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Nature and the Locus of Control

My first time visiting the East Coast, I met a New Yorker, Karl, who upon learning my home state endlessly asked me about my surfing adventures. I don't surf or know any surfers; we had to invent the wetsuit to merely survive in the frigid Pacific. I pondered afterwards how we Californians have to wage constant war on the vast oceans, gargantuan peaks, and mystical deserts that give our state an allure of paradise. To live here, I thought, you either triumph over nature or let it freeze, choke, quake, or wash you away—it all depends on whether nature exists inside your locus of control. While Raymond Chandler's "Red Wind" depicts life in Los Angeles as outside of the individual's control due to the Santa Ana winds, D.J. Waldie's writings illustrate a city where individuals and groups, through exertion, struggle, or violence, grasp the reins of their futures to resist the impulses of the LA River.

The ending of "Red Wind" espouses the mentality of the external locus of control, where due to the hot air, one does not control their surroundings but merely reacts to them. Although John Dalmas is the protagonist in the story, he acts as a bystander to the complex lives of other people. The entire drama between Mrs. Leroy and Waldo simply happens to him, and in the end, his life remains static. Copernik's life changes as a result of the prestige from solving the case: "'I found something,' I said. 'Or rather, the police did'" (Chandler 214). Dalmas massively impacts Frank Barsaly's life as well by not telling the police of his involvement: "If I swing it—you get left out of the story" (204). Dalmas receives five hundred dollars, which do not seem

to affect his life. Finally, Dalmas tries to help Lola, but she does not allow him to: "'There's a detective downtown named Ybarra, a Mexican of the nice sort, who was on the job when the pearls were found in Waldo's suitcase. That's in case you would like to make sure—' She said: 'Don't be silly. It's all finished.'" Lola dashes Dalmas's attempt to take control as her life changes radically with her divorce. By the conclusion, every major character's life evolves as a result of their actions, whether by gaining reputation, making a deal, divorcing, or dying, except for John Dalmas. Just as Chandler's story begins with John as a bystander to a murder, it ends in the same way, as Dalmas watches other characters change and affect him while he remains static, a synopsis of the idea of the external locus of control, all attributed to the Santa Ana winds.

In contrast to "Red Wind," Waldie's writings illustrate the internal locus of control, where groups of people exert effort to alter their futures, specifically to react to the torrential Los Angeles weather. Age-old tales, such as La Llorona, have been created to scare children into avoiding the arroyos during downpour, and petitions to the Board of Supervisors when that did not suffice: "The county fenced and cemented the ditches. The frogs disappeared, and so did the boys" (Waldie 52). The effort of mothers, bureaucrats, and engineers together combined to mold the landscape and ecology of the LA River to protect children, a solid display of the internal locus of control, in stark contrast to life in "Red Wind," in which nature in the form of the red wind molds the lives of characters. More recently, after the River changed course, "a south flowing Los Angeles River was the choice of Anglo subdividers" (56). While Dalmas's only change is $500 from luckily finding himself in other people's stories, 1880s developers rearranged the entire watershed to protect their financial interests. Finally, the ending section of "We Shall Gather at the River" exemplifies humanity's resistance against nature. The efforts of governments, nonprofits, and individuals provided a destitute neighborhood with a slice of hope

in the form of a park to join the Los Angeles Greenway. The project is “a hopeful demonstration of how a perilously fragmented Los Angeles can pull itself together” (70). In Chandler’s work, characters lose their agency to the Santa Ana winds, and Dalmas is forced to react to the consequences. He remains static, refraining from leaving his mark on his surroundings. Against natural disaster, poverty, urban development, these Angelinos make an impact on their world for the future. Against every force of nature, they become dynamic characters in their story and retain their agency in the face of nature—the opposite of Dalmas.

While nature divests “Red Wind” characters of autonomy, and protagonist John Dalmas simply responds to actions happening to him caused by the Wind, people in Waldie’s stories struggle against nature to secure their livelihoods and futures, embracing their autonomy. While Waldo dies, Copernik becomes respected, Frank Barsaly retains his secret, and Lola divorces, Dalmas only becomes entangled in their affairs and his life remains relatively similar by the end. In contrast, the mothers of early Los Angeles, the Westward-Expansion-era real estate brokers, and the modern-day working class all exercised the same endeavor to forge nature to improve their lives rather than resign themselves to the River’s whims. Though more complex than a generalized binary, the locus of control massively affects a person’s decisions and outlook on life. If Karl could just try to scale the Sierras as if they were Catskills, bathe in the Hudson as if it were the LA, and surf in the Sound as if it were the Pacific, he would understand the only two ways to deal with nature in California.

Works Cited

Waldie, D.J. “The City and the River.”
Chandler, Raymond. *Red Wind*. 1946.