

# BLUES CITY

A Walk in Oakland

*Ishmael Reed*





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A WALK IN OAKLAND

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 CROWN JOURNEYS  
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*This book is dedicated to David McClure,  
“The Gum Man.”*



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## New York

UNLIKE OAKLAND WRITER Joaquin Miller, whose *The Destruction of Gotham* (1886) painted a grim portrait of New York, or Jack London and George “the Greek” Sterling, whose experiences in New York were depressing, or Bret Harte, who went broke there after the novelty of being a cowboy writer wore off, I was spoiled by New York. Western writers, at least in the view of urbane easterners, have usually been classified as cranks. Jack London, a socialist, cussed out some wealthy New Yorkers, and the western-style dress of London and Joaquin Miller was viewed with amused curiosity by New Yorkers. Much later, San Francisco writer Richard Brautigan continued the tradition of bewitching easterners with frontier attire and manners. He’d be dressed as a cowboy when I used to meet him at 1 Fifth Avenue in Greenwich Village for lunch in the 1960s. This eccentricity seemed to be provoked by the westerner’s presence in the hostile East.

But I had the opposite experience. It wasn’t New York that frustrated me but San Francisco. In 1958, when I was twenty, I traveled to the city from my hometown of Buffalo in a beat-up car with two friends, an Italian-American named David and a Native American named Kirk. Kirk drove. Of course, we didn’t know he was Native American until he slammed the brakes in anger when David, upon seeing some Native Americans on the street, remarked, “Look at those drunken Indians.” Once the car had come to a sudden stop, Kirk said, “You’ve been seated next to one all day.”

We hung around North Beach for a couple of months but, unable to find jobs, headed back to Buffalo. The police stopped us for speeding near North Platte, Nebraska, and arrested Kirk. We were stranded. David and I went to a local restaurant to figure out a plan when, overhearing our predicament, the strawberry-haired waitress told us to go to her house and have dinner. She said that her sister was home. I think that I must have been one of the few blacks in town, because as we were headed to the waitress’s house, an Indian woman, sitting in a passing truck, pointed at me frantically. The driver, a black man, saw me and, with a startled look, began to wave. He waved until the truck was out of sight. I was a kind of celebrity, accorded the kind of treatment that black American celebrities received in Europe at the time—a combination of shock and fascination. It was an exciting week all around in North Platte: In addition to the presence of a second real, live black man, a man claiming to be Buffalo Bill’s grandson, goatee and all, was putting on a show.

Later that day I went to the judge’s house and explained to him that we had to be back at school the following Monday. He was seated in a rocking chair and wearing a top hat like the one Lincoln used to wear. He ordered that Kirk be released, and we made it back to Buffalo. After the coldness of San Francisco, where we were dependent upon the hospitality of a few friends to keep us alive, I had welcomed the warmth of North Platte, Nebraska. I will never forget North Platte, Nebraska.





I BEGAN WRITING in Buffalo, New York, and in my late teens, I collaborated with some black intellectuals to build a theater group at the black YMCA, but I was getting nowhere. In 1960 I was living in the Talbert Mall projects (named for a black abolitionist) and stuck in a marriage that was destructive for my young wife, our child, and me. My main problem was that I couldn't find a job that paid a decent salary, and even though I had a few years of college, no white-collar firm would hire me. I remember answering an ad for Allstate Insurance and the personnel person saying that he liked the way I sounded on the phone. He asked me to come to his suburban office for an interview. I naively thought that I had the job, even went out and bought a new suit. But when I showed up for the interview, he took one look and told me that there was nothing for me. I tried to get a job at IBM as a salesperson, but the interviewer said that my math was bad. There were no equal-opportunity or affirmative-action provisions in those days. I couldn't even get a job as a laborer at the plant where my stepfather worked. Buffalo, a manufacturing town in those days, had been good to him and my mother, who were part of the 1940s migration from the South. He told me, when I announced that I was moving to New York City, "If you can't make it in Buffalo, you can't make it anywhere." I was stuck at a low-paying job at General Hospital on High Street, and often I would go to the bar, located a block away from the projects, and play "Please Mr. Postman" by the Marvelettes. I wanted someone to deliver a message that would get me out of my situation. I was writing a play and acting in local theater productions, but outlets for such expression were limited in Buffalo.

One weekend in 1962 I went to New York and hung out at a tavern called Chumley's on Bedford Street in Greenwich Village. On the walls, the book jackets of famous authors who'd drunk there, people like Edna St. Vincent Millay, were on display. Hooked on the literary life, I left Buffalo for New York in 1962. I was twenty-three years old. I joined the Umbra workshop of African-American writers, and attended parties where Norman Mailer, Ralph Ellison, Amiri Baraka, and James Baldwin were holding forth. By the time I was twenty-seven, I had a book contract with Doubleday, thanks to the assistance of poet Langston Hughes and the late editor Anne Freedgood.

Boxer Mike Tyson once defined *tragedy* as giving millions of dollars to a twenty-year-old. I didn't receive even \$1 million, but I was still not ready for early literary success. I messed up. Drank too much. Talked too much. Left a trail of hurt feelings. I wasn't used to such attention. My poetry was quoted in the *New York Times*. My name was dropped in gossip columns. I wasn't up to the dinner party held in my honor at Doubleday's town house, the adulation of women, the fame that accompanied being young, gifted, and black in the New York of the 1960s. The jacket of my first novel, *The Freeway Lance Pallbearers*, was put up on the wall at Chumley's months before the book itself had even come out.

I was living with a dancer/choreographer named Carla Blank. We had an apartment on Twenty-third Street in Chelsea. Carla was a star among an avant-garde group of dancers and artists that included Meredith Monk, Elaine Summers, and Sally Gross. Her last major public performance in New York, with collaborator Suzushi Hanayagi, titled *The Wall Street Journal*, had received a standing ovation and cheers at Judson Church. But we both felt a need for change. For new challenges.

I tell people that if I'd remained in New York, I would have been murdered by affection. Indeed, New York's ability to absorb talent is one of the reasons that among American cities, it's still the most brilliant. But such affection can lull you into apathy. Alfred Kazin told Ralph Ellison that if he hadn't spent so much time hanging out at "21," Ellison could have finished his second novel.

whereupon a scuffle reportedly ensued. Ellison wore out his welcome among the literati, and by the time he made a public break with his sponsors it was too late. He'd lost his creative juice. My solution to wearing out my welcome was to leave, and in 1967 Carla and I went to Los Angeles. We spent a very frugal summer there. She worked as a theater instructor at Eddie Rickenbacker's camp in the mountains. Because I had received an advance from Doubleday, I was able to remain in our apartment in Echo Park Canyon, working on my second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*, a deconstructionist Western, before the term became an American academic buzzword.

In September we traveled to Berkeley. We found an apartment in a tacky-tack and waited for the publication of my first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. The book came out and nothing happened. Of course, had I remained in New York there would have been the network interviews, the parties and bookstore appearances, but I was on the West Coast, which Mike Gold, the New York communist writer of the 1930s, described as a sanatorium. I could just as soon have been in another country. We were broke, but a couple of days after I'd returned from the Berkeley unemployment office, I got a call from the late Thomas Parkinson, then professor of English at U.C. Berkeley, inviting me to teach. That was 1968. I've been teaching there ever since.

At first I lived in different Berkeley neighborhoods. I wrote *Mumbo Jumbo*, my third and best known novel, in an apartment that was part of a huge house with a Japanese garden. It was located on Bret Harte Way, named for the famous Oaklander and chronicler of western lore. By the late seventies Carla and I were living in El Cerrito, a small, conservative town with a lot of gun shops on the main drag, located north of Berkeley. In 1979 we began house hunting in Oakland, although it had a bad reputation and I had reservations about moving there. (I had even made some unfair and disparaging remarks about the town in *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, published in 1974.) We were about to decide upon a purchase of a house on Market Street when poet Victor Cruz's then-wife, Elisa, told us that the house we wanted was around the corner. She'd had a dream of our buying a house in Oakland and the house around the corner was a match for the one she'd seen in her dream. It was a huge Queen Anne Victorian in dilapidated condition. Having a mother whose psychic abilities are acute, I decided to take Elisa's advice. We bought it. Her wisdom has been borne out; over the years we've nearly restored the home to its original splendor.



IN 1979, when I moved to Oakland, the city was a model for black power, partially due to the efforts of the Black Panther party, which had helped to transform the city from a feudal backwater run by a few families to a modern city with worldwide recognition. From the seventies through the nineties there was a black mayor, a black symphony conductor, a black museum head, black members of the black city council, and, in Robert Maynard, the only black publisher of a major news daily. Mayor Lionel Wilson, whom the Panthers wanted to lead a nationalist surge like Sun Yat-sen, a U.S. congressman, supervisors, and other black elected officials openly attributed their electoral success to support from the Black Panther party.

The Panthers supported the campaign of our current mayor, Jerry Brown, too, and the scene at his commune after he'd won the mayoral election in 1999 resembled a Black Panther party reunion. B

soon the Panthers and many other black supporters broke with Brown. The decline of Oakland's black power began with the election of Brown, whom some say deceived his progressive black supporters with anticorporate broadcasts aired on Pacifica Radio's KPFA before the election. He wouldn't be the first Oakland mayor elected through the efforts of blacks only to abandon them once in office; progressive conservationist mayor had done the same thing more than a hundred years earlier. The only reminder of the power that blacks once wielded might be the names of black leaders etched on downtown buildings, the post office, a courthouse, and the federal and state buildings, like monuments to now-forgotten pharaohs covered by desert sand or the Oakland schools and streets now named for forgotten invaders from New Spain (Mexico). But now that many of Brown's policies have failed, Wilson Riles Jr., the mayor's opponent in the last election, predicted that African-American influence was making a comeback, and that the mayor's much ballyhooed plan to draw middle-income blacks and hi-techers at the expense of low-income blacks would fail. A couple of days after interviewing Wilson Riles Jr. for this book, my daughter Tennessee and I ran into Dori Maynard, daughter of the late Robert Maynard, at DeLauer's, Oakland's all-night newsstand. As if to confirm Riles's comment about a black comeback, Dori said that she and some other black Oaklanders were restoring a Victorian block in West Oakland under a first-time home ownership plan, planting roots.

Still, as a result of Brown's "elegant density" plan announced during his 1999 campaign—nicknamed "10K" because it aimed to bring ten thousand new residents into downtown Oakland—many poor residents and residents of modest means are finding themselves priced out of the city. Brown had promised that this wouldn't happen. He described his elegant density plan in a speech that was reprinted in a 1999 article in *Whole Earth* magazine: "He wants to create construction jobs and stimulate the retail and entertainment sectors. He's trying to bring 10,000 people to live downtown. He's trying not to overwhelm these areas with too much new traffic or turn downtown Oakland into a gentrified hub at the expense of low-income residents."

To provide a model city for elegant density, Brown invoked Manhattan.

I'm trying to do things that will, at least indirectly, deal with the issue of sustainability. That's why I've said, Let's have some density. Instead of a vision of Pleasanton [a local suburb], we could have a vision of Manhattan. In fact, at one meeting, I said, Think Hong Kong. That's come back to me with derision. People don't like that, because they like space. So I've tried to create an image that would make it more acceptable. I call it "elegant density." Have you ever tried to go from one side of Manhattan to another? That's "elegant density." People are close to one another. You have time in your car. You're not going to get there in five minutes, so you can enjoy having a conversation with the person with you. You have to enjoy where you are. It is a lot of people and it is alive and there is culture and art, and yes, there is money and investment. It's a hell of a civilization. I don't know how sustainable it is, but it's active.

Brown's use of Manhattan as a model should have been the tip-off, because black and Puerto Rican removal has been the policy of several recent New York mayors. Moreover, none of us who supported Brown had heeded the warning from the *San Francisco Bay View*, a black newspaper, which noticed how the Brown campaign staff included few minorities.

Eviction rates have tripled since he took office. Three-quarters of these evictions have been reported by African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans. Rents have increased 20 to 30 percent in the last three years. For some, the invasion of the hi-techers, the '99ers, from San Francisco and elsewhere, can be regarded as the worst disaster to happen to Oakland since the invasion of the '49ers—the gold-crazed hordes who came crashing into Oakland in the mid-1800s. Classical buildings and traditional landmarks are being leveled and replaced by vertical trailer parks that seem to go up

overnight. The success of Brown's operation hinged upon the continuation of a booming hi-tech economy. Why, with his New Age Zen smarts, Brown couldn't foresee the bubble's bursting is puzzling. The signs were visible in 1999. Now, because of Brown's blindness, the ugly boxlike condominiums are vacant in a slumping market, according to a powerful Realtor. Brown is not the first Oakland mayor to be swallowed by the downtown Brasília fantasy.

When Mayor Brown was asked whether his plan to gentrify downtown would threaten diversity, he replied ("tartly," according to his supporter George Will), "There is no diversity there now. You have a concentrated, homogenous population—the elderly, parolees, people in rehab, from mental hospitals, transients. This is not the vibrant civic culture some might have in mind." Obviously, this is not the Brown who worked alongside Mother Teresa.

Having observed the fine work of Sisters Caroline and Maureen at Friendly Manor, a halfway house for women in recovery located on San Pablo in downtown Oakland, I thought this remark especially cruel. I contrasted it with remarks that 1900 mayoral candidate Jack London, a socialist, made before a gathering of wealthy New Yorkers: "You have been entrusted with the world; you have muddled and mismanaged it. You are incompetent, despite all your boastings. A million years ago the caveman, without tools, with small brain, and with nothing but the strength of his body, managed to feed his wife and children, so that through him the race survived. You, on the other hand, armed with all the modern means of production, multiplying the productive capacity of the caveman a million times—yet you incompetents and muddlers, you are unable to secure to millions even the paltry amount of bread that would sustain their physical life. You have mismanaged the world and it shall be taken from you!" Having been born out of wedlock and having lived in poverty during his childhood, Jack London, were he alive today, would probably be part of that "concentrated, homogenous population" at which Brown aimed his Marie Antoinette-like sneer. Clearly, there would have been no place for Jack London in Jerry Brown's Oakland. London said, "I had been born poor. Poor I had lived. I had gone hungry on occasion. I had never had toys nor [sic] playthings like other children. My first memories of life were pinched by poverty. The pinch of poverty had been chronic."



IN THE LATE AFTERNOON downtown Oakland still resembles the blue-collar Canal Street of New Orleans more than it does Fifth Avenue. The dot-commers, hi-techers, siliconers, and others who were summoned to Oakland when Brown announced his elegant density plan in 1999 wouldn't be the first invasion to change the face of the city. The new '99ers, like their forebears in the 1849 Gold Rush, chose not to abide by the Calvinist ethic and accumulate wealth over the long haul but chose to get rich quick. They have that in common with the gang members—outlaw capitalists—who were responsible for Oakland's high murder rate in 2002, the 150th anniversary of the city's founding by men who might today be called white-collar criminals. These founders leased land from a member of a Mexican family, then violated the lease by selling it to squatters. By the time the courts sided with the Peralta family, the squatters had established a city with the lead swindler electing himself mayor. Clearly crime waves are nothing new to Oakland.

Homelessness isn't new to California, either. By boat, the '49ers embarked from San Francisco for

Oakland. From there they traveled to the Sierra foothills, the site of gold's discovery. Instead of uprooting African-Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans, as the '99ers are doing, the gold rush drove out the New Spanish and the Native American populations through genocide and land theft. One witness says that the invaders treated the Indians as though they were wild animals. From the beginning of the Gold Rush to its end, the Native American population was reduced from about three hundred thousand to twenty-six thousand. But just as the bubble of the dot-com rush burst, so did that of the '49ers. Bret Harte, who was run out of Humboldt County for complaining about the Gunther Island Massacre of Indian women and children in 1860, writes about visiting mining camps and finding the once-hopeful miners destitute. (Bret Harte's neighborhood is remembered by some Victorian houses located at 567–577 Fifth Street, which is called Bret Harte Boardwalk Historical District.) After the craze for gold ended, the miners, according to historian Mary Jo Wainwright, came out of the mountains looking for land. The New Spanish had the land, which the American invaders from the east began squatting on or, as in the case of the original Oakland squatters, obtaining through lengthy court battles that were deliberately prolonged so that by the time the courts decided in favor of the new Spanish, ownership of the land became a moot point.

The gold rushers arrived at the foot of Broadway, where the American occupation of California's interior begins. It is called Jack London Square, and a bronze statue of the author stands before the Oakland estuary, once called the Contra Costa Bayou. (Contra Costa means "other shore.") California has never recovered from the damage caused by those earlier invaders, the '49ers, and their treatment of the California natives must rank as one of the cruelest episodes in human history. Moreover, tons of mercury used in processing the gold are still poisoning the wildlife of the bay. Whether Oakland will recover from the invasion of the '99ers remains to be seen.



BROWN'S TOUGH-LOVE posture towards blacks and the poor has earned him an award from the far right Manhattan Institute and kudos from white supremacist columnist George Will. But shortly after the endorsements, Brown made a stirring anticapitalist speech, which only increased his reputation for flakiness. Blacks are moving east to the Sacramento Valley and elsewhere, where living costs are more reasonable. Oakland, however, hasn't become New Hampshire yet. And so, even with the black drain that is occurring under Brown, Oakland still hosts one of the most ethnically diverse populations in the country, a callaloo of cultures. In the winter of 2001, in preparation for writing this book, I attended a black cowboy parade, a Kwanzaa celebration, and a powwow. In addition, I visited Yoshi's, Oakland's landmark nightclub located in Jack London Square, and heard a Lakota musician play John Coltrane's "Naima" in traditional Lakota style. Oakland is a city where identities blur. Where one encounters hip-hop dancers at a festival in Chinatown; where the mistress of ceremonies at a Kwanzaa celebration is a white woman in Yoruba dress; where, perhaps less surprising, about a fifth of the audience at a Native American powwow is black. As if those events weren't enough to reflect the cultural stew, I attended a springtime carnival that celebrated Oshun, a Nigerian "saint." Oshun, daughter of the Yoruba god Olodumare, who made the crossing to Brazil when blacks first arrived there, has become a fashion inspiration to black women in Oakland and elsewhere. (This wouldn't be the only Oakland event I attended during the 150th anniversary of the city at which African "saints"

were invoked—Milton Cardona, who appears on a record called *Conjure*, which features my songs and poetry, invoked Elegba during a performance on drums at Yoshi's while accompanying Don Byrd (known for mixing jazz with klezmer music.) On August 24, 2002, I went to the Chinatown fest and watched Polynesian dancers perform under the watchful eye of a dark-skinned biracial leader named Mahea. Despite the failure of arts middlepersons to serve Oakland's artistic community, writing this book has convinced me that among American cities, Oakland is unique. It combines the beauty of the West, the mountains, rivers, and forests, with the gritty naturalism of old northeastern industrial towns. When you watch the crowds of blacks, Asians, and Hispanics coexisting peacefully in the late afternoon on Broadway and Fourteenth, near the Tribune Tower, you get a glimpse of what the world could look like.

But of all of the events I attended in connection with the writing of this book, those that drew the biggest audiences were those in which the legendary Oakland blues singers sang, preached, and shouted out the blues. Oakland is Blues City, and one of the reasons I like it here is because it has the feel of labor cities in the Northeast such as Detroit, Cleveland, and Buffalo. Oakland is Buffalo with weather. Husky and brawling like Carl Sandburg's "Chicago"—and not like one of Sandburg's "soft cities" that the current administration desires Oakland to become, or like San Francisco, poet George Sterling's "Cool, Grey City of Love." The difference between Mayor Brown and some of us is more than political. There are aesthetic differences as well. Blues is the music of the working class, of the brawling and husky, and one of the nation's largest blues festivals, drawing as many as forty thousand people, is the Annual BBQ, Blues, and Beer Festival. It takes place each year near next door to Evered and Jones Barbecue, located in Jack London Square. I was standing near a fence, dancing in place, taking photos and notes, when Jerry Brown showed up. Nobody noticed him. He looked lost. The blues people complain that they don't receive as much support from the city as the gay pride parade does. The Black Cowboys make the same complaint. But if Brown wants to do a makeover of Oakland, which for some is still the ugly stepsister of San Francisco, the stepsister is resisting. Oakland has more in common with Bret Harte's Cherokee Sal than with Jeanette McDonald. More in common with the blues than with soft rock.

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## *The Birthplace of Oakland*

**AUGUST 17, 2002**

AT 10:00 A.M. my daughter Tennessee and I show up for the Jack London waterfront walking tour sponsored by the city of Oakland. There are five of us, including an African-American author whose reason for being there is an interest in things Oakland. He says he's shown up for some of my poetry readings. I apologize for boring him. There's an elderly white couple from Barthrup-on-Humber, an English town that boasts a church almost a thousand years old. They are dressed for gardening. The tour begins at 101 Broadway, the location of the old Overland House restaurant built in 1887 and now home to Barclay's Restaurant. Our tour guides, two relaxed senior citizens named Virginia La Faille and Pearl McCarthy, are dressed casually in golf hats, patterned blouses, and black pants. We head toward the foot of Broadway, which originated as an Indian dirt path, then became a cattle trail, and then a streetcar line connecting Oakland and Berkeley. This is where the American history of Oakland begins. Moses Chase, a Yankee settler, landed here in 1849 and set up a tent on land belonging to Lucretia Maria Peralta. A conniving wheeler-dealer named Horace W. Carpentier (born Carpenter), Oakland's first mayor, obtained sole ownership of the entire waterfront in 1852, as a result of double-dealing the Peralta family.

We visit the port of Oakland, the third-largest port on the West Coast and the fourth largest in the United States. The *Cielo D. Europa Cagliari* is in the port today and the cranes, some of which are twenty stories high, unload its cargo onto the dock. Oakland was the first major port on the West Coast to build terminals for what port literature describes as "then-revolutionary containership" becoming the second largest port in the world in container tonnage in the late 1960s and second only to New York in container terminal acreage." The goods carried by the container ships, thirty to forty of which pass through the port daily, are loaded and unloaded for distribution throughout the world.

The importance of the port would hit home during the last week of September 2002, when the longshoremen would go on strike over the issues of safety and the union's quest to control jobs tied to new technology. Thousands of pounds of vegetables meant for Asia would lie rotting on the dock. Auto parts, furniture, shoes, and toys would remain unloaded. More than 60 percent of the country's computer equipment passes through the port. Without the port, retailers would have to pay for expensive airfreight, which costs three times as much as shipping, and pass the costs on to consumers. The longshoreman's strike would total losses of \$1 billion for each day of the strike, a refreshing reminder that the roots of the city and the country are in sweaty labor, and testimony to the power of blue-collar muscle-flexing.

Ferries that run round-trip to San Francisco are also located here at the foot of Broadway. These ferries came in handy after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake damaged some of the East Bay freeways. Captain Thomas Gray, grandfather of famous dancer Isadora Duncan, began the first ferry service to San Francisco in 1850. The USS *Potomac*, a yacht that once belonged to Franklin Roosevelt,

is docked at the ferry terminal. Built in 1934 as the Coast Guard cutter *Electra*, it became presidential yacht in 1936. Called the “floating White House” by Eleanor Roosevelt, it is the prize of the waterfront. Among those whom the president entertained on the yacht were King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. One of the tour guides says that for \$75 you can book a luncheon on the yacht and take an excursion on the water. The booking office is nearby. Five million dollars, mostly Oakland money, was raised to restore the yacht, which had fallen into disrepair as well as ill repute. At one time, it was in the possession of drug dealers. When the U.S. Customs Office auctioned it off the port of Oakland was the only bidder. It went for \$15,000.

Around the corner from the booking office, which displays photos from the time when the *Potomac* was more than an exhibition ship, sits Yoshi's, one of the most famous jazz clubs in the world. Formerly located on Claremont Street in Berkeley, it was lured to its present site by a subsidy from the city of Oakland. We pass Jack London Cinema, one of the new-style multiplexes with reclining seats with cups for drinks, en route to a building that was once Oakland's Western Pacific Railroad Station. It was saved from demolition in 1974 by Oakland's city planning department and named Oakland's number one landmark. At one time, Oakland's port was controlled by a Central (later Southern) Pacific Railroad subsidiary that had been formed by one of San Francisco's big four: Charles Crocker, Collis P. Huntington, Mark Hopkins, and Leland Stanford. Rebecca Solnit, author of *River of Shadows*, says of the big four, “Their corruption was as vast as their profit!” According to Abby Wasserman in her anthology, *The Spirit of Oakland*, the agreement to bring the railroad to Oakland was actually brokered by Dr. Samuel Merritt, the city's mayor in 1868. The first mayor, Horace W. Carpentier, ran the waterfront and the railroads through scheming and conniving until the 1900s, when he was challenged by Jay Gould. The passenger station opened in 1910. In the 1940s, kings, movie stars, and presidents, along with thousands of other passengers, boarded the legendary Zephyr, a diesel-powered streamliner with a Vistadome roof that one could take from Oakland to Chicago. The original Zephyr was discontinued in 1970. When the Oakland station became the terminus for the West Coast, winning out over San Francisco, Oakland began to grow from a suburb of San Francisco and a resort town for rich San Franciscans to a city with a burgeoning population of its own.

Our journey continues past Kimball's Carnival, a Latin dance club that boasts eighteen billiard tables and salsa lessons on Wednesdays. If you like the blues, Bluesville, a blues club, is located nearby. We pass eating places such as The Bistro Cafe, The Fat Lady, Everett and Jones Barbecue, and the Oakland Grill, where the mayor has breakfast from time to time. Then we reach the produce area. Truckloads of vegetables and fruit are brought here from the Central Valley farm-land to be bought by Oakland restaurants. These produce warehouses used to be run by the Italians, who once lived in the district. They've been replaced by Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese. In the old days, industries settled near Jack London Square to be near the railroads, but most of them have given way to live/work lofts, apartments, and condominiums built for the new arrivals, the '99ers. To remind us of the past, signs on building walls read THE AMERICAN BAG COMPANY or ALLIED PAPER CO. but just for show, to lend a texture of grit so the newcomers can enjoy their authentic surroundings. A new postmodern version of the old station is located near the mayor's commune-style residence which has the ironic name of “We the People.” As a fully credentialed Boho, Jerry Brown maintains a countercultural style while practicing a brutal capitalist philosophy. A group of cowboy policemen called the “riders,” on trial for terrorizing young African-American men, said in their defense that



they thought they were carrying out the mayor's mandate.

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This new train station was named for C. L. Dellums, and includes some of the wooden benches from the old station. In the first half of the twentieth century, the railroads brought thousands of blacks to Oakland. C. L. Dellums was one of them. An African-American from Corsicana, Texas, he began work as a Pullman car porter in 1924. In 1925 he was elected West Coast vice president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, which at the time was led by its first president, A. Philip Randolph. The brotherhood was the first black union chartered by the AFL, and the job of a porter, while still a kind of domestic, was among the best available to black men in the years before the civil rights movement. The union also became known for its social activism beyond the world of train porters. For many years, Dellums tackled such issues as police brutality and the miserable conditions in which black agricultural workers existed. In 1968, Dellums succeeded Randolph as president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. The new train station, then, serves as another concrete reminder of Oakland's roots in labor and resistance, roots that have withstood waves of urban crisis and gentrification so far. C. L. Dellums's nephew, Congressman Ronald Dellums, served the Berkeley-Oakland district for many years, and the recently built twin-towered federal building is named for him.

Crossing the sky bridge connecting the station to the site of what was once Jack London Village affords an excellent view of Jack London Square and the surrounding area. We pass an empty lot slated to become a parking lot for '99ers dwelling in a new development with the generic name "The Landing," and head toward a wooden shack. It's the famous Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon at the foot of Webster Street, and we find it in the same condition as when it was built in 1880 from the timber of old ships. East Bay Bohemian writers Bret Harte, Rex Beach, Robert Louis Stevenson, Joaquin Miller, and Jack London drank here. John Heinold came to San Francisco from Philadelphia in 1876 and bought the bunkhouse for \$100. Its original purpose was to serve as a bunkhouse for men who worked in the oyster beds. On June 1, 1883, though, Heinold opened the First and Last Chance Saloon, calling it that because for sailors, it was their first chance to have a drink on coming ashore and last chance on shipping out. Sailors often left bills on the wall for good luck, to reclaim when they came back safely—although many never made it back from their dangerous labor. Jack London, who hung around picking up sailing stories, mentions the First and Last Chance Saloon seventeen times in his autobiographical work, *John Barleycorn*.

A stone's throw from the shack is Scott's Restaurant, formerly called The Sea Wolf after another of London's books. One of my favorite places in the city, Scott's features seafood, and a jazz group led by a mellow pianist performs here. You can go out to the patio and catch an excellent view of the estuary and the port, water, ships, and seamen.

Not too far from Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon sits the cabin where London lived during the Yukon gold rush, which was moved to Oakland in 1970. Our tour ends here. From Jack London Square, the city of Oakland began to creep uptown toward what is now called Old Oakland. The squatters who "founded" the town, Horace W. Carpentier, Edson Adams, and Andrew J. Moon, hired a Swiss engineer, Julius Kellersberger, to map out streets in their three adjacent holdings in the grid pattern typical of all nineteenth-century towns in the United States. Streets were numbered or named after presidents. Alice Street, the location of the Alice Arts Center, was named for Carpentier's sister. The Alice Arts Center was in the news during the time of our tour because the Brown administration had threatened to evict some African-American arts groups from the center in order to make way for

an elite arts academy, 35 percent of whose students were to be drawn from out of town, despite the abundance of homegrown talent generously displayed at every event I attended during this anniversary year for the city. Authenticity can't be too real.

## AUGUST 21

Today's our day for touring Old Oakland. The boundaries of Old Oakland are Tenth and Seventh Streets, Broadway and Clay. Jack London said that taverns dominated the businesses between Tenth and Seventh on Broadway in the old days, not a surprising observation, especially coming from London. We meet our tour guide, Betty Marvin, whose appearance is that of someone dressed for the stacks. Someone who does not let up until the last footnote yields, but not necessarily someone Jack London would've run into in the taverns of the old city. The Old Oakland walk begins in front of a building located at 825 Washington Street in Oakland's first commercial district, built in response to the arrival of the railroads. A. J. Gooch erected the building, called a "block" in the old days, where our group meets. In 1876 Gooch was identified in a city directory with "capitalist" as his occupation. The building began as the Windsor Hotel, but has gone through transformations since then. Its architecture is Italianate, a style popular in the 1870s. As thousands of people arrived in Oakland to work on the railroads, they settled in West Oakland, whose houses were built in the same Italianate, Italianate Villa, style: low, pitched roofs; L- or U-shaped windows; a few stories tall. As in most cities, one can identify the dates during which Oakland buildings were built by style. Oakland architects of the 1880s preferred the Stick style, while the Victorian style was popular during the 1890s.

When the center of commerce moved further uptown in the early twentieth century and modernism became the vogue, not only in architecture but in the arts, Old Oakland, or Victorian row, became skid row. After touring the Oakland homes occupied by the rich in the Victorian era, one can argue that wealthy people such as poet Amy Lowell who could afford grand tours to collect culture from all over the world provided the impetus for modernism.

By combining the old and the new, postmodernists fashioned new gargoyles from fiberglass because the wooden ones were infected with dry rot, and beginning in 1982, Old Oakland was renovated with funds from the City of Oakland Redevelopment Agency. With the aim of bringing back some of the features that had been lost when Old Oakland was neglected, architects did some touching up: A cornice that was missing from A. J. Gooch's building was restored, as were the bay windows of the Leimert building, located at 456 Eighth Street, which had previously been sacrificed in favor of the flat modern look. The Storek brothers, Glen and Richard, who directed the renovation of Old Oakland, consulted old library photographs in order to give the Oakland buildings their original look. The past is never lost completely; rediscovery is always possible.

Among the stores and restaurants on the block where we meet are Ratto's grocery, which has been operated by the same family since 1896, and the Old Oakland Hotel. Another piece of nineteenth-century history on this stretch is the Oakland Free Market, which was part of the city's burgeoning commercial district in the 1870s. At this site, later known as the Housewives' Market, independent vendors were allowed to sell their wares from stalls. Its building occupies a whole city block and

one of Old Oakland's most interesting, with its terra-cotta facade featuring sculptures of fruit, vegetables, and livestock. These scenes appear on City Hall as well. We are told by our guide that the fruit was supposed to symbolize California's abundance, the perpetual promised land of the West. Nothing communicates the contrast between old-style architecture and modernism more than the charming old railroad station on Seventh Street, with its nooks and crannies and detailed facade. Across the street is the Bauhaus-style police station, icy and distant.

## AUGUST 28

Tennessee and I show up for the City Center tour. Our guide today is Renate Coombs, a redheaded, freckled-faced, middle-aged woman who, like the two swinging seniors who led us on the Jack London waterfront tour, is dressed casually—Renate wears white sneakers, socks, jeans, and a T-shirt featuring pictures of penguins. There are about five other people on this tour. We're standing in front of Oakland's fifth City Hall, built between 1911 and 1914 and reputed to be the first high-rise City Hall west of the Mississippi. Part of the exhibit inside City Hall includes photos of city halls built prior to the present one. Two were storefronts. The first was located on Broadway and Third Street. The second, on Broadway and Eighth. There's a sign on the second City Hall that announces AN OPEN FORUM EVERY SUNDAY NIGHT. At that time, Renate tells me, white men ruled the town, they would for much of the city's history and as they do now. A third City Hall was built and burned in 1877. It was replaced by a fourth City Hall, which stood in front of the current one.

Inside, attached to the ceiling above the top of an ornate staircase, hangs a light fixture containing 128 bulbs. It's called a disco ball by the irreverent. It's been part of the building since 1914, when City Hall opened. The ball was added to show off electricity and to represent the dawning of the twentieth century. The bronze rings encircling the ball show figures designed to represent the planets. This City Hall at one time housed the fire station and the jail; behind the ornate clock tower that stands at the top of City Hall, the narrow windows of the onetime jail can be seen. In the old days, children were advised that they'd be "put behind the clock" if they didn't behave. The clock is anchored by four posts. It was within ten seconds of falling from its perch atop City Hall during the 1989 earthquake because three of the posts holding it up were destroyed. The last post, seconds from toppling, held when the earth stopped shaking.

After City Hall was damaged by the earthquake, some English engineers were consulted about shielding the building from future earthquake damage, and it was renovated so that now it doesn't touch the earth but rests on shock absorbers and is surrounded by a moat. Prior to the election of Jerry Brown, Oakland mayors presided over council meetings where they often engaged in testy exchanges with the public and council members. After the election of Brown, a "strong mayor" measure was passed; since then, a council member told me, Brown's relationship with the council has been cool. An imperial mayor, he's surrounded by those whom a local gadfly columnist refers to as "Brownies." People who know what is best for Oakland, if only Oaklanders would move out of the way.

## AUGUST 30

Today Carla and I drive to a location known as the birthplace of Oakland. We arrive at a site that features a house of Victorian Italianate style. This house was built on land given to Antonio Maria Peralta by his father, Luis Maria Peralta, who in 1820, at the age of sixty-two, received forty-five thousand acres from Pablo de Sola, the last Spanish governor of Alta California, in recognition of service to the Spanish crown. Peralta had arrived in California at the age of sixteen as part of an exploratory expedition led by Juan Bautista de Anza and hung around until his death. The Peralta grant included present-day Oakland, Berkeley, Albany, El Cerrito, Emeryville, Piedmont, and part of San Leandro.

After being neglected for generations, perhaps as a way of ignoring the shameful chapter of the city's history that it represents, the Peralta House is being restored and is slated to become a museum. The house reminds us that the first mayor of Oakland, Horace W. Carpentier, and his cronies were thieves. In her book *Oakland: The Story of a City*, Beth Bagwell gives these men the benefit of the doubt when, in a footnote, she writes, "Historians still dispute whether the three [Carpentier, Edson Adams, and Andrew J. Moon] deliberately defrauded the Peraltas or whether they believed, like many others at the time, that U.S. sovereignty superseded Mexican claims and opened the way for legitimate claims by American citizens on public land." This is a strange argument, given that a number of U.S. court decisions sided with the Peraltas against the squatters.

In her book *The Spirit of Oakland*, Abby Wasserman paints a far more sinister portrait of Carpentier, a twenty-six-year-old New Yorker and graduate in law of Columbia University: "He made an early career of wresting Peralta land from the family, acting alternately as counselor and confiscator. He is rumored to have dressed as a priest and performed bogus rituals at the Peralta rancho. He was also accused of rustling cattle, filing exhaustive and endless appeals, claims, and litigation, and keeping courts, cohorts, and correspondents at arm's length for years." A living descendant of the Peraltas is more blunt, saying that her ancestors were swindled and, after the squatters had occupied much of their property, persecuted, pushed off their lands, and reduced to poverty. Historian Mary Jo Wainwright, who wrote her dissertation on the Peraltas, agrees. She says that Vicente Peralta, whose father, Luis, left him what is now Old Oakland and downtown Oakland, was swindled of his birthright by the cunning New Yorker.

Carla and I are greeted at a tall, ornate door of the Peralta House by Grey Kolevzon, a young redheaded man in a T-shirt and jeans. He is barefoot. Three black children are playing inside while three young white women, the staff, are at work. Kolevzon gives us a cursory tour of the house and directs us to Wainwright, who, luckily for us, is on her way to Oakland to tell the history of the Peraltas on a tour of famous Oakland houses. Wainwright agrees to meet Carla and me at 3:00 P.M. at the end of her official tour.

We arrive at the park to see tourists departing from the hacienda. They are senior citizens, mostly women, and enjoying themselves. They praise the box lunch: cheese, pasta, salad, and soda water. Though Wainwright has been talking to this group for an hour, she has enough enthusiasm for the Peraltas and their legacy to lead us through their history for an additional hour and a half.

Oakland is celebrating its 150th anniversary, dating from its founding by Carpentier, the man who "swindled" the Peraltas out of their land, but the actual European history of Oakland begins on this site. Indeed, the Peraltas are Oakland's first European family. Up until the Peraltas' arrival, Spanish

soldiers had so abused Native American women that a decision was made to send soldiers' wives and children along with them to what is now Oakland. (Rather than give birth to children born as a result of rape by those whom they considered their oppressors, the Indian women chose abortion and infanticide.)

Peralta and his wife, Maria Loreto Alviso Peralta, who had seventeen children of their own, arrived in California with the De Anza expedition. Two of his sons built the Oakland adobe in 1821. Often described as short and black, Peralta may have had African heritage. He complained that suitors were attracted to one of his daughters because of her money not her beauty. He said that she was too dark. When the Americans arrived, they found a mixed-race population; some of the Afro-Mexicans had come from the same state in Mexico as the Peraltas. Perhaps the Peraltas were the first victims of black removal! Holly Alonso, the director of Friends of the Peralta Hacienda, tells us that before the miscegenophobic Americans came, racism was absent from California culture; indeed, many of the new arrivals who established a white supremacist standard in California were Celtic-Americans who, ironically, weren't considered "white" in the eastern United States. But before the arrival of the Americans, the population here was mixed Native American, European, and African. As a testimony to this fact, a display at the hacienda features a photo of a white man and his Native American wife.

The Peraltas' first home, an adobe, was built in 1821. It was replaced by other adobes, guest houses, and work buildings, which all became part of the two-and-a-half-acre hacienda. For his service, which included rounding up fugitive Indians and returning them to missions where they were used as slave labor and prostitutes, Peralta was granted this spread. Down the hill from the house lies a creek which, according to Mary Jo, is one of the reasons the Peraltas chose this site on which to build. The Peralta land was worked by Indians who had left the missions; one of these was an Indio named Jo Guzmán, who recorded eleven songs in his native language, some of the earliest such recordings.

Along our tour we hear two explanations as to why Indians had Spanish names (such as Guzmán). One was that the Spanish gave them the names; the other that Indians took Spanish names to avoid extermination, which was one of the solutions to the Indian problem in California. In January 1850 Governor Burnett delivered a message to the new California legislature: "A war of extermination will continue to be waged between the two races, until the Indian race becomes extinct. . . . While we cannot anticipate this result with but painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power and wisdom of man to avert."

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## *Preservation Park and the Jewel of Oakland*

**JUNE 11**

IT'S SPRINGTIME IN Oakland, and Denise Lewis is cool and poised. She sits comfortably in a chair on the second floor of the Preservation Park building in which she works as part of the park's administrative staff. Downstairs a Brazilian restaurant specializes in a dish of beans, rice, and sausage. Later today the city council will decide whether to sell Preservation Park to the East Bay Community Foundation.

Located in downtown Oakland, Preservation Park was once one of the city's main residential areas before downtown became industrial. Over the years, the park's sixteen turn-of-the-century Victorian buildings have been renovated— facades restored and surroundings transformed into carefully tended lawns and gardens, with other Victorian touches, such as park benches and street lamps, added— house offices. Restoring Preservation Park cost the city \$11 million, which included the cost of relocating historic buildings from other parts of the city. The council is considering selling it for \$6 million. The park has been making money for the city, but someone higher up, possibly the mayor, who, some say, won't be satisfied until he privatizes all of Oakland, thinks selling it is a good idea. The announcement that it might be sold has mobilized the tenants, who, after holding a number of meetings, decided to favor one bidder, the East Bay Community Foundation. Denise Lewis doesn't know whether the potential new owners will keep her on.

Denise has been working since the age of sixteen. She grew up in San Francisco's Bayview Hunter Point, a black section of town where social and environmental toxins are rampant, and attended Telton and Balboa high schools. She worked mostly for businesses and law firms, she says, until she was recruited to work for Bramalea, the company that developed Oakland City Center, of which Preservation Park is a part. Preservation Park was the idea of developer Glen Isaacson, whose notion was to attract tenants by offering housing for nonprofits. (The Before Columbus Foundation, of which I am a director, has its office there.) Denise obtained a real estate license and handled all of the construction contracts for relocating a set of endangered historic houses that were brought to Preservation Park for renovation.

At first, Preservation Park was considered no-man's land. An outpost. Getting tenants was hard. Though the real estate community thought leasing or renting space to nonprofits unwise, Denise says that the nonprofits pay their rent on time, an unexpected plus.

Eleven years later, Preservation Park hums with activity. It contains forty-seven tenants. According to Denise, tenant-management relationships are very good. Five of the sixteen Victorian houses, including the Nile and Ginn houses, were already located there, while others were brought from elsewhere in the city. Some had been slated for demolition.

Denise's first job at Preservation Park was the Oakland Festival of the Lake, an event that drew thousands of Oaklanders until a police riot closed it down. Denise and Susanne, her former boss who has since retired, had managed to draw in all segments of the community to the festival, low-riders as well as rappers, hills residents as well as flatlanders. Susanne and Denise also spent some of their work hours fighting off those who wanted to turn this nonprofit island of elegance into another casualty of hyperdevelopment. Denise reports that Susanne is enjoying her retirement and has just visited the Galápagos, where the Darwinian struggle for survival is probably less intense than that found in Oakland.

## SEPTEMBER 17

I attend the picnic at Preservation Park for all of the park's nonprofit tenants, not only to hear the latest on the decision to sell this historic park, but to sample the cuisine, which, under the direction of Susanne and her successor, Denise, has always been a feast. Today is no different. It is another beautiful day in Oakland. Some say that Oakland has the best weather in the United States, and I believe it. The sky is as Auburn poet Clark Ashton Smith perfectly described it: "lotus blue." We sit at tables underneath umbrellas while Ted Lacey, who manages the park for CMP Asset Manager, addresses the nonprofit representatives whose offices are housed in the historic buildings. Lacey thanks the tenants for calling the city and supporting the management of the park. He says that the pending sale of the park has been put off indefinitely. Perhaps this victory for the preservationists has been won because someone in city hall realized that even with nonprofits, Preservation Park is making a profit while some of the city's privately run redevelopment projects have collapsed.

## SEPTEMBER 25

Tennessee is working at her teaching job at the New Age Academy. It's a private school founded by Gloria Cooper, an energetic black teacher who adheres to a rugged back-to-basics curriculum. They're covering Homer's *Odyssey*, a book that would be slammed by contemporary critics for its weighty down plot and extraneous details about bull sacrifices, which seem to be excuses for partying. I am reading this magnificent book again and wonder why it isn't classified with the Koran or the Bible as a book of religion. Wrong religion, I guess. Also, what contemporary writer would get away with introducing gods and goddesses to move the plot when stuck?

So today I'm touring solo. The tour meets in front of the Paramount Theatre. There's a young couple—a white man and an Asian woman—on board. They live on Fifteenth Street near Lake Merritt, a neighborhood dubbed the Gold Coast because of its proximity to Oakland's jewel. There are luxury apartments being constructed there, one of which goes by the ridiculously pretentious name "Essex." This building was hardly occupied when a dispute occurred between the landlord and an organization called CALM, Coalition of Advocates for Lake Merritt, which objected to a banner erected over the stories of the building's facade, advertising the apartments. Naomi Schiff of Oakland Heritage Alliance found the building's lighted tower even more offensive, according to the *Oakland Tribune*. "What's really horrible is that light on top; it's disgusting, the worst kind of light pollution," she said.

In Oakland things like “light pollution” still matter, at least to some folks. Buildings like the Essex are rising all over Oakland as a result of the mayor’s 10K plan, a trend vigorously opposed by some members of the heritage and preservation lobbies, who accuse the Boho mayor of being “development hungry.” Film director Francis Ford Coppola set up a site at the Old Oakland Hotel, built in 1915 on the Gold Coast, to shoot his film *Tucker*. He said that the Gold Coast area reminded him of the California of the forties and fifties. Our guide, Annalee Allen, explains that this district gives that impression because many of the buildings were built in the twenties and thirties. In the twenties the Victorian houses around Lake Merritt were either subdivided or replaced by high-rises.

The area where the Paramount stands was once rural. The downtown of the late 1880s began at the foot of Broadway, the location of Jack London Square, and ended at Fourteenth Street, which included much of what is now called Old Oakland. After the famous 1906 earthquake, two hundred thousand people arrived in Oakland from San Francisco, an invasion of refugees that increased the population and required new services, retail stores, and other enterprises. In 1930 the Paramount, an Art Deco movie palace designed by architect Timothy Pflueger, was built, capturing the spirit of Jazz Age design. One feature of its elaborate design is a facade composed of twelve thousand terra-cotta tiles creating the image of a giant puppeteer manipulating the various acts that appeared there over the years. The Paramount reached its zenith in the 1940s, when prosperity, fostered by the war, allowed many to flock downtown to films and dances and live music. In the 1950s, with the advent of television, attendance at the theater fell off, and by the early 1970s the Paramount had been abandoned. Later that decade, however, the Paramount was restored with \$1 million in redevelopment funds and became a city, state, and national historic landmark. Simultaneously, the building of freeways and the Caldecott Tunnel moved the action from downtown to the suburbs.

But the glorious architecture of the modernist moment still stands in downtown Oakland, and there are more buildings than one. One of the families affected by the earthquake disaster was that of Isaac Magnin. His wife, a lace maker who specialized in making undergarments for women of the carriage trade, was the mastermind behind the I. Magnin store, a branch of which stood at Twentieth and Broadway and is built in the Art Deco style. Its architects also built the Mark Hopkins Hotel, made famous in Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Vertigo*.

To the west of I. Magnin is Sears, which was once H. C. Capwells and later Emporium Capwells, a department store built by the Capwells, who came from the East. The Capwells store was designed by the same architect who designed New York’s Lord and Taylor and Bloomingdales. Emporium Capwells suffered damage during the 1989 earthquake. Sears has moved into the building while the former Sears store, located on Telegraph Avenue, is being converted into work loft space that will benefit the 10Kers. Having moved from his commune in Jack London Square, Mayor Brown now resides here.

Built in 1923 with an upstairs ballroom as a reminder of the time when big bands served the Oakland party crowd, the former J. J. Newberry Company is located at 1933 Broadway. Another outstanding Art Deco building, the Floral Depot building, flashing a silver and cobalt blue exterior, is located around the corner at Telegraph Avenue and Nineteenth Street. Built in 1931, the building stands because the Oakland Heritage Alliance fought to keep it from being torn down for a mall.

Across the street is perhaps the most fabulous of downtown buildings, the Fox Theatre, with its design weaving together Hindu and Islamic motifs. Once a movie palace and concert hall where stars



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