From TINSELTOWN

to BORDERTOWN
Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction
  1. The Exorbitant City 1
  2. Rodney King's Los Angeles in the Hollywood Mainstream 29

Part I: Historical Continuities
  3. Alienation and Redemption in the City of Angels 63
  4. Breaking at the Seams: White Los Angeles 89
  5. Tinseltown 123

Part II: The Legacy of the Riots
  6. Out of the Past 145
  7. The Plot Thickens: Multi-Protagonist LA 165
  8. Bordertown 191

Part III: The Brown City
  9. Browning the Millennium 221
  10. The Border Look and Chicano Los Angeles 247

Coda: Spanglish 267

Works Cited 273

Index 289
Contents

Acknowledgments vii

Introduction 1

1. The Exorbitant City 1

2. Rodney King’s Los Angeles in the Hollywood Mainstream 29

Part I: Historical Continuities 63

3. Alienation and Redemption in the City of Angels 63

4. Breaking at the Seams: White Los Angeles 89

5. Tinseltown 123

Part II: The Legacy of the Riots 145

6. Out of the Past 145

7. The Plot Thickens: Multi-Protagonist LA 165

8. Bordertown 191

Part III: The Brown City 221

9. Browning the Millennium 221

10. The Border Look and Chicano Los Angeles 247

Coda: Spanglish 267

Works Cited 273

Index 289
Acknowledgments

Research toward this book was financed by the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (research projects HUM2007-61183/FILO and FFI2010-15312) and by the Diputación General de Aragón (Ref. H12). The University of Zaragoza partially funded two research stays at UCLA, where I was a visiting scholar in 2010 and 2012. During my two stays at UCLA, the Chicano Studies Research Center was my home. I would like to thank the CSRC’s director, Professor Chon Noriega, for welcoming me to the Center and for his advice and encouragement. I am also indebted to Javier Iribarren, Michael Stone, Connie Heskett, and Darling Sianez for their help with practical matters and invaluable advice. Without the infrastructure, the resources, and the warmth of the CSRC, this book would not have seen the light of day.

My research was also carried out at the Charles E. Young Library at UCLA and at the Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills. Susan Anderson, María García, Arlete Pichardo, and José Luis Valenzuela were my guides through various aspects of LA history, culture, and society. Much of what I have learned from them has found its way into this book. Susan also compiled an extremely useful reading list for me, which became the basis of my research on the city of Los Angeles, and she read and gave me most welcome advice on one of my chapters. I would also like to thank José Luis for giving me access to the Luminarias production papers and for his candid discussion of his work and Mexican life in the city.

Stephen Gyllenhaal and Kathleen Mann Gyllenhaal were kind enough to share their views on contemporary Hollywood with me. I am grateful to Rosa Urquiaga for letting me use her unpublished interview with Real Women Have Curves scriptwriter Josefina López and to Ms. López for allowing me to reproduce her views on the film. My very special thanks go to Kevin and Ascensión, the visible part of the iceberg of my many conversations with Angeleno citizens. Ignacio Deleyto helped me with the music in The Soloist, Hilaria Loyo gave me a useful bibliography on the concept of the American dream, Iván Villarma shared with me his research and some of his views on city films, and Jacline Moriceau offered me some references to urban theory. My very special thanks go to Francesc Terrades, who designed the maps of the city included in the book on very short notice and with considerable effort. I am particularly grateful to Gemma López, who kindly
Acknowledgments

Research toward this book was financed by the Spanish Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (research projects HUM2007-61183/FILO and FFI2010-15312) and by the Diputación General de Aragón (Ref. H12). The University of Zaragoza partially funded two research stays at UCLA, where I was a visiting scholar in 2010 and 2012. During my two stays at UCLA, the Chicano Studies Research Center was my home. I would like to thank the CSRC’s director, Professor Chon Noriega, for welcoming me to the Center and for his advice and encouragement. I am also indebted to Javier Iribarren, Michael Stone, Connie Heskett, and Darling Sianez for their help with practical matters and invaluable advice. Without the infrastructure, the resources, and the warmth of the CSRC, this book would not have seen the light of day.

My research was also carried out at the Charles E. Young Library at UCLA and at the Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills. Susan Anderson, María García, Arlete Pichardo, and José Luis Valenzuela were my guides through various aspects of LA history, culture, and society. Much of what I have learned from them has found its way into this book. Susan also compiled an extremely useful reading list for me, which became the basis of my research on the city of Los Angeles, and she read and gave me most welcome advice on one of my chapters. I would also like to thank José Luis for giving me access to the Luminarias production papers and for his candid discussion of his work and Mexican life in the city.

Stephen Gyllenhaal and Kathleen Mann Gyllenhaal were kind enough to share their views on contemporary Hollywood with me. I am grateful to Rosa Urtiaga for letting me use her unpublished interview with Real Women Have Curves scriptwriter Josefina López and to Ms. López for allowing me to reproduce her views on the film. My very special thanks go to Kevin and Ascensión, the visible part of the iceberg of my many conversations with Angeleno citizens. Ignacio Deleyto helped me with the music in The Soloist, Hilaria Loyo gave me a useful bibliography on the concept of the American dream, Iván Villarmea shared with me his research and some of his views on city films, and Jacline Moriceau offered me some references to urban theory. My very special thanks go to Francesc Terrades, who designed the maps of the city included in the book on very short notice and with considerable effort. I am particularly grateful to Gemma López, who kindly
read my manuscript, and to Marimar Azcona for her constant help and unflinching support and for always believing in what I do, even when I don’t myself. At Wayne State University Press, Annie Martin was always at hand, offering all the encouragement and advice an author could possibly ask for, and more. Barry Grant, the series editor, not only believed in my project from the beginning but also contributed to turn it into a better book.

Finally, my greatest gratitude is, as ever, to Esther, Elena, and Anita, the three shining stars in my own private Tinseltown.
individual who cannot be recuperated into civilized society and describing him as a victim of social ills and thus a figure of identification. As an Angeleno, he is both a victim of a rampant economic crisis that affected both the working and the middle classes and a representative of the dominant Anglo majority and therefore of a history of social injustice, the most recent consequences of which were the justice riots. Bill is a victim but also part of the origin of the problem, and Falling Down, perhaps unexpectedly, closes with a subtle but powerful indictment of the white man.

In a film about a character constantly on the move, the most interesting frame movement comes at the very end, in the last shot: After shooting Bill at the Venice Fishing Pier, Prendergast sits next to the protagonist’s wife, Beth, trying to console her. The camera tracks past them and inside the house, eventually focusing on the home movie that Bill had put on a few minutes before, when he broke into the house. This movie is a snatch from the past of the happy Anglo family together, at home by the beach, apparently a recording of better times. Yet it includes an illustration of Bill’s violent temper, even in those blissful moments, and reveals Beth’s worry, already then, about their future as a family. In a movie that highlights spatiality, both in Bill’s relentless, though roundabout, westward movement and in the visual construction of a city dominated by violence, tension, and impending fear, the final camera movement acquires a crucial temporal dimension. The film had quoted Citizen Kane in its first shot and in the paperweight that Bill later buys for his daughter’s birthday. It closes the Wellesian circle by emulating the earlier film’s famous final frame movement. The camera travels to the past, looking for the root of the violence and turmoil that affect the city. Although over the course of the movie the growing visibility of various ethnic minorities is ambiguously linked with its present state, the origin of all this urban evil is ascribed to the white male and situated within the suburban middle-class Anglo family. Lost in a vortex of social unrest, recalling dystopian images of the cinematic past from classic noir to Blade Runner, seemingly wrapped up in the hero’s unhinged push forward no matter what, Falling Down takes this moment of reflection before the final credits to apportion responsibility on the Anglo supremacists who, according to Soja and others, have dominated the history of the city.

Falling Down is an urban apocalyptic film that envisions the city, and specifically Los Angeles, as the repository of a millennial crisis. This “belch of outrage” (Baker 1993, F6) latches onto the justice riots as a manifestation of this condition and situates its story, with various racial displacements, within the tense climate that followed the Simi Valley trials and the jury’s failure to condemn the brutality of the LAPD the previous year; more specifically, the film’s story is situated in Mid-City, the part of town that was most savagely hit by the riots. Beyond this, Falling Down manages, if from an unmistakably male Anglo perspective, to suggest the city’s diversity and, perhaps more important, to highlight the symbolic centrality of Anglo violence and guilt in its history. On the other hand, we have Prendergast, the LAPD officer. He may be cynical about police methods and about the city as a whole, but this honest white policeman holds the key to the future in his liberal attitude. The movie does not offer any solutions to assuage urban anguish, but it does become a powerful symptom, from the cinematic mainstream, of the social and discursive tensions besetting the city. It is a cultural text situated in the vortex of the storm.

Racial Binaries and the Brown Woman

Paradoxically, the future seems much nearer in White Men Can’t Jump, another mainstream movie from 1992, released by its studio, Fox, only one month before all hell broke loose at Florence and Normandie Avenues. It features crossover stars Wesley Snipes, Woody Harrelson, and Rosie Pérez and a generic configuration that would become a mainstay of Hollywood cinema: the comic buddy film, later labeled “bromance” or “hommecom” (Jeffers McDonald 2007, 108–9). A pent-up anger comparable to that found in Falling Down can be felt throughout the narrative of White Men, but its comic register channels that anger in a different direction, in this case through the performance of street basketball. Although local reviewers objected to the problematic and, for most of them, misleading realist vocation of Falling Down, no such worries were expressed about the realism of White Men, which was thought to be more effortless and effective in its depiction of social dynamics. In the press release, director Ron Shelton declared that he wanted to show the real Los Angeles, “the places where people live, not the exotic postcard images” (press release, 1992), and many in the press thought that he succeeded (e.g., Carson 1992; C. James 1992). Tom Carson, for instance, sees the film as Shelton’s answer to L.A. Story and celebrates the Angeleno realities that the other film left
out. The director captures “L.A.’s affability and ramshackle grace, and the boundary-crossing intimacies at the disheveled bottom of the city’s social heap” (Carson 1992, 33). In general, whether it was because of the effect of the justice riots or because the comedic register of White Men made it seem less threatening, reactions were markedly different from those to Falling Down, even though both films engaged with the city in direct ways and even though both dealt head-on with interracial relationships. In a wider sense, both films were symptomatic of ongoing social processes in L.A. Their different receptions, separated as they were by the Rodney King riots, must also be seen as part of the same process of social struggle to adapt to new urban realities. Given the extreme proximity between the release date of White Men and the flare-up of the justice riots, it is tempting to speculate that the movie was reflecting anxieties similar to those that broke out one month later but that it was finding less violent, more hopeful ways of imagining the multicultural, multiethnic city; and it was doing so from the standpoint of some of the very neighborhoods and citizens who felt most acutely the impact of global processes and social injustice—those who, in the real city, initiated the uprising. In this sense White Men can be seen as a comic Hollywood counterpart to the “black cinema” that, with Boyz n the Hood at the front, offered a purportedly realistic denunciation of poverty and injustice in African American neighborhoods.

Part of the attractiveness of White Men lies in its narrative premise. As a mainstream product with a keen interest in realism, the film can be described, paradoxically, as truly fantastic in that it offers its audiences a fictional Angeleno society dominated by black men and, secondarily, women in which the white hero is practically on his own. Going several steps further than, for example, Grand Canyon and its efforts to counter Anglo supremacy in the movies with a difficult balance between white and black characters, White Men throws its white hero, Billy Hoyle (Harrelson), into an almost exclusively African American street basketball scene and leaves him to fend for himself in a racial scenario practically unknown in mainstream comedy. When they first meet, on the Venice Beach courts, Sidney Deane (Snipes) keeps repeating to Billy that it is his court, that the court is his house, that Billy is a foreigner, and that basketball is a black thing. In the film’s fictional world Sidney is right and Billy accepts his position of inferiority. Regardless of narrative incident and development, White Men points at the potential for change of such a mobile and changing society as that of Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century, hypothesizing that in this city, despite its loaded history, everything is possible.

On the other hand, like his namesake Bill, the protagonist of Falling Down, and Mack in Grand Canyon, Billy is one more embodiment of early 1990s whitemasculinity in crisis, and as such, his being surrounded by racially other characters facilitates his victimization. However, White Men is never willing to let its hero off the hook and is more interested in his inadequacies to adapt to a changing world than in blaming others around him for his crisis. Both Sidney, his buddy, and Gloria (Rosie Pérez), his girlfriend, are constructed as more mature and smarter characters than he, and they are, in narratological terms, his helpers in his learning process (Greimas 1986, 174–85). A thriller buddy film such as Se7en (David Fincher, 1995) features a comparable structure, with the Anglo hero (Brad Pitt) having his wife, Tracy (Gwyneth Paltrow), and an older African American detective, Somerset (Morgan Freeman), as catalysts for his moral and emotional growth, but neither Somerset nor Tracy embodies historical situatedness in the way that Gloria and Sidney do. Se7en is color-blind in its articulation of the relationship between the two policemen, and Tracy’s femininity and role in the narrative are part of an essentialist worldview revolving around the eternal fight between good and evil. Gloria and Sidney, on the other hand, base their narrative superiority over Billy on their gender and race. Unlike Se7en and Falling Down, White Men announces from the beginning that the dynamics of gender and race are, in fact, what its story is about.

In this sense the movie wears its stereotypes on its sleeve. Jane Galbraith, referring to the film’s poster and marketing campaign, argues that the image of a white guy and a black guy is part of a very American language, something that everybody understands (1992, 27) and that points to the centrality of stereotypes in the text. Yet, unlike the following year’s Demolition Man (Marco Bramvilla, 1993), another LA movie that uses a white-black protagonist pair as a selling point (Sylvester Stallone and Snipes again), stereotypes are both used and constantly subverted. Aesthetically and narratively, White Men is very much a text of its moment, and, as Caryn James argues, it manages to capture the pulse of the times: “The film is politically correct in its attacks on stereotypes, but rude enough in its humor so that no one feels preached at; it echoes both political correctness and the anti-P.C. backlash” (1992, n.p.). Similarly, for Terrence Rafferty, racial stereotypes function as rules that are waiting to be broken, “occasions for comic anomalies” (1992, 80). In this sense,
out. The director captures “L.A.’s affability and ramshackle grace, and the boundary-crossing intimacies at the disheveled bottom of the city’s social heap” (Carson 1992, 33). In general, whether it was because of the effect of the justice riots or because the comedic register of White Men made it seem less threatening, reactions were markedly different from those to Falling Down, even though both films engaged with the city in direct ways and even though both dealt head-on with interracial relationships. In a wider sense, both films were symptomatic of ongoing social processes in L.A. Their different receptions, separated as they were by the Rodney King riots, must also be seen as part of the same process of social struggle to adapt to new urban realities. Given the extreme proximity between the release date of White Men and the flare-up of the justice riots, it is tempting to speculate that the movie was reflecting anxieties similar to those that broke out one month later but that it was finding less violent, more hopeful ways of imagining the multicultural, multiethnic city; and it was doing so from the standpoint of some of the very neighborhoods and citizens who felt most acutely the impact of global processes and social injustice—those who, in the real city, initiated the uprising. In this sense White Men can be seen as a comic Hollywood counterpart to the “black cinema” that, with Boyz n the Hood at the front, offered a purportedly realistic denunciation of poverty and injustice in African American neighborhoods.

Part of the attractiveness of White Men lies in its narrative premise. As a mainstream product with a keen interest in realism, the film can be described, paradoxically, as truly fantastic in that it offers its audiences a fictional Angeleno society dominated by black men and, secondarily, women in which the white hero is practically on his own. Going several steps further than, for example, Grand Canyon and its efforts to counter Anglo supremacy in the movies with a difficult balance between white and black characters, White Men throws its white hero, Billy Hoyle (Harrelson), into an almost exclusively African American street basketball scene and leaves him to fend for himself in a racial scenario practically unknown in mainstream comedy. When they first meet, on the Venice Beach courts, Sidney Deane (Snipes) keeps repeating to Billy that it is his court, that the court is his house, that Billy is a foreigner, and that basketball is a black thing. In the film’s fictional world Sidney is right and Billy accepts his position of inferiority. Regardless of narrative incident and development, White Men points at the potential for change of such a mobile and changing society as that of Los Angeles at the end of the twentieth century, hypothesizing that in this city, despite its loaded history, everything is possible.

On the other hand, like his namesake Bill, the protagonist of Falling Down, and Mack in Grand Canyon, Billy is one more embodiment of early 1990s white masculinity in crisis, and as such, his being surrounded by racially other characters facilitates his victimization. However, White Men is never willing to let its hero off the hook and is more interested in his inadequacies to adapt to a changing world than in blaming others around him for his crisis. Both Sidney, his buddy, and Gloria (Rosie Pérez), his girlfriend, are constructed as more mature and smarter characters than him, and they are, in narratological terms, his helpers in his learning process (Greimas 1986, 174–85). A thriller buddy film such as Se7en (David Fincher, 1995) features a comparable structure, with the Anglo hero (Brad Pitt) having his wife, Tracy (Gwyneth Paltrow), and an older African American detective, Somerset (Morgan Freeman), as catalysts for his moral and emotional growth, but neither Somerset nor Tracy embodies historical situatedness in the way that Gloria and Sidney do. Se7en is color-blind in its articulation of the relationship between the two policemen, and Tracy’s femininity and role in the narrative are part of an essentialist worldview revolving around the eternal fight between good and evil. Gloria and Sidney, on the other hand, base their narrative superiority over Billy on their gender and race. Unlike Se7en and Falling Down, White Men announces from the beginning that the dynamics of gender and race are, in fact, what its story is about.

In this sense the movie wears its stereotypes on its sleeve. Jane Galbraith, referring to the film’s poster and marketing campaign, argues that the image of a white guy and a black guy is part of a very American language, something that everybody understands (1992, 27) and that points to the centrality of stereotypes in the text. Yet, unlike the following year’s Demolition Man (Marco Bramvilla, 1993), another LA movie that uses a white-black protagonist pair as a selling point (Sylvester Stallone and Snipes again), stereotypes are both used and constantly subverted. Aesthetically and narratively, White Men is very much a text of its moment, and, as Caryn James argues, it manages to capture the pulse of the times: “The film is politically correct in its attacks on stereotypes, but rude enough in its humor so that no one feels preached at; it echoes both political correctness and the anti-P.C. backlash” (1992, n.p.). Similarly, for Terrence Rafferty, racial stereotypes function as rules that are waiting to be broken, “occasions for comic anomalies” (1992, 80). In this sense,
although the main characters in Falling Down are fully-fledged individuals whose gender and race are only a part of their fictional makeup, the three central figures in White Men, while attractive and complex enough in their construction, are also representatives of much larger groups: Anglo and African American masculinities and racially other femininity at a specific historical juncture. Their stereotypical dimension is particularly effective because the comic framework allows spectators the sufficient distance to recognize both the stereotypes and the ideological work that the film is doing with them.

Simultaneously, this contrived narrative structure and ideological construction is fleshed out not only in the performances by Snipes, Pérez, and Harrelson but also in a geographically and historically recognizable space, a familiar Los Angeles in which only one thing is radically unfamiliar: African Americans dominate the frame both visually and socially. In this, White Men is also a harbinger of the ethnic upheaval produced by the justice riots one month after its release. The economic decline of their neighborhoods and the growing frustration with their inability to see a future of racial equality prompted black Angelenos to take center stage in the riots and to assume a visibility that was warranted by the history of the city but not so much by its demography: In the 1990 census, the African American population of LA had decreased to 11.20 percent and would continue to shrink to 9.78 percent in 2000 and 8.78 percent in 2010 (www.laalmanac.com/population/po13.htm). White Men is, culturally speaking, almost a mirror image of the uprising, taking full advantage of the mechanisms of comedy to produce a discourse in which confrontation, resentment, and a charged history of injustice can lead to an empowering fantasy of African American supremacy. It is not just that the Anglo hero, thanks to his talent in a game long dominated by African Americans, can readily accept his inferior position while learning to navigate an initially hostile environment. More important, the text as a whole takes it for granted that in its fictional world African Americans are in charge, a vibrant if socially and economically impoverished community in which the Anglo character is an outsider. It is ironic, and part of the ideological work of the film, that for a city in which 40 percent of its inhabitants are foreign-born, an Anglo man maybe from the U.S. South (Billy tells Sidney that he played basketball at a college in Louisiana) is considered a foreigner, precisely in Venice Beach, one of the few neighborhoods of Los Angeles that is still predominantly white.

The story of White Men starts where Falling Down finished: on Venice Beach. Whereas in Falling Down the streets and ocean walk appear full of people, as they often are in this tourist enclave, White Men evokes fresh beginnings by having its hero reach Venice when all the streets and beachfront are still mostly empty, with only the occasional jogger, skater, and bodybuilder in sight, most of them black, as though to anticipate what is coming. Billy is welcomed by the sound of the Venice Beach Boys, real-life jazz musicians Bill Henderson, Sonny Craver, and Jon Hendricks, singing a capella the gospel song “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” as part of the entertainment on offer at this early hour. The basketball courts can be seen behind the singers, and Billy, who enjoys their performance, immediately associates them with the space he aspires to enter and conquer: the courts where (fictional) street basketball legends Eddie “the King” Farouk and Duck Johnson used to play. At the end of the story, Billy, forming a team with Sidney, will see his dream of challenging and beating the masters (played by college and professional basketball player Freeman Williams and singer Louis Price) come true.

The song also anticipates the importance of music in the film, which boasts an eclectic but almost exclusively African American soundtrack, including rap, rock, soul, and R&B. Centrally, the running gag between the buddy protagonists is whether Billy can or cannot “hear” Jimi (Hendrix). This starts when Sidney objects to his new friend playing a tape of the black musical legend’s songs in his car. Billy insists that he can hear Jimi, by which he simultaneously means (1) that he can be a part of Sidney’s black basketball world, that he too can be “black,” and (2) that one does not need to be black to appreciate “black” music, and, further, (3) that by pretending to be “a chump” (i.e., white), he, as a white man, can beat black people at their own game.

This attitude and narrative dynamic transpire in the first basketball game, in which Billy’s strategy appears to be successful as he takes everyone by surprise by beating Sidney twice, taking advantage of the other’s feeling of superiority. Yet things are not so easy for Billy because of his self-destructive personality and his propensity to always make the wrong decision. Billy is incapable of dunking the ball (a relatively redundant ability in practical terms but one that is part of the “aesthetic” side of the sport and has come to signify black men’s physical superiority) because “white men can’t jump.” When Sidney challenges him, he loses his bet and all the money he had just won hustling. In the final game he finally manages the dunk for
although the main characters in *Falling Down* are fully-fledged individuals whose gender and race are only a part of their fictional makeup, the three central figures in *White Men*, while attractive and complex enough in their construction, are also representatives of much larger groups: Anglo and African American masculinities and racially other femininity at a specific historical juncture. Their stereotypical dimension is particularly effective because the comic framework allows spectators the sufficient distance to recognize both the stereotypes and the ideological work that the film is doing with them.

Simultaneously, this contrived narrative structure and ideological construction is fleshed out not only in the performances by Snipes, Pérez, and Harrelson but also in a geographically and historically recognizable space, a familiar Los Angeles in which only one thing is radically unfamiliar: African Americans dominate the frame both visually and socially. In this, *White Men* is also a harbinger of the ethnic upheaval produced by the justice riots one month after its release. The economic decline of their neighborhoods and the growing frustration with their inability to see a future of racial equality prompted black Angelenos to take center stage in the riots and to assume a visibility that was warranted by the history of the city but not so much by its demography: In the 1990 census, the African American population of LA had decreased to 11.20 percent and would continue to shrink to 9.78 percent in 2000 and 8.78 percent in 2010 (www.laalmanac.com/population/po13.htm). *White Men* is, culturally speaking, almost a mirror image of the uprising, taking full advantage of the mechanisms of comedy to produce a discourse in which confrontation, resentment, and a charged history of injustice can lead to an empowering fantasy of African American supremacy. It is not just that the Anglo hero, thanks to his talent in a game long dominated by African Americans, can readily accept his inferior position while learning to navigate an initially hostile environment. More important, the text as a whole takes it for granted that in its fictional world African Americans are in charge, a vibrant if socially and economically impoverished community in which the Anglo character is an outsider. It is ironic, and part of the ideological work of the film, that for a city in which 40 percent of its inhabitants are foreign-born, an Anglo man maybe from the U.S. South (Billy tells Sidney that he played basketball at a college in Louisiana) is considered a foreigner, precisely in Venice Beach, one of the few neighborhoods of Los Angeles that is still predominantly white.

The story of *White Men* starts where *Falling Down* finished: on Venice Beach. Whereas in *Falling Down* the streets and ocean walk appear full of people, as they often are in this tourist enclave, *White Men* evokes fresh beginnings by having its hero reach Venice when all the streets and beachfront are still mostly empty, with only the occasional jogger, skater, and bodybuilder in sight, most of them black, as though to anticipate what is coming. Billy is welcomed by the sound of the Venice Beach Boys, real-life jazz musicians Bill Henderson, Sonny Craver, and Jon Hendricks, singing a capella the gospel song "Just a Closer Walk with Thee," as part of the entertainment on offer at this early hour. The basketball courts can be seen behind the singers, and Billy, who enjoys their performance, immediately associates them with the space he aspires to enter and conquer: the courts where (fictional) street basketball legends Eddie "the King" Farouk and Duck Johnson used to play. At the end of the story, Billy, forming a team with Sidney, will see his dream of challenging and beating the masters (played by college and professional basketball player Freeman Williams and singer Louis Price) come true.

The song also anticipates the importance of music in the film, which boasts an eclectic but almost exclusively African American soundtrack, including rap, rock, soul, and R&B. Centrally, the running gag between the buddy protagonists is whether Billy can or cannot “hear” Jimi (Hendrix). This starts when Sidney objects to his new friend playing a tape of the black musical legend’s songs in his car. Billy insists that he can hear Jimi, by which he simultaneously means (1) that he can be a part of Sidney’s black basketball world, that he too can be “black,” and (2) that one does not need to be black to appreciate “black” music, and, further, (3) that by pretending to be “a chump” (i.e., white), he, as a white man, can beat black people at their own game.

This attitude and narrative dynamic transpire in the first basketball game, in which Billy’s strategy appears to be successful as he takes everyone by surprise by beating Sidney twice, taking advantage of the other’s feeling of superiority. Yet things are not so easy for Billy because of his self-destructive personality and his propensity to always make the wrong decision. Billy is incapable of dunking the ball (a relatively redundant ability in practical terms but one that is part of the “aesthetic” side of the sport and has come to signify black men’s physical superiority) because “white men can’t jump.” When Sidney challenges him, he loses his bet and all the money he had just won hustling. In the final game he finally manages the dunk for
their winning point against “the King” and Duck, but this also makes him lose his girlfriend, this time for good. The final jam does not even secure him a stable place in the African American community because, as Sidney says, “Hell, you can put a cat in a oven—that don’t make it a biscuit.” On the other hand, Sidney has enough faith in his friend to produce the above-the-hoop pass that makes Billy improve his jump to dunk the ball at the crucial moment to give them victory over their rivals.

The first basketball scene, segueing seamlessly from the Venice Beach Boys performance through a graphic match, anticipates the extent to which basketball is the center of the plot. Billy's plan to get into the game and make money is the basic hustling ploy, one that in cinema history has been used memorably by the protagonists of *The Hustler* (Robert Rossen, 1961) and its sequel *The Color of Money* (Martin Scorsese, 1986): He pretends to be a chump. In fact, he does not even have to pretend much; being white is enough for the rest of the players to laugh him off as a poor challenge. Once the game starts, though, his pretense stops: Billy is an efficient player who takes advantage of what the film seems to construe as the inability of African Americans to tell good basketball from showing off. At the same time, the film visually sides with the exuberance and energy of the Venice courts, as embodied in Sidney. Frame movement and editing constantly succeed at reproducing the idiom of the players. In other words, the text both distances itself, with Billy, from the black players’ superfluous antics and visually identifies with them. Sidney’s performance starts the minute Billy’s ends. Billy performs outside the court, pretending he cannot play. Sidney’s performance is his way of playing basketball; his game consists of decorative flourishes and constant bragging. For him there is no basketball outside the performance and the posturing. The film rejoices in it even as, with Billy, it pokes fun at it. Billy, for his part, soon learns to master the endless chatter outside the court, pretending he cannot play. Sidney’s performance is his way of playing basketball; his game consists of decorative flourishes and constant bragging. For him there is no basketball outside the performance and the posturing. The film rejoices in it even as, with Billy, it pokes fun at it. Billy, for his part, soon learns to master the endless chatter to undermine his rivals’ concentration but finds it more difficult to “look good” and change his “white” sobriety. In this he remains an outsider. The film often resorts to slow motion to insert his approach to playing into its visual style, and although this works visually, it narratively underlines the gap that he cannot bridge.

What Billy also still needs to learn is that his more efficient manner of playing does not guarantee success, nor is it necessarily better than Sidney's. Snipes’s performance captures the complexities of his character's approach to basketball and to social exchanges when, after losing the first two challenges to Billy and being laughed at for what appears to be childish boasting, the frame pulls in to a close-up of Sidney sizing up the business possibilities of an alliance with the character on whom he has just unleashed countless aggravation. He is a more mature player in the broader sense. He plots to take financial advantage of the inexperienced player and hustle him even as Billy thinks they are hustling together. At the same time, he becomes, however reluctantly, the white man’s aid in his attempt to “become black.” Billy, for his part, needs to learn that, as Gloria cryptically explains, when you win, sometimes you lose, and when you lose, sometimes you win. In other words, he still needs to learn that in a game the final score is not always the final word and, more generally, that his binary thinking is a thing of the past and a poor tool to adapt to the modern world embodied in the film by Gloria, Sidney, and the city of Los Angeles. At the end of the film Billy has not fully comprehended what his girlfriend meant, but he is learning (he can hear the music, Sidney concludes, which does not mean to say that he can hear *Jimi* yet).

Billy knows from the beginning, or at least has a good intuition, about the magical qualities of Venice Beach, and both his brief dialogue with the Venice Beach Boys and the first pickup game confirm that he is indeed in the right place. Once the plot is set in motion, his fascination becomes focused on Sidney, and this fascination is reciprocal, though not exactly symmetric: Billy finds in Sidney a role model both as a basketball player and as the type of adult man he has so far failed to become, whereas Sidney is first curious about the white man’s desire of transformation and gradually more involved in the process. He is also amused by the “ebony and ivory” team they have formed. Within its comic world, the film uses this dynamic to put forward a discourse of social tolerance, flexible identities, and interracial homosocial bonding. Its use of the city as the environment in which this social utopia can work explains the centrality of the beach community. In fact, the characters move around various inner-city locations (a neighborhood court on 22nd Street in South Central; another one in Watts, visually dominated by the famous Watts Towers; the tournament in Lafayette Park near MacArthur Park; and the Crenshaw area where Sidney and Rhonda Deane [Tyra Ferrell] live) before returning to Venice and, toward the end of the story, Santa Monica. Yet the movie manages to make all the inner-city neighborhoods look as attractive, sunny, and lively as the beach communities. In fact, somebody not paying too much attention to the specificities of the various locations, and given that the characters often return to the Ocean sides, might think that the characters never leave Venice, Santa Monica, and neighboring
Chapter 2

Rodney King's Los Angeles in the Hollywood Mainstream

...their winning point against "the King" and Duck, but this also makes him lose his girlfriend, this time for good. The final jam does not even secure him a stable place in the African American community because, as Sidney says, "Hell, you can put a cat in a oven—that don't make it a biscuit." On the other hand, Sidney has enough faith in his friend to produce the above-the-hoop pass that makes Billy improve his jump to dunk the ball at the crucial moment to give them victory over their rivals.

The first basketball scene, segueing seamlessly from the Venice Beach Boys performance through a graphic match, anticipates the extent to which basketball is the center of the plot. Billy's plan to get into the game and make money is the basic hustling play, one that in cinema history has been used memorably by the protagonists of The Hustler (Robert Rossen, 1961) and its sequel The Color of Money (Martin Scorsese, 1986): He pretends to be a chump. In fact, he does not even have to pretend much; being white is enough for the rest of the players to laugh him off as a poor challenge. Once the game starts, though, his pretense stops: Billy is an efficient player who takes advantage of what the film seems to construe as the inability of African Americans to tell good basketball from showing off. At the same time, the film visually sides with the exuberance and energy of the Venice courts, as embodied in Sidney. Frame movement and editing constantly succeed at reproducing the idiom of the players. In other words, the text both distances itself, with Billy, from the black players' superfluous antics and visually identifies with them. Sidney's performance starts the minute Billy's ends. Billy performs outside the court, pretending he cannot play. Sidney's performance is his way of playing basketball; his game consists of decorative flourishes and constant bragging. For him there is no basketball outside the performance and the posturing. The film rejoices in it even as, with Billy, it poke's fun at it. Billy, for his part, soon learns to master the endless chatter to undermine his rivals' concentration but finds it more difficult to "look good" and change his "white" sobriety. In this he remains an outsider. The film often resorts to slow motion to insert his approach to playing into its visual style, and although this works visually, it narratively underlines the gap that he cannot bridge.

What Billy also still needs to learn is that his more efficient manner of playing does not guarantee success, nor is it necessarily better than Sidney's. Snipes's performance captures the complexities of his character's approach to basketball and to social exchanges when, after losing the first two challenges to Billy and being laughed at for what appears to be childish boasting, the frame pulls in to a close-up of Sidney sizing up the business possibilities of an alliance with the character on whom he has just unleashed countless aggravation. He is a more mature player in the broader sense. He plots to take financial advantage of the inexperienced player and hustle him even as Billy thinks they are hustling together. At the same time, he becomes, however reluctantly, the white man's aid in his attempt to "become black." Billy, for his part, needs to learn that, as Gloria cryptically explains, when you win, sometimes you lose, and when you lose, sometimes you win. In other words, he still needs to learn that in a game the final score is not always the final word and, more generally, that his binary thinking is a thing of the past and a poor tool to adapt to the modern world embodied in the film by Gloria, Sidney, and the city of Los Angeles. At the end of the film Billy has not fully comprehended what his girlfriend meant, but he is learning (he can hear the music, Sidney concludes, which does not mean to say that he can hear fini yet).

Billy knows from the beginning, or at least has a good intuition, about the magical qualities of Venice Beach, and both his brief dialogue with the Venice Beach Boys and the first pickup game confirm that he is indeed in the right place. Once the plot is set in motion, his fascination becomes focused on Sidney, and this fascination is reciprocal, though not exactly symmetric: Billy finds in Sidney a role model both as a basketball player and as the type of adult man he has so far failed to become, whereas Sidney is first curious about the white man's desire of transformation and gradually more involved in the process. He is also amused by the "ebony and ivory" team they have formed. Within its comic world, the film uses this dynamic to put forward a discourse of social tolerance, flexible identities, and interracial homosocial bonding. Its use of the city as the environment in which this social utopia can work explains the centrality of the beach community. In fact, the characters move around various inner-city locations (a neighborhood court on 22nd Street in South Central; another one in Watts, visually dominated by the famous Watts Towers; the tournament in Lafayette Park near MacArthur Park; and the Crenshaw area where Sidney and Rhonda Deane [Tyra Ferrell] live) before returning to Venice and, toward the end of the story, Santa Monica. Yet the movie manages to make all the inner-city neighborhoods look as attractive, sunny, and lively as the beach communities. In fact, somebody not paying too much attention to the specificities of the various locations, and given that the characters often return to the Oceanside, might think that the characters never leave Venice, Santa Monica, and neighboring...
areas. Everywhere is equally sunny and visualized through the energy and vibrancy provided by the game. Going against dominant discourses of the city, *White Men* is remarkably democratic in its attempt to bring into the realm of comedy areas of LA almost exclusively associated with poverty, criminality, and danger. Conversely, it could be argued that, rather than everywhere else in the space of the film being made to look like an extension of Venice, it is Venice that, with its new racial makeup, has turned into the inner-city neighborhoods without losing its sunny appearance. Like Billy, Venice has also “gone black.”

The combination of acknowledgment of racial tension and envisioning of a future in which diversity can be celebrated beyond vacuous official discourses is based on the traditional dichotomy of black and white that in Los Angeles, as everywhere else in the country, is no longer operative, if it ever was. *White Men* can be related to *Boyz n the Hood* and the hood films of the period in highlighting African American experience as an antidote to a long history of white dominance. Both films articulate their respective critiques of white masculinity, however differently, on the basis of its oppression of African Americans. *White Men* constructs its racial utopia as the result of a simple turning of the social tables between white and black. Like *Grand Canyon*, its attempt at political correctness is predominantly based on racial binarism. Also like *Grand Canyon*, the racial diversity that deconstructs this binarism is also present, except that, whereas in Kasdan’s movie this presence is marginal and remains practically outside the frame, in *White Men* it is embodied in the formidable character of Gloria.

On one level, Gloria’s role in the film is that of the woman who highlights Billy’s inadequate masculinity, just as Sidney provides the contrast to his whiteness. As mentioned, she spells out the limitations of Billy’s binary approach to both basketball and relationships. Earlier she had mystified her boyfriend when, after telling him she is thirsty, she reprimanded him for bringing her a glass of water, instead of “sympathizing with her drymouthedness.” Billy’s world of simple solutions (a way for men to control women, according to a magazine she has read) is not good enough for her. She relates binarism to her boyfriend’s inability to get on in life and his constant wrong decision making. But she is also critical of Sidney’s racial binarism. When Sidney objects to Billy playing Hendrix in the car because he is white, she reminds him that Hendrix’s drummer was white, that is, that Jimi himself was not as intolerant toward white people’s musical abilities as he is. Given the movie’s emphasis on masculinity, Gloria, along with Sidney’s wife, Rhonda, provides the counterpoint within a postfeminist discourse on sexual politics. At the same time, Gloria Clemente is there to break the racial dichotomy on which the text is based.

Like *Falling Down*, *White Men* posits an alliance between white and black that excludes other races and even makes them invisible. In *White Men* it is not just that Venice Beach, a predominantly white community, has become mostly black; the inner city and South Central locations show no trace of the Latino or the Asian communities that one month later would become such central players in the riots. Given that part of the pent-up anger of South Central African Americans about their living conditions would be directed against the other racial minorities whom they thought were trespassing on their territory and stealing their jobs, *White Men*, like *Falling Down*, is also utopian, although in a different sense, in its summary erasure of any Angeleno who is not white or black. Yet this attitude is contradicted by the narrative centrality of Gloria.

The presence of the “brown” woman, then, reminds us that in Los Angeles not only must black and white learn to live together and benefit from their differences and from each other’s strengths, but room must also be made for brown, a skin color that, after all, constitutes more than half the city’s population. Gloria’s presence is a powerful reminder of the ethnic diversity and complexity of Los Angeles, a social makeup that needs to be taken into consideration before a future of social equality and justice can be envisaged. The film’s ending suggests that, although maybe
Chapter 2

On one level, Gloria’s role in the film is that of the woman who highlights Billy’s inadequate masculinity, just as Sidney provides the contrast to his whiteness. As mentioned, she spells out the limitations of Billy’s binary approach to both basketball and relationships. Earlier she had mystified her boyfriend when, after telling him she is thirsty, she reprimanded him for bringing her a glass of water, instead of “sympathizing with her drymouthedness.” Billy’s world of simple solutions (a way for men to control women, according to a magazine she has read) is not good enough for her. She relates binarism to her boyfriend’s inability to get on in life and his constant wrong decision making. But she is also critical of Sidney’s racial binarism. When Sidney objects to Billy playing Hendrix in the car because he is white, she reminds him that Hendrix’s drummer was white, that is, that Jimi himself was not as intolerant toward white people’s musical abilities as he is. Given the movie’s emphasis on masculinity, Gloria, along with Sidney’s wife, Rhonda, provides the counterpoint within a postfeminist discourse on sexual politics. At the same time, Gloria Clemente is there to break the racial dichotomy on which the text is based.

Like Falling Down, White Men posits an alliance between white and black that excludes other races and even makes them invisible. In White Men it is not just that Venice Beach, a predominantly white community, has become mostly black; the inner city and South Central locations show no trace of the Latino or the Asian communities that one month later would become such central players in the riots. Given that part of the pent-up anger of South Central African Americans about their living conditions would be directed against the other racial minorities whom they thought were trespassing on their territory and stealing their jobs, White Men, like Falling Down, is also utopian, although in a different sense, in its summary assurance of any Angeleno who is not white or black. Yet this attitude is contradicted by the narrative centrality of Gloria.

The combination of acknowledgment of racial tension and envisioning of a future in which diversity can be celebrated beyond vacuous official discourses is based on the traditional dichotomy of black and white that in Los Angeles, as everywhere else in the country, is no longer operative, if it ever was. White Men can be related to Boyz n the Hood and the hood films of the period in highlighting African American experience as an antidote to a long history of white dominance. Both films articulate their respective critiques of white masculinity, however differently, on the basis of its oppression of African Americans. White Men constructs its racial utopia as the result of a simple turning of the social tables between white and black. Like Grand Canyon, its attempt at political correctness is predominantly based on racial binarism. Also like Grand Canyon, the racial diversity that deconstructs this binarism is also present, except that, whereas in Kasdan’s movie this presence is marginal and remains practically outside the frame, in White Men it is embodied in the formidable character of Gloria.

areas. Everywhere is equally sunny and visualized through the energy and vibrancy provided by the game. Going against dominant discourses of the city, White Men is remarkably democratic in its attempt to bring into the realm of comedy areas of LA almost exclusively associated with poverty, criminality, and danger. Conversely, it could be argued that, rather than everywhere else in the space of the film being made to look like an extension of Venice, it is Venice that, with its new racial makeup, has turned into the inner-city neighborhoods without losing its sunny appearance. Like Billy, Venice has also “gone black.”

The presence of the “brown” woman, then, reminds us that in Los Angeles not only must black and white learn to live together and benefit from their differences and from each other’s strengths, but room must also be made for brown, a skin color that, after all, constitutes more than half the city’s population. Gloria’s presence is a powerful reminder of the ethnic diversity and complexity of Los Angeles, a social makeup that needs to be taken into consideration before a future of social equality and justice can be envisaged. The film’s ending suggests that, although maybe
White Men Can’t Jump and Falling Down are two mainstream productions from a Hollywood industry that was on the verge of drastic changes, especially as the contemporaneous success of independent cinema was starting to bring about its co-optation by the big studios and the redrawing of the boundaries between mainstream and independent. Released just before (White Men) and after (Falling Down) the social event that marked the beginning of contemporary LA, the two films outline the industry’s cultural and ideological engagement with current urban discourses. In a general sense, as cinematic narratives of LA in the early 1990s, the two films show awareness of the conflicts and contradictions at the center of those urban discourses. Their different generic registers and their different aspirations as records of reality produced drastically diverse reactions from audiences and critics. They both had different things to say about ethnic tensions and relationships and tapped into different traditions of cinematic Los Angeles, but they were both part of an ongoing social conversation that allowed people to look back at the city’s darkest history and at the same time ahead to the future. In retrospect, both films offer alternative visions of the same anxiety-ridden society that produced the riots. These two movies, along with Grand Canyon and a few others, openly engaged with the social crisis that was about to erupt (or in the case of Falling Down had just erupted). Later films would reflect the resilience of traditional tropes and the industry’s ability to find ways to allow alternative visions to creep in. Both tendencies would insert themselves in what might be described as a classical tradition of cinematic representations of Los Angeles. That tradition and its continuation in post-1992 movies are the subject of the two chapters in Part 1.

white and black, with the necessary adjustments, could in the early 1990s begin to imagine living together in the magic comic space of a film, the time was not yet ripe (both in Hollywood and in Angeleno society) to consider Latinos and Latinas on the same footing (Asian Americans are not even seen in the film). In White Men the future of an urban society that has learned from its past is still some way off, but at least this comic story of racial difference points in the right direction.

Even the inclusion of the Latina woman in the magic circle can be seen as just a matter of time: “If I listen to the woman, do I have to agree with her, too?” Billy asks Sidney when Gloria has just left him, to which Sidney replies, “No, no, no. You listen. That’s a good enough start. I don’t want to stress you out.” The exchange is inscribed within the interracial homosocial bonding that makes the ending happy, even though the heterosexual couple does not end up together, but the incorporation of Gloria and the group she stands for (not only women but also Latinos and Latinas) does not seem far off: All the Anglo man has to do is understand her importance and the justice of her demands. And what both the Anglo and the African American men need to learn is the inevitability of a more complex society than the one they are learning to build together, at least in this utopian comedy. Gloria may be gone at the end of the story and Billy may not fully understand her yet, but she, along with millions of her ethnic group, is sure to come back to ask not just for visibility but also for justice and equality in their city.
White Men Can’t Jump and Falling Down are two mainstream productions from a Hollywood industry that was on the verge of drastic changes, especially as the contemporaneous success of independent cinema was starting to bring about its co-optation by the big studios and the redrawing of the boundaries between mainstream and independent. Released just before (White Men) and after (Falling Down) the social event that marked the beginning of contemporary LA, the two films outline the industry’s cultural and ideological engagement with current urban discourses. In a general sense, as cinematic narratives of LA in the early 1990s, the two films show awareness of the conflicts and contradictions at the center of those urban discourses. Their different generic registers and their different aspirations as records of reality produced drastically diverse reactions from audiences and critics. They both had different things to say about ethnic tensions and relationships and tapped into different traditions of cinematic Los Angeles, but they were both part of an ongoing social conversation that allowed people to look back at the city’s darkest history and at the same time ahead to the future. In retrospect, both films offer alternative visions of the same anxiety-ridden society that produced the riots. These two movies, along with Grand Canyon and a few others, openly engaged with the social crisis that was about to erupt (or in the case of Falling Down had just erupted). Later films would reflect the resilience of traditional tropes and the industry’s ability to find ways to allow alternative visions to creep in. Both tendencies would insert themselves in what might be described as a classical tradition of cinematic representations of Los Angeles. That tradition and its continuation in post-1992 movies are the subject of the two chapters in Part 1.

White Men Can’t Jump: listen to the brown woman.

black and white, with the necessary adjustments, could in the early 1990s begin to imagine living together in the magic comic space of a film, the time was not yet ripe (both in Hollywood and in Angeleno society) to consider Latinos and Latinas on the same footing (Asian Americans are not even seen in the film). In White Men the future of an urban society that has learned from its past is still some way off, but at least this comic story of racial difference points in the right direction.

Even the inclusion of the Latina woman in the magic circle can be seen as just a matter of time: “If I listen to the woman, do I have to agree with her, too?” Billy asks Sidney when Gloria has just left him, to which Sidney replies, “No, no, no. You listen. That’s a good enough start. I don’t want to stress you out.” The exchange is inscribed within the interracial homosocial bonding that makes the ending happy, even though the heterosexual couple does not end up together, but the incorporation of Gloria and the group she stands for (not only women but also Latinos and Latinas) does not seem far off: All the Anglo man has to do is understand her importance and the justice of her demands. And what both the Anglo and the African American men need to learn is the inevitability of a more complex society than the one they are learning to build together, at least in this utopian comedy. Gloria may be gone at the end of the story and Billy may not fully understand her yet, but she, along with millions of her ethnic group, is sure to come back to ask not just for visibility but also for justice and equality in their city.