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Palmnameh:
The Epic of the Palm Tree in Los Angeles

by

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ABSTRACT

The Palm Tree of Los Angeles is its own entity. It is spelled with a capital P and T. It is also inherently contranymic. (A contranym is defined as a word with two opposite meanings.) Although referred to as “tree,” it biologically is not. It is a monocot, similar to grass. Although it is completely embedded into the making of Los Angeles, it is not native to the city at all. Different palm trees from around the world, along with their stories, have participated in constructing myths continuously perpetuated in and by Los Angeles.

Current myth making, however, perpetuates a flat, simple narrative. This thesis brings multiple dimensions of positive and negative narratives forward in one continual experience, collapsing these into an alternative mythology. The proposal moves from a flat representation to a collapsed representation. Flat representation is when the myth references only a single story, whereas collapsed representation allows the myth to reference multiple stories.

This shift is a new approach on reading the city’s history, creating an alternative mythology. By using an aesthetic of Persian miniatures, the thesis re-orientalizes representations of the palm tree. I use the term re-orientalize intentionally, also calling to a re-orienting of the interpreter. This thesis uses a flat aesthetic, but tells a collapsed mythology.

The proposal is architecturalized through a series of interventions in the city that can be approached either on their own, or as a constructed loop.

The series of interventions are put together as a “nameh,” which is a book from a Persian tradition that tells a type of history through painting and verse. This is the Palmnameh: The Epic of The Palm.

Thesis Supervisor: Azra Aksamija
Associate Professor of Art, Culture and Technology
For Mona and Mohmmed

I love you
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almnameh:
The Epic of the Palm Tree in Los Angeles
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Introduction

The Palm Tree of Los Angeles is its own entity. It is spelled with a capital P and T. It is inherently contranymic. (A contranym is defined as a word with two opposite meanings.) Although referred to as “tree,” it biologically is not. It is a monocot, similar to grass. Although it is completely embedded into the making of Los Angeles, it is not native to the city. Different trees from around the world, along with their stories, participate in constructing myths continuously perpetuated in and by Los Angeles.

These myths, too recent to completely shed their historicity and yet too ideological to provide a complete picture, tell us how the city was founded, who were the key figures, and what challenges they overcame. These myths tell origin stories; they justify present realities. These myths are the stories European settlers created to instill meaning in Los Angeles. Some of these myths were propagandistic alterations designed for commercial or political gain. Others were earnest attempts to record stories. Without fail, however, the stories involve image more than reality – in our case, the image of the palm.

This image is so deeply rooted as an LA icon that it cannot nor should not be fully disentangled. However, the singular narratives surrounding the palm tree as a symbol lacks dimensionality.

“LA’s palm trees are dying and it’s changing the city’s famous skyline,” read a headline of an LA Times article published September 22, 2017.¹ Here, the death of the palm tree is perceived as a new threat to the city and its notorious sprawling skyline punctuated by swaying fronds. But has the presence of an entity, so vital to the city’s image, always been portrayed positively?

¹ Ally J. Levine, 2017. L.A.’s Palm Trees Are Dying and It’s Changing the City’s Famous Skyline.
Almost 8 decades earlier, we see that the image of the palm tree hasn’t always been beloved. In 1936, the same LA Times published an article about the “Fading fashion of the palm tree.” In 1942, the Times reinforces its judgment of this fading fashion by writing, “the present trend is away from the bizarre and exotic.”

Given the stark contrast with how we view LA’s palm trees today, how do we collapse the contemporary mythological reverence with what has historically been either perpetuated, or challenged?

Throughout the scope of this thesis, I argue that the fear of the palm leaving completely is part of a historical trend of public opinion undulating between reverence and hatred.

In response, this thesis disrupts that wave by bringing multiple stories, both positive and negative, forward in one continual experience, proposing an alternative mythology.

**Approach**

Traditionally, our understanding of sign or symbol is through a linear path from object to representation to interpreter. What Charles Peirce proposes through his Theory of Sign is that these three components act as a triangle, where each is influenced by the next. His theory is presented through three main components.

The symbol, sign, or what we will call *object* is the first component. The sign-vehicle, or what we will call *myth* is the second component. The *interpreter* is the final component.

The representation in the linear path is transformed into myth in the triangle, giving agency to influence

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the interpreted object itself through the creation of myth.

The proposal moves from a flat representation to a collapsed one. Flat representation is when the myth references only a single meaning at a singular moment, whereas collapsed representation allows a myth to reference multiple meanings across a span of time.

This project is both an exploration and subsequent interpretation of the many, often neglected, myths which contributed to LA’s aesthetic construction. By expanding from flat to collapsed representation, we can re-present the origin story of LA and unearth the often-neglected narratives of LA’s past lingering just beneath its perfectly manicured fronds.

This project uses Pierce’s theory in the creation of mythology. The representations of myth act as a two way valve. The myth uses a series of objects in it’s creation, as well as previous interpretations of those objects. The resulting myth produces new interpretations and a new series of objects.

Myth, according to Hans Blumenberg,

“shows mankind engaged in working up and [mentally] digesting something that won’t let it alone, that keeps it in a state of unease and agitation. It can be reduced to the simple formula that the world is not transparent for human beings, and they are not even transparent to themselves.”

In the process of producing this project, a series of stories, facts, anecdotes were hastily jotted down, every part seeming like a perfectly cut piece of an impossible jigsaw puzzle. In order to digest all of these components, from speculations to stories to random facts, a mythology was born. Although not providing

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complete transparency, comfort set in quickly as the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle started to fit together. So, it is not a project of clarification, it is actually a project of understanding through the act of myth making itself. The myth emerges, and it learns itself as we learn it.

At a larger scale, we look to the discourse as a whole, and this iteration of myth making playing a role in theory. Looking at Mark Jarzombek’s *Eco-Pop* as a point of entry, which looks to legitimize pastiche as a device of architecture, and understands cultural imaginaries as constructions that can be integrated into design.

“Its goal is thus rather to think outside of the conventional design ethos of the professional architect and to make use of cultural productions, tropes, and critiques that may not require “design” themselves but that can be grafted into the processes of architecture.”

Jarzombek proposes a design ethos that breaks with convention of what is accepted as “design”. “Design” lives in quotes here as the conventional understanding of what makes up the processes of architecture. If this ethos were fully embraced, then architectural discourse with produce new products. The Palmnameh is not an alternative architecture; it is architecture.

*Precedents*

This work is in conversation with a series of different architectural typologies.

The first typology is the architectural manifesto or treatise on the city, which uses representation to program a new reading of the urban form. This typology reads the form and image of a specific city
through the eyes of a foreigner, but concludes by extrapolating these observations to larger claims about cities in general. The methodology employed here analyzes the history of LA through its palm trees, and constructs alternative origin myths.

Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour propose that symbols play an integral role in myth making. Learning From Las Vegas, in the words of Denise Scott Brown, is a “treatise of symbolism in architecture.” This thesis critically considers the role of the agent as the symbol creator, and therefore the mythmaker.

Like Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour, I am working as a foreigner looking in. When they see Las Vegas as the ideal city to write their treatise on symbolism in architecture, I see Los Angeles as the city to proactively create a program of symbolism.

Reyner Banham’s *Four Ecologies*, which falls into this typology, describes Los Angeles through the eyes of Banham’s experience. In his initial remarks on the city, he describes Los Angeles to be “neither the optimism of those who see it as the prototype of all future cities, nor the gloom of those who see it as the harbinger of universal urban doom.” This allows him to explore a more nuanced, unpolarized experience that he begins to describe in the rest of his account.

The second typology is that of a series of object scale interventions explicitly charged with symbolic myths surrounding their sites. By encountering these interventions in everyday context, the perception of those myths associated with these sites gradually transforms over time. Here, small-scale interventions are actively utilized to destabilize dominant histories and disseminate alternative imaginaries.

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7 Denise Scott Brown et al. 1977. *Learning from Las Vegas*
Azra Aksamija writes about the project *Superkilen*:

“While most of the objects and vegetation in the park have been imported from other cultural contexts and places, the park allows visitors to encounter and use these alien and exotic objects as an everyday life experience. Such experiences gradually transform the perception of exotic cultural artefacts into objects of everyday life.”

These experiences of the exotic and strange in an everyday context allows their representations, or symbols, to be digested in a new way, giving new meaning to those symbols in its community. In Los Angeles, the palm was once just a tree, and now it is a symbol.

The third typology works in the Persianate literary tradition of the “Nameh”, a book that tells a type of history through painting and verse, establishing an immediate link to the exotic oriental that has been key in the circulation and perpetuation of the palm tree’s image. By using an aesthetic of Persianate miniatures, the thesis re-orientalizes representations of the palm tree. I use the term re-orientalize intentionally, in an effort to re-orient the interpreter.

Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*, “The Book of Kings,” establishes the Persianate tradition, where mythologies of various kings over time are recounted together. The stories themselves include accurate historic happenings of the court as well as mythologies constructed in that time.

*Methodology*

Architecturally, the proposal is imagined as a series of interventions in the city that can be approached either on their own, or as a constructed loop.

The series of interventions are put together as a “nameh”.

These are the footnotes of the *Palmnameh: The Epic of the palm*.

This thesis is produced through three things: First, a book, which is the manuscript of the Palmnameh, holding drawings of the interventions and the myths they recall. Second, a map that combines these interventions, stringing together the alternative urban reading of the city, and third, a bookstand that acts as the stage for the mythology to be told. This object’s ornament acts as a reference to the objects described within the Palmnameh.
The Palmnameh takes place through a constructed loop. The loop has two directions. Clockwise, the intended audience is a local, but counterclockwise, the audience is a foreigner.
We start with the moral character which drew people to Los Angeles. In 1872, Charles Nordhoff writes about Los Angeles being the ideal sub-tropical land, domesticated for by people. These are the people—as the myth goes—who established the sub-tropical climate and all the palm trees.

In McArthur Park, we add a little shade. In 1908, the city changed the grade from tropical to sub-tropical, and in response, the LA Arboretum added the inherent lack of shade apparent in the inherent lack of shade apparent.
Shade
We start with the moral character who was drawn to Los Angeles. In 1872, Charles Nordhoff writes about how Los Angeles is the ideal sub-tropical land, domesticated for white people. These are the people – as the myth goes – who establish the city. They use the palm tree as a tool to aestheticize this alternative tropic, that doesn’t have disease or lawlessness, but has security, comfort and a claim to the newly constructed sub-tropical climate.

But it wasn’t the most useful tree to have around. In 1899, Grace Ellery Channing writes about how palms are as useful for shade as telegraph poles. In 1908, the city changed the greenery in MacArthur Park to sub-tropical, and in response, the LA Times protested the lack of shade. In McArthur Park, we add a shading device to alleviate these shortcomings of the palm. This intervention makes the inherent lack of shade apparent.
The first palm tree planted in Los Angeles was at the Spanish Mission of San Gabriel in Los Angeles around 1771 (Figure 1). This tree was imported for its fronds to be used on Palm Sunday. This marks the beginning of a moral and religious association with the palm in Los Angeles.

In 1874, Benjamin Truman’s *Semi-Tropical California*, first introduced the word “semi-tropical” into widespread use in the region (Figure 2). In 1872 the Southern Pacific Railroad hired Charles Nordhoff to write on California in order to attract new settlers. He produced *California: A Book for Travellers and Settlers* in which he praises the virtues of California’s tropical form as distinct from other tropics in the world.

> “California is our own; and it is the first tropical land which our race has thoroughly mastered and made itself at home in. There, and there only, on this planet, the traveller and resident may enjoy the delights of the tropics without their penalties; a mild climate, not enervating, but healthful and health-restoring; a wonderfully and variously productive soil, without tropical

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11 Benjamin Cummings Truman. 1874. *Semi-Tropical California*. 
malaria; the grandest scenery, with perfect security and comfort in travelling arrangements; strange customs, but neither lawlessness nor semi-barbarism.”

He speaks of California as a place of production, of comfort and leisure, but is wary of mentioning that it is strange in only the ways that are lawful. It purports that this land was domesticated by Anglo-Saxons.

In that same spirit, Charles Dudley Warner, another East coast writer, was hired in 1891 by the Santa Fe Railway for $10,000 to take the rail to Los Angeles and write about his surroundings to promote settlement. This literature was produced in order to attract immigrants, not tourists, and therefore described the economic ease of life in such fertile land.

In 1888, the book Walter Lindley and J.P. Widney wrote *California of the South*. It makes the appeal for new settlers (and race) explicit: “…the law of

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13 Charles Dudley Warner. 1904. *Our Italy.*
improvement of race by selection and elimination” and “that other law of the power of climatic surroundings to influence race-development.” These authors claim that just as the Anglo-Saxon race improves California, the climate of California has the power to improve the Anglo-Saxon race.\(^\text{14}\)

California was also seen as the plentiful Cornucopia of the World (Figure 3). Railroad companies often employed these advertising campaigns in order to sell their land holdings around their western stops to potential settlers. As part of this advertising, they reinforced the myth of semi-tropical California by paying farms close to rail lines to plant palms.\(^\text{15}\)

Alternate advertisement was produced, exposing the monopoly of the railroad companies. In 1882, *The Curse of California* showed the railroad as a monster of destruction (Figure 4).

The image of bounty and ease of life earned through hard work was exported during exhibitions such as

\(^{14}\) Walter Lindley and J. P. Widney. 1896. *California of the South.*

\(^{15}\) Farmer
The Southern California Citrus Fair in Chicago in 1886, and the Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893. A Canary Island palm tree was exported from California to the exhibition (Figures 5, 6). These displays of bounty and hard work were aimed at protestant white families from the East to the Mid-West.

MacArthur Park was designed with a sub-tropical theme, which was immediately protested by residents, and in The Land of Sunshine, Grace Ellery Channing writes about how “palms - about as useful as telegraph poles for the purpose - serve as shade trees.”

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16 Grace Ellery Channing. 1899. Land of Sunshine.
Object
Shade
In 1952, Pershing Square in downtown Los Angeles was developed to build an underground parking garage. The City Planning Department recommended that the new park, named Pershing, would be safe from public use, mainly to intervene on political reasons and ‘gay encounters’. We secure the square, giving people directly under the parking garage. We move away from an externalized reflection under this new sense of surveillance, mainly to intervene on political reasons and ‘gay encounters’. We secure the square, giving people directly under the parking garage. We move away from an externalized reflection under this new sense of surveillance, mainly to intervene on political reasons and ‘gay encounters’.
Secure
n 1952, Pershing Square in downtown LA was excavated to build an underground parking garage. The Los Angeles Police Department recommended that the new park plant palm trees for ease of surveillance, mainly to intervene on political rallies, drug deals, and, ‘gay encounters’. We secure the square now with mirrored canopies, giving people directly under the palm tree the agency of surveillance. We move away from an exterior control, and more to an internalized reflection under this new canopy.
Our moral characters have now morphed into law abiding citizens. In 1913, a headline read *Los Angeles Jail to Have Palms and Ferns*. The chief of police said the prisoners could ponder their crimes among, “palms and hanging baskets of plants arranged in the most fashionable effects.”\(^{17}\) Palm trees here symbolize a sense of morality and idealness that was linked to the law.

Prior to excavation, Pershing Square was once a bustling public space filled with lush amounts of greenery located within the heart of downtown (Figure 7). The excess palm trees removed from the site were sent to Disneyland.\(^{18}\)

Once excavation was complete, LAPD suggested palm trees for ease of surveillance. Transparency in public spaces aims to create exposed citizens who will act morally by knowing there is an outside institution as well as their peers surveilling the landscape through vistas created between the thin tall trunks of palms.

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17 San Jose Evening News. 1913. *Los Angeles Jail to Have Palms and Ferns*.
18 Farmer.
Object
Secure
In 1926, gardeners cared for the trimmed, neat top of the palm tree, leaving the trunk of the palm tree, claiming no palm tree should be stripped naked. These pecticots erupted into balls of flame during the Rodney King riots in 1992, when people claimed them to be fake. How racism is ignored.

alight, claiming them to be fireproof pecticots, covering the city stripped palm trees.

The length of each simulated...
Coat
In 1926, gardeners cared for the trimmed, neat petticoat left on the trunk of the palm tree, claiming no palm tree should be stripped naked. These petticoats erupted into balls of flame during the Rodney King riots in 1992, when people set palm trees alight, claiming them to be fake. When power dynamics such as racism are ignored, riots spark in the face of fakeness. In response, the city stripped palm trees of their petticoats in 2006. Here, we recoat the palm tree adjacent to the one burned in 1992, with a fireproof petticoat, covering the char caused by the original fire. The length of each simulated frond is associated with the number of fatal encounters with LAPD from 2000 upwards. The simulated fronds reference the aesthetic of neatly manicured palms that have been stripped away in the act of fireproofing. The act of fireproofing here is only as thick as the coat, and hints at the lack of addressing structural problems relating to power.
In 1992, the Rodney King riots broke out after the four police officers were acquitted of their crimes relating to their assault on Rodney King. Whereas many believed that systematic oppression was no longer present in the early nineties, the riots exposed a racist system to people that don’t experience it on a day to day basis.

In the city of Los Angeles, it isn’t only racism that is thinly veiled. It is a city of simulation that surrounds itself in it’s own fake tropic, where palm trees readily produce a certain image of the city. This image was always meant to be curated, where petticoats were neatly trimmed and kept, and where a naked palm trunk could be seen as improper care.

During the riots, next to freeway 101 near downtown, a man was being interviewed about the riots. He held a match in his hand as she spoke. He interrupted her, “Listen lady, it’s not a real tree, it’s a fake one. They’re all fake. I’m taking this one out. Don’t worry. It’ll be alright.” With one quick flick, he flings the lit match into the palm tree (Figure 8).

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19 Farmer
Today, at that same sight, we can see the stump of the burnt tree, and the charred face of its neighbor that forever lives in the memory of the events that day (Figure 9, 10).
Object
Coat
The myth of Los Angeles began with the image of a white, moral, masculine character, it then transfigured into an Orientalized, feminine, immoral consumer.

In 1910, Hollywood didn’t want trees of any sort forming business district, thinking that greenery would hinder business by evoking a farm atmosphere. But in the 1940s, Mary Pickford planted palm trees on this street, and their devices neatly framed by palm trees, but have now been replaced by more contemporary canopies.
IV

Frame
If the myth of Los Angeles began with the hardworking, white, moral, masculine character, it then transforms into the Orientalized, feminine, immoral consumer.

In 1910, Hollywood didn’t want trees of any sort in its newly forming business district, thinking that greenery would be anti-business by evoking a rural aesthetic. However, in Hollywood, and elsewhere today, the palm tree became associated with commerce. This, in part, is due to America’s sweetheart in the 1940’s, Mary Pickford, who recommended Palm trees as street trees, so that she may window shop from her car. On Hollywood Blvd, along the Walk of fame, we remove the palm trees on this street, and replace them with framing devices. These devices neatly frame storefronts that were previously flanked by palm trees, but have now been obstructed by the ample canopy of the shade trees.
“It is for the citizens of Hollywood to decide whether it shall become a center of business life of a great growing city or whether it shall become a pretty little suburb of beautiful trees.”\textsuperscript{20} As the city of Hollywood was starting to establish in 1910, the equation for business and success did not include lush greenery, which was often associated with ruralness, everything a city was trying to escape (Figure 11). The rural was pushed outside of the city, as suburbs, and the city itself existed strictly as a place of commerce.

As Hollywood became further engulfed by Los Angeles, it also found its true calling in the world of business: making image. And as the city of Hollywood enters that imaginary, with it enters the palm-lined streets of Hollywood.

Here is the transformation of the moral character to the immoral character. We look at Rem Koolhaas’s description of the Generic City:

\begin{quote}
“In the original model of the moderns, the residual was merely
\end{quote}
green, its controlled neatness
a moralistic assertion of good
intentions, discouraging association,
use. In the Generic City, because the
crust of its civilization is so thin, and
through its immanent tropicality,
the vegetal is transformed into
Edenic Residue, the main carrier of
its identity: a hybrid of politics and
landscape. At the same time refuge
of the illegal, the uncontrollable,
and subject of endless manipulation,
it represents a simultaneous triumph
of the manicured and the primeval.
Its immoral lushness compensates
for the Generic City’s other
poverties. Supremely inorganic,
the organic is the Generic City’s
strongest myth.\textsuperscript{21}

As greenery is introduced back into the city through
the palm-lined streets of Hollywood, it carries an
“Edenic Residue” with it. The manicured tropical
uses the image of an ‘immoral lushness’ to represent
the city itself. The immoral character is born in
these streets, as those who produce an artificial
image themselves. The character shifts from the
hardworking, all-business model to the idolization of
images produced and consumed by the masses. Mary
Pickford becomes the image that is consumed by the
masses (Figure 12).

\textsuperscript{21} Rem Koolhaas et al. 1998. \textit{S, M, L, XL}. 

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure12.png}
\caption{Cars of ancient vintage at old-fashioned film premiere. 1958. Los Angeles Public Library Photo Collection, Los Angeles. Calisphere.}
\end{figure}
As the image of the palm built a sense of identity in the success of Hollywood, and was exported in other exchanges as a symbol of success. For instance, in 1953, the first flight from Los Angeles to Boston was symbolically commemorated with a palm tree, gifted to Boston. Headlines read *Palm Gift to Boston Marks Airtourist Run.*

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Object
Frame
The immoral character also wants to have his monastic vows in the middle of the Arabian desert erased, calling to the Orientalized film. Here, we see the scene of the monk and only silhouettes of the dangling palm tree above.
V

Erase
he immoral character also wants to pretend that she has been transported to an exotic land where she is free to consume and to indulge in her vices with impunity. In 1936, the Film The Garden of Allah came out, telling the story of a monk who broke his monastic vows in the middle of the Arabian desert, indulging his vices. We go to Hollywood forever cemetery to screen films in which palm trees are erased, calling to the Orientalized symbol of the palm in film. Here, we see the scene of the monk lying in the desert with only silhouettes of the dangling palm trees remaining above.
The Cahuilla people in Palm Springs were initially documented in 1853 by Anglo-Americans. The accounts exoticized the Cahuilla, stating the scene had “an Oriental aspect; and the similarity was made still more striking by the groups of Arab-like Indians.”

In the early 1900’s, as automobiles gained popularity, Palm Springs became a tourist destination for health tourists, and The Automobile Club of Southern California told members to go to Palm Springs for “a taste of Egypt”. In 1921, a bill passes to make Palm Springs a National Park, and shortly after, headlines of the LA Times read, Palm Canyon, Part of Southern California’s Little Araby, Becomes A National Park (Figure 13). “Little Araby” was the only part of California with native palm trees, and often subject to orientalist representation.

This also became home to the United State’s date farms. Once these farms saturated the region, Indio opened their first Riverside County Fair and National

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23 Farmer, 340.
24 Ibid, 341.
Date Festival Indio California in 1921 (Figure 14). These festivities, complete with a representation of the Taj Mahal, an Arab market, and an Arab princess pageant, marks the moment when the wearing of costumes transformed an initially Orientalist view of the region into a kitsch version of it. It became the space where ordinary citizens could wear costumes, play “oriental”, and indulge their vices.

The Cocoanut Grove in Los Angeles opened its doors in 1921 (Figure 15). It was infamously the place where actors and actresses would come to and get a drink under some fake palm trees. This environment simulated the mystic of the Arabian desert where an immoral character could indulge

The Garden of Allah Hotel was opened around 1936, where actors and the wealthy frequented and were often found naked by the poolside.

The hotel took its name from the 1927 film, which depicts a monk who broke his monastic vows in the exotic Saharan desert, underneath palm trees.

Sarah Seekatz. 2016. *Indio’s Date Festival.*
Object
Erase
In 1904, Abbot Kinney designs Venice, creating a simulated COPY of the city of Venice, where the canals still exist today.

A simulated copy of the palm trees that graced the area, allowing us to snap a quick Instagrammable photo as we lounge at the beach. We are able to feel the presence of the palm even in its absence.
VI

Copy
In 1904, Abbot Kinney designs Venice of America, a failed simulated copy of the city of Venice, where the stagnant water canals still exist today.

At Venice Beach, we make a simulated copy of the palm trees that have been removed, allowing us to snap a quick instagammable picture with our iphones as we lounge at the beach. We are able to evoke the image of the palm even in its absence.
“To fill the demand of the new market, a new commodity was devised: ersatz culture, kitsch, destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide.”

Abbot Kinney of Los Angeles wanted to tap the market that Greenberg describes. In 1904, Kinney designed a development he called ‘Venice of America’. Complete with canals, boat rides, and palm lined streets, he simulated the city of Venice as a residential neighborhood.

But this simulation tore at the seams as mosquitos hovered over stagnant waters filling the canals, and people lacked interest in this little world Kinney created. So, abandoning the canals, he moved to the pier, creating a small Venice as a series of markets along the pier, and, unlike his neighborhood, it didn’t ask for a full emersion, but that you consume and leave.

Similar failed simulations continued to happen throughout Los Angeles. In 1915, 1500 potted palms were placed in a shopping district, and met with displeasure. They were completely abandoned because, as the headline said, “Nobody Loves Them.”

In 1972, a 1.7 mile stretch tested plastic trees on Jefferson Blvd near Loyola monument. The idea behind it was to reduce maintenance and care for greenery producing similar effect. It became an instant scandal and failure, as the plastic degraded more quickly than initially imagined due to pollution and vandalism.

But there were also success stories. As palm trees grew in popularity, palm tree brokers would roam the city, buying palm trees from private properties and selling them sometimes for tenfold profit. In 1989,

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27 Farmer
International Treescapes, based in California, preserved palm trees for The Mirage hotel’s lobby, which, at the time was the world’s largest hotel (Figure 16).

The image of the palm has become so important to Los Angeles’s identity that the 1994 art license plate still in circulation today displays an array of palm trees.

Jean Baudrillard writes on simulacra and simulation, “It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{29} Jean Baudrillard. 1994. \textit{Simulacra and simulation}. 
Object
Copy
In 1917, Culver City was an all-white planned community. We compared streets of Culver City, attaching boots to the four most popular streets.

These boots tell the origin story of each place of origin at the time stories allow for...
VII

Root
In 1917, Culver City was incorporated into LA as an all-white planned community. We come back to the palm lined streets of Culver City, attaching boots (which are artificial frond stub extensions) to the four most popular palm species used in LA. These boots tell the origin story of each palm, showing a globe with the place of origin at the center of vision. This series of origin stories allow for a globally scaled narrative to be traced. Although the palm tree is seen as a native symbol to LA, the roots of each tree trace back to places around the globe.
In 1927, Walter Swingle travelled to Morocco, where he found some date shoots to take back to the United States to test the plausibility of date farming. When he was being shown around, he noticed a lot of the trees looked weak, and soon learned that they were infected with Baioudh. Not wanting to import disease, he received offshoots from a farm that hadn’t been affected yet. They were farming the now famous Medjool dates.

He brought the dates home, and found that they grow successfully in the Coachella Valley. Meanwhile, the disease ran rampantly through Morocco, sparing no tree. When this species of date was wiped out in Morocco, the only thing that saved it globally was its exportation to the US. It was then reexported back to Morocco. This reexportation muddies with the idea of nativeness, where a tree couldn’t exist in its native climate, and only exists now because of its removal.

Not a single palm tree in Los Angeles is native. The top ten planted palms in the county and where they are native:

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30 Seekatz.
Mexican Fan Palm: Northwest Mexico (Figure 17)

Queen Palm: Southern Brazil (Figure 18)

Canary Island Date Palm: Canary Islands of Spain (Figure 19)

King Palm: Eastern Australia (Figure 20)

California Fan Palm: Southwest California

Windmill Palm: Central China

Pygmy Date Palm: Southeastern Asia

Guadalupe Palm: Guadalupe Islands

Date Palm: Northern Africa

Mediterranean Fan Palm: Western Mediterranean

The top four are currently lining the streets of Culver City, each street lined with one type. The interventions are placed on these trees. Their origin
stories, drawn on simulated boots, are told as a way to not forget the international reach and circulation of these trees.

One of the first claims to the image of palm nativeness in Los Angeles occurred right before the 1932 Olympics (Figure 21). In 1931, the city conveniently declared palms as good for infrastructure, because they did not buckle sidewalks and didn’t shed fruit. Immediately after, the city planted 40,000 palm trees in preparation for the Olympics.

Post-Olympics, people went crazy over kentia palms. These easily potted palms can survive indoors. Their popularity ensured that many of Los Angeles’s nurseries were filling the national orders for Kentias.

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31 Farmer, 380.
Object
Root
We come to the river of La Loma, with a thin trickle of water flowing from it. A project to remove the palm trees from our property perforates the concrete, allowing runoff to water.
VIII

Perforate
The concurrent deconstruction of these myths has constantly simmered below the surface, threatening to dismantle these phony worlds and the characters who built them. Lack of water, funding, and shade each expose the physical pitfalls of the palm tree. In 1888, Mary Austin writes about LA’s sickly looking palm trees in a time of drought. In 2006, Los Angeles Department of Water and Power officially discourages the planting of the palm tree as a municipal street tree.

We come to the river of LA, which is currently a sea of concrete with a thin trickle of water flowing over it. This is where all of the palm trees removed from our previous sites are transplanted. This project *perforates* the concrete basin, inserts the palm trees, and allows runoff to water the roots and to recharge the water table below.
Mary Austin moved to Los Angeles in 1888. When writing her autobiography, she remarks:

“...the rack of the lately ‘busted’ boom: the jerry-built bungalows, the blameless young palms abandoned along with the avenues they had been planted to adorn. The unwatered palms had a hurt but courageous look, as of young wives when they first suspect that their marriages may be turning out badly.”

The unwatered palm is an exposé of its own image. It still stands, but it lacks the comfort that allows it to hold strong in its roots.

As more and more palms show defeat, and bow to drought, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, as of 2006, officially discouraged the planting of palm trees as street trees.

This decision seems to mirror the opinion of the city’s first forester, EJ Harper, “I am not a friend of palm as a street tree.”

32 Mary Austin. 1932. Earth Horizon.
33 Farmer, 363.
Object
Perforate
Conclusion

This thesis makes visible the hidden myths which construct our everyday relationships to urban form and which color the judgments we create about that city’s symbols. The interventions in this thesis use objects that directly relate to their context as a link to alternative mythologies surrounding their specific urban and historical sites. It uses a seemingly flat aesthetic to tell a seemingly flat myth. However, both the aesthetic and the myth have hidden complexities that have been collapsed into an alternative narrative. Through this new myth, the thesis redefines the image of the palm. More broadly, the thesis traces how one specific symbol varies in connotation over time. In our compressed aesthetic, the palm tree truly becomes contranymic – simultaneously revered and abhorred. Through this contranym, we gain insight into how symbols are programmed.
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