Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Nowhere: The Influence of Place on Bildungsroman

Brady Gwynn

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Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Nowhere: The Influence of Place on Bildungsroman

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in Literature.

By
Brady Gwynn

Under the mentorship of Dr. Joe Pellegrino

ABSTRACT
This research focuses on two metropolitan cities, Los Angeles and Pittsburgh, and addresses their connection to the novel form. Bildungsroman texts are necessary for this analysis of place because adolescence allows for the awakening of oneself and one’s surroundings. On the brink of adulthood, these protagonists reminisce on home while exploring a new landscape: the city.

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Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Nowhere:
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Introduction: Bildungsroman, Place, and Urbanity

Focusing on an adolescent’s development, his or her inner turmoil, and spiritual distress was not a common practice in literature before the eighteenth century. During the eighteenth century a new type of literature that addressed the process of maturation developed in Germany, and was called the Bildungsroman. The term combines two German words, bildungs and roman. Bildungs translates to “development” or “growth” and roman means “novel.” Therefore, a Bildungsroman novel presents the world either through the unfiltered eyes of an adolescent or through the eyes of a narrator who reflects back on his or her adolescence. The idea revolutionized literature and created a European fascination with the genre. German author Karl Philipp Moritz more or less invented the form in his novel Anton Reiser, published in 1790. The novel follows Anton’s introspective path from childhood to adulthood. Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther, published in 1774, was another influential early work in the genre.

There are several standard tropes in the Bildungsroman genre. One of the more common patterns is that the protagonist faces painful losses during his or her childhood, which cause a loss of innocence. Another type presents inner thoughts of the adolescent as he or she completes a spiritual journey towards his or her acceptance or rejection of adulthood. However, the most significant narrative depicts a teen discovering his or her place in society and subsequently either taking on the mantle or abnegating his or her social responsibilities.
These four Bildungsroman texts, *Less Than Zero (Less)*, *The White Boy Shuffle (Shuffle)*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower (Perks)*, and *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh (Mysteries)* discuss the challenges of navigating adolescence while on the brink of adulthood. Each novel is different; however, all of the main characters experience a sense of self-discovery while carrying wounds or personal demons throughout the text. Each text has a male protagonist, which provides a constant for the analysis process.

In *Less*, the reader gets a glimpse of the affluent LA lifestyle through, Clay, a rich, young college student who returns for winter break. Clay once lived this lifestyle. After a semester at college, he sees his community with different eyes. He rejects and resists the overindulgent lifestyle of the LA elite. He sees the effects of that unsustainable and unrealistic lifestyle. However, Clay eventually returns to old patterns, overindulging in drugs and alcohol. He engages with his friends, such as Blair and Julien, but begins to realize that they are stagnant and at points, in decline. These wealthy kids of LA can do anything they desire, but they cannot seem to master or understand their emotions. Clay’s month at home presents an image of what he once was. After being exposed to a “new normal” at college, he cannot help but see the absurdity of his former lifestyle. Although, he travels from party to party and indulges freely as he used to, he is unable to connect with people he once called friends. He realizes that he has lost the shallow facade in which he originally found shelter.

In *Shuffle*, the reader sees how the other half of Los Angeles lives. Gunnar Kaufman, an African American teenager, finds his life turned upside down when his mother moves him from his beloved Santa Monica to West Los Angeles. His mother believes that he and his sisters feel more at home in a majority white community rather
than in one that embraces its African American heritage. At his new school, his
classmates make fun of his awkwardness around girls and his manner of dress and
speech, which have been obviously influenced by Santa Monica not West LA. Gunnar
uses basketball as a way to connect with his peers. As his skills grow on the court, his
confidences grows in the classroom as well. He realizes that he has a fondness for writing
poetry. His poems become popularized in contemporary poetry. His basketball skills lead
him to Boston University, where his fame continues to grow due to his provocative
beliefs. Gunnar’s words and personal beliefs about mass suicide are misconstrued by the
media. Gunnar stated that African Americans have never and will never be accepted in
America. He continued to express how death as the ultimate exodus. Many African
Americans committed suicide because of his words. However, the media portrays these
words as orders rather than private opinions meant only for himself. Gunnar becomes the
messiah for a community that he did not identify with at an early age. His lack of a firm
identity leaves him empty in search for something more.

In Perks, Charlie is a rising ninth grader, in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. His
introversion makes him fear the transition more than most. The novel opens with the
suicide of a close friend, Michael. Charlie attempts to come to terms with this loss by
writing letters to an unknown receiver. In these letters, he narrates the first year of high
school populating the text with scenes of family discourse, new friends, and supportive
teachers. Between the lines, his cryptic messages reveal remnants of trauma from sexual
abuse inflicted on him by his now deceased Aunt Helen. As the year continues, Charlie
develops friendships with characters such as the bubbly, lighthearted Sam and the
extroverted Patrick and forms a relationship with Mary Elizabeth. While the narrative
provides examples of development and personal growth, the novel’s tone remains solitary and isolated. He continues to struggle with forming genuine relationships. However, when repressed trauma is discovered, Charlie’s newfound community supports him.

In *Mysteries*, Art Bechstein is a recent graduate from the University of Pittsburgh. He clings to the last vestiges of his freedom in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania before his adult life begins, with a job picked for him in Baltimore, Maryland. During this final moment of youth, he longs for his home, uncertain about his future. Because the novel’s time frame spans only three months, the reader focuses on the moment of transition into adulthood rather than preparatory information. Before he must assume the responsibilities of adult life, he spends his limited time working at a bookstore and meeting new friends such as Arthur, Phlox, and Cleveland. During the transition into adulthood, Art cannot accept his sexuality. At the beginning of the novel, he does not identify as gay. He sees himself as a straight man. This summer centers on his turmoil as he becomes aware of his sexual identity and eventually accepts it.

This thesis analyzes how setting affects the development of these characters in Bildungsroman texts. Each of these texts are set in either Los Angeles, California or Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Both of these locations are metropolitan cities in America, providing an urban jungle for Art, Charlie, Clay, and Gunnar to use and to explore. I argue that the traits, culture, and atmosphere of the cities bleed into the personalities of the characters in the text.

The definition of a city is highly debated. Some scholars argue that it cannot be defined by a limited group of words, while others feel that a city should be defined only by its geography and physical presence. For example, the scholar Anthony M. Orum,
defines a city as “a site in which political power is mobilized and economic processes occur” for his research (2). However, the critic Arthur C. Nelson chooses to avoid the definition of a city. Instead he defines the effects of a city, as urbanity: “communities of mixed, interconnected land uses, especially residential ones, served by multiple transportation options … It also implies, largely, the end of spatial expansion of metropolitan areas and a new era of infill and redevelopment” (192). These differing definitions reveal the aspects of a city versus city life. However, each are correct interpretations. This lack of a strict definition allows the city to be a multitude of things such as the people and the physicality.

Bildungsroman texts are necessary for this analysis of place and setting because adolescence allows for the awakening of oneself and of one’s surroundings. Young adults exist between two worlds, childhood and adulthood. In this laodicean moment, they reminisce on the familiarity of the home and domestic space while exploring a new landscape: the city. While gripping with the pains of high school, college, friends, and so on, they begin to grapple with a whole new world. A world that they lived in but never noticed until this awakening away from the nuclear family and closer to a personal self. Characters face emotional and physical challenges. However, each is connected to a negative aspect of the adult world, whether it be prostitution, drug use, racism, sexual abuse, or organized crime. These young adults absorb these moments of pain and discomfort while entering a world far different than the one they previously inhabited.

Cities provide a landscape of choices and experiences for their inhabitants. A person growing up in Los Angeles would have different experiences than a person growing up in Pittsburgh, due to a myriad of factors such as demographics, education, or
climate. These experiences impact the child’s easily impressionable adolescent years. These population centers are a far cry from the rural areas of the Bildungsroman genesis. Louis Wirth addresses this shift and the complicated interrelations that go along with it: “The contemporary world no longer presents a picture of small isolated groups of human beings scattered over a vast territory” (2). Instead, self-contained densely-populated urban centers provide all that is necessary for modern life. Nature is bypassed; people do not need to interact with far-flung groups or carve their living out of the wilderness in order to meet their basic needs. Populations exist in a man-made fortress escaping electronically but not physically. These concrete playgrounds are the over stimulating environment in which these contemporary teens come of age.

   Urban childhood is a somewhat new idea. Authors, such as Chabon and Chbosky perceive Pittsburgh as a city of experiences and opportunities. However, cities were not always depicted as pristine places to live, especially for children. Romantics such as Wordsworth and Blake write poems depicting the squalor and filth of city life. In “The Chimney Sweeper: When my mother died I was very young,” Blake depicts the harsh reality of child labor in the booming, industrial city of London. This chimney sweeper is not given the opportunity to enjoy innocence. His life extends only to the next chimney he must sweep, “So your chimney’s I sweep and in soot I sleep” (4). This depiction stretches far from modern images of city’s wealth, prosperity, and opportunity. Instead, the poem plays on the a city’s physicality, detailing the dirtiness. The children are left parentless to survive in an unsuitable environment.

   Jean Jacques Rousseau takes this depiction a step further and argues that children should not be subjected to city life at all. The prime place of learning and development is
outside the city, in the countryside. In *Emile ou De l’éducation*, Rousseau presents the pedagogical benefits of creating a mind with morals outside the city: “Two school boys from the city will do more mischief in a community than the young people of a whole village” (56). His bias towards the countryside is present repeatedly in the text. He sees the place beyond the city as a “better environment for growing up and moral development” (Fegter 291). In eighteenth century Europe, good childhood was not synonymous with urbanity. Instead, the elite and upper class ran from the dirty cities, overpopulated with lower level citizens. They found solace in nature, enriching their education to create morals that they believed would have been tainted in cities.

However, in modern America, many adults flock to cities for jobs, promise of wealth, and opportunities. New York is home to wall street. LA is home to Hollywood. Metropolis has become a staple in the American landscape. America strayed beyond its agrarian roots and ideals, as its population races to the nearest city. In 2015, the United States census bureau stated that U.S. cities house “62.7 percent of the U.S. population, but comprises just 3.5 percent of land area” (U.S. Census). The present-day equivalent of the Manifest Destiny, which fueled thousands to go west in search for land, is a 700 square foot loft in SoHo, Manhattan.

The apparent rise in urban migration has consequences. Children trick-or-treat in apartment complexes, take public transit alone, and live in densely populated areas. However, the picaresque childhood still exists, but only in the shadow of larger cities. Suburbs remain with their white picket fences and golden retrievers meeting you in the front yard. Whether it be in a suburb or downtown, childhood is changing. Cities are the new normal.
The scholar, Susann Fegter, conducted an ethnographic research project analyzing the effects of urbanity on the child’s identity. Her research focuses on German children growing up in the city, walking to and from school. She conducts interviews discussing the children’s route and activities. Theses children must continually adapt to the city’s constant change. She explains the “epitome of urbanity with its expressions of density, mobility, social conflicts, cultural heterogeneity and constant processes of change and transformation” (Fegter 294). The city’s landscape demands a child’s constant attention. These characteristics of a city are constantly evolving and defining the place. Children must continue to walk to school, aware of these dynamics. While aware, they cannot succumb to the stimulation and continue to school.

Independent activities in the city are crucial for children to grow and to develop outside the domestic space. Children need these experiences to learn about their role in a changing society. They begin to move beyond the self and experience, “cultures or ways of living under social heterogeneity and urban density” (Fegter 292). The city provides them with challenges as well as opportunities to interact with different people and to engage in activities unique to city life. The mundane chore of walking to and from school puts children in the center of their city environment: the street:

The street is still an important place and space in which some children spend time, and that it is still possible to reconstruct broader continuous roaming spaces of children in cities … whereas some focus on this from the perspective of potential danger, others highlight its potential as an experimental space for children in which they learn to deal with unexpected situations, people, and activities. (Fegter 293)
This quotation discusses the importance of being outside and absorbing all that city life has to offer. The city provides the ultimate playground for youth to explore and to conquer. However, the city is the only playground that extends into adulthood, because the same obstacles that faced the younger population will still exist when they reach adulthood. However, the urban population will have an advantage over visitors, because they will have experienced and lived in the city for their entire life, starting with their walk to school. For example, the German philosopher Georg Simmel addressed the mental effects of living in metropolis during adulthood: “The urban dweller … [is] a person who is overcharged by stimuli and thus developing a kind of nervousness … the urbanite hides behind a kind of defensive system” (Eckardt 11). Simmel presents a world far to great for the average inhabitant. A person must shut down aspects of themselves to survive in this overstimulated environment, if he or she moves there later in life.

This thesis focuses on two metropolitan American cities, Pittsburgh and Los Angeles, and their connection to the novel form. These four works follow intense scenes of the protagonists’ adolescence with a backdrop of urbanity. Each city has a different history, which leads to different outcomes. These authors embrace their setting as another character, constantly changing, evolving and growing. Their prose, plot, and character development allude to setting as well as provide necessary tension to ground and to focus the reader’s attention to place.
Histories of LA and Pittsburgh

Despite Los Angeles’ prominent presence in American geography today, in the late 19th century, San Francisco overshadowed its neighbor to the south. The gold rush of the mid-19th century had San Francisco as its nexus, so the city quickly developed into a hub of commerce. However, its geographic insularity limited its growth, and eventually LA, with its better climate and room for growth, outshone the original “West Coast City.”

When two railroad lines met in LA, Southern California becomes an accessible location. David Fine stresses the importance of the establishment of the Southern Pacific Line in 1876 and the Santa Fe Line in 1886 for the development of LA (45). With these companies came a wave of propaganda promoting the opportunities LA made available to both penniless migrants and giant corporations. Prominent and enticing aspects of the city were featured, such as “consistently warm weather, open land, healthful dry air, and agricultural opportunities” (45). These advertisements appealed to white, middle-class workers drowning in overpopulated and polluted East-Coast cities. As the migration began, the phenomenon of the city of eternal summer followed. The population of LA rose, and has steadily increased for over a century. By the early twentieth century, LA had already surpassed San Francisco’s population of 575,000 (Fine 44). The once small and insignificant neighbor of the south overtook San Francisco in number and economic significance.

The geography of Los Angeles supports its call for residents. Except for the Pacific Ocean, the LA sprawl is not constrained by geographical obstacles. The city can expand to accommodate rising numbers. Unlike San Francisco, which is bound by the Pacific Ocean and the bay, or New York City, which is confined to a set of islands, LA’s
greatest advantage for its development is its lack of limits. With the rise of the film industry in Hollywood in the early twentieth century, its population increased exponentially, and the city grew outwardly rather than upwardly, like its East Coast competition.

In 2017, Los Angeles reached its highest population, over four million people, and maintained its role as the “dominant population center in California” (Grad 1). This growth testifies to the city’s overpowering allure in our national narrative. Beginning with the Manifest Destiny and the propaganda created by rail companies, the west has been romanticized as something exotic yet achievable, something people deserve as a reward for their previous lives in other dreary, workaday locales. This rhetoric obviously works, as the population details demonstrate. As this population increases, so does the ethnic diversity of the city. Fine argues that LA’s diversity rivals—and may even surpass—the diversity of New York City (44). The city contains a wide variety of ethnic and cultural heritages, as well as extreme discrepancies in socio-economic status. The City of Angels becomes heaven only for those who can afford its high cost of living.

The promise of endless summer days, beachfront properties, and entertainment is not always fulfilled. With such as large population, the city’s infrastructure is strained to the point of breaking. The region’s water woes are well-known, but even these are glorified in films like Chinatown or Mulholland Drive. As the city expands, it moves into more arid, inland areas, exacerbating its potential for water shortages and even drought. Its high cost of living necessitates that new construction be densely-packed multi-family dwellings, but even with its encroachment into the desert, LA cannot accommodate all who move there: “The region’s population has continued to increase, but a lack of
housing is becoming a bigger issue. While LA is adding more and denser housing, experts say it is not keeping pace with demand” (Grad 10).

This putative utopia is only functional for a particular group of people: the wealthy. The poor and the shrinking middle class live in a city meant only for the rich. The siren songs that called to many new residents, such as open land, clean air, endless summer, and a the glamorous life, easily elide the realities of the city: pollution, limited natural and civic resources, a lack of basic services, and overpopulation. Those who can afford it, however, are able to buy themselves a different LA. From their houses in the hills to the beaches of Santa Monica, they can live a life above the squalor. They can afford the clean air and open spaces that enticed then betrayed so many with more limited resources.

While Los Angeles promised fame, fortune, and endless summer, Pittsburgh promised nothing. Divisions were just as stark; however, there were and are far fewer rich and far more poor. Where the Allegheny and the Monongahela meet to form the Ohio, in southwestern Pennsylvania, at the north end of the Alleghenies, sits industrial Pittsburgh.

By the nineteenth century, steel rose to power due to Pittsburgh’s fortune of natural resources, such as “coal, timber, natural gas, iron, and limestone” (Visit Pittsburgh). Millionaires such as the Carnegies, the Mellons, the Westinghouses, and the Fricks created a home in Pittsburgh, increasing their wealth and aiding in the city’s economic development. Industry was present in every aspect of city life in Pittsburgh. The city’s reputation of a surplus of jobs and of a tireless work ethic was respected throughout the nation:
In the 1870s, Pittsburgh saw the beginning of a period of immense industrial growth that would last through to the middle of the twentieth century. Entrepreneurs … introduced integrated mills, mass production, and modern manufacturing management to the steel industry and others. Modern plants and company towns were built to expedite mining and milling practices, and by the turn of the twentieth century a network of mining towns, ethnic neighborhoods, and mill works spread throughout south-western Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh had become an international and industrial power and a hub for blue collar labor.

(Duryea 768)

As the industrial leader, competing with other cities such as Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Chicago, Pittsburgh succeeded. The city had a plethora of different outlets and means of work. Industry fueled the city’s growth and prominence in the American landscape.

The presence of job security and affordability reached the ears of potential European immigrants, who were facing economic hardships in their home countries. The city attracted immigrants from western Europe, such as the Irish and the German. However, industrial cities also attracted immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, such as such as Italians, “Poles, Slovaks, Ukrainians, Croats, Slovones,” (768). This cheap labor allowed for successful industries such as steel and mining. Their presence gave the city a diverse population with structured neighborhoods. The environment boasted pockets of Europe, with ethnic neighborhoods such as “Polish Hill, Bloomfield, and Squirrel Hill,” which in turn became close, tight-knit communities (769). This influx of ethnic diversity before the early twentieth century, gave the city a vibrant landscape as well as a new resource.
Pittsburgh’s overzealous attitude towards prosperity and economic growth tried to overshadow the negative environmental impacts. During the early twentieth century, Pittsburgh was known as the *smoky city*, alluding to the excess of smoke and chemicals due to industrial greed. The city’s citizens were passive, accepting the smoke rather than reacting to it: “the smoke … [is] a necessary cost of being the world’s leading producer of steel” (769). Residents chose progress over health. City life became dark and grim. Street lights were used during the day because the high amounts of pollution blocked the sun’s rays. Industry officials decided to transform the narrative of health problems associated with the smoke to benefits: “They concluded that although Pittsburghers had mottled lungs, this was not dangerous to their health because of what they called ‘pulmonary anthracosis,’ or formation of lesions that allegedly warded off bacteria and promoted healing in the case of tuberculosis,” (Tarr 18). Greed and money overpowered the rights of the people, and the city’s dirty reputation continued to escalate.

In the 1970s, the foreign market overtook the domestic steel and mining industries, which in turn created the present rust belt across the Midwest. America could not compete, with their high labor and material costs. The city that once identified itself with smoke, industry, and steel, was left with the shadow of abandoned smokestacks. In 1960, steel contributed to “16% of total employment.” In 1979, it reached “8.8%,” and in 1987, it reached only “2.7%” (Duryea 769). The constant decline in blue color jobs provided a grim future for the Pittsburghers, so many left, creating a population decline.

After the departure of steel, Pittsburgh faced an identity crisis; they needed to reinvent themselves if they were going to succeed and to grow without steel. The city now boasts cleaner air and new methods of commerce. Transferring from industry to
intellect, the city has become a mecca for “technology, health care, and bio-sciences” attracting “educated millennials” to move to the once smoky city (Russo 28). A city with an abundance of universities, public libraries, and educational entertainment such as museums and theaters might be mistaken as a larger East Coast neighbor. However, where Pittsburgh differs is in its intrinsic value of community.
Defining Structures of LA and Pittsburgh

In this thesis, I study certain traits that are attributed to city life, such as climate, cost of living, demographics, language, infrastructure, neighborhoods and city planning, civic pride, and physical health. These categories are only some of the many elements that create and define a city. For the purpose of this thesis, I will primarily look at the statistics confined to two decades, the 1980s and 1990s. The four novels are set during that time period.

The residents of Los Angeles boast a Mediterranean climate with endless summers. The winters are mild and almost nonexistent; residents assume winter is spring, with average temperatures in the sixties. The summers are met with intense dry heat, from the Santa Ana. The wind comes from the California and Arizona deserts, gliding over the mountain ranges and reaching sunny LA. During autumn and winter the wind is apparent and forceful; however, it is possible all seasons. With it comes the rise of temperatures well into the upper eighties (°F). Parts of the city are affected differently by the wind. The hills become scorched reaching the upper nineties (°F), but the parts of the city nearest to the coast, such as Santa Monica, remain comfortable in the mid-seventies (°F) due to the cooling Pacific. The high winds also cause the spread of wildfires during the hottest and driest months (Climates to travel).

The residents of Pittsburgh experience all four seasons. While LA’s climate is stagnant, Pittsburgh embraces cyclical change. January is the coldest month falling to temperatures in the twenties (°F), and July has the highest temperatures reaching slightly above 80 °F. The average snowfall for the country is twenty-six inches per year, but Pittsburgh well surpasses the average with forty-one inches. Daylight reaches its peak
during the summer months; however, the amount of sunlight is limited due to the large, impenetrable clouds that hover just above the skyscrapers. For example, in July, the city has 15 hours of daylight, but only 8.1 hours reveal sunlight, due to the overpowering cloud cover (Best Places).

Cost of living is defined by the money residents pay each month for essentials necessities, such as food and housing. Residents enjoy the plethora of amenities that Los Angeles offers, only if they can afford it. With a steadily increasing population, the demand has boomed exponentially. The overall cost of living is 95% higher than the national average (Best Places). The higher cost is present in almost all aspects of life. For example, the cost of groceries can escalate quickly. In an article about budgeting and saving, Greg Depersio addresses the problem: “A gallon of milk costs $4.02, and a loaf of bread costs $2.77 … Even a frugal consumer, to be safe, should build $500 into his monthly budget for food costs in Los Angeles” (7). The rise in cost does not stop with food. Affordable and available housing is becoming a serious problem in LA. The median price for a house in the United States is approximately $220,000. However, in Los Angeles the median price is approximately $680,000. Nationally, a little over 50% of homes are owned. In LA, only 34% of homes of owned. This reality leaves the vast majority only able to rent due to rising costs. However, renters still face shocking prices. The average rent in LA is just over $3,000 compared to the national average of $1,300 (Best Places). To have a home and to eat in Los Angeles, a resident should be prepared to face steadily increasing prices as demand refuses to cease.

In comparison, the cost of living in Pittsburgh is slightly below the national average. The aspect of the city that makes living pleasantly obtainable and within reach is
the affordable housing. The median home price in the city is $138,700, which is over $75,000 dollars less than the national average. The median income, $44,092, is less than LA, $54,501 (Best Places). However, the Pittsburgh income can stretch further than the western counterpart. For example, a family of four, two adults and two children can expect to spend $750.00 on food per month compared to LA’s monthly cost of $500.00 for a family of one (Heyl). A family living in “the Pittsburgh metro area would need to earn a combined $78,769 per year - or $6,564 a month - to attain what the organization describes as ‘a modest yet adequate standard of living’ (Heyl). These statistics provide a positive outlook and a promising future. The affordability and prospective job growth, due to new company headquarters such as Duolingo and Uber, promote the ideal of success for more than the elite. If middle class Americans can afford to live where new, innovative jobs are emerging, their future is far better than a place designed for only the wealthy to succeed.

Demographics refer to aspects of a specific population such as race, religion, politics, populations, and education. When you compare LA’s past with its present situation, it “was once overwhelmingly white, with roots in the Midwestern and Eastern United States, [LA] now looks very different and captures the diversity of people on this planet” (Allen and Turner 1). However, Los Angeles’ makeup since the eighties and nineties has grown in number but the percentages have remained constant. In 2019, the population is roughly four million. The city boasts its diverse landscape with a 49.8% White population, 9.6% African American population, 11.3% Asian population, 48.5% Hispanic population, and a 4.6% population of people who identify as two or more races (2010 US census). Hispanic and Latino populations are centralized in East Los Angeles.
Asian populations resided in densely populated neighborhoods designated by their ethnicity, such as Historic Filipinotown, Koreatown, Chinatown and Little Tokyo. Prominent African American Communities in south Los Angeles, such as Compton, are in a state of transition. Since the 1980s the Hispanic population has been climbing. These new populations are moving to these southern neighborhoods. Now, the African American population is dwarfed by increased Latino immigration (World Population Review). The United States census cannot voluntarily ask for information about one’s religious background, therefore I could not find concrete statistics. However, I found a study conducted by the University of Southern California for the 2010 population. The leading Christian faith was Roman Catholicism at 36.08%, followed by evangelical, protestant faiths, each between 0.5% to 4.0%. The demographics of the State of California have primarily been Democrat. However, the Bay Area and Los Angeles are the driving forces in this statistic. In comparison to these urban centers, the state sways more towards republican voting patterns. The growing population in these cities adds to the blue wave affecting the politics of an entire state. In 1980, the likelihood of an adult in Los Angeles to vote democratic in a presidential election was just below 50%. In 1990, the probability rose to between 65% to 70% (Public Policy Institute of California). The data continued until the 2008 presidential election, with the probability of a democratic voter being almost 70%. Of the adult population over 25 years-old, roughly 20% have a high school diploma, 22% graduated from an undergraduate degree, and 12% obtained a graduate degree. When one breaks down education by race the contrasting realities appear. About 95% white populations in LA will graduate from high school and 54% will graduate from college. In the African American community, 88% will graduate from high
school and 25% will graduate from college (World Population Review). This brief review of related aspects of the Los Angeles population are present in both of the LA texts.

As with Los Angeles, Pittsburgh’s racial makeup has remained steady since the 1980’s. However, the exponential growth of LA has not been a defining aspect of Pittsburgh ever since the decline of steel. In contrast, the population has been declining over the past forty years, with only small moments of growth during that period. The city has a majority population of white Americans at 66%, followed by African Americans at 23%. Asian, Multiracial, and Hispanic communities each fall under 6% (Data USA). Similar to LA, branches of Christianity are the dominant faith groups, with Roman Catholicism with the largest congregation at 32%. Non-Christian religions, such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hindi, follow suit making up 4% of the population (Pew Research Center). The city has a reputation of being a dominant democratic center for eligible voters. “As for party politics, Pittsburgh is still an overwhelmingly Democratic town. The city hasn’t elected a Republican as mayor or even as a council member since before the Depression.” (O’Toole). Blue votes have always been present in Pittsburgh, starting with blue color steel workers and transitioning to an educated younger population, due to the stellar universities and job growth. Of the adult population over 25 years-old in Pittsburgh, roughly 27% have a high school diploma, 22% graduated from an undergraduate degree, and 20% obtained a graduate degree. When one breaks down the education by race, the two highest communities have differing results. About 94% white populations in Pittsburgh will graduate from high school and 47% will graduate from college. In the African American community, 88% will graduate from high school and 18% will graduate from college (World Population Review).
The language of a region can refer to a multitude of things such as vernacular, common phrases, and foreign languages present in the area. Los Angeles is a medley of immigrants interacting with each other while remaining faithful to their mother tongue. Claudia Parodi explains how the mixing of languages does not create, “a melting pot, but rather a sociolinguistic mosaic of languages in contact. In this city live Anglos, Latinos, Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, Iranians, Arabs, Russians, French and Israelis, just to mention some Angelino ethnic groups” (33). While a multitude of different languages exist with one another, native SoCal English is unique and differs from other parts of the country. Its quirks are present in vocabulary and accent. A study currently being conducted at Stanford University is attempting to determine what defines the California accent. A news release on that study suggests that there is a difference between northern and Southern California, stressing how a place has the power to transform the attitudes, persona, and dialect of a population:

Researchers are quick to point out, that people speak differently not only because of where their ancestors came from but also because of their attitudes. How speakers relate to people around them, and to the rest of the state and country, plays an important role in the way they express these attitudes in speech. “People might think of it being a Northern California/Southern California distinction, because Southern California is Los Angeles, is opulence, is celebrity, is liberalism,” said Geenberg [a doctoral student associated with the study]. (King)

Some examples of the relaxed, laid-back SoCal vernacular and accent are outlined in a *Los Angeles Times* article. For example, interstates and highways carry the article *the* in front the number. Before the national interstates, LA created several highways naming
them after the local regions. Therefore, the *the* carried over with the number system. Angelenos cannot be bothered by too many syllables so they shorten the word. Santa Monica becomes *Samo*. The overabundance of the *like* and *stoked* plague the local conversations. The city is overrun with industry vernacular or Hollywood-speak. Phrases, such as “I’ll get you a drive-on,” mean nothing to an outside visitor; however, to its members, a drive-on is a valued title. A person can drive onto a movie set instead of walking. All of these terms, idiosyncrasies, and stereotypes are manifested in the SNL skit, “The Californians.” The long-running skit presents overdramatized accents of the surfer dude, the Hispanic maid, and wealthy, valley girl.

While the accent and language of LA is strengthened by diversity and constantly shifting populations, isolation caused the emergence of the Pittsburgh accent. The city is in Southwestern Pennsylvania, geographically separated from eastern cities such as Philadelphia. The Allegheny mountains contain lush and thick forests, which create an impassable barrier during winter months, even during the 20th century. The secluded city evolved independently, revealing a distinct accent and vernacular: Pittsburhese:

“Pittsburgh speech is a living example of a distinctive urban U.S. dialect of the sort that is becoming less and less common” (Johnstone 1). The speech connects the people with each other forming a “local identity” that in turn is connected to the geographical location (1). Pittsburgh is not Midwestern, Southern, Eastern, or Appalachian. The city exists near these places but does not share many ideologies. Residents identify themselves with the city rather than a region or a state (3). Their Pittsburhese illustrates the stark difference between the city and the surrounding regions. The critic, Barbara Johnstone addresses that the common and recognized Pittsburgh accent is primarily connected with the
working class population. An example of the distinct accent is the insertion of the letter l, preceding long vowels. Pittsburghers say drawling rather than drawing (22). The phonetic / sound is commonly follows the letter r, in words like warsh and squarsh (22). Pittsburghers pronounce creek with a soft i. The second-person plural pronoun, you, is replaced with the Pittsburgh equivalent, yinz (27-28). Each of these examples provides a rich image of the working class population’s vernacular and speech patterns.

With an exploding population, the infrastructure of LA must manage the weight. The infamous rush-hour extends into late morning and begins again in the early afternoon. In Paul Sorensen’s research, he addresses the burden of LA’s traffic congestion on the structure of its urban design and on the wellbeing of its population: “The LA region leads all other major urban areas in terms of total annual congestion-related costs” (37). In this quotation, cost refers to the time lost due to traffic, accidents or road work. Angelenos exist in a city designed by a maze of highways and interstates, making its residents dependent on personal vehicles rather than public transportation. Sorensen continues to explain the strain on the highway system. The population overwhelms the existing structures creating highways existing in a standstill: “The significant congestion is spread throughout the freeway network, with many links experiencing four or more hours per day of travel speeds averaging less than 35 mph” (41-42). The glistening highways trick the eye; the hoods form an endless sea of sedans and sports cars, reflecting the light like the nearby Pacific. Despite the negative aspects of the congested urbanity of LA, one can still find its beauty. In 1948, the four-level interchange, or better known as “The Stack” was finished. It became a commuter’s worst nightmare, connecting the 101 and the 110. It provides no time to change lanes or second
guess one’s choices. One must simply drive. The design was revolutionary and “an improvement over the more sweeping cloverleaf interchange design for reasons of safety and space—sited as it was in densely developed area of downtown Los Angeles, there was only so much room for this crucial junction” (Los Angeles Conservancy). The structure provides a picturesque image of concrete as well as a demonstration of man’s efforts to transform the landscape.

While Pittsburgh does not have the same problems with traffic and congestion, the infrastructure provides unique and peculiar features, incorporated into the city’s landscape. For example, the ruins of its industrial past are scattered throughout the city. Abandoned smokestacks litter the modern skyline: “When industry moved out, nature moved in. Tree roots have undermined the stability of some Carrie Furnace buildings [a blast furnace outside Pittsburgh], and grapevines scale the superstructure of the sprawling mill. Foxes, hawks and deer have recently been spotted on the site” (Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation). The presence of history succumbing to time is present in these massive structures. They provide an image of what was and what is no more. Another decrepit facet of Pittsburgh’s infrastructure are the city steps. Margaret J. Krauss describes these structures as “a crucial part of the pedestrian network” (NPR). In the height of the industrial period, these steps were created for the blue collar workers descending from the city’s network of steep hills to reach the steel mills. There are over 800 hundred staircases throughout the city, but now, they are overrun by weeds and protruding metal. Krauss interviewed people who continue to use the steps in their dilapidated state. One commuter fell and cracked a rib due to “exposed steel rebar and
missing treads” (NPR). The state of the steps is in need of repair for both residents’ daily use and for the city’s image and history.

Other famous landmarks of Pittsburgh are the Fort Pitt Tunnel and the boiler plant in the Oakland neighborhood. The tunnel enters the city from the southern suburb of Mt. Washington. Without traffic, the experience is under a minute. After emerging from the tunnel, the driver is bombarded with the skyline, overtaken by the massive buildings and low-hanging clouds. The image is both beautiful and overpowering, leaving the driver with no option other than moving onward into the heart of downtown. The boiler plant, also known as the cloud machine, has stacks significantly taller than the surrounding buildings. Margaret J. Krauss also writes about the structure, explaining how it creates “480,000 pounds of steam per hour” (NPR). It was originally created to heat the local library and museum donated by Andrew Carnegie. Today, it heats surrounding buildings including local universities. The mix of cool air and gases creates the infamous clouds escaping from the stacks. Each of these features of the city’s infrastructure reveals the quirks and history of Pittsburgh.

The city sprawl of Los Angeles extends from the Pacific into the desert. With this wave of city-life, come one of the most densely populated counties in the United States. The Los Angeles Times conducted a survey and researched its many diverse neighborhoods. There are a total of 272 neighborhoods in the country and 87 within city limits (LA Times). This map uses the term neighborhood fluidly, “to encompass everything from unincorporated areas to standalone cities to neighborhoods within cities” (LA Times). The map is split into 16 regions, each overrun with densely populated and diverse communities.
In Central LA, the neighborhoods consist of both wealthy and poor populations, with communities such as Hollywood Hills, Hollywood, West Hollywood, Beverly Grove, Koreatown, Chinatown, Echo Park, and Downtown. Downtown is the least wealthy neighborhoods with the highest “percentage of households earning $20,000 or less” (LA Times). However, the median household income of the Hollywood Hills is “$69,277” and the percentage of households “earning $125,000 and up is high for the country” (LA Times). Central LA is 57.87 square miles and contains pockets of diverse people culturally and financially. This data reveals the effects of a dense Urban landscape. While diversity exists, communities still try to separate themselves, creating these specific neighborhoods.

While Los Angeles’ diverse community has been growing and changing the demographics since the 1980’s, the population of Pittsburgh has remained culturally
consistent since the industrial period. Therefore, its neighborhoods are defined by the steel age, when an influx of immigrants arrived due to the available jobs.

Squirrel Hill is the historic Jewish community in Eastern Pittsburgh, creating a geographic hub of Jewish culture, with restaurants and kosher butcher shops. Eastern Europeans with Jewish heritage, became prominent members of this community flocking to the abundance of row houses. Bloomfield had a predominant Italian population. Its past is present in “Italian markets, bakeries, restaurants and bars” (Dorris and Doyle). Today, the affordable housing in Bloomfield, Shadyside and Oakland attracts college students. Each neighborhood has a short walk to local universities. Highland Park boasts a “380-acre park” and “quiet streets” while still remaining close to the city center. Residents can find larger houses at a steeper cost. Downtown or the Golden Triangle is the center of commerce for the city after steel mills closed. Businesses rushed to the skyscrapers claiming real estate. The abundance of neighborhoods along the perimeter of
the city limits were commonly home to blue-collar workers in search for cheaper housing. Today, in comparison to neighborhoods closer to the Golden Triangle, these outlying communities still offer less expensive housing. However, north and south of the city limit, one can find generational wealth in the upper class suburbs of Pittsburgh. Each of these neighborhoods form a mosaic of different heritage and diversity, starting from its blue color origins to its renaissance of tech and medical companies.

Civic pride refers to one’s appreciation of their city’s achievements. However, Los Angeles seems to have an overwhelming lack of civic pride. Even with title-holding professional sports teams, the history of Hollywood, and respect for the arts, Angelenos fail to appreciate their surroundings. The sprawl that defines the city makes it difficult to find the city center and the aspect that connects the growing population. David Halle describes the city’s landscape as unmanageable and ever-growing:

The Los Angeles School’s key idea was to stress, when analyzing Los Angeles and many (but not all) major urban areas, their “sprawling, polycentric character,” containing “multiple urban cores” or “edge cities” or “techno-cities” spread around the periphery of the traditional city center. The central point was these “edge cities” are not just “bedroom suburbs” from which people commute to the central city. Instead, they contain many jobs and retail outlets. (3)

With too many options, residents look to their local community and neighborhoods for civic pride rather than city as a whole. The sprawl creates prosperity with the cost of civic engagement. The suburbs have transformed into smaller city centers each enticing and promoting population growth with job opportunities. The city center or downtown LA has become nothing more than the geographical center of the city. In reality, it is the
poorest neighborhood with the least economic growth. The city has “a less cohesive civic feeling” than other metropolitan American cities (Places, Sociology, and Sports). In other cities such as New York or Atlanta, downtown has remained the center of commerce and economic focus for jobs, with residents commuting to the area. LA lacks a center of commerce. A quotation attributed to the poet and critic Dorothy Parker describes this disconnect: “Los Angeles is 72 suburbs in search of a city.” It lacks the ability to unify and create a large-scale sense of community. The scale and population requires more of everything. For example, almost every professional sport has two teams. Two basketball teams, Lakers and Clippers. Two baseball teams, Dodgers and Angels. And two football teams, Rams and Chargers. The overabundance of opportunities does not aid in connection; Instead, the overabundance hinders it. Residents recognize the options, but they choose to not form connections with each other through these city-wide events.

In contrast, the people of Pittsburgh love their city, and they engage with each other through civic pride. In Kathleen George’s Anthology of short stories, she creates a fictionalized narrative depicting residents’ obsession with their city. The simplest and most common way to depict this obsession is through sports:

Not everybody in Pittsburgh is sports crazy, but most are. Scratch a Pittsburgher and you will hear about Bill Mazeroski’s home run that won the 1960 World Series, the catch known as ‘the immaculate reception” by Steeler Franco Harris, the amazing year of 1979 when the Pirates won the World Series and the Steelers won the Super Bowl. The Pirates, the Steelers, and the Penguins play out our personal drama … the story of the underdog fighting back and winning. (9)
Sports creates the image of a city united and strong, overcoming any and every obstacle together. Pittsburgh’s beginnings started from nothing. The city became an economic powerhouse determined to make a name for itself. The industry carried over into the name of a professional sports franchise: The Steelers. Residents find pride and status in their sports just as the city’s origins revealed its desire to create an image or status for other economies to respect and acknowledge.

The need for sports in civic pride is essential for the population. However, some would argue that sports have created a dependency among adults rather than a reciprocated relationship. An editorial piece in *The Tartan*, (the student newspaper at Carnegie Mellon University) describes the city’s civic pride as a disguise, hiding other problems: “If the city of Pittsburgh is a damaged piece of furniture, the Pittsburgh Steelers, and their beloved Steelers Nation, are the lacquered facade covering the blemishes” (Hackett). As addressed above, the city’s infrastructure is dilapidated and lacks upkeep. The sports craze that envelopes the people of Pittsburgh allows them to see the good in the city and shield their eyes from the physical problems. The newspaper article presents the opinions of New York Times editor, Holly Brubach: “She writes that ‘Pittsburgh needs the Steelers in a way that few, if any, other cities need their teams. The Steelers are our mirror: They tell us who we are. When they win, we walk a little taller’” (Hackett). Civic pride has become a necessity for the people of Pittsburgh. Rose colored glasses blur the image of the city; residents perceive the success and failure of professional sports as their individual success and failure as well.

The residents of Los Angeles California stress the importance of health and wellbeing. Their need to be the best image of themselves stems from the ideals of
Hollywood. An actor or actress must present the best version of him or herself for the screen and the audience. The obsession trickles down to the everyman, sitting in the theater watching the moving stars. The journalist, Paddy Calistro, documents this phenomenon and “The Cult of the LA Body” on the Looks column for the Los Angeles Times: “Outsiders may call Los Angeles laid back, unsophisticated, even flaky, but they never say its people are out of shape. To everyone who isn’t from here, this is the home of the body obsessed, the mecca for the body worshiper” (LA Times). The luxurious lifestyle of LA bleeds into the interpretations of outsiders. Visitors and tourists assume the residents treat and care for their bodies like an extension of their nine to five job. The actress Ellie Kemper says, “In Los Angeles, people dress with the deep and earnest hope that people will do nothing but stare at them” (Huffpost). She plays with the visual senses associated with LA. One’s image is his or her livelihood. The comedian Jaboukie Young-White finds the humor in a community obsessed with looks and overrun with vanity: “A Chicago hot is a New York cute, is an LA shunned” (The Tonight Show). These two quotations illustrate the superficial qualities of Los Angeles. One’s image has risen to superior importance that residents cannot see passed themselves.

When researching Pittsburgh, the city lacks any form of physical health obsession, unlike Los Angeles. Health is not the top priority of residents. Referring back to the history of Pittsburgh, residents came to the city for job opportunity. Living conditions were terrible and caused health problems, but the people needed the polluting industry more than they needed their health. Industry heads even created documentation explaining smog’s health benefits. With a city designed around an industry creating pollutants, Pittsburgh is the opposite of health and wellbeing.
Spheres of Influence

Influence of Climate

Climate is present in the four novels. In Less, the novel occurs during winter break. Clay returns to Los Angeles from his New Hampshire college, with new revelations about his friends and their lifestyle. However, one thing that remains constant is the weather. Despite the fact, that the plot exists over the months of December and January, the climate still acts like summer. The text has references to the beach, skimpy clothes, and outdoor activities, all of which are most enjoyable in warmer months. This endless summer bleeds into the native LA characters, such as Blair, Trent, and Julian. Clay recognizes Trent’s “deep, dark tan and most of the other people’s complexions” (Easton Ellis 14). Winter has not and will not affect the people of LA, because they exist isolated from any season other than summer. Clay’s peers worry about his appearance because his pale complexion makes him appear sickly and foreign: “Trent reaches into his pocket … ‘This is an address of a tanning salon on Santa Monica’” (14). Over the span of four pages, three individuals recognize Clay’s paleness as physical difference due to his absence from the LA sun. At the beginning of the novel, Clay’s high school friends want to bring him back to his roots. They see his changing appearance as disownment of his identity and of the SoCal lifestyle. Trent and others want for Clay to return to bliss, untouched by changing seasons and harsh winters.

These characters are vapid examples of young adults, with excess time, no need to work, and every desire fulfilled. Therefore, with their wants and needs satisfied, they have no need to evolve, to change, or to grow. They embody the unchanging summer weather that overtakes the LA landscape. However, while consistent dry heat met with a
constant sea breeze creates a paradise, the characters’ consistent personalities inflict unnoticed pain on themselves; their lack of emotional development creates selfish, child-like adolescents. When Clay arrives from his new, wintery New England home, he is met with the reality of his growth versus the stagnancy of his friends during his summery winter break.

In *Shuffle*, the first line of the second chapter address the climate of Southern California. Gunnar is connected to his place and surfer lifestyle with the breeze creating the waves: “My earliest memories bodysurf the warm comforting timelessness of the Santa Ana winds, whipping me in and around the palm-tree-lined streets of Santa Monica” (Beatty 25). The first person narrator reveals his connection to his place. The hot wind fuels his actions and motions. He embraces the heat as a way of life, providing him with year-round surf culture. However, this novel occurs over the span of many years. The reader watches the main character grow and develop in Los Angeles, California. For college, Clay leaves and moves east to Boston. He attends Boston University with his friend, Nicholas Scoby; they both play basketball for the school. Scoby address his dislike for city: “Here we are in May, fully clothed at a beach with no waves”’ (203). Beatty presents an image of Boston, as the opposing reflection of LA. With the sun “setting behind” them, they look out to another ocean longing for home (203). In a cooler climate with four seasons, they cannot enjoy the beach and water in the same way. The hot wind that once created the waves that fueled their pastime, is met with a cold, wet breeze which requires warm clothes at the beginning of summer. Both Gunnar and Scoby are met with a new climate which ignites a nostalgia for their home and for the consistency of the endless summer days.
In *Perks*, the epistolary form presents moments in time, structured by letters. The first letter is dated “August 25, 1991” and the last letter is dated “August 23, 1992” (Chbosky 2-208). The plot takes place during a school year, allowing the reader to experience and recognize the changing landscape and climate of the city. In early November, Charlie writes to his friend, explaining how “It’s starting to get cold and frosty here” (50). This quotation alludes the reader to a changing climate. As the seasons shift and move in a cyclical pattern, Charlie evolves and changes. He begins the narrative in the August heat, with no one except a nurturing English teacher. As the weather cools, he shifts his outlook, finding new, supportive friends in Sam and Patrick. By the time the frost emerges and the holidays are approaching Charlie has a supportive network of friends that he can depend on. However, at the New Year’s party, he cannot escape his wandering mind. His attitude becomes anxious, distant, and cold:

My brother … football … Brad … Dave and his girlfriend in my room … the coats … the cold … the winter … “Autumn Leaves” … don’t tell anyone … you pervert … Sam and Craig … Sam … Christmas … typewriter … gift … Aunt Helen … and the trees kept moving … they just wouldn’t stop moving … so I laid down and made a snow angel. (98-99) [ellipses in original]

His restless mind is caught between passing memories, current events, and his surroundings. He gives up trying to control his emotions and remains lifeless in the snow, with his body, “pale blue and asleep” (99). He succumbs to the elements and the harsh winter of Pittsburgh and falls into the depths of his mind as he falls into the soft, beautiful, and dangerous snow.
As the seasons change in the novel, Charlie changes. Whether his outlook changes for better or worse, he is evolving. Unlike the spoiled children of LA, who remain stagnant, Charlie deals with the opposite problem. He cannot control his turbulent emotions. His lack of consistency creates an uneasiness and anxiousness in the prose. The friend addressed at the beginning of each letter discovers different versions of Charlie writing on certain days. Some days he is positive, while others he dangerously negative.

In *Mysteries*, the plot takes play over three months, specifically the summer after Art’s college graduation. This time is the moment before life happens. Art experiences his city one last time as an adolescent, before a career, before the responsibilities of a family, and before the pressures of adulthood. His father, the mobster, worries that this last summer is too much time away from his encroaching adult life. The father already has a respectful job lined up for his son in Baltimore; he worries that his son is a “‘devout narcissist’” and “‘doomed to terminal adolescence’” (Chabon 11). His worries stem for the reputation of a child’s summer: fun and games with no responsibility. A summer between two worlds of childhood and adulthood provides Art with the chance to be free and to experience aspects of youth that will soon become foreign and distant in adulthood.

**Influence of Cost of Living**

The high cost of living is present in in both LA texts. In *Less*, the absence of the money required to participate in this fun, addictive lifestyle presents the narrative of a rich person’s paradise. These characters have an abundance of disposable income from their wealthy families; therefore, they want and need nothing. Their next meal, their education, and their roof over their head are never questioned and always expected. Their
entitlement exudes from the prose: “Blair’s father … this movie producer” (Easton Ellis 15) and “My mother has spent most of her time at Neiman-Marcus, and my sisters have gone to Jerry Magnin and used our father’s charge card” (23). An interesting aspect of these quotations is the lack of blatant facts of the outrageous cost of living. The absence is because these characters never once have a worry about making enough money to exist and to survive in LA. Instead, these descriptions present men and women with too much money. The wealth of LA’s entertainment industry fuels Blair’s family. Clay’s mother does not work, because she has no need. Instead, she spends her time shopping at high-end clothing stores. Her daughters’ charges will unassumingly go unnoticed and paid without question. These luxurious details provide an image of upper class America, untouched by problems such as cost of living.

However, in Shuffle, the cost of living defines every aspect of Gunnar’s life. From the beginning of the novel, he breaks down his family heritage, explaining the limited growth upward in society: “She’d [Gunnar’s mother] start in with Euripides Kaufman, the youngest slave in history to buy his freedom” (Beatty 8). Gunnar’s family heritage begins with slavery. Even after freedom, his family is met with disadvantages and longstanding discrimination. With each generation having consistently fewer opportunities to grow and to accumulate wealth, Gunnar lives in an endless cycle of poverty. He recognizes the fact that he is a poor kid from a poor family, living in a city meant only for the wealthy to succeed. Unlike Clay’s mother, Ms. Kaufman is a working single mother, “testing the unlucky poor for VD [a venereal disease or a sexually transmitted disease] at a free clinic in East Los Angeles” (6). While his mother works tirelessly, his father is never a consistently present member of his family, parenting only from a distance. The
LAPD officer observes his son without having to engage with him for the majority of the novel. This family dynamic presents a household working diligently to survive and to keep afloat. These characters would never be found shopping in Neiman-Marcus, because every dollar earned goes towards rent, food, and utilities.

Later in the text, while Gunnar is away at Boston University, he writes home to his mother about an experience with a rich, white man:

He took out his wallet and opened it so I could get a good look at what was inside, a brick of hundred-dollar bills. I thought about taking it and sending it to Christina and Nicole [his sisters], but unfortunately, you raised me better than that.

Your still poor ghetto child, running wild,

Gunnar (149)

In this letter, Gunnar recognizes his identity of a child born into poverty. Even though he leaves LA and gains success in basketball and writing poetry, he cannot escape where he is from: the neighborhood of Hillside in West Los Angeles. He witnesses an image of wealth sitting next to him. However, he does not take from the rich to feed the poor. One thick man’s wallet cannot solve the systemic problem of generational poverty. Gunnar recognizes the temptation, but does not succumb to it. Instead, he succumbs to his label of a poor man in a rich world, never living, only existing.

In *Perks*, cost of living presents itself in subtle exchanges of dialogue and inner thoughts. For example, the cost of higher education is represented in the mother’s anxiety of providing a means for better future for her children: “My mom is just glad he [Charlie’s older brother] gets to go to college for free because my sister doesn’t play football, and there wouldn’t be enough money to send both of them. That’s why she
wants me to keep working hard, so I’ll get an academic scholarship” (Chbosky 8). While cost of living is significantly lower than LA, Charlie’s family still worries about providing for their family. However, worries stem from larger issues such as higher education rather than day to day issues of finding money for dinner and rent.

The significant decrease in housing cost allows for an upper middle class family to afford the wealthy, southern suburbs of Pittsburgh. In the text, Charlie reveals the house as “rich” and “very clean” (65). Later Charlie describes Mary Elizabeth’s basement as “very clean and smelled like people didn’t live there. It had a fireplace with a mantel and golf trophies. And there was a television and a nice stereo” (125). These examples of houses in Pittsburgh’s suburbs provide the image of financially secure households. Mary Elizabeth’s house alludes to her parents’ expensive hobby of golf. The trophies insinuate that the father and mother take pride in themselves and want to flaunt their accomplishments. These houses are flaunting success on a larger scale. These families can secure a single-family home and provide a place of residence for themselves and their children.

In Mysteries, Art’s family is led by a mob member father and lacks a mother. The wealth of his family is uncertain. However, his father’s illegitimate income funds Art’s recent education at the University of Pittsburgh. Unlike Perks, Mysteries takes place primarily within the city limits of Pittsburgh. Compared to the wealthy homeowners of the southern suburbs, one can find reasonable and less expensive housing in one of Pittsburgh’s many neighborhoods. As a recent graduate and bookseller at a chain store called “Boardwalk Books,” Art can afford the carriage house in the well-established neighborhood of Terrace Village: “I was moving into what had been a kind of coach
house or chauffeur’s quarters, small rooms over the garages … my new neighbors seemed to bear [no] resemblance to me: an old man, babies, parents” (42-44). Art presents the possibilities and opportunities Pittsburgh has available to residents. Other metropolitan cities, such as LA, promise job security and endless opportunity accompanied with an above average commute from a neighborhood that a person can barely afford. However, in Pittsburgh, Art can afford to live in the city, walking distance from museums and universities and a ten-minute drive from downtown and the cultural district. The cities affordability allows for Art to enjoy his city in a present manner rather than observing from a distant suburb.

**Influence of Demographics**

Demographics deal with a multitude of characters, such as ethnic diversity, religion, political tendencies, and access to education. In *Less*, some of these factors are addressed in the first-person narration and dialogue between characters. For example, the main characters are white Caucasian men and women. The white population is the majority in LA, at 49.8%. These are individuals are upper class and flaunt their wealth in expensive homes, domestic help, and private education. A “gate” surrounds Clay’s home and his family employs a “new maid” and Blair lives in the expensive neighborhood of “Beverly Hills” (Easton Ellis 10-12). These white, upper class communities remain isolated from other ethnic populations in LA. The characters only ever interact with people at the same socio-economic level. For example, when Clay enters his home, he does not engage or speak directly to the maid. Instead, she “smiles at [him]” (11). She works for the family, but is still recognized as a lower individual from a different economic standing. Each of these examples recognizes the wealth of these characters,
however that is all. The shallow facade of money does not equal culture; it only provides the illusions of it.

Religion is barely mentioned in the text. These characters do not need what religion offers, a sense of community and security. They can afford the luxuries of life; therefore, they need nothing. Religion offers a medium to find solace and aid in your anxieties of the present. These characters anxieties can be solved by expensive shopping sprees, drug and alcohol binges, and late night drives in expensive cars. Religion is useless when you are already living in the City of Angels or a rich man’s paradise.

The presence of education overwhelms the opening pages of the novel. With nearly 100% of the white populations in LA completing high school, the focus shifts to college. Education from a highly-respected university is expected for these wealthy students. They meet the standards, attending some of Southern California’s prestigious universities, such as UCLA and USC. However, Blair poignantly explains, “I go to the University of Spoiled Children” (13). She mocks her reality of privilege and unfair opportunities. However, her choice to present her situation as a joke lessons the authority and truthfulness. One can question her words because of her humorous tone. Blair and Trent continue to use humor as a way to address other realities of education in LA:

“U.C.L.A. or as the Orientals like to call it, U.S.R.A.” Trent imitates an old Japanese man, eyes slit, head bowed, front teeth stuck out in parody, and then laughs drunkenly ... “U.S.C ... Or Jew.S.C.,” she says, almost gasping. “Or Jew.C.L.A.,” Trent says, still laughing. (13-14)
In this example, Blair and Trent make fun of minority populations. Both are dealing with uncontrollable bursts of laughter as they tarnish other ethnicities. They provide an image of the powerful majority able to lessen the significance of other minorities.

In *Shuffle*, the main character, Gunnar Kaufman, is a member of the African American community, which is another minority in LA. Starting with the beginning chapters of the novel, Gunnar is aware and recognizes the fact that he is living in a city designed for the rich, white man to succeed. During his youth, he lives in Santa Monica and engages with the surfing community. His friends and classmates are mostly white, with families in a higher tax bracket: “Me and white boys Steven Pierce, Ryan Foggerty, and David Schoenfeld … Ryan always had enough money for everybody” (Beatty 24). In this dynamic of friends, Gunnar is and always be the outsider. He exists and interacts with white, upper class children, but he is not a member of their community. This distinction and difference isolates him from both ethnicities. He is growing up in a neighborhood away from those who look like him. He sees himself as different than others within the African American community, because he acts more like his white peers. His mother recognizes this in-between state when her daughter, Christina, complains about attending an all-white camp. When she asks if a camp with more African American children would be better, both her children respond, “‘Noooooo … Because they’re different from us’” (37). These children are in limbo, coexisting with a group different from them while feeling different from a group their mother thinks they should belong. Her response is simple; she leaves. Her choice to move signifies the importance of identify in a diverse community with several minorities coexisting with a dominant majority.
Another aspect of demographics is access to education. With only 25% of the African American community in LA graduating college, attending college is not a prominent conversation. Gunnar even debates whether he wants to finish high school: “Psycho loco suggested I take the GED and forget school, which I did” (162). In an environment less focused on education, it is ironic to have a child genius as the protagonist. His Hillside high school focuses on seminars, such as “‘Young Black and Latino men: Endangered Species,’” which deal with common, stereotypical challenges connected to this community: “‘Raise your hand if … you are on welfare … you don’t live with your parents … you’re a father … you’ve ever been handcuffed’” (112) [ellipses in original]. This series of questions addresses the stereotypical ideas placed upon these minority groups. Time out of the school day is dedicated to discussing these issues that students currently face rather than having class.

While the majority of students struggle to graduate high school, Gunnar has many offers from interested universities. The Harvard recruiter presents his school with a pretentious tone, belittling communities that he deems lower than himself. The African American man is described as well dressed, attractive, and using a pocket watch (157-158). He invites Gunnar to his house in the wealthy neighborhood of Cheviot Heights. It is geographically above the poorer communities such as Hillside. The recruiter uses demeaning language such as “down there” to address his literal and metaphorical superiority (158). From his vantage point, he has made something of himself while his counterparts exist in squalor below. He continues his negative language describing Hillside as “‘a Petri dish for criminal vermin’” and stating, “‘Those poor people are beyond help … The only reason I and others of my illustrious ilk pretend to help those
folks is to reinforce the difference between them and us”’ (159). This disrespectful rhetoric signifies the distance between rich and poor present geographically and emotionally. While wealthy, the man is morally poor.

In the Pittsburgh texts, the ethnic makeup is less diverse, with the white population reaching 66%. Therefore, with two white protagonists, the differences are found in characteristics of the white populations, such as religion and wealth. In Perks, Charlie’s family is Catholic, which is the largest religious group in Pittsburgh. Throughout the novel, there are references to priests, mass, and Ash Wednesday. The presence is consistent and poignant, taking the time to allude to family’s spiritual affiliations. This subtle choice alludes to the cities origins. Since the steel era the dominant faith has been Catholic. Therefore, its ties to the city have been apparent. The subtle references in the novel alludes to the looming and omnipotent Catholic Church.

References and prejudices towards other ethnicities are not as blunt as in the LA texts. Due to the epistolary form, the reader is not experiencing events first-hand. Instead, the form provides letters or filtered summaries from Charlie’s interpretations. The secondhand information takes the form of long, flowery sentences spewing out Charlie’s emotions rather than detailed notes about an event. In this example, his nuclear and extended family come together for Thanksgiving dinner. After several drinks, Charlie’s grandfather makes his opinions known about his changing neighborhood:

My grandfather usually just complains about black people moving into the old neighborhood, and then my sister gets upset at him, and then my grandfather tells her that she doesn’t know what she’s talking about because she lives in the suburbs. (56)
The discourse between the grandparent and grandchild creates an interesting dynamic of generational knowledge. One has years of experience and wisdom, while the other uses new progressive ideas. However, I argue that the grandfather wins the argument, because of his final rebuttal. Charlie’s sister can say that she supports diversity and changing populations, but she does not live in that environment. How can she support something she does not know or have experience with? In the white suburbs of Pittsburgh, she can praise diversity from afar.

Another aspect of demographics is access to education. Many characters in *Perks* flaunt their wealth in their choice of highly respected universities to attend, such as, “University of Washington,” “Penn State,” “Sarah Lawrence,” “Berkeley,” and “New York University” (168-169). These universities entice students from upper class families who want the personalized attention of a small liberal arts education and the freedom to pursue your passions. These characters have the opportunity to pursue an education of their choice due to their parents’ wealth.

In *Mysteries*, Art is also a young, white male; however, he is member of the Jewish faith. Non-Christian faiths make up only 4% of the Pittsburgh population. Other demographics are not a formative feature of the novel. For example, we do not know the income level of his father or the type of house Art grew up in, because he lives independently, in an apartment. However, early on, Art reveals that his father is a member of the Pittsburgh mob scene. Therefore, his money is dirty and a trace of wealth would be unlikely and unwanted. Art is also a college graduate, about to embark on life after academia. Due to the novel’s confined timeframe, the first-person narrator cannot delve deeper into details about demographics, such as ethnicity, religion, and education.
This fleeting timeframe contributes with one of the ideas of the novel: not knowing. Art does not know what he wants to do, where he will end up, and how he will get there. Just as Art has limited knowledge about the man he will become, the reader has limited knowledge on who Art is.

Influence of Language

In the LA texts, the authors balance the diverse set of voices in Southern California. In *Less*, Easton Ellis implies the different accents through differing characterization. For example, the text has stereotypical valley girls, surfers, and junkies. The text has an overabundance of the words *yeah, totally, dude*, and *so*. The excess of these terms in most dialogues suggests the excess in their lifestyle. They can waste time with excess and exaggerated words in conversation. While not imperative for communication, their vernacular’s significance is connecting the characters to their place.

In *Shuffle*, Gunnar’s relationship with language is constantly evolving, from his time in Santa Monica and Hillside to Boston. He addresses how each place, specifically the earlier two connected to his younger years, affected his vernacular, accent, and discourse with others. In Santa Monica, Gunnar describes his language as a, “three-foot swells that broke left to right,” saying, “‘No waaaay, duuuude. Tuuubular biiitchin’ to the max. Toooootally fucking raaaad’”(Beatty 35). He embraces the laid-back lifestyle of the beach neighborhood. He extends his words and the length spent on each syllable. When he arrives in Hillside, he must learn a new set of vernaculars: “By high school I was no longer the seaside bumpkin, clueless to the Byzantine ways of the inner city. But I hadn’t completely assimilated into Hillside’s culture. I still said ‘ant’ instead of ‘awwwnt’ and ‘you guys’ rather than ‘y’all’” (95). He must adapt and change to fit the mold of his new
environment and to succeed. This forced move creates a child who can shift and to change his identity to meet the standards and expectations of the place and community.

An interesting absence in both Pittsburgh texts is definite examples of language and local dialects. However, as stated above, Pittsburgh is known for its particular accent and vernacular due to its isolated position in Pennsylvania. The accent is recognized as a blue-collar phenomenon. This absence suggests that both Charlie and Art are not from working-class families. For example, the generic prose of *Perks*, creates the image of any American Suburb rather than a Pittsburgh one. The novel relies more on landmarks to ground the reader in place rather than focusing on language. While both texts may have limited examples of socio-economic levels, their language and vernacular separates them from blue-collar Pittsburgh.

**Influence of Infrastructure**

To live in LA, residents depend on infrastructure for every aspect of their lives. One must drive everywhere, to work, to school, to the mall, etc. The driving culture is overwhelmingly present in *Less*. The opening line of the novel refers to the common practice of merging: “People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles” (Easton Ellis 9). This reference to commuters’ travels can also refer to the residents. Their shallow personalities cannot see past themselves. They cannot merge with one another, because they cannot shift their focus away from themselves to form something greater. The abundance of luxury cars speaks to both the necessity of independent transportation and the wealth of this community. However, the novel presents families with multiple cars from luxury brands such as, a “Mercedes,” “a 450 SL,” a “BMW” (23, 25, 35).
These small and overlooked details provide context for the city as well as these characters.

The words *drive*, *driven*, and *driving* are constantly present in the novel, starting with the opening pages to the final passages. Clay provides details about every turn, every road, and every section of town he travels through:

After leaving Blair I drive down Wilshire and then onto Santa Monica and then I drive onto Sunset and take Beverly Glen to Mulholland, and then Mulholland to Sepulveda and then Sepulveda to Ventura and then I drive through Sherman Oaks to Encino and then into Tarzana and then Woodland Hills. (61)

He can easily address the fact that he left and is returning home. However, he chooses to provide excruciating detail. He must adapt to the LA sprawl traveling longer and farther to get to his final destination. To a non-Angeleno, this quotation seems unnecessary and insignificant, however for an LA native the detail is essential. Clay acknowledges the dependency residents have to individual transportation and infrastructure.

The novel is separated by sections without a consistent length or structure; they are primarily short bursts of thoughts and emotions. The opening lines of more than ten percent of the sections use a form of the verb *to drive*, which sets the tone for the passage (10, 25, 41, 61, 75, 88, 89, 96, 97, 109, 125, 136, 194, 206). These passages refer to travel and conversations in a confined space. The reader witness uncomfortable dialogue between Clay and his mother, Clay and his sisters, and Clay and Blair. Many of these interactions occur in vehicles, when neither can leave the conversation. Trapped dialogue creates uncomfortable tension.
Despite the necessity of driving and cars in Los Angeles, the reference to it in *Shuffle* is almost non-existent. The distant father is a police officer who drives an issued vehicle. However, Gunnar does not spend time describing movement or means of transportation. He is limited to public transportation and to his feet to get around the city. This limitation restricts his view of the city. At the beginning of the novel, Gunnar exists primarily in Santa Monica and shifts to Hillside. He knows of the other wealthier communities, but he does not have to means to reach those areas. This difference between the characters in *Less* also alludes to his lower socio-economic status, and the cities unintentional divisions. If a community cannot afford vehicles or other means of transportation, they will not leave their neighborhoods and interact with other communities. This reality creates tensions between differing communities and limits the perspectives of those residents, including Gunnar, who only wishes to “get out of Los Angeles” (Beatty 158).

In the Pittsburgh texts, the characters interact with landmarks throughout the city. For example, in *Perks*, Charlie, Sam, and Patrick engage with the Fort Pitt Tunnel:

> When we got out of the tunnel, Sam screamed this really fun scream, and there it was. Downtown. Lights on buildings and everything that makes you wonder. Sam sat down and started laughing. Patrick started laughing. I started laughing. And in that moment, I swear we were infinite. (39)

They leave their southern suburbs and drive north towards the city. The structure travels beneath Mount Washington and opens at the South Shore with the skyline overpowering the driver’s view. They reach the city, which in turn means they reach freedom. Rather than being suffocated by the stimulating city, they feel restricted by the suburbs. They
look to the city for freedom, exploration, and amusement. Sam translates her thoughts, emotions, and excitement into a lighthearted scream. The wonderment of the city provides hope that there is something more than their suburbs. Charlie, Sam, and Patrick have this moment for an infinite amount of time. When they are grown, followed different paths, and lost touch, they can call upon this memory of the tunnel and of each other.

In *Mysteries*, Art’s interactions with Pittsburgh are less hopeful than the *Perks* scene at the Fort Pitt Tunnel. Chabon plays more with the industrial past scattered in the present as an obsolete characteristic. The *Cloud Factory* becomes a constant image throughout the novel. The boiler plant that heats the local buildings is insignificant during the summer months, however it’s presence is still looming. Arthur says:

> “When you walk across the Schenley Park bridge, there, from the park into Oakland, you pass above the Cloud Factory. What does it do? We used to wonder. Why do these great clouds, perfectly white and clean, white as the new baseballs, come out of that building by the tracks … turning out a fresh batch of these virgin clouds.” (50)

The Cloud Factory is never called by its actual name, a boiler plant. The nickname provides and illusion or mystery surrounding the structure. Arthur is a native of Pittsburgh and has witnessed the clouds seep out of stacks his entire life. He questions their origins and purpose, but he never wishes to find the answer. Instead, he choose the mystery and magic of the structure. This structure is an aspect of Pittsburgh’s industrial past that had a greater significance in the 20th century. However, the importance has shifted from industrial duties to a landmark or an identity of Pittsburgh’s mystique.
In Less, the novel moves between wealthy neighborhoods of LA, such as Beverly Hills, Hidden Hills, Rolling Hills, Malibu, Santa Monica, Bel Air, and San Marino. An interesting observation in the text was the judgment and hierarchy of neighborhoods. The rich, spoiled college students only respect their peers who live in other elite LA neighborhoods. They see other communities as inferior, such as LA suburbs: “Oh, what does she know? She lives in Calabasas for God’s sakes” (Easton Ellis 28). This distinction creates an *us and them* narrative. They desire to be different, superior, and better.

*Shuffle* is more detailed with descriptions about the two LA neighborhoods that Gunnar lives in. With less geographic ground to cover, the first person narrator can provide more details. The distance between Santa Monica and Hillside, a neighborhood in West Los Angeles, is less than five miles. However the two could not be more different. The white majority Santa Monica is a stark contrast to the dynamics and ethnic makeup in Hillside. Gunnar finds himself dropped into an African American community he knows nothing about:

Hillside is less a community than a quarry of stucco homes … the community [is surrounded by] a great concrete wall … At the bottom of this great wall live hordes of impoverished American Mongols. Hardrock niggers, Latinos, and Asians who because of the wall’s immenseness get only fifteen minutes of precious sunshine in the summer. (45)

This neighborhood lives in the shadow of the wall as well as the taller, studier houses of rich and wealthy just beyond the wall. They are even deprived of the LA sun. The sense
of community present in Santa Monica, is absent in Hillside. He uses the word “hordes” to describe the different groups of people living in poverty. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as “a large gathering of people, esp. of wild or fierce people; Of animals: a moving swarm or pack” (OED). Gunner uses a term associated with the wilderness and animalistic nature to describe his new community of Hillside. He presents an image of an underprivileged group defined by Los Angeles’ city plan to separate the rich and poor by a thick concrete wall.

While both Clay and Gunnar hold judgments towards their city, they also recognize the beauty and orderliness in the design. LA exudes glamor and luxury that even the skyline presents a pleasing image. Gunnar describes the view as “magnificent. The web of amber street lights looked like a constellation fallen to earth” (Beatty 159). Clay looks over his cityscape and sees Hollywood as a “blanket of lights under a neon purple sky” (Easton Ellis 81). These two descriptions present LA in a positive light. Despite both characters tense relationship with their home, they are still able to recognize the beauty in the man-made jungle.

In *Mysteries*, Art interacts with the many different neighborhoods and communities in Pittsburgh. One place in the city that creates a sense of awe and wonderment is the:

Lost neighborhood: the mysterious couple of streets and row or two of houses … [I] had never known of the half-dozen ancient staircases scattered throughout south Oakland that led down to it, nor realized that there were people really living in it. There was even a school and a baseball field; you could see the tiny shapes of children running bases there at the bottom of Pittsburgh. (49)
Art looks from above at a neighborhood left behind in a changing city. In one of the lowest points of Pittsburgh, a community existed primarily of Italian immigrants. However, with passing decades, residents moved, leaving a shadow of what the community once was. Art’s distance from and unfamiliarity with this place suggests his extreme differences. He is a newly-educated caucasian. The residents of the lost neighborhood were primarily blue-collar workers aiding in Pittsburgh’s industrial reputation. Art is Jewish. These Italian immigrants were all Roman Catholic. The physical structures of this scene balance the differing dynamics. Art looks down on a community, its history almost forgotten and discarded, a perfect symbol of Pittsburgh’s steel past and stagnant present.

**Influence of Civic Pride**

Both LA texts lack a sense of civic pride. Clay and his friends have too much time and money, so they need not be bothered by man-made creations such as professional sports or public museums: “I don’t find anything I want that I don’t already have” (Easton Ellis 94). They exist above the entertainment of a common man; therefore, they do not need to involve themselves in common activities. They desire to partake in events of a higher status, and every desire is fulfilled. However, Gunnar is the opposite; he has little money and time, so he cannot waste his energy on fun forms of amusement. The text follows Gunnar’s basketball skills, but the focus is centered on the opportunity to escape from LA. Playing the game will help him find another life in another place with a different community; it will not strengthen his ties to his current place. This disconnect from the city with both texts suggests busy lives, one consumed by nothing of importance and the other consumed by everything important.
In *Perks*, Charlie is not connected to the city’s sports; however, it is an important aspect of his family dynamic. His father watches the Steelers on television every Sunday, like clockwork. His brother received an athletic scholarship to play football at the college level: “He’s playing football for Penn State but he needed the summer to get his grades right to play football” (Chbosky 5). While Charlie may not care, sports are integrated into the daily functions of his family. Football is providing an education for his brother and his father’s Sunday afternoons provide him with a greater purpose. He supports his city and team from the comfort of his couch in his wealthy southern suburb of Pittsburgh.

In *Mysteries*, the text feels closely connected with the city and characters’ identities with the place. The text is flooded with references to the Steelers, Pirates, and Penguins. However, an interesting line reveals how the residents are just as vital to the city’s identity: “I,’ [Phlox] said, ‘am a very important part of Pittsburgh’” (47). This character is one of Art’s new friends. She presents herself with confidence, because she believes that she is essential to Pittsburgh. Her civic pride stems from herself.

**Influence of Physical Health**

In a city where heath has become an unhealthy obsession, the characters in *Less Than Zero* care nothing about their bodies and choose to continuously destroy their physical health. Drugs are present at every party and consumed by the main characters. Upon arrival, Clay is hesitant to partake in his once common activity. However, after peer pressure and close proximity, he returns to his past patterns:

“Are you going back [to school in New England] or are you gonna stay … and play … in L.A.” Rip laughs and lights a cigarette. With a razor he cuts the pile into four high lines and then he hands me a rolled up twenty and I lean down and do a
Clay becomes dependent on these forms of escape. The drugs allow him to accept his surroundings and his stagnant friends. They provide him with comfort, security, and familiarity. Simply, they give him an escape. He relishes the feelings and renewed power he feels from the drugs. He becomes dependent, needing them to exist in this world of endless fun and no responsibilities. He needs the drugs to make this fantastical world tolerable.

This lack of respect for the physical form has consequences; the characters destroy their bodies, and along with this their own beauty, something that they feel is of the highest importance. Clay continues to provide examples of Blair’s fading body. She gives her body no nutrients and indulges in drugs and alcohol. Blair is “really pale” and “so totally thin that [one] can see the veins in her neck too clearly” with her “dark circles” contrasting with her unnaturally white skin (45). Blair’s body is suffering, but she does not care. She continues this behavior, never changing throughout the entire book. She does not recognize the need for health because sex, drugs, and alcohol are more fun than a well-balanced meal. In one scene, she watches a television exercise program. Instead of learning from the program she “laughs at the people doing exercises” (45). She has no respect for herself and her health. She lives in a place obsessed with health, but she and her friends choose self-harm.

Because LA focused on physical health, the ultimate test is whether your outward appearance reveals your healthy choices. In LA, one cannot age and still be beautiful.
They must stop their natural clock. They must remain young forever. Clay’s father falls into this narrative:

My father looks pretty healthy if you don’t look at him for too long. He’s completely tan and has had a hair transplant in Palm Springs … He also has had his face lifted … I remember seeing his face covered with bandages and how he would keep touching them lightly. (42).

Clay’s father buys the illusion of health, beauty, and anti-aging. However, the facade is not sustainable. An onlooker does not see a young face. Instead, he or she sees an old man obsessed with youth. When aging is deemed unacceptable, an appearance becomes the top priority. Once Clay and Blair grow into middle aged adults, they too will depend on the tricks of the wealthy to stay young and reverse the effects of their booze and drug filled twenties.

In *Perks*, the obsession with physical health is not present at all; one’s health, physical or mental, is not deemed important by other characters in this Pittsburgh text. Mental health is prevalent in this novel, but Charlie, his family, and many of his friends do not recognize it. The opening of the novel deals with the death of Charlie’s friend, Michael, in middle school, who “killed himself” (Chbosky 3). However, the reasoning behind Michael’s actions are never revealed and Charlie’s emotions in response to his friends passing are brushed under the rug and never validated when his older brother tells him, “to get it out of [his] system before Dad came home” (3). *It* refers to Charlie’s tears and overwhelming emotions. His father and family do not see or recognize Charlie’s struggles with mental health. In this scene and throughout the novel, Charlie is not healthy; however, his family and friends do not recognize his problems. They only
acknowledge the signs of mental distress when he reaches an emotional breakdown. The characters’ choice to look the other way when dealing with health, parallels the steel industries choices to avoid the narrative on smog as dangerous and eventually transform its image into a benefit for one’s health.
Convergence of Childhood and Adulthood

Clay, Gunnar, Charlie, and Art are on the precipice of adulthood, experiencing adulthood in this laodicean state being neither a child nor a grown up. These emotionally unstable subjects enter the adult world with only elementary or childish experiences. This lack of experience presents the protagonists with a world foreign from anything they have ever known before. Each character witnesses and engages with a negative aspect of growing up such as prostitution and drug use, racism, sexual abuse, and sexuality and organized crime.

In Less, there are endless examples of drugs present at parties, in the domestic space, and in cars. However, Julien, one of Clay’s friends, experiences the realities of these poor decisions associated with LA. After becoming in debt to a powerful drug dealer and having no means to pay back his debt, he is forced into prostitution. He uses his body as form of payment. In one scene, Julien undresses, removing “his underwear” for a Midwestern man in a hotel room (Easton Ellis 176). While aiding in the man’s physical pleasures, he asks Julien if he enjoys living in Los Angeles. Julien responds saying, “‘Yeah. I love L.A.’” (175). His home, they only place he has ever known, creates a nightmare for him. Endless nights of alcohol and drugs lead him to this path of prostitution. Yet, he still chooses the word love when describing his feelings for his city. While Julian is still blind to the horrors of his personal life, Clay is not. He witnesses his friend endure prostitution because of the elite culture of LA. The monsters of adulthood that he was immune to as a child come to fruition.

In Shuffle, Gunner deals with a broader ideological problem: racism. He must recognize the disparity between himself and those with a different skin tone. However,
this reality is not limited to LA. When he travels to Boston for college, he cannot find a prominent African American community: “By October we had finally figured out that the colored folks lived in Roxbury. Roxbury was an old, hilly community practically inaccessible by public transportation. For the most part it was a desolate place” (Beatty 182). While in LA the African American community is present and acknowledged, in Boston, it is shunned. For the first months of college, Gunnar did not know that a neighborhood similar to Hillside existed. While isolated from the city, in this example, African Americans are presented with another disadvantage, hindering their chances of success. Gunnar witnesses events and moments of racism repeatedly in the text. He depends on poetry writing as a place to release his emotions and thoughts. In one poem he contemplates African American’s chances anywhere. If they had the option to leave, he does not know of a destination available to them. Instead, they would embark on a “constant migration to nowhere” (178). He feels that his community does not have a home and is trapped in a racist country never willing to change. Gunnar engages with different aspects of racism during his adolescence. He learns to adapt and find an escape from racism in writing poetry.

In Perks, Charlie deals with repressed trauma from sexual abuse at a young age. At the end of the novel, Charlie reveals his mark of sexual trauma when he responds negatively to Sam’s touch. He is physically affected turning pale and crying. He does not understand why he acts negatively with the girl he has been in love with for a year from afar. Memories start to flood back to him, of his aunt: “And she was doing what Sam was doing” (Chbosky 204). Charlie realizations are met with frustration and fright. He cannot control his emotions and has an episode. Only once he has reached sexual maturity can he
understand and recognize what abuse occurred as a child. He needed these moments of experimentation and growth to release his repressed memories. Without these adult interactions, his aunt’s sin would never have been unearthed. The transition into adulthood, allowed his memory of childhood to heal. The memories are painful, but they also provide Charlie with knowledge and growth that he can take with him into adulthood.

In *Mysteries*, Art recognizes new aspects within himself and about his father’s way of life. First, Art’s sexuality creates constant tension between who Art is and who Art thinks he want to be. For several chapters, Art does not want to recognize his feelings for Arthur. He even “stepped back,” when Arthur kissed him. He watches Arthur hit “his knees on the floor” (Chabon 83). In this moment, he puts physical space between himself and the pursuer; however, he also wants him as more than a friend, but he cannot yet allow himself to say it or to believe it. Instead, he torments himself with his emotions. The summer before adulthood provides him with the time he needs to contemplate and to understand these emotions. The text does not reveal how long Art has been stressed about his sexuality; however, it presents this summer as his pinnacle moment of acceptance. By the end of the novel, he stops resisting his feelings and enters a relationship with Arthur.

The text also deals with organized crime. Art’s father is a member of the mob scene in Pittsburgh. The realities of crime affect Art personally. His friend, Cleveland, becomes connected with the father’s business. Cleveland is convinced by the possibly of wealth and the excitement of the chase. He agrees to steal expensive jewelry in exchange for a reward. However, the plan unravels, and Cleveland finds himself surrounded by police with the only option to scale the cloud factory: “He lost his footing and fell head
over heels over head” (286). Art watches his friend fall to his death, because of his involvement his father’s illegitimate work. His adolescence of a fun whirlwind summer converges with death and dirty business.

Each of these characters live and engage with aspects of an American City. Emotional development in a city provides children with a minefield of mature problems that they witness and become involved with. Clay, Gunnar, Charlie, and Art enter a broken world. They travel through their city. However, they see it differently than their child selves. The see the dirtiness, the crime, and the discrimination. Out of the four protagonists, Clay provides the most realistic image, stating information like a newsreel:

Before I left, a woman had her throat slit and was thrown from a moving car in Venice; a series of fires raged out of control in Chatsworth, the work of an arsonist; a man in Encino killed his wife and two children. Four teenagers, none of whom I know, died in a car accident on Pacific Coast Highway. Muriel was readmitted to Cedars-Sinai. A guy, nicknamed Conan, killed himself at a fraternity party at U.C.L.A. (Easton Ellis 195-196).

These images present the city in a negative light, as a place of mayhem, crime, and suffering. His relationship with his city changes. The world of parties of drugs can no longer hide the realities of city life in LA. Instead, Clay accepts these realities as an aspect of coming to age with yourself and your surroundings. While growing up has benefits, children must also accept a new view of places they once knew. In order to drive, to have a job, and to start a family, children must put aside immature antics and recognize that life as an adult is not as glamorous as they perceived.
Conclusion

Each of these characters are at the moment before life happens. Each are experiencing a taste of adulthood, while remaining in their familiar settings: home. This research focuses on the importance of an individual’s adolescent years in relation to their place. This thesis specifically looks at setting is a driving factor in character development. I research two American cities, Los Angeles, California and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I analyze defining aspects of city life that affect residents such as, climate, cost of living, demographics, language, infrastructure, neighborhoods and city planning, civic pride, and physical health. These dynamics define what it means to exist as a member of a large population in a restricted amount of area.

While these fictional characters exist in curated and constructed portrayals of real cities, the novel form presents theses urban landscapes as driving forces in a child’s transition into adulthood. Bildungsroman texts are essential for this connection to place because only during adolescence is an individual able to separate him or herself from the domestic space. Clay, Gunnar, Charlie, and Art interact and engage with their city, further strengthening their self-identity in an urban adult world. The protagonists remove the rose-colored glasses of childhood and witness the harsh realities of their surroundings. However, without this step, none of these young adults would have experienced growth. Hardships such as drug use, racism, sexual abuse, and organized crime force these characters to adapt and to transition from a naive child into a socially conscious young adult aware of his surroundings in metropolitan, American cities. For Clay, Gunnar, Charlie, and Art, growing up is the greatest adventure of all.
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