Utopia, Nevada: Las Vegas and American Nonfiction

Abstract: This essay examines Las Vegas nonfiction by paying particular attention to the utopian function of the city in American aesthetics and to the dystopian energies of those literary texts positioned in the tradition of the New Journalism. It argues that Southern Nevada, though frequently considered as a postmodern cityscape of simulacra, has in fact always been reflected and shaped by a strong realist tradition. Some of the most important authors of literary nonfiction have written about Las Vegas: among them Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, and David Foster Wallace. In addition numerous works have appeared in recent years exploring the city from a host of architectural, urbanist, and historical perspectives. Visiting writers were interested chiefly in the city’s wealth of opportunities for meticulous observation and representation of the body (the essay explores the figure of the showgirl as a case in point). As the essay outlines this interest has not abated in the early 21st century. But the general nature of Vegas writing has changed from prose informed by the mercurial language of the New Journalism to works interested in larger, more complex and academic representations of this new American metropolis.

1. Allegories of Clark County

In Utopia, as in Las Vegas, a somewhat relaxed dress code applies.1 “No value is set on the fineness of thread,” Thomas More imagined in 1516, “a man is content with a single cape, lasting generally for two years” (1965, 135). Reporting from Las Vegas almost half a millennium later, journalist Marc Cooper observes “herds of shorts-clad schleppers” wearing “fanny-packs around their waists” (2004, 27). Like Las Vegas, with its rich tradition running from Liberace to Siegfried and Roy, Utopia is “very fond of fools” (193). And just as Utopia was turned into an island by a fifteen-mile “excavation” ordered by its conqueror Utopus (113), the new metropolis in Southern Nevada’s Clark County has also completely transformed its environment, turning untouched desert into suburban and exurban sprawl.

But the differences outnumber the similarities – by far. Gambling, Las Vegas’ reason for being, is a practice explicitly condemned by the Utopians. “Dice and

1 The author would like to thank Markus Hartmann (Hatje Cantz, Stuttgart) for sending him off to Nevada. For an inspiring recent essay from a European perspective and comments on the city’s utopian aspects see French philosopher Bruce Bégout’s Zéropolis: L’Expérience de Las Vegas (2002). This essay will pay relatively little attention to postmodernist debates of Las Vegas’ spatial and architectural specificities; for astute reflections on these subjects see Klein (2004).
that kind of foolish and ruinous game they are not acquainted with,” More states (129). The “mob of mortals” might cherish such entertainments. Utopians “positively hold them to have nothing to do with true pleasure” (171). There is no “wine shop, no alehouse, no brothel anywhere, no opportunity for corruption” (147). Commodities “are distributed evenly among all” in Utopia (147), “everything belongs to everybody” (239), and the people “are firmly joined together by good will” (199). Contemporary observations of Las Vegas emphasize quite in contrast that America’s fastest growing metropolitan functions with an almost complete disregard for commonality, public space, and the public good. On the lists of social ills Nevada in 2004 ranked 50th of the states of the union in suicide among the elderly, 49th in high school completion, 47th in teenage drug abuse. It was 46th in homicides, 44th in teenage suicide, 43rd in child abuse (Murphy 2004, n.pag.). Neither the “fresh and pure water” described by More in the city of Amaurotum, Utopia, nor its “gentle and pleasant river” (119) have counterparts in Clark County. Las Vegas is North America’s first “arid metropolis” (Rothman and Davis 2002, 9). To Mike Davis the city symbolizes “the fanatical persistence of an environmentally and socially bankrupt system of human settlement” (2002, 91). The historian, moonlighting as prophet, finds Vegas “headed for some kind of eschatological crackup” (101).

Dystopia, Nevada? Many accounts suggest nothing else. The dazzling population growth of the Las Vegas Valley (from a population of 8,000 in 1940 to more than 1.5 million at the end of 1999 [Rothman 2003, 3; Land & Land 2004, xviii]) is mirrored by a similar explosion of Las Vegas histories, essays, urbanist texts, cultural criticism, autobiographical writings, and investigative journalism. Along the lines of Davis’ gloomy visions various nonfictional texts treat the city as an allegorical territory of all things going wrong in contemporary America. But things aren’t always this clear cut. Utopian and dystopian elements mix in reportage from Southern Nevada – and most texts make claims as to Las Vegas’ significance as a unique laboratory of America’s urban future. One of the very first nonfiction books on Las Vegas, Ed Reid’s 1961 City without Clocks, depicts the city in one and the same short paragraph as a “display of fireworks that never goes out in the night sky on a Fourth of July that never ends” and a “gigantic television set with 20 channels, all of them broadcasting full-color spectaculars at the same time” (17). The two symbols form an ambiguous template of the republican dreams and the visions of crassness that illuminate Las Vegas prose.

Some of the most prominent authors of nonfiction and literary journalism have written extensively about Southern Nevada: including Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Joan Didion, John Gregory Dunne, Michael Herr, and David Foster Wallace. Yet a brief survey of Las Vegas nonfiction as a whole may best begin

2 Though central terms and interests of nonfiction are discussed below, there is no space here for a meticulous discussion of such categories as “creative nonfiction,” “literary nonfiction,” and “literary journalism”. John C. Hartsock presents a useful account of the problems involved in historicizing and defining what he convincingly calls “literary journalism” (2000, 3-20). For
with one of the most recent monographs on the city, Hal Rothman’s 2003 *Neon Metropolis: How Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century*. Rothman, a historian, reads the new metropolis as “one of the pillars of the postindustrial, postmodern future.” He treats the city as “the latest in American dream capitals” (2003, xxvii), a model of the future of America in economic, cultural, and urbanist terms. There is some ambivalence in Rothman’s study whether a Nevadaization of America should be hoped for or feared. But the author is sure that what’s sprawling over Clark County needs to be understood as a showcase of the American future. Las Vegas, Rothman states, “anticipated the transformation of American culture” understood chiefly as a culture of radical individualism (323). Las Vegas, Rothman’s readers could surmise, is a most paradoxical space: neoliberal utopia.

Earlier traces of this idea can be found in Vegas studies focusing almost exclusively on aesthetics. Works such as Venturi/Brown/Izenour’s 1972 essay *Learning from Las Vegas* and Alan Hess’ *Viva Las Vegas: After-Hours Architecture* (1993) have praised the city as a utopian territory in the field of architecture and design. These accounts read the city as the place that will make Americans understand how their vernacular culture should find expression in postmodern urban space. “Las Vegas’s values are not questioned here,” the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas* concede; “morality” is not an issue. And yet, Venturi, Brown, and Izenour do develop political visions. Their study imagines architects “learning from popular culture,” using irony to develop “architecture for a pluralist society” (1972, 161). In this society, the authors hope, architects would draw their inspiration from the “decorated shed on Route 66” (105). *Learning from Las Vegas* projects Los Angeles as “our Rome”, Las Vegas as “our Florence” and the neon sign of the Flamingo Casino, Las Vegas, as the “model to shock our sensibilities toward a new architecture” (161).

At the other end of the spectrum, in much less optimistic terms, investigative journalists Sally Denton and Roger Morris have treated Las Vegas as a key place to study the links between commerce, politics, and the underworld. *The Money and the Power: The Making of Las Vegas and Its Hold on America* continues a tradition begun by Ovid DeMaris and Ed Reid. Their 1963 study, *The Green Felt Jungle*, had first revealed Las Vegas’ “slimy underside” (Rothman 2001, 629), the intricate connections between organized crime and the casino industry. In *The Money and the Power* the history of Las Vegas reads as the transformation of a “remote oasis of legal vice” to a “criminal city-state” growing “as a colony, then clearinghouse, then international center of a pervasive and swelling American corruption” (Denton and Morris 2002, 11).

Covering more neutral ground, finally, two recent anthologies have focused on discovering the ‘real’ Las Vegas. David Littlejohn’s collection *The Real Las Vegas: Life Beyond the Strip* and Hal Rothman and Mike Davis’ *The Grit beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas* both emphasize the city’s transfor-
mation from mere tourist resort into mid-sized metropolis. Insisting on the ‘real’ Las Vegas comes as a counter-reaction to the more speculative work associated with what Davis/Rothman call the “journalists’ trick of the quick visit” (2002, 5). The new observers of the city, the authors of the ‘real Las Vegas,’ are not content with the surface effects. They call for immersion, depth, and accuracy.

It is highly interesting that Las Vegas, long considered the unspoiled habitat of postmodern simulacra, has now produced its own realist literary tradition. Southern Nevada wants a Dreiser, not a Baudrillard. And literary nonfiction, the genre explored here, ranks as the prose form most intimately associated with realism – “drilling down,” as it is expected to do, “into the bedrock of ordinary experience” (Boynton 2005, xv). It only seems far-fetched to treat the Vegas texts at hand in the framework of naturally fictional utopian writing. Any text advertising its own factuality – a central feature of contemporary nonfiction – makes a perfect object for studying its fictionality (Campbell 2002, 263). It is especially behind the reports from the ‘real Las Vegas’ that various fictional and imagined cities appear most clearly: some sunny, some dark. This essay thus follows M. Keith Booker’s suggestion of a much more open analysis of dystopian or utopian writing, an approach questioning fixed and stable genres. Booker speaks of dystopian or utopian “impulses” or “energies” in literary texts. If in utopian literature these impulses feed into the search for the perfect society, dystopian writing positions itself in opposition to this quest, using, in Booker’s words, “defamiliarization” as its “principal literary strategy” (1994, 3).

In the case of a city constantly described as unfamiliar, strange, and disconnected from reality, even the most hard-nosed nonfiction texts are closely linked to and informed by utopian and dystopian perspectives on the unfamiliar. Exceptionalism shapes Las Vegas writing. Nonfiction from Southern Nevada frequently implies that what it describes a) exist nowhere else in America and b) will be extremely significant in America’s future. The territory thus produces a textual mixture familiar to students of New England’s early intellectual history: literary representations combine nonfictional accounts of the land and evocations of its potential in larger American allegories. (Reid’s *City without Clocks* taps into Colonial American discourse when it sketches a picture of a place “where savage Indians once camped, where the desert hides secrets that hold the fate of many a man” [1961, 10]). Reading *Of Plymouth Plantation* Myra Jehlen notes that the ‘newness’ of the New World to William Bradford lies in “being the site for the emergence of the Pilgrims as a new people” (1994, 91). Accounts of Las Vegas, in a quite similar fashion, present the image of a new city in order to unfold theories of new Americans, new mentalities, and new ways of defining the self.

Most of the texts studied in this essay from the material of the real ambitiously reach for larger meanings. They link everyday observations to such concepts as the model city and the city of darkness. This kind of moral bent, combined with the representational strategies of literary journalism, has led some critics to describe nonfiction per se as a utopian genre. Mark Kramer claims that there is something “intrinsically political” and “strongly democratic” about creative nonfiction and
its “pluralistic, pro-individual, anti-cant, and anti-elite” qualities (1995, 34). Robert Boynton states in a similar argument that contemporary nonfiction writers are prone to view their protagonists not as “exotic tribes, but as people whose problems are symptomatic of the dilemmas that vex America” (2005, xv). Seen in this context Las Vegas appears as a perfect case study of the republic’s fate in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, portrayed in inherently ‘democratic’ literary nonfiction. Both city and literary text are read as highly allegorical and indicative of the future of the nation and, consequently, the future of American utopian promise.

2. Dystopian Vegas: The New Journalism

At first Vegas-as-fireworks registers as the dominant metaphor in Tom Wolfe’s essay “Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can’t hear you! Too noisy) Las Vegas!!!,” the opening chapter in Wolfe’s early collection *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (1965). The essay treats the city’s neon spectaculars as dazzling indices of indigenous American creativity. “I call Las Vegas the Versailles of America,” (xv) Wolfe declares, viewing the casinos and their display signs as “the new landmarks of America” disconnected from any form of “art history tradition of the design schools of the Eastern universities” (xvi). But the utopian vision of aesthetic democracy doesn’t last too long. The essay moves on to the other travellers attracted by the signs. These individuals, mostly aged tourists, are not exactly received in a Whitmanesque embrace. Instead Wolfe describes their “fleshy, humped-over shape,” their torsos “hunched up into fat little loaves supported by bony, atrophied leg stems sticking up into their hummocky hips” (1965, 19).

In these passages – quite disconnected from his contemplations of Vegas architecture – Wolfe keeps an enormous distance, portraying the human body in the terms and spirit of bourgeois abhorrence. They reflect what the journalist describes as one of the central goals of his particular reportage in the introduction to *Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. In his introduction Wolfe praises those unknown Americans ignored or insulted by the “educated classes,” yet “creating new styles all the time and changing the life of the whole country in ways that nobody even seems to bother to record, much less analyze” (xiv). As the Vegas essay opens his collection devoted to a new form of cultural and stylistic analysis, Wolfe treats Southern Nevada as a key territory in what he defines as a radically new American culture. He seems to have found the ‘good place’ of aesthetic regeneration – Utopia. And yet the concept falls apart as soon as some actual human beings appear, tourists living, as Wolfe depicts it, at the moment “before the tissue deteriorates and the wires of the cerebral cortex hang in the skull like a clump of dried seaweed” (18).

Numerous literary explorations followed Wolfe’s in the 1960s and 1970s. They rarely employ a similarly medical language, but they are often just as dark and pessimistic as the most misanthropic passages in Wolfe’s piece. Both Joan
Didion’s essay “Marrying Absurd” – part of Didion’s 1968 collection Slouching towards Bethlehem – and John Gregory Dunne’s 1974 Vegas: Memoir of a Dark Season improvise in an alienated mood, sounding out the crassness of Las Vegas with an injured aesthetic sensibility. With accelerated intensity Hunter S. Thompson’s 1971 Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas veers Vegas prose off into drug-crazed paranoia. (Looking at a neon sign outside his hotel window, Dr. Gonzo sees “some kind of electric snake… coming straight at us” – “Shoot it”, his attorney replies [1998, 27].) David Foster Wallace’s 2005 essay “Big Red Son,” an account of the “Adult Video news” award ceremonies held in the city, could be read as a companion piece to Thompson’s, chronicling the frenzied world of hard-core pornography and Las Vegas as its nexus.

“You want the parfait or the mousse, the mousse is the soft stuff,” John Gregory Dunne quotes a Vegas waiter (1995, 63), one of a host of instances in which random observations by the visiting intellectual help construct a more elaborate portrait of the city’s perceived tastelessness. Joan Didion’s miniature “Marrying Absurd” makes a similar point. Didion observes events at some of the Las Vegas wedding businesses. “One bride out, another in,” she relates, “and again the sign goes up on the chapel door: ONE MOMENT PLEASE – WEDDING” (1993, 164). Watching a wedding party progress in a restaurant on the strip Didion sketches how a pregnant bride, the groom, and family members are sipping pink champagne, having shrimp cocktails, a steak special, and again pink champagne, until the bride sobs: “It was just as nice […] as I hoped and dreamed it would be.” Didion, the observer, does not hesitate to comment on what she perceives as the utter superficiality and tackiness of this moment of happiness. (Using ironic capitalization the text explains: “She had meant of course that it had been Sincere. It had been Dignified” [164].) Didion x-rays the wedding party as cultural critic, treating the pregnant girl as one of many “Las Vegas brides in the detachable modified trains, for whom the sexual revolution was a newspaper phrase, quite without meaning” (165). Pars pro toto the party at the casino table illuminates – in Didion’s view – Las Vegas’ exiled position from America’s vibrant culture of change: a city in a cultural and political straightjacket.

As Joyce Carol Oates puts it in her essay On Mike Tyson, the “men and women of all ages, races, types” working the Las Vegas slot machines seem “as hopefully attentive to their machines as writers and academicians are to their word processors” (1994, 162). It is a rare case of viewing the gamblers and the writers through the same lens. Usually the quick prose survey produced by literary journalists will portray Southern Nevada as the American territory where the distance between intellectuals and ‘civilians’ seems largest. Writers are lost in this city. But they are not at all lost in the way flâneurs are lost in Paris. In 19th century and modernist urban fiction the chaos of the city offers “multifarious stimuli,” as Robert Alter puts it, creating the mind of the “new urban man” and subsequently literary texts grappling with the fragmented, the confused, the fantastic (2005, 20-21). Stimuli of late 20th century Las Vegas induce helpless tiredness rather than creative excitement. Not even the darker drama of postwar
American urban fiction develops here – the coming to terms with a city marked by violence, division, and decline. As Elizabeth Wheeler observes containment culture frequently gets uncontained in city writing of the postwar years (2001, 265). Yet in Las Vegas intellectuals see only stasis, no flux.

Whether dealing with the neon-lit entertainment of the postwar decades or with the elaborately themed environments of late 20th century Las Vegas, writers of nonfiction are prone to emphasize the city’s crass commercialism, the brutality of the casino environment, the sense of irreality pervading the cityscape, and the perceived stupidity of the figure taken as the typical tourist. “This is the Sixth Reich,” Hunter S. Thompson quips about Vegas casino Circus-Circus. The entertainment complex provides an idea, in Thompson’s words, of “what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war” (1998, 46). Decades later David Foster Wallace introduces readers to his depiction of the Las Vegas “International Consumer Electronics Show” with similar hyperbole: “Imagine that the apocalypse took the form of a cocktail party” (2006, 11). From understated depictions of tastelessness to the wild, paranoid, and apocalyptic, Las Vegas literary journalism triggers wildly different forms of representation. What they have in common are Vegas visions of a bleak American future looming behind the mountains.

To historians Hal Rothman and Mike Davis the authors of these dystopian accounts resemble reconstruction age carpetbaggers. Vegas outsiders, Rothman and Davis argue, “have often mistaken malleability for gullibility or lack of sophistication, for guile and venality” (2002, 14). To what the authors call the “self-proclaimed hip intellectuals and grandstanding writers,” the city becomes a projection screen for their own “neuroses, their fears and needs” (13). In the eyes of the two historians these observers “see evil because they’re predisposed to see evil, not because it’s necessarily there” (14). In a review essay titled “Las Vegas and the American Psyche” Rothman attacks the figure of the visiting writers even more aggressively. Most writers, after spending “thirty minutes” and talking “with a handful of people who claimed to be in the know” would comment on the “degradation of American deviance” (2001, 628). Their “arrogance,” Rothman states, “was and is palpable, the lists of claimants endless” (628). He sees “neo-moralist posturing” (639) in Las Vegas nonfiction, texts consciously playing to “the preconceptions of a public that had a little box into which to cram Las Vegas” (629).

The fact that travelling writers categorize cities and use them as projections screens for their own psyche is, of course, nothing new and not a specific quality of Las Vegas writing. As Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs point out the traveller’s tale is as old as fiction itself (2002, 2). And the conjunctions between city and writing are naturally intimate and impossible to ignore. E.B. White, in his classic essay “Here Is New York,” likens Manhattan to a poem “whose full meaning will always remain elusive” (1999, 153-4). That statement in itself, however, is a form of boosterism. There is nothing inherently odd about rhetorical ‘little boxes’ into
which cities are crammed in writing. Literary texts, fictional or nonfictional, categorize, reflect, and shape urban space and Las Vegas is not an exception.

Postmodernism, in fact, may be the most interesting "little box" Las Vegas has been crammed into. A tight connection exists between the rise of postmodern Las Vegas and the rise of literary nonfiction. Marianne DeKoven has made this linkage explicit, reading it against the background of late-20th century utopian narratives. To DeKoven Las Vegas ranks as a "key location" of postmodern American culture, the territory America moved into after "mov[ing] on from the sixties." The "utopian desire," so prevalent in the counterculture, according to DeKoven was "transmuted into, or grafted onto, the utopian aspects of Las Vegas." Instead of "modernity’s agenda of anticapitalist social and cultural transformation," an ideology of cultural egalitarianism now prevailed, with Las Vegas as a perfect embodiment (2004, 92). Like Las Vegas, DeKoven argues, the New Journalism of such writers as Thompson, Didion, and Wolfe was a product of postmodernity. Writers positioned themselves as democratic and egalitarian, "no more authoritative than the readers." Like fictional postmodern texts the new literary nonfiction emphasized self-consciousness and irony. It reflected the "locatedness of the subject" and so it seemed as if the postmodern writer qualified for the role of the natural Las Vegas, feeling quite at home in the vernacular world of neon as one of many gamblers and fortune-seekers, just another hunter for the spectacular in post-60s America.

And yet, DeKoven points out, a sense of alienation remained. A central underlying conflict still separated the writer’s self from Vegas. There is a ‘true story’ in Hunter S. Thompson’s narrative, for instance: the meticulous recording of the horrible. The ironic narrative and the ironic cityscape don’t just produce textual effects, but also, as DeKoven argues, something “profound and tragic” (2004, 92). The city’s purpose is clear: money is all that matters. The intellectual, however, stops to think and gaze at the larger picture, the larger utopian narratives of the American West or the promise of the American Sixties. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson imagines climbing a steep hill in Southern Nevada, looking west, and being able to see how the utopian San Francisco movement of the mid-1960s failed. “We had all the momentum,” he remembers, “we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave” (1998, 68). Vegas functions as a vantage point from which to perceive historic failure. With “the right kind of eyes,” he notes, “you can almost see [...] that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back” (68).

3. The Showgirl’s Point of Origin

The sort of political and historic consciousness developed in Thompson’s travelogue needs to be read against the background of an almost old-fashioned relationship to the real. The New Journalism, though a product of the first vibrant decades of postmodernism, “still believe[d] in both truth and authenticity” (DeKoven 2004, 92). This separated authors like Wolfe, Didion, Dunne, and Thompson from observers celebrating Vegas as an aesthetic utopia. Venturi/Brown/Izenour may have
been happy with the city’s signs, learning from them to advance the postmodern architectural project. Along similar lines Las Vegas-based art critic Dave Hickey emphasizes his preference for “the honest fakery of the neon” over the “fake honesty of the sunset” (1997, 52). In contrast New Journalists cultivated a predilection for honesty, unfaked.

It’s not an overstatement to argue that Las Vegas was invented by realist writers just as much as by neon designers and theme park architects. The city, often considered a postmodernist’s paradise, also exists as a realist’s utopia: a ‘good place’ offering a wealth of opportunities for social studies, vibrant depiction, and, most importantly, meticulous observation, an element central to the writing process in literary nonfiction. The “eye of the writer” is defined as an “omnipresent lens” by a historian of literary journalism, a tool flexible enough to “[refocus] in an instant to take us beneath the surface and into the psyche” (Kerrane 1998, 20). Lounsberry names “[d]ocumentable subject matter chosen from the real world” (1990, xiii) as a characteristic feature of literary nonfiction. Mark Kramer describes literary journalism as a “union of detailed fact, narratives and intimate voice” (1995, 33). Nonfiction literature “couples cold fact and personal event” in Kramer’s account, which culminates in the axiomatic final sentence: “Truth is in the details of real lives” (34).

Said details of real lives often seem identical to the details of real bodies – in Vegas nonfiction and elsewhere. As Prendergast argues in a study of 19th century French realism, issues relating to the body, to sexuality, and gender are more than just ‘themes’ of realist writing. They “connect with basic presuppositions,” he states, they “furnish constitutive categories.” The typical setup of a realist text would include “a male looker” and, as “one of the privileged objects of vision,” the “body of a woman” (Prendergast 1995, 5). Informed by Barthesian and Foucauldian readings Prendergast regards realism as involved with the “knowledge regimes across the body.” Not accidentally did the modern discourses of sexuality and realism emerge concomitantly. The body “houses a mystery, an enigma wrapped around an essence” (7). What’s “fuelling and exceeding the will to truth and knowledge” (7), then, is material directly related to sexuality, gender, the body. The woman’s body becomes the central object of observation and speculation, the central image that structures both 19th century French realism and, indeed, late 20th century Las Vegas nonfiction.

Ed Reid’s *City without Clocks* can be cited as the earliest example of this Vegas perspective. In a chapter titled “Girls – Girls – Girls” Reid analyzes the Vegas showgirl as a ‘species.’ The showgirl, Reid states, “is always in Vegas. She emerges from the cocoon as a basic type and can evolve into almost anything her intelligence directs” (167). It is the ignorance of the city that provides that freedom, however: the fact that “Las Vegas couldn’t care less.” The most central questions are “never asked nor answered” here, Reid points out and then moves on to ask them: “What is the point of origin of a showgirl? Where does she come from? How does she evolve?” (167).
Reid’s questions obviously call for more than the observation of visual effects. They express the desire for the larger story, the filled-out background, in short: the epic treatment of the city. But it takes a while for Reid’s queries to be answered. Tom Wolfe’s essay, for instance, makes it a point to ignore all questions about origins, evolutions, personal histories. What the author records does not open entryways to biographies or portraits. All images, scenes, and reflections only serve to reinforce and improvise on the great Vegas surface spectacular (including the titillating bodies of dancers and waitresses and the withered bodies of aged tourists as carefully selected counterpoints). There is no larger story ‘behind’ Wolfe’s reflections on “Las Vegas buttocks décolletage” and the way “bikini-style shorts” cut across rather than cupping “the round fatty masses of the buttocks” (1965, 9). Closely observing the bodies of waitresses, showgirls, and dancers in Wolfe’s Vegas aesthetics identifies the outsider as outsider and, possibly, as a figure possessing a literary sensitivity. “I stare,” Wolfe states, “but I am new here” (9). His staring leads the observer not to a point of origin but to a terminus, located in the classic institution of the late 19th century realist gaze: the psychiatric ward. Here, in a Vegas hospital, appropriately the last place Wolfe observes on his journey, the territory turns most reminiscent of a dystopian fantasy. A “big brunette just keeps rolling her decal eyes,” (26) Wolfe notes as the woman patient is pressing herself to a wall, an “old babe is rocking herself back and forth” and “putting one hand out in front from time to time and pulling it in toward her bosom” (27) (to the reporter a pathological ritual re-enacting the pulling of the lever of a slot machine). But, again, there is no story behind and around the body – the body is story and observation is all it takes.

In Michael Ventura’s 1980 Las Vegas piece “The Odds on Anything,” the writer directs his gaze at waitresses in off-Strip restaurants: “bitterly etched tallish women in their fifties and sixties with great bone-structure and coiffed dyed hair […], beauties from the days of bomb blasts, wisecrackers with hard, tired eyes” (1995, 172). He describes the writer’s reflex to these impressions as the sense that “you’re dying to ask their stories, you know each one has a story […]” (172). Whereas for Ventura this is not much more than a notion, early 21st century Las Vegas nonfiction finally makes the move from observation to history, from the surfaces to the points of origin. The legacy of New Journalism can still be felt – but now Vegas prose carries the much heavier load of an actual city waiting to be explored. Aesthetics have become less important as Las Vegas has taken on the role of a middle-class utopia for hundreds of thousands of migrants who turned the city into a full-blown metropolis over the course of just a few decades. Early 21st century works such as Cooper’s The Last Honest Place in America or Davis/Rothmans’ The Grit Beneath the Glitter: Tales from the Real Las Vegas in their very titles reflect this transformation, claiming authenticity and honesty as both their own key virtues and as characteristic features of the city itself.

The heroes and heroines look familiar, however. In The Last Honest Place in America Marc Cooper makes a striptease dancer one of the most important protagonists of his Las Vegas story. As in Wolfe’s text full visual access is essential.
Cooper’s reportage introduces the reader to the “Déjà Vu” strip club, the mirrored disco ball rotating on the ceiling, the audience, and finally to the dancer known as Colette and her striptease routine. The writer, of course, uncovers the secret the audience will never learn about. By and by Cooper reveals “Colette’s” true identity, her real name, her work organizing a labor movement of Las Vegas strippers (the Las Vegas Dancers Alliance), and, finally, the history of her sex change operation and her previous work as a male machinist for the Boeing Corporation, Seattle. But what Cooper’s book finally discusses aren’t strip clubs, nor Colette’s routines, but the new social and cultural realities of Las Vegas in a post-9/11 America.

With a similar agenda New York Times reporter Sarah Kershaw focuses on the life of a dancer known as Trixie in a journalistic portrait under the headline: “Trixie: A Life as a Live! Nude! Girl! Has a Few Strings Attached.” Like Cooper’s text Kershaw’s article, part of a series of Las Vegas reports titled “American Dreamers,” gradually reveals a true identity: “Trixie is her stage name,” Kershaw relates, then presents the stripper’s name she tells “customers who demand to know her real name before they lay down a tip,” and finally announces the real ‘real name’ of this particular dancer, a “small-town Midwesterner […] who stands 6-foot-3 in her 7 ½ inch heels with a fake blond ponytail, fake eyelashes, fake green eyes, a fake tan, and fake breasts” (Kershaw 2004, n.pag.). Trixie’s body may be artificial. But Kershaw’s report uses all the key elements of the realist portrait, providing life story (“[s]he was a tomboy growing up”), lively dialogue, and details of the craft (“Trixie is […] the house supplier of ‘anti-lick’, spray-on deodorant that lets customers find out the hard way that tongues are not welcome on skin” [2004, n.pag.]).

Writing the body of the stripper still functions as both effect and symbol of straightforward realism. In contemporary Las Vegas prose such observations appear as elements of more panoramic social and cultural analyses of a ‘real’ American city – a city shaped and portrayed not as a theme park, nor in New Journalist prose fireworks, but in the much less mercurial language of realism with a social agenda. Sociologist Kathryn Hausbeck reflects this transformation in a 2002 essay. The author first tests the allegorical: “Las Vegas is a city clothed in its lights,” she writes, “beneath these sheaths is the fleshy seduction of the body of the city.” Her text then feminizes Las Vegas, “its underbelly fattened by the coffers of gambling,” the “moist breath warmed by the heat of desire and fanned by a burgeoning sex industry” (2002, 337). But then Hausbeck takes a step back to examine the metaphoric construction of Las Vegas as both capitalist utopia and exposed woman. She relates autobiographical episodes of being taken for a prostitute by passers-by. And she points at the “short metaphorical distance” between woman’s sexuality described as dark, uncontainable, excessive, and the “seductive allure of Las Vegas.” Hausbeck explores these visions in the context of her own political agenda. “Here is my Vegas dream,” she states, “that with a little rereading, the fantasy world of gritty and glitter-clad girls that is Sin City can and give way to a more deft analysis of Las Vegas as a city of women, full of
potential and the possibility of a more diverse, equal and enlightened model of
gender and female sexuality” (346).

Such concepts couldn’t be farther removed from Wolfe’s new journalist utopia
of unlimited visual access. In the early 21st century, Las Vegas, still a woman, has
turned into a feminist; the roaming journalist observer into an academic sociologist
imaging a city of women where gender, sex, and the commodification of the
body are carefully and collectively reframed.

4. Naked City

Jean Baudrillard once voiced that any consideration of critical or moral nuances
would not do justice to Las Vegas or to America as a whole. “[V]ous en effacerez
l’originalité,” Baudrillard envisioned, “qui vient justement de défier le jugement et
d’opérer une confusion prodigieuse des effets” (2000, 147-8). For many years
writers seem to have been content with preserving said originality and uniqueness
by indeed leaving aside the nuances, by not questioning the effects. Las Vegas
and its bodies were components of a largely aesthetic utopian concept, shaped by
populist American aesthetics and desires. To the New Journalist, whether writing
of darkness or of light, the city with its multiple performances granted every op-
opportunity to observe, record, and caricature American individuals in this thoroughly
indigenous American environment. A utopia for the writer, yet written about
in dystopic terms, Las Vegas offered unlimited access.

In contemporary writing much has changed. The moral and political nuances
have entered Las Vegas discourse. And Baudrillard’s assumption seems correct:
Vegas exceptionalism appears to be waning. From a collage of meditations on
the spectacular the discourse on the city has turned into a forum of voices
interested first and foremost in Clark County as real political space. Utopian and
dystopian tropes are still active, yet tied into much more down-to-earth debates.
And the genre of the showgirl essay has moved on from Wolfe’s excited reflections
of “buttocks décolletage” to Hausbeck’s utopian city of women and to Las Vegas
intellectual Libby Lumpkin’s reflections on the showgirl revue in the framework
of postmodern feminism, objectification, and spectacular sexuality. The Vegas
revue, Lumpkin argues, should be ranked less as “the voyeur’s smorgasbord than
a public ritual of courtship in which the female is on more than equal footing
with the male” (1999, 76).

The transformation brings to mind More’s depiction of Utopia’s mating rite.
In the second book of Utopia Thomas More describes a custom in “choosing
mates” that “seemed to us very foolish and extremely ridiculous.” Before marriage
a woman “is shown naked to the suitor by a worthy and respectable matron.”
The suitor in turn “is presented naked before the maiden by a discreet man.”
Utopians, More explains, marvelled at “the remarkable folly” of other nations to
choose a partner simply by looking at the face (“hardly a single handbreadth of
her”). More presents this examination of the whole body as a wise custom, as
“such foul deformity may be hidden” beneath the suitor’s or maiden’s clothes (189).
The implicit normalist brutality of More’s phrase may be hard to take. His lines hurt less if they are read as a metaphoric depiction of the liaisons between writers and the Southern Nevadan cityscape. Reporting from “Las Vegas, the exceptional place” the New Journalists, in spite of all their observational feats, may have examined only “a single handbreadth of her.” What’s in full view today, after the flowering of Las Vegas nonfiction, is just another naked city – “foul deformit[ies]” and all.

Works Cited


Discover genuine guest reviews for Utopia at Lake Las Vegas along with the latest prices and availability – book now. Book great deals at Utopia at Lake Las Vegas with Expedia.com. Check guest reviews, photos & cheap rates for Utopia at Lake Las Vegas in Las Vegas. This condo is located in Henderson. Cowabunga Bay Water Park and Nevada State Railroad Museum are local attractions and those in the mood for shopping can visit Boulder Strip and Galleria at Sunset. Looking to enjoy an event or a game while in town? See what's happening at Sam Boyd Stadium or Henderson Events Plaza and Amphitheatre. Discover the area's water adventures with sailing nearby, or enjoy the great outdoors with hiking/biking trails. Visit our Henderson travel guide. “The American Dream” is the theme of this adventure story (though I use the term adventure in place of “drug binge fueled blaze across Nevada), and two unlikely companion take their wild “trip” to the heart of Nevada: Las Vegas to find the dream and write about it to bring home. This story is very crazy to be honest but it is time and time again one of my favourite stories. Utopia Management-Las Vegas, Las Vegas. 2 likes · 1 talking about this. Our comprehensive property management service is delivered by a professional... Property Management Company in Las Vegas, Nevada. Closed Now. CommunitySee All. 2 people like this. 2 people follow this. AboutSee All. 2300 Sahara Avenue, Suite 800 Las Vegas, NV, NV 89102.