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Los Angeles Intersections (Folklore and the City)^{1}*

TIMOTHY R. TANGHERLINI

Los Angeles holds a special place in the imaginations of people around the world. The global familiarity with the city is in large part attributable to the extraordinary influence that the film and television industries have had during the past eighty or so years. In these media, the city often plays a significant (albeit largely uncredited) role as the backdrop—Los Angeles is the place where the story unfolds. Yet, for those who live in Los Angeles, the representations of the city in popular film and television rarely align with lived experience. Although the physical space and the concrete manifestations of the city that appear on the screen may be familiar, the “thickness” of the city and its neighborhoods—places which are imbued with different meanings for and by different people (and groups of people)—is never captured in these superficial engagements with the city (Geertz 1973). Of course, few people who live in Los Angeles would claim to have an intimate knowledge of all its neighborhoods (both real and imagined) (Anderson 1983). Indeed, one could argue that such familiarity is an impossibility given the diverse cultural and economic backgrounds of the city’s millions of inhabitants and the complicated spatial practices of these people that characterize each and every place in the city. In this regard, Los Angeles is at once well-known—at least on a superficial level—yet, on a “thicker level,” unknown or possibly even unknowable.

The object of fierce derision and intense glorification, Los Angeles can be viewed as a constant and ever-changing series of contradictory interpretations of space: for some, it is a city of dreams and for others, a city of despair; it is at once a city of extraordinary wealth and a city of crushing poverty, a city of culture and a city of plastic, a city of WASPs and a city of immigrants. Referring to New York, Los Angeles’ east coast counterpart (or perhaps antithesis), Michel de Certeau opines that it presents “a textur-ology in which extremes coincide—extremes of ambition and degradation, brutal oppositions of races and styles, contrasts between yesterday’s buildings, already transformed into trash cans, and today’s urban irruptions that

block out its space" (1984, 91). This same texturology can also be applied to Los Angeles which is, in many respects, the epitome of the postmodern city, "a landscape filled with violent edges, colliding turfs, unstable boundaries, peculiarly juxtaposed lifespaces, and enclaves of outrageous wealth and despair" (Soja 1996, 448). Perhaps Los Angeles is simply an extreme example of the city in the late twentieth century/early twenty-first century—a preview of coming attractions for other large cities. Or, perhaps Los Angeles is an entirely unique urban environment, situated at an intriguing confluence of historical events, cultural developments and transnational movements. Or perhaps it is both. Whether or not Los Angeles is an extreme example of a future norm or a unique urban space, it deserves the attention of folklorists who, given their experience with the analysis of situated, cultural expressions, may be able to contribute to untangling the extraordinarily complex web of signification that is expressed not only in the physical environment but also in people's use and interpretation of that environment.

While the study of folklore has long been connected to the study of place, it has primarily been concerned with revealing how place affects folklore—or how place is expressed in folklore—and not the inverse process of how folklore affects place. Much of the initial impetus for the collection of folklore came from a desire on the part of European scholars to describe and to preserve the traditional expressions of rural peoples. These expressions were considered to be reflective of the "national spirit" but, because of the onslaught of rapid modernization, they were also considered to be disappearing rapidly. A strong philological slant informed much nineteenth century folklore scholarship and, under the influence of the Indo-European hypothesis, a great number of scholars became engaged in attempts to reconstruct original versions of songs and tales collected from the rural populations, as a means to reveal the genealogies of these expressions. This endeavor was closely related to the nationalism that inspired many collectors as it was geared toward revealing the ancient—and often glorious—roots of the nation's culture (Anderson 1983). Place name studies as part of the folkloristic endeavor also began to emerge as an important enterprise, in large part to help in the process of tracing diffusion and, simultaneously, as part of the philological mapping of potential sites of national historic import.

The obsession with original forms, geographical diffusion and early history was perhaps best expressed in Julius and Kaarle Krohn's well-known—and unfortunately titled—*Die folkloristische Arbeitsmethode* (1926), which described in great detail what became known as the Historic-Geographic

method in folklore. The method emphasized both diachronic variation (hence historic) and synchronic diffusion (hence geographic) of traditional expressions of primarily rural populations. By looking at variation across space and time, the belief was that one could devise a stemma describing the relationships between variants and, in so doing, isolate the “original” elements in the folk expression. The Historic-Geographic method had remarkable impact particularly on the study of European folklore. Regrettably, the notion of a single folkloristic method suggested by the work’s title—which focused primarily on the traditional expressions of rural populations—possibly blinded nonfolklorists to developments in the field that had transformed folklore into a discipline spanning various theoretical approaches to the study of tradition.

The conception of the “folk” as primarily rural dwellers has changed significantly since the flowering of Romantic nationalism in the nineteenth century and now includes groups in the urban environment. In the United States, the work of Alan Dundes (1977), who posed the rhetorical question, “Who are the folk?,” and the work of Richard Dorson in his *Land of the Millrats* (1981) solidified the already emergent process of shifting the folkloric gaze from rural areas to the city. The 1967 seminar at Wayne State University on “The Urban Experience and Folk Tradition” (Paredes and Steckert 1971) must be seen as a milestone in the development of American folklorists’ concern with folklore in urban areas, a concern that had already been engaged in Europe, best exemplified in Hermann Bausinger’s study of folklore in the technological world (1961). However, despite the changes in the conception of the folk, and significant shifts in the conception of legitimate fieldwork sites presaged by these works (and scores of others), the majority of folklore scholarship since the mid-1960s has continued to take the lead of the Historic-Geographic method in the sense that history and geography are primarily seen as forces influencing folklore.

Fortunately, in recent folkloristic studies one can note a significant theoretical change concerning the interplay between folklore, history and geography. In Ruth Finnegan’s study of the English city of Milton Keynes (1998), for example, people’s conceptions of the city as a place to live are juxtaposed to academics’ and planners’ either apocalyptic or idealistic totalizing conceptions of the same city. Here, folkloric expression (primarily personal experience narrative) is seen as a means for interpreting both history and geography. As such, the emphasis has shifted. Rather than viewing folkloric expression as solely reactive, it is now conceived of as proactive—folklore influences history and, more importantly, geography, just as these two factors influence the folklore itself. It is in this spirit of a

newly conceived historic-geographic perspective that we offer these essays. Just as the folkloric expressions of groups in Los Angeles are deeply affected by historical processes and geography, the folkloric expressions of members of these groups have a profound effect on subsequent interpretations of history and geography. These interpretations, in turn, influence the interpretations of other groups both synchronically and diachronically.

Los Angeles as a place, like any city, can be viewed as a space that through history has been transformed not only by economic forces written onto the landscape but also by the culturally informed spatial practices of the diverse groups that comprise its vast population. These groups are by no means isolated, and most individuals are members of numerous, at times overlapping, groups. Each of these groups is in a state of flux, and new groups are constantly forming. Furthermore, and most importantly in this context, each group engages the landscape in their own manner, developing through this engagement an ongoing interpretation of place and, through time, an interpretation of history. De Certeau, and earlier Walter Benjamin (1970) with his description of the nineteenth century leisurely observer, the *flâneur*, discuss the role of the individual and their engagement with the landscape as a tactic opposed to the strategies of powerful institutions, such as City Hall and its planning department, that attempt to map the landscape authoritatively. In de Certeau's view, "the city serves as a totalizing and almost mythical landmark for socio-economic and political strategies," yet "urban life increasingly permits the re-emergence of the element that the urbanistic project excluded," namely a non-authoritative alternative interpretation of the city (de Certeau 1984, 95). With both de Certeau and Benjamin, the idiosyncratic engagement with the city—perhaps best exemplified in the tactic of walking—makes the city individual and ambiguous, resisting the totalizing interpretation of lived space proposed by city planners, architects, politicians and developers.

There is of course another potential engagement with the landscape, just as "unofficial," just as resistant to totalization, and certainly just as ambiguating as the idiosyncratic engagement of walking described above, namely that of group situated interpretations of space. These non-idiosyncratic interpretations of space importantly engage what Michael Chesnutt calls, "the dialectic tension between tradition and the individual" (Chesnutt 1999, 11). It is in this context—the examination of interpretations of space created by individuals who see themselves as part of a group rather than individuals' idiosyncratic engagements with space—that folklorists can contribute to the understanding of the remarkable juxta-

positions of spatial practices that characterize the modern multicultural city. These group situated interpretations of space—interpretations which are constantly being negotiated not only within groups but between groups as well—and the spatial practices that emerge from those interpretations greatly influence individual circulation in the city. If one accepts the notion that “spatial practices in fact...structure the determining conditions of social life,” as de Certeau proposes, then the exploration of these spatial practices that are frequently influenced by the cultural expressions of close homogeneous groups is a necessary step in understanding the complex cultural landscape of the city (de Certeau 1984, 96). Given the vast number of overlapping, intersecting groups that comprise the city, and given that individuals’ interpretations of the city are likely profoundly shaped by the interpretations of the city proposed by these various, at times conflicting groups, the notion of a single Los Angeles is a fiction. A much more accurate view of the city is one that recognizes it as a multiplicity of constantly changing, constantly reinterpreted spaces. Individuals and groups write their experiences, their hopes, their aspirations, their failures, their defeats, their histories, and their cultures onto the city. In turn, these projections, which are in themselves all fictions, come to influence those same groups and individuals—as well as new groups and new individuals—who once again engage the process of (re)interpreting the city.

Of course, any time a single space is subject to multiple interpretations by diverse groups, the potential arises for extreme conflict. This potential has, of course, turned into reality on numerous occasions in the history of Los Angeles. Some of these occasions have been extraordinary events of national interest, such as the Watts riots of 1965 and the Los Angeles riots of 1992, while other events have been on a smaller scale, but perhaps no less important—or devastating—than the aforementioned crises for the individuals involved. That is not to say that everything associated with the intersection of multiple—perhaps at times contradictory—interpretations of space in Los Angeles are all negative. Rather, the constantly changing interpreted landscape of Los Angeles makes it (and many other cities) a source of extraordinary cultural potential as well. Certainly in Los Angeles, the meetings of various cultural groups in a space that is undergoing constant redefinition has led to some of the most exciting and complex urban areas in the world.

The current volume is intended to explore aspects of the intriguing intersections between groups in Los Angeles, and how their interpretations of place and history emerge in their folkloric expression and how that

expression in turn affects future interpretations of place and history. In the opening article, William Estrada presents a critical history of the development of Los Angeles' Old Plaza and Olvera Street areas—the “birthplace of Los Angeles.” His exploration shows how a space, through time, was transformed by a powerful group of civic elites into a romanticized projection for tourist consumption of the traditional cultures of an otherwise disenfranchised segment of the Los Angeles population, namely people of Mexican heritage. While Christine Sterling's project may have been a totalizing one, ruptures in the otherwise tight-woven fabric appeared, allowing the constructed place to be reclaimed as a site of political struggle and, in later years, as an important place attached to expressions of ethnic identity and historical belonging for the large number of Angelenos of Mexican heritage.

As Estrada notes, Sterling attempted to duplicate her “Mexican” street scene with plans for “China City,” with limited success. In this volume's second essay, Sojin Kim explores in part the history of “China City,” New Chinatown and its contemporary incarnations as constructed places. But Kim shifts her focus toward the individual's engagement with the urban environment, examining how a public, commercial space has been interpreted and reinterpreted by several Chinese American families trying to make meaning for themselves in the urban environment. She explores the concept of “personal ecologies” in the organization and inventory of two curio stores, and proposes that while the stores are public spaces, the topographies of the stores reveal a great deal about the individual's engagement with local and family history, their own lived experiences of culture, and outsider's expectations and perceptions of that culture. Groups of Asian heritage have long been an integral part of Los Angeles' dynamic population. At times, Asian cultures have been romanticized, as in the case of Sterling's “China City”—a romanticization intriguingly undermined in the curio shops Kim examines—while at other times they have been the target of vilification.

Timothy R. Tangherlini, in his essay, explores the folkloristic reaction among Korean Americans to the extraordinary devastation of Koreatown in the aftermath of the 1992 riots. In the article, he shows how both the performative and narrative responses of Korean Americans quickly began the process of reclaiming spaces that had been forcibly redefined through several days of protracted rioting from vibrant Korean American commercial areas to sites of extraordinary violence. Two types of folkloric activity—the public performance of farmer's band music and the frequent telling of “riot narratives”—contributed to the remarking of these erased

places as Korean American. Unlike the places discussed by Estrada, Kim and Tangherlini, Elizabeth Tarpley Adams, in her essay, examines how gay men and women in Los Angeles write narrative interpretations of place onto the landscape and, in so doing, construct for themselves a “Queer space” or a “Queer Los Angeles.” Rather than a single geographic space being the focus of the traditional—or traditionalized—expressions as is the case for many other groups, “Queer LA” exists entirely in narrative as a highly individuated place, recognizable by others aware of the codes of the communication, but not necessarily identical with their own perceptions of that imagined place.

Despite the broad range of the four essays presented here, this volume is by no means intended to be exhaustive, nor is it intended to present an exclusive series of folkloristic perspectives on the city. Rather, it is intended to open a dialogue between folklorists and others involved in questions of the city, from geographers to sociologists, from urban planners to policy makers, from educators to architects, from historians to anthropologists. In so doing, we hope to develop approaches to understanding the city and all its complexities that are multivalent, culturally sensitive and constructive.

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^{1*} I would like to dedicate this volume to the memory of my older brother Arne whose frequent questions about folklore and the urban environment and whose tales of Jeepney drivers in Manila inspired me to explore Los Angeles from the perspective of a folklorist.