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Kerwin Lee Klein

*Apocalypse Noir:
Carey McWilliams and Posthistorical California*



University of California, Berkeley
1997

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
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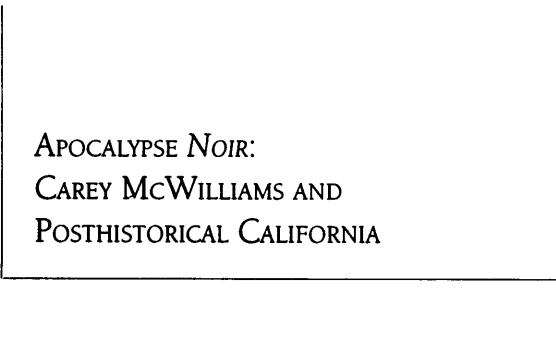
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APOCALYPSE *NOIR*:
CAREY McWILLIAMS AND
POSTHISTORICAL CALIFORNIA






PREFACE

The goal of this series is to foster scholarship on campus by providing new faculty members with the opportunity to share their research interest with their colleagues and students. We see the role of an academic library not only as a place where bibliographic materials are acquired, stored, and made accessible to the intellectual community, but also as an institution that is an active participant in the generation of knowledge.

New faculty members represent areas of scholarship the University wishes to develop or further strengthen. They are also among the best minds in their respective fields of specialization. The Morrison Library will provide an environment where the latest research trends and research questions in these areas can be presented and discussed.

Editorial Board



In the 1860s Mark Twain wandered the Sierra foothills and marvelled at the ruins of the Gold Rush. In California history ran so fast that the past rotted overnight, mining communities decayed into ghost towns, lonely prospectors haunted the hills, and the entire country suggested “a living grave.” Twain took the dead landscape for evidence of the failure of America’s millennial fantasies, but he confessed a certain nostalgia for the “peerless manhood” of the Fortyniners. Where now were those heroic pioneers?


Scattered to the ends of the earth—or prematurely aged and decrepit—or shot or stabbed in street affrays—or dead of disappointed hopes and broken hearts—all gone, or nearly all—victims devoted upon the alter of the golden calf—the noblest holocaust that ever wafted its sacrificial incense heavenward.

We know from recent scholarly studies of Gold Rush letters and diaries that Twain’s passage was no simple aberration. In the mid-nineteenth century, miners and journalists developed many of the tropes we today associate with postmodern California—from the living dead to the apocalypse—and handed them down to the muckraking journalism of Victorian San Francisco.¹

A little over a century later, another journalist crawled through the California wreckage, this time at the site of Llano del Rio, a failed socialist utopian colony in the Mojave desert. In the first ten pages of *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990), Mike Davis unleashed the apocalyptic allusions—Stealth Bombers as “hot rods of the apocalypse,” Joshua Trees older than “The Domesday Book,” Palmdale as the “hard edge of the developer’s millennium”—and described Llano as the progressive Cali-

fornia-that-might-have-been. That mix of prophecy and nostalgia found its way into the book's subtitle and mapped its narrative trajectory, for while *City of Quartz* opened with the apocalypse, it ended in Twain's historical graveyard. In the story's final pages, Davis wandered a "post-apocalyptic" Fontana of "skeletal" factories, "ghostly" ranches, and wrecking yards. While nearby teenagers argued with a desert prophet about UFOs and a Jehovah's Witness passed out endist literature to flea-market shoppers, Davis contemplated a pair of abandoned stone elephants that had once stood at the gates of Selig zoo. The statues represented, he concluded, Southern California's judgment on its "lost childhood. The past generations are so much debris to be swept away by the developers' bulldozers. . . [to] the junkyard of dreams."²

Twain and Davis mark early and late moments in a genealogy of endist metaphors in popular histories of California. The key figures—California as the dead millennium and California as the dustbin of history—have entered into the historical vernacular. These tropes draw symbolic power from their resonance with three common articles of American faith: History runs from East to West, California is the future, and Christ will come again. In recent decades, those old ideas have entered into strange combinations and the darkening of America's Pacific edge has gone hand in hand with changes in the ways in which we imagine history. In brief, I am arguing that the twentieth century identified history with the future, and the future collapsed. In the face of an absent or apocalyptic future, history fractures or disappears. California is the most revealing site of that narrative shift. An effective narration of that full story would take much more than forty minutes, so today I mean to focus on one of the middle seg-



ments of that story, namely, the convergence of prophetic literary traditions and popular history in the writing of Carey McWilliams.


Carey McWilliams is commonly remembered as editor, political activist, and author of a countermyth of California that has shadowed the citrus pastorals painted by regional boosters. While California's cheerleaders predicted a Pacific millennium, McWilliams documented the tribulations. Their California was sunny and leisured, his was bleak and anxious. In an age when professional historians wrote monographs, McWilliams sought a wide audience, and he probably did as much as any author to shape historical discourse about California. The result was a diverse body of writing that resists categorization. Although most of his books and articles lack the paratextual apparatus—footnotes, bibliography, and other evidence of original research—considered mandatory for historical scholarship, McWilliams's encyclopedic knowledge of the scholarly literature, his personal contacts, and his many hours of interviewing gave his work a density rare in journalism.

Indeed, Mike Davis has argued that McWilliams surpassed muckraking to “integrate historical narrative with economic and cultural analysis” in a “full-fledged theory” and “authentic epistemology” of Southern California that “deconstructed” the mystifying “rhetorics” of the city's boosters. Davis's claim alludes to a 1982 essay by Michael Sorkin, “Explaining Los Angeles,” in which Sorkin contended that Los Angeles has “a rhetoric but not an epistemology” and outlined a series of dominant tropes that had displaced historical analysis: apocalypse, madness, death, America, the future. But we may wonder about the confidence with which Davis and Sorkin distinguish rhetorics from epistemology, for even as Carey McWilliams trashed

the cults, fakirs, and futurists of the Pacific edge, he returned time and again to the image of California as history's end. McWilliams infused popular history with endist allusions and noir sensibilities, and his *Southern California Country* (1946) set the apocalyptic tone for guides to the Golden State.³

In 1945 Colorado-born Carey McWilliams, the new West Coast Contributing Editor to the *Nation*, recalled his arrival in Los Angeles in the 1920s. McWilliams had hated the place from the first. He had worked like a dog at menial jobs at the *Los Angeles Times*, suffered through night classes for law school, and spent hours awash in the city's chaotic tides. One morning in Hollywood, after several years of "exile" in Babylon, he passed a newsboy shouting the day's events: A dismemberment murder, a famous athlete charged in a bank robbery, the indictment of the district attorney for bribery, and "in the intervals between these revelations, there was news about another prophet, fresh from the desert, who had predicted the doom of the city, a prediction for which I was morbidly grateful." It was an epiphany. McWilliams realized that in all the world there would never be another place like this City of Angels.⁴

By the time he wrote his epilogue to *Southern California Country*, McWilliams was already an established author. His first book, *Ambrose Bierce* (1929), a carefully-researched biography, marked his entrée into California history, but he won his reputation as a social historian for a devastating exposé of agriculture entitled *Factories in the Fields* (1939). When Erskine Caldwell invited McWilliams to contribute a regional study to Duell's "American Folkways" series, the young writer responded eagerly. Not only did he have tons of material, he also had a storyline that



lifted California out of the antiquarian darkness. He meant to stand the nation's origin story on its head.⁵


Affluent Americans had long drawn comfort from the ancient idea that History ran from East to West. In the nation's origin story, the regenerative sweep of the European frontier across the New World had created American Democracy. California, as the western edge of the continent, thus had a special relation to American democracy and universal history. Yet even white Americans had not easily agreed upon the narrative outlines of their shared past. Eastern élites especially had regarded the frontier West as the dumping ground for the country's most degraded citizens. In 1888 Lord James Bryce noted that "California is the last place to the west before you come to Japan" and the "scum which the westward moving wave of migration carries on its crest is here stopped, because it can go no farther. It accumulates in San Francisco." And even as historians like Frederick Jackson Turner redescribed the West as the most democratic part of the nation, and even as California's demographic center of gravity began sliding toward Los Angeles, eastern journals continued to provide outlets for criticisms of the "useless" western past.⁶

Like many other intellectuals in the twenties and thirties, Carey McWilliams shared the belief that westering had been the motor force of American development but saw that frontier heritage as preeminently tragic. In a 1931 article, "The Myths of the West," he denounced frontier historians like Turner for sophistry and legend mongering, and by 1935 McWilliams had crystallized his favorite mode of emplotment: "If the pioneering adventure is to be regarded as the essential American experience, then the trek of farm hands, village louts, and 'folks' of the middlewest to Los Angeles can safely be regarded as addi-

tional proof of the accuracy of Marx's generalization that history repeats itself, first as tragedy and then as farce." As Warren Susman has noted, such critiques drew tragic conclusions about the moral character of American experience but left intact the narrative underpinnings of mainstream frontier history: History still rolls from East to West, and the western edge of the continent thus holds a special world-historical significance.⁷

In *Southern California Country* Carey McWilliams created a frontier eschatology in which California represented the collapse of historical consciousness. That eschatology stands out most clearly in the sections of the work that deal with cults and politics. The book canonized the image of Southern California as the summit of America's millennial fantasies, and McWilliams decorated his narrative with false prophets, endist allusions, and picturesque quotations. With his characteristic historical sense, McWilliams pointed out that the region's affinity for crankiness had deep roots: "I am told," said Mrs. Charles Stewart Daggett in 1895, "that the millennium has already begun in Pasadena." The first certified Southern California eccentric was William Money, the first person to write and publish a book in the Los Angeles region and the creator of a map of the world, "William Money's Discovery of the Ocean," which depicted San Francisco on a thin crust of earth. Soon, Money predicted, that crust would disintegrate and send the wicked urbanites to their fiery reward.⁸

McWilliams contended that California's global position underwrote the proliferation of endist discourse. "Cult movements have moved westward in America and Los Angeles is the last stop." San Francisco had once been the logical destination for westering extremists, but with Los Angeles ascendant, Hollywood notorious, and the mysti-



cal expanses of the desert wilderness that much closer, the City of Angels was taking the title of cult capital of America. For confidence artists fleeing past disappointments back East, California was the obvious haven and Los Angeles the likeliest market for spiritual goods. There one found herds of midwesterners, alienated from their origins and each other, their social loyalties frayed by the westerward migrations. McWilliams quoted novelist Frank Fenton: "This was a city of heretics. . . . It rested on a crust of earth at the edge of a sea that ended a world."⁹

That sense of an ending struck McWilliams as a key to California history, for the state marked the spot where Eastern mysticism and Western millennialism converged. When William Butler Yeats, author of the "The Second Coming" (1908), visited California, his wife, a medium, had a series of occult experiences which Yeats later worked into his strange book, *A Vision* (1925). "Here if anywhere else in America," said Yeats of California, "I seem to hear the coming footsteps of the muses." In other ears, the footsteps rang more like hoofbeats, and D. H. Lawrence's treatise on Revelations drew heavily upon an obscure work by a Los Angeles author, James M. Pryse's *The Apocalypse Unsealed* (1910). And in 1937 Aldous Huxley chased his mystical interests to the end of the earth in Los Angeles where he conceived his cultic novel, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939). To McWilliams, such examples showed American history ending in Asian mysticism, for California faced West across the Pacific sea, "waiting for the future."¹⁰


Southern California Country fairly creaked under the weight of these endist images—the eschatological plot, the catalogue of cults, the prophetic quotation, and McWilliams's incantations of California's world historical

significance. The journalist drew his endist metaphors from a variety of sources, but two of the most important came from a California literary culture which had raised apocalyptic to high art.

One of those sources was an Anglo-American poetic tradition of imagining California as the end of the world, a tradition that found its strongest early voice in Walt Whitman but lived on in the modernist era in the work of Robinson Jeffers who created sanguinary epics out of season in his stone house on the Carmel coast. As a young poet, Jeffers had retreated to the seashore with his wife Uma and their two sons, and here he mapped the “cutting edge” of the continent. Incest, parricide, and apocalypse stood at the thematic core of his great narratives, *Roan Stallion*, *Tamar*, and *The Women at Point Sur*, and his lyrical poems of the twenties returned darkly to Whitman’s California. “Here is the world’s end,” wrote Jeffers, “the sun goes on but we have come up to an end.”¹¹

Jeffers received the occasional favored pilgrim, and in 1929 Louis Adamic and Carey McWilliams paid him a visit. According to McWilliams, the poet said little but impressed them with the sheer force of his personality and made them feel that World War I marked the “beginning of the end of the kind of civilization that we had known.” The idea was common among European literati, but still fairly rare in California. Surprisingly, though, the state’s bleakest prophetic voice was also one of its most influential. Today Jeffers is virtually forgotten, but when McWilliams knew him, he was one of the West Coast’s literary giants, and in 1932 he graced the cover of *Time*.¹²

Jeffers envisioned history as decay. His poetry relied heavily upon metaphors of recurrence reminiscent of



the great classical theories of history as a cyclical process. But Jeffers did not believe that humankind progressed through ages of bronze, iron, and gold. Civilization in all its forms was a blight on the earth, and the poet built misanthropy into a prophetic code. In his most optimistic moments, Jeffers imagined that the coming holocaust would sweep the globe clean of humankind. "How many remote generations of women," he asked in "Post Mortem" (1928),


Will drink joy from men's loins,
And dragged from between the thighs of what
mothers will
 giggle at my ghost when it curses the axemen,
Gray impotent voice on the sea-wind,
When the last trunk falls? The women's abundance
will
 have built roofs over all this foreland;
Will have buried the rock foundations
I laid here: the women's exuberance will canker
and fail in
 its time and like clouds the houses
Unframe, the granite of the prime
Stand from the heaps: come storm and wash clean:
the
 plaster is all run to the sea and the steel
All rusted; the foreland resumes
The form we loved when we saw it

The poem concentrated several of Jeffers' favorite posthistorical images: A decadent, effeminate civil order; the end of humanity; and the return of the land to its pri-

mal form in some inhuman millennium. In the last lines, Jeffers transposed prophecy into history, rendering his predictions in the present tense and remembering his own death. This was Jeffers in 1928, near the peak of his popularity, around the time of his meeting with Carey McWilliams, and in one of his brighter moods.¹³

Poetic visions of humanity as a cancer did not offer a firm foundation for social reform. As viewed from Carmel, the world was degenerating and utopian enterprises hastened the process. In a letter to Adamic, Jeffers confessed that he believed the best thing one could do was retreat as far as possible from the pollution of history. He himself had planted hundreds of cypress and eucalyptus trees to wall off his compound from neighbors and tourists. However attractive Jeffers may have been as a literary figure, and however much Carey McWilliams loved the sheer beauty of his verse, the poet's apocalyptic vision would not be easily appropriated for political activism. Although Marxist critics in the late twenties generally appreciated Jeffers's work as a critique of industrial society, by the early thirties his misanthropy had grown too obvious to ignore, and reformists and revolutionaries alike began to denounce the Carmelite.¹⁴

When Edmund Wilson visited California in 1940, he decided that the place itself encouraged endism. "It is a good deal too easy to be a nihilist on the coast at Carmel," said the critic: "your very negation is a negation of nothing." Indeed, the writings of journalists like Adamic and McWilliams were even more vulnerable to the charge, for where Jeffers had driven his misanthropy to its logical conclusions, the critique of McWilliams and Adamic scattered like buckshot. Like so many writers in the Mencken tradition, their cynicism knew no bounds. In one of his jour-



nals, Adamic had written, “I can’t see why one couldn’t look at a thing cynically and enjoy it at the same time.” With that attitude for inspiration, the bohemian journalists tried to rationalize their morbid fascinations.¹⁵


In a lengthy essay of 1935, *Louis Adamic and Shadow-America*, McWilliams defended theorists and artists of “decadence.” The explosion of bohemian movements, from Expressionism to Dada, showed art freeing itself from the old bourgeois aesthetics. If an Adamic or a Jeffers seemed outlandish, it was because they were transitional thinkers consumed by the great task of remaking art and subjectivity. In a world where the traditional forms no longer did justice to the chaos of real life, art needed to be pedagogic, even propagandistic, and that meant intellectual violence: “Is it not . . . evident that . . . we have literally *outgrown* the past?” McWilliams depicted the world of 1935 as a senescent wreck, yet remained more hopeful than Jeffers that better forms would bury the old. He ended with a quote from Adamic: “A New America, that is the challenge and the prophecy, that is the future.” Decadent art, then, was part of cultural revolution for without corruption there could be no renewal of virtue; lacking death and decay, there could be no rebirth.¹⁶

Despite his jibes at evangelical Christianity, McWilliams continued to draw on America’s prophetic heritage, looking at it cynically and enjoying it at the same time. But where would he take those very flexible apocalyptic figures of decay and rebirth? The “inhumanism” of Jeffers mapped one possible trajectory, and in *Southern California Country* McWilliams quoted California’s most infamous nihilist: “Continent’s End / The long migrations meet across you.” But however much McWilliams admired the poet’s jeremiads, Jeffers’s vision of the end of history was

altogether too earnest. McWilliams sought a less mystical touch, and he found it in a different but equally eschatological literary tradition known as the “Hollywood Novel.” In 1946 *Southern California Country*’s clearest apocalyptic debts tumbled out of lengthy block quotations from a novel which Carey McWilliams reckoned the best single point of entry to the California mind: studio writer Nathanael West’s *The Day of the Locust* (1939).¹⁷

McWilliams read West’s avant-garde fiction as a social history, and in some ways, *The Day of the Locust* did represent a common authorial rage at the movie industry and its urban life support system. West intermittently hated Hollywood, and he and a select circle of other intellectuals on the industry dole, from author William Faulkner to bookseller Stanley Rosen, met regularly at Musso and Frank’s restaurant to drown their sorrows and deride the narrative factory in which they labored. *The Day of the Locust* dropped neatly into an expanding category of works, from tabloid sex scandals to Huxley novels, that exposed California venality, but it remained to Carey McWilliams to transpose that decadent art into historiography.¹⁸

McWilliams found *The Day of the Locust* a brilliant chronicle of California as the degenerate end of Manifest Destiny. California was not a new beginning, but a grave: “[T]hey had come to California to die,” said West of the region’s newest arrivals. The former midwesterners had slaved their lives away dreaming of golden shores. Their hopes were miraculous and their frustration horrific. West’s antiheroes mill aimlessly about the streets, their apathy erupting into violence at frequent intervals. The central character, Tod, a design major from Yale recruited by the studios, wanders slack-jawed through the novel, indulg-

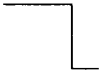


ing fantasies of rape and murder, fixated on a talentless young wannabe named Faye Greenaway. Homer Simpson, a bookkeeper from Iowa, is the very type of the curiosity seeker who has come to California to die. None of the agonists are calculated to stir the reader's empathy, and the book finds its best moments in ironic evocations of Californiana rather than memorable dialogue or character development.¹⁹

With two enduring images, West defined Los Angeles as the ultimate posthistorical place. On a Hollywood backlot, Tod finds the "dream dump," the dustbin of history made material in a heap of discarded stage sets: the battle of Waterloo, a medieval castle, splinters of the Old West. A truck adds another load to the pile, and Tod realizes that "there wasn't a dream afloat somewhere which wouldn't sooner or later turn up on it. . . . [N]o dream ever entirely disappears. Somewhere it troubles some unfortunate person and some day, when that person has been sufficiently troubled, it will be reproduced on the lot." That collapse of history into collage reaches far past the Hollywood backlot, and *The Day of the Locust* wallows in southern California's promiscuous mix of architecture, fashions, and ideologies: the "Irish" bungalow on the "Spanish" block with its "Mexican" living room and "New England" bedrooms, or the impromptu prophet at the "Tabernacle of the Third Coming" who, like an "illiterate Anchorite" berating decadent Rome, hurls strings of dietary rules, economics and Biblical threats into the California evening. No simple celluloid aberration, the dustbin of history reflects the new time consciousness of modernity in which past and future telescope into a flattened, apocalyptic present.²⁰

The second and more famous endist image from *The Day of the Locust* is “The Burning of Los Angeles.” Tod’s main work-in-progress is a painting, imagined in detail but never actually painted, of the city in the throes of the final battle. “He was going to show the city burning at high noon, so that the flames would have to compete with the desert sun and thereby appear less fearful, more like bright flags flying from roofs and windows than a terrible holocaust. He wanted the city to have quite a gala air as it burned, to appear almost gay. And the people who set it on fire would be a holiday crowd.” The happy apocalypse must have disarmed many readers in 1939, but West’s more creative spin came in the fate he devised for the painting. At the climax of *The Day of the Locust*, Tod’s scenario comes to life as a movie premiere crowd erupts into violence, the rioting made all the more brutal by its festivity.²¹

West had experimented with these different ends before he came to California. Born Nathan Weinstein in 1903, West had grown up in a middle-class Jewish family, dabbled in college, and read stacks of experimental fiction. Dada fascinated him, and in one inspired moment, he created an article for *Field and Stream* by cutting and pasting bits of previously published stories into a narrative assemblage. Assemblage remained one of his favorite compositional methods, and his writings recycled debris and ruin. In one early, unpublished story, “The Adventurer,” the central character tries to salvage a coherent psyche from the shambles of his memories. He feeds his day dreams with trips to the public library where he flips from ancient Greece to modern Africa with a turn of the card file. One day, the library reveals itself as an alternative world built out of historical rubbish: “The Apocalypse of the Second Hand!” In 1933 West rendered a more traditional endist



vision in verse: “Burn the cities / Burn Paris / City of light / Twice-burned city / Warehouse of the arts.” Hollywood allowed West to combine the apocalypse of the secondhand and the civic barbecue in a single story.²²


The regional tradition known as the Hollywood Novel complemented West’s synthesis of apocalypse and entropy. Although *The Day of the Locust* is perhaps the most frequently mentioned novel in the canon of California endism, West did not originate the vision of the state as Armageddon. In 1922 Upton Sinclair’s *They Call Me Carpenter: A Tale of the Second Coming* featured a long dream sequence about the return of Christ, and at the story’s climax, crowds run riot in the streets of America’s entertainment capital. In 1933 Myron Brinig had published *The Flutter of an Eyelid*, a book recounting the terrible ennui of the Hollywood writer and ending with California collapsing into the sea. In 1934 the faux apocalypse of Liam O’Flaherty’s novel, *Hollywood Cemetery*, with its hysterical mob of fans tearing their hair, their clothing, and each other in ecstasy at the second advent of their favorite movie star, anticipated West’s conclusion.²³

Like these predecessors, West rendered the end as a dismal farce, and although his novel made only the tiniest of dents in the commercial market for apocalyptic, it achieved a secondhand circulation in *Southern California Country* and thence entered into popular historical imagination. Carey McWilliams invoked the novel three times, using its characters and vision to anchor key narrative moments, cutting and pasting great chunks of its prose into his own history. And he adapted all of the book’s grim tropes from the dead millennium to the dustbin of history. The tactic was curious, for however brilliant West’s vision, *The Day of the Locust* made a poor foundation for

the historical consciousness that McWilliams wished to build. The journalist read West's novel as social history, but we might more profitably read it as a declaration that history had already ended.

Unlike a Robinson Jeffers, West did not think that history traced a devolutionary arc. On the Hollywood backlot, history simply fell into ruins, bits and chunks of the past commemorating a time when people still believed in history as a coherent process. The burning of Los Angeles suggested a more convincing apocalypse, but West left even this image ambiguous. The "bonfire of architectural styles" found in Tod's painting cast an artificial light on the dustbin of history, but despite the Biblical allusions in his title, West did not stamp the ending with authenticity. The final scenes of the book were not only festive, but far from truly endist: The earth does not open, Satan does not show, and the crowd melts away. West's last paragraph simply left off in the whiteness of the page.

Once upon a time, decadence and corruption had been familiar topoi that prepared readers for an apocalyptic climax. In canonical Biblical apocalyptic, narratives of civil degeneration prepared readers to expect a revelation, the arrival or return of the Christ which would be followed by a new heavens and earth. In nineteenth century radical polemic, Marxist invocations of the decomposition of the German ideology testified to the imminence of revolutionary renewal. And in the various "decadent" aesthetic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Matei Calinescu has argued, avant-garde and decadence became popularly linked as the narrative stages of a transitional epoch, decay registering modernity's sense of crisis, avant-garde heralding the birth of the new world. But *The Day of the Locust* unravelled that narrative pattern and



made decay and apocalypse interchangeable tropes if not perfect synonyms.²⁴

West's end of history was not a proper apocalyptic battle, but more like Nietzsche's death of God: History had ended because it was something in which one could not believe. *The Day of the Locust* was less apocalyptic than "postapocalyptic" in the skeptical sense of the word connoting a place peopled with a citizenry so jaded or traumatized that it had lost the ability to believe even in the end of the world. In such a place, apocalypse becomes farce or is privatized—personalized—and adopted as one more atomized form of subjectivity to be suffered or celebrated. That attitude materialized in *Southern California Country* as Carey McWilliams recalled his own morbid gratitude to the nameless desert prophet who had promised California's imminent end: Apocalyptic had become aesthetic spectacle.²⁵

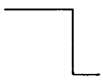
Apocalyptic kitsch subverted *Southern California Country's* incipient radicalism, and the process shines through the book's conflicted use of "utopia." Carey McWilliams tried to demystify California's "crackpot" reputation by showing how old were utopian hopes in the Golden State and by describing its persistent radicalism as an understandable response to regional despotism. Southern California élites had so ruthlessly suppressed even moderate reform that every conceivable revolutionary proposal—from Pentecostalism to socialism—swept like brush fire through the desperate masses. McWilliams sympathized with some of these causes and characters, notably Job Harriman, the socialist who had founded Llano del Rio. But throughout *Southern California Country*, the journalist substituted words like "crackpot," "demagogic," "extremist," "sensational," and "Messianic" for "utopian."²⁶

Socialist colonies, the EPIC campaigns, Pentecostal prophets—Why were California politics pathological? In answer, McWilliams introduced in full Nathanael West's infamous description of "the cheated," the midwesterners who have come as far West as history can carry them.

Once there, they discover that sunshine isn't enough. They get tired of oranges, even of avocado pears and passion fruit. Nothing happens. They don't know what to do with their time. . . . If only a plane would crash once in a while so they could watch the passengers being consumed in a "holocaust of flame," as the newspapers put it. But the planes never crash.

Their boredom becomes more and more terrible. They realize that they've been tricked and they 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. The 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 saved and slaved for nothing.

As it turns out, *Southern California Country's* 'full-fledged historical theory' comes not from Marx or Mannheim but from a homemade American Dada. McWilliams grounded his 'epistemology' in Nathanael West's sociology of expectation. Driven by millennial fantasy, American history decayed into the West where its alienated subjects ran amok in vicious parody of divine judgment. While McWilliams imaged that dismal "utopian mentality" as a national phenomenon, in Southern



California the nation experienced most poignantly the “defeat of the American Dream.”²⁷


If the faux apocalypse of *The Day of the Locust* was utopian, then utopia was in trouble, and the world had good reason to worry. “In a confused, distorted, half-crazy manner,” McWilliams ventured, “these mass political movements represent a dim foreshadowing of the future.” *Southern California Country* struggled to reconcile its author’s belief that California held the nation’s destiny with the persistent revelation that the future was chaos, but the utopian hopes of a Job Harriman paled beside the postapocalyptic brilliance of a Nathanael West. Southern California, the western summit of America’s frontier eschatology, was a “tribal cemetery,” the “junkyard of a continent.” In *Southern California Country*, even the Jeffersian hope that this world might end in bloody rain simply ran to rust, for McWilliams’s progressive exhortations could not overcome his relentless chronicle of swindles, scandal, and corruption.²⁸

The basic difficulty would trouble all subsequent radical writers. Parodies of apocalyptic came easily to the pen and facilitated powerful revisions of California history, but once an essay, article or book had labored through so many endist allusions, it became virtually impossible to cobble together a successful conclusion appealing, as the ending of *Southern California Country* vainly did, to future hopes that the story might change, the culture cohere, and the tensions be transcended. As a form, the jeremiad worked best when speakers and listeners shared a deep religious faith in a final judgment. Absent that conviction, apocalyptic quickly degenerated into a sophisticated posthistorical cynicism. For the religious faithful, the proliferation of endist images proved that the End was here;

for secular thinkers, that proliferation drained apocalyptic of power, reduced it to spectacle, and hastened the loss of historical consciousness that critics like McWilliams sought to forestall.

McWilliams was no philosopher, and he never worked through the contradictions in his own writing. That does not mean that he was a bad historian. His books stood upon hours of careful research, introduced scores of innocent readers to a sordid past of racial violence, class war, and political intrigue, and helped to offset the impact of the pabulum sold as history in school textbooks. But as contributions to historical imagination, his works left a mixed legacy. If historical writing, like other forms of art, needed to negate the old decadent forms, then McWilliams had failed in his revolutionary aims. *Southern California Country* did not so much debunk California's prophetic heritage as glue it in its fractured place.

Other journalists took up endist metaphors as enthusiastically as they jeered Mojave prophets. As Alan Cranston summarized *Southern California Country* for readers of the *New York Times*, McWilliams "deeply holds and lends new realism to the common conviction of all southern Californians that a destiny awaits them." What might that destiny be? McWilliams continued to wonder, and after moving on to the editorship of *The Nation*, he kept a spotlight on his old home with essays and commissions of Californiana, including the article that led to gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson's *The Hell's Angels* (1966), the classic description of the postmodern locusts of the apocalypse. ("The outlaw motorcyclist views the future with the baleful eye of a man with no upward mobility at all.") In 1968 McWilliams edited an anthology of essays on California, but *The California Revolution* did little more than



formalize the twenty-year-old clichés of *Southern California Country*. “California is the future,” concluded McWilliams, but even in 1946 few signs had pointed toward a Heavenly City, and the phrase had grown more ominous in the intervening seasons.²⁹

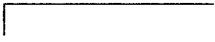
In 1946 one of the reviewers of *Southern California Country* found the book “rich with potential movie scenarios,” and the judgment was timely, for that same year Hollywood released a series of grim, existential films that moved a French critic to coin the phrase, “film noir.” Thirty years later, *Southern California Country* inspired Robert B. Towne’s neo-noir screenplay, *Chinatown* (1974), famously directed by Roman Polanski. At the cinematic crux, anti-hero Jake Gittes, played by Jack Nicholson, interrogates Noah Cross, the villainous oligarch played by John Huston.

Jack: “What could you possibly buy that you can’t already afford?”

Huston: “The future, Mr. Gittes, the future.”

In early seventies novels and movies, as soon as a character began to babble about the future, the reader knew that something bad was about to happen, for only crooks and children still believed in an easy golden destiny.³⁰

The future had become yet another casualty of history, buried in the Pacific rubbish and awaiting excavation: Tomorrow had joined Mark Twain’s Gold Rush and Mike Davis’s stone lions as an object of nostalgia. In 1946 Carey McWilliams had hoped that decadent art would pave the way for prophetic progress and that California’s decay foretold a rebirth of civic virtue. His *Southern California Country* had begun with degeneration and ended in strained millennial exhortations, but that narrative cur-



rent suffered its own reversal. In 1990 Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* began with a dead millennium and ended in the junkyard of dreams. California's prophetic history had gone full circle.

Footnotes

1. The passage was first published in "Around the World. Letter No. 3," *Buffalo Express* 13 November 1869, 1. Twain later adapted this piece for *Roughing It* (1872; Reprint, Boston: Pantheon, 1985), 415, 432. Thanks to Robert Hirst for assistance with this cite. On the Gold Rush tropology, see especially Stephen Fender, *Plotting the Golden West: American Literature and the Rhetoric of the California Trail* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

2. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (1990; Reprint, New York: Vintage, 1992), 434, 435.

3. Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country* (1946), reprinted as *Southern California: An Island on the Land* (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1973); Davis, *City of Quartz*, 30-35, 88n.8; Michael Sorkin, "Explaining Los Angeles" in *California Counterpoint: New West Coast Architecture 1982* (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 8-14. For the reception of *Southern California Country*, see A. A. Liveright, *Book Week* March 31, 1946, 3; J. F. Thorning, *Catholic World* 163 (September 1946), 570; M. W. Bayley, *Christian Science Monitor* April 10, 1946, 16; E. N. Saveth, *Nation* 162 (June 8, 1946), 697; F. O. Matthieson, *New Republic* 114 (May 20, 1946), 739; Alan Cranston, *New York Times* April 7, 1946, 6; J. H. Jackson, *Saturday Review of Literature* 29 (May 4, 1946), 22; and Oscar Lewis, *Weekly Book Review* April 14, 1946, 1. Compare the treatments of McWilliams by Kevin Starr in *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), esp. 310-313, and *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), esp. 262-264. It is instructive to compare McWilliams's work with that of one of his contemporaries, Robert Glass

Cleland, *California in Our Time, 1900-1940* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947). See also Greg Critser, "The Making of a Cultural Rebel: Carey McWilliams, 1924-1930," *Pacific Historical Review* 56 (May 1986), 226-255.

4. McWilliams, *Southern California*, 376. See also McWilliams, *The Education of Carey McWilliams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), and "Honorable in All Things: Carey McWilliams," Carey McWilliams Interviewed by Joel Gardner, Oral History Program, University of California, Los Angeles, 196-203, in the Special Collections of the University Research Library, UCLA. (SC, URL) Compare this account of McWilliams's arrival in Los Angeles with Louis Adamic's account of his own arrival in *Laughing in the Jungle: The Autobiography of an Immigrant in America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932), 206.

5. Carey McWilliams, *Ambrose Bierce* (1929; Reprint, New York: Archon, 1967); McWilliams, *Factories in the Fields* "Honorable in All Things: Carey McWilliams," 196-203.

6. Lord James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth, III* (London: MacMillan, 1888), 227; Warren I. Susman, "The Useless Past: The Frontier Thesis and the American Intellectual, 1910-1930" (1963), reprinted in Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 27-38; Kerwin Lee Klein, *Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

7. Carey McWilliams, "Myths of the West," *North American Review* 232 (November 1931), 424-432; McWilliams, *Louis Adamic and Shadow America* (Los Angeles; Arthur Whipple, 1935), 25, 26. See also Susman, "The Useless Past."

8. McWilliams, *Southern California*, 249, 264-5. McWilliams seems to have drawn his account of Money from the work of a UCLA graduate student. See William B. Rice, *William Money: A Southern California Savant* (Los Angeles: Privately Printed, 1943). See also Money's *Reform of the New Testament Church* (Los Angeles: n. p., 1854), SC, URL, UCLA.

9. Frank Fenton, *A Place in the Sun* (New York: Random House, 1942), cited in McWilliams, *Southern California*, 269.

10. *Ibid.*, 270-2, 367, 377.

11. For biographical accounts of Jeffers, see Melba Bennett, *The Stone Mason of Tor House: The Life and Works of Robinson Jeffers* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie, 1966), and James Karman, *Robinson Jeffers: Poet of California* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1987). For introductions to the vast critical literature, see Alex A. Vardamis, *The Critical Reputation of Robinson Jeffers* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon, 1972), and Jeanetta Boswell, *Robinson Jeffers and the Critics, 1912-1983* (Meutchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1986).

12. McWilliams, *Southern California*, 375. See also the McWilliams-Jeffers correspondence in The Carey McWilliams Papers, Collection 1319, Box 3, SC, URL, UCLA. Compare McWilliams's account with that in Louis Adamic, *My America* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938), 463-476.

13. "Post Mortem," in *Roan Stallion, Tamar, and Other Poems* (1924; Reprint, New York: The Modern Library, 1934), 284, 285. Twenty years later, Jeffers prophesied a firestorm of black rain and poisoned smoke from which the human race would, unfortunately, emerge. "We need,"

he claimed, "a new dark age." See *The Double Ax and Other Poems* (1948; expanded ed., New York: Liverwright, 1977), 162. On Jeffers and history, see especially Robert Zaller, "Robinson Jeffers and the Uses of History," in Robert Brophy, ed., *Robinson Jeffers: Dimensions of a Poet* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1995), 30-47, and Kirk Glaser, "Desire, Death, and Domesticity in Jeffers's Pastorals of Apocalypse," in *ibid.*, 137-176.


14. Robinson Jeffers to Louis Adamic, May 17, 1935, cited in Adamic, *My America*, 470; McWilliams, *Southern California*, 375.

15. Edmund Wilson, *The Boys in the Back Room: Notes on California Novelists* (San Francisco: The Colt Press, 1941), 62; Louis Adamic quoted in Carey McWilliams, *Louis Adamic and Shadow-America*, 19.

16. McWilliams, *Louis Adamic and Shadow-America*, 65, 66, 100. To anchor his comments, McWilliams cited R. G. Collingwood and Kenneth Burke. On McWilliams, Adamic, and the Southern California bohemians, see Davis, *City of Quartz*, 30-35, and Starr, *Material Dreams*, 310-313.

17. McWilliams, *Southern California*, 375; Nathanael West, *The Day of the Locust* (1939), reprinted in *Miss Lonelyhearts and The Day of the Locust* (New York: New Directions, 1962). All references are to this edition.

18. The best source on West's life is Jay Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1970). Some of the many critical assessments of West's book are gathered in David Madden, ed., *Nathanael West: The Cheaters and the Cheated. A Collection of Critical Essays* (Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards,



1973). More recently, see especially Margaret C. Jones, *Prophets in Babylon: Five California Novelists in the 1930s* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 83-104, and Richard Keller Simon, "Between Capra and Adorno: West's 'Day of the Locust' and the Movies of the 1930s," *Modern Language Quarterly* 54 (December 1993), 513-535. On Hollywood novels, see Jonas Spatz, *Hollywood in Fiction: Some Versions of the American Myth* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969) and Walter Wells, *Tycoons and Locusts: A Regional Look at Hollywood Fiction of the 1930s* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973).

19. For other regional variations on this theme, see Richard Lehan, "The Los Angeles Novel and the Idea of the West," in David Fine, ed., *Los Angeles in Fiction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 29-41.

20. West, *The Day of the Locust*, 132. Carolyn See, "The Hollywood Novel: The American Dream Cheat," in David Madden, ed., *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), 199-217, argues that this temporal flattening typifies period Hollywood novels.

21. West, *The Day of the Locust*, 118. See also Gerald Locklin, "The Day of the Painter; the Death of the Cock: Nathanael West's Hollywood Novel," in *Los Angeles in Fiction*, 67-84.


22. Martin, *Nathanael West: The Art of His Life*, 167-168, 329.

23. Upton Sinclair, *They Call Me Carpenter: A Tale of the Second Coming* (Pasadena: Upton Sinclair, 1922); Myron Brinig, *The Flutter of an Eyelid* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1933); "Books and the Imagination: Fifty Years

of Rare Books," Volume 1, Jacob Zeitlin interviewed by Joel Gardner, UCLA Oral History Program 1980, SC, URL; Starr, *Material Dreams*, 328-29; Liam O'Flaherty, *Hollywood Cemetery* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935), 288.

24. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1977; Rev. ed., Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1987), esp. 151-221. The cite is from p. 5. For a different reading, see Frank Kermode, "Waiting for the End," in Malcolm Bull, ed., *Apocalypse Theory and the End of the World* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995), 250-263, which argues that postmodernist topoi of decay reiterate the older sense of decadence as narrative transition.

25. On the relation between modernism and decadence, see Matei Calinescu's remarks in *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (1977; Rev. ed., Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), esp., 151-224. On posthistoricism, see Lutz Niethammer, *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?* (1989; Eng. lang. ed., New York: Verso, 1992), trans. Patrick Camiller. The sort of aesthetic endism we find in Nathanael West is commonly associated with the advent of the atomic bomb and postmodernism. For a survey, see Klaus R. Scherpe, "Dramatization and De-Dramatization of 'the End': The Apocalyptic Consciousness of Modernity and Post-Modernity," *Diacritics* 5 (Winter 1986/1987), 95-129. For overviews of the scholarly literature, see Saul Friedlander *et al.*, *Visions of Apocalypse: End or Rebirth?* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1985); Malcolm Bull, ed., *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995); and Richard Dellamora, ed., *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).



26. McWilliams, *Southern California Country*, 284, 286. His willingness to stretch the word into strange shapes showed in his description of Los Angeles itself—open shop, Aryan suburbs and all—as a utopian enterprise.

Los Angeles is itself a kind of utopia: a vast metropolitan community built in a semi-arid region, a city based upon improvisation, words, propaganda, boosterism. If a city could be created by such methods, it did not seem incredible, to these hordes of the dispossessed, that a new society might be evoked, by a process of incantation, a society in which the benefits of the machine age would be shared by all alike, old and young, rich and poor.

But compare Robert V. Hine, *California's Utopian Colonies* (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1953).

27. West, *The Day of the Locust*, 177-8; McWilliams, *Southern California*, 308-311. Compare these passages with the similar ones in *Louis Adamic and Shadow America*, 80: "It is progress in America to be able to substitute Upton Sinclair and Dr. F. E. Townshend for the Rev. Robert P. Shuler and the very Rev. Aimee Semple McPherson, even if the same credulous millennial complex is responsible for both types of phenomena." McWilliams cited Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (1929; Eng. lang. ed., New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936), trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils, but virtually collapsed Mannheim's categories.

28. McWilliams, *Southern California*, 369.

29. Alan Cranston, review in *New York Times* April 7, 1946, 6; Hunter S. Thompson, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (New York: Random House, 1966), 75. See the Thompson-McWilliams correspondence in Box 4 of the Carey McWilliams Papers, SC, URL, UCLA. Carey

McWilliams, ed., *The California Revolution* (New York: Grossman, 1968), 13.

30. Review by A. A. Liverwright in *Book Week* March 31, 1946, 3; Roman Polanski, dir., *Chinatown* (Universal, 1974).

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