

Tortilla Curtain and The Ecology of Fear

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This essay reads T.C. Boyle's *Tortilla Curtain* (henceforth *TC*) as a novelization of Mike Davis's concerns in recent books like *City of Quartz* and, especially, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (hereafter *CQ* and *EF* respectively). If on the one hand I use the tradition of Marxist geography to produce a reading of *TC*, on the other hand I use Boyle to enrich Davis' work and both to illuminate current realities.¹ While it is routine to use social theory to deepen our appreciation and understanding of fiction, here, I use fiction to produce knowledge of the referent and so view for this purpose fiction as social theory.

Both Davis and Boyle write about the border problems accompanying the physical and mental geography of capital accumulation, with L.A. functioning as a microcosm for neoliberal globalization and its problems. *EF* is in one sense about the political economy of ecological disaster, of fire and flood and its ecological consequences. But it is just as much about how this condition is ideologically transformed—"the dialectic of ordinary disaster" in his words—into a powerful ecoracism (*EF* 3).

A central point for both Davis and Boyle is that the racialized political economy of urban sprawl, white flight in essence, has led parts of the city and outlying suburbs to

“sprawl” into the wilds of the Santa Monica and San Gabriel mountains, leading to a complex “ecotone” where “wild” and “urban” interpenetrate: wildlife becomes more urban while domestic species go feral. The ideological counterpart is more to the point here though. Wild predators are criminalized as “gangbangers” and “serial killers”—cougars and coyotes becoming symbols of urban disorder—while “the urban underclass is incessantly bestialized as predators”: “in ripe Hegelian fashion, the social construction of nature is typically mirrored by the naturalization of purely social contradictions” (*EF* 208)

In the novel’s opening pages, Delaney Mossbacher, driving up the congested mountain road to his home outside L.A., accidentally hits Candido Perez. The main characters in *Tortilla Curtain* consist of these two men and their wives. One couple is upper middle class and white, living in what becomes a gated community, the aptly named Arroyo Blanco Estates. Delaney Mossbacher is a self proclaimed “liberal humanist” who writes a weekly environmental newsletter about local ecology; his wife, Kyra Mossbacher, is a hi-end real estate agent worried about the invasion of too many brown people in the neighborhood, yet who ultimately takes advantage of this to facilitate more rich predominantly white flight further into the wild edge, further into the fire corridors or fire chaparral, they have already invaded.

The second couple are Mexican immigrants, illegals—Candido (an honest man) Perez and his young wife, America—trying to achieve the American dream, the two having gone north in response to the underdevelopment reinforced and tremendously exacerbated by NAFTA. Their migration is paralleled—these parallels operate through a

¹ Marxist geography might be defined as the study of the relation of capital accumulation to the production of space and some of its major recent and current practitioners are Henri Lefebvre, David

fabric of literary allusions to Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*—to the northern migration of Mexican labor and the western migration of “Okie” labor during the Great Depression. Ultimately, these two couples come into conflict in a way that epitomizes the relation between north and south, immigrant and “citizen,” capital and labor, and the intimate connection between the universalizing forces of globalization and the segregationist forces of virulent racism and nationalism that follow in its wake—the totality of which merges into an apocalypse both natural and social.

Delaney Mossbacher, our “liberal humanist,” is a member of the Sierra Club, Save the Children, National Wildlife Federation and the Democratic Party. His aforementioned weekly ecology column for the local newspaper—entitled “Wide Open Spaces”—is read by nearly everyone in his gated community existing at the moving suburban/wild edge. Initially, he opposes the building of a wall around the gated community because “having cut his teeth in the sixties,” he’s about “democratic access” (43). He drives a Japanese car, a sign that proclaims his cosmopolitanism. As he drives home after the fateful accident, preoccupied with the event, Delaney inattentively listens to the radio, which is “nattering on about import quotas and American jobs” (4). If this is the era of NAFTA and the L.A. “riots,” it is also the era both of “the Japanese miracle” and its collapse, all of which contributes to a dominant rhetoric of racialist national anxiety that the novel reflects and critiques.²

Harvey, Edward Soja and Davis himself.

² In *CQ*, Davis spends many pages on Japanese power as part of his analysis of the “internationalization of class formation” that L.A. seems to represent. Anticipating his own fascination with the vocabulary of natural disaster and social process, he describes Japanese capital (part of the Asian rentier stratum) as arriving in the eighties with the force of a tsunami. By the time of *EF*, the Japanese financial bubble has burst.

Delaney's thoughts on the way home are hardly liberal. He intuitively feels that Candido is homeless, living in "his," Delaney's, beloved canyon:

Making . . . Topanga State Park into his private domicile, crapping in the chaparral, dumping his trash behind rocks, polluting the stream and ruining it for everyone else. . . . That was state property. . . , rescued from the developers and their bulldozers, set aside for the use of the public, not for some outdoor ghetto. And what about fire danger? The canyon was a tinderbox this time of year, everyone knew that. (11)

While he and other volunteers fight a losing battle trying to keep the canyon clean, "people like this," "thoughtless people," "stupid people," wanted "to turn the whole world into a garbage dump, a little Tijuana" (11).

The liberal motif of preserving public space from the developers, a real concern in L.A. as Davis shows, is here trumped by a virulent racism (of which Delaney is largely unaware) that blames poor people for pollution. In a longer passage about his local column, we are told that while he tries to focus on the local habitat, Delaney, like a good citizen of the world, cannot split the local from the global so more and more he found himself "brooding over the fate of the pupfish, the Florida manatee, the spotted owl and panda." And he couldn't ignore "the larger trends":

[O]verpopulation, desertification, the depletion of the seas and forests, global warming and loss of habitat? We were all right in America sure but it was crazy to think you could detach yourself from the rest of the world, the world of starvation and loss and the steady relentless degradation of the environment. Five and one half billion people chewing up the

resources of the planet like locusts and only 73 California condors left in all the universe. (32)

He later writes a column where he celebrates in Wordsworthian idiom unity with the world, being “part of the whole grand scheme of things, drinking from the same fount as the red-tailed hawk” (78). Delaney’s holism here does not include people and his analysis of the whole is largely rooted in Hardinesque neoMalthusianism: overpopulation causes hunger and ecological problems, from pollution to disease. Moreover, the poor themselves become not only insects but identified with plague—the biblical plague of locusts, “lepers” (91).

Subsequently, the prospects of a walled off community lead an opponent of the plan to compare Arroyo Blanco to Poe’s medieval fortress in “The Masque of the Red Death.” Thus, the forces outside the gates are again implicitly compared to plague.

There is little here in essence to distinguish Delaney from his right wing alter ego Jack Jardine, who talks of the immigrants draining California tax dollars and “killing us” and who castigates Delaney and “all you bleeding hearts [who] want to invite the whole world in here to feed at our through without a thought as to who’s going to pay for it, as if the American taxpayer were Jesus Christ with his loaves and fishes” (101,146).

When his car is stolen, Delaney, in a rage, thinks: “[o]wn a car, it will be stolen. . . . It was like a tax, like winter floods and mudslides.” This thought indicates in Delaney a “ripe, Hegelian” structure of feeling associating taxes, poor immigrants of color and natural disaster.

Davis’ epigraph to section four of chapter three, “the incendiary other,” is from a Hollywood screenwriter: “I was extraordinarily liberal until I came to Malibu, now I’m a

Fascist” (*EF* 130). Boyle has Delaney follow the trajectory of the screenwriter—though the path is much more contradictory and nonlinear than that suggested in the one-liner. While in his liberal humanist phase, he fears having to subordinate himself to “some jerk in a crypto-fascist uniform,” he becomes in fact a gun-toting fascist and a racist hunting Candido, tracking his “spoor” (41, 339). Boyle’s portrait is not overblown. In fact, Delaney is fictional counterpart to the new vigilantism that sprouted up in the wake of the ’92 riots: In the San Fernando Valley, “volunteers from the white upper-income neighborhoods,” “clad in black ninja gear,” had “been informally deputized as stealth auxiliaries in the police war against black and latino gang youth” (*EF* 390).

But the Sierra Club fascist has its roots in the context of local L.A. politics that Davis too diagnoses—the tax revolt of 1978, the incorporation movements led by wealthy homeowner’s associations, the slow growth movement. More specifically, Davis shows how the green component of the slow growth movement was largely subordinate—it is very complex as Davis notes—to the interests of wealthy homeowners, who were to a point at war with the developers and their bulldozers to which Delaney refers above. As Davis sums up the overall political dynamic, we can see how in a sense Delaney’s liberal humanism could itself be a stepping stone to the virulent racism limned in Delaney’s green Malthusianism:

Like all ideology, “slow growth” and its “progrowth” antipode must be understood as much from the standpoint of the questions *absent* as those posed. The debate between affluent homeowners and mega-developers is . . . waged in the language of *Alice in Wonderland*, with both camps conspiring to preserve false opposites, “growth” vs. “neighborhood

quality.” It is symptomatic of the current distribution of power (favoring capital and the residential upper-middle classes) that the appalling destruction and misery within L.A.’s inner city areas became the great non-issue during the 80’s. The silent majority of non-affluent homeowners and renters have remained mere pawns in the growth power struggles, their independent social interests suppressed in civic controversy. (CQ 212)

If the poor were a non-issue in one sense, they were precisely the issue in another. As Davis notes, hysterical homeowner’s associations, supported by local business, waged war “on the very immigrant labor upon which their master race lifestyles depend” (CQ 208). One form of this war was to crack down on “street corner labor markets and bush encampments,” where daylaborers like Candido are forced to reside due to the unavailability of low income housing. They are described, as in Boyle, in the language of disease—as “immigrant blight” (209).

Kyra in fact wages war on the street corner labor market that had become, in the language of “the local citizens,” “a perpetual encampment of the unemployed.” Davis refers to these quasi homeless day laborers as “Spanish speaking Okies of the eighties.” Davis writes here about 1989. In the context of the ‘93 fire, the Eaton Canyon fire, accidentally triggered by a transient, and clearly the model for the one presumably set by Candido in *TC* (which I discuss below), was blamed on “clandestine hobo encampments” “an invisible army of careless embittered strangers lurking in the brush” (*EF* 132).

Candido, of course, the object of Delaney’s naturalist’s (and naturalistic) discourse, desires to come to the U.S. to protect America, and to be “safe from all the

filth and sickness of the streets, from la chota—the police—and the Immigration” (27). He realizes that their temporary home in the park, where they have been forced to live, mirrors the “dump” in Tijuana referred to in a much different way by Delaney and with which Candido is all too familiar from his experiences with “that girl [not America] in the dump in Tijuana”:

He could see her now, skinny legs, eyes like pits. She was a child, twelve years old, and her parents, poor people who were out working all day, sifting through the mountains of trash with broomsticks fitted with a bent nail at one end, and the drunks in the place had come after her. The girl’s parents had a shack made out of wooden pallets [Candido will construct just such a shack for America later in the novel, in the area of Delaney’s backyard] nailed together, a surprisingly sturdy little thing set amid a clutter of tumbledown shanties and crude lean-tos (27).

Boyle highlights Delaney and Kyra’s error through the use of parallelism. Both couples seek safe haven and fear violation but the difference in the two situations is that Candido and America contend with a much more serious version of the problem of animals outside the walls, barbarians outside the gates, a problem whose social causes lie with the wealthy who “dump” on the poor. If Delaney “felt violated” by having his car stolen, America is violated, raped (146). And if this contrast is meant to highlight the distinction between the relatively trivial and the deadly serious, it is also the case that given the tremendous class and status distinctions between the one couple and the other, even something so small as a touch can bring down worlds.³

³ After the labor exchange is shut down, and Candido’s hopes for a better life for him and America seem dashed (“the weight of the news like a stone crushing his chest”), he finds himself in the

Davis notes that at the height of the Eaton Canyon hysteria, “the Sierra Club was indicted on radio talk shows as arson’s fifth column” (133) but in a recent article on the greening of hate, Betsy Hartmann notes that this movement has taken root among a significant minority of leading Sierra Clubbers. It blames “environmental degradation on poor populations of color.” Its logic is precisely Delaney’s: “immigrants are the main cause of overpopulation, and overpopulation in turn causes urban sprawl, the destruction of wilderness, pollution, and so forth” (Hartmann).

There are numerous examples here of the naturalization of social contradictions, an ideological maneuver intimately connected to blame the victim tropes reversing cause and effect. The “invasion” of immigrants, locusts, parasites (in Delaney’s picture) and vampires (in Jack’s picture), are a response to neoliberal globalization, NAFTA, U.S. support of death squad democracies, etc. In the novel, NAFTA, supported by the majority of the homeowners in Arroyo Blanco it is implied, is not seen as related to the immigration problem, and it is overheard among cocktail conversation, along with discussions of gourmet food. That the wealthy are in fact sucking the ordinary tax payers dry is turned into the vampiristic immigrant sucking dry the homeowner, himself compared to Jesus Christ (appropriately Candido is compared to Christ throughout). We

parking lot of the corner grocer, eyeing a woman’s purse, sitting in a Lexus with the windows down. The car turns out to be Kyra’s who is just then returning to the car where, before he could protest his innocence or fade back into invisibility, she nonchalantly presses two quarters into Candido’s palm:

Her touch annihilated him. He’d never been more ashamed in his life, not when he was a drunk in the streets, not when Teofilo Aguadulce took his wife from him and threw him down in the square with the whole village looking on. He hung his head. Let his arms drop to his sides. He stood rooted to the spot for what seemed like hours after she’d ducked into the car, backed out of the lot and vanished, and only then did he open his hand on the two quarters and the dime that clung there as if they’d been scarred into his flesh. (*TC* 202)

will get to the details of this socialism of the predatory rich when we consider the problem of socially caused natural disasters.

In *TC*, Candido supplies the riposte to Delaney's Malthusianism when, after Candido discovers that the labor exchange has been removed, "as if a tornado had sucked the thing into the sky"—shut down, fenced off, and declared Private Property (later, the chains are removed and replaced by beautiful landscaping in yet another politicized production of space), Candido thinks:

why not just kill himself now and get it over with? He couldn't go back to Mexico, a country with forty percent unemployment and a million people a year entering the labor force, a country that was corrupt and bankrupt and so pinched by inflation that the farmers were burning their crops and nobody but the rich had enough to eat (197, 199-200).

The 40 % unemployment rate is meant to echo U.S. depression era unemployment figures. Technically, unemployment was not nearly that high in Mexico, but that is because much of the Mexican employment is of the informal variety and might easily be characterized as unemployment if there were unemployment insurance. As Donald Hodges and Ross Gandy note (speaking of the mid-1990s up through '97), "two out of three economically active Mexicans found work only in the hell of the informal economy: street vendors, seasonal workers, domestic servants, shoe shiners, fire eaters, windshield cleaners, subway musicians, migrant laborers, fortune tellers, teenage prostitutes, seamstresses, messengers, women in illegal sweatshops. . .—the list is endless" (138, 142).

The million new laborers released into the labor market is accurate. Inflation did soar around this time in the wake of the devaluation of the peso, hitting 50 percent. As Gandy and Hodges note, when 1995 opened, the economy collapsed in the worst recession since 1932—to cement the Depression era connection. Candido’s reference to the burning of crops also makes sense. I assume what’s being referred to here is the common response of farmers to excess supply—destroying crops to increase value, the way dairy farmers dump milk, the way the government pays farmers not to grow certain crops. But this is primarily a reference to *The Grapes of Wrath*, the burning of the crops in Chapter 25, the famous interchapter where Steinbeck shows the contradictions of capital accumulation to be at the heart of both Okie migration and starvation, and so by extension we are to assume the same basic processes at work here.

As Raymond Rocco notes in *Latino Los Angeles*, economic restructuring led by the United States, pursued through World Bank and IMF policies, is one of the major reasons for the “rapid growth of large immigrant communities.” These policies domestically led to “a process of deindustrialization-reindustrialization” which resulted “in the growth of low-wage, semi-skilled or unskilled jobs” and “an economy characterized by distinct and different labor markets for immigrant labor and for middle class hi technology labor and by a highly polarized social fabric.” However, it should also be noted that significant sectors of migrant labor was itself middle class as export promotion policies in Latin America decimated the middle class and lowered the standard of living in these countries. Rocco explains that the hysteria around 187 emerged from a “situation set in motion by the U.S.” (370-2).

If Boyle through *Candido* compares the depression in Mexico to the Great Depression of the 30s, Davis notes that in L.A. at least, depression has come to the U.S. as well:

then, 1990: cutbacks in defense spending and the bursting of the Japanese financial bubble (source of massive super yen investments in Los Angeles real estate during the 1980s) converged to plunge the southern California economy into its worst recession since 1938 (372).

Jack and Delaney pick up on these problems in a distorted and racist way. At a Thanksgiving party thrown by the homeowner's association, one homeowner says, "the more you give them, the more they want." And Jack follows up asking, "why should we be providing jobs for these people when we're looking at a ten percent unemployment rate right here in California—and that's for citizens" (192). Delaney then rewrites the dynamics of capital accumulation in context in the Darwinist language of territoriality:

Kyra had cleaned up the corner of Shoup and Ventura, and Dominick Flood had cleaned up the labor exchange. All right. But where were these people supposed to go? Back to Mexico? Delaney doubted it, knowing what he did about migratory animal species and how one population responded to being displaced by another. It made for war, for violence and killing, until one group had decimated the other and reestablished its claim to the prime hunting, breeding or grazing grounds. It was a sad fact, but true (193).

Fire and Flood and Taxes

Candido, forced to live in the chaparral, accidentally sets fire to the chaparral while cooking a Thanksgiving turkey he receives from a supermarket giveaway (actually, he receives the turkey from Jack Jardine's racist son, who wants to see uncomprehending Candido's reaction when Jack Jardine Jr. gives him the bird). As both Davis and Delaney note, these fires are a natural part of chaparral ecology and it would have happened at this time of year with or without the turkey since the Santa Anas are strongest during the fall, especially between Labor Day and Thanksgiving.

When a holocaust ensues, Delaney blames "Mexicans," even though he knows about the fire cycle and he knows about suburbanization eating into the wild, chewing up the mountainsides. While the fire has natural causes, its damage results from social contradictions—the dialectics of white flight, privatization, flight from development—naturalized by being blamed on the racialized and bestialized incendiary other. Another related irony connected to the complications of Delaney's false consciousness is that, while at a general level he turns Candido into a predator, he understands that the "coyote problem" for these settlements does not result from "them" invading "us" so much as vice versa. Delaney, in fact, is quite admiring of the coyote, and the text parallels, for diverse ironic purposes, Candido with the coyote, and "Mexico" so as to heighten the smart Delaney's blindness regarding Candido, imperialism, racism, and the class war.⁴ In terms of Davis' dialectic, Delaney humanizes the coyote and bestializes Candido. Boyle

⁴ Both Candido and the coyote are figured as tricksters, canny survivors able to adapt to new environments. In his column Delaney notes that the coyote can eat through sprinkler lines to get water. Candido taps into sprinkler lines to siphon off water. And both are able to find ways into areas from which they are barred. Coyotes carry away the Mossbacher family dog; Candido, with America pregnant and both without money or food, takes the family cat for a stew! The slang meaning of Coyote, as someone, often unscrupulous, who helps people cross the border for a fee, is also at work in the novel, Candido himself victimized by this coyote.

makes clear the near identity between war on nature and war on the other. After the fire starts, the planes come in to put it out: “THE NIGHT CAME DOWN LIKE A HAMMER. . . . Bombers [C 130s probably] pounded overhead. . . . It was war” (284). The war on nature turns into a near race riot (“‘fucking wetbacks,’ Jack growled, I lay you odds they started this thing”) against scapegoats. As Davis’ makes clear, “they” did not start this thing. It seems likely that Boyle intends the HAMMER as an allusion to an earlier attempt to put out “racial fires,” the scapegoating and fascist Operation HAMMER (see chapter five of *CQ*).⁵

The homeowner’s association’s picture—in *TC*—of the immigrant vampire leaves out that it is “the ordinary taxpayer” who foots the bill for the fires, including the cost of putting them out, the insurance costs of rebuilding the homes, etc.⁶ In the aftermath of the ’93 blaze (“defended by the largest army of firefighters in American history”), “wealthy Malibu homeowners benefited from an extraordinary range of insurance, landuse, and disaster relief subsidies (state and federal).” And yet, Davis continues, “periodic firestorms of this magnitude are inevitable as long as residential development is tolerated in the fire ecology of the Santa Monicas” (*EF* 99).

⁵ Interestingly, when the Mossbachers are safe from the fire, they watch it on T.V. where the narrator tells us that they were “hoping for a reprieve, hoping that they’d been watching old footage, color-enhanced pictures of the Dresden bombing.” (*TC* 271). This comparison needs unpacking. The Dresden bombings during World War Two were responsible for the deaths of around 100,000 civilians. Is the comparison meant to suggest that the homeowners are “victims” or “Nazis?” Either way, it is ironic. Earlier in the novel, after Candido is hit by Delaney’s Japanese car, his headache is so bad it feels as if “a bomb had gone off inside his head, one of those big atomic ones like they dropped on the Japanese, the black roiling clouds pushing and pulling at his skull, no place to go, no release” (16). The references to two of the apocalyptic events of World War Two, both committed by “the good guys,” to foreshadow a self-righteous “race war” resonates in a fascinating way with the current “war on terror.” Jose Navidad’s (see below) teeth are described as if they were put together by a “Nazi torturer” (90). Boyle suggests it’s not the Nazis but the whole life of a migrant worker in contemporary capitalism that is responsible for the shape JN is in.

⁶ The Arroyo Blanco homeowners’ view also, of course, omits the cheap and virtually free labor the migrants perform for the gated communities, among others.

To help us understand clearly the class character of certain seemingly natural disasters, Davis pairs two analyses of fire and its social costs: one, the fires of the rich; two, the urban fires among the poor, specifically the largely Mexican working class of Westfield whose fires result from overcrowded housing, budget cuts in fire safety and prevention/inspection. This separate and unequal fire treatment is one component of a general subsidizing of the rich through the creation of edge cities that loot not just the inner city but the older suburbs, which subsidize their own decline.

Because “[p]olitical discourse... constantly valorizes resentments against the poor and people of color while remaining discreetly silent about the real structures of urban inequality,” the Euroamericans “stranded and forgotten” by capitalist suburbanization can easily point the finger at newly arriving immigrants and people of color: “The vampirish role of the edge cities in sucking resources from older or poorer suburbs is less evident than the desperate needs of growing populations dependent on the dole” (*EF* 405). Fire, white flight, eco-racism lead the wealthy deeper into the chaparral firebelt: “Fire accelerates gentrification” (*EF* 141). This process despoils nature and extends the privatization of formerly public space. In *TC*, Delaney early on accuses “them” of treating the chaparral like their own private domicile, not noticing this is in fact what “his people” are doing, and what Kyra’s livelihood is built on. In one nice moment, Delaney himself describes how, if a wall is built around the complex, only he will be able to scale it so that on the other side “Delaney would have the hills to himself, his own private nature reserve” (246). (Correspondingly, Candido scales this same wall—which he helped build to get in—to get food and shelter.)

If fire in this context accelerates gentrification, it also brings floods in its wake. As Davis notes, the state and federally subsidized hi tech mode of total fire suppression—itsself designed to facilitate the continuing process of gentrification—helps produce a “water repellent layer in the upper soil” that “accelerates subsequent sheet flooding and erosion,” thus making “doomsday like firestorms and the great floods that follow them virtually inevitable” (*EF* 101-3). Toward the end of the novel, when Delaney is hunting Candido, and it begins to pour, “he could hear boulders slamming around in the culverts high up on the hill that were meant to deflect runoff and debris from the development.” Ever the ecologist, he knows that due to “erosion in the burn area,” there is “nothing to hold the soil.” Unlike Davis, Delaney blames “the match-happy Mexican up there” (345). Davis notes, as if personally rebutting Delaney’s green Malthusianism—recall that for Malthus population increased geometrically while food increased only arithmetically—that [t]he social cost of fire has increased in almost geometric relation to the linear growth of firebelt suburb populations” (*EF* 143).

Early in the novel, Candido, prior to shitting in the chaparral and thus accommodating the racist imaginary, wonders, before he drinks from the stream, “how many septic fields drained off of those mountains? Or how many houses were packed up there all the way to the asshole of the canyon and every one of them leaching waste out into the gullies and streams that fed into the creek?” (53). Later in the novel, he will look up from the hill from his symbolic location in the chaparral and see “blight,” a term in the culture of poverty lexicon usually reserved for poor people. And after he triggers the inevitable fire, looking up from the fire-consumed canyon, he spots literally a mountain of garbage—the refuse of the rich, counterpart to the “dump” in Tijuana to which

Delaney refers. Candido and America will escape the holocaust by climbing this Mount Trashmore. But they won't escape the next disaster, the inevitable flooding of the culvert, with its debris, which will flush them, along with Delaney, "down the canyon like waste in a toilet" (329). This flood that ends the novel is described as a river of shit and brings home dramatically who the real polluters are and what causes Candido to shit in the chaparral.

While Delaney is flooded out of the canyon with his "quarry," Kyra is having an epiphany. We are told that several of Kyra's listings have burned up in previous fires. And her prime listing, the Da Ros place has burned down in this one. This last loss to fire sends her into a tailspin. She returns to her car, her last sanctuary, and calms herself by listening to nature tapes, the nature her job and the cars and roads that go with it are helping to despoil.

She drives around aimlessly, ranting about the Mexicans—"the barbarians outside the gates of Rome," "polluting the creek and crapping in the woods"—until she finds herself further up into the mountains, an area formerly wild now inhabited by a bustling mini-mall, testimonial to white flight, "the megalopolis encroaching on the country side" (*TC* 311). And from here one last drive, further into the wild, which she imagines—this is the epiphany—as a drive into the past of pure nostalgia, rutted roads and model Ts, "so much open space," lifted out of "*Saturday Evening Post* covers and *Lassie* reruns." And where she stops to gape at "a three story stone and plaster mansion that could have been lifted out of Beverly Hills or better yet a village in the south of France," a place that could form the "anchor" for her new life, not as a seller, but as a developer: of

communities of the rich fleeing development. And so we have another disastrous dialectic of vicious circles that surround and devour all in their path (*TC* 337-9).

Kyra's epiphany serves as an ironic sublation of an earlier epiphany in another turn of the dialectic. In these earlier moments, Kyra, obsessed with selling the Da Ros place (from which she looks down on Arroyo Blanco whose orange roofs appear like a "fungus"—if Arroyo Blanco plays fungus to those higher up, those in the chaparral function as blight to those in the Arroyo—a relativity of strata and status which gives the lie to Delaney and Jack's racist essentialism), experiences a funk, a malaise, a "fatigue that went deeper than any physical exhaustion: all this over a dog? It was ridiculous, she knew it. There were people out there going through Dumpsters for a scrap to eat, people lined up . . . begging for work, people who'd lost their homes, their children, . . . people with real problems? What was wrong with her?" (74). She then realizes she is making her real estate boss richer, has a vision of the sky on fire and a "glimpse of her own end, laid to rest in short skirt, heels and tailored jacket, a sheaf of escrow papers in her hand" (75). This is a kind of *Christmas Carol* moment. But ultimately, Kyra, instead of dedicating herself sentimentally to the poor, dedicates herself to the rich. While Boyle acknowledges the reality if not the power of human decency, the trope of kindness during holidays is mercilessly debunked. On Thanksgiving, the fire is set and a "race riot," if not lynching (of Jose Navidad, perhaps), is only barely averted.⁷

⁷ Joe Christmas is lynched (castrated) in *Light in August*. I would speculate that this scene underlies the "race riot" threat in *TC*, an intertextual reference that hardly put the reader in mind of Tiny Tim. See below for more details on the Faulkner parallel.

Later, Kyra sees Candido, “his face bruised and swollen like bad fruit,”⁸ who has found temporary work building the wall designed to keep the coyotes, snakes and him out:

This was the man, the very man—had to be. She watched him slide the long plastic strips from the back of the truck and balance them on one shoulder, and she felt a space open up inside her, a great sad empty space that made her feel as if she’d given birth to something weak and unformed. And as he passed by her again, jaunty on his bad leg, the space opened so wide it could have sucked in the whole universe (161).

The connection between these moments is suggested in several ways. But what’s most of interest is the spatial dialectic where Kyra, whose role as both besieged white woman and hi-end real estate agent significantly shapes the spaces within which Candido and America can exist, gives birth to a great, sad, empty space that expands so as to contain, paradoxically, the whole universe within her own inner space, itself produced by capitalism’s multiple alienations. It is hard not to see this as an unrealized, unformed moment of solidarity and common humanity—yet that particular vision, testament to the contradictions opened up in all of us by class society, testament therefore to the possibilities of resistance, is also testimony to the inadequacy of such spatial epiphanies in the absence of an alternative ideology and community of solidarity, so that this wide open space containing the two of them gives way to the seemingly wide open spaces at novel’s end that are the preserve of the superrich, spaces produced by a dynamic of

⁸ As I’ve been suggesting, *TC* is packed with allusions to *The Grapes of Wrath*, and this reference to Candido’s face as bad fruit is likely another. One of the many ironies characterizing the relation between the two novels, is that much of the space, the beautiful orchards in which the immigrant workers slaved, has been bulldozed to make way for “pyromanic suburbanization”

capital accumulation, class differentiation and eco-racism which pollutes the segregated spaces it produces for those it divides and leaves in its wake. And to heighten the contradiction, Boyle repeats the spatial metaphors in attempting to describe the mental geography of Kyra's counterpart, America, after being raped by Jose Navidad, about whom I will say more below. Kyra's wide open privatized spaces of the superrich meet their dialectical counterpart in America's mind, shut down "till the world went from a movie screen [of Hollywood and American Dream fantasy] to a peephole, and still she wanted to close the peephole too" (272).⁹ While the novel sends us into the past for parallels, it is to be noted that the characters' experience of temporality emphasizes their different worlds as much as does their experiences of space, with America and Candido reliving the Depression while Kyra, as per above, reliving the mythic time of the American Dream, the time of "*Saturday Evening Post* covers and *Lassie* reruns."

If Boyle's novel is a *Grapes of Wrath* for modern times, Davis's work, *Ecology of Fear* in particular, seems a riff on *Grapes of Wrath*. If the former title works together the promise of nature—come to California—offered to Okies ruined by the economically and ecologically devastating practices of agribusiness and drought with the anger of class struggle, *EF*, like *TC* but more pessimistic, brings together the ecological devastation of late capitalism with, not the anger of the working class, but "the middle class" fear of the working class. If Boyle recruits Steinbeck to suggest interesting parallels between the 90s and the 30s, the migration of the Okies and the migration of Mexican workers, it ought also to be noted that—to develop the shared context uniting the three writers—both Steinbeck and Davis were influenced by the work of Carey McWilliams, who studied in

⁹ Candido's love is able to bring her back from this place so that "the gulf inside her," of "black bitter waters," begins "to close even as the peephole widened" (273).

detail not just the movement of labor in the U.S., but the great northern migration of Mexican workers during the Depression, an event Steinbeck features in the background of the interchapters. Davis' analysis of suburbanization focuses primarily on the period between the 20s and the 90s, and he notes that the great flood of '38, so featured in Steinbeck and paralleled in *TC*'s close, was itself no mere phenomenon of nature but was facilitated by urbanization which "inexorably increased the menace of such floods by reducing the porous surface area available to absorb runoff" (*EF* 70).

Both Davis and Boyle also highlight the bulldozer—whose role in the transformation of the California landscape to fire and flood-promoting suburbanization parallels the role of Steinbeck's tractor in reshaping the ecopolitical landscape paving the way for Okie migration to the farm fields of California, which themselves succumbed to the bulldozer.

Another interesting nod to the Great Depression in *TC* is the damaged, diseased character who rapes America and is wrongly accused of starting the fire (Candido actually "starts" it). The character's name is Jose Navidad, Joe Christmas, thus a nod to the central character of Faulkner's Depression era novel, *Light in August*. Boyle's reading of these Depression era novels, the use he makes of them, I speculate, is quite subversive. If Steinbeck emphasized the dynamics of capital accumulation, Boyle deepens this analysis by bringing out the racializing character of this process. With the Faulkner reference, readers might focus on parallels like rape, as both Joe Christmases rape key female characters, and both characters are animalistic, predatory, roaming. While readers get detailed access to the psychodynamics of Joe's damaged character, so that we might infer something similar for Jose, Boyle's reference to the larger contexts of

capital accumulation also highlights Joe's fate or career as a migrant worker, taking on many different jobs as he follows what Carey McWilliams called the migratory circle. In the Faulkner novel, this search for work during hard times is seen as a product of Joe's search for identity, itself rooted ambiguously in earlier psychodynamics or his competing bloods. So Boyle, appropriate to the literature of Marxist geography, recruits these Depression era novels in a leftward direction that emphasizes the racial component of accumulation in Steinbeck's novel that the novel itself largely backgrounds and, in the case of Faulkner, contextualizes the issue of "bad character." For example, when Jose (who, like Candido, but in much different respects, is compared with the coyote—Jose, carrying disease, is indeed feral) rapes America, this rape is experienced by her "as if a tree had fallen on her" (*TC* 141). Later, after the labor exchange is "cleaned up," Candido observes the 200 or so desperate workers with whom he stands on the street corner and we see here another reference to Steinbeck: "Men were starving. Their wives and children were starving. They'd do anything for work, any kind of work, and they'd take what the boss was paying and get down on their knees and thank him for it" (209). America sees something a little different: "What she saw made her stomach sink with fear: they were hopeless, they were dead, as bent and whipped and defeated as branches torn from a tree" (209).

Jose Navidad is one of these dead, hopeless men, bent and whipped. As America notes of him earlier in the novel, "[h]e'd been damaged somehow . . . , damaged in the way of a man who has to scrape and grovel and kiss the hind end of some irrecusable yankee boss and his eyes showed it, jabbing out at the world like two weapons" (81).

Torn by the logic of capital, he turns his rage on America, not the country or the “yankee boss,” but an innocent woman from “his” country.¹⁰

Looking toward the apocalyptic future, Davis wonders: “what kind of dystopian cityscape . . . might the unchecked evolution of inequality, crime and social despair ultimately produce?” (*EF* 362). Davis suggests the vision of Octavia Butler’s parable novels, which use “disciplined extrapolation to explore the dark possibilities of the near future” (*EF* 362).

Boyle’s novel, unlike its Depression era precursor, does not offer the possibility of radical organizing. Predatory/prey relations predominate as in Butler. A scifi-like otherworldliness is constantly emphasized, Candido feeling often “at a loss as if he’d been dropped down on another planet” (168). There seem to be utopian moments, moments of surprise, when a common humanity shines through. Prior to meeting America, Candido, along with other migrant workers, heads to Oregon looking for farm work. Their car breaks down and they are chased by cops. Candido hides outside a farmhouse, but here the farmer turns out to be a decent human being. In Boyle’s novel, these are “surprises.” “There are always surprises,” Boyle’s narrator informs us in a fairy tale voice: “Life may be inveterately grim and the surprises disproportionately unpleasant but it would be hardly worth living, if there were no exceptions, no sunny days, no acts of random kindness” (*TC* 171).

In *TC*’s apocalyptic closing, echoing the flood from *GW*, Candido is searching desperately for America, calling for her at the top of his lungs. He finds her, but Socorro (“help” in English), born blind due to the venereal disease contracted by America as the

¹⁰ It is always difficult to know how far to take intertextual relations. But I would note that in Faulkner’s novel, it is Joanna Burden who is compared to a diseased tree.

result of her rape, is gone, drowned—the drowning of the baby in the river, which evokes Uncle John’s release of Rose of Sharon’s dead infant and especially his angry speech, makes very clear who should be the objects of wrath. Instead, they find Delaney, their predator, who Candido, the prey, pulls out of the excremental flood. Whether this momentary, surprising common experience is enough to neutralize class differences and racist ideology can be doubted.¹¹

In Butler’s *Parable* novels, a multiracial, largely working class band of survivors—circa 2024-2035—are burned out of their low end walled up community (fortress), not by, in Davis’ phrase, “pyromanic suburbanization,” but by desperate, frenzied lumpen predators (Davis calls them “jackals” in his paraphrase of *Parable of the Sower*) high on pyro or “ro”—a drug that produces intense sexual pleasure when triggered by fires.¹² This besieged little band—seed of a new world that no longer evokes the American dream, along with what seems like the entire population of the former working class—flees joblessness, lawlessness, slavery in the secure gated communities of the superrich, and an emerging fascist state, to head El Norte, north, to the border: Canada, temporarily safer, with better weather—the temperate climate of L.A. having been displaced north along with the people—all of this testimony to Engels’ great truth that capitalism doesn’t solve its problems, but moves them around.

¹¹ I would suggest that *Tortilla Curtain* may very well play off another central Depression era novel that masterfully examines the mental and physical geography of capital accumulation and that is Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. One of the central spatial images in that novel is the image of the wall, one worked hard by Boyle to similar thematic purpose. In TC, the fortress gated community has its counterparts in Candido, who is told by his father that “[i]n times of extremity, make like a wall.” “. . . present a solid, unbreachable surface” to “protect the inner fortress of yourself from all comers.” When Candido and America definitively discover Socorro’s blindness—caused by capitalism’s spatial dialectic of capital accumulations that unites the personal and political in horrific ways—the distance between them and their child is “as if there were a wall between them”(TC 171, 327).

¹² Ironically, Delaney calls Candido a pyromaniac (TC 111).

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A Journal on Social History and
Literature in Latin America

Una revista de historia social
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