

# DESTROYING *VERONICA MARS*: GENTRIFICATION, GENDERED INTERSECTIONALITY, AND THE COMING OF AGE OF LOS ANGELES

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In the summer of 2019, fans of *Veronica Mars* were treated to a fourth season of the critically acclaimed television series, which had played for three seasons (2004-06) before being cancelled due to low ratings despite the protests of its large, fiercely loyal fan base, who call themselves “marshmallows” as a tribute to the opening bumper of the show, which ends with Veronica noting that “people say I’m a marshmallow” (Cochran). When it became clear that Warner Bros. would not back the feature-film script that creator Rob Thomas had written as an alternate way of continuing the series, Thomas and his team turned to *Kickstarter*, crowdsourcing the 2014 *Veronica Mars* film to the tune of \$5,702,153, which far surpassed the \$2 million they had set out to raise, and broke several *Kickstarter* records in the process (Hicken; Thomas, “The Veronica Mars Movie Project”; Thomas, “Update 2”). Like the three TV seasons before it, the film garnered critical but not commercial success, grossing only \$3.5 million worldwide with a budget of \$6 million (Acuna), and it was only on the strength of continued fan demand that an abridged fourth season (of eight episodes vs. 64 in the first three) was made.

The *Veronica Mars* franchise, which also includes two novels co-authored by Thomas and Jennifer Graham, *Veronica Mars: The Thousand Dollar Tan Line* (2014) and *Veronica Mars: Mr. Kiss and Tell* (2015); and a short-lived web spinoff, *Play It Again, Dick*, follows the eponymous young blonde hard-boiled PI as she solves crimes in Neptune, a seaside town in Southern California in the fictional spirit of Chandler’s Bay City.<sup>1</sup> The changes that Neptune undergoes from the first season in 2004 to the fourth in 2019 are substantial, and parallel Veronica’s own coming of age as she goes from being a date-raped teenager who helps out in her father’s office after school to being a full partner in the firm, and the one who keeps it afloat when her father faces a potentially debilitating health crisis. Season Four ends with a shockingly unex-

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pected bombing, the results of which see the season end with Veronica driving out of Neptune determined never to return. Thomas admits that this plot twist was a huge gamble that could well end the series (Gennis), and it received considerable criticism (Connolly).

What I am interested in in this article is how the changes that Veronica and Neptune undergo over the course of a pivotal decade and a half reflect the development of both feminism and urbanization. Comparing Veronica's coming of age with the city's along the parallel vectors of gentrification and generation allows me to explore what it means for Los Angeles that it has gentrified to the point that the makers of *Veronica Mars* no longer felt it was the right place for her. After detailing the points in the series along which Neptune and Veronica are shown to mature, I explore what these parallel transformations mean for the figure of the female private detective as well as for the city in which she lives and works.

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## NEPTUNE: FROM NOIRISH SUBURB TO SPRING BREAK DESTINATION

At the end of the 2014 *Veronica Mars* film, Veronica opts to stay in Neptune, "preferring self-employed work on her home turf to a stressful, high-powered career in corporate, East Coast law" (Ingram and Reisenleitner 32). She also does so in order to be able to look after her father, Keith, who is seriously injured in the film in a car accident when someone tries to take him out for pursuing a case against the Sheriff's Office over the planting of evidence at crime scenes involving the poorer members of Neptune's population. When we next meet up with them in *Veronica Mars: The Thousand Dollar Tan Line*, we learn that

[f]or the past two months he'd been able to pretend she was there to help him in his convalescence, but more and more she sensed him rankle at the mention of her work [...] because h[e] couldn't understand why she'd come back. Some days, she didn't understand it either. *Neptune was still the same glittering, dirty seaside town*, like a tarnished bronze angel looking out over a graveyard. (Thomas and Graham, *Veronica Mars: The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line* 14; emphasis mine)

While the ways its creators have conceptualized Neptune may not have consciously changed over the course of the series, the type of backdrop the town provides for Veronica and the crimes she investigates does.

The Neptune to which Veronica returns in the *Kickstarter* film is not the same hometown she had not yet left at the end of Season Three. As is outlined in *L.A. Chic*, Neptune makes a significant shift from being "an almost textbook example of what Klein details as suburban noir" in the TV series into "a centrally located, urban neighbourhood with the detective agency run by Veronica's father at the centre of a space transformed by the technology-, fashion-, and real estate-driven capitalism of

the twenty-first century” (Ingram and Reisenleitner 33-34). This shift is reflected in a change in filming locations. Where the first three seasons were shot “in Oceanside and around San Diego,” crucial scenes of the film were shot “in DTLA’s Arts district [...], mobilizing this part of L.A.’s potential for gentrification in canny ways for the plot development while indicating that maturing millennials have made lifestyle choices that are resolutely urban rather than suburban” (Ingram and Reisenleitner 32-33).

This gentrifying trend continues in the two novels that were delivered to fans as thanks for the *Kickstarter* campaign. In both *Veronica Mars: The Thousand Dollar Tan Line* and *Veronica Mars: Mr. Kiss and Tell*, Neptune now has a “Warehouse District,” to which Mars Investigations has relocated, “far inland, miles from the brilliant Pacific surf, away from the luxurious playgrounds of the lucky and the care-free” (Thomas and Graham, *Veronica Mars: The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line* 316). When the new office is first introduced to us, the circumstances of Neptune’s gentrification are detailed:

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The redbrick building that housed Mars Investigations had been a brewery at the turn of the twentieth century, but in the past decade it’d been subdivided into lofts and offices. Veronica was still getting used to it—back when she’d worked as her dad’s receptionist in high school, the office had been in a modest commercial district, surrounded by bookstores and Chinese takeout joints. But when the ‘09er, an exclusive new nightclub, opened just down the street from their old location, rent had shot through the roof, effectively gentrifying her dad’s one-man operation right out of the neighborhood. Rent here was more manageable. Though if she didn’t land a good case soon, it still wouldn’t be manageable enough. (Thomas and Graham, *Veronica Mars: The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line* 21)

The second novel also draws attention to the gentrified aspects of the office, emphasizing its styling:

The Mars Investigations office was dim and cool, a relief from the sweltering heat outside. [...] The rented space looked and felt industrial, more in terms of its original function—brewing enormous vats of lager—than any conscious design mode. It had twenty-foot ceilings and stained concrete floors. The rooms were so big they were hard to light, and deep shadows pooled in the corners. The one part of the room you might call “sleek and modern” was Mac’s desk, laden with computer equipment. (Thomas and Graham, *Veronica Mars: Mr. Kiss and Tell* 22)

Both the style and location of Mac’s apartment similarly befit her technological prowess and skills as a hacker, and once again the description draws attention to the gentrification processes Neptune has undergone since the original three seasons:

Mac’s apartment—rented in the salad days when she’d worked for Kane Software—was located in a sleek building just a few blocks away from Neptune’s single art-house movie theater. It was sparsely decorated: a dark red couch, covered in jacquard pillows, took up one wall, and a plasma-screen TV was mounted on the exposed brick opposite. Where most people would have put a dinner table, Mac had a high-tech ergonomic desk covered

with monitors and computer equipment that changed height at the touch of a button.  
(Thomas and Graham, *Veronica Mars: The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line* 115)

As it appears in both the *Kickstarter* film and the two novels, then, Neptune ca. 2014 has decidedly made the shift to the knowledge economy, the effects of which on the built environment and type of work located there are palpable.

- Season Four builds on the *Kickstarter* material and marks a further shift in Neptune's (sub)urban imaginary. The interceding five years have turned it from being driven by the knowledge economy to being increasingly reliant on tourism, which is not to say that its gentrification has ceased. On the contrary, it is now the force driving the plot, with Thomas noting in an interview that he specifically wanted Season Four "to show the gentrification of Neptune" (Gennis). Mac's hacker character does not return,<sup>2</sup> and this time the rich and powerful villain, who, true to noir, once again wins out over the poor and defenceless, is not a movie star, software billionaire, or sports star, as was the case in the first three seasons, but rather, and also true to L.A. crime stories, a real-estate developer, who has been wheeling and dealing in order to drive down the price of beachfront property he has set his sights on redeveloping. In that spirit it is noteworthy that, for the first time, the series features an actual, non-fictional, location: the Sea Sprite Motel, where a bombing literally sets off the season's plot (Walsh). While this first crime scene is theoretically in keeping with the suburban imaginary of the original Oceanside Neptune, whose "walk-up apartments, dingbats, and small bungalows of the less affluent" contrast starkly with the gated mansions of the '09ers (Ingram and Reisenleitner 32), this beachfront motel, where rooms pre-COVID started at over \$300 per night, is of a considerably different class than the motel that had been featured in the first three seasons and that makes a return in the novels but not the *Kickstarter* film. In *The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line*, the sardonically named Camelot is the place where Veronica interviews the two young women who have stayed on after Spring Break on account of their missing friend:

They were staying in the Camelot Motel. The sun-bleached building was surrounded by pawn shops, storefront churches, and bars so divey even the spring breakers didn't bother—which meant it was one of the only places the girls could afford after their spring break reservations ran out. Veronica had spent more caffeine-fueled nights outside the motel than she liked to recall—it was a favorite for the kind of trysts that resulted in shattered prenups, messy divorces, and broken hearts. Read: a home away from home for an enterprising young PI. (Thomas and Graham, *Veronica Mars: The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line* 55)

The victim's friends reveal themselves to be very aware of the Camelot's status, underscoring to Veronica that "We all met up at the motel—we were at the Sea Nymph last week, closer to the beach—" (58).

It is on the beach that one sees Neptune's transformation to tourist destination most clearly. In Season Four it is no longer the desolate place of the first three seasons, where friends could take refuge from and confer about the travails of high school or

get proof of shady goings-on. Rather, it has become a crowded, carnivalesque display of body culture that speaks to the explosion in popularity of surfing, which led to its becoming an Olympic sport. This transformation of the beach into a scene of consumption, display, and spectacle had been foreshadowed in the *Kickstarter* film, in which Logan and his stoner friend Dick Casablancas shared a beachfront property that provided them with direct access to the waves. However, it is not just that Season Four reroutes the series specifically to Hermosa Beach, a much more upscale location than Oceanside, and one whose pier went on to star in the 2016 *La La Land* (Ingram and Reisenleitner 3-4). It also takes the series to a place that can be reached by public transit from downtown in almost the same time it takes to get from downtown to Oceanside by car, depending on traffic, of course—a significant shift in the transportation timescape indicative of DTLA's new centrality and the city's new bicycle- and transit-friendly image.

So why did *Veronica Mars*'s creators end Season Four with Veronica *driving* out of this gentrified tourist mecca?irate fans who felt betrayed by the season and especially its ending, and who unleashed venomous online attacks on Thomas (Bleznak), have reason to suspect that he wants to produce future seasons in Vancouver, where he made five seasons of *iZombie* between 2015 and 2019. When asked whether he believed Veronica could find her happiness somewhere besides Neptune and if so, what it might that look like, Thomas responded:

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One of the things that I've given a lot of thought to, and it's one of the reasons why we make these occasional references to the eight column inches she got in *Vanity Fair*, is that I want people from across the country to be able to hire Veronica. I want there to be an excuse for people to seek her out. I don't want to limit the show to Neptune. I have a couple of ideas for what I'm noodling with for the next *Veronica Mars* adventure and neither of them take place in Neptune. (Gennis)

Thomas further claims that his show needed to leave its SoCal setting in order for it to leave behind the "teen soap" elements in the show's past: "it needs to become a detective show—a noir, mystery, detective show—and those elements of teenage soap need to be behind us" (Gennis). Thomas was also very specific about what kind of detective show he had in mind:

the next time out I want to be full throttle "this is a detective show." One of the ideas that I have is an Agatha Christie sort of murder in a manor house-style mystery, only modernized a bit. The next one is going to lean very heavily into "we're a detective show." We can exist in any environment doing any case. (Gennis)

Any environment, it would seem, except for Los Angeles, the ur-setting of noir.

As Dahlia Schweitzer reminds us, "noir was defined by Los Angeles, and Los Angeles was defined by noir" (13). So one would expect that as Los Angeles has gentrified, there would be a corresponding transformation in the L.A. private eye, who, as Schweitzer argues, "cannot exist anywhere else" (Schweitzer 4). In offering cursory answers to the questions of "What happens when the private eye is no longer white?

No longer a man? No longer an adult?” (4), Schweitzer seems to have noticed that changes have taken place. However, her answers do not engage with the city’s new image, in keeping with her taking on board Thomas’s position regarding location: “Originally, Thomas planned to set the show north of Los Angeles, in a fictionalized Santa Barbara or Ventura, before settling on San Diego as a result of a union deal. The location did not matter much, as long as it was an hour or two outside Los Angeles” (Schweitzer 159-60). Neptune in this view remains a “small town,” which is important because it “provides Veronica with power and opportunity that might elude her in a big-city setting, while still leaving her close enough to reach Los Angeles easily by car” (160), something of much less importance in the new urbanist mecca of cappuccino and craft beer Los Angeles has become.<sup>3</sup> One would think that a white, middle-class, middle-aged male writer such as Rob Thomas, who is from a small town in Washington and for a time called Austin, Texas home (cf. Acosta), would feel comfortable with Los Angeles’s gentrification, but that would be to forget that such

16 a setting is not conducive to noir, in which the city is a hostile environment against which a detective can prove *his* mettle. As we see in the next section, this new environment does not lessen the enormous challenges beautiful young “All American” blondes face when working as PIs there.

## VERONICA, YOU’LL BE A WOMAN SOON

After the *Kickstarter* film aged her nine years and used her high school’s tenth anniversary as a device to reunite the main cast of the TV series, when we meet up with Veronica another five years later in Season Four she looks very much as we saw her in the film. Her hair has remained long, wavy, blonde, and bang-less, and she is still wearing her black leather jacket, even to the beach, where in long sleeves and long pants she repeatedly stands out as the only non-flesh-flashing person present.<sup>4</sup> While such a wardrobe has the advantage of being a forgiving style for someone who had given birth a few short months before the filming of the *Kickstarter* (she announced the birth of her first daughter, Lincoln, on *Twitter* on March 28, 2013, and principal filming began in June), Tamy Burnett and Melissa Townsend remind us that this style also serves as a reminder of her date-rape trauma, noting

the shift from long-haired pastel-colored clothes-wearing Veronica of pre-series flashback to the short-haired young woman who routinely wears long sleeved shirts and layers in Southern California (her wardrobe change depicting a classic response to sexual assault wherein the victim takes to wearing more concealing clothing). (Burnett and Townsend Kindle 1467-68)

It is not in the film, but rather in the first three seasons of the TV series, that Veronica undergoes a conspicuous shift in appearance, as she transitions from a teenager in high school to a college-going young adult. As Schweitzer notes, Veronica is “significantly more feminine, at least in appearance, in season 3 than in season 1” (153),

detailing that

as Veronica grows older, her choppy bob from season 1 is replaced in season 3 by flat-ironed hair and bangs or, alternately, by soft, romantic waves. Rather than appearing as a punky high schooler, college Veronica frequently looks as if she is on her way to a job interview. Her hair gets longer, softer, and fuller, while her makeup gets heavier and her relationship to detecting becomes increasingly complicated. (Schweitzer 153-54)

What Veronica's longer locks signify is less complicated, in no small part as her change of look occurs in Season Three, the serial rape plot of which transforms the show into a backlash text, something Rosalind Sibielski convincingly demonstrates in her analysis of its "narrative shift from an apparent investment in supporting feminist values to a virulent attack on US feminism" (321).<sup>5</sup> Like Burnett and Townsend, Rhonda V. Wilcox and Sarah Whitney also draw attention to the fact that in the Season One flashbacks of Veronica's pre-date-rape life, she appears "exceptionally innocent" (Whitney Kindle 2277) "with her long blonde hair and white dress" (Wilcox Kindle 770-71). Whitney further cites Judy Fitzwater's observation that "Sixteen-year-old Veronica questioned very little [...]. She wore her hair in long, soft curls, chose modest, age-appropriate clothing, and wore lots of pastels (196)" (Whitney Kindle 2277-78). Growing out her hair can be seen as a sign of healing from the damage of the date-rape, yet it undermines the status of her adulthood in containing an echo, albeit sexualized, of her childhood innocence. In her 2019 memoir, the lead singer of Blondie, Debbie Harry, explains her choice of hair colour in terms that reveal an awareness of this dynamic:

There were so many movie stars that influenced me, especially the gorgeous blondes. For me that glowing irresistible attraction gave me little choice. I had to hit the bottle. I had to be a blonde. As well as this mad attractiveness that the blondes possessed for me, they also seemed so innocent: the vulnerability of little children, the child inside us all. (Harry 7)<sup>6</sup>

The challenge of turning Veronica from a feisty teenage PI into a feisty adult PI for a TV audience at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century is something the franchise shares with *Nancy Drew*.<sup>7</sup> Where Schweitzer posits Nancy's "refusal to age" (153) as the secret to that series' longevity, it is something true only of the original novels and films Schweitzer analyzes to generate a model of "the girl sleuth," against which she then measures the Veronica of the first three seasons and the film. While Schweitzer acknowledges the "five films, two television shows, numerous computer games, graphic novels, and even a podcast (*Unlocked! The Nancy Drew Podcast*)" (134), she stops her analysis with the very successful 2007 film starring Emma Roberts, the tagline for which was "small town girl, big time adventure," because she is interested in "what happens when [Nancy] comes to Los Angeles" (139):

She zips around Los Angeles in her convertible as if she is a native, seeming entirely at home. Contrary to expectation, her childhood status actually gives her more freedom and accessibility. Not only does she not need assistance from adults, but unlike [adult



female PIs such as] Holt, West, Hayes, Warshawski, and Vaughan, she also seems thoroughly impervious to the needs or demands of men. She defies the men (her father, her boyfriend) who try to tell her how to behave, and she does not need their assistance to get the job done. (140)<sup>8</sup>

How differently the Nancy Drew character has come to be represented on television and on film can be seen by comparing the current reboot of the series, which debuted in October 2019, starring Kennedy McMann and barely renewed for a second season, with the considerably more successful 2019 remake of *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase*, starring Sophia Lillis, who, born in 2002, is five-and-a-half years younger than McMann.<sup>9</sup> While the film character remains very much a teenager and sports a cropped, tapered haircut, the TV show ages her by a crucial two years, has her put her college plans on hold to solve a mystery, and undermines her credibility as a rational adult by involving her with seances and ghosts. One should by now be able to guess McMann's appearance without an image; suffice it to say that at 5'8", she is much less

18 "pint-sized" (Logan) and with much longer, not to mention wavy and dyed, trellises than either the 5'0" Lillis, or the 5'1" Kristen Bell.<sup>10</sup>

How to best age their protagonist in Season Four presented the makers of *Veronica Mars* with a real challenge. A factor not to be underestimated in the longevity of the *Nancy Drew* franchise is the fact that no single actress has come to be associated with the character the way Kristen Bell has with Veronica Mars. Much has been made of the pivotal decision to cast Bell, and Thomas is on record as finding it "almost impossible to imagine Veronica Mars played by anyone other than Kristen Bell" (Thomas, *Neptune Noir* 6), something easily confirmed in the two novels in which the other characters are described in visualizing detail and Veronica is not. Whereas we learn that "Keith Mars was a short, stocky man, mostly bald, his dark hair a low wreath round the sides of his head. His heavy jaw was usually in danger of five o'clock shadow by noon" (Thomas and Graham, *Veronica Mars: The Thousand-Dollar Tan Line* 15) and that Mac has a "short shock of brown hair [that] fell over one eye" (22), all that is noted about Veronica's appearance is her diminutive status and hair colour, neither of which is deemed an asset: "it was rapidly becoming clear that her petite frame and blond hair didn't exactly win the confidence of her clients" (27); "at five foot two she was at a disadvantage for seeing through it. She stood on her tiptoes, straining to see" (113). By Season Four, however, fans knew Bell as a mother of two almost school-age girls who made no secret of her postpartum depression and declared on *Good Morning America* that one of the reasons she was returning to play the character "after all these years" is that she believed in the character's importance: "I want this girl, Veronica Mars, to be representation for other women, young girls [...] men, boys, anybody. [...] I want her to exist and I want her to exist for my daughters" (Winifred). Critics were thus primed to pick up on how Bell's aging increasingly strained the series. Libby Hill, for example, notes in a scathing review of Season Four that "instead of a show about a plucky teen girl detective, you're now watching a series about a 30-something woman who is kneecapping her own future for no discernible



reason” (Hill), which, one will recall, is precisely the reproach Veronica’s father Keith makes in the novels. Schweitzer also comments on “the awkwardness of the film’s reconciliation of Veronica’s older age with her return to her Neptune roots” (160), albeit without contemplating how Los Angeles’s gentrification has contributed to that awkwardness.

Yet one has to ask whether there is *anywhere* in America that an *adult* Veronica can now work as a hard-boiled PI, and, if there is not, what this means for beautiful, no longer youthful, blondes.<sup>11</sup> Thomas already planted a seed for his idea to turn the series into “an Agatha Christie sort of murder in a manor house-style mystery, only modernized a bit” (Gennis) in the *Kickstarter* film. In the first three seasons Veronica is likened to Nancy Drew:

In the show’s episode “You Think You Know Somebody” (UPN, October 26, 2004), Logan Echolls (Jason Dohring) [...] tells Veronica (Kristen Bell) that she sucks “at this Nancy Drew stuff” [...] and i]n the episode “There’s Got to Be a Morning After Pill” (CW, February 6, 2007), Keith Mars (Enrico Colantoni), Veronica’s father, intentionally conceals their identities, introducing the two of them by saying, “My name is Carson Drew. This is my assistant, Nancy.” (Schweitzer 141)

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However, “in the *Veronica Mars* movie, Vinnie Van Lowe (Ken Marino) refers to Veronica as “Neptune’s very own Angela Lansbury” (Schweitzer 144-45), and in an interview in the aftermath of Season Four, Bell similarly “reassured viewers that she will never be able to fully say goodbye to Veronica,” saying “I will play this character well into the *Murder, She Wrote* years” (Preston). So, as soon as the fully adult Veronica returned to the gentrifying Neptune of loft-living, Thomas subtly shifted the style of detective with whom she is associated from Nancy Drew to Angela Lansbury, which is to say, from a prepubescent and therefore not yet professional private investigator to a homey older amateur detective, the gender implications of which Schweitzer underscores (105-06).

This domesticating of Veronica can also be seen as a form of neutering. Thomas has insisted in interviews that wherever any future iterations of the series take Veronica, she will remain single:

my belief is that those will be better with Veronica Mars as the lead of a noir detective series who does not have a boyfriend or a husband [...] finding love is going to be off the table for a while [...] don’t expect I’m just giving Veronica a new boyfriend. That isn’t going to happen. (Gennis)<sup>12</sup>

That Thomas anticipated the backlash that locking Veronica into a metaphorical chastity belt would unleash points to its predictability. It also encourages reflection on how much of the sex in the series is non-consensual, not to mention violent, and on what a departure Season Four represents in this regard. Sarah Whitney, Tanya R. Cochran, and Elizabeth Logan all draw attention to the centrality of rape narratives in the series. Whitney notes the “many plotlines that involve Veronica seeking justice on behalf of women and girls who, like her, have been sexually violated and humili-

ated” (2308-09), while Cochran is concerned with “the ways in which fans came to increasingly identify with the character of Veronica through the metaphoric function of her initial rape” (Wilcox and Turnbull Kindle 329-30). For her part, Logan identifies “rape and sexual assault [as] core themes of the show, central to its purpose and story engine” and praises Thomas’s decision to change the lead’s gender to female as “arguably the best and most important decision he ever made” (Logan). Veronica’s sexuality, she emphasizes, is “**everything**” (bold in original). This trend continues in the *Kickstarter* material, all of which involves “dead girls.”<sup>13</sup> The plot of the film hinges on the murder of one of the girls Veronica went to high school with, of which Veronica’s (at this point) ex-boyfriend Logan is accused, and in her investigation of the murder, Veronica discovers that one of the murdered girl’s friends, who had disappeared during high school, had also been murdered. *Veronica Mars: The Thousand Dollar Tan Line* involves two nubile spring breakers who have gone missing: one turns up dead, and the other turns out, in proper noir fashion, to be a femme fatale.

20 Finally, the plot of *Veronica Mars: Mr. Kiss and Tell* follows brutalized call girls, the first of whom is discovered barely alive and turns out to be the younger sister of the person who had dated and had a child with Veronica’s high school ex-boyfriend, Duncan, and from the novel’s opening, one would think it was a *CSI* episode:

Kozlowski’s eyes locked in on the thing in the field. Definitely a mannequin—he could see the arms and legs splayed out in the mud. Cleaned up and restored it might get him a C-note from a vintage shop or a tailor. And there was the outside chance it was worth real money. He’d heard of antique mannequins going for seven, eight hundred a pop, sometimes more if it was a rare model in good condition. But even from fifty feet away, this one was looking pretty rough. Its wig was so tangled and dirty he couldn’t guess what the original color might have been. The left arm crooked out at a strange angle to the rest of the body, probably busted. Dark streaks of mud wreathed the pale figure. Gus darted ahead across the field toward the thing, running in wild circles around it for a moment as Kozlowski approached. He was a few yards away when the hair on the back of his neck suddenly shot up. Something felt wrong about the whole scene. The mannequin’s skintight dress was hiked up around its waist, its sculpted buttocks bare to the sky. Another time he might have thought it was funny, trying to imagine why the hell the manufacturers had designed a dress-store dummy with a realistic ass. But here in the rain, splayed out in the mud, it looked so sad—so sick—he felt a creeping unease that crowded out the dollar signs he’d imagined. Gus was pawing at the thing’s torso, a thin whine coming up from his throat. Through the sound of the rain, Kozlowski could hear the distant croak of a raven from the tree line around the lot. He stepped closer, barely noticing the dull throb in his knee or the cold weight of his soaked denim jacket, kneeling down next to the shattered form in the gorse. Two things happened at once. The first was that Kozlowski’s eyes confirmed what some part of his gut already suspected: that the pale peach color was not fiberglass but flesh. That the dress was torn almost to shreds. That the black grime caking the skin was laced with streaks of dark red. The second was that the woman’s left hand—jutting at a grotesque angle from the rest of her body—slowly clenched, fingers curling down into the dirt. She was still alive. (Thomas and Graham, *Veronica Mars: Mr. Kiss and Tell* 7-8)

In my description of the opening episode of *CSI: NY* (“Blink”), I note that “the two

corpses are depicted as beautiful and their fashion accessories accentuated” while the one “who is discovered barely alive on wooden slabs and only able to communicate with her eyes (hence the episode’s title), resembles a corpse” (Ingram).

In contrast to the violence inflicted on beautiful young women in the television series and the film, in Season Four of *Veronica Mars* violence is inflicted primarily on property by bombs, and the only “face-to-face” murder is that of the wealthy white male real-estate developer, who is paid a visit in his mansion by two Mexican hit men, Alonzo (Clifton Collins Jr.) and Dodie (Frank Gallegos)—the fact that they are given names is indicative of how humanized they are over the course of the eight-episode season, and it also does not hurt that they are played by experienced actors whose faces are familiar to television audiences. It seems the series cannot do without what Rhonda V. Wilcox cleverly calls a “*deus ex Mexican*” (Wilcox Kindle 795). This role is usually filled by Eli Navarro, a.k.a. “Weevil,” the head of the Hispanic motorcycle gang “the PCHrs,” who does return in Season Four, unlike Mac, but only in the very reduced capacity of providing the bad guys with muscle to discourage tourists (cf. Hill).

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While they might be a far cry from the freeways of the past to which Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, et al. took in order to traverse the city’s social divides, it is not the case that Season Four’s gentrified streets are no longer mean. Rather, they need to be traversed differently, as forms of policing have become increasingly technologized and correspondingly inhuman(e). This also means that new kinds of detectives feel more at home in them, such as Naomi Hirahara’s Japanese-American bicycle cop Ellie Rush; Steph Cha’s wannabe Philip Marlowe, the Korean-American Juniper Song; and Joe Ide’s African-American Isaiah Quintabe, known as IQ. Ethnic, racialized protagonists at home in their L.A. hoods are also starting to populate other TV genres, such as the Starz drama *Vida* (2018) and the Netflix comedy *Gentefied* (2020), both of which are set in the predominantly Mexican-American neighbourhood of Boyle Heights. These new TV shows indicate that Los Angeles has taken on board its positioning as the northern capital of Latin America, something it heralded in its Olympic bid advertising (the original bid was for the 2024 Games, but it ended up being awarded the 2028 one). This is not to deny that the *Veronica Mars* franchise has engaged intersectional elements since its beginnings. As Rhonda V. Wilcox and Sue Turnbull underscore in their introduction to the 2011 *Investigating Veronica Mars: Essays on the Teen Detective Series*, the series “presents social challenges in many categories—class, gender, and race (cf. Naremore 223-24)” and “is far from color-blind” (Wilcox and Turnbull Kindle 197); they further acknowledge that “[r]acial and ethnic difference are not as pervasively problematic in *Veronica Mars* as class and gender issues, but they are not simplified either” (Wilcox and Turnbull Kindle 207).

As we have seen here, Season Four continues in that spirit in not simplifying the situation of its beautiful blonde female PI. On the contrary, a locational analysis that focuses not exclusively on the figure of the protagonist but also on her environs brings out the increasing difficulty, indeed near-impossibility, of this positional-

ity in the contemporary imaginary of Los Angeles. Such a reading draws attention to the fact that it was while Los Angeles was “reinventing itself for the twenty-first century as a walkable, pedestrian friendly, ecologically healthy and global urban hotspot of fashion style” prominently inhabited by ethnicized millennials (Ingram and Reisenleitner back cover) that Thomas struggled to find a suitable place there for his adult Veronica. Possibly sensing what Annette Burfoot explicated in 2006, that “violence is a manifestation of a temporal crisis in the relationship between technologies of modernity and the body—specifically, the female body as a prize commodity shared by the scientific and entertainment industries” (179), the series tentatively tried out depicting violence against property rather than against the bodies of beautiful young women. In the past these bodies had often been interchangeable with that of the series’ protagonist, but by Season Four Kristen Bell had too obviously outgrown them. One can observe, then, that as both Veronica and Neptune matured, the violence meted out was transferred from one to the other, and gave rise to a need to leave.

22

In her critique of “America’s Sweetheart,” Sophie Mayer identifies the embodiment of mainstream American culture’s physical ideal as “white, blonde, slim, attractive, and able-bodied.” In drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s insight that “subjects on the margins of dominant power” allow for “a strange kind of critique, one bound up, too, with its own complicity with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyze and maybe even undermine’ (4)” (qtd. in Mayer Kindle 2041), she focuses her analysis on Veronica’s body and questions whether “it can critique the semiotics of idealized teenage femininity, even as it is complicit in renewing such representations” (Mayer Kindle 2044-45). Given that the franchise has never escaped its complicity with the corporate consumer culture that uses beautiful young women for its own propagation and reproduction, it is not surprising that the series was not able to transcend its liberal perspective in Season Four either.

In the hegemonically white heteropatriarchy that is corporate America, something the current challenges to it seem unlikely to meaningfully derail because they are aimed at its political and not economic structure, white women occupy a key subject-position not simply on the margins of dominant power, but on the nearest margin. For a reflexive feminist critique of this complicity and how it situates violence vis-à-vis the beautiful adult female detective in Los Angeles, I conclude with a brief nod to Karyn Kusama’s 2018 *Destroyer*, which stars an exceedingly banged-up Nicole Kidman as an LAPD detective who exacts revenge on a gang she has infiltrated undercover and helped to commit a bank robbery that went bad. Flashbacks contrast a beautiful young FBI agent with luscious, long dark hair who is blissfully in love with her partner and the aged, bitter cop with dry, cropped, and streaked hair that she becomes after her partner is killed in the bank robbery—the character’s name, Erin Bell, evokes Erin Brockovich, a beautiful blonde who was crowned Miss Pacific Coast of 1981, worked as a legal clerk, successfully sued Pacific Gas & Electric for

contaminating ground water, and has gone on to become a prominent environmental activist; Steven Soderbergh turned her story into the well-known, award-winning biopic starring Julia Roberts. Kusama's courageous film unflinchingly depicts the brutality and ugliness of the city and graphically shows the toll its violence takes on its protagonist, yet she found it "interesting that people find it as difficult to watch as they do," contrasting it to what she finds difficult to watch, namely, "waking up in the morning and facing the news of the day" (Puchko). Rather than doing violence to the image of Kristen Bell as America's (albeit aging) sweetheart, the ending of Season Four of *Veronica Mars* seems to indicate that its makers preferred to blow up gentrified Los Angeles and relocate Veronica elsewhere rather than continue to depict the ravages wrought by and to the big city. Whether this move destroys the series remains to be seen, but should it proceed in this direction, there are not likely to be too many marshmallows in the audience.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to Peter Brown for drawing this connection to my attention and to him and Art Redding for participating in the COVID-induced virtual joint panel of the Canadian Association of American Studies and the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, at which I presented a preliminary version of this material. As in the rest of my work on Los Angeles, I am deeply indebted to Markus Reisenleitner, and I also owe a great intellectual debt to the fabulous group of feminists responsible for making recent detective panels at NeMLA enormously productive. Special thanks to Kathryn Hendrickson, Malinda Hackett, Mollie Copley-Eisenberg, and Lauren Kuryloski, as well as to the wonderfully knowledgeable anonymous peer reviewers.
2. This hole is inadequately patched twofold by giving Veronica a potential new BFF in the form of a nightclub-owning new character played by Kirby Howell-Baptiste (an actress who worked with Kristen Bell on *The Good Place*) as well as a young protégé in the form of the orphaned daughter of the motel owner, who died in the initial bombing, played by Izabela Vidovic (an actress who worked with Rob Thomas on *iZombie*).
3. Schweitzer's analysis is marked by a focus on the L.A. of freeways and cars. She finds it significant, for example, that "in season 3, in addition to all the other changes—including a more 'mature' opening credit sequence—the LeBaron convertible is replaced with a Saturn VUE, a compact sport utility vehicle without a retractable roof" (Schweitzer 154).
4. My thanks to Jaclyn Marcus for encouraging me to pay attention to the significance of Veronica's wardrobe.
5. Elizabeth Logan's critique of the season is similar but from the point of view of a fan: "The third season is, in my opinion, a missed opportunity to tackle the campus rape epidemic. By blaming the rapes on a psychological experiment gone awry, the show unfortunately ignores the fact that toxic masculinity isn't a role-playing aberration but a pervasive national issue. But its heart is in the right place, if not its logic" (Logan).
6. I am grateful to Katie Franklin for bringing Harry's memoir to my attention.
7. For those who did not grow up with this young mystery-solving heroine, Nancy Drew was introduced as a female counterpart to the Hardy Boys in an enormously popular and long-lasting young adult series that began in 1930 and was ghostwritten under the *nom de plume* of Carolyn Keene.

8. In keeping with the film's having been made in the year when *Veronica Mars* was cancelled, its imaginary is akin to the suburban/freeway imaginary of the first three seasons.
9. That the film was produced by Ellen DeGeneres points to its being intended to appeal to girls not primarily interested in appealing to boys.
10. These heights are taken from the actresses' respective *imdb.com* profiles. Although she is 16 years older than McMann, Bell appears more youthful due to her size and styling. The importance of Bell's size to the series can be seen in the dedication of the 2014 novel: "For all the *Veronica Mars Kick-starter* backers. You're like the people who clapped loud enough to bring Tinker Bell back from the dead. Except instead of clapping, you sent money. And instead of a tiny blond fairy, you resurrected a tiny blond detective" (2). One can imagine Thomas enjoying resignifying fan fiction as something for, and not by, fans.
11. For one of the many excellent examinations of the ageism suffered by television actresses, see Arbogast.
12. That Thomas has always thought of his protagonist in this way can be seen in the Pilot when Veronica declares, "I'm never getting married. You want an absolute? There it is. Veronica Mars: spinster. I mean, what's the point? [...] Sooner or later, the people you love let you down" (Cochran 2454-55).
13. For my analysis of this narrative form vis-à-vis Los Angeles, see Ingram.

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