more freedom for women to rise to leadership. The first element is “a perception of the divine that de-emphasized the masculine either by means of a bisexual divinity or an impersonal, nonanthropomorphic divine principle.” Theosophy is an excellent example of the move to a more universal divine energy rather than a belief in a singular God. The remaining three characteristics apply to the movement within Pentecostalism that allowed women like Kuhlman and McPherson to ascend to

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<sup>21</sup> Maria B. Woodworth-Etter (1844-1924) was an early evangelist in the revival tradition, often referred to as the “grandmother” of the subsequent Pentecostal movement. For more information on Aimee Semple McPherson (1890-1944), see Chapter Three. Rheba Crawford was Aimee Semple McPherson’s popular stand-in at the Angelus Temple. Uldine Utley (1912-1995), inspired by a McPherson sermon, became the youngest known female evangelist at age 14 in 1926.

power: “a tempering or denial of the doctrine of the Fall,” “a denial of the need for a traditional ordained clergy,” and “a view of marriage that did not stress the married state and motherhood as the proper sphere for woman and her only means of fulfillment” (3). The nature of Pentecostalism and its focus on sanctification – the ability to remove sin in this lifetime – and spiritual healing undermined the concept in many established forms of Christianity that original sin was irrevocable. However, the subtext of the rejection of original sin also prevents blame for mankind’s postlapsarian state from falling squarely on the shoulders of Eve. The system of Pentecostal revivalism and its acceptance of evangelists who did not possess formal training allowed women, who otherwise would not have been permitted to become ordained, to attract their own congregations. While it was hardly a tenet of Pentecostalism that women did not need to marry – in fact, the unmarried state of all the evangelists in this discussion was a cause of much sexual anxiety and speculation – there was an acceptance of the idea that a woman could devote her life to being a healer.<sup>22</sup>

Ann Braude, in defending her claim that “Women’s History *Is* American History,” describes how the rejection of conventional gender roles and conventional religious beliefs go hand in hand: “Because women have been excluded from religious leadership at the same time that they have been elevated for their natural piety, it is not surprising that they have played a prominent role in dissent” (163). She lists Mary Baker Eddy, Helena Blavatsky, and Ellen White, among others, as women leading the charge in creating religious alternatives, while also highlighting the

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<sup>22</sup> In *Women and Religion*, Majella Franzmann discusses the idea that the sexuality of a woman with religious aspirations called attention to her gender. The more virginal a woman was, the more she could resemble a man and therefore be more readily accepted as a religious leader.

overlooked presence of women in the development of religious sensibilities in the U.S.: "...the numerical dominance of women in all but a few religious groups constitutes one of the most consistent features of American religion, and one of the least explained" (Braude 162). Rather than venture an explanation here, it may be more pertinent here to raise another question. Religious scholar Mary Farrell Bednarowski wonders what came first – "whether women are attracted to certain marginal religions because of their characteristics favoring women's equal participation and leadership, or whether women deliberately shape these religions to have these characteristics" (Wessinger 13). In looking at the life of Kathryn Kuhlman, a prominent female Pentecostal evangelist who spent formative time in Los Angeles, we can see that it is often difficult to discern the distinction.

Kathryn Kuhlman got her start in 1924, touring with traveling evangelists Myrtle and Everett Parrott. Eventually, Kuhlman enrolled at the Christian and Missionary Alliance's Simpson Bible Institute in Seattle, but she was shortly expelled in 1926 for infractions involving a midnight rendezvous. She then moved to Los Angeles and attended Aimee Semple McPherson's LIFE Bible College. In his biography of Kuhlman, Wayne E. Warner claims that it was obvious McPherson was a role model for the budding evangelist, but due to the scandals surrounding Kuhlman's arrival in L.A. and McPherson's alleged kidnapping, Kuhlman would never admit to having studied with the Foursquare Gospel founder. It wasn't until six years after McPherson's death, when the spotlight had dimmed sufficiently, that Kuhlman started to get national headlines.

In 1928, Kuhlman partnered with Helen Guilliford and began touring the revival circuit under the name “God’s Girls.” Whether due to the shame cast by the legacy of McPherson’s scandals, the backlash against the 1920s New Woman, or Kuhlman’s status as a single woman rather than a widow, she and Guilliford were loudly criticized for using sex to sell salvation. Later, Kuhlman described her life to a Detroit newspaper: “The girl evangelist has no easy time – I work as high as 18 hours a day. She must live in an atmosphere of ever watchful care, for there are so many eager to misjudge. She must always be smiling, happy, eager – the famine relief of tears is denied her....The life is no bed of roses, but I am happy in my work, for I believe in it” (quoted in Warner 49). The persona of overworked but grateful servant of God was used to combat images of the spiritual consort. However, Kuhlman was not able to retain her happy-go-lucky persona for long before the threat of sexual peril became more than simply unfounded gossip in her congregation.

Following in the footsteps of McPherson in more ways than one, Kuhlman moved to Denver, where she started a healthy congregation and founded religious radio station KVOD. She also began having an affair with a married man, Burroughs A. Waltrip. While he eventually left his wife for her, Kuhlman lost her Denver church when the indiscretion became public knowledge. The couple moved back to Los Angeles, where they separated in 1946 when Waltrip went to jail for allegedly taking money from another woman. Warner recounts how the streets of Los Angeles came to play a leading role in the mythos Kuhlman cultivated for the rest of her days:

Kathryn often looked back to a critical Saturday afternoon in Los Angeles as the time she actually surrendered to God’s will. She called it the death of

Kathryn Kuhlman. And with the death came a new awareness that the Holy Spirit was now in complete control....Years later in a rare time when Kathryn was willing to indulge in nostalgia, she tearfully described walking along that Los Angeles street, deep in thought and fighting the battle of her life. Would she remain married even though she was seldom with Waltrip, or would she return to what she had known before she left Denver? As she walked and pondered her future, she saw a sign that told her the street she was on was a dead end. Nothing could be clearer to her (109).

While Kuhlman conceivably could have interpreted the dead end sign in a number of ways, she took this transformative day as a sign to devote herself more fully to her spiritual mission. She went on to preach for 48 years, publish dozens of widely translated books, produce thousands of radio and television programs, and build churches all over the world. “She was honored by several cities, the South Vietnam government, and everyone from poor immigrants in north Pittsburgh to Pope Paul VI” (Warner 13). Up until her final service in 1975 at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, Kuhlman frequently recounted the story of the city itself sending her a message.

### **Cosmic Consciousness**

Kathryn Kuhlman wasn't the only one receiving messages. Many varieties of religious experience in Los Angeles focused on a heightened communion with the cosmos, drawing on spiritualist and New Thought philosophies and embracing the universal divine in all. This tradition falls under the name “harmonial”: “Harmonial

religion encompasses those forms of piety and belief in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person's rapport with the cosmos" (Ahlstrom 1019). Common features include charismatic leaders, complicated histories and rituals, and secret – or at least vague – spiritual doctrines. The nature of these harmonial religions struck a chord with the American public, and in some ways, they came to represent the varied spiritual desires of the nation. Christian Science, Mormonism, Seventh-Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Pentecostalism all "bear the stamp 'made in America'" (Ahlstrom 1021). While only some of these religions play a part in the spiritual history of Los Angeles, some other, less enduring religions in the harmonial tradition were L.A. born and bred.

One of the most provocatively named alternative religions in Los Angeles, the Mighty I AM movement was started in 1930 by Guy and Edna Ballard. The couple had prolonged connections with occultism before Guy Ballard published *Unveiled Mysteries* in 1934, a book in which he claimed to have received revelations from Saint Germain, the "ascended master" who starred in the texts and public ceremonies of the Ballards. The real Comte de Saint-Germain was the alleged founder of freemasonry in eighteenth-century France, but Ballard claimed to have met him in the form of a young man offering him a creamy drink during a mountain hike.

According to Ballard, Saint Germain had ascended to become a member of the Divine Spiritual Hierarchy which rules the life of the universe, and had been assigned the task of initiating the Seventh Golden Age, the permanent "I AM" Age of eternal perfection on this earth. He had searched Europe for

several centuries to find someone in human embodiment through whom he could release the instructions of the Great Law of Life. Not finding anyone, he began a search in America, where he...subsequently designated Ballard, his wife Edna, and their son Donald as the only Accredited Messengers of the Ascended Masters (Institute for the Study of American Religion ¶ 5).

The Ballards and their special relationship with the master drew the public in hordes; there were theatrical meetings across the U.S. attended by an estimate of three million people. “Like Christian Science, their program emphasized healing; like the later New Thought, it stressed the vast powers latent in man by virtue of his unity with Being (I AM) and the aid to be received from ascended cosmic beings” (Ahlstrom 1043). Guy’s death in 1939 and subsequent lawsuits for fraudulent use of the mail system ended the movement.

Considering the number of spiritual and cinematic narratives being crafted in Los Angeles on a daily basis, it is somewhat surprising that only one Hollywood screenwriter ever took a shot at starting his own religion. In a March 1929 *American Magazine* article, Hollywood screenwriter and real estate promoter William Dudley Pelley claimed that he had died and been reborn after “seven minutes in Eternity” (Ahlstrom 1043). Subsequently, Pelley became a medium for the wisdom of the mahatmas and gathered his followers under the moniker, “The Legion of Silver Shirts.” In a sign of the times, Pelley was convinced that Hitler was the leader “to whom his divine instructions pointed” (Ahlstrom 1043). Eventually, Pelley wound up in jail, and many of his adherents turned to the Mighty I AM movement. After his release from prison in 1954, Pelley picked up where he left off and published

messages he claimed to have received from Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy.

No contemporary discussion of alternative religion in Los Angeles could be complete without the secretive enclave popular among Hollywood celebrities, The Church of Scientology. However, the church has become a completely different institution than it was during the time period generally covered in this project. Originally, L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology and its philosophy Dianetics, was a struggling science fiction writer. According to R. Laurence Moore, Hubbard's original intent was "to establish a new school of psychotherapy, one with its own language of 'auditing,' 'reactive mind,' engrams,' and 'clears'" (259). It wasn't until 1953 that he decided to turn some of these ideas into a religion and increase the popularity of his opus, *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*. The book details how engrams (brain records of past experiences and lives) can be treated to free the reactive mind from destructive behavior through auditing and clearing of the engrammic effect:

In the 1960s Hubbard added to this basic therapy a more elaborate metaphysics that described the spiritual essence of the human being as a "thetan"...Scientologists strive to become not only "Clears" but also "Operating Thetans" (O.T.s). Freed from the ill effects of the "reactive mind," O.T.s are thought by Hubbard to possess extraordinary powers, including the ability to bring into existence MEST: Matter, Energy, Space, and Time (Marty *EARH 596-7*).

Such descriptions clearly harken back to Hubbard's science fiction beginnings, but they are also elements in Scientology that evoke Freud, Eastern religions, Native American folklore, and Mormonism. "The French sociologist Regis Dericquebourg, an expert in comparative religions, explains Scientology's belief system as one of 'regressive utopia,' in which man seeks to return to a once-perfect state through a variety of meticulous, and rigorous, processes intended to put him in touch with his primordial spirit" (Reitman ¶ 5). Few reach the high plane where Operating Thetans return to this ideal state.

In 1967, the Church of Scientology suffered a blow when the IRS ruled that it was not a tax-exempt religious organization, its critics citing greed as the reason. The decision was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1988, and ten Scientology leaders were imprisoned in early 1980s for investigation interference. The Church was redeemed in 1993 when it was granted tax-exempt status after a vocal defense by celebrities and the American Civil Liberties Union. L. Ron Hubbard died in 1986, and the Church is now led by David Miscavige. While the Scientologists claim eight million members, a recent survey by the City University of New York numbers its members at only 55,000 (Kosmin & Mayer). What once began as an experiment by a speculative novelist is now an incredibly wealthy, clandestine institution whose participants are fiercely loyal and notoriously close-mouthed. This secrecy is possibly so customary because they don't know enough to betray the organization. In a February 2006 exposé in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Janet Reitman reports that only the most exalted followers of Scientology ever learn the central tenets of its theology: "this would be akin to the Catholic Church refusing to tell all but a select number of

the faithful that Jesus Christ died for their sins” (§ 5). The fact that Scientology has grown to such an extent while providing little to no information on its theology, its finances, its rituals, or its history is a testament to the reactionary contagion behind any successful new religious movement.

### **Waiting for the End Time**

The “apocalyptic tradition” within alternative religion is “...a term used to identify religious movements that focus on the expectation of an imminent end to the present world” (Stein, 75). In 1844, the Millerites – led by William Miller and believing in the Adventist philosophy that the Second Coming was around the corner – were met with disappointment when they gathered, not for the first time but for the last, to receive a Christ that didn’t show. However, a young woman named Ellen Harmon refused to give up and, after her marriage to James White in 1846, began spreading the apocalyptic message. She rationalized that Christ had materialized on that October day in 1844 – only in heaven rather than on earth – and this belief was a cornerstone of the founding of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in the 1860s. Ellen White’s focus involved the notion of “hygienic living,” a brief flirtation with “dress reform” for women, and the benefits of Christian education. When her husband died in 1881, Ellen White took refuge in a mourning ritual also employed by Aimee Semple McPherson: world travel and missionary work. When she returned to the U.S. in 1900, White settled in California, basing the Seventh-day Adventist church on the West Coast.

The Branch Davidians are a sect of the Seventh-day Adventists, most well-known for the 1993 stand-off between followers and the FBI in Waco, Texas that left 80 dead, including leader David Koresh. The Branch Davidians split from the main church when a Bulgarian Adventist in Los Angeles, Victor Tasho Houteff, led a call for reform in 1929, arguing for a more strict doctrinal application centered around the scripture “Here ye the rod” (Post 1). Houteff saw current events as indications of the end of the world. Decades later, Koresh named the Branch Davidian compound at Waco “Ranch Apocalypse” and believed that the end time would begin when the U.S. army attacked, and for the 80 believers who perished, it did.

The focus on dispensationalism, an apocalyptic end to this sinful life on earth and the infallibility of the scriptures that predict this fate, is the primary component of the early twentieth-century Fundamentalist movement in America. According to Ernest Sandeen, the Fundamentalist identity as an alternative, marginal religion is crucial to their ecclesiology:

The church was made up of God’s elect who were always only a handful, seldom if ever the possessors of power. The true church could not possibly be identified with any of the large denominations, which were riddled with heresy, but could only be formed by individual Christians who could expect to be saved from impending destruction (69).

A 1924 *Time Magazine* article identified The Christian Fundamentals League of Los Angeles as the main organization at the heart of this movement. This centrality was affirmed through the mass dissemination of a single publication generated by the League between 1910 and 1915: *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*.

Lyman and Milton Stewart, two oil stockholders in Los Angeles who went by the pseudonym “Two Christian Layman,” printed and distributed over a million copies of a series of twelve pamphlets that became “the most commonly cited source of Fundamentalist teaching” (Sandeen 77).<sup>23</sup> Over time, a total of 64 authors contributed 90 articles to the series. The Stewarts then went on to establish the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (BIOLA), an educational institution that still thrives today (DeBerg 158). While *The Fundamentals* took a conservative course when it came to grandstanding the day of reckoning, millennialist disaster still loomed large as a tenet of the belief system.

The Jesus People are most often considered the hippie center of counterculture religion. The People were “committed to conservative Christian values” but felt “alienated from conventional religion and established churches” and saw a “personal relationship with Jesus as the religious experience at the center of the movement” (Stein 131). Critics claimed their acolytes were often converted while their recovery from the counterculture lifestyle – drugs, free love, and unconventional living arrangements – left them in a weakened state. While not all members of the Jesus movement were convinced of the imminent end of the world, the organization piqued the apocalyptic interests of those “under the spell” of publications like Hal Lindsey’s 1971 book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Stein 132). Lindsey’s text, written after he formed a prophetic ministry in California, is important to the development of the dispensationalist mythology because of its expansion of the apocalyptic imagery into a nuclear war sparked by a Russian invasion of the Middle East. Lindsey appealed to

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<sup>23</sup> While Sandeen states that somewhere between 175,000 and 300,000 copies went out, Martin E. Marty places the total distribution figures closer to three million.

the Jesus People because he also saw the dangers of a combination of drugs and religion:

Look for drug addiction to further permeate the U.S. and other free-world countries. Drug addicts will run for high political office and win through support of the young adults....Look for drugs and forms of religion to be merged together. There will be a great general increase of belief in extrasensory phenomena, which will not be related to the true God, but to Satan....Astrology, witchcraft, and oriental religions will become predominant in the western world ("Hal Lindsey" 1).

While different believers have different ideas of what the end of the world will look like, both in its approach and its arrival, writers and thinkers in Los Angeles have been preoccupied with images of the apocalypse since the city's inception. In Chapter Five, we will look at some literature of the apocalypse that has contributed to Los Angeles culture and how religion plays an integral role in this prophecy.

In *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation*, Harold Bloom analyzes the development of the American religious imagination and argues for the importance of a genre he calls "religious criticism," focused on the spiritual dimensions of our culture in the way that literary criticism focuses on aesthetics. He observes that "[no] Western nation is as religion-soaked as ours" and refers to the U.S. as a "religion-mad country" (37). Identifying the national faith as an Americanized Gnosticism, he describes the common desire for an individual relationship with the spirit rather than a communal salvation. "And since the American Religion was syncretic, from the start, it can establish itself within nearly

any available outward form” (31). The variety of these outward forms, and the mélange of traditions and rituals that comprise each belief system, can be seen in this survey of Los Angeles religion. While the community appeal of each of these sects attracts members to its fold, in the end, the only soul you can save is your own.

## *Chapter Five*

### *Apocalypse Salvation: Literary Dispatches from the End of the World*

In the 1953 film adaptation of H.G. Wells's classic invasion tale *The War of the Worlds*, aliens come to Earth, bent on human destruction. Southern California stands in for the world when an alien spaceship crashes in a small town called Linda Rosa. Representing two poles of the area's industry and energy – science and religion – a “Pacific Tech” scientist and a minister's niece team up to combat the invasion. When the minister tries to intervene with the aliens and convince them to accept a peaceful resolution, he is vaporized for his trouble. Scenes in Los Angeles proper show the chaos overtaking Earth, complete with a riot in the downtown streets. In keeping with the film's origins, the aliens are eventually annihilated, not by military intervention or high-tech weaponry, but by bacteria that spreads lethally through their population. One of the final scenes of the film is most relevant to this project: when the aliens appear indestructible and human demise imminent, the masses are seen fleeing in droves to their nearest church, the last refuge of the apocalyptically threatened. This connection between the end of the world and the overwhelming need for spiritual solace, even in the face of its incompetence, recurs continually through the canon of Los Angeles literature. The apocalypse is both feared, an anxiety inspired by continual reminders from the Southern California landscape, and desired by those seeking further spiritual frontiers and a long-deferred meeting with their maker.

Los Angeles is widely characterized as the territory of earthquakes, mudslides, wildfires, and more recently, civil unrest. The land itself seems in volatile opposition to its reputation as a nirvana of sunshine and oranges. In March 2003, author John Rechy was the keynote speaker at a University of Southern California film festival, during which he addressed the quotidian nature of apocalypse in Los Angeles:

Los Angeles is a city of daily apocalypse – fate swirls on the freeways. The city constantly prepares for natural disasters (and, now, very unnatural disasters), disasters that include Sant'Ana winds, fires, earthquakes, floods, sliding cliffs – no tiny catastrophes; they're immense, dramatic, extreme, even melodramatic. Los Angeles is not only metaphorically edgy but literally on the edge....Against such a dramatic backdrop, this last frontier that at any moment may tremble toward apocalypse, this last-chance frontier, against all that, almost-biblical concepts of good and evil, morality, ethics, explorations of complex identity – these themes play well. After all, this is the City of Angels, a city of promiscuous spirituality – every religion and cult group settles here – and of physicality, a city of bodies and souls. It might be the place of exile for rebellious angels who refused to sing the praises of the celestial dictator (“From Sunset Boulevard to Mulholland Drive” ¶ 3-4).

As seen in Chapter Four, Rechy's rebellious angels are responsible for a myriad of heterodox alternatives to mainstream religion, formed in a spiritual panic against the ideas of death, perdition, and insignificance. Representations of these attempts at systems of meaning in the face of nothingness, as they come up against days of reckoning both real and imagined, are portrayed throughout the history of Los

Angeles literature. We'll take a look at three novels from different eras to see how the themes of religion and the apocalypse intertwine to construct this important motif of the genre. Nathanael West's formative 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust* initiates the discussion and, one could argue, the widespread incidence of apocalypse salvation imagery in Los Angeles literature. Gore Vidal's 1954 novel *Messiah* shows us how a death cult can precipitate the end of the world, and Carolyn See's 1987 novel *Golden Days* delivers a visceral apocalypse in the form of a nuclear war that interrupts the pursuits of the latest popular savior.

### **Generic Ambiguity**

As a result of the mass migration to California before the 1930s and the disheartening reality of the Depression, many acolytes flocked to the City of Angels in search of the one true angel who would provide solace and a sense of collective salvation. Nathanael West arrived in Los Angeles for the first time in July 1933, in search of easy Hollywood money being offered as a result of the critical acclaim of his novel *Miss Lonelyhearts*. This sojourn and those that followed led the writer already known for his religious themes to turn his critical eye to the proliferation of "invalids...health seekers...healers, spiritualists, psychics, and utopian reformers" that congregated in the areas surrounding the Hollywood dream factory (Fine 8). These impressions were brought to life in West's 1939 novel *The Day of the Locust*, which illuminates the dark side of the spiritual environment of southern California.

Nathanael West, known to his friends as “Pep,” is often credited with creating the prototypical Hollywood novel.<sup>24</sup> Despite a number of novels published before the appearance of *The Day of the Locust* in the late 1930s by writers living in the Los Angeles area, West is often discussed as having conceived the genre of the Hollywood novel as we have come to know it: the apocalyptic atmosphere pervading the city, the influential presence of the film industry, and the chaotic landscape inhabited by a principally settler population. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, literary critics weighed in on West’s contributions, in the process canonizing the author and the genre.

In a 1951 issue of the *Partisan Review*, Isaac Rosenfeld declared that of all American writers who deal with popular culture, only West “knew what he was doing” (75). V.L. Lokke and Edmund Wilson both agreed that “West was not only the first novelist to catch Hollywood’s ‘emptiness’ but also the first to make ‘this emptiness horrible’” (Siegel, 19). Harold P. Simonson wrote in 1970 that *The Day of the Locust* “should be read as a profound interpretation of how the great myth of the West comes to an end” (104). David M. Fine, author of several works of Los Angeles literary criticism, credits West’s novel and Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* with putting “Los Angeles on the national literary map” (4). Upon its publication, however, *The Day of Locust* was hardly hailed as a masterpiece, and it failed to elevate West from bohemian poverty before his death in 1940. It was not until the publication of his collected works in 1957 that the novel began to receive the critical acclaim it has since enjoyed.

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<sup>24</sup> According to Lawrence Clark Powell, this nickname was “a sarcastic reference to his lethargy in schoolboy sports” (347).

Many contemporary critics believe West's slow rise to popularity and recognition has to do with an ambiguity in his choice of genre. In a letter to George Milburn in 1939, West described his belief in this situation and bemoaned his plight:

[All] my books always fall between the different schools of writing...The radical press, although I consider myself on their side, doesn't like my particular kind of joking...and the literature boys, whom I detest, detest me in turn. The highbrow press finds that I avoid the big, significant things, and the lending library touts in the daily press think me shocking. The proof of all this is that I've never had the same publisher twice...because there is nothing to root for in my work and what is even worse, no rooters (cited in Powell, 354).

*The Day of the Locust* incorporates themes of modernism as well as a distinct negative reaction to modernist language play and highbrow themes as well as a concern with mass culture and genre blending, prefiguring postmodernism. This blur of generic identity also includes a patent exploration of what Jackson Lears terms "antimodernism." In his 1981 text *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, Lears defines this idea of antimodernism as "the recoil from an 'overcivilized' modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience...religious doubters yearned for the fierce convictions of the peasant and the ecstasies of the mystic" (xiii). He tracks symbols of Eastern and medieval cultures in the intellectual discourse of the time as evidence of this turn away from modernity. Particularly fitting for this project, Lears identified this trend as encompassing "longings for regeneration through violence," in a move away from "utilitarian standards of morality" and "the pleasure principle of a

democratic, industrial culture” (117-8). West’s focus on spiritual experimentation, violent corporality, an absence of morality, and general disgust with the trappings of “civilization” places him firmly in the antimodernist camp.

West also offers scenes of naturalism and social realism that prevent the novel from being generically characterized. The narrator seems to speak as a modernist reacting to the lingering aesthetic of romanticism when he comments on the futility of such idealism in the postwar world. “It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous” (24). For West, romanticism is not dead, but modernism has made it an object of derision and pity. In this way and others, West can be said to articulate a modernist attempt at cultural expression.

As in other modernist texts, the voices we hear in *The Day of the Locust* are from the margin. The abundant grotesques can be placed in the company of other outcasts, such as *Mrs. Dalloway’s* Septimus Warren Smith and *The Sound and the Fury’s* Benjy. From angry dwarf Abe Kusich to vaudeville buffoon Harry Greener, West’s characters are openly anti-intellectual. However, unlike other modernist authors, West does not provide a glimpse into the interior dynamic of these characters. We are told by the third-person narrator that Homer Simpson has come to California to die, and his turmoil is only revealed through the frantic inner life of his hands that “trembled and jerked, as if troubled by dreams” (84). Many critics call attention to this direct allusion to Sherwood Anderson and his short story “Hands” from *Winesburg, Ohio*, the type of town from which a character like Homer could have easily emerged. We do not know if Faye Greener, an aspiring actress who uses

men to support her financially often in return for sex, even working briefly in a brothel, senses the pathetic inconsistency between her life and her dreams, or if she feels anything at all as a result of the tragedies she leaves in her wake. This lack of interior revelation is one way West is marked as a successor to modernism.

Like Eliot's *Waste Land*, West's *Hollywood* is a barren postlapsarian world whose inhabitants wander through a nightmarish void. Victor Comerchero even goes so far as to say that "*The Day of the Locust* is, and should be read as, a prose *Waste Land*" (121). In making this statement, however, Comerchero does not consider the fact that West harnesses the confluence of fragmentary voices calling out in Eliot and removes their subjectivity. Moving away from subjectivity toward absurdity, West describes his characters in a way that makes the reader wonder if they possess any consciousness at all. When West describes Homer's emotions, for example, it is as an impotent flood that fails to reach fruition, leaving only "the refuse of feeling":

He got out of the tub, dried himself hurriedly with a rough towel, then went into the bedroom to dress. He felt even more stupid and washed out than usual. It was always like that. His emotions surged in an enormous wave, curving and rearing, higher and higher, until it seemed as though the wave must carry everything before it. But the crash never came. Something always happened at the very top of the crest and the wave collapsed to run back like water down a drain, leaving, at the most, only the refuse of feeling (62).

The individual consciousness of characters still ripples beneath the surface, but their roles as social types elucidating a realist message eclipse and mortify the climax of their emotions. The "something" that always happens at the top of the crest is the

shift away from modernist consciousness toward postmodern politics and spiritual chaos.

At play in all of these genres and movements, Nathanael West was crafting his own genre with this one story: the Hollywood novel. So much of what will later be written about living in Los Angeles is there in the story of those that stare, those that masquerade, and those that succumb to the violence that ensues. The motivations of West's characters come from a desire to find something exterior to themselves that will justify their existence. Whether this higher power takes the form of fame, sex, love, money, Dr. Know-All Pierce-All, or the "Church Invisible," the one thing that ties together the misery of these characters is a search for salvation and the repudiation of that search. This frustrated drive towards redemption links the characters in most of West's work and, as we'll see, continues through the genre to the novels of Gore Vidal and Carolyn See.

### **Pep, Judaism, & the Wirehaired Fox Terrier**

If West contributed so distinctly to the genre's origin, we must acknowledge yet another element of his work that figures heavily in all subsequent Los Angeles literature: the proliferation of religious themes, particularly those outside of the mainstream. West's fascination with religion in all its diverse forms can be traced to an early ambivalence about his own Jewish heritage. In his biography of West, née Nathan Weinstein, Jay Martin speculates that his parents gave him the name "Nathan" from the Hebrew word for "gift" in gratitude for surviving the Russian pogroms from which they fled at the turn of the century (21). Ties to their past, however, did not

prevent West's parents from joining in the tradition of a million other immigrants: becoming Americanized as quickly as possible, refraining from speaking Russian or Yiddish at home, refusing to send their children to Hebrew school, and choosing to identify with fellow German émigrés rather than the Russian Jews populating the Lower East Side of New York City. Eventually, Nathan Weinstein changed his name to Nathanael West in 1926 when he officially registered with the County Clerk before getting a passport for travel to Paris. Ben Siegel believes West eschewed his Jewishness at Brown, where he desired to join a fraternity (2). Jay Martin posits that the combination of a lack of parental guidance towards development of a Jewish identity, a distrust of orthodoxy in any form, a fear of anti-Semitism, and an embrace of modernism led to West's transformation. The figure of the Jew does not present itself often in West's works. The strict orthodoxy of any organized religion may not represent the fragmentary modern world, the multiplicity of sectarian America.

The interest of many Los Angeles writers in alternative religion follows a rejection of more mainstream faith. Despite West's apparent preferences of self-identification, many critics argue that West is crucial to the canon of Jewish-American literature. Particularly Leslie Fiedler, in a number of critiques, repeated his essential claim that "despite his own disclaimers, [West remains] in a real sense, a Jew...[revealing] so absolute a sense of the misery of being human" (cited in Siegel, 18). Fiedler discussed West's religious identity in his 1958 *Midstream* article "The Breakthrough" and expanded this idea further in his important work of criticism, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, linking West's obsession with violence to his Jewish heritage. In a comparison between West and Franz Kafka, he writes, "Jews

seem not only particularly apt at projecting images of numinous power for the unchurched, but are skillful, too, at creating myths of urban alienation and terror” (462). In Fiedler’s 1967 essay “Master of Dreams” in *Partisan Review*, he credits West with beginning “the great take-over by Jewish American writers of the American imagination” (347). Harold Bloom echoed Fiedler’s opinions in his 1987 introduction to *Modern Critical Interpretations: Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts*: “[It is] a melancholy paradigm that West, who did not wish to be Jewish in any way at all, remains the most indisputably Jewish writer yet to appear in America” (cited in Siegel 33). Yet however critics may cast West, he did not deal with themes of Judaism in his work, except in very minor exchanges between characters, such as when Balso Snell offends his Jewish guide through the horse’s intestines by referring to his “thrifty race.” For the most part in West’s work, religion took more heterodox and sinister forms.

While West’s Jewish heritage may be conspicuously absent from the novels, alternative forms of spirituality abound. Before West ventured to California, he had already written *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931), employing tropes of Greek mythology; *Miss Lonelyhearts* (1933), the tale of an advice columnist suffering from a Christ complex; and *A Cool Million* (1934), a parody of the Horatio Alger genre, almost a parable of capitalism without spirituality. *Miss Lonelyhearts* features the malevolent editor Shrike, who sees Christ as the “Miss Lonelyhearts of Miss Lonelyhearts,” alluding to the fact that Americans turn to the Christian icon as they would a popular newspaper columnist, seeking advice for the forlorn and escape from the harsh reality of Depression-era life. Citing a newspaper article that describes how

a Christian sect leader will use a “goat and adding machine ritual” to save the soul of a condemned killer, Shrike observes, “America has her own religions” (176). America, a rivalry of religions from its outset, has become the breeding ground for religious abundance. Shrike, who seems to have a disdain for everything but the sound of his own voice, sardonically suggests a number of ways that Miss Lonelyhearts may find salvation, including “escape to the soil,” the South Seas, the pursuit of pleasure, and the quest for art. His favored solution, superseding the others, is God and the church, although Shrike purposely specifies no church in particular by mentioning the ludicrous-sounding First Church of Christ Dentist. “God alone is our escape. The church is our only hope, the First Church of Christ Dentist, where He is worshipped as Preventer of Decay. The church whose symbol is the trinity new-style: Father, Son, and Wirehaired Fox Terrier” (215). Shrike’s apparent message is to undermine Miss Lonelyhearts as any possible manifestation of redeemer. By the time West writes *The Day of the Locust*, Miss Lonelyhearts has been deprived of self-doubt, and the actual desire to redeem and has been replaced by multiple Hollywood messiahs. The letter-writers of the earlier novel have been transformed into their worshippers, whom *The Day of the Locust* protagonist Tod believes are capable of destroying civilization. As we shall soon see, this death wish develops into its own religion in Gore Vidal’s imagination, but the origins of this impulse in Los Angeles can be traced to much earlier in the century.

## **Opiate of the Masses**

The 1930s saw a move toward collectivism away from a focus on the individual. The acceptance rather than denigration of the idea of mass culture, to which Hollywood catered, created a need for the American to belong. A sense of community and solidarity focused toward some goal, especially one as seductive as salvation, would lend an albeit artificial purpose to an existence characterized by urban anonymity and modernist anxiety. This need for a collective relief of despair and a nostalgic reach away from modernization and urbanization leads to the tremendous outpouring of religious fervor that Los Angeles witnessed in the 1930s.

The sect leaders who sought to recruit followers used the idea of the individual to manipulate and inspire faith. This was not necessarily a new approach to collecting disciples. In discussing William James's 1910 book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Alfred Kazin writes,

What we may or can convert to is not a new idea of God or faith in Him, but a suddenly charged realization of possibilities in ourselves withheld by the restrictive formulae of our culture – meaning scientism as necessary objective judgment superimposed on and restraining the throb of our actual experience, the truth we come upon only within our individual existence....According to James, we liberate ourselves first by being totally disenchanted with the manner and shape of our lives. This is the great thing about the arduous saints, mystics, penitents, original eccentrics, and what not, from Saint Paul to Tolstoy, whose neuroses, if you insist on that Freud-flavored word in disparagement, were really critics of their civilization (171).

In a turbulent environment like 1930s America, alternative cults that emphasized the strength of the individual within the structure of an organized community provided simultaneously a sense of belonging in an era of collectivism and an escape from the pressures of historical reality. Peter Washington describes how the religious leader of the 1930s addressed the political climate of the time, by focusing on the individual instead, “claiming, indeed, that it was only through individuals that any real change could take place in the world, and that it was worse than useless to address problems at the political level. Caught between the necessity of responding to political challenges and the impossibility of doing so, most western gurus retreated into private life during the ‘30s, that characteristically political decade” (282). As James points out, disenchantment is required for conversion, and the backlash of the Depression combined with the failure of the California-variety American dream supplied this disenchantment. The gurus supplied the criticism and the path to the “realization of possibilities,” an open-market economy for spiritual salvation.

As discussed in Chapter Four, Los Angeles in the 1930s could lay claim to hundreds of alternative religions. In *The Day of the Locust*, Tod comforts himself for the loss of Faye by haunting various Hollywood churches and drawing those disciples in attendance.

He visited the “Church of Christ, Physical” where holiness was attained through the constant use of chestweights and spring grips; the “Church Invisible” where fortunes were told and the dead made to find lost objects; the “Tabernacle of the Third Coming” where a woman in male clothing preached the “Crusade Against Salt”; and the “Temple Moderne” under whose glass

and chromium roof “Brain Breathing, the Secret of the Aztecs” was taught (141).

In this passage, West underscores the farcical nature of the motley assortment of sects springing up in Los Angeles, some of which could easily compete with his fictional churches.

Aimee Semple McPherson and her Angelus Temple epitomize the charlatanism and chicanery that marked L.A. religion 1930s-style. As seen in Chapter Three, McPherson played a significant role in shaping the landscape of alternative religion at this particular time. “Mankind United” founder Arthur Bell “claimed to have several doubles ‘all capable of thinking as one,’ *Time* reported in 1945, and Bell’s spiritual guides belonged to ‘a superhuman race of little men with metallic heads who dwell in the center of the earth’” (Reid 197). L. Ron Hubbard’s 1938 manuscript “Excalibur” posited that the “dynamic thrust” of all life, including humans, is only to survive and all life should be restructured accordingly. Hubbard went on to construct a mythology that involved ascension of the faithful in a fleet of spaceships manned by aliens (although this aspect is minimized in the Church of Scientology’s current incarnation).

When the man with the “same countersunk eyes, like the heads of burnished spikes, that a monk by Magnasco might have” rises to speak at the “Tabernacle of the Third Coming” in West’s novel, his sermon is an amalgamation of various popular religious ideologies of the time:

He was very angry. The message he had brought to the city was one that an illiterate anchorite might have given decadent Rome. It was a crazy jumble of

dietary rules, economics, and Biblical threats. He claimed to have seen the Tiger of Wrath stalking the walls of the citadel and the Jackal of Lust skulking in the shrubbery, and he connected these omens with ‘thirty dollars every Thursday’ and meat eating (141).

The “thirty dollars every Thursday” and his harangue on economics reflect popular sentiment in movements such as the Silver Shirts, who sought “Christian economics” through the disenfranchisement of Jews. Most Christian sects employed some form of “Biblical threat,” and “dietary rules” were influenced by the growing popularity of Eastern religions.

The most vividly portrayed supplicant in *The Day of the Locust* is Adore Loomis’s mother, Maybelle. She symbolizes those that have come to California to participate in the collective dream of Hollywood as well as those that have bought into some form of sham salvation. When Maybelle tells Homer and Tod that she has come to Los Angeles for her child, Homer’s first question is, “Is he sick?” He assumes she is a fellow believer in California as physical salvage yard. Instead, she subscribes to the belief of Hollywood as dream factory and idealizes the location.

“...I’ve just come from the East,” Homer said.

“Oh, have you? I’ve been here since Mr. Loomis passed on six years ago. I’m an old settler.”

“You like it then?” Tod asked.

“Like California?” she laughed at the idea that anyone might not like it.

“Why, it’s a paradise on earth!” (136)

The transitory nature of inhabitation in Los Angeles is evident in the fact that Maybelle considers herself an old settler after six years, and it is even more telling that she still considers it a paradise on earth. The reason is yet another example of the wide variety of spiritual philosophies that offered an illusion of happiness.

Her next question surprised them both.

“Who do you follow?”

“What?” said Tod.

“I mean -- in the Search for Health, along the Road of Life?”

They both gaped at her.

“I’m a raw-foodist, myself.” she said. “Dr. Pierce is our leader.

You must have seen his ads -- ‘Know-All Pierce-All’” (137).

This exchange reveals the essential spiritual climate of 1930s Los Angeles. It is automatically assumed, judging from Mrs. Loomis’s question, that one *must* be a member of some religious regimen. Who would not Search for Health along the Road of Life? Additionally, those who participate in this search must see themselves labeled as members of a congregation (“I’m a raw-foodist”) and partake in a sense of communal worship (“Dr. Pierce is *our* leader”). West – as a modernist or anti-modernist, as a naturalist or social realist, as an astute cultural critic, as a Hollywood immigrant – captures this collective desire and carries it through the frustration and backlash that occur when such a desire is thwarted.

### **Since Our People Were Barbarous and Drenched in Superstition**

From approximately 1880 to 1930, there was an enormous influx of immigrants into California from states in the Midwest, contributing to the evolution of Los Angeles as the largest city on the West Coast.

As if the continent tilted toward Southern California, the people journeyed to Los Angeles, which, like some vast organism, spread out for miles while its population increased from some fifty thousand in 1890 to over half a million thirty years later. The prospering oil, moving-picture, and aircraft industries were in Los Angeles, but people also came to wrest, sometimes desperately, nothing less than human fulfillment and God's special providence for America (Simonson, 101).

The ideas of the frontier and the Golden State promised health and wealth, while the film industry's orbit promised youth and beauty. However, as a social realist, West calls attention to the economic reality of these travelers. *The Day of the Locust's* Iowa bookkeeper Homer Simpson had inherited money from his father, which enabled him to venture to California in the first place; without it, he doubtlessly would have been forced to remain in Waynesville or to end up loitering, staring on the corner of Hollywood and Vine. "His father had left him about six thousand dollars and during the twenty years he had kept books in the hotel, he had saved at least ten more" (61). Many immigrants in search of the California dream were not veterans of a twenty-year career or they were required to spend their savings on their quest for health, the driving force of "the kind of person who comes to California to die, perfect in every detail down to fever eyes and unruly hands" (50). Often,

however, before they have the chance to die, they are consumed by the Hollywood machine, symbolized by the lizard in Homer's backyard.

The lizard represents the society of spectacle lurking behind the film industry and 1930s religious revivalism; the flies are its casualties. Homer spends hours watching the formulaic scenario that repeatedly unfolds before him. "The lizard was self-conscious and irritable, and Homer found it very amusing to watch. Whenever one of its elaborate stalks was foiled, it would shift about uneasily on its short legs and puff out its throat" (66). The lizard is capricious and self-absorbed, like the Hollywood machine that serves as the foundation for the attraction of Los Angeles. Homer is aware and fatalistic enough, however, to realize he is "on the side of the flies":

Whenever one of them, swinging too widely, would pass the cactus, he prayed silently for it to keep going or turn back. If it lighted, he watched the lizard begin its stalk and held his breath until it had killed, hoping all the while that something would warn the fly. But no matter how much he wanted the fly to escape, he never thought of interfering, and was careful not to budge or make the slightest noise. Occasionally the lizard would miscalculate. When that happened Homer would laugh happily (66-67).

In this account, not only is Homer seen as immobilized and unwilling to participate in the salvation of his "side," but West also purveys a realism that blurs into naturalism. There is no higher salvation possible here, only the natural order of predator and prey.

At first glance, it may seem Gore Vidal subverts any sense of the natural order in his 1954 novel *Messiah*, which equates suicide with salvation, but he is actually

writing squarely in the tradition of apocalypse literature. Whereas West's final image is of irredeemable madness, the historical notion of the apocalypse – a mythology dating back to 200 B.C. – involves the ultimate destruction of this degraded, sinful world *in order to* clear the way for the beginning of a new, more faithful and uncorrupted civilization (Stewart & Harding 286). In the essay “Embracing Doomsday: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalyptic Beliefs in the Nuclear Age,” millenarian scholar Daniel Wojcik describes the medieval movements that undermined dominant ecclesiastical structures from the eleventh to sixteenth centuries in a way that evokes twentieth-century Los Angeles: “The leaders of such movements – self-proclaimed messiahs, visionaries, heretics, and mystical anarchists – gained their authority apart from the institutional church and attracted disciples through personal charisma and promises of an apocalyptic end to current suffering and the establishment of a world free from pain, evil, and sin” (300). As we'll see in Vidal's novel, this promise of an end to current suffering is the exact currency used by the founder of a postwar suicide cult.

*Messiah* is narrated by Eugene Luther, whose very name evokes religious iconoclasm, a historian who has contributed to the worldwide dissemination of a suicide cult founded by a charismatic guru named John Cave. At the time the story is told, Luther has been exiled to live out his anonymous days in Egypt, his very existence erased from the annals of Cavesword history. The popularity of and adherence to Cavesword, meanwhile, has reached epic proportions, with a majority of the American Congress converted and Cavesword established as the official religion. Theodore Ziolkowski sees the Cave/Luther dynamic as “a fictional transfiguration of

Jesus Christ” with Luther in the role of Judas, which is something of an oversimplification of their relationship, despite the common initials described by Vidal as “calculated to amaze the innocent” (27). Instead, Luther embodies the role of language and rhetoric (Luther’s forte) in the success of any religious doctrine, regardless of the charisma of its leader. While Luther begins his tale with the proclamation that he has “never found it easy to tell the truth” and that “historic truth is quite impossible,” as readers we must rely on his account because the other main players are dead or fully under the Cavite sway (2). The novel alternates between flashbacks of Cavesword’s Los Angeles origins and Luther’s attempts to hide his identity during his final days in Egypt when he encounters a Cavite Communicator, a missionary role within the organization, who is trying to spread the Word throughout the Arab League where the Cavites have essentially been banned.

According to Luther, the “Squads of the Word” have “become adept at demoralization, at brainwashing and autohypnosis” and Luther fears Butler, the Communicator, is actually his assassin, which betrays the historian’s false idea of his importance to the movement (36). He attributes Cave’s power to the philosophical context in which his historians have placed him: “I, among others, composed the words which bear his name and we gave them, I fancy, a polish and an authority which, with his limited education and disregard for works of the past, he could not have accomplished on his own” (63). Throughout the novel, there is this tension between religious doctrine and spiritual charisma that is as much a clash between the foundation of religious establishment and alternative forms of mystical experience as it is a rivalry of authority between Luther and Cave. However, even Luther realizes

that the zeitgeist after the Second World War is not stable or satisfied with outdated traditions: “And that, finally, was the prevailing note of the age: since reason had been declared insufficient, only a mystic could provide the answer, only he could mark the boundaries of life with a final authority, inscrutably revealed. It was perfectly clear. All that was lacking was the man” (11).

As would be expected, Cavesword begins its ascendancy to power in Los Angeles. Gene Luther has journeyed West in order to avoid working on a history of Roman Emperor Julian, who is credited in the novel with making “the last stand of paganism against Christianity,” keeping the empire “divided between the old gods and the new messiah” (24). When Luther arrives in California, he finds the city “unique in its bright horror” (45). He is introduced to Iris Mortimer, who has been living in L.A. for a few years, working on a fashion magazine. When Luther asks her if she’d become involved with the Vedanta Society – explained as the pastime of writers “under the illusion that Asia began at Las Vegas” – Iris demurs, saying there had been “too much to read” (25). Instead, she reveals her burgeoning interest in John Cave, whom she describes as “a kind of preacher”; Iris cannot recall his teachings, only that clever and worldly people “listened to him like children” (27).

Iris is quick to defend her fascination with Cave, claiming awareness that “this part of America is particularly known for religious maniacs.” Luther’s bombastic response questions how Cave could appeal to someone like him who has acquainted himself with all of the “more colorful and obscure manifestations of divine guidance,” although he admits “human beings can be made to *believe* anything” (53-5). When Luther first encounters Cave, witnessing a sermon by the former

undertaker's assistant in a funeral parlor, he is moved more by the man's presence than his words. Something "magic" comes over the crowd, which echoes the desire for collective rapture found in *The Day of the Locust*:

We had shared an experience and it was the first time in my life that I knew what it was like to be the same as others, my heart's beat no longer individual, erratic, but held for at least this one interval of time in concert with those of strangers. It was a new, disquieting experience: to be no longer an observer, a remote intelligence. For ninety minutes to have been part of the whole (Vidal 61).

After the sermon, Luther is not even sure what he has witnessed and asks, "What *did* he say, Iris? What did he say tonight?" She answers blithely, "That it is good to die" (62).

One major difference between the apocalyptic finale of *The Day of the Locust* and *Messiah* is that Vidal constructed the tenets of Cavesword in an atomic age America embroiled in the drama of the McCarthy hearings and the early stages of the Cold War. Cave's vision addresses the pervasive anxiety of the age in its simplest terms: "Death is nothing; literally no thing; and since, demonstrably, absence of things is a good; death which is no thing is good" (67). While sects based on Eastern religion, like the Vedanta Society, are mocked in the novel and Cave had never ventured out of the Northwest U.S. until his arrival in Los Angeles, his message is most likely influenced by Buddhist teachings along the lines of the *dharmic* cycle and *asammulho kalam karoti* (the ability to face death undeluded). This Cavite focus on the beneficence of death draws so many followers – four million within a year –

because of the uncertainty of a future born from such a violent present, with accumulating signs of the endtime. Vidal writes, “The first dozen years after the second of the modern wars were indeed a ‘time of divination,’ as one religious writer unctuously described them. Not a day passed but that some omen or portent was remarked by an anxious race” (3). Among these omens are alleged extraterrestrial visitors, born of technological emergence as in *The War of the Worlds*, and Luther describes the need for belief, any belief, in an explanation for the phenomena:

It made little difference whether these mysterious blobs of light were hallucinations, intergalactic visitors or military weapons; the important thing was to explain them. To behold the inexplicable was perhaps the most unpleasant experience a human being of that age could know....And since our people were (and no doubt still are) barbarous and drenched in superstition, like the dripping ‘Saved’ at an old-time Texas baptism, it was generally felt that these odd creatures whose shining cars flashed through our poor heavens at such speed must, of necessity, be hostile and cruel and bent on world dominion, just like ourselves or at least our geographic neighbors” (4-5).

The occurrence of extraterrestrial visitation is dropped early on in *Messiah*, but the political climate in the U.S. informs the events that lead to Cavesword’s worldwide domination.

When John Cave begins to preach his message in California, the acolytes attending the meetings are monitored by the local authorities reacting to the perceived threat of communism: “...our government in its collective wisdom decided that never again would any sect or party, other than the traditional ones, be allowed to interrupt

the rich flow of the nation's life." All "deviationist societies" were watched by the police, fingerprinted, and photographed (58). We are beginning to see the hostility toward alternative religion that eventually culminates in the anti-cult movement. In his biography of Gore Vidal, Fred Kaplan outlines the state of the union that influenced the writer:

As Gore, writing *Messiah*, looked around him, he had seen an America dedicated to Senator Joseph McCarthy, to superficial Christian piety, to suppression of individuality and free speech, to increasing authoritarian control through media and political pressure, to the use of nuclear terror if not nuclear war to intimidate dissent abroad and at home, and to the triumph of Henry Luce's vision that the mission of America was to bring to the entire world *Time* magazine's combination of Christian and capitalistic doctrine (388).

Cave both works within this set of circumstances, using television as a weapon and forming the corporation Cavite Inc., and is persecuted by it, when a special Congressional hearing is formed to investigate his growing power. As Luther points out, "Ours was no longer a country where the nonconformist could escape disaster if he unwisely showed a strange face to the multitude" (144). Cave broadcasts his "strange face" through telecasts that magnify his power. His subdued method of preaching takes on a persuasive intimacy when delivered through the medium of television. Luther observes, "Cave certainly had one advantage over his predecessors: modern communications. It took three centuries for Christianity to infect the world. It was to take Cave only three years to conquer Europe and the Americas" (182). In

fact, when Cave appears before Congress, the hearing is unwisely televised and Cave's performance solidifies his catechism for the general public. Economists even begin crediting Cavesword with successful population reduction and diminishment of the need for war. Like Jesus Christ, however, Cave is soon betrayed by his media manager, Paul Himmell, who murders the guru and disguises it as a suicide, claiming Cave subscribed ultimately to his central belief. Luther, meanwhile, takes his knowledge of the murder with him to Egypt, where he watches Cavesword continue its international ascendancy.

Vidal adds a sense of order to the chaos of alternative religions in *The Day of the Locust*. In the later novel, religion does more than predict the apocalypse; it galvanizes and enables the destruction of mankind. Vidal casts the fear, anxiety, and superstition of postwar America as signs of the endtimes, and then through Cavesword, removes the negativity of these emotions and ideas to make death attractive, thereby hastening the actual arrival of the end of the world. In this ambiguous apocalyptic genre that begins with *West*, alternative religions do not provide the freedom and solace their adherents might seek at the edge of the frontier, unless death is only a precursor to paradise.<sup>25</sup>

### **Myth & Anti-Myth**

While writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Budd Schulberg were focusing on the studio head in their fiction, other writers, beginning in the bleak 1930s, began the "identification of the city with dark imaginings and violent endings":

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<sup>25</sup> *Messiah* was not Vidal's last look at the power of new religious movements. In 1978, he published *Kalki*, the tale of a war veteran in Katmandu who claims to be the latest reincarnation of the Hindu God Lord Vishnu. The end of the world is also Kalki's primary preoccupation.

Whatever power the old booster myth exerted in the early boom years, it gave way in the novelists' Los Angeles to darker visions. By the depression decade the landscape that greeted the writers was one that could no longer sustain the sunny version of new beginnings that lured the early settlers. It contained neither a sense of local history to which they could give allegiance nor an ordered sense of space (Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles*, x, 18).

While many of the L.A. novelists turned to an obsession with crime, found in the *noir* fiction of Cain and Chandler, other novelists turned to the struggle of the everyman to find his way in a strange land, a quest in which he usually had plenty of company. There is a wide variety of seekers in *The Day of the Locust*, from Maybelle Loomis to the lost souls West referred to as "the cheated." Whether as "extras" or as the protagonist, the figure of the acolyte recurs throughout the fictional portraits of the streets of Los Angeles.

The myth and antimyth of Los Angeles have battled one another since the city was sufficiently formed to merit analysis. As David Reid illustrates, the myth of Los Angeles ensured fertile ground for the creation of systems of personal revelation. "Rebirth – metamorphosis, transfiguration, second acts – here is the key to all Southern California mythologies, and the promise held out by its gods, goddesses, avatars, and messiahs" (178). Unfortunately, the materiality of the rebirth offered by immigration to Los Angeles is often more disheartening than the conditions that led to immigration. The "antimyth" of Los Angeles, a term coined by J.U. Peters, finds its origins in the writings of Hollywood novelists, such as West, hired as screenwriters in the 1930s immediately following the advent of sound pictures that

required dialogue. Mark Royden Mitchell believes “they stayed long enough to feel artistically traduced and to vent their spleen in nihilistic novels which have made the Hollywood antimyth a permanent part of our national folklore” (166). However, Mitchell does not make the distinction between those screenwriters that could retreat to the comfort of the position of cultural elite and the proletarian immigrants who found nothing but a geographic end to their dreams.

The opening chapter of *The Day of the Locust* provides a description of one type of Hollywood immigrant who would be most susceptible to the sham preachings of manipulative messiahs: the starers. In an earlier draft of the novel, West called this group “The Cheated” and considered this term as the title. In the final publication, this collective identity of starers or cheated included “those who had come to California to die” and counted Homer Simpson among their members. The starers evoke Homer’s flies as the cheaters or “masqueraders” suggest the lizard. Faye would be one who masquerades, who “enjoyed being stared at” (73). Those who stare, on the other hand, communicate a simmering violence that lurks beneath their petulant gaze.

Scattered among these masquerades were people of a different type. Their clothing was somber and badly cut, bought from mail-order houses. While the others moved rapidly, darting into stores and cocktail bars, they loitered on the corners or stood with their backs to the shop windows and stared at everyone who passed. When their stare was returned, their eyes filled with hatred. At this time Tod knew very little about them except that they had come to

California to die .... He was determined to learn much more. They were the people he felt he must paint (23).

Those who come to California to die do not evoke a literary representation of the end of the line. They represent an economic reality of 1930s Los Angeles. It was a common belief, similar to the 1920s expatriate opinion that the air of Switzerland had recuperative value, that if one's health was compromised, a Southern California retirement would add years of vitality to an otherwise ailing existence. "It is difficult to say how much of Los Angeles's air of fatalism and baffled expectancy lingers from the decades between 1880 and 1930 when Southern California lured mostly the unyoung and infirm, and the care and housing of invalids ranked as a leading industry" (Reid xviii). The reason Homer Simpson is last seen being torn apart by an angry mob begins with his escape from Wayneville, Iowa in search of recovery from pneumonia and rest for his weary nerves. Yet this false promise of health and happiness further tries the spirit of those that seek its fulfillment, leading them to cast about for fruition elsewhere. The gaze of the starers is the search for collective redemption or, failing redemption, participation in collective apocalypse.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of apocalypse is a unifying concept when considering Los Angeles literature because it is a fear built into the culture – brought on by earthquakes, fires, the end of the frontier, the Ballard-esque anxieties of the automobile culture, the brutal mythologies of the desert – that is confronted in the city's narratives, be they spiritual

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<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Stewart and Susan Harding report that L. Quinby identifies three main arenas of American apocalypse: "(a) divine apocalypse, in which the end of the world brings a heavenly home for an elect group; (b) technological apocalypse, in which technological progress brings both devastation and salvation – a heaven on earth; and (c) ironic apocalypse, the dystopian, postapocalyptic view that history has exhausted itself, coupled with a playful celebration of surface styles and reproductions" (290).

or literary. Religions attempt to frame the end of the world as a chance at redemption, and novels such as Carolyn See's *Golden Days* try to visualize survival in the aftermath of our modern-day conception of the apocalypse: nuclear war. Daniel Wojcik argues that contrary to the historical significance of the apocalypse as a way to purge the world in preparation for purification and renewal, the threat of nuclear war has engendered the threat of a "meaningless apocalypse," however dispensationalists (Christian fundamentalists who anticipate the imminent end of the world) have found a way to incorporate the nuclear menace into their faith:

The possibility of a senseless and unredemptive nuclear apocalypse brought about by human ignorance, violence, or accident, that would kill innocent people on a massive scale, is an affront to the religious belief in a morally ordered universe which requires that the destruction of the world be meaningful....By imbuing the awesome and terrifying power of nuclear weapons with supernatural significance, dispensationalists have transformed the threat....into a vision of redemption. As a morally righteous event by which current evils will be violently destroyed, nuclear annihilation is embraced as a necessary prerequisite for the establishment of God's kingdom" (315).

While far from being a declared dispensationalist, the narrator of *Golden Days* anticipates a nuclear attack by seeking faith in religion, but after the bomb comes and she is one of the few Los Angeles survivors, the post-apocalyptic environment does resemble a redeemed world.

After her second divorce in New York, Edith Langley moves back to her childhood home of Los Angeles with her two daughters and a desire to teach women how to make money. She takes a house in Topanga Canyon, where fires have been known to be so severe, the occupants had to be airlifted out by helicopter. Before long, Edith has added Skip Chandler to the household, a terminally ill international financier with a family in Argentina. One weekend in the early 1980s, Edith and Skip attend a motivational seminar given by Lion Boyce, “a confidence man....rumored to espouse all kinds of crooked behavior and to recruit mush-minded young people by the strength of his charisma” (26). Although Edith enters as a skeptic, she is swayed by Lion’s methods and his message: everyone should believe, “I am a powerful, loving, and creative person, and I can handle it, and I can have anything I want” (33). Lion is a typical caricature of the consciousness-raising gurus of the late 1970s, yet he obviously offers Edith something for which she is searching. Even though she realizes Lion has nicely packaged “early Christian beliefs, common sense, American positive thinking and some half-baked Eastern semithought,” Edith still subscribes to his ideas (35). This spiritual pursuit is only intensified when she runs into an old college friend at the seminar, Lorna Villanelle, who transforms her attendance at Lion’s meetings into a full-fledged cult of her own when her guru disappears after an arrest for drug trafficking. At first, Edith and Lorna begin to follow another spiritual guide named Baba Muktananda, but soon Lorna’s supernatural powers of healing land her a syndicated television program in which she assures her viewers that “happiness was natural; that *abundance was our natural state*” (83).

Meanwhile, the world in which Lorna spreads her message of joy plunges ever closer to war; the draft is reinstated and peace protests erupt across Los Angeles. Additional signs of the apocalypse become more frequent: volcanic eruptions cause breathtaking sunsets; Central American guerillas detonate an atomic device; normally rational people are paralyzed by fears of sharks, fire, murder, looting, the plague, and above all, nuclear war. See devotes a significant section of the novel to Edith's struggle to understand the men behind military aggression, for whom she blames the escalating international terror:

So, who *did* do it? Those men who, having invented the atom, had to go to dinner parties with their briefcases strapped to their belts? The man who, when the Nike missile was invented, went around giving talks in front of men's clubs, saying (as crepe-paper streamers floated out behind electric fans), "This, gentlemen, is the NIKE!"? The boy I met once on a Rhine cruise, his hair shaved to peach fuzz and his poor brain the size of the pit that went with it, who said, by way of conversation, "*I just love missiles*"? (142).

Edith realizes her anger may be misdirected, wives behind husbands equally blind, but she still faults men for the fate of her world, which is revealed on an ordinary day in July 1987: a nuclear bomb devastates America.

In the weeks leading up to the blast, the headlines read, "L.A. PREPARES FOR THE UNTHINKABLE," and Lorna begins to deliver her "You Can Master Fear By Going Straight Into It" talks six to eight times a day (156, 163). For the millions of people living in Los Angeles, this advice translates into a frenzied evacuation.

When Edith and her family decide to stay, she realizes that it is not bravery or stupidity that keep her in Los Angeles, but the city itself:

Finally, it was the city that held us, the city they said had no center, that all of us had come to from all over America because this was the place to find dreams and pleasure and love. I noticed – looking at headlines – that some cities emptied and some didn't. Ours didn't, not completely. They said we were crazy to stay. But then someone had always said we were crazy to be here in the first place. And someone had always said Noah was crazy to build a boat in his desert, and Lot had been crazy to pack up, on an impulse, and head west (167).

The survivors in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles struggle to remain alive with burnt skin and scant supplies, but See makes a connection between the spiritual strength shored before the holocaust, regardless of its dubious rhetoric, and the construction of a new Los Angeles from the ashes of the old. Language remained, memory remained, human connection remained, and the survivors begin to build the world anew: “You can believe what you want to, of course. But I say there was a race of hardy laughers, mystics, crazies, who knew their real homes, or who had been drawn to this gold coast for years, and they lived through the destroying light, and on, into Light ages....Believe me” (196). Edith's voice at the end of the novel is the sound of the new savior in a new city, a far cry from the lonely ramblings of a dying exile in *Messiah* or the siren of madness in *The Day of the Locust*. In *Golden Days*, the apocalypse is not meaningless.

### **False Messiahs and the Burning of Los Angeles**

Before writing *The Day of the Locust*, Nathanael West's continued interest in unorthodox religion gave him a sharp sense for what was driving the spiritual revival occurring around him in Los Angeles. Dreams were being dashed and needed constant replacement. A longing for health or fame, love or money, if not replaced by a belief in a new messiah, was converted into a desire for havoc. Jim Tejani sees West's comment on the California dream and its failure as the central statement of the novel. "Observing the ascendant film and mass cultures of the thirties, West confronted in California the empty promise of consumerism and predicted that the resulting alienation and boredom would midwife society's destruction" (4). Faye expresses one form of undoing, that of the self, by means of dissipation or death, the same impulse we see at play in *Messiah*:

"I'm going to be a star some day," she announced as though daring him to contradict her.

"I'm sure you..."

"It's my life. It's the only thing in the world that I want."

"It's good to know what you want. I used to be a bookkeeper in a hotel but..."

"If I'm not, I'll commit suicide" (79).

Salvation and death are presented here as the only two options available in Hollywood. As *The Day of the Locust* represents, the acolyte who does not find redemption is more likely to seek outward destruction of those he holds responsible for his fall.

What the characters in most of West's texts experience is not solidarity at all but a destructive escape – through mob rule – from their own fragmented subjectivities. In Tod's imagined paintings, "The Dancers" and "The Burning of Los Angeles," the insidious starers play a large role in inciting anxiety, if not outright violence.

Abe [Kusich] was an important figure in a set of lithographs called "The Dancers" on which Tod was working. He was one of the dancers. Faye Greener was another and her father, Harry, still another. They changed with each plate, but the group of uneasy people who formed their audience remained the same. They stood staring at the performers in just the way they stared at the masqueraders on Vine Street. It was their stare that drove Abe and the others to spin crazily and leap into the air with twisted backs like hooked trout (26).

The vulnerability of the dancers in the lithographs comes from their sense of individuality in the face of the masses. In "The Burning of Los Angeles," Faye alone is chased by this same mob who hurl rocks at her as she runs away. The social status of Faye, Harry, Homer, and the others might speak to the idea that West has embraced the common, a recurrent theme in 1930s realism, but more obviously, *The Day of the Locust* manifests an overwhelming anxiety leading to violence. It is impossible to ignore the mob, driven by mass culture and the failure of both capitalist and California dreaming, that tears the social fabric at the end of the novel in an apocalyptic vision that brings to life Tod's painting "The Burning of Los Angeles."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> All three of the novels discussed in this chapter follow critic Kevin Lewis's apocalyptic plot formula: "(1) depiction of portents, unnatural or extraordinary occurrences read as signs; (2) a sense of

Before the outbreak of violence, Tod watches the crowd mill about outside Kahn's Persian Theater and speculates on the nature of the mob. "All their lives they had slaved at some kind of dull, heavy labor, behind desks and counters, in the fields and at tedious machines of all sorts, saving their pennies and dreaming of the leisure that would be theirs when they had enough....Where else should they go but California, the land of sunshine and oranges?" (192). What is described here is an almost Marxist vision of the proletariat, opiated by their dreams and the bourgeois ideology of the leisure class. Yet Tod's next observation rends this narcotic nirvana with the materiality of this fantasy. "Once there, they discover the sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges....Nothing happens. They don't know what to do with their time. They haven't the mental equipment for leisure, the money nor the physical equipment for pleasure" (192). The collective dreams of Los Angeles have become hollow, and the dreamers realize they have been duped. David Reid comments on the disjunction of this mythology, citing Mike Davis, eminent L.A. cultural theorist. "The polar division of sunshine and *noir*, as Mike Davis demonstrates in *City of Quartz*, is the faultline separating all Los Angeles mythologies, and this is no parochial issue: it is Los Angeles's complex fate to figure in the contemporary imagination of the city as both utopia and Great Wrong Place" (xviii). Since it has been the historical fate of all utopias to fail, West's Los Angeles remains only as Great Wrong Place. The "faultline" by which the division is

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irreversible deterioration of values and behavior, incapable of correction by purposeful reform; (3) a centerpiece catastrophe imminent or actual which will radically alter the status quo frame of reality; (4) an accompanying final judgment; and (5) the coming of a new world, frame of reality, or consciousness to replace what was destroyed" (5).

demarcated is yet another reference to the air of apocalypse with which Hollywood Boulevard is infused at the end of the novel.

Tod continues to speculate about what happens when “nothing happens.” The Pacific waves are boring in their monotony, and planes flying into Glendale Airport don’t crash often enough.

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they’ve been tricked and burn with resentment. Every day of their lives they read the newspapers and went to the movies. Both fed them on lynchings, murder, sex crimes, explosions, wrecks, love nests, fires, miracles, revolutions, wars. This daily diet made sophisticates of them. The sun is a joke. Oranges can’t titillate their jaded palates. Nothing can ever be violent enough to make taut their slack minds and bodies. They have been cheated and betrayed. They have slaved and saved for nothing (192-3).

This is the mob that exacts punishment on Homer Simpson, dragging him down into a pit of fury by his gaping mouth. This is the mob that turns on one another, biting, fighting, raping, and exacting arbitrary revenge for all wrongs. This is the mob that brings to life Tod’s painting and is eventually confused with it. This is the mob that Tod envisions being led by Dr. Pierce in “The Burning of Los Angeles.” The frustration and desperation of the mob is the perfect catalyst for a false messiah to step in and assume control.

For the face of its members, he was using the innumerable sketches he had made of the people who come to California to die; the cultists of all sorts, economic as well as religious, the wave, airplane, funeral and preview

watchers -- all those poor devils who can only be stirred by the promise of miracles and then only to violence. A super “Dr. Know-All Pierce-All” had made the necessary promise and they were marching behind his banner in a great united front of screwballs and screwboxes to purify the land. No longer bored, they sang and danced joyously in the red light of the flames (201).

Of course, all of this is taking place in Tod’s deluded imagination as he is swept away by the crowd outside Kahn’s. Yet the social commentary is apt. It is clear from the proliferation of cults in West’s Los Angeles through the present day and the history of the city’s collective violence that the “screwballs and screwboxes” are still in search of a miracle.

In *The War of the Worlds*, the miracle comes in the form of divine intervention in the face of apocalypse. The biological weaponry that destroys the aliens is not unleashed by the Pacific Tech scientists; their equipment and samples are stolen by an unruly mob during evacuation of Los Angeles. Instead, the film uses language from the original H.G. Wells novel to evoke a providential defense: “Mankind was saved by the littlest things that God, in his wisdom, has put upon this earth.” In an analysis of the benefits of the bomb in 1950s science fiction films, critic Robert Torry connects survival in the face of nuclear war and alien invasion to the idea of a distinctly American election and salvation.<sup>28</sup> This providential status is “central to American national mythology: that of the faith, initially articulated by the

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<sup>28</sup> Torry’s primary observations on the film revolve around the idea of God’s intervention in the Cold War: “In implying that God himself has intervened on behalf of American civilization, *War of the Worlds* subdues the disquieting specter of Soviet-American nuclear parity. Such an intervention, making nuclear weapons irrelevant to a divinely sanctioned defeat of the godless by the faithful, allows the film to maintain, in the context of the loss of American technological superiority, that spiritual rather than technological assets will decide any Soviet/American conflict” (19).

Puritans, in America as ‘the earth’s millennial fourth quarter,’ a nation vouchsafed a privileged destiny as the site of the culmination of divinely ordained historical narrative” (9). This historical narrative and its denouement are best examined in the microcosm of Los Angeles’s spiritual culture. The ideals of religious freedom on which America is founded reach their apex in twentieth-century Los Angeles, where spiritual experimentation and proliferation provide succor for immigrants confronting the end of the frontier.

Throughout the literature of Los Angeles, divine ordination is used to boost the city’s growth and to justify the labor and expense behind film production. While often an object of literary ridicule, the sects driving the spiritual culture of Los Angeles never fail to fascinate the writers who came to the city. Religious figures like Aimee Semple McPherson not only inspired novelists and critics to devote entire texts to their endeavors, but they also aroused vast public devotion and participated in the growth and livelihood of the burgeoning metropolis. Up against ideas of apocalypse and a landscape of aggression, the early citizens of Los Angeles often used the search for salvation as way to ground themselves in a new identity, a complicated pursuit in what may have seemed to them to be a city at the end of the world.

## **Writers, Musicians, and Artists Who Came to Los Angeles 1920-1950**

**Louis Adamic  
Bertolt Brecht  
Simone de Beauvoir  
Truman Capote  
Alfred Döblin  
William Faulkner  
F. Scott Fitzgerald  
Chester Himes  
Christopher Isherwood  
Fritz Lang  
Anita Loos  
Heinrich Mann  
Herbert Marcuse  
H.L. Mencken  
Octavio Paz  
Max Reinhart  
Charles Reznikoff  
Arnold Schoenberg  
Upton Sinclair  
Salka Viertel  
Franz Werfel  
Billy Wilder  
Edmund Wilson  
Stefan Zweig**

**Theodor Adorno  
Herman Broch  
James M. Cain  
Raymond Chandler  
John Fante  
Lion Feuchtwanger  
Gerald Heard  
Aldous Huxley  
Gavin Lambert  
Vachel Lindsay  
Alma Mahler  
Thomas Mann  
Horace McCoy  
Robert Musil  
Man Ray  
Erich Maria Remarque  
Bertrand Russell  
Anna Seghers  
Berthold Viertel  
Evelyn Waugh  
Nathanael West  
Tennessee Williams  
William Butler Yeats**

***Urban Fervor: Los Angeles Literature & Alternative Religion***  
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