

**Life in the Ruins of Gay L.A.: American Urban Space as Historical Palimpsest
in James Robert Baker's *Tim and Pete***

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In their study of *Gay L.A.*, historians Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmins argue that Los Angeles played a central role in the evolving gay movement in the United States, that “gay consciousness and lifestyles that have developed there have had tremendous influence on how gay life is lived everywhere.”¹ Kevin Starr broadens this metonymic vision, seeing the city as a microcosm of “mainstream American history,” but he states that by the early 1990s this exemplar had “gone seriously awry.”² Major civil disturbances in Los Angeles in 1992 were sparked by a “not guilty” verdict against four white LAPD officers accused of assaulting African American Rodney King, despite the prolonged beating being captured on video camera and relayed across the world. Days of rioting followed, initially concentrated in the deprived and predominantly black area of South Central but quickly spreading, which left fifty-three people dead, thousands injured and damage to property totalling over one billion dollars. The scale of the disturbances has led some to define “the civil unrest as a rebellion as opposed to a riot.”³ Seeing beyond the catalysing effect of Rodney King, Cedric J. Robinson blames the uprising on the rescinding of welfare programmes, increasing poverty and wealth disparity underlying the neoliberal 1981-1993 administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, provocatively describing the violence as “a reverberation from the disintegration of civil society in America.”⁴ The riots exposed a city riven by extreme inequalities in wealth, ghettoised along race and class lines and reaping the social fallout of the Reagan-Bush years: a smouldering urban metaphor for a wider American crisis.

James Robert Baker's novel *Tim and Pete*, first published in 1993, is set in the aftermath of the uprising and highlights parallels between this crisis in American

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pluralism and the Reagan administration's inadequate response to the AIDS crisis that devastated the gay community in the 1980s. For Baker, the ruined city spaces of Los Angeles signify much more than just the immediate effects of the riot. The novel opens with Tim, stranded on the outskirts of the city with no money or transport, contacting his ex-boyfriend Pete and requesting help to get home. They journey back through a stratified and fragmented Los Angeles comprised of distinctive and divided areas and districts, embarking on an automotive version of Michel de Certeau's "pedestrian speech act," the journey through the city that uncovers its stories and histories, past and present.⁵ In his work on queer urban history, Mark W. Turner asserts that "[q]ueer experiences have always been remembered, if remembered, as fragments and traces [...] in the stories of our cities."⁶ *Tim and Pete*, as Martin Dines highlights, is acutely concerned with the recovery of these fragmented "histories – even archaeologies – of homosexual contact embedded in a landscape usually presumed to be devoid of a past."⁷ Tracts of Baker's Los Angeles are still scarred by the 1992 uprising but, in a more pervasive sense, each area of the city the couple encounter is marked and defined by the remnants of its past.

Norman M. Klein characterises Los Angeles as a city particularly defined by the perpetual and systematic erasure of its own past, yet he recognises that traces or "clues" to its history remain embedded in the detritus of its landscape.⁸ In *Tim and Pete*, the city is depicted as an urban palimpsest: a fragmented composite where successive spaces and structures are layered over those partially erased or eroded, nonetheless leaving residual and discernable traces. Palimpsestic spaces or buildings are inherently the sum of their previous material and historical impressions; the past lingers and is inextricable from the building's fabric and accumulative meaning. These locations, embodying the imbrication of different historical moments, offer a means of historicising Los Angeles in the novel, most notably when the characters' spatial explorations take in the ruins of gay liberation. Moving through silent pleasure beaches, decayed bathhouses and faded dance halls, the material, architectural and psychic traces of the radical gay and countercultural past throw into sharp relief a present neutered by consumerism and devastated by AIDS. In *Tim and Pete*, urban space is a link, concrete and metonymic, by which to explore and conceptualise pasts at an individual, subcultural and national level.

This paper will focus on the novel's central concern with the significance of place and space in two key and interrelated forms. First, I will argue that, through his spatial representation of the 1992 riots, Baker understands urban geographies as not simply metaphorically or mimetically reflecting social and historical changes or conditions, but also actively constituting them. This focus reflects Lawrence Knopp's conception of urban spaces as "social products, in which material forces, the power of ideas and the human desire to ascribe meaning are inseparable."⁹ Knopp's study of sexuality and urban space foregrounds the importance of understanding the "sexual codings of cities, spaces within cities and the populations associated with them."¹⁰ These codings are fraught and contested, reflecting social divisions: their interpretation is deeply invested in the varied interests of both dominant and minority groups. The second section of this paper analyses *Tim and Pete's* presentations of Los Angeles's disparate districts and their differing codings or significations, exploring the ways in which these spaces are used to figure a particular historiographic vision of post-war developments in queer and gay identities.

Los Angeles's effect as a physical environment is vital to understanding both the 1992 disturbances and the wider resonance of urban spaces in *Tim and Pete*. Mike Davis's *City of Quartz*, originally published in 1990 and explicitly referenced in the novel as a "refreshingly leftist view of L.A., parts of which [Tim had] been rereading since the riots," is an acute influence on Baker's novel.¹¹ Davis offers a nightmarish sociological vision of the city as an atomised metropolis defined by a failing infrastructure, pervasive corporate greed and social iniquity. Los Angeles is comprised of many separate districts and smaller "incorporated" cities that control their own level of taxation, property growth and bureaucracy, and are designed to, in his view, "safeguard their property from potential utilization as a resource for government expansion or fiscal redistribution."¹² To avoid this tax liability, property-owners "separate themselves from nearby apartment dwellers and welfare recipients" and fix high home values to avoid the development of social housing.¹³ This deep dislocation is reinforced at an aesthetic and architectural level, with the "citadels" of Downtown's postmodern corporate buildings "segregated from the poor neighbourhoods around by a monumental architectural glacis."¹⁴ Los Angeles's urban environment constitutes sharp social and spatial stratification, with adjacent areas strictly divided along class, income and racial lines; high instances of poverty

amongst immigrant, Latino and African American populations effectively mean widespread ghettoisation. Indeed, the King trial's movement to incorporated Simi Valley (an affluent white middle-class area to the north of the city) at the request of LAPD defence lawyers, was widely blamed for the shock "not guilty" verdict and the anger that boiled over into the 1992 uprising.

For Tim and Pete, the riots were inevitable: "'I saw it coming,' Pete said. 'I wasn't surprised.' 'Who was?'" (79). They sympathise with the rioters, reflecting their advocacy of revolutionary politics, but contend that their violence was focused in the wrong places:

I wish they'd aimed their rage better though. Instead of burning themselves out, and burning down Koreatown, they should've gone after Daryl Gates. They should've gone out to the Simi Valley and burned down the courthouse. And the Reagan Library. With the Reagans in it (79).¹⁵

With a bleak irony, the uprising's worst effects are largely hidden from the affluent areas of the city; the lasting damage is contained within the poorest districts where the bulk of the protestors lived. Pete caustically questions the riots' impact on Tim's home of Santa Monica, a wealthy left-wing enclave on the outskirts of the city: "Nothing happened in Santa Monica, did it? Except there weren't any crosstown buses for a few days. So all the anguished liberals had to do their own housework" (79). However, as they journey through the heart of the city, Tim and Pete encounter first-hand the force and legacy of the unrest through its physical effects on the urban environment. They find themselves stranded on the outskirts of South Central, now an isolated, dystopian landscape, by "a block of burned-out storefronts. In sloppy black letters on the cinder-block wall by the car were the words FUCK THE WHITE MAN" (92). Moving through the area, the recurrent description of spaces that are "burned-out" is pervasive: "a gutted Boy's market, a charred, collapsed Thrifty drugstore, what may have been a Home Depot. It looked like George Bush had ordered in an air strike" (99). The only movement in these dislocated, threatening spaces is the "yellow crime-scene ribbons fluttering in the wind" (94). The riots have transformed central Los Angeles into a war zone, with Bush's abnegation of domestic responsibility figured in incendiary terms. The riots' widespread attacks on

commercial premises also connote an assault on American neoliberal capitalism and its unfettered markets that drive social inequality. The existence of sharp social and racial divides is reiterated as Tim and Pete's presence (they are both white men) is met with "startled double takes" in these almost exclusively black areas (94). Tim reacts angrily when he perceives a young African American man "glaring at [him] as if [he] were David Duke" (95) before seeing a logo on his T-shirt for an "interracial homo dance club" and realising that "They're gay. They're queers of colour" (96). Niche spaces like the club may exist, but, in these stricken areas, an atmosphere of fear and mutual distrust has a corrosive effect on the interaction between racial and other minority groups. If Los Angeles is, as Starr contends, a condensed urban metaphor for broader American society, the spatial and socio-economic segregation and decay described by Davis and explored in *Tim and Pete* highlights the precariousness of minority positions in the mythically heterogeneous and meritocratic America.¹⁶

Alan Sinfield argues that the emergence of gay rights in the late 1960s was predicated on what he terms the "ethnicity-and-rights model" advanced by African Americans and the civil rights movement:

[W]e have constituted ourselves in the period when ethnicity, following the precedent of the Black Civil Rights movement, has offered the dominant paradigm for political advancement [...] For it is not that existing categories of gay men and lesbians have come forward to claim their rights, but that we have become constituted *as gay* in the terms of a discourse of ethnicity-and-rights.¹⁷

Within the pluralist American system, and corresponding with a wider sociological change understanding homosexuality in terms of identity rather than behaviour, homosexuals were not only acknowledged as a minority but conceptualised the gay movement in these terms. Dennis Altman, writing in 1982, saw this move as a refiguring of homosexuality in "social rather than individual terms," stating that:

Once the homosexual is perceived as part of a people with his or her particular lifestyle, s/he will likely be treated as are other members of

recognised minorities and accorded a particular identity that is a far cry from the stigmatised one implied in earlier definitions.¹⁸

That an increased level of civil and legal protection did follow in the late 1960s and 1970s can be credited to the civil rights model employed by gay liberation. However, the 1992 uprising exemplifies this model's fault lines: for African Americans, this legacy of the 1960s has not achieved meaningful equality and formal segregation has been replaced by pervasive urban and socio-economic ghettoisation. Whilst it would be glib to uncomplicatedly conflate race and sexuality in these terms (and the novel pointedly refuses to do so), Sinfield concludes that, for gays too, "the pluralist myth which legitimates the ethnicity-and-rights model affords useful tactical opportunities, but it is optimistic to suppose that it will get us very far."¹⁹ Its limitations are evinced throughout *Tim and Pete* as inequality is transposed into (and reinforced by) the glass, steel and concrete of Los Angeles's physical environment. The devastated black areas of Baldwin Hills and South Central are urban testaments to a historical, and ongoing, failure of the pluralist myth for racial minorities, and African Americans in particular. Throughout *Tim and Pete*, Baker forges striking parallels between these endemic social failures and the experiences of other minority groups.

The AIDS crisis and the rise of the New Right demonstrated the brittle contingency of America's toleration of homosexuality. In his study of the Reagan years, John Ehrman seeks to recast Right-wing America as socially liberal, arguing that a commitment to "the emphasis on individual rights that had developed during the 1960s and 1970s" was mirrored by an acceptance of the "loosening of moral standards [that] had given rise to [...] a 'live and let live' ethos."²⁰ This is far from the dominant critical view. Gillian Peele, whilst rejecting unitary definitions of the American Right, sees a common "obsession within the religious right and the new right with the general theme of sexual morality, and especially the issues of homosexuality and abortion."²¹ In Los Angeles, homophobic legislators even "raised the spectre of quarantine relocation camps for those found to be HIV-infected."²² The government's wilful refusal to provide funding or educational support to fight AIDS is highlighted by journalist Allen White, who quotes a senior public health official describing the "legacy of silence" left by Reagan's AIDS policy, "the silence of tens of thousands who died alone and unacknowledged, stigmatised by our government

under his administration.”²³ In the novel, Tim angrily recalls “Bush’s admission in ’87 that there was still a ‘giggle factor’ in the administration regarding AIDS. Imagined cutting off Barbara Bush’s head with a chain saw, setting it on a stake. I’d giggle at *that*” (9-10).

Tim and Pete figures this national failure in polemical terms as its protagonists struggle to reconcile the evidential limitations of democracy and identity politics for queer men and women in the wake of reactionary conservatism and AIDS. Angrily repudiating the assumptions of a tolerant pluralism at the heart of America, Pete argues that gay subculture’s embrace of the civil rights agenda and mainstream political advancement is rendered pointless when the government is outwardly discriminatory. He doubts mainstream gay protest groups can make a difference: “That’s what still pisses me off about most homos though. ACT UP and Queer Nation don’t go nearly far enough [...] They’re still into playing victim and martyr, which is just what people want to see” (143). Pete even suggests these organisations are imbricated with the government’s response:

Be a good little faggot and mince on off to the hospice and pay the price for your sins. Fuck *that* shit. Why should *we* always be non-violent? [...] Hug a teddy bear, boys, and visualise Bambi, till you’re too weak to cross the room, let alone pick up a gun. George Bush couldn’t come up with a better containment plan (143).

The novel’s vision of extreme political disenchantment is troublingly reinforced when Tim and Pete encounter a group of AIDS afflicted artist-militants who plan to turn the couple’s political revenge fantasies into reality and assassinate the Reagans. For this extremist group, the right-wing hegemony of 1980s politics and a homophobic government’s abandonment of its citizens to their declining T-cell counts leaves them with as little legitimate political recourse as the oppressed inhabitants of inner city Los Angeles. Political terror seems their only option: “An object lesson. [...] That passive genocide earns active retribution” (213). Tellingly, the imagined aftermath of their planned attack on the ex-president and his wife at a Bel Air church suggests an equivalency with the 1992 uprising: “the sanctuary in ruins, as gutted as a South Central market, virtually everyone inside it killed” (208). Violence itself appears to be

the only medium to respond to the violence of America's systemic iniquity. The ethnicity-and-rights model, a product of the idealistic 1960s that produced the civil rights movement, is depicted as politically inadequate in the novel: a progressive policy neutered by mainstream conservative politics and failing to live up to the utopian promise of gay liberation. As with the roots and aftermath of the 1992 riots, the events and experiences of recent gay history are starkly addressed through the novel's exploration of space. Ruination, urban fragmentation and decay are again recurrent tropes as Tim and Pete journey through the historical remains of Los Angeles's gay past and the novel explores the potential for this changing urban landscape to signify broader historical and political issues.

In a pivotal scene, as Pete stops at a gas station in a fringe area of the city, Tim notices a building that seems familiar: an old gay dance hall that has been converted into a spiritual centre. He is shocked at a sudden "flood of images of men dancing, stomping, shaking the floor upstairs," as the now "deserted business area [sets] off a memory jag of walking the same empty street late at night after a dance in 1971" (140). This vivid experience, contrasted with the anaemic New Age-ism of the building in the 1990s, leads Tim to recall sadly "other images – a blond-bearded kid's wet erection jutting up against his tie-dye T-shirt – that made me glad I'd been eighteen then instead of now" (140). The relationship with the past evinced by this spatial encounter goes beyond mere nostalgia for the pre-AIDS sexual innocence of gay liberation. Tim's sense of temporality is disrupted by the experience, by the traces of the past inherent underneath the blank new finish of the building – he smells, feels and sees past events as if they were happening now, prompting him to wonder: "Do you think physical locations contain the vibrations of past events?" (142).

Sinfield notes the explicitness of *Tim and Pete's* references to the "most developed theory of countercultural art and the dramatic insurrectionary gesture, [of] the Situationist International group in the 1960s."²⁴ It is therefore no accident that Tim's experience of space is framed in terms so redolent of Situationist psychogeography. As with Davis's urban sociology and the novel's own treatment of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Sadie Plant argues that psychogeography is formulated around the concept that "only an awareness of the influences of the existing environment can encourage the critique of the present conditions of everyday lives."²⁵ Yet the episode at the dance hall also demonstrates another key facet of

psychogeography: the idea that architecture and space can have an emotionally and physically affective, yet disruptive, historicising role. Situationist psychogeography comprehends buildings, in Simon Sadler's words, "through their use, their history, and their collective and associative generation of meaning and mood, like words in poetry."²⁶ The concrete juxtaposition of past and present in the altered space of the dance hall acts as a metaphor for the differences between the idealised "early gay lib days. There was a bohemian spirit, you know. In a sense, it was still the sixties" (142) and a blanched, homogenised present: "Light and airy now, spotless cream-colored walls. Rows of meditation pillows on the floor where young men had once sweated and yowled" (141). The disruptive physical and sensory nature of this experience also suggests urban space's dissonant historical potential, reminiscent of Carolyn Dinshaw's conception of an affective queer history that reckons "with what it feels like to be a body in time, or in multiple times, or out of time."²⁷ Tim's experience in the dance hall, where space functions as a locus for memory, emotion and affect, reflects Dinshaw's vision of heterogeneous temporalities challenging the linear or positivistic understanding of our relationship with the past. It also undermines conservative conceptions of historical and societal progress that are ideologically interlinked with this linear understanding. In the palimpsestic space, the past is never truly gone; its effects are still being felt and its meaning is ripe for contest, revision and resignification. In *Tim and Pete*, Los Angeles's city spaces evince a history of gay liberation that tracks the Sixties' attrition into "the growing chilliness of the Seventies, an increasingly harsh decade for those whose ideals had been nurtured in earlier years."²⁸

Each area of the divided Los Angeles encountered by Tim and Pete has its own distinctive social and cultural connotations, articulating a different instance of historical transition. Tim's boyhood home in affluent La Jolla represents the transition between the values of 1950s and 1960s America, a "once-sleek [...] dreamhouse [that] was now a gutted shell at the end of Narcissus (or, circa 1968, Narcosis) Drive" (36). The house's ruination and decline by the 1990s undermines the 1950s consumer utopianism it was intended to embody: "In the yellow breakfast nook where my mother had served Aunt Jemima pancakes on bright sunny mornings in 1959, someone had taken a dump" (36). In an act of sexually refiguring the pre-gay lib past, the couple have sex in the remains of Tim's old bedroom, a space dominated by

memories of his homophobic father, likened to “Joe McCarthy in the next room” (36). The wider area’s fate, devastated by a “landslide in the late sixties” (35), has metaphorical weight: the heteronormative values La Jolla represents for Tim were irrevocably altered by his experience of gay liberation in the late Sixties. However, on the national stage, those values are shown to have endured. La Jolla is also the site of the Republican conference that the gay militants decide to target at the end of the text: “a virtual who’s who of the American Right [...] the people who *invented* Ronald Reagan” (235). Their attack signifies a radical assault on the resurgent 1950s conservative values rhetorically re-deployed by the New Right.

The later frustration of the idealism popularly associated with the 1960s is explored in a scene in which Tim watches Pete’s band perform their radical protest song “What This Country Needs (Is a Baader-Meinhof gang)” (130). The music is dark, politicised and steeped in the sound of the Sixties, likened to “the Velvet Underground deconstructing Brian Wilson, the mindless sun-drenched imagery taking on an apocalyptic edge” (117):

*The Reagans let their friends
Turn this world to crud
That’s why I’d like to drench them both
With AIDS-infected blood
[...]
Like to see that Jeane Kirkpatrick
Machine-gunned in a revolving door
The death-squad dead won’t be avenged
Till someone smokes that right-wing whore
[...]
I’m sick of watching the wrong people die
with a victim’s whimper instead of a bang
What I’d like to see
What this country needs
Is a Baader-Meinhof gang.
(130-131)*

The setting is the crumbling Ambassador Hotel in central Los Angeles, a place “just brimming with history” and associated with both the glamour of the Hollywood Golden Age and a darker, more recent act: “Charlie Chaplin, Gloria Swanson [...] Judy Garland singing ‘The Man That Got Away’ in the Coconut Grove. Sirhan Sirhan singing ‘I Don’t Know How to Love Him’ in the kitchen” (111). In June 1968, Robert Kennedy was assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan at the hotel while campaigning for the Democratic Party’s presidential nomination and Pete’s gig takes place in the very “ballroom where [...] Kennedy made his victory speech before he was shot” (111). The hotel is “monumentally dilapidated, the salmon pink walls crumbling, eaves sagging,” and is imminently “set for demolition” (111). This decaying space, where many Americans’ dream of a liberal mainstream politics died, evocatively and disconcertingly frames Pete’s extreme political views. From the literal and figurative ruins of the Sixties, a new politics emerges, albeit one with violent and extremist overtones.

Long Beach, a city in the south of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, is represented as a shadow of its former gay glory, and once again the novel’s progression through it figures the Sixties as a historical fulcrum. It also offers one of the text’s most potent examples of the palimpsestic space provoking a critical historiographic engagement with the recent past. Presaging their arrival, Tim and Pete’s drive takes them past Huntington Beach, described as progressing “from a field of rusty tin cans in the fifties to pure white sand dunes in the sixties to the long parking lot and string of cinder-block toilet buildings it was now” (52). The narrative of gay and countercultural rise-and-fall continues once they reach the spaces around Long Beach’s shoreline, metaphorically described as another “bombed out block” (65). Tim notices the remnants of an old tile floor amongst the ruins and recalls the carnivalesque atmosphere of the funfair in 1969 (the year of the Stonewall riots that catalysed the gay rights movement), remembering the tearoom (public toilet used for casual gay sex) and “the *freak show building!* Talk about pure Americana raunch!” (55). These buildings are gone, but traces remain:

We started walking down what had once been the amusement park’s midway arcade. Only one building remained, a moldering blue stucco structure a couple of blocks away. Everything else had been leveled over a decade

before. There were just the foundation grids, old tile floors, weeds growing up through the pavement. Above us on the bluff, high-rise office buildings lined Ocean Boulevard, where there'd once been dumpy 1920s apartment buildings, in the late sixties filled with bikers and sailors and sluts and queers. "You should stay away from there, Timmy," my mom had warned me. "That place has a bad reputation" (54).

The Sixties past, its promise so valorised by the American Left, has declined and been left to rot, but its imprints, the gaps it has left behind, still linger suggestively in urban spaces. In comparison, a local gay bar recalled as a haunt of Tim's "in the midseventies" (56), is extant if virtually deserted. Remembered as "[p]retty cruisy at weekends, otherwise depressing" (56), the couple enter to find a case of subcultural arrested development. The building is faded but unchanged, seventies fashions endure with "a gaunt, fiftyish individual in an aqua jumpsuit" and the barman is uncannily familiar:

Buddy had to be in his fifties now, but his outsize [...] pectorals were still bulging under his tight white T-shirt, much the way they'd bulged under his tight white sailor suit the night we met at the trough in the men's room a block away when I was sixteen and sexed up and scared (59).

The novel invests this unchanged locale with a sleazy, jaded feel and associations with anonymous sex that remind Tim of the bathhouse culture linked to the explosion of AIDS in the early 1980s: "The baths? I knew there were places like that still open, but the idea of going to one of them made my skin crawl" (60). The spatial remains of the gay past at Long Beach, either ruined or preserved in aspic, denote the novel's historical vision of a transition from the idyllic, queerly carnivalesque Sixties to a sleazy and compromised Seventies gay scene. Indeed, Tim and Pete's experiences at Long Beach prefigure the text's extreme representation of Los Angeles's traditional gay centre: West Hollywood.

West Hollywood is crucial to any understanding of gay subcultures in Los Angeles, representing the "space within which the minority may legitimately express itself" intrinsic to Sinfield's conception of the ethnicity-and-rights subcultural model.²⁹ The area was originally a haven for queer men and women. To quote Starr,

“before incorporation, the gay community had gravitated to the unincorporated West Hollywood region partially in the belief that the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Department did not harass patrons in gay bars as much as the Los Angeles Police Department did.”³⁰ But in the wake of the AIDS crisis, its connotations in the novel are much more ambivalent. In Baker’s depiction of a stratified Los Angeles, just as South Central is a metonym for the deprived inner-city African Americans, West Hollywood represents a spatial shorthand for the gay community. When Tim and Pete are having a public argument, a woman shouts out of her car window “Take it back to West Hollywood!” (98). Tim dismissively describes “mainstream homosexuals. Smooth, tanned, muscle boys in pastel bikinis, with virtually no body hair and mean Reagan-era faces: West Hollywood south” (18). Pete contrasts “real people” (28) with “pretentious West Hollywood fags” (29), and AIDS-afflicted artist and porn actor Joey is the “*type* you saw so often, on the streets of West Hollywood, in the floodlit rooms of porno cassettes” (185). In *Tim and Pete*, West Hollywood connotes meaningless hedonism and a lack of meaningful (or rather, radical) political action in the wake of the AIDS crisis, its vapid mix of consumerist “designer shops” (160) reflecting Aaron Betsky’s description of gay urban centres post-AIDS “as queer shopping arcades filled with the ghosts of their former exuberance.”³¹

The couple’s initial impressions of the area are suggestive: a deserted “empty stretch” (146) of streets marked by a “rusted, empty *Advocate* news rack” (147), the traditionally political gay newspaper an anachronism in a stricken contemporary world. They visit the decaying “8550,” formerly “the most popular bathhouse in West Hollywood,” which Pete describes as a “mausoleum” (147) and a “mortuary” (146). Tim argues that it impossible “to think of this [place] as an innocent pleasure palace” (149) any longer, its post-AIDS significance clearly signposted. Altman, writing before the crisis, observed that “the assumption that it is desirable to have frequent and varied sex partners is increasingly seen as a positive part of the gay life style.”³² On balance, he saw the bathhouse scene as “both a triumph of commercialism and a mark of the declining furtiveness about homosexual sex.”³³ The novel instead depicts a “dingy mirror maze” (155), the walls “oozing decade-old despair” (154), with a parade of derelict formerly sexualised spaces: “a row of doorless stalls with low outhouse-style wooden seats. ‘The butt-eating room’” (150). The building is unflinchingly figured as dank and rotting: “The stalls in the glory-hole room were

hospital green, the carpet rust colored, badly stained. Crud everywhere, trash, a decomposing orange condom” (151).

The imagery of the ruined bathhouse space markedly contrasts with the gay liberation associated dance hall encountered earlier in the novel; its “dingy mirror maze” is a stark inversion of Long Beach’s ruined but idyllic gay funfair. Space once again provokes in Tim a powerful emotional and physical reaction – but this time it is an oozing despair. The feelings generated become overwhelming and he comments that “this place is already starting to give me the horrors” (151). As with other palimpsestic spaces in the novel, this representation is invested with historical and political significance. Figuring the abandoned bathhouse space as a filthy ruin draws parallels between the devastating effect of AIDS on the lives of queer men and women and the hedonistic gay sexuality of the Seventies. This association is reinforced by the derelict drag queen Tim and Pete encounter in the remains of the “orgy room,” “softly singing to himself the old Donna Summer disco hit ‘I Feel Love’” (159). Indeed, West Hollywood bleakly illustrates the nadir of Baker’s narrative of gay subcultural decline. The bathhouse, and the promiscuity its spaces vividly connote, is seen as instrumental in the spread of the disease and Tim expresses disgust that it was kept “open *for years* after people knew what was going on” (148). This polemical historical vision is further demonstrated by Tim’s condemnation of the Seventies gay scene:

A crazed, compulsive abuse of what sex can provide. Cynical and loveless.
Sex as ego gratification, as ephemeral validation. Sex as a product, something
you need to feel better about yourself for a while. A new shirt, a new car, a
new fuck. Capitalism. I didn’t like the music either (150).

Baker’s criticism of a perceived commodification and assimilation of 1960s idealism into 1970s mainstream culture lapses into a familiar but highly debatable historical cliché.³⁴ However, the vehemence of the novel’s moralistic association between the promiscuous gay scene and the AIDS pandemic is far more troubling, reminiscent of Mark Simpson’s view “that gays might not have had to respond to [AIDS] so heroically without the ghettoism and hedonism of the gay seventies and the gay identity itself.”³⁵

Bradford Martin notes that, from “the beginnings of the AIDS epidemic, tensions arose over how sexual expression would be redefined in the context of the crisis, both within the gay community and the larger American public.”³⁶ Some conservative gay elements, in embracing self-censure and condemning sexual promiscuity, “reflected how the gay community had internalised the opinions of homophobes such as the Moral Majority’s Jerry Falwell, who viewed AIDS as a divine judgement on sexual mores gone awry.”³⁷ *Tim and Pete* is demonstrably neither a conservative nor a homophobic text. However, its representation of the filthy bathhouse as the exemplar of West Hollywood, and by implication the “mainstream homosexuals” (28) that putatively comprise its gay subculture, paradoxically recycles a version of this moral narrative. This jars with the rage displayed throughout the text at the New Right’s characterisation of AIDS as moral retribution: “We’ve died and we’re innocent! Let the slime who let it happen see what it’s like!” (226).

The novel’s representation of West Hollywood is also emblematic of its repudiation of “mainstream” gay subculture that occludes the positive effects an organised community may provide. Dines notes that “a gay centre is arguably felt in [...] LA stories as an absent presence; the all consuming vapidness of gay West Hollywood rather acts to define all that these narratives and their main characters are not, a feeling confirmed by their protagonists’ or authors’ excoriation of the ‘scene’.”³⁸ However, Faderman and Timmons make clear that during the crisis the community in fact “became one of the most AIDS-proactive cities in the nation,” providing health and welfare support to gays and lesbians struggling to cope in the wake of their illness.³⁹ Groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation, which Tim “resisted direct involvement in,” are critiqued in the novel for their “bickering and in-fighting” (10) or for following mainstream political paradigms. Yet they had tangible, meaningful successes in this period, not least in their “sex positive” campaigns which resisted the causal narrative that linked “the reality that many gay men were getting sick with AIDS” with “indicting gay sexual culture as a whole.”⁴⁰ Through a fusion of direct action, sex education and high profile, often subversive, artistic interventions and media campaigns, “members carved out a safe place for sexual expression amid a mainstream response to AIDS that rendered American sexual culture more conservative by the minute.”⁴¹ This element of the gay community’s “scene” supported queer men and women through the crisis, helped to save lives and resisted

the retrograde resignification of safe gay sexual expression as dangerous, damaging or morally wrong.

The particular historical “coding” or signification of *Tim and Pete’s* West Hollywood is certainly reductive. It complicates Dines’ assertion that the novel’s “reconnection with sexual histories” through its journey through Los Angeles’s urban fabric leads to Tim and Pete positively reconciling “their promiscuous pasts before AIDS.”⁴² These sections instead represent the novel’s complex and often contradictory attitude to specifically sexual pasts, perhaps best understood as a reaction to the trauma of the AIDS crisis when, for Tim, “the whole idea of sex had been contaminated” (118). As this paper demonstrates, one of the novel’s keenest concerns is examining the many ways in which the past’s material and historical legacies interact in the present. Early in the narrative, Tim desultorily wonders if “The past was all used up” (10), if examining it is too painful or offers little practical potential for gays and lesbians contending with all too pressing contemporary problems. However, *Tim and Pete* reinforces just how vitally important recovering and interpreting gay or queer histories can be: their potential is anything but exhausted. The novel’s depiction of Los Angeles, a metropolis with an urban environment often characterised as ahistorical, insists upon the enduring presence of gay and queer histories in the city. Each varied district contains within it the remnants of Los Angeles’s gay past: its myriad urban spaces offer a physical means to remember and reflect on recent historical changes and events.

Robinson, writing in the aftermath of the 1992 riots, argues that with the rise of the New Right, a socially progressive historical process reaching its apex in the 1960s was ideologically resignified:

Obliterating the historical consciousness that the [...] New Deal programmes of the mid-1930s, and the Civil Rights acts of the 1960s had been necessitated by the voracious excesses of capitalism and racism, the reactionaries contained their public recitations to pseudocivic oppositions to big government, judicial activism and reverse discrimination (i.e., affirmative action).⁴³

Colin Harrison contends that the uprising in Los Angeles violently rejected this historical refiguration, nullifying complacent notions that discrimination and systemic

inequality had been solved in America by the 1990s: “The riots can be seen as a disorganised but collective attempt to insist upon the permanent rupture of race in the fabric of the nation.”⁴⁴ Similarly, *Tim and Pete* insists on the rupture of discrimination against queer men and women so clearly evidenced in the wake of the AIDS crisis. It provocatively questions whether mainstream American political and social channels and institutions are viable for minority groups and, if not, what political recourse they have left. The gay militants, whose success remains ambiguously unresolved at the end of the novel, represent a far from perfect approach, but one that the novel renders understandable in the political context of the Reagan-Bush years and the ashes of the 1992 uprising. Crucially, Tim and Pete’s narrative insists upon the importance of locating and acknowledging the presence of gay histories at the heart of American society and its urban fabric. It refuses their erasure, marginalisation or resignification, as well as that of the more progressive and radical politics of the 1960s, the activist legacies of which are simultaneously advocated and disputed in the text. Particular historical interpretations are clearly contestable, as exemplified by the West Hollywood bathhouse scene. However, the novel’s broader exploration of the ruins, material traces and fragments of the past that constitute urban space represents a compelling means to debate and narrativise complex historical signifiers.

Throughout *Tim and Pete*, Baker represents Los Angeles as a spatial metonym for America in the early 1990s: an atomised, stratified series of spaces; a city that reinforces inequality through its very structure. But through the novel’s parallel exploration of the city’s palimpsestic ruined urban spaces, traces of national and subcultural pasts can be excavated, explored and potentially contested. Urban geography offers a tangible, physical and even emotional link to the past. The potential for an affective understanding of the historical and cultural processes that underpin contemporary life – in *Tim and Pete*’s case neoliberalism, gay liberation and the AIDS crisis – can be explored, however provisionally. As de Certeau states:

Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encysted in the pain or pleasure of the body.⁴⁵

The pain of AIDS dominates the novel, as it does the various gay milieus it depicts. The disease, and the US government's abnegation of political or moral responsibility for its effects, prompts the characters in the novel to radically reassess the foundations on which gay identity, and American life, is constituted. In doing so, *Tim and Pete* embraces the Situationist concept that "only an awareness of the influences of the existing environment can encourage the critique of the present conditions of everyday lives."⁴⁶ By highlighting the fault-lines in the ethnicity-and-rights model through the spaces scarred by the 1992 uprising and provocatively mapping the evolution of the gay movement through the deserted and ruined remains of Los Angeles's gay past, the text uses palimpsestic urban spaces to radically conceptualise contemporary American history.

Endnotes

¹ Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons, *Gay L.A.: A History of Sexual Outlaws, Power Politics, and Lipstick Lesbians* (New York: Perseus Books, 2006), 361.

² Kevin Starr, *Coast of Dreams* (London: Penguin, 2006), xi.

³ Melvin L. Oliver, James H. Johnson, & Walter C. Farrell, "Anatomy of a Rebellion: A Political-Economic Analysis," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 118.

⁴ Cedric J. Robinson, "Race, Capitalism and Antidemocracy," in *Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 77.

⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 97.

⁶ Mark W. Turner, *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 43.

⁷ Martin Dines, *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture: Homecoming Queens* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 20.

⁸ Norman M. Klein, *The History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London and New York: Verso, 2008), 1-23.

⁹ Lawrence Knopp, "Sexuality and Urban Space," in *Designing Cities: Critical Readings in Urban Design*, ed. Alexander R. Cuthbert (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 199.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹¹ James Robert Baker, *Tim and Pete* (London: Fourth Estate, 1996), 11. Subsequent citations are taken from this edition and indicated parenthetically within the text. All emphasis is original.

¹² Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 166.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁴ Ibid., 223.

¹⁵ Daryl Gates was the highly controversial LAPD police commissioner at the time of the riots; Koreatown was a target during the riots because of tensions between African American and Korean American communities.

¹⁶ Starr, *Coast of Dreams*, xi.

¹⁷ Alan Sinfield, *Gay and After* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998), 18-19. Original emphasis.

¹⁸ Dennis Altman, *The Homosexualisation of America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 6.

¹⁹ Sinfield, *Gay and After*, 26.

²⁰ John Ehrman, *The Eighties: America in the Age of Reagan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 175.

²¹ Gillian Peele, *Revival and Reaction: The Right in Contemporary America* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 11.

²² Faderman and Timmons, *Gay L.A.*, 308.

²³ Allen White, "Reagan's AIDS legacy, Silence equals death," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 June 2004 <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/06/08/EDG777163F1.DTL> [accessed 23 April 2010]

²⁴ Alan Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 80.

²⁵ Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1995), 58.

²⁶ Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 160.

²⁷ Carolyn Dinshaw, "Temporalities," in *Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 109.

²⁸ Jonathon Green, *All dressed up: The Sixties and the Counter-Culture* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 394-395.

²⁹ Sinfield, *Gay and After*, 23.

³⁰ Starr, *Coast of Dreams*, 348-349.

³¹ Aaron Betsky, *Queer Space* (New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1997), 177.

³² Altman, *The Homosexualisation of America*, 16-17.

³³ Ibid., 17.

³⁴ For an analysis of the 1960s counterculture and capitalism, see Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³⁵ Mark Simpson, "Gay Dream Believer: Inside the Gay Underwear Cult," in *Anti-Gay*, ed. Mark Simpson (London: Cassell, 1996), 11-12.

³⁶ Bradford Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2011), 184.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dines, *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture*, 16.

³⁹ Faderman & Timmons, *Gay L.A.*, 317.

⁴⁰ Martin, *The Other Eighties*, 186.

⁴¹ Ibid., 185.

⁴² Dines, *Gay Suburban Narratives in American and British Culture*, 162.

⁴³ Robinson, 75.

⁴⁴ Colin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 107.

⁴⁵ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 108.

⁴⁶ Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture*, 58.

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