
The Dream Abides: *The Big Lebowski*, Film Noir, and the American Dream

SHAUNANNE TANGNEY
MINOT STATE UNIVERSITY

Critics and aficionados alike have noted the film noir qualities of *The Big Lebowski*. Certainly the Coen Brothers are no strangers to film noir: in addition to *The Big Lebowski*, their credits include *Blood Simple*, *Barton Fink*, *Miller's Crossing*, *Fargo*, and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, but *The Big Lebowski* is their self-admitted homage to Raymond Chandler, perhaps most especially to *The Big Sleep*, with its weird characters, wheelchair-bound millionaire, and various nasty underworld types. But the movie has noir credibility much deeper than a simple comparison to any given classic noir film. It has been argued that classic film noir (from the 1940s and 1950s) poses a critique of the American Dream and the alienation that the failure to achieve it creates. *The Big Lebowski*, like those classic films noir, also offers a similar critique, but because the film is set in a late-twentieth-century, a late-capitalist America, the alienation is amplified and focused on the widening gap between rich and poor, and on an intolerant multiculturalism, and prompts a reevaluation of the American Dream itself. There are any number of ways that *The Big Lebowski* foregrounds the failure of the American Dream and the resulting alienation. In this paper I will explore how the film uses setting and place—namely, Los Angeles and several of its architectural hallmarks or landmarks—as well as the idea and fact of space itself, as exemplars or physical manifestations of that failure and alienation, and how they shed light on a late-twentieth-century take on the American Dream itself.

The notion that film noir offers a critique of the American Dream is well-argued in Ken Hills's "Film Noir and the American Dream: The Dark Side of Enlightenment." In it, Hills argues that film noir characters "reflect an existential, often despairing awareness of the impossibility of their own enlightenment and, by extension, of ever realizing the American Dream" (3). Although it is a phrase of widespread use, the American Dream is not always defined or explained as thoroughly as it should be. When I ask students what the American Dream is they almost always reply, "a house, two kids and two cars, a dog, and a white picket fence!" They are tuned in to the materialism inherent in the American Dream, but there is more to it than that. Hills captures the essential nature of the American Dream when he states that

by dint of hard work, a modicum of education, “natural” intelligence, *and luck*, people may achieve a measure of self-advancement and prosperity. Each American is raised within this hybrid ideology of Enlightenment utilitarianism, fatalism, social Darwinism, and aspects of Calvinist and Puritan belief systems about the self, the meaning of personal gain, and the supposed abiding competitive advantage available to Americans and newcomers hoping to become citizens. (7)

Here, then, is the ideology that fuels the materialism that my students are so quick to recognize, an ideology of hard work, fair play, and fitness that leads inevitably to material success. Here also is an idealism that many Americans hold dear.

Hills rightly notes, however, that there is a dark underbelly of the American Dream: “Individuals who are *both* lucky and clever” may achieve the American Dream (4). President William J. Clinton put it another way in 1993 when he said, “the American Dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one—if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given abilities will take you” (qtd. in Hochschild 18). It seems a simple statement, but it belies the cracks in the American Dream. Firstly, the verb “should” does not imply that everyone will achieve the Dream. Secondly, “God-given abilities” tacitly ignores the fact that some are simply more talented than others and therefore have a greater chance at success. Finally, we are well aware that many Americans do not play by the rules. Indeed, we have made a fetish of those who do not and succeed anyway, although the 2008 corporate and stock market crumble may cause us to take stock of our love of those who “get away with it.” As Jennifer Hochschild says, “the distinction between the right to dream and the right to succeed is pathologically hard to maintain and always politically blurred.... When people recognize that chances for success are slim and getting slimmer, the whole tenor of the American dream changes dramatically for the worse” (27). The tenor becomes one of self-ridicule and doubt. The logic becomes, if the American Dream is a promise but I cannot achieve it, it must be my fault; I must be a loser. Hills puts it thus: “From knowledge without power, however (awareness without the ability to achieve the dream’s promise), flows cynicism, alienation, and bitterness” (7). This cynicism, alienation, and bitterness, Hills argues, is evident in film noir characters not simply as personal flaws, but as evidence of a systemic or ideological failure, the failure of the American Dream. In *The Big Lebowski*, this failure is highlighted not in the characters themselves (after all, it is systematic, ideological failure, not character flaws that matter here), but in the Los Angeles settings the film employs. The failure of the American Dream is made manifest in the film’s use of and commentary on space itself, or lack thereof, in its neat juxtaposition of rich and poor, lavish and meager space, respectively.

I began to consider setting, or place, and space because a brief comment Hills makes about the American Dream. He points out that the American Dream has its roots in Jeffersonian theories about land and its use. He refers to Thomas Jefferson's notion of the yeoman farmer, and suggests that the idea of every citizen owning enough land for self-sustainability is the bedrock of the American Dream. It makes sense: inherent in both Jefferson's idea of the yeoman farmer and the American Dream is the argument that every individual, according to his or her willingness toward hard work, diligent study, fair play, and access to land, will achieve some degree of success. According to Jefferson, open land—or, the frontier—is crucial to the American Dream. And while it may seem odd to bring the frontier into a discussion of *The Big Lebowski* and film noir, it is crucial to a discussion of the American Dream, and, as I shall demonstrate later, relevant to a discussion of the movie as well. If the American Dream is essentially one of opportunity, it is arguable that the frontier—or open land—is essential to that opportunity. Fredrick Jackson Turner, from whose thesis all frontier theory flows, notes the “waves” of opportunity that occur on the frontier: “First comes the pioneer, [who maintains a subsistence existence; t]he next class of emigrants purchase the lands, . . . put up . . . houses with glass windows . . . , build mills, school-houses, court-houses, [who exhibit, in short,] plain, frugal, civilized life; [finally, t]he men of capital and enterprise come; [the settlers sell out in order to become themselves men] of capital and enterprise” (n.p.). From subsistence, to frugal civility, to luxurious frivolity (the term had yet to be coined), Turner traces the path of the American Dream, at least in its most material aspects. He asserts that economic advancement would be impossible without the frontier: “So long as free land exists, the opportunity for a competency exists, and economic power secures political power” (n.p.). This, too, is a restatement (a pre-statement?) of the American Dream: work hard, play fair, and the opportunity for advancement is yours, given that the open space, that the frontier, is present and available. Turner was well aware, however, that advancement must not be solely economic. “From the beginning of that long westward march of the American people,” he writes, “America has never been the home of mere contented materialism. It has continuously sought new ways and dreamed of a perfected social type” (n.p.). That type, for Turner, is a “social idealist” (n.p.), one who wants something better for his/her children, who is innovative and indifferent to dogma, who is self-directive and individualistic (n.p.). But as the frontier closes, Turner is forced to ask, “[where are] America's ‘morning wishes’?” (n.p.). Turner fears that materialism has taken firm root, and that materialism will only increase (thus diminishing the social idealism) as the frontier diminishes, and finally disappears. In *The Big Lebowski*, we have an America without frontier,

an America that has run out of space, and the film provides clear commentary on the death of social idealism at the hands of rampant materialism, which only augments the cynicism, alienation, and bitterness Hills finds in classic noir.

Two other Turnerian ideas are important here. First is the notion of the crucible. For Turner, the frontier was a crucible in which the American character was forged—neither European nor Indian, but something entirely new and original. Second, it is important to remember that Turner's essay was written in response to the 1890 census, which declared the frontier "closed." And while the debate continues as to the actual closing of the frontier (the 1890 census identified that land as frontier that had fewer than two people per square mile, but even today many areas of the country still qualify as frontier under that distinction) it is overwhelmingly true that the United States is no longer a frontier nation. So, following Turner, I am prompted to ask: if the frontier is the crucible of American character, what happens when it is gone? If we have run out of open space, what kind of character can be forged? Gary J. Hausladen and Paul F. Starrs answer this question thus:

A hero in a Western augured a spacious Turnerian opening-up, a vindication of a "new" American personality and a blessing to the idea of the exceptional West. But for noir, dingy alleys and awful days and wicked dialogue and disconsolate weather all presumably added up to damp, if not dyspeptic, souls. (47)

Film noir does not depict the sweeping western landscape, but rather the dark alley-ways of urban America—and of one city especially, Los Angeles. Hausladen and Starrs contend that between sixty and one hundred classic films noir were set in Los Angeles (note 4), and that no small number of so-called "neo-noir films" are set there, as well (*Chinatown*, *LA Confidential*, *The Grifters*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, *Mulholland Drive*, *Crash*, and *Blade Runner* come to mind). When we run out of frontier, then we get Los Angeles. Arguably the greatest crucible of all time, Los Angeles is not, however, what Turner had in mind. Turner's frontier ideal is very much one of space—two people per square mile means that there is not very much material to mix in that crucible. Los Angeles, while arguably our most horizontal city, is nevertheless one of some twelve million inhabitants, and that much material very rapidly overflows any crucible; indeed, it throws into question the very utility of a crucible. As Hausladen and Starrs point out, while optimists emphasize the diversity of LA—in terms of ethnicities, cultures, microclimates, economies—noir realizes

the proliferation of people and problems as a toxic brew that guarantees discord and unease. Not only are the pathologies of packed-in people savage enough—think gated communities, racial strife, variform cults and religious sops, designed

to ally unease and inspire calm—there too is the savagery of profit and disorder: hoodlums . . . , pornographers . . . , whores or pay-boys . . . , exotic sexual gratification . . . , sleazy cityscapes, speculators and developers run amok. . . . (51)

According to Hausladen and Starrs, film noir clearly accepts Turner's claim that the frontier has closed, that open space is no longer available where to nurture the American Dream, and that it poses LA as the seething crucible of America without it.

As it happens, this idea is brilliantly illuminated in the opening sequence of *The Big Lebowski*. It is evening, and we watch a tumbleweed bounce and roll through a western landscape of creosote and sage. Sam Elliot, a true icon of the western, provides the voiceover narration while "Tumbling' Tumbleweeds" by the Sons of the Pioneers plays in the background. Elliot, known in the film only as the Stranger, says, "There was a lot about the Dude that didn't make a whole lot of sense to me—and a lot about where he lived likewise." Los Angeles does not make sense to the Stranger, a cowboy, because it is not the wide-open space of the frontier. As he continues his voice-over, the camera follows the tumbleweed over a plateau, and then pans over the entire Los Angeles basin. "They call Las Ang-e-lis the City of Angels," the Stranger says, "but I didn't find it to be that exactly," as the tumbleweed continues to roll down the streets of LA, and then across a beach and into the Pacific Ocean. Clearly, America has run out of space, and any reevaluation of the American Dream is going to happen here, on the edge of the continent, where we literally and metaphorically run out of space. We know this because of the scene that immediately follows, which features the Dude stalking a quart of half-and-half in a Ralph's Supermarket. The Stranger's voiceover in this scene tells us that the story he is about to tell takes place in the early 1990s, "just about the time of our conflict with Sadam and the I-raquis." As we see the Dude sample the yet-to-be purchased half-and-half, the Stranger says, "Sometimes there's a man—I won't say a hero because what's a hero?—but sometimes there's a man [... and] he's the man for his time and place [...] and that's the Dude and Las Ang-e-lis." This man—not a hero, just a man—belongs in this place. The Dude is no Great American Dreamer (or achiever—the Stranger calls him "a lazy man"); he's just a nameless, impoverished, collapse of a man. And Los Angeles is the proper place for this man because it is the antithesis of the open frontier that might generate the Great American Dreamer. It is, as mentioned, the very end of the twentieth century (the American Century), and at this time and in this place, the Dude shows us that the potential for greatness is limited and shrinking fast. Paradoxically as I will show, we still cling tightly to the ideology of the American Dream. We still believe in it, even if evidence suggests that it is less and less likely that we will achieve it.

As the Dude pays for his half-and-half, writing a check for sixty-nine cents (material success is clearly not his) the camera cuts to President George H. W. Bush on television, saying of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, “This aggression will not stand.” Without delving too deeply into political science, it is safe to say that the Gulf War (like the Iraq war that succeeded it) was one of ideology as much as territory. In other words, George H. W. Bush’s contradiction of aggression is not only aimed at Iraq’s towards Kuwait, but also of his conception of the Middle East’s views in general of America. Both Presidents Bush made great hay out of the notion that various Middle Eastern (and, inevitably, Muslim) nations pose a great “threat” to “the American way of life.” For its part, *The Big Lebowski* is not an examination of that alleged threat, but rather of that alleged American way of life or, in other words, of the American Dream, and most especially to the material success we associate with the dream.

The film’s setting—Los Angeles—is important to the film’s examination of the American Dream. The LA of *The Big Lebowski* is a postmodern one, indeed, a late-capitalist one; the cynicism, alienation, and bitterness captured in postmodern film noir are amplified by late capitalism, which is in turn doubly amplified by the city of Los Angeles. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis points out that “social anxiety, as traditional urban sociology likes to remind us, is just maladjustment to change. But who has anticipated, or adjusted to, the scale of change in Southern California [since the mid-1970s]?” (6). Film noir has always recognized Los Angeles for the “deracinated urban hell” (Davis 37) that it is, as the place where the American Dream “[ran] out along the California shore” (Davis 38), but the LA of the early 1990s, the setting for *The Big Lebowski*, was something else again. As Davis points out, “Los Angeles was first and above all the creature of real-estate capitalism” (25) one which by the 1990s had in fact become a “stand-in for capitalism in general” (18). When Davis says “real-estate capitalism,” he is talking about rampant speculation. By definition, real estate speculation means to buy, sell, or trade real estate in the attempt to profit from fluctuations in price irrespective to underlying value. Real estate speculation, then, is not about acquiring personal space in which to dream, and grow, and flourish (perhaps the ultimate underlying value of real estate), and as such is antithetical to the American Dream. Speculation does not allow for social idealism, but only for materialism, and this compromises the American Dream, as Turner knew, and as Davis implies when he recognizes that because of “real-estate capitalism, [...] Los Angeles had come to play the double role of utopia *and* dystopia for advanced capitalism” (18). This double role is nowhere more evident than in the widening gap between rich and poor, a gap that threatens to swallow the middle class whole, which was evident earliest in America

in LA. Davis notes that by the 1980s in the Los Angeles area, “affluence [... had] almost tripled (from 9 per cent to 26 per cent) while poverty [... had] increased by a third (from 30 per cent to 40 per cent); the middle range, as widely predicted, [had] collapsed by half (from 61 per cent to 32 per cent)” (7). Davis makes a direct link between these economic realities and real estate speculation:

Decades of systematic under-investment in housing and urban infrastructure, combined with grotesque subsidies for speculators, permissive zoning for commercial development, the absence of effective regional planning, and ludicrously low property taxes for the wealthy have ensured an erosion of the quality of life for the middle classes in older suburbs as well as for the inner city poor. (7)

These characteristics of late capitalism—the widening gap between rich and poor and the subsequent elimination of the middle class, the firm if blind belief in market-driven development rather than governmental planning, and the inequities in the tax code—are exactly what make the American Dream less and less attainable for more and more Americans because they make it increasingly impossible for individuals to obtain and maintain some modicum of space in which to nurture the American Dream. If Davis is correct (and twenty years of economic and real estate data we have accumulated since the 1992 publication of *City of Quartz* certainly suggests that he is) and Los Angeles is a creature of real estate speculation, then it is indeed a fitting locale for the tale of the failure of the American Dream, and most tellingly so in its treatment of the home.

We can begin to understand how *The Big Lebowski* uses LA architecture as commentary on the failure of the American Dream by making strategic comparisons of the homes of various characters. The first two homes we see are the Dude’s and the Big Lebowski’s, and there is the obvious comparison of the squalor of the Dude’s apartment with the opulence of the Big Lebowski’s mansion, but it behooves us to examine the locales more closely in terms of space. The footage of the Big Lebowski’s mansion comes from two different houses, one used for exterior shots and a second for interior shots. The exterior of the Lebowski mansion presents the viewer with the height of Southern California Mediterraneanism—a home opening on a meticulously planned and well-watered garden and monumental swimming pool. The interior is the infamous Greystone Mansion, formerly known as the Doheny Mansion, built by oil magnate Edward L. Doheny for his son Edward “Ned” Doheny, Jr. In 1929, under the cloud of the Teapot Dome scandal, Ned and his secretary Hugh Plunkett died in the mansion in an apparent murder-suicide. Exactly who was the murderer and who was the suicide has never been determined, giving the locale “real life” noir credit

(Rayner 60-67; "Greystone Mansion" pars. 5, 12). The set décor of the interior may be described as ostentatiously rich, luxurious, lavish; there are works of art everywhere, expensive and antique furniture fills every room, and beautiful oriental rugs cover the floors of rooms and hallways, foyers and staircases. Most important to my argument, however, is the Big Lebowski's study wherein we are given a tour of his "ego wall." The Big Lebowski is adamant that he is seen as an achiever; all his plaques, photographs, and mementos proclaim his achievements in life, as most especially does his charitable organization, the Little Lebowski Urban Achievers. Clearly, the Big Lebowski believes that he has achieved the American Dream. Never mind that his wealth is not really his, but was conferred upon him in marriage, or that he is currently embezzling from the Little Lebowski Urban Achievers: the Big Lebowski constructs the ego wall so that any visitor to his home is faced (literally, as when the Dude faces himself in the *Time Magazine* Man of the Year gag mirror) with the conceit of his achievement and material success, and its propagation. The overall effect of the two locations is a recollection of the stately homes of the Southern California gentry, and of a generation of Southern California architectural theory and practice. In the two locales of the Big Lebowski's mansion, we can see the connection between space and the American Dream. Space is abundant here and we can see it as both the stimulus to and result of the American Dream: open space breeds an American character who works hard, plays fair, and achieves much so that s/he can then claim a large amount of open space in which to build a house, a home, that describes his/her character.

The Dude's apartment represents the nadir of that theory and practice. First appearing in the Los Angeles area in the 1920s, garden apartments were initially modeled on Mediterranean-style homes like the Big Lebowski's, and were well-suited to the burgeoning LA population, as noted by Kevin Starr: "patios and courtyards allowed for a reconsolidation of personal and family identity in a social and cultural environment frequently deprived of the normal reference points of more developed cities" (215). Here was an attempt at space, a minor version of the wide-open Mediterranean styles of the stately homes of the rich, but one that becomes only the pretense of space, postage-stamp courtyards left for the less than well-to-do. By the 1990s, the time of the Dude's occupation of such an apartment complex, these dwellings had become the worst example of LA's early optimism and developmental zeal gone awry; now they were left to fester and sprawl (that the Dude's apartment is in Venice is important here: a LA architectural oddity, originally envisioned as a playground for the wealthy, now left largely to the poor). The complex is unkempt, trash-strewn, and its garden merely a shamble of weeds and overgrowth. The interior of the Dude's apartment exhibits not integrity but

randomness; the apartment does not evidence retro, or even kitsch, just exhaustion and grime. This is not the home of an achiever. Indeed, when Jackie Treehorn's thugs bust into the Dude's apartment to shake him down for the money Bunny owes Treehorn, and then realize their mistake, Wu ("the rug-pee'er") says, "He looks like a fucking loser." There can be no clearer depiction of the gap between rich and poor in LA than that of the Dude's apartment and the Big Lebowski's mansion. A certain fascination with this gap, how it illustrates the failure of the American Dream, is a lasting tenet of film noir. "There is a constant tension between the 'productive' middle class [...] and the 'unproductive *declassés*' or idle rich [in film noir]," Davis claims, and the opposition of these classes "suggests the contrast between the 'lazy', speculative Southern California economy (real estate promotions and Hollywood) and America's hard-working heartlands" (*City of Quartz* 40). Los Angeles is the place where the American Dream goes bust, where its promise is not always kept for hard-working Americans, but it is for those who speculate, gamble, or inherit. And when the latter are unable to accumulate any more via these methods, they turn inevitably to "murder over toil" (*City of Quartz* 40) or, in the case of *The Big Lebowski*, to kidnapping and blackmail over toil.

The juxtaposition of the Dude's garden apartment and the Big Lebowski's mansion presents early evidence of a paradox at work throughout the film, the paradox to which that my title alludes. Although the American Dream is clearly suffering systematic and ideological failure, Americans still hold on to it: the Dream abides. We can see an example of this belief in the Dude's fondness for his rug. The Dude's rug is shabby at best, but as he says on more than one occasion, "it really tied the room together, man." Small space or not, the apartment is his and he takes pride in it. When the rug is soiled by Jackie Treehorn's inept thugs, the Dude is insistent on reparations. Even though the Dude makes a mistake, assuming that the Big Lebowski is responsible for the damage to his rug, he avails himself of a very fine replacement rug by lying to Brandt, the Big Lebowski's mealy-mouthed secretary. In the Dude's taking of the rug, we can see the final extension of Davis's argument about class and film noir. The shrinking of the middle class means that there are relatively more "idle rich" and significantly more struggling poor. Without the model of the "productive middle class," the Dude has no example of hard work and fair play, so he just steals what he wants, or thinks he deserves. The Dude's rug shows that there is all but total corruption of the American Dream but, again, Americans still hold on to it. It is as if the American Dream stills ties us all together, regardless of the fact that we find evidence everywhere that it no longer works.

Two other houses in *The Big Lebowski* stand out in stark comparison: Jackie Treehorn's Malibu estate and Larry Sellers's North Hollywood single-family home,

and a comparison of these two homes lead us to a consideration of space as crucible. Treehorn's house is a stunning example of mid-century modernist architecture, or what became known in Los Angeles as the International Style, an architecture that puts forth an "intended radical break with history [and a concern] with abstraction and the elimination of ornament" (Gebhard and Winter 22). The actual house, known as the Sheats-Goldstein residence, was designed by American Architect John Lautner. It is not in Malibu, but in Beverly Hills—Lautner's style, sometimes referred to as organic or as postmodern, owes a debt to mid-century modernism/International Style (Gebhard and Winter 24-25). It is telling, then, that the Coen Brothers transferred the location of the house to Malibu, a city that is in many ways an abstraction of Los Angeles. In *An Architectural Guidebook to Los Angeles*, Gebhard and Winter call Malibu a "colony," "a private, well-guarded world [that] is not open to the public" (39). A colony is an outpost where the norms of society are often absent. In the case of Malibu, it is not the seething ethnic, linguistic, architectural, political, economic, cauldron of Los Angeles proper, but rather a celebrity enclave where the harsh reality of the "real" LA is forcibly kept out and a kind of "irreality" of safety and homogeneity reigns. Malibu is even meteorologically distinct from LA and, in summer and fall, it is often ten or twenty degrees cooler than it is in LA proper. In *Ecology of Fear*, Davis says that, "indifferent to the misery on the 'mainland' [LA proper, downtown], the residents of Malibu suffer through another boringly perfect day" (96). There is a striking connection to Davis's description of the Malibu weather and Jackie Treehorn's profession: pornographer. Like the Malibu weather, pornography presents the human body as boringly perfect, sex itself as boringly perfect and, in Treehorn's explanation of it, the profession itself as boringly perfect: when the Dude asks him, "How's the smut business, Jackie?" he replies, "I wouldn't know, Dude. I deal in publishing, entertainment, political advocacy." Indeed, pornography as political advocacy is an abstraction every bit as abstruse and remote as Treehorn's house itself.

In sharp contrast to Jackie Treehorn's Malibu palace, but likewise on the fringes of LA proper, is Larry Sellers's house. In the movie, the Sellers house is located in North Hollywood; the actual location is in the Fairfax neighborhood of Los Angeles (Green et. al. 228). This house is a stunning example of what Mike Davis calls "prison cell architecture" (*Ecology of Fear* 479). Sellers's modest stand-alone home is entirely encased with "burglar bars"—wrought iron bars and gates that cover every window and door of the home. Larry Sellers's North Hollywood neighborhood is no private, well-guarded colony, not open to the public; rather, it is frighteningly open to the public, a public that includes thieves, gang-bangers,

drug dealers, and no amount of wrought-iron “protection” can keep them out. The Sellers house shows us that LA is a dangerous place, and that this crucible produces a much more volatile mixture than Turner might ever have imagined. Ironically, Malibu is a dangerous place too; Davis points out that Malibu is “the wildfire capital of North America and, possibly, the world” (*Ecology of Fear* 97). But the rich who inhabit Malibu believe they can fight or even control fire, whereas the middle class families, like the Sellers, know that in their neighborhoods, crime is out of control, and the only way they might fight back is by encasing their homes in iron. Irony rules again, for with the “prison architecture” that dominates Larry Sellers’s neighborhood, it is the residents, the non-criminals, who are imprisoned, not only by the bars on their homes, but also by their fear, and their political powerlessness. Money and power (or their scarcity) are key to an examination of both Malibu and North Hollywood. Because of the topography and the fire dangers, it is unadvisable for people to build in Malibu, but for those who have enough money and political influence, build they can. It is likewise foolish to think that wrought-iron bars can offer ordinary people any real protection from rampant crime, yet without money and political influence, barring their houses may be the best they can do. As evidenced in the comparison between the Big Lebowski’s mansion and the Dude’s garden apartment, the comparison between Jackie Treehorn’s and Larry Sellers’s homes presents yet again the vast difference between rich and poor in Los Angeles, the failure of Turner’s crucible thesis.

Perhaps the chief architectural model in *The Big Lebowski* of LA-as-crucible-run-amok is the bowling alley where so much of the movie takes place. The actual location was Hollywood Star Lanes on Santa Monica Boulevard in Los Angeles, a stellar example of Googie architecture (sadly, the building of Hollywood Star Lanes has since been razed and replaced by an elementary school). Googie is also known as “Populuxe, Doo-Wop, Coffee Shop Modern, Jet Age, Space Age and Chinese Modern” (“Introduction to Googie” n.p.), and is generally attributed to Southern California architect John Lautner, the same Lautner who designed the Sheats-Goldstein residence used as Jackie Treehorn’s Malibu mansion. Googie’s was the name of a Lautner-designed coffee shop that sat at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Crescent Heights in Los Angeles and provided the moniker for the style (“Introduction to Googie” n.p.). The design hallmarks of Googie style are upswept roofs, large domes, large sheet glass windows, boomerang shapes, amoebae shapes, atomic models, starbursts, exposed steel beams, and flying saucer shapes (“Introduction to Googie” n.p.). Think: “The Jetsons;” think: LAX; think 1960s coffee shops like Denny’s, Norm’s, Sambo’s, Bob’s Big Boy, or coffee shops like Johnnie’s or Dinah’s Original Pancake and Chicken House (in Los Angeles and

Culver City, respectively, both used as locations in the film), that is Googie, as is the bowling alley in *The Big Lebowski*. Googie architecture, especially as used in a bowling alley (dozens of Southern California bowling alleys used Googie style), is important to *The Big Lebowski's* portrayal of the failure of the American Dream for two reasons. First, Googie is a Southern California phenomenon. It was created in Southern California, it flourished there as nowhere else, and it remains a poignant signature of that area. Second, it also remains a poignant signature of an era, a post-World War II moment of utopian ideals fueled by space-age optimism and rampant consumerism. It is an architectural hallmark of a time when Americans believed the future was now, and the future was good. It was a belief that did not last: the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Vietnam War, race riots, the counter-culture revolution, and the failure of the "Great Society" severely shook that belief, a belief otherwise expressed as the American Dream, a dream that was rapidly turning into a nightmare.

By the time *The Big Lebowski* takes place, the bowling alley in the film is but a faded remnant of that glorious future passed, bordering on kitsch, bordering on absurdity. Nevertheless, in "Abduction and Adoption: Tracing the Western in *The Big Lebowski*," Michael Lattek has high hopes for the Dude's bowling alley; for him, *The Big Lebowski* "celebrate[s it] as the quintessential American idea. Every ethnicity is involved in bowling: white guys with beer bellies, African Americans and Hispanics" (52). The bowling teams in *The Big Lebowski* are certainly multifaceted. One consists of the purple jumpsuit-clad Latino pedophile Jesus (pronounced "gee-zus," not "hey-soos") coupled with crew-cut, beer-gutted Irish-American Liam; another is comprised of So-Cal pacifist hippie hold-out ("I was one of the authors of the Port Huron Statement—the original Port Huron Statement, not the compromised second draft") The Dude, observant Jew ("I don't roll on Shabbos!") gun-nut Walter, and the sloe-eyed and slow-witted sidekick Donny. This might serve as "Hollywood's shortest definition of multicultural America" as Lattek puts it (52), an example of the crucible at work, and maybe it does, but only if we refuse to interpret "multiculturalism" or "crucible" in a positive way. This is where we listen to The Gypsy Kings' version of The Eagles' "Hotel California," but this is also where Walter pulls a gun on an opposing team member for stepping over the line in his lane, screaming "This is not 'Nam! This is bowling! There are rules! Am I the only one around here who cares about the rules?!" When The Dude and Walter are slated to bowl against Jesus and Liam in the league semi-finals, Jesus warns (perhaps "threatens" is the better word) Walter: "You pull any of your crazy shit with us—you flash your piece out on the lanes—I'll take it away from you and stick it up your ass and pull the fucking trigger 'til

it goes ‘click.’” This is no hopeful, tolerant, multicultural bowling alley. Instead, it is one that evidences all the tensions and rages that underlie Los Angeles like lava waiting to burst forth if a crack will only open sufficiently wide (this often happens: Rodney King, Watts, the Zoot Suit Riots). After all, riots are a staple of LA history, e.g., the 24 October 1971 race riot in which some 500 men (or 5% of the total population of Los Angeles at the time) all but decimated the Chinese community in the city). And all of this tragedy is represented by the Hollywood Star Lanes: Googie gone wrong.

To be precise, it is not that Googie has gone wrong, but rather that it is so inappropriate in the late-twentieth-century world of the film. Googie is an architectural style that was influenced by 1960s utopian ideals, space-age optimism, and a positive futurism, all of which have gone bust. The world of Walter and the Dude is not only a post-1960s world, but also a post-1980s world. Both men lived through the 1960s and the collapse of optimism noted above, but they also lived through the 1980s, a new wave of cold-war paranoia, of nuclear angst and racial tension and go-go-capitalism. These guys have seen not only My Lai and Kent State, but also the Challenger explosion, the Chernobyl meltdown, Iran-Contra, and Black Monday; they are living at the moment of the Rodney King riots and the Gulf War. It is perhaps no surprise that Walter longs for some rules. Walter’s longings aside, however, it is easy to see the film’s challenge to an assertion like Lattek’s, that the bowling alley is a celebration of multicultural America. It is not a celebration; rather it is vivid depiction of the failure of the crucible. These bowlers, as Every-American as they are, are certainly not the new American character Turner imagined.

There is another obvious reason the bowling alley does not represent “Hollywood’s shortest definition of multicultural America:” other than Jesus (a Latino character played by an Italian American actor, not unlike generations of Hollywood “Indians,” “Mexicans,” and other “ethnic types”), no people of color are represented by main characters in the entire movie. For a film set in late-twentieth-century Los Angeles, this is unrealistic, but for film noir, it is not at all uncommon. Film noir is a post-World War II phenomenon, and the years between the end of that war and the countercultural movement of the late 1960s are often referred to as an age of anxiety. Cold War hysteria reigned after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, leading to Communist witch-hunts in the US and widespread apprehension about a nuclear doomsday. Women who had worked in wartime factories were forced back into the home and suffered measurable angst and dismay. Civil rights victories such as the desegregation of the US armed forces and Brown-v.-Board of Education actually intensified strained

race relations. It is arguable that film noir captures these anxieties, most notably in terms of race, and paradoxically if not alarmingly, captures racial anxiety by putting it under erasure. As Julian Murphet argues, “if ‘race’ is an absence in original film noir—if black Americans are not represented—then this absence contradicts the prodigious growth of the black presence in the cities themselves” (28). That so many films noir are set in Los Angeles is important, especially given that during the 1940s, LA witnessed the in-pouring of some 140,000 African Americans from the US south (nearly 10% of the city’s total population) to work in the burgeoning defense industry (“African American in Los Angeles” n.p.). However, as Murphet points out, this migration of black Americans to Los Angeles “was not matched by an integrationist housing policy [and] the more blacks who came to the [city], the less space they had to occupy. Deed restrictions, naïve public housing initiatives and pervasive resist intolerance” coupled with “a national strategy to house returning white veterans and their families in new suburban communities at the urban peripheries” (28) meant that more and more blacks and fewer and fewer whites were inhabiting the gritty metropolitan landscape of film noir. Film noir, according to Murphet, exploits the white audience’s “well-nigh hysterical fantasies about black occupation of inner cities,” not by including African Americans and their concerns in the films, but by manipulating their “racial unconscious in complex ways: the jazz score; the chiaroscuro; black/white cinematography; the ‘dark’, ‘black’, ‘night’ and ‘shadow’ of the film’s ... titles” (31). There may no black people in films noir, but white anxiety about them is foregrounded by the stylistic use of black and white in lighting, set design, and nomenclature.

Murphet’s is a provocative argument, and has relevance for my argument about *The Big Lebowski*. Although the movie is shot in color, it retains the film noir penchant for long shadows, dark alleys, empty urban scenes, and chiaroscuro lighting effects. Scenes such as the opening shot of the Dude’s apartment complex, Maude’s studio, and the Malibu sheriff’s office pay obvious homage to these film noir effects. More importantly, virtually every outdoor scene in the movie is shot at night, and virtually every outdoor scene has to do with crime. The bowling alley’s parking lot, where petty crimes like parking in handicap spots and high crimes like assault, battery, arson, and death-by-heart attack happen, is always shot in utter darkness. Sellers’s neighborhood, where Larry’s auto theft is revealed, and Walter’s destructive, if misdirected, revenge is enacted, is shot in darkness. Jackie Treehorn’s Malibu porn-camp is shot in darkness. The night streets of Los Angeles, then, are portrayed as criminal space. One street scene in particular connects *The Big Lebowski*’s portrayal of night streets with Murphet’s argument about black absence in film noir: the scene in which the Dude takes a cab home from Malibu.

When the Dude complains about the cabbie's choice of music saying, "I hate the fuckin' Eagles, man" (ironically, the song playing is "Take It Easy"), the cabbie pulls over and throws the Dude out of the cab. If one accepts Murphet's premise, this scene is a perfect example of the "well-nigh hysterical fantasies about black occupation of inner cities." No one will "take it easy," and whites will be thrown out of town by angry, violent blacks. Also noteworthy is that when people of color do appear in the film in speaking roles, they are always associated with crime. There is the Asian Wu, "the rug-pee'er" and one of Jackie Treehorn's thugs; likewise Maude's thugs, who steal the Dude's rug, are a black man and another dark-skinned man. Of the three cops who appear in the movie, save the sadistic Malibu sheriff, one is African American and one is Latino, thus firmly associating crime with people of color. *The Big Lebowski* may not be set in post-World War II America, but it is set in the Los Angeles of the Rodney King beatings (1991), a time of racial strife and anxiety as severe as the 1940s and 1950s, and that anxiety and strife is an undercurrent in the film.

I have argued that space and place—Los Angeles, its architecture and its streets—are crucial to *The Big Lebowski's* exploration of the gap between rich and poor and the intolerant multiculturalism that mark the failure of the American Dream. These are not the only topics in the film that do so. Consider, for example, that the whole plot of the movie revolves around the fact that the Big Lebowski has money and others want it. These others—neither the kidnappers nor the Dude—want to earn it by dint of hard work, but they still recognize it as the most poignant marker of success in America. Remember also that the Big Lebowski did not get his money honestly—he is accused of embezzlement by his daughter, of both her mother's fortune and the Lebowski Foundation's funds. If, as President Clinton said, the American Dream is one wherein hard work and fair play insure success, the Big Lebowski is as much a failure as the Dude or the kidnappers. When the Dude shows up at the Big Lebowski's mansion, demanding compensation for his rug, the Big Lebowski lashes out: "I cannot solve your problem, sir—only you can! [...] Your revolution is over, Mr. Lebowski! Condolences! The bums lost! My advice to you is to do what your parents did—get a job, sir!" Clearly, the Big Lebowski's cynicism, alienation, and bitterness run as deep as the Dude's. Perhaps this is so because, as Jennifer Hochschild puts it, "the American dream includes no provision for failure" (30).

Hochschild's book *Facing Up To the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* is an important sociological study, which makes a critical contribution to our understanding of the American Dream, especially in its discussion of virtue and sin, individual facility and systemic failure. Hochschild outlines a psychologic

inherent in the American Dream that colors the way Americans view both success and who does, or does not, achieve it. The “psychologic” means that if a person acknowledges responsibility for success, then a person must accept responsibility for failure (30). She calls this “psychologic” because it does not adhere to the rules of strict logic; Americans who do everything they possibly can to succeed know this all too well. But the “psychologic” is a pervasive element of the American Dream, one Americans cling to ardently. We associate success with virtue, and failure with sin; both success and failure are seen as personal or individual conditions. We rarely take the various systems of American life, like democracy or capitalism, into consideration when measuring success or failure. And because we do not, Hochschild says that it is

extremely difficult for Americans to see that everyone cannot simultaneously attain more than absolute success [reaching a threshold of well-being merely higher than where one started]. Capitalist markets require some firms to fail; elections require some candidates and policy preferences to lose; status hierarchies must have a bottom in order to have a top. But the optimistic language of and methodological individualism built into the American dream *necessarily* deceive people about these societal operations. (37)

Yet, the Dream abides. Americans continue to believe simultaneously in systems that require failure and an ideology that ascribes failure to sin. We live in these complexities, but we do not often stop to consider what they do to us. As Hochschild says, for those who have achieved success, the American Dream is “a vindication, a goad to further efforts, a cause for celebration—and also grounds for anxiety, guilt and disillusionment,” and for those who have not achieved success, the American Dream is “a taunt, a condemnation, a object of fury—and also grounds for hope, renewed striving, and dreams for one’s children” (38).

As for *The Big Lebowski*, I like to think that the film’s ending provides keen commentary on the complexities of the American Dream. In the final scene, the Dude and the Stranger meet up one last time. “Take it easy, Dude,” the Stranger says, “I know that you will;” and the Dude replies, “Yeah. Well. The Dude abides.” “The Dude abides,” the Stranger repeats; “I don’t know about you, but I take comfort in that. It’s good knowing that he’s out there—the Dude—takin’ it easy for all us sinners.” *The Big Lebowski* shows us that we are all failures, sinners, in one way or another, and it is the Dude who constantly reminds us that life in America is filled with “strikes and gutters, ups and downs,” “lotta ins, lotta outs, lotta what have yous.” Even though the whole of *The Big Lebowski* has been fraught with tension, with anxiety, cynicism, and bitterness, it ends happily—optimistically, even—with the Stranger hoping that the Dude and Walter make it to the finals of

the bowling tournament, and telling us that there is a little Lebowski on the way. These are hallmarks of absolute success (reaching a threshold of well-being higher than where we started) and absolute success is possible for most of us. The Dude abides; he accepts this measure of success. He also accepts his own sinfulness, as well as the sinfulness of others, which is possible when we accept a different, perhaps lower, measure of success: just enough. After all, all the Dude wanted was his rug back, “because it really tied the room together, man,” which might just be the ultimate lesson of *The Big Lebowski*: if we respect one another, we might just be able to pull together, we might just be able to reclaim something of the American Dream.

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