From Magic Milieu to Destructive Denizens: Examining Socio-Historical Shifts within Representations of Los Angeles in YA Literature

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Francesca Lia Block and Marie Lu deftly construct two vibrantly distinct depictions of Los Angeles in their novels *Weetzie Bat* (1989) and *Legend* (2011). Both natives of LA, the two authors offer markedly different views of a city that has come to symbolize a vast array of mythic ideas from stardom and renewal to corruption and deception. Written for a young adult audience, the two stories communicate the trials and tribulations of teenagers and the anxiety that comes from growing up and living in an urban setting. *Weetzie Bat* follows Weetzie, a quirky high schooler, as she tries to find a place of her own in a city that is magical and dark and beautiful. Weetzie befriends Dirk, a young man who shares her nontraditional lifestyle, falls in love with My Secret Agent Lover Man, and starts an alternative family with these adventurous characters. Although the novel deals with troubling topics such as sex, drugs, and the AIDS epidemic, Los Angeles is depicted as a fantastic and postmodern landscape that the characters navigate with magical ease. In stark contrast, Lu’s *Legend* tells the apocalyptic story of June and Day. June is a fifteen-year old prodigy tasked with finding the fifteen year-old criminal Day. Set in the backdrop of a dystopic Los Angeles, the story articulates the anxiety and paranoia that comes from living in a militant state. The two novels, emerging twenty years apart from each other, mirrors a shift in its representation of Los Angeles from a magic reality to an apocalyptic dystopia. I argue that this shift reflects a change in the literary landscape of Young Adult (YA) literature.

These two distinctive novels in YA literature, Block’s *Weetzie Bat* and Lu’s *Legend*, illustrate the utopic and dystopic visions with which Los Angeles has long been associated. Los Angeles is a city both idealized and maligned. Critics have applauded
LA for being a city of culture all the while decrying that it is nothing but a “tinsletown.” Block presents an almost magical version of the City of Angels, where fantasy and reality blur together. In Block’s award winning story, Weetzie embraces the hyper-stylized version of LA, using the city’s heterotopic space as a place to find herself and construct an identity as colorful as the city itself. In direct contrast, Lu paints a militarized and disease-ridden vision of the city, where an authoritarian government controls its population within a surveillance state. This paper examines the shift from the fantastic to the gritty “reality” presented in the two tales, arguing both novels depict the city as a “hyperreal” space. Los Angeles is a city created by signs and symbols. The sensational and sentimental descriptions of the city, as well as the militaristic portrayals, become a part of the hyperreal truth, where postmodern uncertainty destabilizes the landscape.

In addition, I would argue that the shift in the two works also highlights what Kerry Mallan has described as “an Age of Security . . . a post 9/11 surveillance culture [that] testifies to a new set of anxieties about how we relate the present to the past and to the new future” (4). This paranoia and need to always be on guard after the attack on September 11th manifests itself in current YA literature. Scholars such as Sara Schwebel have also noted the importance of 9/11, asserting, “YA dystopias are a post-9/11 phenomenon in the United States” (204). In fact, in an interview I conducted with Legend author, Marie Lu, she explained, “The U.S. is such a warrior nation and after 9/11 it has become more so. The division between the country in the book was inspired by how our two political parties are just so extreme and do not like each other. It’s just a world of opposites now” (Lu). With post 9/11 anxieties resonating within current dystopic YA fiction, it is easier to understand the literary shift from a magical realist landscape to a post-apocalyptic terrain.

I turn to Michael Cart for a brief survey of Young Adult literature to illustrate the shift in ideological representations that appear in Weetzie Bat and Legend. Though described as “inherently slippery and amorphous,” YA literature is clearly tied to an emergent youth culture (Cart 5). However familiar and popular this genre is now, YA literature has a short, but interesting history. Cart sees Young Adult literature transforming from early columns such as “Boy Dates Girl” (1936) to general escapist
novels such as *Hi There, High School!* and *First Love*—works which functioned as a means of socializing young people who are no longer children but not quite adults. Cart notes, however, that the genre takes on a darker tone in the 1970s with works such as *The Chocolate War* (1974). A tale about a young boy named Jerry Renault, who refuses to conform to his Catholic School’s mob mentality, *The Chocolate War* reflects an era permeated by the anxieties evoked by the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War, which raised questions about obeying imperialistic authorities that may be unjustly excluding others based on racial, sexual, or national difference. Cart contends that Cormier’s novel “disturbed the comfortable universe of both adolescents and the adults who continued to protect their tender sensibilities,” allowing “not all endings of novels and real lives are happy ones” (29). In the succeeding 1980s and 1990s, he noticed that along with the dark turn of tales, there was also an emergence of magical realism. Now fantastical stories contained grim topics. The most popular series illustrating this phenomenon is the *Harry Potter* series.

*Harry Potter* caused a reading revolution, cataclysmic for Young Adult novels. The tale situates the adolescent anxieties of growing up within a magical realm, allowing readers to both identify with the characters, while escaping the hardships of everyday life. Cart posits, “In the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, worldwide economic distress, and the specter of global warming, this invitation to escape has surely become increasingly attractive and the group accepting it, ever larger” (102). Amidst the escape into fantasy, Cart also notes that there was an interesting increase in dystopic novels. After *Harry Potter’s* fame, which showcased how lucrative YA novels can be, similar novels started emerging. Books like *Twilight* and *Divergent* met with great success, launching profitable franchises with devoted fan bases. But as Cart acknowledges, the turn to dystopic novels reflects the anxiety of an America feeling both under threat from external forces and under an increasingly panoptic gaze.

*Weetzie Bat* and *Legend* follow Cart’s explanatory arc of the YA trend. Proclaimed a “postmodern fairytale,” Block’s 1980s story about an eccentric young woman in love with the city she lives in resonated among a whole generation. *Weetzie
Bat, and the books that follow the series, highlights the magical realism of Los Angeles, where “happily ever after” means “the land of skating hamburgers and flying toupees and Jah Love blonde Indians” (30). In contrast to Block, Lu paints a dystopic future where a militarized Los Angeles divides its citizens. With a class system established, citizens are categorized by their scores for “The Trial,” an equivalent to the modern-day SAT. So why the change? As Mallan and Cart recognize, growing up in a post 9/11 world, an Age of Security, has affected the way young adult readers view their surroundings and people in authority. In such an era, Murphy argues that for young people “important self-esteem and self-actualization values become less important and their survival and safety values become more important,” resulting in adolescents who have become increasingly suspicious of their surroundings (Murphy). Very much a story about self-discovery and acceptance, Weetzie Bat depicts introspective characters who achieve self-fulfillment through internalized conflicts and revelations. In contrast, Legend's characters fight external forces of corruption, defending beleaguered communities against an oppressive government and unethical officials. Lu’s novel “invites idealistic teens to examine the logical consequences of illogical human behavior and [to] consider how their own actions—or failures to act—might affect the future of the planet and humanity” (Cart 103). However different, though, the novels both display the tension through the hyperreal landscape of the city.

The name Los Angeles evokes both a surreal wonderland and a gritty urban city. Stories and media associate places such as Hollywood and Beverly Hills with wealth and privilege while linking areas like Skid Row and Compton with poverty and distress. Lu notes, “LA, in general, feels very dystopian to me because there’s no zoning. You really see it in Downtown, especially now because it’s been so gentrified. So you see these beautiful restaurants and shops and literally right next to it is Skid Row. That was originally what inspired Legend in the first place—this hugely opposite, this world of opposites. LA has a lot of that” (Lu). Nevertheless, despite these social and economic disparities, the city still evokes a sense of wonder and inexplicable allure, although we might suspect that this wonder is all a facade. As Mike Davis elucidates, “[T]his essentially deracinated city has become the world capital of an immense Culture
Industry, which since the 1920s has imported myriads of the most talented writers, filmmakers, artists, and visionaries,” but it is also a place where “truly indigenous intellectual history seems a barren shelf” (17). So how can a city both be a capital of Culture, yet also be cultureless? The theory of LA as a simulacrum helps in exploring this issue.

As Jean Baudrillard observes, in his seminal work “The Precession of Simulacra,” the city is “the map that precedes the territory” (1557). Baudrillard explains that the hyperreal exists when the image or sign of a place comes to represent and define the place. In this case, the signs and landmarks of Los Angeles become the city, where there is nothing “real” that remains behind the sign. Thus, this place becomes a hyperreal space where there is both tangible physicality and ungraspable content. It is “a place where extremes come together in a recombinant whirl,” a place too irresistible to let go of (Soja 3). Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal manifest in the two novels this paper examines: Weetzie Bat and Legend. The two texts portray an exaggerated version of LA that reflects Cart’s YA trend, depicting not only a changing national environment but also a shift in predominant concerns, from personal growth to national safety concerns.

Although not the only Young Adult novel to take place in Los Angeles, Weetzie Bat is one of the most popular. Written in 1989, the novel traces the journey of young Weetzie as she traverses through the city, finding friendship and love. An outsider who resides on the edge of society, Weetzie befriends Dirk and Duck, falls in love with My Secret Agent Lover Man, with whom she has a child. All of this takes place in an Edenic, nostalgic world of Los Angeles. In the opening pages of the book, Weetzie Bat expresses her particular view of Los Angeles:

The reason Weetzie Bat hated high school was because no one understood. They did not even realize where they were living. They didn’t care that Marilyn’s prints were practically in their backyard at Graumann’s [sic]; that you could buy tomahawks and plastic palm tree wallets at Farmer’s Market, and the wildest, cheapest cheese and bean and hot dog and pastrami burritos at Oki Dogs; that the waitresses wore skates at the
Jetson-style Tiny Naylor’s; that there was a fountain that turned the tropical soda-pop colors, and a canyon where Jim Morrison and Houdini used to live. (3)

The first sentence places Weetzie on the outskirts of her high school community. Mesmerized by Los Angeles’s old school charms, she becomes an outcast within a group of students who cannot appreciate the magic of the city. In this opening passage of the novel, the narrator paints a portrait of LA as nostalgic but whimsical, merging iconic landscapes with the touristy aspect of the city. Block’s novel accepts and embraces the dichotomy of Los Angeles, where “a peculiar bundle of emotional extremes are attached to our images of LA. . . . There is nothing like it, yet it is not outrageous to say that everywhere is becoming increasingly like LA” (Soja 3). By remembering and idealizing a Los Angeles of the past, Block transforms the urban city into a Shangri-La.

However, to say that Los Angeles is simply a utopia in Block’s novel would be both inaccurate and one-dimensional. As Jan Susina asserts, “To make sense of her characters, the reader needs to accept Block’s postmodern version of Los Angeles as a paradoxical literary landscape that embraces both the . . . text as fantasy and . . . as [an] accurate reproduction of reality” (191). LA then becomes the hyperreal city combining the exaggerated urban descriptions and making them real. In a similar vein, Leslie Ann and Witt Salley argue that Block’s utopic vision of LA as both “imaginary” and “real” cannot be reached except through her novel (85). For the Salleys, then, Los Angeles becomes a city that is only attainable through the imagination. Although I agree with these scholar’s observations of the novel, I would like to further maintain that more than just a simulacrum, Block’s LA becomes a Foucauldian heterotopia, a heterogeneous site that simultaneously contains incompatible spaces—material and immaterial, physical and mental, sameness and otherness. The juxtaposition of mythical figures such as Marilyn Monroe, Jim Morrison, and Houdini alongside with the concrete figures of Grauman’s theater and the Farmer’s Market, connote a sense of placeful placelessness. The contrasting images portray a nonhegemonic vision of Los Angeles that defies binary views of the city and instead brings the two together.
In order to better understand the blurring of the real and imaginary in the novel, it would be prudent to give insight into the author’s Los Angeles. Block’s home represents the physical space in reality that reappears in the fictional world of Weetzie Bat. I look to Block’s and Grandma Fifi’s home as an example where lines of reality and the imaginary become blurred. When describing first visiting Block, Sonja Bolle states, “A visitor to Francesca Lia Block’s house might be forgiven for confusing fantasy with reality. Entering through a white picket fence in a well-kept residential Los Angeles neighborhood and looking up the curving brick path lined with roses to a house festooned with tiny white Christmas lights in the middle of July, even the most casual Block reader . . . will be reminded of Grandma Fifi’s cottage” (1). Bolle likens Block’s habitation to something fantastical, a fairyland of sorts, a concrete space echoing the magic of reality. The author’s actual residence reverberates within the novel, with the portrayal of Grandma Fifi’s Hollywood cottage. Fifi’s house has “fairy-tale” roofs and “roses and lemon trees in the garden” and is filled with “plaster Jesus statues, glass butterfly statues” (20). The dichotomy of the Edenic exterior, with the constructed, concrete interior reflects a “postmodern” mode of living—rejecting a world of imposed orders and grand narratives and embracing a playful and destabilized existence. The adjacency of Block’s real life with the fictional representation of Los Angeles echoes Foucault’s notion of the heterotopia. Foucault likens the heterotopic space to the space within a mirror where “when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there” (4). In this sense, Los Angeles transforms into a space both tangibly lived in and completely outside of reach. Block’s home is like the physical body that Foucault places before the mirror, while Grandma Fifi’s house is the reflection in the mirror. Both are present, but out of reach. However, rather than experiencing a sense of fear and fragmentation, *Weetzie Bat* and Block embrace the separation and the postmodern existence.

For Weetzie and Block, Los Angeles evolves into a utopic, heterotopic simulacrum. It is real and unreal. It is a place of contradictions that must be embraced. When communicating her desire to have a baby with My Secret Agent Lover Man,
Weetzie notes, “Beneath the sign the city was only lights, safe and sparkling, like the Hollywood in ‘Hollywood in Miniature’ on Hollywood Boulevard. It didn’t look like any of the things that My Secret Agent Lover Man was talking about” (34). The novel itself is highly conscious of the various perceptions of the idealized city, but makes no attempts to resolve the divide. In one scene the Hollywood sign transforms into the heart of Los Angeles all the while maintaining the façade of the city. The representation of Los Angeles as a small figure demonstrates the illusive reality of Los Angles. The miniature, though just a replica of Los Angeles, mirrors the city’s intangibility. Though there is a physical space, LA’s reality remains out of grasp. This particular description illustrates Baudrillard’s idea of the simulacrum where “genetic miniaturization is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models—and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (1557). With its many different meanings and representations, the Hollywood sign then becomes a signifier for the Los Angeles experience, both empty behind the structure but connoting an infinite amount of meanings.

Moreover, the novel is quite aware of the dark, grittiness of Los Angeles. It is hyper conscious of the detrimental effects of living in an idealized Hollywood. Charlie Bat, Weetzie’s father, serves as the prime example of what it means to not embrace the LA lifestyle. A New York native, he comes to Hollywood to follow his dream of being a screenwriter, but instead he works as a special effects man, “making cities and then making them crumble” (13). This description of Charlie’s job represents his own experience with LA, where the city highlights the beauty and magic of the possibilities allotted to him, but also crushes his dreams, when he cannot actualize them. Shortly after failing at his dreams, Charlie leaves for New York, only returning to visit Weetzie. When Weetzie visits Charlie on the east coast and sees that he’s not doing well, she beseeches him to come home where “we have fairy tale houses, pancakes at Duke’s, and dinners at the Tick Tock Tea Room” (57). In response, Charlie answers, “I can’t be in that city. Everything’s an illusion; that’s the whole thing about it—illusion, imitation, a mirage. Pagodas and palaces and skies, blondes and stars. It makes me too sad. It’s like having a good dream. You know you’re going to have to wake up” (58). Here Charlie
illustrates the deep-rooted fear and anxiety of living in a heterotopic simulacrum, where nothing is “real.” Charlie’s description of LA contrast with Weetzie’s vision, where she depicts her home as “hot and cool, glam and slam, rich and trashy, devils and angels, Los Angeles” (15). Weetzie, rather than crumbling under the weight of this postmodern vision, survives and thrives, thus the novel acknowledges and celebrates the decentralized reality of postmodernity. Weetzie and Charlie’s journey through Los Angeles emphasizes the notion that one can go after their own dreams, construct their own space and identity within the space. Of course, with Charlie, he realizes he cannot exist in such a space, but the novel does give him a chance to try. But regardless of Charlie’s outcome, the novel focuses on the experiences of self-actualization and an embracing of the others in this postmodern landscape.

Subsequently, despite the contrasting images, the city turns into a utopia for Weetzie and her friends. As Clare Archer-Lean describes it, “utopian programs are defined by closure. We might simplify closure…to a radical breach with the known whereby the utopia is independent, self-sufficient, and conscious: a total vision for how life may be lived” (3). More than the utopia, the LA space transforms into the heterotopia of deviation, where “individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm” find solace and comfort. Weetzie offers an alternative lifestyle to those her peers in high school are living. Weetzie falls in love with My Secret Agent Lover Man, while Dirk falls in love with Duck. They all live together in a cottage that Dirk’s grandmother Fifi left them. In addition, this motley crew raises two babies together. Although they do not characterize the traditional family, the characters represent an alternative and loving family unit where being the “other” figure is embraced and celebrated. By being this intersectional space, Los Angeles allows for others to experiment and discover who they are, without judgment or fear. In talking of the city, Block states, “I think that's what is great about L.A. in general—we can all just blossom like these weird little poison weeds that turn into this beautiful thing” (1). Thus, the novel’s characters navigate a postmodern landscape that allows for ways of living that may not completely be classified as “normal.”
The end of the novel produces a sense of closure, where everyone lives the proverbial “happily ever after,” that gives the novel a sense of utopic closure. Moreover, despite having to deal with issues such as AIDS and teenage pregnancies, the characters overcome their hardships, thus embracing the postmodern fairy tale. Block describes the experiences in the book: “In the effort to conquer our fear, we may thrust ourselves alone into a smaller version of that world—a violent concert, a threatening sexual encounter, a riot—and feel that having survived we are more in control of our destiny” (1). In a time period where youth ranked self-respect, family security, true friendship, and freedom as their top values, *Weetzie Bat* illustrates this by embracing the postmodern anxieties, rather than shrinking from them. As Weetzie states, Love and disease are both like electricity. They are always there—you can’t see or smell or hear, touch, or taste them, but you know they are there like a current in the air. . . . We can choose to plug into the love current instead. And she looked around the table at Dirk and Duck and My Secret Agent Lover Man and Cherokee and Witch Baby—all of them lit up and golden like a wreath of lights. I don’t know about happily ever after . . . but I know about happily. (70)

With its evidently happy ending, *Weetzie Bat* exemplifies the optimism and vibrancy of a time not centered upon hyper surveillance and paranoia. So how has the representation and society changed since the attack on 9/11? As Foucault remarks, “In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates” (*Of Other Spaces* 9) and that is exactly what we see occur in Marie Lu’s *Legend*. In a marked shift, *Legend* portrays a post-apocalyptic vision of Los Angeles. Set in a dystopic future, the story follows fifteen year old June and Day. America has now been split into the Republic and the Colonies, where both factions are at war with each other. June is a young woman born into the elite, groomed to work in the military. Day comes from a lower class family and is a wanted criminal. The story follows June’s hunt to capture Day, since she believes he killed her brother. The story presents Los Angeles as highly militarized and in ruins. Set predominantly in downtown LA, the novel depicts a world gone wrong. The narrator describes Los Angeles in stark
binary oppositions. As noted earlier, Lu was inspired to write her novel by her dystopic vision of LA as a place of opposites, where an impoverished Skid Row is situated next to gentrified areas of privilege. Here, as with Block’s and Grandma Fifi’s homes, Lu’s reality and the fiction of her stories blur together, creating a dystopic simulacrum.

The reader is introduced to the novel through Day’s point of view. He shares how “at least twice a month, I see my Wanted poster flashed on the JumboTrons scattered throughout downtown Los Angeles. It looks out of place up there. Most of the pictures on the screens are of happy things” (1). Already, within the first page of the book, the text sets up a dystopic future. In this regard, “the source of the dystopian world here lies in the relationship between the present and the future. Dystopias are evident in futures significantly worse than the hoped for or expected” (Archer-Lean 6). A sinister air surrounds the Republic’s advertisements for Los Angeles: “smiling children standing under a bright blue sky” of an apocalyptic world of ruins (1). The city’s residents now live in a surveillance society, where even the skies and smiles are regulated. From the first moment, the book establishes Day as an “other” figure, wanted by the government. This, of course, seems a little suspicious, considering he is only fifteen years old. However, this paranoia is highly reflective of the militarized era of Day’s society, a Foucauldian panoptic vision of the future. In this surveillance society every citizen must be monitored and regulated. The postmodern unease emerges, not from a destabilized institution, but from an institution with too much control. As Marie Lu articulates, “The U.S. is such a warrior nation. No one has ever complained about the violence in the books. Everyone complains about the sex and the love because that’s somehow more dangerous than the bombs. Nobody is calling me out that people get massacred in these books. That’s more disturbing to me. That’s what I thought I was going to get into trouble for” (Lu). The representation of Los Angeles as a fortress city reflects the growing anxieties that emerged after the attack on 9/11, where citizens voluntarily relinquished personal freedom for high security.

Not only do the JumboTrons circulate propaganda, but they are also a means by which the authoritarian government controls its citizens. As Foucault articulates in his work *Discipline and Punish*, “We should admit rather that power produces knowledge . . .
...that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (550). The JumboTrons transform into avenues in which the government controls what information is disseminated to the masses. There are grids of power, specific sections in which appointed individuals must reside. Day transcends these rules by living on the fringes of society.

There is tight regulation over all aspects of a civilian’s life, most citizens having their futures predetermined based on class and race. In her article, “Everything You Do: Young Adult Fiction and Surveillance in an Age of Security,” Kerry Mallan examines the power relationship between a subject and its government and asserts, “The protagonists are viewed by the State or its enforcers as ‘other’ because of their difference and actions, which are contrary to the collective ethics and ideologies of the State” (6). In the novel, the reader learns that Day is a wanted criminal because he escaped a labor camp. He was sent to the labor campus because he seemingly received a low score on the Trial, a SAT-like test that determines where one will be placed in society. In actuality, he earned a perfect score, achieved only by one other individual: June. Day, a slum kid, defies the social rules that categorize him as inferior to his peers. Aware of his predicament, he states,

The Republic has no idea what I look like. They don’t seem to know much of anything about me, except that I’m young and that when they run my fingertips they don’t find a match in their databases. That’s why they hate me, why I’m not the most dangerous criminal in the country, but the most wanted. I make them look bad. (2)

The Republic is a society who maintains control and power through knowledge, much as Foucault theorizes. Though the Republic may think otherwise, in Foucauldian terms, no one owns power for power runs through everything (561). Thus, power becomes a tangible entity in the form of knowledge. There is power permeating in all aspects of life. Those who are aware of the manifestation of power, and those who create the knowledge with which to influence others, affect the nature of that power. Thus, power is
not something earned by class or birth, but through knowledge. In this sense, that the government has no concrete information against Day makes them essentially powerless, for knowledge leads to power. This is why Day is such a dangerous figure in the novel; he questions the ideologies and views that the present society stands for and runs on.

To better understand this mutual suspicion between teenagers and the government, it is important to look at the effects that the attack on The World Trade Centers and Twin Towers had. As Mallan states, quoting from Zygmunt Bauman, “A crisis of agency occurs when there has been an erosion of trust, in that governmental systems no longer serve the people, and so other ways of being proactive and political need to be found” (4). The “erosion of trust” stems from the attack on US ground and the US’s response to the invasion. Seemingly skeptical of Bush’s ideas of the war on terror, youth were still very much concerned with the idea of national security and safety. In their experiment, “9/11 Impact on Teenage Values,” Edward Murphy et. al. found that teenage values shifted from the interior to the exterior. Before, the top five teenage values were self-respect, family security, true friendship, freedom, and health” (414). Consequently, after the 9/11 attack, values shifted to “freedom, world peace, family security, self-respect, true friendship” (414). Murphy et al. also saw that this was a time that national security registered in the youth’s mind. Prior to this, in times of crisis, young adults would worry about world peace, where they cared about conflicts rather than national security. The 9/11 attack brought violence to the homeland for most citizens. The trauma of the attack echoes within the world of Legend.

As a dystopic novel, Legend presents Los Angeles in ruins, reflecting the lack of faith in institutions and the government. At one point, June remarks,

I can’t believe how filthy the streets are here. Probably even worse than the dilapidated outskirts of Los Angeles. The ground sits low against the water (not unlike the other poor sectors, which all seem to look the same), so that whenever there’s a storm, the lake probably floods all the streets lining the shore with dirty, sewage-contaminated water. Every building is
faded, crumbling, and pockmarked—except, of course, the police headquarters. (96)

June’s vision of Los Angeles—with the land constantly ravished by floods and human turmoil—is not Weetzie’s view of LA. What’s so striking about this passage is that amid the destruction, the city is still highly guarded. The only thing unblemished by the ruins is the police headquarters. Lu’s version of LA echoes Mike Davis’s concerns: “In cities like Los Angeles, on the bad edge of postmodernity, one observes an unprecedented tendency to merge urban design, architecture, and the police apparatus into a single, comprehensive security effort” (224). The constant surveillance of the city echoes Davis’s image of “Fortress LA.” The high police activity demonstrates the ever-present anxiety of the “other”—a fear that especially reemerged after the attack on 9/11. The catastrophic event produced a shift from worrying about internal struggles and instead projected those outwards. This version of the hyperreal, dystopic LA demonstrates the distrust and fear engendered in an Age of Security.

The representation of Los Angeles as a whole can be viewed as the Foucauldian regulated subject. The beginning of the novel establishes that there is a disease that plagues the inhabitants of the lower slums. Throughout the novel, Day’s sole mission is to acquire an antidote that will save his brother. But looking largely at LA as a sickly body, where buildings are dilapidated and waters are contaminated, allows us to see just how the government retains control. Foucault asserts, “The plague-stricken town, traversed throughout with hierarchy, surveillance, observation, writing; the town immobilized by the functioning of an extensive power that bears in a distinct way over all individual bodies—this is the utopia of the perfectly governed city” (553). The vision of the utopic landscape becomes perverted into a place of desolation. The ideal emerges from control: in this case, “power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (549). In this sense, Los Angeles has been marked and ravaged by war, transforming into a hyperreal entity, no longer recognizable. When a young Day finds a quarter, he remarks to his mother, “See the name? United States. It was real” (233). The city becomes an echo of what it used to be, both real and unreal.
Los Angeles is a city at war with the Colonies. Familiar landmarks get deconstructed into ruins. Los Angeles becomes an industrialized warzone, where Jumbotrons, always on, regardless of power shortages, display the latest warnings about floods and quarantines. A few are about the Patriots—this time for another bombing in Sacramento that killed half a dozen soldiers. A few cadets, eleven-years-olds with yellow stripes on their sleeves, linger on the steps outside an academy, the old and worn Walt Disney Concert Hall letters almost completely faded. Several other military jeeps cross our intersection, and I see the blank faces of their soldiers. (39)

This image, particularly of the Walt Disney Concert Hall, demonstrates the extent to which this dystopic vision of LA has become militarized. A building once used for the arts and entertainment is now an academy for soldiers. This version of LA is also heterotopic because “the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” (6). This particular representation illustrates the anxiety of the fear of the future of LA. No longer is control or power centered within the individual. The novel gives hope to an alternate reality, when the novel ends with both June and Day forming an alliance, both based on emotion and politics. The two set off to San Francisco to aid the rebel alliance set to dismantle the hegemonic government.

Young Adult literature has a rich history, reaching diverse audiences. Weetzie Bat and Legend reveal two alternative visions of LA: a postmodern, heterotopic city and a post-apocalyptic dystopia. The two works reflect the changing socio-political environment for young adults, who now live in a surveillance age precipitated by the watershed moment: 9/11. Though both stories deal with very real markers in LA, the symbols become just that—symbols—leaving one to wonder whether LA can ever truly be defined.
Works Cited


---. Personal interview. 11 Apr. 2015.


