For many of us, our earliest and most persistent images of Los Angeles came from the writers of detective fiction. We learned about both the City of Angels and its urban satellites through the ironic detachment of Raymond Chandler and his world-weary Philip Marlowe, or Ross Macdonald’s equally careworn Lew Archer. Chandler was one of the pioneers of detective fiction set in Southern California. Private eyes and Los Angeles became nearly inseparable due to his writings. Even if you haven’t read Chandler, chances are you’ve seen his version of greater Los Angeles whenever you’ve watched a private eye punch, drink, smoke, and, occasionally, even think his way through a late-show movie. Chandler’s dark vision simply undergirded Hollywood’s conception of itself.

As metropolitan Los Angeles has evolved, though, has its depiction in this popular genre evolved as well? What changes have occurred in the fictional landscape? What do they tell us about the de facto capital of the country’s Pacific Coast?

The designation Los Angeles can identify several differ-
ent areas, ranging from the downtown central business district, to the political city, to the megalopolis which blankets the Los Angeles Basin itself. Unless otherwise indicated, the megalopolitan scale is intended whenever “Los Angeles” is discussed.

This essay will demonstrate that Chandler, Macdonald, and others are not simply mystery writers. The best writers of detective fiction are also keen social observers who critically examine our culture and our environs. American detective fiction has sent its jaded gumshoes searching through all of Los Angeles and its surrounding environs; and they have returned with trenchant insights regarding social geography, urban processes, and architecture.

Geographers have often turned to novels to learn about and understand a place. Yet few, if any, urban geographers have considered the possibility of utilizing detective fiction as a way of comprehending the American city. Urban geographers especially could profit from hard-boiled mysteries. This genre strives to show metropolises in all their complexity; housing life cycles, migration patterns, transportation epochs, architectural trends, cultural tensions, political skulduggery, and other aspects of urban processes abound in detective fiction. Of course these hard-boiled novels are entertainment first and incisive social science second. So housing life cycles, migration patterns, various transportation epochs, and the like are not explicitly identified as such. Yet, they are present.

These processes—and the resulting landscape changes depicted by detective novels set in Los Angeles—constitute the focal points of this paper. Nearly a dozen books provide a framework for comparison of the city in Chandler’s era, roughly 1939–1954, to novels written since 1986. A trio written by Ross Macdonald between 1949 and 1956 provides a bridge between the two periods.

Considered are six works by Chandler: The Big Sleep (1939), Farewell, My Lovely (1940), The High Window (1942),
The Lady in the Lake (1943), The Little Sister (1949), and The Long Goodbye (1954). The “bridge” works by Macdonald are: The Moving Target (1949), The Way Some People Die (1951), and The Barbarous Coast (1956). Recent works examined include: Robert Campbell’s duo, In La-La Land We Trust (1986) and Alice in La-La Land (1987); Roderick Thorp’s Rainbow Drive, and Robert Westbrook’s The Left-Handed Policeman (both 1986); and Robert Crais’ The Monkey’s Raincoat (1987).

Detective fiction is intensely oriented to place. Philip Marlowe in New York City is simply as unthinkable as Nero Wolfe investigating crime in Los Angeles. Detectives observe the city and its denizens closely; these investigators help paint intimate portraits of their respective cities’ landscapes. The private eye rarely strays from his own turf; indeed, he often becomes identified with it. A few examples of authors and their place-bound creations found outside of Los Angeles would include Dashiell Hammett’s Continental Op and San Francisco; Tony Hillerman’s Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn, who range the Southwest’s Four Corners country; and Robert Parker’s Spenser, who prowls Boston.

The Los Angeles of Raymond Chandler, 1939–1954

Chandler set the tone for 1940’s Los Angeles. He was among the pioneers of fictional portrayals of the Southland’s chief city. Indeed, his influence is so pervasive that the designation “Chandlertown” often stands for the metropolitan Los Angeles of that era. Among the authors examined in this article, Chandler has attracted a majority of the critical attention and scholarly analysis. Thus, unavoidably, secondary sources cited in this paper concentrate on his city, circa 1940.

In his essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” Chandler wrote of the harshness of urban life and the paradoxical need for a man “to walk down these mean streets who is not mean himself.” For Chandler, those mean streets represented all that was rancid in America’s cities.
Typically, Chandler’s novels feature Marlowe’s Hollywood office and its surrounding environs throughout the Southland. In the following excerpt from The Little Sister he presents a vivid portrait of the seedier margins of Hollywood’s then-vibrant central business district. Here, Philip Marlowe sardonically observes of his office building, located at 615 Cahuenga Boulevard in Hollywood:

The pebbled glass door panel is lettered in flaked black paint: *Philip Marlowe... Investigations*. It is a reasonably shabby corridor in the sort of building that was new about the year the all-tile bathroom became the basis of civilization.7

Though he was based in Hollywood, Marlowe’s cases led to his making many trips into downtown Los Angeles, where he not only spoke with police and prosecutors, but also examined various records. In fact, after thirty years of robust development, the Los Angeles central business district of the 1930’s was beginning to decentralize. Yet, the earlier core remained functional with all the elements of a classic downtown: department stores, theaters and movie palaces, jewelers, and clothiers. Indeed, 1930 saw 75 percent of the city’s professional and commercial functions occur in the central business district. Even so, key merchants were beginning to flee the core. In 1929 Bullocks’ opened a new department store on Wilshire Boulevard a few miles west of the central business district, a store that catered to the newly-important automobile via valet parking. Other retailers followed this growth west of the traditional downtown. The historic core muddled along until it was “rediscovered” in the 1950’s and 1960’s. During those decades, financial towers, ethnic enclaves, and civic centers combined to redefine the central business district (Figure 1).8

The atmosphere of that circa 1930 decline steals into the raffish downtown which Marlowe prowls. There are gaudy Art Deco skyscrapers (the Treolar Building in *The Lady in the Lake*), and there are also decrepit buildings with sleazy tenants, exemplified by the Fulwider Building of *The Big Sleep*: 
DOWNTOWN
LOS ANGELES

FIGURE 1. Downtown Los Angeles.
A single drop light burned far back, beyond an open, once gilt elevator. There was a tarnished and well-missed spittoon on a gnawed rubber mat . . . I shook the rain off my hat and looked at the building directory . . . Numbers with names and without names. Plenty of vacancies or plenty of tenants who wished to remain anonymous. Painless dentists, shyster detective agencies, small sick businesses that had crawled there to die . . . A nasty building. A building in which the smell of stale cigar butts would be the cleanest odor.9

Symbolically, the city’s showpiece department store has physically removed itself from the core’s decay. Marlowe looks out and sees the “violet light at the top of Bullock’s green-tinged tower was far above us, serene and withdrawn from the dark, dripping city.”10

When Marlowe leaves his office on a job he never drives on freeways. Between publication of The Big Sleep in 1939 and the 1954 appearance of The Long Goodbye, Los Angeles went from having no freeways to slightly more than fifty miles of freeway.11 Thus, Marlowe’s trips give the reader a glimpse back into a Los Angeles with a transportation network which differed markedly from today’s. Marlowe travels surface streets exclusively. Like other Angelenos, he drives to escape the tensions of his job, but sometimes finds that he increases them instead:

I drove east on Sunset but I didn’t go home. At La Brea I turned north and swung over to Highland, out over Cahuenga Pass and down to Ventura Boulevard, past Studio City and Sherman Oaks and Encino. There was nothing lonely about the trip. There never is on that road. Fast boys in stripped down Fords shot in and out of traffic streams . . . Tired men in dusty coupes and sedans winced and tightened their grip on the wheel and ploughed on . . . toward dinner and home . . . Great double trucks rumbled down over Sepulveda from Wilmington and San Pedro and crossed towards the Ridge Route, starting up in low-low from the traffic lights with a growl of lions in the zoo.12

The lattice of roads and the resulting nascent sprawl of Los Angeles pervades Chandler’s writings. Marlowe often drives great distances to meet clients, to question suspects,
to visit nightclubs and crime scenes. As one author noted, it is astounding how often the novel’s setting shifts to the city’s margins. The detective can be found in the foothills, at the ocean, and at the resorts in the mountains where the city dwellers transplant themselves.\textsuperscript{13} These journeys underscore the great spatial dimension of Los Angeles, a city that Marlowe repeatedly demonstrates is geared to automobiles.

Ironically, Los Angeles once possessed an excellent mass transit network. The Pacific Electric Railway began in 1901. Following a series of mergers, Pacific Electric’s “Big Red Cars” rolled over more than a thousand miles of track by 1925, servicing approximately seven hundred square miles. The world’s largest interurban system knitted Los Angeles and all its myriad satellite towns together (Figure 2). The relationship between land developers and the interurbans was as close as that of the trolley and the power line above.\textsuperscript{14} Marlowe noticed this in a rather gruff aside from \textit{Farewell, My Lovely}: “We slid down a broad avenue lined with unfinished electroliers and weed-grown sidewalks. Some realtor’s dream had turned into a hangover there.”\textsuperscript{15}

The roads and trolleys produced a widely-flung system of settlements. Marlowe’s clients often come from these suburbs, particularly their wealthier sections. Expansive emerald lawns engulf their mansions, a vegetative lushness that belies the desert climate. Curiously, Chandler, via Marlowe, makes few references to canyon homes. The first is from \textit{Farewell, My Lovely}, and the second is from \textit{The Lady in the Lake}.

Montemar Vista was a few dozen houses of various sizes and shapes hanging by their teeth and eyebrows to a spur of mountain and looking as if a good sneeze would drop them among the box lunches on the beach.\textsuperscript{16}

Altair Street lay on the edge of the V forming the inner end of a deep canyon . . . His house was built downwards, one of those clinging vine effects, with the front door a little below street level, the patio on the roof, the bedroom in the basement, and a garage like the corner pocket on a pool table.\textsuperscript{17}
Figure 2. Pacific Electric Company, 1923.
Chandler’s writings provide a sense of urban history, quietly pacing itself, as portions of the city lose their luster. Neighborhoods decline and once spacious homes become subdivided into cheap rooming houses. A passage from The High Window nicely captures the changing demographics:

Bunker Hill is old town, lost town, shabby town, crook town. Once, very long ago, it was the choice residential district of the city, and there are still standing a few of the jigsaw Gothic mansions with wide porches and walls covered with round-end shingles and full corner bay windows with spindle turrets. They are all rooming houses now...\(^8\)

One geographer described Bunker Hill as a “topographic barrier whose slopes were not easily climbed by pedestrians. It long remained as a relic residential island...”\(^9\) Businesses kept to the level lands that surrounded the knoll, which was bedecked with Victorian homes from the 1880’s. Angels Flight, the funicular tramway that climbed Bunker Hill, adorned numerous postcards; but a 1959 redevelopment project scoured the by-then dilapidated houses from the hill, leveling this small piece of Chandler’s world.\(^10\)

An aura of lost chances and poor choices hangs over Chandlertown like the smog which cloaks the modern skyline. Ultimately, almost a decade’s worth of change caused Marlowe to explode:

I used to like this town. There were trees along Wilshire Boulevard. Beverly Hills was a country town. Westwood was bare hills and lots offering at eleven hundred and no takers. Hollywood was a bunch of frame houses on the interurban line. Los Angeles was just a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no style, but good-hearted and peaceful. It had the climate they just yap about now. People used to sleep out on porches. Little groups who thought they were intellectuals used to call it the Athens of America. It wasn’t that, but it wasn’t a neon-light slum, either.\(^11\)

**The Social Milieu of Ross Macdonald, 1949–1956**

By way of contrast, Macdonald’s trilogy bypasses the central business districts of both Hollywood and Los An-
geles, except for a whimsical note in *The Way Some People Die* to the effect that "parking spaces in downtown Hollywood were as scarce as the cardinal virtues." Instead, Macdonald often worked on a larger canvas. Archer moves among more rarified circles than Marlowe. As one scholar stated, in Macdonald's writings "rat-infested wharves have given way to private marinas, and opium dens to legally prescribed anti-depressants . . ." Here, Lew Archer neatly dissects the economic topography of Pacific Point, a fictional suburb near Long Beach. To Macdonald social cleavages extend both horizontally and vertically:

Tourists and transients lived in hotels and motels along the waterfront. Behind them a belt of slums lay ten blocks deep, where the darker half of the population lived and died. On the other side of the tracks—the tracks were there—the business section wore its old Spanish facades like icing on a stale cake. The people who worked in the stores and offices inhabited the grid of fifty-foot lots that covered the next ten blocks. On the slopes above them the owners and managers enjoyed their patios and barbecue pits. Along the top of the ridge live the really wealthy . . .

As did Chandler, Macdonald provides a feeling for time passing. He also delves into larger societal changes and their refraction in the Southern California landscape. Thus, in *The Barbarous Coast* a neighborhood undergoes a change in status and begins to decay both physically and morally:

The house was in Santa Monica on a cross street between the boulevards, within earshot of the coast highway and rifle shot of the sea. The street was the kind that people had once been proud to live on, but in the last few years it had lost its claim to pride. The houses had too many stories, too few windows, not enough paint. Their history was easy to guess; they were one-family residences broken up into apartments and light-housekeeping rooms converted into tourist homes.

**The Modern Private Investigator**

*Have car, will travel; have home, will worry*—In modern writings about Los Angeles two themes predominate: the
impact of the automobile, and home owners building in environmentally unsound places. A minor motif is architectural change, particularly in the central business district. Another lesser chord concerns the migration of new immigrants into the city and their struggles to be assimilated. All of these aspects address a melange of socio-cultural transformations that occurred in Los Angeles during the latter portion of this century. Robert Campbell's shamus is Whistler, who duly notes the automobile's influence on daily life in Los Angeles. In Alice in La-La Land, Whistler comments on the locals' adaptive response to the car culture and automobile-scaled growth:

L.A. is the kind of town where people leave changes of clothes at the office, the health club, or a favorite bar. Some even carry a spare wardrobe in the trunks of their cars. The distances are so great from work to playpen, the traffic such a killer, that hustlers of every persuasion on a tight schedule make provisions.\(^{27}\)

Characters in these contemporary novels rarely travel on surface streets. Instead, they drive along that signature showpiece of Los Angeles, the freeway. These concrete paths reinforce the low-density settlement patterns begun by the trolleys (Figure 3). Though freeways comprise just 4 percent of the total mileage of surface streets and highways, they carry more than 40 percent of the traffic in the Los Angeles Basin.\(^{28}\) The Arroyo Seco Parkway opened in 1940, connecting downtown Los Angeles to the affluent suburb of Pasadena. (Later the road was renamed the Pasadena freeway). Cold War fears fostered interstate highways in the 1950's and 1960's; the highways would double as evacuation routes from cities under nuclear attack and form a network for high-speed, military movements of troops and supplies. The 1970's witnessed the end of the major road-building projects.\(^{29}\)

Today's freeways are overmatched by the sheer volume of the region's denizens. Roderick Thorp in Rainbow Drive speaks for many when his creation, Mike Gallagher, battles
along Interstate 5, which is better known to Southern Californians as either the Golden State or San Diego freeway:

Half an hour later, Mike was on I-5 downtown, passing County-USC hospital . . . and half an hour after that he was crawling past the Egyptian facade of the abandoned Firestone tire factory in the middle of the industrial corridor only a few miles south of the hospital. If there was a freeway in Los Angeles that was not a rolling traffic jam all through the daylight hours, Mike did not know of it ... 30

These freeways dominate the landscape and compose a transportation web which is much larger than the complex of surface streets depicted in Chandler's novels. A sense of the freeways' expanse and the scale of the resulting com-
mercial suburbanization emerges in Robert Westbrook’s *The Left-Handed Policeman*, as a kidnapper flees eastward toward the city’s edge:

The freeway cut across the city from the northwest diagonally southeast; past fifty miles of shopping malls, gas stations, miniature golf courses, pizza parlors, cemeteries, and still more gas stations, still more shopping malls.31

The other noted feature is the houses that cling dizzily to the sides of canyons, where they are vulnerable to many natural hazards. Virtually all the recent novels mention this, and often follow up the observation with predictions of dire misfortune. Rising property values, the lure of a view, and cool maritime air masses combine to draw Los Angelenos up into the hills. Chandlertown rarely built here; instead the well-to-do generally lived in isolated suburbs with bucolic names, though a few resided high up in the hills. In the more recent novels, the middle class has elevated its station. For example, in Westbrook’s *The Left-Handed Policeman*, they have infiltrated an area of the city that was formerly the province of privacy seekers. Lieutenant Rachmaninoff, the novel’s hero, is the son of one of those privacy seekers. His father built a house in the manzanitas and oaks, but the area has lost its Bohemian aura since many other families moved in. Rachmaninoff lives

. . . high in the Hollywood Hills, in the last house on a road called Sunshine Terrace, which veered up at crazy angles from Laurel Canyon . . . [these hills] are covered with houses, many on long stilts, hanging over the cliffs at ridiculous angles in order to utilize every last square inch of ground.32

He’s not alone up there. Like many home-owning Americans, modern detectives have moved either to the suburbs at the edge of the city or to urban “oases” in Los Angeles’ canyons. Marlowe may have lived for much of his fictional life in a downtown apartment, but his successors reside well above the city lights. In Robert Crais’ *The Monkey’s Raincoat*, private eye Elvis Cole describes his view and home:
Where the canyon flattened out into Hollywood and the basin beyond, the lights concentrated into thousands of blue-white diamonds spilled over the earth. ... I'm in a rustic A-frame on a little road off Woodrow Wilson Drive above Hollywood. The only other house is a cantilever job to the east.  

Other detectives aren't quite so sanguine about their location. A worried Whistler remarks in *Alice in La-La Land* that he lives in:

... a rackety bundle of sticks and glass built with only twenty feet of solid ground, the rest was on stilts overlooking the long drop down to Iris Terrace, which hugged the hillside above Cahuenga Boulevard and its river of automobiles.

Owning such an aerie is hardly free of peril. Whistler numbers the dangers and explains that he keeps the house only because he owns it. This demonstrates that he is a prisoner of the hyper-inflated real estate market that has gripped Southern California since the 1970's. Between 1970 and 1981 the national median price for a home increased from $32,000 to $74,000. During the same period in the five-county Los Angeles area, however, the market value exploded from $32,000 to $118,000. Housing in greater Los Angeles wields a double-edged sword: it's pleasurable to sell and agonizing to buy. An entrapped Whistler wryly returns to the drawbacks of his canyonland home:

In summer, I'm afraid [of] the brushfires charging down the hill-sides. In winter, I'm afraid the rains will wash me down on top of traffic. In between, I'm afraid I'll walk in my sleep and take a dive off the balcony.

Police detective Gallagher explains the appeal of living on the angle of repose. First, the canyons of Los Angeles offer patches of wilderness within a vast concrete realm. Their contours form natural amphitheaters which "made for neighborliness on a grand scale." Second, though these hillside perches do not make topographic sense, they do make sense on a microclimatic scale since a layer of marine air eases into the city nightly. This natural air conditioning reaches the higher elevations first, and then the heavier cool
air drains onto the valley floors, "which was why the rich had appropriated the hills all over Southern California."  

These passages showcase the compromises modern Los Angelenes have made between hazards and home. They are aware of the environmental dangers of hillside fires and landslides, but they willingly run the seasonal gauntlet. The pull of a canyonland home—its view, status, and natural air conditioning—evidently outweighs the push of either being burned out of home or having home slide several hundred feet downslope.

The unsettling dislocation of modern life in Los Angeles also comes under scrutiny by current authors. They describe the city as a rapidly changing kaleidoscope—where cycles of urban renewal, suburbanization, and migration move through the City of Angels. Obviously, these changes are not always beneficial to all concerned, as Whistler points out in *In La-La Land We Trust*.

In the mid-thirties the Chinese in L.A.’s ‘Old Chinatown’ were moved out to make way for the Union Passenger Terminal. So they built China City just to the northwest. When that was burned out, the ‘New Chinatown’ rose up out of the ashes . . . And not only the Chinese [live there], but the Koreans, the Thais, the Cambodians, the Laotians, and Vietnamese, the whole damned troubled people of Southeast Asia crowding in where they’re not wanted because they’re not wanted even more elsewhere in the city.  

At least the writers recognize that minorities exist and confront special problems. Chandler’s novels contain few references to blacks or Hispanics. Even poor whites are few and far between in Marlowe’s world. Instead, the migrants to Los Angeles came from the Midwest and the East. This actual internal domestic migration in the first third of the century led to many jokes about Los Angeles being the port of Iowa. H. L. Mencken acerbically rebuked the city by dubbing it Double Dubuque.

The massive number of Midwesterners gravitating to Los Angeles surfaces in Chandler’s writings. Several major
characters claim roots in the nation’s heartland, including Dubuque, Iowa, and Wichita and Manhattan, Kansas. These Midwesterners bring not only their architecture with them, but also “flowers, trees, shrubs, and even the weeds.” At one point Marlowe notices a sideboard in the home of a woman he’s questioning. He comments that it must have been “the admiration of Sioux Falls,” and she softly corrects him—“Mason City.”

As modern detective fiction notes, the suburbs in citrus groves—a vision of a suburban Arcadia which drew those migrants to Los Angeles in Chandler’s time—have long since disappeared. Gallagher decries the loss of tree-lined suburbs pioneered thirty years ago. The rampant real estate market simply carries off the world of his childhood as easily as a Santa Ana wind whisks away a scrap of paper. As the detective drives into one of these doomed throwbacks, tellingly named Shadyglade, he ponders the changes in Los Angeles since his family moved here when he was a child:

The city had been declining ever since—growing larger, but declining . . . Now the Shadyglades were vestigial, these pretty streets, and Mike wondered if Laura Demming knew that the builders planned a high-rise office building that would block the street’s view of the hill to the south. She probably did; Studio City had a homeowners’ group—there were homeowners’ groups in every section of the city, famous for losing their battles.

Conclusions

Taken collectively, these illustrative passages—set in the same urban realm, yet written forty years apart—provide an interesting comparison of greater Los Angeles then and now. The transportation mosaic has been dramatically altered in form and extent as freeways have displaced surface streets in both actuality and detective fiction. The change has social and environmental costs. Marlowe rarely mentions smog, although in *The Long Goodbye* he notices the stinging cloud which blankets the ground. “When you were in it you could taste it and smell it and it made your eyes
smart . . . Everybody was griping about it . . . Everything was the fault of the smog."45 By contrast, his modern peers sit in their cars and fume about the air.

Developmental pressures disrupt lives throughout 1980's Los Angeles, issues scarcely discussed in Marlowe's world. The complex ethnic mix of modern Los Angeles also separates it from Chandlertown, with its handful of blacks and few Hispanics.

Changes in land uses constantly strike the reader. While Marlowe enjoyed driving through orange groves on the way to Pasadena, Cole and Gallagher mourn their passing. Condominiums stand where cowboys once shot Indians before the whirling cameras of the film industry.

As the collective citations amply illustrate, American detective fiction offers the astute geographer another potential source of material to help discern the patterns and processes in some of our larger urban centers. A critical examination of these novels reveals the various writers' acumen of Los Angeles, both in the past and the present. Many American cities have their own distinctive versions of the hard-boiled poet laureate. To cite only a few: New York City has Andrew Vachss' Burke; Cincinnati has Jonathan Valin's Harry Stoner; Loren Estleman's Amos Walker patrols Detroit; J. A. Vance's J. P. Beaumont reigns in Seattle; and Charles Willeford's Hoke Manley battles Miami's vice. These characters are all private eyes, except the last two; and each frequently reminisces about his city's past, allowing the reader a glimpse of how a particular city has evolved.

Whether the protagonist is a private eye or a police detective, the hard-boiled novel can present an overly gritty picture of our urban centers. However, by its overall stress on realism and detail to its localized setting, this genre often paints a rich portrait of its host city and can augment traditional data sources such as the federal census. While much of mainstream urban geography uses quantitative techniques to show us how cities are similar, detective fiction
offers many clues to help us understand what makes each city a unique place. Urban geographers should not overlook the possibilities inherent in these mysteries.

NOTES

10. Ibid., p. 168.
16. Ibid., p. 38.
20. Ibid., p. 190, and p. 198.
29. Ibid., pp. 89-131.
32. Ibid., pp. 19-20.
38. Ibid., p. 117.


44. Thorp, op. cit., note 28, pp. 165-166.