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***Falling Down* in *El Norte*: A Cultural Politics & Spatial Poetics of the ReLatinization of Los Angeles**

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[Figures](#)

"We can't help others up, if we are falling down"

from Internet discussion on Proposition 187, February 1995

Opening



Begin with a sharp intake of breath, the sound of life hooked up to a ventilator. Fill the screen with a man's parted lips, beaded with sweat. Move like a fly along the bridge of his nose. Stare into the eye which stares out through foggy lens at steam rising from car's engine. The outside world comes first as noise filtered, its base tones heightened, through water. The objects on the landscape come into view, one by one: Latina child-waif clutching blonde bombshell doll, her empty stare fixed on you; woman painting protruding exaggerated lips, scarlet red; schoolbus of screaming schoolchildren--multiculturalism wrapped in American flag; Hollywood hustlers, smacking chewing gum, clinching a deal on cellular phone.

You are imprisoned amidst all these fragmented worlds of the metropolis in this impossible space--the hardened arteries of the Los Angeles freeway. **[End Page 183]**

The air conditioning fails. A fly buzzes invisibly but insistently around your head.





Repeat, close-up and frame by frame, at greater and greater speed: Garfield's barred teeth;"Jesus Died for Our Sins; The American flag; "DELAY... DELAY... DELAY"; "How's My Driving, call 1-800 Eat Shit"; to this music, a Cagian urban cacophony, an unbearable shrill crescendo.


The car door flies open. Our protagonist, D-Fens abandons his car to the highway.

"Hey, where do you think you're going? Hey! Hey!" an angered man parked behind D-Fens' car shouts, fist in air, horn honking.

Running for the embankment, D-Fens returns the volley, "I'm going home." Disengaging from the high ground of the highway, his normal life path through space, D-Fens enters the low ground of the inner city, where he begins his epic journey across the post-industrial wasteland of Los Angeles. **[End Page 184]**

Place--Panic

    *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1992) begins thus, with an assault on the nervous system and with a powerful evocation of the sensory and emotional tone of Los Angeles at a particular historical juncture. In so doing, the film draws us in with a tentative exploration of the "psychic disturbances" ¹ associated with the contemporary recomposition of space-time-being ² in post-coldwar and fin de siècle Los Angeles. Film director Schumacher employs an array of filmic devices to produce an awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy in his protagonist, and indeed, in his audience--the sort of madness born of [late] capitalism's excess depicted in Deleuze and Guatarri's *Schizo out for a stroll* in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. ³ This opening scene is a graphic evocation of what Jameson, drawing upon Lacan's theorization of the connection between linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic, argues is central to the postmodern condition: "The breakdown of the signifying chain... into a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers." ⁴ In this opening scene, signifying chains have snapped, and D-Fens is left without a frame of reference with which to make sense of this changed grammar of urban life. D-Fens temporarily loses his capacity to organize his immediate surroundings perceptually and to map his position in relation to the external world.

 Schumacher has here very effectively depicted the disjunction between D-Fens, the body, and the freeway, its built environment. The earlier modernist frame which gave meaning to action in this Los Angeles context--the freeway commute between the bourgeois private sphere (the nuclear family) and the capitalist public sphere (the Fordist era workplace)--has been disrupted. As the film unfolds, we discover that D Fens's odyssey is set between two receding horizons. He navigates between a job lost to the downsizing of the defense industry and a home broken by domestic violence and divorce. D-Fens, in truth, has nowhere **[End Page 185]** to go. He is a migrant in postmodernity. D-Fens could well, and does to some extent, serve as an intriguing foil for the examination of a distress and unease which some would argue as being particular to the late twentieth century: place-panic ⁵ or an insecurity of territory. ⁶

Falling Down begins with a potentially powerful exploration of a particular phenomenology of late capitalism, its changed "structures of feeling," ⁷ and one level at which the economic and social transformations of regional integration are being felt by the downsized-worker. ⁸ But the potential therein is quickly lost to a series of defensive reterritorializations, and the important class subject of the downsized worker is recast as, and overshadowed by, the trope of the "the angry white man." In the following, drawing upon Jameson's contention that "all mapping is undergirded by ideology," ⁹ I want to first map the ideology undergirding these reterritorializations at work in *Falling Down*, and then to blow open that defensive cartography to a globalized geographic imaginary through a discussion of *El Norte* (Gregory Nava, 1983), a film about two displaced Guatemalan refugees in Los Angeles. As Roger Rouse notes, "Migration has always had

the potential to challenge established spatial images," and it is to this end that I include herein the journey to *El Norte*. [10](#)

In focusing on both the Anglo and Latin American, I am arguing for something much like Said's notion of contrapuntal histories, [11](#) and Berger's notion of complex patterns of cultural interjacency in modernity. [12](#) I argue that both the unemployed Anglo-American defense worker and the Central American refugee live within, albeit at different ends of, the same global processes. [13](#) While I critique the former, I do not present the first as merely false consciousness and the other as truth. True, they occupy different levels of displacement in [post] modernity, but given the radical instability of contemporary experience, I am willing to entertain that both are migrants whose everyday movements--life paths through time and space--have been disrupted, the former by demilitarization, the latter by militarization. I wish to suggest that these individual biographies and spatial journeys are linked around issues of (de)militarization, and to critique *Falling Down* precisely for its failure to link the project of the defense of American "national security" to the "third-worlding" of America. *Falling Down*, however, fails to bring these subject positions into an empathetic **[End Page 186]** relationship to one another precisely because of the defensive cognitive map which undergirds its narrative. As a result, the film misses the opportunity therein to fuel, what Soja argues is urgently needed in mapping (post-modern) geographies, the "awareness of our personal political responsibility for the social production of space as something we have collectively created." [14](#)

Defensive Reterritorializations

This essay is concerned with the cartography of *Falling Down*, and its mapping of a defensive *cultural politic* associated with the *spatial poetics* of late capitalism--the nationalist clause in capitalism's free flow. *Falling Down* is a particularly complex example of a liberal representation of a working-middle class defensive reaction to the changing cultural cartographies of continental American landscapes, and its concomitant phobic representations of the mass migration stream from South to North. It is a piece of popular culture which springs from and feeds into that cultural movement afoot to reterritorialize place in this new global world order. If film is, as Guiliiana Bruno suggests, "a form of modern cartography," [15](#) the film *Falling Down* is surely a most powerful and particularly troubling example of cinematic mapmaking. Much has already been said about the geographical imaginary at work in this film. [16](#) Building upon those critiques, I wish to reposition *Falling Down's* manipulation of the changing face of the city in its various guises--the "browning," "thirdworlding" or "Latinization" of Los Angeles--as an immanent critique of what Soja identifies as late "capitalist spatiality." [17](#)

As he traverses its horizontal length, our protagonist, D-Fens, maps Los Angeles westwards from downtown to the Pacific coast. But the angle in *Falling Down* is not yet wide enough. Whereas Norman Klein critiques *Falling Down* for its failure to account for the malign neglect of the inner city by urban and economic policy, I want to explore the production of that landscape within the broader context of global capitalism, and to remap its cityscape onto a particular global-scape. Therein lies my primary argument with *Falling Down*--the urgent need for a cognitive mapping of Los Angeles more appropriate to what Jameson calls this "the globalspace" of this "multinational moment." [18](#) **[End Page**

When I first saw *Falling Down* in a dollar movie theater not long after its release, I laughingly whispered to the friend sitting next to me that I was going to write something on a fifteen second shot in the film of a Latino im/migrant selling oranges in a hot dusty crowded inner city neighborhood. ¹⁹ I was at the time, as I am now, doing ethnographic fieldwork on Central American migration to Los Angeles. My tongue in cheek conflation of *Falling Down* with that other film *El Norte*, is an intentional effort on my part to pull that figure of the Latino orange peddler out of the two-dimensional backdrop, the macabre muralscape across which D-Fens roams, and to insert the Latino refugee/immigrant's biography into the narrative of *Falling Down*. ²⁰ I employ this intertextual strategy in order to hold *Falling Down* accountable to the narrative in *El Norte*, and D-Fens complicit in the production of its narrative--the migration of the Guatemalan protagonists, Rosa and Enrique Xunax, to Los Angeles. Thus in conflating these two popular films, *Falling Down in El Norte*, I am seeking to force *Falling Down* further into Los Angeles, a move which itself, as I argue below, requires transnational insights.

Falling Down depicts a world falling apart. In the first section of this essay, drawing upon Bakhtin's theorization of the novel and intertextuality ²¹ and Barthes on history and myth, ²² I explore how the film attempts to put that world back together, that is, how the social order is reconstituted in the textual order. The intertextual relations underlying *Falling Down* work--in very complex ways--to reassert law and order under a white masculine norm. The film is a sophisticated allegory about a particular social type--the angry white male who has had all he can take of the democratic promiscuity and "polyphony borne of [late] capitalist [spatiality] and its clash of formerly distinct worlds." ²³


In the opening scene--we are caught with our protagonist--"a white guy in a **[End Page 188]** white shirt and tie" (so described in the film) in a traffic jam on the LA freeway--and forced into a space of sociability--or rather of extreme unsociability --with a shocking diversity of barbarous commuters. With the question thus posed, "Are we falling apart?" this proliferation of multiple publics is depicted as symptomatic of decline and fragmentation. ²⁴ This opening scene is a hyper-representation and intensification of a grotesque social body, which clogs the arteries of progress and individualism that the freeways of modernity once promised and at one point delivered--at least, to our protagonist. ²⁵ That American Dream--so thoroughly propagated by this Hollywood dream machine --is now re-presented as having come to a careening and inelegant halt. The rest of the film is a dramatic enactment of the vigorous attempts underway in US cultural politics to reterritorialize this disorderly and disruptive cultural flow by remapping the boundaries of what constitutes the official and legitimate public sphere, which is to reassert the cultural and racial hegemony of the Anglo American male over a disconcerting proliferation of multiple counter-publics. This filmic manipulation of the face of the nation mimes an important aspect of the national project: to topographically reform the civic body. By taking into itself as negative the very domains which surround and threaten it, the film reasserts a particular kind of official public sphere

Nancy Fraser argues that constructing--or in this case reconstructing--an official and singular public sphere, necessarily, rests on certain inclusions and exclusions. ²⁶ In the second part of the essay, I focus on a particular kind of exclusion: the Latin American

migrant. Indeed, one could say that the *deportado* has become to the North what the *desaparecido* was to the South--an illegal and unwanted body to be excised from the social corpus. In this part of the essay, borrowing, once again, from Barthes's *Mythologies* and from Bauman and Briggs's reading of Sapir's notion of "generic seepage," ²⁷ my textual analysis of the film is reconfigured through a Voloshinovian move to reconnect the dialectic between the *text* and its *context*--that is, *Falling Down* with polyglot Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century. ²⁸ [End Page 189]

Falling Down: Remapping The Social Order through Textual Order

Falling Down, a post-L.A.-riot Hollywood ²⁹ release about an unemployed defense worker's descent into the "urban nightmare" of Los Angeles was promoted by its producers as "an unconventional tale about urban reality." ³⁰ An urban-folk-tale of sorts, *Falling Down* is a complex genre, which serves as an ideologically orienting framework for the production, reception, and interpretation of "middle-class folk" discourses about "inner city" and "thirdworld folk." ³¹ Or to draw upon Geertz, as a tale middle-class folk tell themselves, not simply about others, but about themselves and their fear of falling from their privileged race-class position, a metaphorical fall into this black hole, the abyss that the inner jungle is taken to represent. ³²

 Let's return to that traffic jam, and to our protagonist, D-Fens, who, having cracked under the "pressure of contemporary urban living," abandons his car to the L.A. freeway and flees on foot across the city to seek refuge with his ex-wife and their child. D-Fens's transformation from commuter to pedestrian, his disengagement with the highway and engagement with the urban landscape of Los Angeles do mark a potentially powerful encounter with the changed cultural cartography of Los Angeles. In this regard, the film is what it claims to be, a tale about "urban reality," and as such counters another post-riot release--Studio City's newest theme park-mall, *City Walk*. Unlike the cityscape in *Falling Down*, *City Walk* is a tame simulation of the inner city for the tourist industry endangered by the fallout of bad post-riot press: "the best features of Olvera Street, [End Page 190] Hollywood and the West Side synthesized in easy bite-sized pieces for consumption by tourists and residents who don't need the excitement of dodging bullets in the Third World country that Los Angeles has become." ³³ By mounting the concrete barrier which separates the highway from the lived spaces hidden on the other side, D-Fens brings into vision that which is made peripheral to our vision by the likes of *City Walk*, a world he does not recognize as America. How is it, he wonders, that this country has come to look like the third world? This unfamiliar cultural landscape which D-Fens enters is littered with signifying scars of the inner city: gang graffiti, "homeless will work for food," "we are dying of aids," Latino street vendors selling oranges and peanuts, "economically unviable" African Americans, etc. D-Fens's journey maps Los Angeles "*apartheid* space." ³⁴ and its "ecology of fear" as deconstructed by Mike Davis: a downtown financial core surrounded by a ring of barrios and ghettos, giving way to wealthy gated communities on the distant metropolitan frontier. ³⁵ In this respect, the film engages precisely those elements that *City Walk's* facile celebration and commodification of multiculturalism holds at bay: the Los Angeles landscape as it "socially and physically erodes into the twenty-first century." ³⁶

  *Falling Down* depicts a world falling apart. The problem is

how it attempts to put that world back together by reestablishing law and order in the social world. While Los Angeles's social context and its ties to global processes are both vividly evoked through the film's content, it is ultimately emptied of the "full meaning of history" ³⁷ due to its generic form. Despite the promoters' claims for the unconventionality of this tale about urban reality, and despite its **[End Page 191]** complex intertextuality, *Falling Down* is ultimately a master narrative. By recontextualizing a number of genres into a particular hierarchy, the film frames a polyphony of contemporary discourses (on immigration, economic decline, inner city violence, racism, capitalist greed, government waste, etc.) into an ordered, unified, and bounded text. *Falling Down*'s engagement with the "urban reality" of Los Angeles is mediated through an intertextual dialogue between film noir and futuristic desolation epics, on the one hand, and a western epic adventure and cops-and-robbers on the other hand. While all these inter-textual surfaces ³⁸ intersect in *Falling Down*, they do so in a particular configuration. The former two genres are recontextualized within the competition for dominance between the latter two genres. The cop-detective genre ultimately subsumes the "good guy" in the Western adventure genre, as the "bad guy" in law and order narrative. The intertextual relations underlying the complex genre, *Falling Down*, are thus intimately linked to social, cultural, ideological, and political economic factors. ³⁹

Perhaps the unconventionality of this film is attributed to this struggle between two competing heroes, and the narrative twist, which turns D-Fens, the "good guy" in the former, into the "bad guy" in the latter. Indeed, D-Fens is a modern anti-hero, a sort of Dostoyevskian underground man, who has lost his biographical plot (his job and his family) and longs to reattach himself to one of these normal life plots. In a desperate attempt to reengage, he first disengages from the high ground of the highway, his normal life path through space, and enters the low ground of the inner city, where he begins his epic journey home. By turning his world upside down thus and entering the "reverse side of his world," D-Fens has the opportunity to come into "free and familiar contact [with] people who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers... [and to explore a] new mode of interrelationship between individuals." ⁴⁰ But the critical potential of this alienated character [noir] and the apocalyptic setting [desolation] is immediately recontextualized into a western epic narrative. Indeed, D-Fens's albeit tragic journey from a job and to a home which no longer exist, employs the Los Angeles's inner-city as contemporary Hades or Inferno. Our hero, like countless Western heroes beginning with Odysseus and then Dante, must traverse a dangerous territory, filled with lost and desperate souls in order to prove his strength and cunning. The inner city is similarly hostile, filled with greedy Koreans, irrationally violent Latinos, and aggressive homeless panhandlers. **[End Page 192]**

As a modern hero, however, D-Fens is not a static epic hero but a plastic novelistic hero. ⁴¹ Indeed, during his journey across the urban geography, his identity undergoes a series of destabilizations. In this sense, D-Fens is reminiscent of the nineteenth century boulevard aristocrat. Here the adventure plot is clothing draped over the hero, clothing which he can change. His identity is not stable but a series of positions in which he finds himself. ⁴² D-Fens, your average "white guy in a white shirt and tie," trades in his brief case, which is now an empty sign, for the props and clothing associated with the pathological traits of the urban jungle: a duffel bag full of submachine guns and military garb. The urban landscape refashions this former fifties style engineer into an urban vigilante.

But the disruptive potential of the foregoing destabilization is lost on two fronts: at the level of plot, and at the level of generic intertextuality. With regard to the former, upon entering the inner city, D-Fens reasserts his hierarchical race-class position, and his authority over "greedy Korean grocers," "irrational and violent Chicano youth," "undeserving homeless poor," etc. Thus the inner city is little more than a macabre hyperviolent world across which D-Fens roams freely and shoots his way across, reenacting a colonizing journey of power fantasies in his own backyard, a symbolic frontier for the reconstruction of the white masculine norm threatened with extinction. As such, *Falling Down* merely shifts the ethnic marking of Hollywood's convention of the urban jungle from Chinatown and South Central Los Angeles to Koreatown and Little Central America. These "inner city folk," therefore, serve as little more than a textured backdrop to the Anglo-American protagonist's journey. Their fallen state is an underprivileged but necessary backdrop to the central tragedy, the privileged fall of the middle class Anglo-American.

This social order is also reasserted within the textual order. The disruptive potential of the complex genre (film noir, desolation epic, western epic and cops and robbers) and the ambiguity therein, is further mitigated by the hierarchical ordering of those genres. The subordination of the film noir and desolation epics to the western adventure epic puts the ethnic inner city at the service of D-Fens. As a result of the subsequent subordination of the western adventure epic to the cops and robbers genre, D-Fens serves yet another and ultimately privileged protagonist, a cop. While *Falling Down* is one more installment in a **[End Page 193]** long tradition of the white male journeying across a terrifying landscape to get home, D-Fens isn't the hero upon arrival. *Falling Down* is billed as a story about a "man at war with everyday life [who] is about to get even." But it is as much a story about a cop, Prendergast, who regains his agency and the courage to restore law and order. He does so in a shoot out with D-Fens, in which D-Fens is eradicated and falls into the abyss of the sea. It is in fact the cop then who is ultimately reconstructed as the white masculine norm. Thus the critical and parodic elements of film noir and the desolation epic are absorbed into Western adventure only to be contained within a detective-cop genre and its law and order narrative.

This generic ordering speaks to ideological and power relations underlying the production and consumption of discourse. ⁴³ The project of local law enforcement (Prendergast) now has primacy over global defense (D-Fens). National security is encoded in a new dominant mythology, no longer communism but **[End Page 194]** criminality. D-Fens's defunct project "to make the world safe for democracy" is conceded to the cop's more timely project "to serve and protect." Discourses about immigration, racism, inner city violence, etc. are all subsumed within this ideological frame of criminality. Polyglot Los Angeles and the diversity of the inner city is mirrored in the composition of the staff at the local police head-quarters. It is only here, within the boundaries of law enforcement, that the possibility of a new mode of interrelating between groups formerly separated by racial and national hierarchies is realized. The operative mode is policing.

***Falling Down* in *El Norte*: Reconnecting the Text and its Context**

Falling Down is filmed in the shadow of history--rumors of immigration and inner city crises and the urgent need to contain and police those crises--rather than in the "full light

of the historical day" ⁴⁴ --the radical displacement of cultures brought on by the global movements of labor, commodities, and technologies. In this sense, the film is a myth. It has a historical foundation. While it is written in light of the historical day, the historical biographies of all the racialized and gendered characters, in both the inner city and the police station who serve as foils for two competing white male norms respectively, have been placed within parentheses. ⁴⁵ However, as Barthes notes, even as myth distills a historical concept and reduces it to form, to a symbol, it cannot suppress meaning. It only impoverishes it. Thus "[t]he Negro who salutes [the French flag] is not the symbol of the French Empire, he has too much presence, but it is a tamed, distant presence made an accomplice of a concept." ⁴⁶ Similarly, the "tamed richness" and "distanced presence" of polyethnic Los Angeles is made accomplice to the white middle-class fear of falling into an underdeveloped third world condition, and the desire to police that fall, to restore the "once upon a time" ordered and law abiding citizenry and its protectors.

Like all genres, however, *Falling Down* leaks. ⁴⁷ Despite the heavy law and order frame, certain elements of historical contextualization (the defense industry, civil war, police brutality, white flight and gated communities) creep in, "fashioning indexical connections between the text and broader social relations, and the particular historical juncture at which discourse is produced and received." ⁴⁸ There **[End Page 195]** is an excess, a residue, a remainder, which despite complex narrative conventions of intertextuality, recontextualization, and hierarchical ordering, undermine the boundedness of the text. The text is saturated with signifiers left unread, which nonetheless seep through the overarching narrative. The elements within the textured backdrop do not always know their place, and come to the fore in disconcerting ways.

It is here where D-Fens, himself, has the potential to become a foil for the landscape he traverses and the people he encounters. Benjamin has suggested that the "revealing presentations of the big city are the work of those who have traversed the city absently, as it were, lost in thought and worry." ⁴⁹ There is an element of this optical unconscious at work in D-Fens's state of distraction. He walks through the city lost in the desire to return home, and preoccupied by worries over his unemployed status. In these wanderings, the viewer apprehends more out of the corner of D-Fens's eye than the narrative structure can contain. While the previously mentioned intertextual generic relationships render the text ordered, unified, and bounded, the same textual strategy also leaves the text fragmented, heterogeneous, and open-ended. As Bauman and Briggs argue: "[G]eneric classification never quite works: an empirical residue... is always left over." ⁵⁰ Intertextuality sutures genres together, but it also creates "intertextual gaps." ⁵¹ This excess seepage of signifiers, together with the film's claim to represent contemporary urban *reality* in Los Angeles, makes *Falling Down* communicatively accountable, and thus open to evaluation and historical criticism. ⁵²

It is to these intertextual gaps in the film that I would like to turn, to fill those gaps with my own generic recontextualizations, in an effort to return to the concern I posed at the outset of this essay: my desire to reconnect the dialectic of the text, *Falling Down*, with its context, polyglot Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century. Let's return to that fifteen second shot in the film of a Latino immigrant selling oranges in a hot dusty crowded inner city neighborhood, a look of hopelessness and bewilderment in his eye. This image of the Latino orange peddler is one example of the film's excess, a haunting residue of the desolation epic which the cops and robbers genre cannot contain or digest,

and for which the attendant discourse on criminality is unable to account. Because **[End Page 196]** my own interest is in *Latinization* as a particularly marked aspect on the discourses on "thirdworlding" and "browning" of America in the cultural politics in California, I choose to reread how the story about Latin American immigration has been absorbed into a new dominant master narrative. My focus, thus, dictates how I read, where I choose to interrupt the text, which of its gaps I choose to blow open. However, the text can and should be blown open at any number of levels. One could take any sign and reread it--greedy Korean merchants, violent Chicano youth, [53](#) or hysterical wives. [54](#)

El Norte is the story of two adolescent indigenous Guatemalans, Rosa and Enrique Xuncax, who flee their homeland to seek refuge as migrant workers in Los Angeles after their *campesino* father has been executed and their mother disappeared by the Guatemalan military. These Central Americans flee civil war in one *zona conflictiva* only to fall down in yet another *conflict zone*, this time, *El Norte*. Rosa and Enrique enter the United States through an abandoned subterranean sewer. Upon reaching the other side, Rosa and Enrique think they see the light at the end of the tunnel--the dazzling spectacle of Hollywood lights set to MGM's musical score. But it is a mirage in the Southern California desert. In truth, Rosa and Enrique never surface to realize the American Dream, but upon reaching their Los Angeles destination, are relegated to an underground, underclass, and criminalized status. Their father's hope that they would live to be more than just arms in the service of rich people is thwarted by their entrance into a precarious service sector economy as day laborer/busboy and garment worker/domestic. "Recalcitrant" peasant labor in Guatemala has **[End Page 197]** "evolved" into a surplus proletariat in the United States. While they flee Guatemala under threat of being *disappeared* by the Guatemalan military, they work in Los Angeles under the constant threat of being *deported* by *la migra*.

The respective transnational and city-walks, *El Norte* and *Falling Down*, two fissures erupting along a common fault line which respects no national boundaries, collide in Los Angeles's inner city. [55](#) The inner city serves as hyperviolent and militarized containment zone where the protagonists in *El Norte*, "illegal immigrants" are held in quarantine, [56](#) and across which the protagonist in *Falling Down* travels in relative freedom and with a curious immunity. Granted,

Falling Down does engage the terrain which the protagonists in *El Norte* must negotiate upon their arrival in Los Angeles. But this representation of the urban ecology is left largely uninterrogated.

Indeed, the most under-read sign and yet surely a most compelling empirical residue in the contemporary landscape of Southern California is "D-FENS," the license plate and pseudonym for our protagonist. The defense industry is a subtext which never comes fully into view, and is never located in the urban ecology through which D-FENS travels to his fateful end. This is a glaring omission in the landscape of a city like Los Angeles, a city built on two industries: the military industrial complex and Hollywood, and in deep economic crisis over the apparent dismantling of the former in the post-cold war era. [57](#) D-Fens is unable to reconcile his work to defend American national security with the alien environment in front of him. He fails to understand the role his work in that industry has played in reshaping the spatial, economic, political, and personal geographies of the city, in which he is now an exile. It is precisely at this point that the film misses the opportunity to fuel that urgently needed "awareness of our personal political responsibility for the

social production of space as something we have collectively created." [58](#) [End Page 198]

Thus, while *Falling Down* does engage the contemporary recomposition of space-time-being through D-Fens's dislocation from the economy and his disorientation in the cultural landscape, this "tale about urban reality" ultimately veils the reality of (de)militarization. D-Fens does not recognize the synchronism of the urban crisis in the world that surrounds him, and the global crisis in the world out there, and thus the relationship between his exile in his homeland and the exodus of our Central American protagonists from their homeland. D-Fens, Rosa, and Enrique are all expendable surplus labor in the wasteland of industrial capitalism and the post-Cold War era. Both journeys are produced and undone by the instrumental spatiality of the defense industry. This failure to bridge the gap between the urban geography and the cultural landscape with the political economy of the military industrial complex masks the "changed look of things" as an effect of militarization and demilitarization.

The film's neglect of global militarization is carried through to its concomitant, the militarization of the local landscape: low intensity warfare tactics of the cold war have found their way to the criminalized inner city. Pulling the Latino immigrant orange peddler out of *Falling Down's* backdrop through an entextualization of *El Norte* stands to complicate images of benign police officers, and depictions of harmonious multicultural police forces. Whereas D-Fens enters the inner city from the high ground of the highway--the buffer zone of the apartheid urban order [59](#)--Rosa and Enrique enter the Southern California from the low ground of a subterranean and rat infested sewer. These disparate vantages--the former's advantage, the other's disadvantage--do not unravel in the inner city where their journeys collide. In the inner city, where ethnicity, and not the commission of a crime, is the basis for arrest, [60](#) D-Fens's mobility is unfettered by the constant and visible police presence on the ground and overhead. At the border and in the city, however, Rosa and Enrique must dodge a veritable "armed response" to their illegal presence: a full constellation of law enforcement agencies mobilized to arrest, detain, charge, and deport them.

Indeed, the nostalgic portrayal of local law enforcement as the kindly and gentle grandfather, Prendergast, is a remarkable one for a city which is home to the likes of former police chief, Daryl Gates, convicted police officer, Stacey Koon, and Mark Furhman; and a city which has recently come under the critical gaze [End Page 199] of international human rights and local civil rights monitors alike. The film reads rather like a redemptive narrative for the bruising that the police force has taken in the wake of the Rodney King beating, and as such, an erasure of King's baton bruised body. However, given the period of its production (post-Rodney King beating), and the timing of its release (post 1992 riots), the choice to frame *Falling Down* within a cops and robbers genre, and Los Angeles within a law and order discourse, simultaneously invokes the empirical residue of those events.

This particular intertextual gap calls, therefore, for a intertextualization of yet another genre, the human rights document, and its assertions of uneven and racist law enforcement. The 1992 Los Angeles riots provided a particularly instructive moment to observe the deployment of these forces against Latinos. Both the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN) released reports denouncing widespread civil and human rights abuses against Latinos during the riots.

The reports charge that law enforcement failed to protect city residents without regard to ethnic or national origin, and violated constitutional protections which mandate that interrogations and arrests be made on probable cause and not on ethnic appearance. This situation was further inflamed by the Chief of Police and the US Attorney general singling out Latino and Central American immigrants as a major cause of the uprising. [61](#)

Moreover, in an Amnesty International report from the same year, "Torture, Ill-Treatment and Excessive Force by Police in Los Angeles," found that in Los Angeles human rights violations of low-income minority populations, including immigrants, are a systematic feature of the "war against crime." [62](#) The full deployment of these multiple agencies of law enforcement (LAPD, LASD, INS, Border Patrol, National Guard) during the riots was, thus, only a hyper-intensification of activities which occur under normal conditions. "Normal" conditions in Los Angeles's inner city are a particularly good example of what Walter Benjamin insisted was a "chronic state of emergency" (sic: the "inner city crisis"). [63](#)

D-Fens thinks America has come to resemble the "third-world" by virtue of its "changing demographics," code for "immigration crisis" and "browning of America." LAPD's "disturbing patterns of impunity" with regard to frequent **[End Page 200]** police abuse of black and Latino residents suggests resemblances with the "third-world" at another level, a law enforcement itself exempted from law and order. The inner city in *Falling Down* stands as the "free fire zone" [64](#) that it is, but absent from this portrayal is an interrogation of how the violent social body is violently produced as a criminalized third world by a local low-intensity warfare--the war on the racialized poor and im/migrants.

Openings & Closings: Axes of DisAlignment

I have thus far attempted to open up *Falling Down's* defensive angle on Los Angeles and the alienated and criminalized cityscape depicted therein by remapping both onto *El Norte's* globalscape. Any cognitive remapping of Los Angeles's changing urban topography must surely account for that seeming contradiction between global projects--militaristic and economic--and nationalism. The cognitive map offered us in *Falling Down* fails to address how, for instance, an initiative like Proposition 187 becomes a viable proposition alongside supranational trade agreements such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Act)? Its defensive reterritorializations do nothing to illuminate the spatial logic of late capitalism: the simultaneous breakdown and retrenchment of national boundaries. [65](#)

On the one hand, there are signs and rumors that we are on the brink of a cultural revolution on the scale of Anderson's state-formation, one which may have the potential for undoing our current mode of apprehending the world as a cluster of nation-states, a mode which would demand that we unthink the nation as we now know it, bounded and sovereign. Yet just as the nation is, purportedly, about to lose its axiomatic grip on our minds, nationalism is hard at work, reinforcing the barricades between the West and the rest, at home and at the border. This purported decline of the master symbol, nation, and its master narrative, nationalism, as does the bewilderment over their persistence, have a familiar ring. It is the anomaly, as Anderson puts it, that nationalism posed to Marxism. Only it is now posed as an anomaly to global capitalism. Or is it?

Is it anomaly or logic that underpins, to draw upon, once again, Stuart Hall's succinct

phrase, the "simultaneous breakdown and retrenchment of national [End Page 201] boundaries"? In her discussion on the contradictory role of the state in the accumulation process, Sassen suggests:

[While] [a]t first glance, the strengthening of states and the concomittant enforcement of borders seems to counter the needs of a consolidated world economy for massive international labor migrations... national boundaries do not act as barriers so much as mechanisms for reproducing the system through the international division of labor.... Border enforcement is a mechanism facilitating the extraction of cheap labor by assigning criminal status to a segment of the working class... [thus] while the consolidation of the world capitalist economy creates the conditions for international migrations as a world-level-supply system, the strengthening of the nation-state creates the conditions for im/migrant labor as a distinct category of a nation's labor supply. [66](#)

Similarly, in his discussion on "the nation-state and its borders in the age of transnationalism," Kearney shows us how, in the case of Mexican migration, "the disciplinary power of the state... insure[s] the reproduction of difference as social inequality." [67](#) His Foucauldian analysis suggests that INS and Border Patrol surveillance activities "are not intended to prevent [im/migrants] entry into the United States to work, but instead are part of a number of ways of disciplining them to work hard and accept low wages." [68](#)

I would suggest that this "anomaly" between global capitalism and nationalism is the logic of late capitalist spatiality, and that fin de siècle Los Angeles must be remapped within the following axes of disalignment:

NORTH/SOUTH:

NAFTA

Global Capitalism

Geologic Fault Line

EAST/WEST:

Prop 187

Nationalism

Reinforced Steel Fence

[?](#) The map in *Falling Down* merely works along the East/West axis of late capitalist spatiality. He very literally maps Los Angeles from the East to the West as he traverses its length from downtown to the Pacific. His movements, and our vision, are restricted to that horizontal plane. As such, *Falling Down* anticipates and, arguably, feeds into those defensive reactions to the changing cultural cartographies of the US American landscape and that current crescendo [End Page 202] of nativist discourses seeking to seal off the global flows of culture and to redraw the border between the West and the Rest, North and South with the clarity of definition of reinforced steel fence, dirt ditch, and infrared beam.

[?](#) [?](#) [?](#) I do not want here to posit the globalscape as panacea. The thoroughly globalized imaginary at work in Wim Wenders's recent film about Los Angeles, *The End of Violence* (1997), proves an interesting canvas to hold up against *Falling Down*, in this regard. *The End of Violence* is a provocative post-coldwar and Pacific Rim Century narrative. Indeed, *The End of Violence* seems, as do a number of other Wenders's films, to be a direct

response to Frederic Jameson's plea "for new maps." ⁶⁹ In his remapping of Los Angeles, Wenders uses what postmodern ethnographer George Marcus invokes as "analyst's artifice" to produce a text riddled with the juxtaposition of local and global geography, and one which brings together activities and sites of knowledge too often blind to each other into engagement and mutual critical commentary with one another." ⁷⁰

The *Latinization* of Los Angeles's cultural cartography and political economy is invoked everywhere by the constant depiction of the Latino service class outside and inside the homes and businesses of Anglo establishments. Indeed, the protagonist's bored and alienated wife's fantasy of going south to Guatemala to find "life" is realized instead by her husband and very literally in their backyard, where he is first encountered by their hired help and his rescuers--a family of Mexican grounds-keepers. His wife's romanticized southern gaze is redirected. She may want to escape to the south, but the south is already in the north. The border has, in this sense, already been crossed over and become superfluous. The presence of the Salvadoran political refugee serves to establish the presence of Latin America in Anglo America further, and to suggest just how far south the border has been extended. Her Central American identity also demands a complication and **[End Page 203]** disaggregation of the category "Latino" as something more than Mexican.

The film's angle is most certainly wide enough. The view of Los Angeles from the panopticon of the Griffith Park Observatory affords us sweeping cityscapes and lots of closeups of everyday street life in the city. The video images of Los Angeles's cityscape are loosely woven into a narrative about the military industrial complex of the eighties and the high tech security industry of the nineties. Wenders even attempts to weave the personal histories of Anglo Americans (a Hollywood producer and former NASA computer scientist) into those of African and, more pertinent here, Latin Americans (the family of Mexican gardeners and the Salvadoran political refugee and her child, who have lost their family "to the death squads"). In so doing, Wenders approaches something of the cultural interjacency championed by Berger, and the contrapuntal histories argued for by Said which have informed my discussion thus far.

But these intercultural encounters are ultimately reduced to fanciful rendezvous and to stereotypes--albeit positive and even heroic. The capital-mongering, technophilic Hollywood producer discovers the values of manual labour, family, and religion through a rather forced interaction with a Mexican im/migrant family, depicted as they are as the salt of the earth, and a God-fearing, simple, although not uncritical, people. An ex-NASA computer scientist is **[End Page 204]** betrayed by his janitor and lover, a Salvadoran political refugee, to the unlikely agents of her rescue, the US government. Granted she remains an enigmatic and ambiguous figure. Her initial mute naiveté and deference, one of the stereotypes in circulation about the Latina, turns out in the end to be strategic on her part. She does function more as autonomous protagonist than her Mexican counterparts, who remain accomplices and backdrop to the Anglo protagonist's transformation, even if they are the agents of that transformation. Nonetheless, we are left to guess so much about the Salvadoran's connection to the plot, because so much about her biography remains obscured.

Fanciful encounters with the Other or not, *The End of Violence* does work against the horizontal axis in *Falling Down*, calling for the end of the paranoia and fear which fueled

the defensive tactics of the coldwar and which now fuels a virulent anti im/migrant politic. Like *Falling Down*, the film ends at the Santa Monica Pier, looking out onto the Pacific Ocean. But instead of closure and the shutting down of horizons of possibility depicted in *Falling Down*, the end of *End of Violence* pans across the expansive ocean with these closing remarks: "I can see China now." While the film rubs against the grain of nationalism, it is an unabashed globalization narrative. The defensive white man has let his guard down, but to what? A millennial fever of global futures? In the end, the film reads as a facile celebration of globalization as **[End Page 205]** somehow, quite mysteriously, ushering in the very end of violence itself. True, the Mexican orange peddler, locked in parentheses in *Falling Down*, and the Central American protagonists in *El Norte* have both entered the plot alongside the Anglo-American. But, as with *Falling Down*, these characters are still made accomplice to a problematic geopolitical concept. Globalization has been substituted for nationalism. Yet, the ideology undergirding narratives about globalization as a new and liberatory process are, to say the least, ahistorical and politically naive. ⁷¹ Neither defensive nationalisms nor imaginary globalisms can provide a model of political culture appropriate to Los Angeles at this historical juncture.

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Notes

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1. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York : Zone Books, 1988), xviii.

2. David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1989), 201-10.

3. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (New York: Viking Press, 1977).

4. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left*

Review, no. 146 (1984): 53-92.

[5.](#) Edward Casey, *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), and "Getting from Space to Place in a Very Short Time," in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, N.M.: School of American Research Press; Seattle: Distributed by the University of Washington Press, c1996).

[6.](#) Paul Virilio, *Essai sur l'insecurite du territoire* (Paris: Stock, c1976).

[7.](#) "Changed structures of feeling" refer to Raymond's William's hypothesis that emergent cultural forms are registered not yet as world view or ideology but as impulse, restrain, tone, as a change of presence. Williams was writing about the pre-emergent forms of a general condition in the late nineteenth century, which he identified in the intensity of experienced fear and shame expressed in the novels of Dickens and Charlotte Bronte. See Raymond Williams, "Structures of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 128-34.

[8.](#) See Nadia C. Serementakis, "The Memory of the Senses, Part I: Marks of the Transitory," in *The Senses Still*: (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 3, where she poses the question, "At what levels are the economic and social transformations of regional integration being felt?" in relationship to the European Economic Community.

[9.](#) Jameson, 89.

[10.](#) See Roger Rouse, "Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism," *Diaspora*, Spring (1991): 1.

[11.](#) Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

[12.](#) See John Berger, *The Seventh Man: Migrant Workers in Europe* (New York: Viking Press, 1975) and Nikos Papastergiadis, *Modernity as Exile: The Stranger in John Berger's Writing* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1993).

[13.](#) While, like Berger, I am here concerned with those migrant voices, which have emerged from "modernity's hardest roads," I also concur with Berger in his insistence on a broader definition of exile and estrangement. As Nikos Papastergiadis points out, Berger suggests that, given the radical instability of contemporary experience, rupture and dislocation need not presuppose movement, and that exile can also occur in the heart of the homeland. The immigrant and the native are, albeit differentially, understood as co-victims in global restructuring.

[14.](#) Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies* (London: Verso, 1990), 24.

[15.](#) Guiliana Bruno, "Site-seeing: Architecture and the Moving Image," *Wide Angle*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1997): 9-23.

[16.](#) See Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 107-9 for a discussion of the film's remapping of LA as "Hispanic Hell," and Elisabeth Mahoney, "'The People in Parentheses: Space Under Pressure in the Postmodern City,'" in *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), 173-78 for a discussion of the gendered nature of the film's geography.

[17.](#) Soja, 1989, 129.

[18.](#) Jameson, 1984, 9.

[19.](#) Much like Roger Rouse, 1989, who proposed the use of the term "(im)migrant" to account for the phenomena of transnational communities and the circularity of the Mexican migration process, I adopt the term "im/migrant" to refer to ambiguity of the migration experience, both in terms of its transnational character, as well as the mixed immigration status of members within a given family and the changing migratory status of individuals.

[20.](#) I am here guilty of risking a conflation between Mexican and Central American labour market niches. While it is true that Mexican im/migrants tend to dominate the agricultural market and thus fruit peddling, I hope my readers will afford me this much room for maneuver and poetic license.

[21.](#) Michel Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 3-40.

[22.](#) Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 109-58.

[23.](#) Michel Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 5-46.

[24.](#) My discussion of the public sphere and counter publics draws upon an essay by Nancy Fraser entitled "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 1993), 1-32.

[25.](#) My discussion of the social body is drawn from "The Grotesque Body and the Smithfield Muse: Authorship in the Eighteenth Century," in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[26.](#) Fraser, 1-32.

[27.](#) Richard Bauman, and Charles Briggs, "Genre, Intertextuality, and Social power," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, Vol. 2(2) (1992): 131-72.

[28.](#) V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. L. Matejka & I.R. Titunik (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

[29.](#) My use of the term "riot" may raise some eyebrows. I hold onto the term because I find what one does with the analysis of the event more important than the name one gives it. I also am a follower of Walter Benjamin's aesthetic of engaging and working through the forms circulating in the public imaginary and its discourses to arrive at allegorical rereadings. Let me say, however, that in my own analysis, which does not belong in the scope of this article, the events of April 1992 are multiply determined, and as such are all of those things attributed to them--riot, uprising, rebellion etc.

[30.](#) While *Falling Down* was conceived of before the LA riots, its filming spilled over into the riots, and it was promoted and released three months after the riots. There is ample

evidence that its reception was colored by this climate. Indeed, in a post-riot interview with Robert Shumacher, a journalist wanted to know if Shumacher didn't consider the riots to have been a lucky break for the promotion of his film. For a discussion of the film's reception see Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 1997), 107.

[31.](#) Richard Bauman, "Genre" and "Performance" in *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 53.

[32.](#) Clifford Gertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 448. I am here recontextualizing Gertz's discussion of the interpretive function of metasocial commentary. "Its function, if you want to call it that, is interpretive; it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves."

[33.](#) Quote from project's publicist in Mike Davis, "Beyond Blade Runner: Urban Control The Ecology of Fear," *Open Magazine Pamphlet Series*, (1992): 18.

[34.](#) David Goldberg, *Racist Culture* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 185.

[35.](#) Davis, 10-11.

[36.](#) Davis, 2.

[37.](#) Barthes, 117.

[38.](#) Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 64-65.

[39.](#) Kristeva, 159.

[40.](#) Bakhtin, 1993, 122-23.

[41.](#) Bakhtin, 1981, 3.

[42.](#) Bakhtin, 101-4

[43.](#) Kristeva in Bauman & Briggs, 1992, 63-164.

[44.](#) Bakhtin, 1982, 3

[45.](#) Barthes, 118.

[46.](#) Barthes, 117-19.

[47.](#) Edward Sapir, *Wishram Texts*. Publications of the American Ethnological Society, vol. 2 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979).

[48.](#) Ibid.

[49.](#) Walter Benjamin, "Paris of the 2nd Empire in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973), 9-106.

[50](#). Bauman & Briggs, 132.

[51](#). Ibid.

[52](#). Bauman, 44.

[53](#). Klein, 1997, 107-9.

[54](#). Mahoney, 1997, 173-78.

[55](#). The image of a faultline is drawn from Rubén Martínez, *The Other Side: Faultlines, Guerilla Saints and the True Heart of Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Verso, 1992). Martínez uses the image of the geological faultline as a metaphor for a continental American spatial trajectory and for the cultural cartography emerging between San Salvador, Mexico City, and Los Angeles, and identities which exceed national boundaries.

[56](#). See Davis, 1992, 8-12 for a discussion of ethnic enclaves as containment zones.

[57](#). As noted by Edward Soja, 1989, 222-48, the Southern Californian desert is bounded by an almost unbroken perimeter of military air bases, bombing ranges, and desert warfare reservations.

[58](#). Soja, 24.

[59](#). Goldberg, 190.

[60](#). American Civil Liberties Union, "Civil Liberties in Crisis: Los Angeles During the Emergency" (ACLU, 1992), 7.

[61](#). Central American Refugee Center (CARECEN), "*Report on Civil Rights and Human Rights Violations during and post-Los Angeles Riot*," (Los Angeles: CARECEN, 1992).

[62](#). Amnesty International USA, "Torture, Ill-Treatment and Excessive Force by Police in Los Angeles," (California: ACLU, 1992), 4.

[63](#). Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253-64.

[64](#). Davis, 6.

[65](#). Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global," in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System* (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1991), 19-67.

[66](#). Saskia Sassen, *The Mobility of Labor and Capital: A Study in International Investment and Labor Flow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 36-7.

[67](#). Michael Kearney, "Borders and Boundaries of State and Self at the End of Empire," *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol. 4, no. 1, (March 1991): 55.

[68](#). Kearney, 61.

[69](#). Jameson, 1984, 89. Drawing upon Benjamin, Jameson argues that a new radical cultural politics rests upon the aesthetic of cognitive remapping: "The model of political

culture appropriate to our own situation will," he argues, "necessarily have to raise spatial issues as its fundamental organizing concern."

[70](#). George Marcus has written extensively on the demands that globalization and "disorganized" capitalism place on ethnographic research strategies and writing practices. This particular discussion of the "analysts' artifice" required of the ethnographer who wished to capture "a postmodern sense of place and community" is drawn from "Imagining the Whole: Ethnography's Contemporary Efforts to Situate Itself," *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 9, no. 3 (1989): 26.

[71](#). Even that most avid proponent of globalization theory, Arjun Appadurai, reaches back in history to locate the historical antecedents of "durable cross-societal bonds" in the sixteenth century. See Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture*, Vol 2, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 124.

