Navigating Affective Space: Representations of Los Angeles and the Freeway in Helena María Viramontes’ *Their Dogs Came with Them* and Joan Didion’s *Play It As It Lays*.

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What does the study of a city entail? Is it mere geography and history? Can it be translated into the study of literature? Would it be a novel, a play, a poem? All? None? Can a city such as Los Angeles be studied through literature? What would such a study reveal? At the intersection of literary studies and geography studies lies a mutual plane: physical socially constructed space. And social construction of our physical space creates wide ranging implications, including the creation of an affective politics, as Nigel Thrift argues in his article “Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect.” Thus, critic Reyner Banham, in his *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, and Edward Soja, in both *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, and *My Los Angeles: From Urban Restructuring to Regional Urbanization*, champion a spatial turn within literary criticism that emphasizes the importance of analyzing physical space in relation to social space. Soja describes that “the spatial turn springs to a significant degree from a focus on urban spatial causality, the explanatory power associated with socially produced urban space” (*My LA* 176).

According to Thrift, more emphasis should be placed on how physical space affects individuals, both emotionally and physically—both individually and communally. In my essay, I propose to examine the intersection of literary, urban, and affective studies by examining one of the central tropes of the Los Angeles urban landscape—the freeway. Specifically for the city of Los Angeles and LA authors Joan Didion and Helena María Viramontes, the intersection between literary studies and geography studies become manifest by examining the development and use of the Los Angeles freeway system.

One cannot imagine Los Angeles without also recognizing the freeway: a multidimensional and multi-representational mechanism essential to the functioning of
the city and its citizens. To understand the affective and social power that the idea of the freeway inspires in Angelenos, we need look no further than the massive atmosphere of panic in 2011 with the temporary closure of the Interstate 405 freeway for construction, known as “Carmageddon.” In 2011, with the freeway’s temporary closure, numerous television and radio news broadcasting stations instituted mass affective manipulation—panic and anxiety to name two—by repeatedly surmising and forecasting complete and utter chaos, stopping just shy of advertising the end of the world as Angelenos knew it. Yet at the same time these media outlets laid bare not only their ability to emotionally manipulate the population, but also the extent and nature of the community’s dependent relationship on such a system. For by the year 2011 Los Angeles had already long since adopted, embraced, and transitioned into an automobile driven community environment. To move freely in and around LA requires use and access to this system. Knowing how to drive, having access to an automobile, and having the ability to navigate around LA provides a sense of agency through freedom of movement. The word agency, here (and for the rest of this article), serves to represent and incorporate these aspects of movement and freedom. And ready and continuing participation only perpetuates use of such a system.

What lies underneath this media coverage but receives remarkably less animated attention is the multifaceted effect that the initial freeway construction had and continues to have on the use of both physical and social space in LA. By examining literary representations of the freeway and the authors and characters response to that freeway, I propose, in Thrift’s words, to explore a spatial politics of affect. How does the space of the city transform, contain, and even entrap individuals? Specifically, use of space refers to an individual’s movement in and around their city. This movement pertains to how an individual is able to navigate and the degrees of freedom involved in that movement, pertaining to both the physical landscape, and the surrounding social community. Through analyzing representations of the city of Los Angeles and the freeway in Joan Didion’s *Play it As it Lays*, and in Helena María Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them*, I will examine how the freeway becomes a powerful trope for
both freedom and entrapment, affecting the residents of the city of Los Angeles and the freeway—both literally and figuratively.

Most recently, critics have read Didion’s 1970s novel in the context of feminist discourse and the genre of the Hollywood novel. They depict Didion’s main character Maria as a frustrated actress, trapped by gender discrimination and listlessly pursuing her fading American Dream. Chip Rhodes in his article, *The Hollywood Novel: Gender and Lacanian Tragedy in Joan Didion’s Play It As It Lays*, argues that “as one reads the brief, anecdotal chapters that mix first- and third-person narration, a main character doesn’t emerge—and that is exactly the point. ‘Maria Wyeth’ is an absence . . . there isn’t any continuous subjectivity . . . or any ‘meaning’ to be assigned to her life . . .” (133). For Rhodes, Maria struggles mainly against a dominantly male-privileged industry in which her existence is both trivialized and marginalized. And critic K Edington’s article, *The Hollywood Novel: American Dream, Apocalyptic Vision*, addresses the naturalistic forces behind the back drop of Didion’s Los Angeles, reporting “destruction and impending death form a backdrop for *Play It as It Lays*: earthquakes, mud slides, storms, Santa Ann winds, brush fires, and nuclear tests replace the magnificent California landscape as setting” (67). These critics fail to address how space—specifically the Los Angeles freeway system—reflects Maria’s struggle for a sense of agency through movement. For Didion, who regarded driving on the freeway as a form of “rapture,” the LA freeways offer Maria freedom of movement.

For Maria freeway space is the only space where she acquires, asserts and maintains any sense of agency. The ideal purpose of the freeway, by design and implantation, is to allow commuters to move—rapidly and without obstruction. By associating Maria’s search for and experience of agency with an unobstructed freeway, Didion is suggesting that, like the freeway, this search is both mobile and fluid. Although many argue that Maria is simply traveling and going “nowhere,” I argue Maria’s search is an existential one, in which the journey becomes just as important as the destination. Didion, who was writing her novel in the late 1960s, situates Maria in the context of both a stifling patriarchal world and a feminist revolution, in which women were exploring the nature of their identity in the context of an ever-changing world of social norms.
Although critics have tended to highlight the ways that Maria is trapped by her social and spatial environment, I think it is also important to examine Maria’s search for agency against the LA landscape, in which she attempts to “keep on playing.”

In her 2007 novel, Helena María Viramontes looks back on a Los Angeles that existed in an environment of antagonism and violence, a narrative of a community left scarred and mutilated by the construction of freeways slicing through their Los Angeles neighborhoods. Focusing upon the lives of several young Chicanas and Chicanos growing up in East Los Angeles, Viramontes highlights how the very decision of where to build freeways becomes an issue of social justice. In her novel, agency becomes the privilege of the few, while impoverished East LA families such as Ermila Zumaya’s are forced to navigate a barely recognizable space they once referred to as home. Several critics discuss Viramontes’s use of freeway imagery in terms of its social symbolism.

Dale Pattison, in his article “Trauma and the 710: The New Metropolis in Helena María Viramontes’s Their Dogs Came with Them,” discusses how trauma functions in the novel. He posits, “One of the chief concerns for Viramontes and her characters is the possibility of confronting trauma in a city under constant transformation, where construction and growth are continually erasing important sites of cultural and social production” (122). Alicia Muñoz states that Viramontes “challenges the necessity of the freeways by recognizing the contradictions inherent in their construction. She takes the well-used and positive metaphor of freeways as arteries and exposes the negative side” (28). In my essay, I explore the “contradictions inherent in their [the freeways] construction.” In Play It as It Lays, Didion writes about her traumatized heroine Maria finding solace and agency in driving freeways during the era of its rapid growth, while Viramontes views the freeway as a source of trauma for a community, rather than a source of spiritual and psychological comfort. Thus, the literary representation of the freeway, in the context of spatial and affective theory, becomes both an expression of individual freedom and a colonizing depiction of social containment.

The historical background of the city’s freeway system—its design and implementation—is one of many catalysts of the multiple and contradictory representations of Los Angeles. This history begins, like many histories, before the city
knew it was in the process of becoming—before the city of Los Angeles knew it was a city. The history of Los Angeles’s freeway system and developing relationship with movement is detailed below. This growing relationship with movement, as depicted in the creation, function, and maintenance of a freeway system, vividly portrays the disjointed and haphazard appropriation, transformation, and destruction of physical space that engenders an environment of anxiety beneath the Los Angeles backdrop of each novel.

In spite of housing the world’s largest interurban railway operation, as well as an urban streetcar system, Los Angeles as a city would still succumb to the automobile lifestyle. Author David Brodsly, in his book, *LA Freeway, An Appreciative Essay*, outlines the extensive freeway history of Los Angeles. Brodsly’s history begins with the existing railway and streetcar systems, and how they actually helped fuel the process of suburbanization that seemed to go hand-in-hand with the automobile. Population in the cities “grew, new suburban communities were opened, and the metropolis began to take shape, not according to any plan but rather at the subdivider’s discretion” (132). Electric rail companies were originally “responsible for construction and maintenance of many of the streets and highways needed to make automobile transport practical” (80-3). About ten percent of the streetcar revenues were allotted to these projects. But, full capacity and accommodation limitations of the railway and streetcar systems, resulting from rapid population growth in the city and surrounding suburban areas, strained the system.

In 1915 Los Angeles County housed roughly 750,000 residents—around 55,000 of whom owned private cars. Only three years later, in 1918, vehicle registration jumped to around 110,000 and by 1924 rose above 440,000. During the 1920s, the development of transcontinental highways brought more people and more traffic. This decade saw a population growth of more than 1.25 million people, many of whom had benefited from the new mass-produced and low-priced automobile, which became the primary mode of urban and suburban transportation in Los Angeles. This decade also saw a real estate explosion along with the creation and extension of roads and highways. Later, industrial expansion in Los Angeles would begin around 1940, and with
World War II and the opening of new oil fields, as well as increasing automobile production, a soaring population led to suburbanization in Los Angeles—making the city “a vital center of the postwar business boom” (109) around 1950. Within two decades “the population of Los Angeles and Orange Counties increased by 1.4 million in the 1940s and by 2.3 million in the 1950s, more than doubling the number of residents” (109). It seemed nearly impossible to support the transportation needs of such a rapidly growing population.

Unlike today, private parties assumed responsibility for any aspect of preparation for the automobile. Opening, paving, and widening any roads only concerned property owners or subdividers, and their own private community counsels and interests. The properties benefitting from the new roads assumed the full cost. In 1909, however, the local government “began to assume the responsibility for road construction, when a $3.5 million bond issue was approved by the County Board of Supervisors” (84). The next year, California as a state also began to allocate funds for highway construction as well. Such street planning processes, and an additional 500 more miles of roadway built between 1904 and 1914 was ill conceived, as these roads were not designed to keep up with the continuing population growth in and around the city. In retrospect “a further benefit of early construction was that future development would conform to the structural order defined by the freeway, resulting in a better-integrated urban landscape” (130).

Los Angeles’s downtown became nearly impossible to navigate. Public regulation of traffic first began when, still in 1920, a ban on daytime parking in the downtown area prevented any parking on the streets. This ban, however, lasted only nine days after receiving marked opposition from local business workers and drivers. Three years later, the County of Los Angeles together with the newly organized Traffic Commission of the City hired a few renowned city planners to address the traffic problems. Their report entailed a massive plan and vision for the development of the city—not just a street map. These planners attempted to address the major developing metropolitan space before the space solidified, in hopes of ensuring a smooth transition with detailed steps. Their goal was to “create order in a street layout that was perceived as uncoordinated and chaotic” (85).
Attempting to alleviate the chaos, city planners instituted a systematic definition and study of traffic in general. This meant differentiating roads based on function and different types of traffic and automobiles, resulting in “three basic classes: major thoroughfares, parkways and boulevards, and minor streets.” The first category would continue to “dominate traffic plans” but distinctions between the first and second categories largely consisted in [the parkways and boulevards having] “scenic and pleasure values” (87). The use of these roads would be limited to passenger vehicles. Many of these proposed parkways, thoroughfares—the city plan in general, has never been fully completed.

The state legislature, in 1947, passed a compromise measure known as “the Collier-Burns Highway Act, [which] was designed to bring in new revenues for extensive highway construction by increasing the state gas tax and introducing several new highway-related taxes to be collected by the state, all of which were to be paid into a special highway tax fund” (115). This act fueled freeway building and provided the resources to do it. During this, and the next decade, the major freeway system that we are currently familiar with was born and the first complete freeway, named Arroyo Seco (which began in 1938) and an extension, was finally completed in 1953. Later, in 1956 with the launch of the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, “the San Diego, Golden State, Santa Monica, San Bernardino, Foothill, and San Gabriel River freeways were all built under the program” (116). Some previously established highway routes were “adopted piecemeal as freeways by the California Highway Commission . . . a semi-independent appointed body . . . empowered to select specific routes for state highways” (119), and roughly 12,000 miles of highways were reclassified as state freeways.

Cent by cent, gas taxes increased in order to fund the advancing freeway system. Major construction on freeways began in the 1950s, with emphasis placed on routes going downtown. By the 1960s, those main routes were finished but in 1963 the gas tax rose to seven cents, to further funding. Also during the 1960s, additional expenses “of aesthetic landscaping and environmental protection, plus higher
compensation to displaced homeowners and businesses, all aimed at appeasing opposition, began to escalate construction costs” (120).

Thus began the decline of the freeway era. Some freeway plans met with community opposition, and any attempt to increase taxes for revenues were defeated. All that remains of the former freeway and highway departments is Caltrans: the California Department of Transportation, whose “basic purpose is to keep the existing system running” (120). Nearly two hundred miles of the original master freeway plan may never be built, and only about thirty miles have any chance of being approved. The miles that have been built, according to Brodsly, “will retain their central place in Los Angeles . . . [for] the freeway’s dominance in both the economic and the psychological geography can only increase” (140).

The dramatic and unforeseen consequences of freeway construction, highlighted above, rest in the ‘psychological geography’ that Brodsly mentions at the close of his study. Although Brodsly does not fully address the psychology of the affective nature of space, it is impossible to ignore the ramifications of building and constructing urban spaces in regard to this psychology. In his *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Banham asks, “How then to bridge this gap of comparability. One can most properly begin by learning the local language; and the language of design, architecture, and urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement” (Banham, 5). The language of movement portrayed in Joan Didion’s and Helena María Viramontes’s novels articulates agency, on the one hand, and containment, on the other.

Joan Didion, in her novel *Play It As It Lays*, addresses the psychology of geography as well by positioning the novel’s characters as part of the larger social and political environment of 1960s Los Angeles. Maria is a disenchanted and out of work actress struggling to establish her identity and agency against the backdrop of a patriarchal society, shifting under the pressure of a growing feminist movement. Both Rhodes and Edington view Maria as dominated by the men in her life and caught in the illusive myth of Hollywood and the American Dream. Although I see Maria as limited by her social and economic environment, I argue that Didion’s division of the freeway reframes Maria’s deterministic end; she is not doomed to madness and death. A
transplant to Los Angeles, Maria is constantly moving: originally from Reno, Nevada, she moves to Silver Wells, then to New York to further her acting career, and, then after the death of her parents, to Los Angeles, where she meets Carter Lang, her future husband. Although she does have one main residence, a home, Maria never truly feels settled. She constantly travels back and forth between her Los Angeles home, an apartment she rents, Las Vegas, and the homes of friends and random lovers. At a party “in May she left not with the choreographer who had brought her but with an actor she had never before met” (152). These movements portray Maria as mobile, but a woman without direction. The most powerful sense of agency that Maria experiences is when she is driving on the freeway:

She dressed every morning with a greater sense of purpose than she had felt in some time, a cotton skirt, a jersey, sandals she could kick off when she wanted the touch of the accelerator. . . . [!]It was essential (to pause was to throw herself into unspeakable peril) that she be on the freeway by ten o’clock. Not somewhere on Hollywood Boulevard . . . but actually on the freeway. If she was not she lost the day’s rhythm, its precariously imposed momentum. Once she was on the freeway and had maneuvered her way to a fast lane she turned on the radio at high volume as she drove. She drove the San Diego to the Harbor, the Harbor up to the Hollywood, the Hollywood to the Golden State, the Santa Monica, the Santa Ana, the Pasadena, the Ventura. She drove it as a riverman runs a river, every day more attuned to its currents, its deceptions, and just as a riverman feels the pull of the rapids in the lull between sleeping and waking, so Maria lay at night in the still of Beverly Hills and saw the great signs soar overhead at seventy miles an hour, Normandie ¼ Vermont ¾ Harbor Fwy I. Again and again she returned to an intricate stretch just south of the interchange where successful passage from the Hollywood onto the Harbor required a diagonal move across four lanes of traffic. On the afternoon she finally did it without once braking or losing the beat on the radio she was exhilarated, and that night slept dreamlessly. (15-16)
Navigating and controlling her own vehicle, Maria has ostensible control over everything in a temporary, contained environment. She controls the radio, the speed, and the direction of the car, whether or not she even wears shoes while driving. But most importantly, mastering the skills involved in freeway driving offers Maria the most acute sense of agency. As Banham points out, for Maria, like many Angelenos, “the actual experience of driving on the freeways prints itself deeply on the conscious mind and unthinking reflexes. As you acquire the special skills involved, the Los Angeles freeways become a special way of being alive” (196).

Yet, even though she expresses agency through her movements between spaces, Maria maintains little agency in other aspects of her life. Her waning career, forced abortion, and ultimate institutionalization all demonstrate major instances where Maria is able to express very little individual will. Carter, Maria’s ex-husband and the father of their child Kate, forces Maria into having an abortion. When Maria resists, “‘I’m not sure I want to do that,’” Carter threatens her, “‘All right, don’t do it. Go ahead and have this kid . . . and I’ll take Kate” (54). Maria may appear to have agency, but her only actual option is to do what Carter demands. Maria does not want to give up her daughter Kate and so she only has one option.

Through these seemingly contradictory representations of female agency, Didion addresses one of the social-political struggles of 1960s Los Angeles: the shifting roles and gender equality that women confronted. In this cultural moment, Didion captures not only a woman, but also a society in crisis. In a world that offers her little meaning, Maria, part of a 1960s lost generation, looks to the order and freedom of the freeway as a means of attaining a “secular communion.” Banham recalls his experience witnessing a communal aspect freeway driving:

As the car in front turned down the off-ramp of the San Diego freeway, the girl beside the driver pulled down . . . the mirror . . . to tidy her hair. Only when I had seen a couple more incidents of the same kind did I catch their import: that coming off the freeway is coming in from outdoors . . . the journey in Los Angeles does not end so much at the door of one’s destination as at the off-ramp of the freeway. (195)
When Maria exits the freeway she relinquishes her agency. Movement, for Didion, represents the nature of a continuous battle for female agency. Positioning Maria as acquiring agency while driving on the freeway, even if the agency and the driving is temporary, signifies the need for not only Maria’s agency and movement, but also a larger movement that will garner greater social agency for women collectively. By situating Maria in a psychological institution at the close of the novel, Didion portrays institutions and socially oppressive norms as very real obstacles for Maria and other women. Didion does warn her readers that Maria must still assert her will even in the space of the automobile, for tellingly Maria’s mother commits suicide through a car accident. Maria wants a different fate for herself and Kate. At the end of the novel, motivated by her lover for her daughter—the next generation—Maria is committed to “keep on playing,” creating meaning out of her existential mobility. As Banham states, “As you acquire the special skills involved, the Los Angeles freeways become a special way of being alive” (196).

Viramontes, in her novel *Their Dogs Came With Them*, also addresses the psychological geography that Brodsly only briefly mentions. Like Didion, Viramontes also uses freeway imagery and politically charged social environments to tell her story of Los Angeles. In this novel the freeway, however, divides a once communal urban space, creating feelings of fracture, loss, fear, anger and violence. Writing in 2007, Viramontes reflects on the urban space of East Los Angeles during the devastating construction of multiple freeways through a community. Her novel follows several families, the Zumaya family, Tranquilina and her mother and father, as well as Turtle and her brother. The opening of the novel begins by describing and animating the impending fear of freeway construction: “The earthmovers, Grandmother Zumaya had called them; the bulldozers had started from very far away and slowly arrived on First Street, their muzzles like sharpened metal teeth making way for the freeway” (6). The freeway is posed in forward motion, while halting the movement of the community—and nothing can stop its arrival.

Once arrived, the freeways disrupt and fracture the space. Tranquilina and her mother experience the existence of the freeway not as Didion’s symbol of agency, but
as a spatial and communal impediment. The Highway Commission instead appropriated
the space and community in East LA, destroying and then repurposing the land, making
it unfamiliar and fracturing any sense of community rooted in the urban space:

The two women struggled through the rain in a maze of unfamiliar streets. Whole residential blocks had been gutted since their departure, and they soon discovered that Kern Street abruptly dead-ended, forcing them to retrace their trail. The streets Mama remembered had once connected to other arteries of the city, rolling up and down hills, and in and out of neighborhoods where neighbors of different nationalities intersected with one another. To the west, La Pelota Panaderia on Soto Street crossed Canter’s Kosher Deli on Brooklyn Avenue, which crossed Pol’s Chinese Kitchen on Pacific Boulevard to the east. But now the freeways amputated the streets into stumped dead ends, and the lives of the neighbors itched like phantom limbs in Mama’s memory: la Senora Ybarra’s tobacco smell and deep raspy voice; the Gomez father’s garden of tomatoes; Eugenio’s pennies taped on envelopes for their ministry; Old Refugia, who had two goats living in her cluttered backyard and who took the goats to graze at the edge of the Chinese cemetery before opening hours. (32-33)

The freeways have violently fractured, diminished, and restricted movement through city space, but more than that, they have fractured Tranquilina’s and her mother’s consciousness of space and the interaction between multiple nationalities that comprise the entire community. The result is disconnection from space, restricted agency, and ultimately violence.

The close of the novel ends with extreme violence, as Ermila Zumaya’s cousin Nacho is ruthlessly murdered by a fellow community member, Turtle. Violence between community members demonstrates the core of Viramontes question: “Why? the woman asked Turtle, and kept asking” (324). The freeway becomes a symbol for a larger social injustice that fosters a sense of helplessness and frustration that ultimately materializes as violence between members of the community. Continuing this violence is tragic, senseless, and only leaves Viramontes’s question palpably unanswered: “why? Turtle
forgot why. Turtle didn’t know why. She didn’t make the rules. Why? . . . Why? Go ask another” (324). Unless violence, both in the novel and in the urban community of LA, ends there will always be “another.” Amid such violence and struggle, Viramontes suggests that the true victims of freeway construction are the members of a marginalized community, forced to live under a system that denies them access to freedom and movement. Except for Tranquilina, “no one, not the sharp shooters, the cabdrivers . . . not one of them, in all their glorious hallucinatory gawking, knew who the victims were, who the perpetrators were” (325). Tranquilina, who represents a spiritual center in Viramontes’s novel, desires to unify and heal a fractured community, and she realizes that community must first seek empowerment and agency. Yelling at the authorities, she cries, “We’re not dogs,” and she disobeys their demands, refusing to yield—saying “no” to an oppressive hegemony that includes both the police, unjust laws, and even the city planning commission that dictated the construction of the freeways through East LA. For Viramontes, this process begins by ending violence within the community and through reclaiming and re-envisioning a space of support and nonviolence.

Joan Didion and Helena María Viramontes contextualize and humanize the complex and significant relationship between space, constructed space, community, community members, movement and agency. Edward Soja in his *Thirdspace*, emphasizes the critical nature of analyzing all perceptions of space. Urban space, for Banham, directly affects our self-perception in relation to our space, which in turn affects how we move through and inhabit physical urban space. For Soja, urban space is a socially constructed environment. Soja has envisioned Los Angeles in multiple ways, from a global cosmopolis to a hyperreal simcity, from a carcereal fortified city to a city of increasing social injustice. He poses the question “What, then, is critical spatial thinking?” (*My LA* 175). And to address this question, he derived three methodologies with which space may be reimagined:

First as empirically defined perceived space, which emphasized “things in space,” . . . conceived space or representations of space, which emphasized thoughts about space, ideologies and imageries; and finally
the most unconventional and creative notion of lived space, which combine[s] the previous two spaces but contained much more that is never completely knowable. (My LA 177)

Didion and Viramontes embody the combination of these three consciousnesses in their novels, as readers are subjected to all aspects of the characters’ interactions in the space of Los Angeles. For Soja, and evident in Didion’s and Viramontes’s novels, thirdspace is a harrowing attempt at a boundary-less study between geography studies and literary studies:

*Everything* comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. Anything which fragments Thirdspace into separate specialized knowledges or exclusive domains . . . destroys its meaning and openness. (*Thirdspace* 57)

Yet Soja posits “from a Thirdspace perspective, no space is completely knowable; there is always something that is hidden, beyond any analytical point of view, shrouded in impenetrable mystery” (My LA 177). For Soja, a thirdspace analyses may appropriately end by asking another question. Through *My Los Angeles*, Soja attempts to personalize and identify sources of the struggles, social and political, that urban communities are facing. For Didion and Viramontes, this question involves how social politics affects space.

Nigel Thrift, in his article “Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect,” addresses this question by identifying the human capacity for affect as a new and unrecognized source of exploration. He posits that affect, for urban landscapes, are a “vital element of cities” (57). Part of the essential nature of affect, importantly, has also become political. As proof Thrift takes for example the “marshaling of aggression through various forms of military trainings such as drill . . . [which] may appear to many to be an extreme example”; he, however, thinks, “it is illustrative of a tendency towards the greater and greater engineering of affect” (64). Little concrete attention to this
politics has been addressed, Thrift states, in part because of the divide between the institutions of science and humanities. For too long this divide has persisted, resulting in an unrecognized form of exploitation, but now these two “‘traditions’ have become mixed up, most specially in experiments in thinking about the politics of encountering the spaces of cities which we are only at the start of laying out and working with” (75). Now more than ever, a topography and geography of urban landscapes should be mapped and analyzed by using affective capacity as a critical point of intersection.

Thrift admits that recognizing a relationship between space and affect is not new and rather obvious. He positions himself in a conversation between urban studies and literary affect theory. Within theories of affect he sees major critical debates vacillate between affect as simply another term for emotion, or affect as defined by psychoanalytic or psychobiological terms. Debate also continues as to where those emotions come from and what or whom they can affect. Thrift sees in these multi-sided and numerous arguments, that the turn to affect still demands attention. The turn to spatial inquiry, like the affective turn, signals an interest in the dialectics of embodiment. In combining the two studies, Thrift envisions space as both physical and mental, in that a person must occupy and collectively navigate both physical space and a mental space simultaneously. For Thrift, urban studies must include recognition of affective space as constituting the fundamental operations of urban space:

Affect has always, of course, been a constant of urban experience, now affect is more and more likely to be actively engineered with the result that it is becoming something more akin to the networks of pipes and cables that are of such importance in providing the basic mechanics and root textures of urban life. (58)

The ability to manipulate the affective environment of urban space occurs through networks similar to the systems of pipes and cables for a city. Among the affects that Didion and Viramontes address are agency and entrapment. Their novels demonstrate the circular nature of the affective environment. Space is built—constructed upon, which in turn creates affects within an individual in regard to the space, which further changes the social-political environment.
The history and development of Los Angeles's freeway system created an environment with paradoxical implications. For some Angelenos this topographical landscape engendered violence and entrapment, while for others, the freeways promoted agency and movement. For authors such as Viramontes and Didion, and the urban landscape of Los Angeles, these processes of movement beg for attention. Viramontes, on the one hand, demonstrates that the freeway, although designed for movement, actually impedes movement and devastates the functioning of community and communal collective behavior. Didion, on the other hand, focuses on the metaphorical movement both of the physical body and of senses of agency, along these channels. It is clear that LA will continue to provide an affective environment of movement. By examining movement as it pertains to real physical urban space that is humanized and portrayed through literary genres we may better form questions to address the nature of a new affective politics and how that politics functions in an urban community.
Works Cited


