

# LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

## Street-Level Writing: Los Angeles in the Works of Charles Bukowski

Marc Brosseau

University of Ottawa

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**Abstract:**

Los Angeles is central to Charles Bukowski's (1920-1994) life and work. This paper examines the evolution of the representation of the city in his writings. It does so by situating the author in the broader context of the literary representation of Los Angeles in order to illustrate his particular perspective on the city and its many sites: that of a marginalized insider writing at street-level. It then proposes to reconstitute the dual trajectory of the author and his works in relation to the city. Interpreting Bukowski's urban imaginary proves challenging because places are poorly fleshed out through description. Yet when approached as a whole, his writings do possess a coherent spatiality. Acutely myopic at first, the representation of the city gradually becomes more complex sociologically and geographically. Incomplete and patchy, the image of the city and its contrasted social worlds progressively acquires texture and depth. The paper finally argues the geographical imaginary Bukowski developed through his experience in the city's underbelly informed his interpretation of L.A.'s social reality as a whole, provided him with the language and themes to express it, and supplied his very own vantage point to make sense of it all.

**Keywords:** Los Angeles; Charles Bukowski; place; urban imaginary.

**Author contact:** [Marc.Brosseau@uottawa.ca](mailto:Marc.Brosseau@uottawa.ca)

Most cities are alike: you've got people, a business district, warehouses, police who hassle you and a bunch of bad poets walking around. Maybe the weather is different, and the people have slightly different accents; that's about it. But, like I said, LA has a spiritual and geographical difference, which, because I've been hanging around it, I've picked up on. I have an acquaintance with LA, you might say. (Bukowski, interviewed by Wennersten in 1974, in Calonne 2003: 90)

Los Angeles can be conceived as modernity's last stop westward, as an ambiguous and mythical incarnation of the American Dream. It is also a particularly intriguing site for literary representation. As David Fine rightly observes, Los Angeles' literary tradition was established by migrants and exiles attracted by Hollywood's many lures and by a desire for a new life, fortune and the possibility of reinventing themselves:

From its beginnings Los Angeles fiction has been a migrant fiction, constructed essentially – and until the past few decades almost exclusively – by men and women who left homes elsewhere, drawn to Los Angeles and Hollywood largely to work as screenwriters. Like immigrant fiction, Los Angeles fiction is double-edged: implicitly, at least, it is about both the place discovered and the place left behind, what is gained and lost in the process of extirpation and resettlement. (Fine 2000: vii-viii)

The imagination of these writers, 'outsiders' to Los Angeles, was disoriented, so to speak, by various factors: the unusual sprawling urban form and horizontal vertigo produced by the city, its violence (both real and imagined), the 'pastiche' character of its landscapes, and the puzzling maze of freeways irrigating an unstoppable flow of traffic. In Los Angeles, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, the distinction between fiction and reality is difficult to establish: it is 'a city made of words' (McNamara 2010: 1). The city constitutes a form of quasi-unsolvable semantic geographical enigma, the key to which can only be found in comparison with the more familiar, highly concentrated, 'vertical' urban landscapes of America's north eastern cities like New York, Boston and Chicago:

Landscape in the Los Angeles novel is always weighted with symbolic meaning. The fact that the writers, as outsiders, were playing the region contrapuntally against a home territory accounts to a large extent for the symbolic quality it acquired in fiction. The landscape offered itself readily to a vision of being cut off from a familiar sense of place. (Fine 1995: 10)

For the most part, these writers came from elsewhere to make a living as screenwriters in Los Angeles, where Hollywood, the 'beach' communities of Malibu and Venice West, and the rich neighbourhoods nested on the hills (Beverly Hills, Pacific Palisades, etc.) served as recurring literary settings (Fine 2000). Until the 1930's, the city's many less fortunate neighbourhoods that sprawl endlessly on the plain around the 'official' central business district in the east have been either snubbed or ignored by most writers. Their literary 'discovery' was initiated by writers like John Fante who, while he also came from elsewhere, made 'excursions' to these neighbourhoods, setting his narratives in the shady bars, cafés

and dusty rooming houses of Bunker Hill (Fante 1939/1999; Cooper 1995). With Chester Himes, Oscar Zerta Acosta, Walter Mosley and Charles Bukowski, Fante spearheaded the ‘exploration’ of Los Angeles’ relative *terra incognita*, which is now inhabited by Latinos, Chicanos, and various African-American and Asian communities (Skinner 1995; Parades 1995; Ghorra-Gobin 1997; Fine 2000; McNamara 2010). Within this body of literature – often violent and unapologetic in its representation of the city’s many ills – the trajectory and writings of Charles Bukowski (1920-1994) are peculiar in more ways than one.

### **Bukowski and Los Angeles**

Los Angeles lies at the core of Bukowski’s life and writings. The author and his alter ego, Henry Chinaski, are only truly at home in that city, a place neither strange, nor fascinating, nor intriguing to them. It is a trivial and ordinary city, a place devoid of any kind of exoticism, the everyday turf of the working class and the many jobless, homeless, disinherited and largely forgotten (Fontana 1985). Bukowski is also one of the rare South Californian writers who have remained, in spite of late success, deeply attached and somewhat ‘loyal’ to Los Angeles and Southern California. Bukowski has always felt out of place in the older cities of the Northeast:

Apart from Charles Bukowski, who had fame imposed upon him at the last after a film (*Barfly* [Schroeder, 1986]) was made of his work, any moderately successful Los Angeles writer who hasn’t wanted to subserve the film industry has found it virtually impossible to resist the gravitational tug of the East. (Murphet 2001: 3)

The landscape of Los Angeles – the complex assemblage of ocean, mountains, valleys and deserts of South California and, more importantly, the perennial risk of cataclysmic earthquakes – has inspired extravagance in the geographical imagination of many Californian writers (Davis 1998; Seed 2010). Not so for Bukowski. The city does not give rise to the metaphorical exuberance and symbolic profusion present in so many writings. Bukowski is a man of the street, writing the city at street level, a ‘poet laureate of skid row’. It has been said that he is among the first generation of writers to depict Los Angeles as a familiar place, from within as a ‘real’ insider so to speak.

This may very well be the case, yet Bukowski also approaches the city from the vantage point of a socially and spatially marginalized man: an ‘outsider’ in a familiar place. While he does possess the privileged perspective of the insider, he contemplates the world he lives in and writes about from the relative distance of his own (sense of) marginality. For the longest time, he only felt at home in a very limited list of places: bars, back streets, the racetrack, grey rooming houses and flophouses, and numerous soulless and alienating workplaces. Together, these locales constitute a social geography where alcoholics, bums, winos, prostitutes, exhausted co-workers, obnoxious managers, shrewd landladies, smiling waitresses, macho barmen, little hustlers and gamblers try to cope with their own ‘ordinary madness’.

As familiar and mundane as these places may be, they remain somewhat disconcerting for the critic who wishes to reconstitute the imaginary geography of

Bukowski's Los Angeles. His narratives (both in novels and short stories) are, by and large, set in generic places that are poorly fleshed out through description; they are, more often than not, named without being elaborated upon. Bukowski does not offer long-winded descriptions of place through which, as literary geographers often do (Brosseau 2008a; Hones 2011), one could extrapolate his interpretation of the city's geography. Places seem to be taken for granted; they are simply 'there'. Yet these places constitute an uncompromising prism through which the city and American society are perceived. Although they provide very little material for a literal reading of the urban landscape or an interpretation of Los Angeles' sense of place, Bukowski's works are certainly not without their own very coherent spatiality.

Extremely prolific in many genres (poetry, short stories, novel, letters), Bukowski's writing is known for its simplicity ('the same simple line I learned in those cheap rooms', Bukowski 1996: 361), absence of stylistic ornamentation and sentimentality, punchy dialogues and tongue-in-cheek humour. His fascination for life at the bottom, or on the margins of the city stems not only from personal experience, but mostly from the conviction that those are the places where human authenticity can really be found:

Bukowski posits a comparable belief in the value of marginality when regarding outlaws (who like the poor, live essentially outside of, and in spite of, the boundaries of law): 'Criminals and tyrants supposedly live more authentically (that is unhampered by moral codes, external authorities) than the law-abiding citizen'. (Brewer 1997: 53)

The spatial trajectory of Bukowski's personal life and that of his works are intimately interrelated. From the city's Skid Row in the shadow of the central business district, to the suburb of San Pedro by the seaport, and a long decisive stay in East Hollywood (not to be mistaken for the other more glamorous Hollywood) where he lived and wrote for some twenty years, Bukowski's writings follow him closely; yet they also mystify the journey of Bukowski/Chinaski in the city. As with Los Angeles itself, fact and fiction are difficult to distinguish in Bukowski's life and writings. Acutely myopic, if not claustrophobic, the initial representation of the city gradually becomes more complex sociologically and geographically. Incomplete and patchy, the image of the city and its contrasted social worlds progressively acquires texture and depth. At times marginal, provocative and often off-centre, this street-level representation of Los Angeles does constitute, as argued by Harrison (1994), a very grounded critique of the American Dream and one of its greatest urban symbols.

It is obviously impossible to provide an interpretation of Bukowski's complete works (thousands of poems, more than two hundred short stories, some essays, six novels and a screenplay, collections of letters) and their intricate relationship with the city.<sup>1</sup> Not only do the various genres require different reading regimes, but the city does not appear in the same light or the same degree of mimesis in each of them. Apart from *Pulp* (1994), where Bukowski leaves his usual alter ego (Chinaski) behind for a private eye that still resembles him, all his novels share an undeniable autobiographical dimension, with all the traps, auctorial manipulations and 'improvements on life' it involves (Bukowski in Calonne 2003:

201). All novels, except for the many out-of-town excursions to New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, Atlanta and New Orleans in *Factotum*, are set in Los Angeles. Furthermore, their publication dates do not follow the chronological sequence of Bukowski's life. His first novel, *Post Office* (1971), chronicles his long excruciating years at the Los Angeles Post Office (1958-1970). *Factotum* (1975) follows Chinaski's bumming, drinking, working and refusing to work in a long litany of mindless jobs in the cities identified above and in Los Angeles' Skid Row (1940-1958 approx.). *Women* (1978) deals with Bukowski's slow rise to fame and tumultuous love life from the time he left the Post Office for good in order to dedicate his life to writing 'full time' in 1970, almost to the very moment the novel was to appear in 1978. His Bildungsroman, *Ham on Rye* (1982), tells the story of the narrator's first twenty years (1920-1940), from his very first childhood memories to his first excursions to downtown Los Angeles in the late 1930s. *Hollywood* (1989) recounts the epic story of the movie *Barfly* (1987), from the signing of the contract with Barbet Schroeder in 1979 to the première in 1987 of the film based on the screenplay condensing Chinaski's down and out period in Los Angeles during the 1940s and 1950s. Much less autobiographical, yet obliquely revisiting Bukowski's many recurring Los Angeles settings, is *Pulp*, a spoof detective novel in which Nick Belane, an aging private investigator is commissioned by 'Lady Death' to locate Celine (the famous French author) who has been seen in Los Angeles.

Bukowski's numerous short stories are not as closely related to his life. Many have no autobiographical dimension whatsoever. Yet a great number are very much associated with the Los Angeles landscape: more than a third of them make explicit reference to the city or its landmarks. Many others seem to take the city for granted as if no specific indication were necessary (the fact that many were published initially as columns in local newspapers such as *Open City*, *Nola*, *Los Angeles Free Press* supports this interpretation). Furthermore, what has been said about the relative lack of spatial description in the novels is just as true, if not more so, for the short stories. Spatiality in the short story lends itself more easily to an analysis of the role of place as a mediator of social relations than it does to a more synthetic reading of the city as a whole (Brousseau 2008b). Yet every now and again, short stories provide insight into the meaning of certain places or neighbourhoods for Bukowski or his characters. Needless to say, it would be even more difficult to tease out an image of Los Angeles in his poetry. The sheer volume of his poetic output, the varying degrees of auctorial presence they showcase, and the complex ways the city reverberates through the poems make any attempt at reconstituting their imaginary geography fatally incomplete<sup>2</sup>.

Yet, the fact remains that it is possible to highlight how the representation of the city gradually acquires a kind of depth of field, that of the distance of time, in the process also developing greater social and geographical texture. In order to tease out how his depiction of the city evolves, one needs to read his works in the chronological order of their publication, not the chronological sequence of his alter ego's fictive life. Despite many shortcuts and simplifications, I will reconstitute this process by showing how the city was depicted in his early and late works. However artificial and arbitrary these points of departure and arrival, so to speak, they nevertheless highlight the transformation of the

representation of Los Angeles in Bukowski's work and suggest how temporal distance also provides for geographical and sociological depth of field when it comes to writing the city.

### **Myopic description of place: From Skid Row to East Hollywood**

In Bukowski's first writings – poems written between 1946 and 1966 collected in *The Roominghouse Madrigals* (1988), or the early short stories and columns collected in *Notes of a Dirty Old Man* (1969) and *Tales of Ordinary Madness* (1972 [1983a]) – the representation of space is characterised by a certain short sightedness, a lack of perspective. There is barely any sense of the larger city in which the action is taking place. We find ourselves in a series of places that are either closed (small rooms, bars), or semi-open (stairwells and back alleys). The atmosphere there is somewhat suffocating: it smells like alcohol, solitude, despair and death:

It's not death  
but dying will solve its power  
and as my grey hands  
drop a last desperate pen  
in some cheap room  
they will find me there  
and never know  
my name  
my meaning  
nor the treasure  
of my escape  
(‘Old man, Dead in a Room’, in Bukowski 1988: 53-54)

Beside the cheap rooms, bars are certainly the most recurring setting. The personality of such places is not fleshed out through description or abundant adjectives; it stems from the type of characters found within. Examples are innumerable:

Harry and Duke. The bottle sat between in a cheap hotel in downtown L.A. It was Saturday night in one of the cruellest towns in the world. [...] They drank and smoked some more. They didn't talk. They were both thinking of the future. It was a hot night. Some of the roomers had their doors open. Most of them had a bottle of wine. The men sat in their undershirts, easy and wondering and beaten. Some of them even had women, not too much as ladies but they could hold their wine. (‘All the Pussy We Want’ in Bukowski 1983b: 195-97)

I was plenty bored with bars at that time – all those lonely male idiots hoping some woman would walk in and carry them off to wonderland. The two most sickening crowds are the racetrack crowd and the bar crowd, and I mean mostly the male species. The losers who kept losing and couldn't make a stand and gather themselves. And there *I* was, right in the center of them. [...] here came Gramercy walking

through the door – a victim of reform schools and prisons. His eyes seemed to keep rolling back into the inside of his head as if he were trying to look into his brain to see what had gone wrong. He was dressed in rags and a large wine bottle was jammed into the ripped pocket of his pants. He stank, and a rolled cigarette dangled. ('A drinking partner', in Bukowski 1983b: 225-26, emphasis in original)

The streets and sidewalks are depicted at eye level, through the shadowy eyes of a drunken man or the dirty window of a cheap room. In contrast to nineteenth-century realist depictions of place one can find in the pages of Balzac or Dickens for example, Bukowski offers no landscape descriptions, no panoramic gaze overlooking the city. Time and space seem to be defined in absolute terms without depth or perspective: very little past, barely any future (only the next drink to look forward to); here and now. As Bukowski himself writes, 'Now is the only living breathing reality' (Bukowski 1995: 115). There is little room for duration or hope for a better future, and, accordingly, no place to go.

Together, these writings constitute a simplified geography of Los Angeles' underworld and Skid Row. We are close to the center of the city, but a center without a periphery; in short, the center of nothing. The street names (Alvarado, Alameda, Coronado, Figueroa, Irolo, Pico, Temple, Union, etc.) remind us that we are indeed in Los Angeles. Yet the city as such is only alluded to with rare generic markers: 'I met her in an Alvarado St. bar, which is about as close to getting to skid row as you can get' ('Confessions of a Man Insane Enough to Live with Beasts', in Bukowski 1973: 168). The text seems to be addressed to a reader who is already in a familiar place, a reader for whom any geographical detail would indeed be superfluous. Bukowski is anything but a tourist guide to the underbelly of Los Angeles (for only an outsider would need to be guided through this 'exotic' foreign place).

This imprecise geography, composed of a limited series of places, gradually becomes more dynamic in the short stories. Through narrative and emplotment, places become more interconnected and in the process fragments of a 'real city' start to emerge. Very often, the spatial sequence of events follows this pattern: we go from the room to the bar, or the room to the liquor store, and back. The cast of characters remains relatively unchanged: alongside the author/narrator, we encounter disillusioned men and women, lost souls, little hustlers, bums and drunks on the margins of society and at the bottom of the social ladder. For them, the here and now is a form of absolute as if their own standpoint were the only possible one. The range of action is also very repetitive: drinking, arguing, fighting, storytelling of failed love affairs, violent or inconclusive sex scenes, half-botched misdeeds and so on. Yet there is a critical tone in the backdrop. By exhibiting the everyday suffering, failure and humiliation of these very ordinary people, Bukowski is also exposing the city at its crudest and most 'authentic'.

'The shortest route between Heaven and Hell in contemporary America', writes Mike Davis, 'is probably Fifth Street in Downtown to L.A.' (Davis, quoted in Fine 2000: 179). Davis refers to the short link between the Central Business District and Skid Row, yet the city's underbelly is as multi-centered as Los Angeles itself. East Hollywood, north of downtown, is another incarnation of Los Angeles in the raw in Bukowski's stories. While it does constitute a minor step up from Bunker Hill and Skid Row, this neighbourhood is

far removed from the glamour of the other Hollywood. Bukowski lived there for some twenty years himself (1958-1978), and his experiences provided ample material for his fiction, serving as a street level vantage point for his observations of social life:

He peddled the shit – all of it stolen – at the various hippie shops and head shops along Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards – that is, the poor man’s area of these boulevards where I lived, where we all lived. I mean we lived near there – in broken-down courts, attics, garages or slept on the floors of temporary friends. (‘Nut Ward Just East of Hollywood’, in Bukowski 1983a: 18).

... and then I drove down Hollywood Blvd., west, the most depressive of all the streets, jammed glass nothing of nothing, it was the only street that really made me angry, and then I remembered I wanted Sunset which was just about as bad, and I turned south... (‘A Rain of Women’, in Bukowski 1983a: 154).

I lived in one of the last slum courts on DeLongpre. someday the landlord would sell it for a tremendous sum and I would be bulldozed out. too bad. I threw parties that lasted until the sun came up, ran the typer day and night. a madman lived in the next court. everything was sweet. one block North and ten blocks West I could walk along a sidewalk that had footprints of STARS upon it. I don’t know what the names mean. I don’t hit the movies, don’t have a t.v. when my radio stopped playing I threw it out the window. (‘Night Streets of Madness’, in Bukowski 1983a: 162)

Depictions of social contrasts between rich and poor, West and East Los Angeles, become more frequent in the stories of the late sixties and early seventies. In ‘The Killers’, for example, Harry and Bill meet at Pedro’s on Alameda where ‘they can sit for a couple of hours for a nickel’ (Bukowski 1973: 54). They are tired, beat, broke and in search of an easy way to make a fast buck.

You take the Beverly Hills bus and ask the driver to let you off here. Then walk two blocks north. I’ll be waiting [...] All right. I’ve been casing these places. I think I’ve got us a good one. It stinks of money. [...] Harry followed Bill for a block and a half, then Bill cut between two shrubs and onto a large lawn. They walked to the back of the house, a large two storey affair [...] It did stink of money and furniture polish... (‘The killers’, in Bukowski 1973: 55-56).

After a gruesome yet unplanned rape and double murder, they end up back at the bus stop only to realize that they forgot to take the money. No escape.

‘A Shipping clerk with a red nose’, also published in 1973, crosscuts Los Angeles social space from a different perspective. As narrator, Chinaski (Bukowski’s usual alter ego) tells the story of Randall Harris, a writer in the process of becoming famous, which was the case for Bukowski himself at the time. Chinaski describes Harris’ slow rise to literary notoriety and exposes the perverse consequences of this upward mobility – the (H)ills of success – which is also a movement toward the west of the city. This positive trajectory –

uphill and westwards – is portrayed ironically as a transect of the city’s social geography: from East Hollywood’s relative poverty to the plush Hollywood Hills, with a stop in Malibu, with houses becoming more luxurious, women growing prettier and younger, and cheap beer replaced by fancy French wine. Very much concerned by the possible negative outcomes of his own growing literary fame, Bukowski examines, with this *mise en abyme*, the relationship between the so-called authenticity and truth of life at the bottom, and the superficiality and moral vacuity in the quiet comfort of privileged neighbourhoods. While Bukowski remains deeply attached to the dusty rooming houses and smoky bars that moulded his identity as a writer and informed his literary style, his fiction starts to explore new spaces in the city.

Bukowski’s trajectory from downtown and Skid Row to East Hollywood, a place with which he will be forever associated (Malone 2003, for example), also corresponds to the emergence of a relatively new theme: mobility and the fear of immobility. Los Angeles is the city of cars ‘par excellence’: not possessing a car is indeed a form of condemnation. Chinaski’s many movements through the city, ‘the vast paved archipelago that is L.A.’ (Goldstein 2014: 105), become more frequent in the narratives, providing opportunities to name the city and its main arteries: Hollywood and Sunset Boulevard, Vermont and Normandie, Broadway, Western Avenue, etc. Although these many paths through the city are often described elliptically, they succeed in creating a sense of its horizontal expanse in all directions. They also allow for different neighbourhoods to be compared and contrasted.

In what he rightly identifies as the ‘banality of evil’ in Bukowski’s writings, Harrison argues that ordinary madness is represented with disconcerting familiarity: the worst atrocities are depicted with such moral detachment that they appear mundane and almost trivial. This ordinary madness was first portrayed as an experience specific to the city’s underbelly and the people who revolve around it. From roughly the mid-seventies onward, Bukowski shows how it is also present in the city at large. In Los Angeles, ordinary madness is *ubiquitous*.

I went to every town broke in order to learn the town from the bottom. You come into a town from the top – you know fancy hotel, fancy dinners, fancy drinks, money in your pocket – and you’re not seeing the town at all. True, I denied myself a full view. I got a bottom view, which I didn’t like; but I was more interested in what was going on at the bottom. I thought that was the place. I found out it wasn’t. I used to think the real men (people you can put up with for over ten minutes) were at the bottom instead than at the top. The real men aren’t at the top, middle or bottom. There’s no location. They’re just very scarce; there aren’t many of them (Bukowski, interviewed by Wennersten in 1974, in Calonne 2003: 89-90).

This certainly does not mean that he is abandoning Skid Row or East Hollywood. These are places to which he always returns in his novels, poems and short stories. In a way, these places are the pivots around which his geographical imagination was formed and continues to gravitate. Although Bukowski’s life takes him to other areas of the city (with his fiction

following him very closely) this same geographical imagination informs his understanding and interpretations of urban life.

### **From East Hollywood to San Pedro: A Three-Dimensional City**

I had noticed that both in the very poor and the very rich extremes of society the mad were often allowed to mingle freely. I knew that I wasn't entirely sane. (Bukowski 1982: 274)

Owing to his greater spatial mobility and the recently acquired freedom to devote himself to writing full-time, the geographical horizon of Bukowski's writing opens up to new urban and social territories at the turn of the 1970s (Sounes 1998). Cheap rooms and seedy bars were not deserted, but his short stories also begin to explore daily life in middle and upper class neighbourhoods, the world of sports (boxing, baseball, horse racing), and the artistic scene (painters, writers and actors) in which racial and ethnic tensions became more concrete. With varying degrees of historical distance, the more autobiographical novels continue their examination of the author/narrator's life in the city.

*Factotum* (1975) recounts the story of Chinaski in the urban underbelly of New Orleans, New York, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Los Angeles. In this novel, Bukowski revisits and rewrites the contents of previously published short stories about slices of life at the bottom. The labour conditions of the working class and lumpen proletariat of the 1940s and 1950s – dehumanising jobs, exploitation, and precariousness – are depicted with lucidity and cynical humour:

In those days the L.A. River was a fake – there was no water, just a wide flat, dry cement runway. The bums lived down there by the hundreds, in little cement alcoves under the bridges and overpasses. Some of them even had potted plants in front of their places. All they needed to live like kings was canned heat (Sterno) and what they picked out of the nearby garbage dump. They were tan and relaxed and most of them looked a hell of a lot healthier than the average Los Angeles businessman. Those guys down there had no problems with women, income tax, landlords, burial expenses, dentists, time payments, car repairs, or with climbing into a voting booth and pulling the curtain closed. (Bukowski 1975: 164)

Between 1970 and 1977, during his slow rise from local cult writer to relative literary fame, Bukowski accumulates notes about love affairs that lead him to explore various places in Los Angeles. Pursuing his many conquests, the narrator navigates the city's web of streets and boulevards, out of East Hollywood and into Venice Beach, Burbank, Westlake and Westwood (*Women*, 1978). When things get too entangled or heartrending, the freeways lead him faithfully to his usual refuge, the racetracks of Hollywood Park or Santa Anita.

While *Factotum* constitutes a deeper exploration of everyday life in downtown Los Angeles' poorest enclaves and *Women* covers a wider territory, *Ham on Rye*, set in the 1920s and 1930s, is much more sensitive to issues of class from a sociological standpoint, along with processes of exclusion and marginalisation from an individual standpoint. In

retrospect, this combination of perspectives provides a textured explanation of what Bukowski's life, personality and work would become. *Ham on Rye* is geographically confined within the orange groves of the San Bernardino hills to the east, and the beach of Venice to the west. In both places, as Fontana insists, Chinaski is presented as an intruder or an outsider. On the one hand, Chinaski's family would be chased, at gun point, after being caught trying to steal oranges:

This episode defines the territorial limits that Chinaski and his family are confined to. The paradisaal abundance of Southern California is forbidden to them, and Chinaski's father, who loses his job as a milkman during the Depression, becomes an increasingly embittered, frightened, and tyrannical father. Confined to the working-class neighborhood of 21<sup>st</sup> St. and Crenshaw Ave., he will terrorize Henry [...] To this has been reduced the father's American Dream. (Fontana 1985: 5)

On the other hand, fearing to expose his acne-covered body, Chinaski rapidly becomes an outcast amidst a group of young sunbathers on Venice beach (Bukowski 1982: 164-169). The orange groves and Venice Beach not only contribute to forging his class identity and outsider's ethos, they also define the limits of his normative geography: the places that attract and repel him, that make him feel in or out of place (Cresswell 1996). Although Chinaski's father belonged to the working class in terms of employment, he shared the values of the petty bourgeoisie (Harrison 1994; Brewer 1997). This gap between class and values was quickly recognized and categorically rejected by the son:

I think it was my father who made me decide to  
become a bum.  
I decided that if a man like that wants to be rich  
then I want to be poor.  
(‘My Father’, in Bukowski 1990: 283-84.)

Written with the benefit of historical distance (Bukowski wrote about his childhood years when he was sixty) and a better understanding of the circumstances that informed his own trajectory, the representation of social relations in Chinaski's neighborhood and school are far from the myopic view of the early years. This social- and class-sensitive perspective, more prevalent in *Ham on Rye*, was also sharpened by Bukowski's work experience in various workplaces (in the 1940s and 1950s) and at the post office in the 1960s. At the end on the novel, Chinaski is a young adult who has discovered the bliss of alcohol. He is often found drinking downtown, in a rooming house in Bunker Hill, or on Temple Street in the Filipino neighborhood. *Ham on Rye* ends where Bukowski's literary journey was to begin: ‘I made practice runs down to skid row to get ready for my future’ (Bukowski 1982: 284). Bukowski's last ‘truly’ autobiographical novel, *Hollywood* (1989) explores unknown if not hostile territory. The representation of the city is even more textured and sensitive to other points of view and the various ways it is experienced by different social groups.

So we got the directions and were in the Volks and heading for Marina del Rey. Strange territory.

Then we were down at the harbour, driving past the boats. Most of them were sailboats and people were fiddling about on deck. They were dressed in their special sailing clothes, caps, dark shades. Somehow, most of them had apparently escaped the daily grind of living. They had never been caught up in that grind and never would be. Such were the rewards of the Chosen in the land of the free. After a fashion, those people looked silly to me. And, of course, I wasn't even in their thoughts. (Bukowski 1989: 9)

The multiplication of different points of view is made obvious by the fact that the novel tells the story of the shooting of *Barfly*, and, in so doing juxtaposes two distinct Chinaskis: Chinaski the usual narrator, and Chinaski the main character of the script. It is a literary representation of the cinematic representation of the same character at two different periods of his life.<sup>3</sup> Hollywood, the real Hollywood that overwrites the distinction between fiction and reality, simulacrum and origin, artifice and authenticity, finally managed to catch up with Bukowski (Madigan 1996). Barbet Schroeder's film brings Chinaski/Bukowski back to his *barfly* years in the cheap bars and rooming houses near downtown Los Angeles. The novel, on the other hand, shows a seasoned and relatively famous writer driving a brand-new BMW to his comfortable new San Pedro home overlooking the seaport. The narrator discovers, somewhat reluctantly, the twisted underside of West Los Angeles, with its ostentatious mansions, fine restaurants, mile-long limousines and cast of capricious and eccentric characters. Above all, the narrator is afraid of 'becoming like *them*' (Bukowski 1989: 63), soft and fake. The retrospective aspect of the novel and the superimposition of two time-spaces provide Bukowski with the opportunity to redraw the map of various places in the city. In the process, city space loses its one-dimensional absolute character; it is historically and socially contingent. Different places are also affected differently by what happens elsewhere in the world.

Revisiting East Hollywood, for instance, Chinaski muses about the demographic transformations and political processes at work in the neighbourhood, which leads him to re-examine the sociological dimensions of his own residential history:

The neighborhood around Carlton Way near Western Avenue was changing too. It had been almost all lower-class white, but political troubles in Central America and other parts of the world had brought a new type of individual in the neighborhood. The male usually was small, a dark or light brown, usually young. There were wives, children, brothers, cousins, friends. They lived many to an apartment and I was one of the few whites left in the court complex. [...] Well, no matter. My tax consultant had suggested I purchase a house, and so for me it wasn't really a matter of 'white flight'. Although who knows? I had noticed that each time I had moved in Los Angeles over the years, each move had always been to the North and to the West (Bukowski 1989: 61-63).

In a 1981 short story focusing solely on Bukowski's East Hollywood period, the neighborhood is, again, no longer defined in and of itself as a self-contained world, but situated within the broader urban fabric of Los Angeles and southern California:

East Hollywood sits in the smog in front of the purple mountains. It begins at Hollywood Boulevard and runs east of Western Avenue down to Alvarado Street, bordered by Santa Monica Boulevard on the South. Here you will find the greatest contagion of bums, drunks, pillheads, prostitutes per square foot, in Southernalifornia ('East Hollywood: The new Paris', in Bukowski 2010: 188.)

*Hollywood* tackles racial tensions head on. In the following excerpt, the voices alternating between the movie producer, who lives in the Venice ghetto, and Chinaski, who is paying him a visit, bring to light not only the relativity of their respective viewpoints – the amusement and fascination of a European foreigner (outsider) and the uneasiness and introspection of the native (insider) – but also the impossible reconciliation of these views in a coherent and unified representation of the city:

We're in the ghetto in Venice. Brooks Avenue. All blacks. The streets are war and destruction. It's beautiful! [...] There are gangs everywhere! There's a large hotel somebody built down here. But nobody paid their rent. They boarded the place up, cut off the electricity, the water, the gas. But people still live there. THIS IS A WAR ZONE! The police do not come in here. It's like a separate state with its own rules. I love it! You must visit us! [...]

We drove slowly into the Venice ghetto. It was not true it was all black. There were some Latinos on the outskirts. I noted a group of 7 or 8 young Mexican men standing around leaning against an old car. [...] Two young blacks about eleven stared at us from bicycles. It was pure, perfect hate. I could feel it. Poor blacks hated. Poor whites hated. It was only when blacks got money and whites got money that they mixed. Some whites loved blacks. Very few, if any, blacks loved whites. They were still getting even. Maybe they never would. In a capitalistic society the losers slaved for the winners and you have more losers than winners. What did I think? I knew politics would never solve it and there wasn't time left to get lucky. (Bukowski 1989: 83-84)

The intricate geography of Los Angeles – Marina del Rey's seaside landscape where rich whites live, East Hollywood which is becoming Latino, Venice and its violent black ghetto, Alvarado street downtown where the movie is being shot, the chic Chateau Marmont where the city can be contemplated from a distance, the racetrack of Hollywood Park where Chinaski continues to find solace amidst a motley crowd, and his home in the San Pedro suburb where he resides with Sarah who is about to become his wife – is interconnected by a complex web of boulevards and freeways and represented with a social depth that is rarely equalled in any of Bukowski's novels. Fragmented, full of holes and blind spots, this representation exposes the best and the worst of a megalopolis struggling with its many contradictions.

In his last novel, *Pulp*, published shortly after his death in 1994, Bukowski leaves Chinaski behind and creates a new character, the private detective Nick Belane, who navigates the streets of a 'mottled and smog-choked Los Angeles at the end of the century' looking for clues to solve his cases (Brewer 1997: 181). Clouded by his own approaching death, Bukowski does not offer his best or most insightful reading of the city. However, 'as a gift to his readers' (185), *Pulp* is also Bukowski's very last opportunity to revisit Los Angeles' various locales from his death bed and appropriate them in writing before leaving for good: Red's bookstore, Musso and Frank grill, Hollywood Park, Grand Central Market, Griffith Park, Redondo Beach, Glendale, East Los Angeles, Rudson Drive, W.L.A in a 'nice' neighbourhood. 'Definition of a nice neighbourhood: a place you couldn't afford to live in' (Bukowski 1994: 155). Bukowski also brings us along on imaginary car rides through the city: Hollywood and Sunset boulevards, San Diego Freeway, Harbor Freeway, Pacific Coast Highway. Some itineraries are indeed so precise that they seem to fulfill a desire to possess the city one last time:

I rode the Harbor Freeway to the end. I was in San Pedro. I drove down Gaffey, took a left on 7<sup>th</sup>, went a few blocks, took a right on Pacific, just drove along, saw a bar, The Thirst Hog, parked, went on in. It was dark in there. (Bukowski 1994: 43)

### **Bukowski's Urban Imaginary**

In many respects, one could argue that Bukowski's geographical imaginary is a decidedly urban version of American 'dirty realism':

It is instead a fiction of a different scope – devoted to the local details, the nuances, the little disturbances in language and gesture – and it is entirely appropriate that its primary form is the short story and that it is so conspicuously part of the American short story revival. But these are strange stories: unadorned, unfurnished, low-rent tragedies about people who watch daytime television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music. They are waitresses in roadside cafés, cashiers in supermarkets, construction workers, secretaries and unemployed cowboys. They play bingo, eat cheeseburgers, hunt deer, and stay in cheap motels. They drink a lot and are often in trouble for stealing a car, breaking a window, pickpocketing a wallet (Buford 1983: 4).<sup>4</sup>

On the one hand, it would be relatively easy to find material in Bukowski's biography – and biographies about him are almost more numerous than critical assessments of his works (Cherkovski 1997; Sounes 1998; Malone 2003; Baughan 2004; Miles 2005) – to explain the role of the many social, economic and indeed ideological factors that contributed to the development of his geographical imaginary, with its recurring set of components (in terms of place, time, type of characters and action). From this standpoint, one could argue that his imaginary is mostly determined by external forces: the socio-economic trajectory of his family (who experienced the worst possible fate in America,

including downward mobility, the father losing his job, the mother being forced to clean houses to make ends meet) and his own personal experience of paternal violence, social marginalisation, dehumanising jobs and life at the bottom. His geographical imaginary would appear to be the by-product of forces beyond his control. On the other hand, Bukowski's writing – 'nothing can save you except writing' as he himself explained (Bukowski 1996: 132)– allowed him to become, at least in part, the architect of his own destiny. Writing about himself (and his alter ego) became a formative practice for his own identity as a man, and the creation of his persona as an author. Not only did it help him to gain a better understanding of the forces that influenced the development of his personality and to overcome them to some degree, but also gave him the means to actively forge his own personal myth as a writer (Brousseau 2010; 2017).

Bukowski's enduring mythology – 'his unhappy childhood, years bumming around the country, living in rooming houses and working at menial jobs, crazy jobs...' (Sounes 1998: 47) – is also spatially rooted and connoted. He clearly identifies his social origins and learning grounds as a writer: 'Hospitals and jails and whores: these are the universities of life. I've got several degrees. Call me Mr' (Bukowski 1973: 171). Most reviewers concur: Bukowski is known as a 'writer of the gutter', 'chronicler of the underground', and 'poet laureate of skid row' among many other variations on the same theme (see Freyermuth 2000). Such was the case when Bukowski first emerged on the Southern California literary scene, and it continued to define his auctorial identity until the end. However, what is most decisive about his underground urban imaginary is that it became the prism through which the city as a whole was envisioned. It served as the matrix generating the various sets of everyday life circumstances he chose to represent in his writings. Therefore, even when his stories 'migrate' out of the inner city and into the rich neighbourhoods of West Los Angeles (sports, literary or movie scenes for example), the very same themes – violence, exploitation, murder, sex, drinking, crime and petty misdemeanour – continue to frame the action of the characters. Although they may have different social standings, their behaviours, attitudes and ethos remain relatively unchanged. Ordinary madness, as discussed earlier, is indeed ubiquitous. This would explain why, as Calonne rightly observes, 'Bukowski equalizes the 'high' and 'low elements' of society: bankers and killers are placed on the same level of perception' (Calonne 2012: 86).<sup>5</sup>

Clearly centered on seedy inner-city neighbourhoods at first, Bukowski's writings gradually explore a fairly broad 'sample' of Los Angeles urban diversity, leaving many large areas untouched. Initiated at the bottom, the representation of the city maintains its crudeness and truly grounded critical stance. On very rare occasions, and with limited success, Bukowski attempts to describe Los Angeles from above. As a man of the street, apart from generic comments or a hint of sarcasm, he does not find many penetrating words to write about the city observed from a distance:

We followed him to the balcony. A hell of a view of a hell of a town (Bukowski 1989: 107).

I had a window seat and stared out at the wing and the lights below. Everything was arranged down there in nice straight lines. Ant nests ('In and out and over', in Bukowski 1983c: 129).

Despite fame and fortune, however relative and tardily acquired, Bukowski continued to write the city from below, at street level. The geographical imaginary he developed through his experience in the city's underbelly (and with the help, of course, of writers like Fante who preceded him there) informed his interpretation of social life, provided him with the language and themes to express it, and supplied his very own vantage point to make sense of it all:

The language of a man's writing comes from where he lives and how. I was a bum and common laborer most of my life. The conversations I heard were hardly erudite. And the years I lived were hardly laced with upper class relationships. [...] For my observation on humanity I sat on a bar stool bumming drinks' ('Basic Training', in Bukowski 2008: 249).

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I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their very constructive comments and thoughtful suggestions. I have discussed some of the theoretical and methodological implications of this work elsewhere. I have exposed the challenges of teasing out spatiality in literary texts that resort very little to description: in short stories (Brosseau 2008b) and in Bukowski's work in general (Brosseau 2008a). The biographical and autobiographical dimensions of his writings are approached in more reflective and critical terms both in Brosseau (2010) and Brosseau (2017). Finally, the conceptualization of geographical imaginaries for literary geography are discussed at length in Brosseau (2012) and more briefly in Brosseau (2017). I have kept these concerns deliberately implicit here by removing, so to speak, the theoretical scaffoldings once the building was completed. I felt it would deter the attention from my main object, which is the particular way L.A. is represented in Bukowski's writings.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is made yet even more complex by the ongoing posthumous publication of uncollected or rare stories and essays: Bukowski 2008; 2010; 2011; 2015 and 2018, for example.

<sup>2</sup> In his evaluation of Bukowski's poetry, Laurence Goldstein makes similar observations: 'Bukowski remains satisfied with a bare minimum of descriptive information and interpretation. And that seems to be the way his readers like it' (Goldstein 2014: 103). He argues that in his poems 'the city is incidental in both sense of the word, the source of incidents and beside the main point' (109). I would argue that it is a bit less so in his prose.

<sup>3</sup> Gay Brewer makes a similar point concerning the benefit of historical distance: 'Bukowski's novels are most effective when written from a historical distance (*Factotum*, *Ham on rye*), and less consistent when employing material from his recent past (*Post Office*, *Women*). The wonder of *Hollywood* is that it does both, using current experience as a lens for viewing older material. The mix is unique. Chinaski has a last story to tell and it is the story of telling the story' (Brewer 1997: 171).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Bukowski and the aesthetics of American dirty realism, see Hemmingson (2008).

<sup>5</sup> In his insightful analysis of Bukowski's poem 'The Hell with Robert Schumann' in which the narrator leaves a piano concerto, drives '21 blocks South and East' to attend a boxing match, Goldstein (Goldstein 2014: 108) observes: 'he crosses a boundary of taste, of lifestyle, from high culture to low'.

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