

## 4. Los Angeles since the End of Molly's Story: 1986-2021

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It has been almost forty years since the closing moments of *Bleeding Through*. Today, our sense of drift is as subjunctive and unreliable as Molly's. Something vast has overwhelmed the American psyche, and is radiating down to Los Angeles. Between 2020 and 2021, the surges of COVID-19 intensified this emerging panic, and Trump's suicidal presence never seems to evaporate. He is obviously a caricature of something much larger: an unending constitutional crisis. Big Lies and blackshirt vigilantism are normal election strategies today. The public looks mostly traumatized, unable to move. Nevertheless, one matter is broadly agreed upon: these 2020 balkanized problems go back forty years. This is particularly apparent in Los Angeles. Since the eighties, Southern California's image of itself has vastly changed. Instead of an erector set of freeways, it is now an archipelago. Photo spreads feature tiny recovered neighborhoods, hidden canyons, lost stream beds, and isolated ecosystems.

From downtown to Venice Beach, food-truck cantinas have popped up – guerilla *loncheras* served by Asians and Latinx side by side.<sup>1</sup> All

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1 In the sixties, food trucks evolved from the hashhouses and taco stands in LA that accompanied the waves of Mexican and Asian immigration, often sharing the same neighborhoods. This caught on as a trend nationwide. Some trucks were even rated by Zagat, and their cooks opened trendy indoor restaurants during the nineties. The craze shifted toward fusion, like Korean-Mexican Kogi BBQ, by after 2008, then, after 2018, began again. For this, see Trinh; Gold; Resnick.

at once, a filigree of micro-ecologies replaced the city of circulation. *Loncheras* are a glorified part of the vendor economy, very immigrant-based, “bohemian” (a nineteenth century term for urban transients), but not simply about immigrants. They suggest the medieval caravan, a zocalo on Sunday, a farmer’s market, a flea market. It’s a long category nowadays. We can add online startups, *elote* street-cart vendors (see Bhimji)<sup>2</sup>, home-office handymen, day-labor construction crews, popup vintage clothing stores, itinerant auto repair shops, under-the-table carpenters who convert garages into apartments, Lyft drivers, any temp worker who never gets regularized, even adjunct professors.

Short-term contract jobs are replacing more stable permanent work. Instant startups and peripatetic food trucks indicate how fiercely labor conditions have already changed – not only in the growing service industry, but in manufacturing and construction as well; there is also a steep drop in work for college teachers (see Kezar et al.), and for “creative freelancers” (see Puko). Food trucks (some with Zagat ratings) are the cuter, aestheticized version. But job precarity is more than just urban picturesque. It resembles an economic nervous breakdown, fiercely highlighted by shutdowns during the pandemic. And while the job picture improved slightly by the summer of 2021, there remains a labor crisis that will only grow. Perhaps the Biden Administration rescue plan can slow that down.

Back in the nineties, I called this more varied, more subaltern LA the New Byzantium. I was referring mostly to colossal waves of immigration, starting in 1965. The Immigration and Nationality Act, passed only months after the Watts Rebellion, removed immigration quotas, and helped start a land rush. Within forty years, five million immigrants settled into Southern California. Los Angeles had more foreign-born residents than New York and had become the most ethnographically diverse city in North America (Waldinger/Bozorgmehr 13f.).

That was the setting I lived in while shaping my social imaginary Los Angeles, the unreliable narrators, the layers of the city, and finally,

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2 The harassment of Mexican immigrant women vendors by the LAPD finally became citywide news in the summer of 1993 (see Lopez 1993, 1994).

*Bleeding Through* (see Sanchez). I could barely find schools to educate my son. In LA, a crackup in public education followed the passage of Prop. 13 (1978), and coincided with the growing hegemony, at least for a time, of the San Fernando Valley. Too often, the public sector was treated like a casino investment that didn't pay off. In fact, one of the early names for this withering syndrome was "Casino Capitalism" (Strange 38, 52–55).

Throughout Southern California, many towns suffered vast losses in manufacturing, from auto and steel to St. Regis Paper Company, National Lead foundry, Chevron Chemical Refinery. "Deindustrialization" and "automation" became slug lines for a "two-tier" economy. Plant closures hit South Central especially hard, one of the root causes of the 1992 insurrection.

Offsetting these crippling losses was a neo-mercantilist trade boom with Asia. This was part of a worldwide scramble after the end of Western colonization, and America's inability to continue it. As colonies gained their independence, the US and its NATO allies invaded their economies instead through the World Bank, and multinational corporations. Only through deregulation and hyper-fast banking could this fragile setup continue.

But in the US, that "postcolonial" gambit backfired. It sparked a phenomenon that essentially colonized the United States itself. The US underdeveloped its own infrastructure. Los Angeles could not get its subway and trolley system "untracked" for decades. The mythical California bullet train has languished for thirty years. LA was confronting postcolonial mercantilism, the hallmark of the Reagan/Thatcher era. We must remember that both Republicans and Democrats wanted deregulation. For LA, however, it manifested as a shrinking public sector that reinforced inequality and police abuse. A lot of this was through ordinances. New restrictions against busing flared up in the San Fernando Valley. A zoning and parking lockdown in Hollywood claimed it was just getting the sex industry off its streets. In LA, the politics of real estate highjacked an international neoliberal agenda. Year by year, parking instructions on upscale side streets grew more incoherent and arcane. They helped to create urban satraps from Hollywood to Santa Monica.

The urban core was being colonized as well, from hipster enclaves to increasingly poor, racially mixed slums in South Los Angeles. The towns of Commerce, Bell, Vernon, Compton and South Gate were rocked by corruption, and swept toward bankruptcy. Real estate oligarchies were sanctioned across the LA Basin. This is connected to worldwide mercantilism. Asian capital adored Los Angeles, at first in the beach towns, then in old Protestant enclaves like San Marino. But the coup de grace came after 2009, in the platinum finesse of the arts district downtown. LA was like a reprise of the seventeenth century, of foreign concessions granted to the Dutch and British East India companies along the coastal littoral of India and China. A special-effects cosmopolitanism took hold in LA, similar to New York, London, the Emirates, Luxembourg, the Hong Kong airport. The age of anchor babies and helicopter children had arrived. With neo-mercantilism, instant money is more valuable than productivity. Biden's infrastructure bills might reverse that for a year or two, but consider how deep the problem goes.

Legacy manufacturing (heavy industry) severely declined by the eighties. Factory workers in LA were savagely displaced, almost singled out. In 1971, Chrysler closed its key assembly plant in the City of Commerce. Chrysler, along with GM and Ford, was trying to out-Japan Japan, and failed. As early as 1971, foreign cars already accounted for 41% of sales in LA (the highest percentage in the US at the time) (see Baker).<sup>3</sup> That misery index worsened year by year. LA's eclipse was right in sync with steel and aluminum closures in Youngstown, Ohio, after 1977, marking the birth of the Rust Belt.

By 1985, the problem had metastasized further. That was when Molly finally gave up her tiny garment factory on Main Street, now the capital of homelessness in Southern California. The shop had to be locked tight all day. The general area was dotted with grimy sweatshops that kept chains at the front door to slow down immigration inspectors. The deepest recession in decades overtook most of downtown. Back east,

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3 “Developers built almost enough new space – about 8 million square feet between 1988 and 1992 – to fill Century City.” (Baker). Bob Baker was an *LA Times* Labor Writer (a category that seems to have disappeared nationally).

heavy manufacturing was almost treated as a lost cause. So much had been offshored, so many union jobs transferred to the American south, or lost when big plants over-automated. For LA manufacturing, there had been an ace card. As late as the eighties, aerospace was still growing, but less surely. It had once been concentrated in a belt of 800,000 people from Hughes Aircraft below West LA to the San Fernando Valley. During the World War, it was centered around the Lockheed factory in Glendale/Burbank. By 1945, two thirds of all airplane manufacturing came out of LA county. That was when Victorian homes two blocks from Molly's house were converted into rooming houses. By 1947, Southern California was suddenly the largest industrial hub in the US. The Korean War added even more – exotic missile and electronics contracts (see Scott). Aerospace grew even further when America went into space; and when space travel was computerized with satellites during the Vietnam War. Then came B2 and Stealth bomber research (\$500 million to \$1 billion for each plan). LA represented a supply chain from Saigon to Berlin. That would transmogrify into a supply chain for goods more than weapons, but not yet.

Missile contracts began to slow down in the eighties, when aerospace actually lost another 18,000 jobs (very uncharacteristic). Then the bottom dropped out: in 1991 Northrop and Lockheed, along with their subcontractors, removed over 21,000 jobs (see Vartabedian).<sup>4</sup> Every month, the hole deepened, to about 300,000 overall. Production of B2s dropped by ninety percent.

The University of California lost government grants that incubated tens of thousands white collar technical jobs, especially in engineering. In the crime melodrama *Falling Down* (1993, director Joel Schumacher), the protagonist is a psychotically unemployed aerospace engineer named DFens. He still wears a plastic pen insert in his shirt pocket. Then, in the midst of freeway traffic, he freaks out, and goes on a killing spree. From an army-navy store (in Silver Lake on Sunset), he kills a fascist Cold War salesman, then symbolically carries around a duffle bag filled with anti-tank missiles and automatic weapons. Everything about

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4 The closures around aerospace continued into 1997.

DFens is a leftover from the Cold War; with echoes added to the 1992 insurrection. If the movie were remade now, DFens might be a software psychotic who joins QAnon.

Ford had already shut down in Pico Rivera (1980), GM in South Gate (1986: my wife taught ESL in Southgate at the time, and the shockwave was apparent in store closures and street turmoil). Firestone closed its famous plant in South Gate (1980, dating from 1927). Goodyear's even more famous plant complex (1920–79) was a chief employer on Central Avenue, in the heart of African-American LA. Tremors were felt across the region. Mike Davis writes about Kaiser Steel's polluted odyssey in southern California, before abandoning Fontana (1982). Overall, a hundred-mile supply chain around automobiles shrank precipitously, from dealerships to auto supply outlets, to trucking.

American capitalism was undergoing savage post-hegemonic redesign. The implications were right on the surface, but often went strangely unnoticed. For example, in 2010, I visited the last fishing boat docked on Terminal Island. The local Japanese fishermen were gone (see Macias Jr.),<sup>5</sup> along with their combined fleet of 250 vessels. Sunkist Cannery had been closed since 1985. At one time, LA produced half of all canned tuna in the US. Now, mackerel replaced tuna as the main LA catch, strictly for the Asian market (see Waters).<sup>6</sup>

I was surprised by the ocean blasts of extreme afternoon heat. A middle-aged sailor was mending a net that symbolically had seen better

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5 A memorial site was set up in 2002, by the children of former residents who were interned in 1942. One descendant explained: "If something like that happened again, I would be taken [...] Bulldozing this life, this entire community in a non-negotiable way, it's scary. It cannot be undone." (see Macias Jr.).

6 The canneries died from 1918, included Chicken of the Sea (closed in 2001) and Starkist. The canneries built a company town of 300 houses, for a community of fishermen that ranged between two and three thousand, most of them Japanese. There was still beach alongside the cement. A writer columnist for the *LA Times* wrote: "As the sun rises higher and higher, the smell of fish becomes almost a tangible cloud" (Meares). The entire community was given two days to move, by presidential order. A plaque honoring their ordeal was installed in 2002.

days. There was no one else in sight. The sailor shook his head, explained that he needed to quit. The sadness of this fadeout was overwhelming him. Five hundred feet away, cranes like giant stick insects were unloading hundreds of container ships. Each ship could hold a thousand times what small fishermen like him might catch over an entire year. The freeze trawlers hauling fish were big, but just stegosaurs. Everything seemed to be overwhelmed by the cranes (not unlike those huge conveyors that used to dominate coal mines). Machines of this kind are the folklore of an age. Our urban folklore is cybernetic, a Marvel Universe, less about skylines, and more about AI things against the sky. Our urban gigantism is now quasi alive, but alien.

LA's shipping container industry first replaced small fishing boats during the Vietnam War. Then, the very same shipping routes that serviced the weapons (from Okinawa to Vietnam) were retrofitted to deliver imports back to the US. That is essentially how Japanese subcompacts first arrived in Long Beach (especially after 1970). Southern California's twin ports were tailor-made for container ships. The harbor depth had been originally dredged out of mudflats (by 1913). That was its edge back then over San Diego. These mudflats proved easy to trench ever deeper, once container ships mushroomed in size, to eventually hold 12,000 containers apiece, each container 40 feet long, holding about 125,000 pounds. In 2000, nine million containers (measured as TEU) passed through the ports each year. By 2020, despite the Great Recession, that figure had nearly doubled. The ports had survived more competition, a slump in 2005, five or ten percent decline in certain years – even before the pandemic. However, business was platforming. Essentially, the first wave of globalization was already slowing down, even before the tremors of 2020. Despite these risks, by the Fall, container deliveries to the ports recovered from massive drops to their highest levels ever. By the summer, volume was on its way to a record ten million container units over the year. Experts pointed out that global supply chains were growing treacherously long. Suddenly, the world stood still; but no one should have been surprised. Why was there no default to allow for such interruptions? There is an implacable congestion. A new business model is coming. And it is already showing up in the LA region. Let me explain:

Due to the ports, the nineties LA economy saved itself. The boom in techware would never have been enough. After the Cold War ended, LA transformed into the Eastern capital of the Pacific (the “gateway”). That reengineered life on the ground for a million people at least, across five counties.

The new rules were a “neo-mercantilism.” A quick historical note on that term: In the seventeenth century, the Dutch and British East India (joint-stock) Companies were given charters to function as independent sovereigns on behalf of the king. They directly owned their own fleets across Asia. The king did not control their capitalist ambitions. Mercantilism was a pluralist, deregulated form of sheer greed. After 1980, it came back. Inside the kleptocracies of the fading Cold War, multinational corporations were granted unregulated authority over Pacific trade. In the Pacific, Los Angeles was the freebooting major port of call.

After the Gulf War (1991), Pacific trade exploded, led increasingly by China. To keep up, the harbor of Los Angeles made special arrangements with East Asian traders – and particularly with Denmark’s Maersk shipping, the largest carrier in the world. By 2005, if you walked across the two ports that constitute the LA harbor, almost no ship docking still flew American colors. At first, these flags represented a partnership, because American multinationals ran the table on globalization in the late sixties. But soon enough, the multinationals themselves became increasingly non-American, set up headquarters in tax-free zones. And their East Asian and West European partners were more than thoroughly independent.

The prologue to this deregulated free-for-all was fifties consumerism, also pioneered in Southern California – bringing McDonalds, Disneyland and cable TV to America. The evisceration (privatizing) of public life began under the banner of consumer fun. Hollywood was already neo-mercantilist in the fifties, through international distribution deals. Most of all, the hegemony of the screen replaced city life. From Nintendo to color TV, the true coming out was the Mackintosh in 1984 (see Levy; Webster). The Mackintosh was announced in a TV ad where the past was blown up as if it were a Hollywood trailer. How splendid

and horrible the future has been. We have cheerfully gone along, allowed for new kinds of distortion in our memory, public archiving and even intimacy itself. This economy of the senses is a hallmark of California mercantilism.

The result has been a plastic surgery of the present, without much of a past, or much of a future. Along with medication, this frozen smile was then engineered into themed streets from Horton Plaza to Citywalk, and finally, the Arts District of Los Angeles (see Regardie).<sup>7</sup> But there are signs of downtown glitter hitting a wall after the pandemic. So underneath the hype, the first age of globalization is ending. What does that mean? It is not simply about recession or panic. Global *consumerati* are still around. And yet, something within global trade is crumbling.

The economics of the developed world cannot support the oligarchic side of globalization much longer. The European Union and the Biden Administration have agreed to forbid corporate income taxes below fifteen percent. This is supposed to reign in multinationals, and reduce havens for piracy. Global supply chains cannot meet the climate crisis either. Nation states are reigning in global policy everywhere.

But we are so far along. Heavy manufacturing has long since given way to a service-oriented economy. There is a vast supply chain of industrial parks along our freeway systems. Cold War manufacturing no longer dominates the suburbs. Forgotten inner cities throughout the Basin are starting to “gentrify” (I find that term incredibly reductive).

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7 Since 2000, “spectacular growth... (boosted) downtown’s residential population from about 18,000 to 85,000.” (Regardie). Also 500,000 now work downtown, or use downtown (from nearby areas). All of that was frozen during the pandemic. The November 2020 Downtown Los Angeles Community Plan Update projected another 150,000 residents added to downtown by 2040. But these magic statistics sometimes involve magical thinking as well. The pandemic has clearly stifled the future growth of downtown for a few years. The future of many districts in the city depends on five vectors at least: the shrinking of globalization supply chains; the crises in Hollywood (exhibitors especially, like Pacific Arclight going bankrupt in April 2021); the changing logistics from the ports; the future of Silicon Beach. There will be a relative boom, but booms are always selective as well.

But ‘Gateway Cities’ like Bell and Southgate continue to absorb more immigrants than they could sustain. Everywhere, we find orphans to neo-mercantilism. A new hardening of oligarchy has remade what we mean by segregation, but not removed it.

The Ramparts police scandal of 1997 was shocking, eventually tainted over 3,000 cases, led to investigations or arrests of 2,500 officers (see Weinstein). The Ramparts CRASH anti-gang unit (sometimes called The LA Confidential story in real time) remains officially the “most corrupt” in LAPD history; and that’s saying something. The story broke when its kingpin, Raphael Perez turned state’s evidence in 1999. His girlfriend admitted to witnessing him killing two men. Officers in Perez’s unit had “planted evidence, beaten suspects and covered up unjustified shootings” (Glover/Lait). They were also implicated in a robbery of a Bank of America branch (1997), had falsely detained street gang members, beaten up innocent detainees, and stole huge amounts of cocaine (see Rampart Area Corruption Incident). To the present day, “the ghosts of Rampart hover over” new cases of police abuse (see “Editorial: Ghosts of Rampart”).<sup>8</sup>

In the nineties, I lived in the Rampart police district when it happened, had no clue to be honest. Still, I would hear surreal drivel from some police officers arriving from the Ramparts station. One cop refused to bother with fingerprints, asked me why I lived in a slum altogether. Another warned me that my house was the center of an Angel Dust mafia. Those non sequiturs disappeared with more community policing. However, in public hearings and through lawsuits, many residents now complained about county sheriffs behaving badly in the outlying districts of the county.

During the Iraq War, through the 1033 Program, the Department of Defense could “transfer excess military equipment to local law enforcement” (see Lee).<sup>9</sup> Over \$7.4 billion in equipment were donated to hun-

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8 Presumably body-worn cameras can prevent Ramparts-scale abuses in the future. This appeared less than four months before the killing of George Floyd.

9 This scandal was reported throughout the national media after the Floyd murder.

dreds of police forces, including the LAPD – a new boondoggle for defense contractors (see Lee). This weaponizing of local cops, as if they were an army of occupation in Baghdad, was probably more extreme in other cities. But the impact of immigration and growing density<sup>10</sup> and growing inequality could not be ignored here either.

Let us take the long view again: In sync with the growing anti-government mentality of Washington politics, Los Angeles entered a cycle of underdevelopment that one usually associates with the Developing World. Eventually, about one third of all imports into the US arrived through the LA harbors, but only 3 percent were inspected, so the tax revenues are dubious. Was this Pinochet's Chile? Nevertheless, the roar of capital seemed worth cheering about. Those trillions of dollars required a bigger distribution chain within Southern California. What used to be seen as "corridor cities" isolated within the county, along freeways from the ports, were national arteries that would have been impossible in 1960. The delivery of all this merchandise finally stretched a thousand miles or more. The Inland Empire was a key hinge to an expanding nationwide chain of distribution.<sup>11</sup> More trains from the

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- 10 Arguments about how to densify Los Angeles, and where to densify, have come and gone over the past fifty years (but have mostly not amounted to very significant changes in the ratio of single-family homes to rentals): see Chiland; General Plan Framework, chapter 4 (on how the number of rentals did not keep up with population growth from 1980 to 1990). Today, one out of three renters in LA spends more than half their income on rent (see Cowan/Gebeloff). This problem was long foreseen. However, the 1970 Centers Concept Plan – arguing for densification of rental housing – had almost no impact by 2007, and only minimally since. It was almost impossible to shift from R1 homes to a rental-first strategy (see Peralta).
  - 11 De Lara traces the Inland Empire's rise underneath the canopy of expanding trade through the ports. Also, there are signs of a 2020 boom in new business construction in Rancho Cucamonga, and other depot sites in the Inland Empire—even during the pandemic. As global supply chains presumably tighten after 2020, the globalized Inland Empire will double more as a revitalized network for American-made inventories as well (cf. CBRE). CBRE is a leading corporate real estate company.

Alameda Corridor<sup>12</sup> continue straight to Chicago<sup>13</sup>, or by trucks into Mexico. Transport from the ports is radiating more widely each year. A shift in capital – both eastward and across northern Mexico – is deeply underway.<sup>14</sup>

This new supply chain is a kind of sovereignty outside the United States as well. It also pushes the nation's western boundary into the Pacific as never before.<sup>15</sup> Using seventeenth-century mercantilist imagery,

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- 12 See Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority; Zamicho. See also Alameda Corridor Project; Barden. For the enormous growth midway through the recovery from 2008, after the Inland Empire was among the hardest hit in California by the Great Recession, see Kirham: "Overall, the Inland Empire accounted for two-thirds of the new businesses created statewide from 2012 to 2013... Over the last year, Inland Empire jobs have increased 2.7%, a faster rate than any part of California except the Bay Area. That's more than double the rate of Los Angeles County and nearly triple the pace of Orange County. Thursday's report predicts the Inland Empire will add jobs at an even faster clip – about 3.4% annually – over the next five years."
- 13 "Walmart's warehouse in Elwood, Illinois, operated by 3PL (third-party logistics subcontractor) Schneider, is a block away... where the containers are first opened after having been closed at the factory in China"—transported from the LA ports. There was a strike at this Illinois warehouse in November, 2012. In Los Angeles, seventy workers from ILWU 663 – Pier 400 at the Port of Los Angeles – also struck in sympathy, indicating two-thousand-mile echoes made by this Pacific distribution chain (see Global Supply Chains Research Group).
- 14 The American artist most involved in recording this maritime transition into Los Angeles, from 1972 onward, was probably Allan Sekula. One of many articles covering his work is Roberts, who argues that Sekula's *Fish Story* 1989–95 "expresses a shift from a culture of postmodernism to one of globalism and reflects the artist's effort to renew realist art in the wake of the postmodern culture of the 1980s." Also, Sekula's films *The Lottery of the Sea* (2006) and *The Forgotten Space* (2010). Coming out of a family linked to industrial labor in Erie, Pennsylvania, he grew up near the port of San Pedro.
- 15 See Port of Los Angeles annual reports, 2006 forward; Port of Los Angeles Facts and Figures, 2000 forward; for the growth of Pacific trade since the 1960's, but especially after 2000, see Sharpsteen; Flanigan; White; Gottlieb. During the pandemic, the ports suffered a decline, but recovered briskly over the late summer, 2020, indicating renewed momentum, even expansion in the future. An incentive program to speed up truck turns, in order to handle the

LA was like a freeport on the Open Sea (*Mare Liberum*),<sup>16</sup> as they called the Pacific in the seventeenth century. Losing aerospace turned LA into a sovereign city state, like Venice in the fifteenth century, or Singapore today. During the nineties recession, LA was forced to self-isolate (see

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"clogged gateway" was set up in February, 2021 (\$7.5 million in incentive rewards; see Mongelluzzo. This came in response to renewed fears of another logistics "meltdown" at the ports, with container ship waits at crisis levels already (Mongelluzzo). All this was a sign of a boom confronting uneven planning and infrastructure (see Tirschwell). The congestion was expected to clear up by late spring "seeing glimpses of improved productivity" (Johnson). Clearly, the post-pandemic trade patterns were somehow different than earlier, not simply a return to anxious normal. I would suggest that new logistics were forced by the pandemic, and that these changes suggest a more permanent shift – differences in the Pacific supply chain, a new era about to begin; probably more about shift in consumer tastes, and certain areas of manufacturing growing, with different needs, a new stage in globalization. Another shift will certainly be toward more infrastructure to support data capitalism at the ports: "Initiatives aimed at turning container ports from conduits of physical freight activity into hubs for the digital information surrounding those cargo movements are underway in virtually every major gateway." (Johnson).

<sup>16</sup> Mare Liberum, or The Open Sea, was a concept developed by the Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, beginning in 1607. But it was also reframed in defense of the nation state – and strangely enough, also in defense of destroying the nation. Upon the Open Sea – the Pacific today (and the wide open internet) – non-national carriers hemorrhage the American state. They are updates of pirates and privateers – or joint stock companies who were legally vassals of the king, but saw vassalage more as a license to steal (circa 1600–1780). The most exalted of these thieves were the Dutch East India Company, and the British East India Company. Many historians consider globalization today a freewheeling return to Baroque mercantilist anarchy. Upon the Open Pacific in 2021, multinational entities do what they please; and prefer "freeports" rich enough to cater to their every whim; like the ports of LA. Another historical strategy, mostly after 2010, has been to examine urban zones as freeports, then and now (i.e. mercantilist concessions to foreign traders); and the blurred meaning of sovereign urban territory then and now. This runs parallel to post-structural concepts of deterritorialization. It imagines cities reshaped by neo-mercantilism; see, e.g., Easterling; Eldon.

Leiter/Barbour).<sup>17</sup> Contracts from Washington diminished, especially when gridlock overtook Congress after 1994, after Gingrich unleashed the Contract With America. Then nothing much was done after Clinton's Penisgate fiasco started.

## Interregnum

Post-Trump America even resembles medieval Byzantium in some ways. Byzantium had once dominated the eastern Mediterranean, including Egypt, but lost out to Arabs, Turks, and to fellow Christians. Constantinople itself was sacked by Trump-like Crusaders in 1204. The Byzantines then drifted into insignificance while Crusaders took over for sixty years, and proceeded to bleed and destroy everything Byzantine. What followed was an interregnum where Constantinople lost colonies to Venice, and in the north, to Russia. By the time the city of Constantinople actually fell in 1453, it had undergone a violent drift lasting 450 years, a population drop of ninety per cent from its peak. That is the mood in the US at large in 2021, quite melodramatic. But is this the end of interregnum, or simply another stage?

The American interregnum is a dialect from the early stages of European imperialism. As empires gradually fade, they produce many dialects – a subaltern overlay of leftovers. These do not simply die; they eccentrically reincarnate, as they fracture into separate regions. The period after the Cold War revived nativist hatreds within the US. That split the nation into three political sovereignties: the Atlantic kingdom, the Pacific kingdom, and the new Confederacy. In the meantime, master planning all but ceased for generations. I leave the reader to guess whether that puts us in 2021 in the second act or the third act. Biden's first two

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17 The rift between the federal government and LA's regional needs grew much wider after 1980; and especially in the nineties. I do remember FEMA being very helpful after the Northridge Earthquake (1994). But that was also the year of Gingrich's Contract With America, which began a defunding cycle that did not stop until 2021.

years will tell; as will future planning in quasi-sovereign kingdoms like Los Angeles.

The rerouting of LA since 1990 – and not just the ports – is a product of earthshaking proportions. Clearly, nothing will be easily resolved. Our *longue durée* resembles how the Roman empires faded away. Or the Spanish and the Mediterranean empires in the sixteenth century. Or the Ottomans after 1693, or the Ming Dynasty, the Persian kingdoms in Central Asia, or India in the late middle ages. Hyper-powerful empires tend to contract, lose equilibrium. Their decay incubates new civilizations. After the Western hegemony ended, the earth was terraformed again.

The Biden Administration will redirect us away from Trump's suicidal distrust of California. But the overall transition may take fifty years. The elections of 2020 nearly toppled the Constitution itself, with years of unrest to come. America is being transmogrified, that much is certain. Among the possible scenarios is that Americans will take charge of this liquid moment. I vote for that.

The eighties! Where would Trump be without the decade that made him a rock star? Whatever those 1980 fissures have been – economic, racist, technological – they came of age in 2020. And yet, somehow on a micro level: As we paused, they saturated into the fine points of everyday life.

## Portability

The matrix radiating from LA Harbor provides a million jobs across four counties, and 2.9 million nationwide (see Flanigan). That means 73% of all cargo in the West Coast, and 30% nationwide, on average over \$2 billion a day. The supply chain from China, in particular, is now so continuous, it dissolves many boundaries within the US itself. The increasing congestion at the ports will not stop this blurring of sovereignty.

I was already researching this mutation while I wrote *The History of Forgetting and Bleeding Through*. I grew convinced that it is part of what I call a feudal condition, as opposed to a feudal system. That is, the steady hardening of oligarchy weakens the federal government, espe-

cially through multinational evasions of the law, and revenue loss (even locally in San Pedro). That loss inspires a growing rage that is damaging the rule of law, safe elections, and long-term planning by the federal government. I imagined Molly's world as part of a growing abscess. A character, Harry Brown, became my avatar for explaining how picaresques and piracies operated inside this world. Then Harry was given his own project, *The Imaginary 20th Century*. But I had been cultivating Harry since 1979. I watched cities being forced to plan independently of the federal government, as regionalism overwhelmed constitutional government.

Neo-mercantilism is feudo-capitalist, a blend of job precarity and multinational neglect of America itself. One might call it America International, rather than America Inc. It has taken Los Angeles over fifty years to adapt, to evolve into a crossroads city, between continents. After 1898, Harry was hired for over fifty years to hide crimes for the oligarchs of Los Angeles.

As of 1970, Los Angeles relied heavily on the militarized federal government (aerospace, research grants, Asian war zones). Since then, various feudo-mercantilist alternatives have stepped in, intensifying the bond with new East Asian economies, and northern Mexico. Even Hollywood, that most American of industries, has grown ever more international, around the Chinese market. The software industries, of course, are a ship with all flags. Global imperatives have transformed Los Angeles from an island on the land to a hanseatic kingdom.

We understand that immigration to Southern California is part of it. But so is our suffocating infrastructure. Intense traffic has broken up the region into hubs of about 800,000 people. Each hub has joined the neo-mercantilist new stage. Downtown is increasingly living off deliveries from the ports. The beach town hub is increasingly absorbing Asian investors, adding to the run-up in the cost of housing. Hollywood increasingly partners with Silicon Valley, which has practically no national boundaries at all. Most of all, housing prices have rocketed. A home is increasingly a neo-mercantilist portfolio, like a manifest off a container ship. These portfolios are easily more international, like the 1930s French concession in old Shanghai. The contrast between overdone global hotel

life, and the lumpen class around it has grown. Los Angeles is not London yet, but the parallels are unmistakable, especially in bourgeois re-habs of old warehouse districts (Tribeca vs. the Arts District in LA). In Hollywood, gated communities from the nineties have turned to soft-core real estate apartheid, through parking restrictions, and new styles of redlining. A hansa-style soft-power version of glitzy districts continues, while an urban schizophrenia makes police abuses all but impossible to contain. And housing for the homeless remains an insoluble mess.

Road networks are crucial to neo-mercantilism. The keystone that we never see is the Alameda Corridor (1992), dedicated to transporting goods from the ports (at least ten million container units per year). Meanwhile, the American nation state was being steadily dismantled, ever faster after 2010, while I wrote *The Imaginary 20th Century*. Hyper-regionalism and urban fracture would soon inspire white supremacism across the country. Signs of political erosion slowed down basic services within city governments, especially resources to fill in the gaps quickly. However, public services inside downtown utterly collapsed.

In the year that I wrote *Bleeding Through*, LA already resembled crossroads cities like Byzantium or even Venice. It operated across continents, even as a sovereign power. Historically, such mercantile kingdoms served as freeports. Even tiny New Amsterdam was almost unrestricted – 2,000 residents, renamed New York after 1660. Freeports must be flexible, more open to strangers. They are also usually open to cultural diversity from outside.

While I worked on *Bleeding Through*, especially its archives, I noticed how automation and AI were changing the street level facts of Los Angeles. At the ports themselves, new waves of automation were already depressing employment. Soon, digital apps would steadily replace people. Both media novels were homages to a future where cities would be dominated by the screen.

Then there is the broader question of how computers will alter the physical city: Clearly, to service the internet of things requires more fulfilment warehouses closer to home, to keep up with e-commerce, through Amazon and FedEx. The logistics sector already accounts for 20% of all new jobs (during the pandemic, higher than that). More light

manufacturing goes with more logistics: spare parts, new packaging, 3D printing. Add to that regional (rather than global) factories now asked to deliver renewable energy, like batteries and solar panels. We are about to see an inversion of offshoring and the global. Logistics is outstripping production through overextended bottlenecks. But why is this so fragile all of a sudden? The origins go back to the fifties, when high consumerism took off, to finally account for 70% of the entire economy. The internet merely turned consumer marketing into global logistics. That means light manufacturing in industrial parks and smaller shops, but where is the master plan? On the computer? Who said puppet masters are not your friend (at least on Facebook)? How involuted our madness has become.

Oops. Your screen says that Amazon just delivered a package. Talk about end-to-end visibility and flexible process! (see “Impact of COVID-19”). The pandemic is turning logistics into the last friend who can walk on your front porch. In the years to come, that means shorter supply chains to stay fast; a speedup of trends since 2016. And unfortunately, at the warehouse, that “requires” more robots (and fewer employees) to bring a smile to your face.

Molly’s first husband suffered from a mental disease that has recently made a comeback. Thus, *Bleeding Through* is a psychological tool where digitized citizenship leads to melancholia. As Freud insisted (1917–26), melancholia also means grieving for a world lost around you.<sup>18</sup> That grief might zombify you, or drive you into explosive violence. Neither serve citizenship in real terms. Perhaps the US is mutating a different model of national government altogether. Will LA politics

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<sup>18</sup> “Mourning and Melancholia.” The reference is to the monumental translation of Freud begun by Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf back in the twenties, finally published in toto in the decades after 1953. Since the late nineties, reevaluation of Freud on Mourning has generated many books and articles, from Judith Butler, Derrida, Leo Bersani, Isabell Lorey; reevaluations of Foucault and Benjamin, and of Hegel. The heart of the matter is that flip switch, where a nihilistic zombie-like mourning flashes into rage; also how mourning serves as the bridge where the unconscious is invaded by neo-mercantilism, by the feudal condition.

mutate as well? Clearly, Los Angeles, like other great American cities, remains in drift. Anthropocene evasions keep mounting.

I label these as part of Neo-Mercantilism (globalized paranoias) and emergent urban feudalism (increasing indenture and neighborhood chaos matched by real estate oligarchy). It seems naïve to shrink these grand themes down to cute neighborhoods inside the gig economy – or Molly's three square miles. But power does radiate on to streets. Bland sandwich cafes in modernist office towers are in trouble. With more work at home, neighborhood bars will expand (if they survive the pandemic). Los Angeles will have to frantically house ten percent more poverty; and service another twenty percent who are nearly homeless. Tented hoovervilles (as in the Great Depression) will begin to dot city parks.<sup>19</sup> As I often say, your grandchildren will ask you about 2020.

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19 The crisis surrounding the closure of a homeless encampment in Echo Park in late March, 2021: 174 tents were removed, and 180 protesters arrested. There is clearly more to come across the LA area. But the future for the unhoused must not be envisioned strictly as a tent. For every homeless person, imagine fifty who are nearly homeless. Then imagine millions of people a paycheck away from being on the street. How will they organize their lives? Sleep in closets, in cars, on trains? Over the next few years surely, rents will skyrocket. Over the next twenty years, the percentage of gig jobs within the labor market will also skyrocket. How many directions will bare survival require? (see Oreskes; Oreskes/Smith). A program for housing the homeless has accelerated slightly in L.A., due to the pandemic (another 6,500 units added in early 2021, with 62,000 already on the waiting list). However, the larger problem must be solved nationally. That is: how to give more people a job and a future, not just a temporary roof over their heads. Since 1974, the precarious economy has been made infinitely worse by a shrunken public sector. As of 2021, the housing shockwave is so far gone, it can only be addressed by Washington first. But that alone could never be enough. The federal response must be coordinated with local bond issues as well; and with cultural reforms across the entire educational sector. And finally, corporations must offer genuine support, as a sound investment. A jobs engine of this kind, both legal and structural, can save perhaps a hundred million Americans from being "nearly homeless" in the future. This is not an impossibly high statistic. As FDR said at his second inaugural address in 1937 (after substantial improvement in the economy), "I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished."

Historians will dedicate programs to it. At the same time, children will dress up as Americans for Halloween.

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