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Podcast Transcription: **L.A.'s Dark History as told through *Chinatown* and Library Archives**

[Soft Jazz Music]

AB: Hello! Annabelle Bonebrake here. I'm a graduate student at CSUN in the English Masters program. I'm recording this in the year 2020, which is a special year in many respects, but especially because we're living through a global pandemic. The holiday season is here and cases of COVID-19 are increasing dramatically in the U.S. But that's a topic for another podcast. Today, we are going [delay effect] *back in time.*

[Noir Music]

First Man's Voice: It's bad business to let the killer get away with it.

Woman's Voice: The only trouble is, we could have had a lot of fun if you weren't a detective.

Second Man's Voice: Yeah, I killed him. I killed him for money and for a woman.

AB: Yes, we will be talking about film noir today and some related archives from L.A. history. But let's fast forward. Maybe thirty years or so?

[fast forward sound effect]

Lawrence Walsh: Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown.

[Theme from Chinatown]

AB: Today we're going to be talking about a post-golden-age classic, Roman Polanski and Robert Towne's *Chinatown*. If it sounds similar to the clips I played earlier, that's because it is. *Chinatown* is a neo-noir film, meaning a post-1950s revival of the film noir genre. Another important piece of vocabulary we'll be working with is "archive".

[music fades out]

AB: What is an *archive*? In simple terms, it's a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people. An archive can also refer to a single document from such a collection, or to the place where the collection is kept. However, the meaning and role of archives have changed dramatically over time, especially in the last thirty years. Today, we'll be looking at more traditional archives, such as old photographs and newspapers. We'll also be reading *Chinatown* as an archive of Los Angeles history and culture.

[mysterious vibraphone jazz]

AB: In *Chinatown*, Towne and Polanski focus on hidden pasts and secrets of Los Angeles, using dialogue and camera techniques to reflect on and critique the historic corruption of the city. Similarly, archives from the Los Angeles Public Library and CSUN's own Oviatt Library Special Collections offer snapshots of a dark past, lenses through which we can study and question the story of L.A.

Before we get into the **content** of the film itself, let's take a look at the **context** of *Chinatown*'s production.

[music fades out]

AB: Like so many artifacts from LA's past, *Chinatown* is layered with dark histories, from corruption in LA infrastructure to the hollow glamor of the Golden Age of Hollywood. Polanski famously cast John Huston, a titan of classic Hollywood cinema, as the villain in this neo-noir. His performance is, of course, striking, but Huston's presence as an old campaigner in the industry also provides an extra layer of critique. Think about this: in character, the bad guy is a filthy rich water and land mogul. Break the fourth wall, and he's also a well-known and loved film star-- aged, and deeply connected to the past L.A. *Chinatown* intends to scrutinize. Thus, Polanski both celebrates and criticizes Hollywood, a very noir thing to do. The combination of glamor and scrutiny was also a product of production timing. The early 1970s were a time of political and social disillusionment in America for a variety of reasons. In this case, *Chinatown* was made in the shadow of the Manson murders. To direct the film, Roman Polanski would return to L.A. for the first time since his wife, Sharon Tate, was killed in their Benedict Canyon home. Another notable meta-haunting of *Chinatown* is the notoriously antagonistic environment on set. Polanski and screenwriter Robert Towne had numerous arguments about the script, some of which were so bad that Polanski rewrote parts himself. This includes the film's famous ending-- all Polanski. There's also the case of actress Faye Dunaway, who claims to have been treated poorly by Polanski, from general rude remarks to literally ripping out strands of hair to get them out of the shot. Add contemporary associations with Polanski and his sexual abuse case, and *Chinatown* becomes a movie absolutely filled with phantoms. Though unfortunate, these production hauntings are thematically perfect. They act as another lens through which viewers can access the thematic content of the film: corruption can be paved over, glossed over, and pushed aside, but the remembrance of evil always finds a way to surface.

[jazzy music]

AB: Hollis Mulwray, a central character in *Chinatown's* mysteries, makes prominent the motif of anxiety and concealment in the film. Polanski uses a variety of techniques, including framing and lens motifs, to mystify Mulwray's past and shroud him in an ominous fatality. When we first see Mulwray in a medium-full shot, he is giving a formal presentation on the Van Der Lip Dam.

[music fades out]

AB: He is the object of investigation, viewed through the perspective of Gittes, one major figurative "lens" through which viewers access the story. As a hard-boiled detective, Gittes is working to reveal all that is concealed, but the case of Mulwray proves to be more shrouded than expected. In this scene, we only see a medium close-up of Mulwray for a moment. He looks with significant distress at the sheep farmer who is scolding him for stealing water from the valley. A few scenes later, we see another extremely brief medium-close up of Mulwray on the

beach, again looking pensive and worried. He walks away from the camera, picks up a sea star, and turns his back to the viewer. This is followed by a series of shadowy long shots of Mulwray alone on the beach, turned away from the camera. Therefore, audiences' primary experience of Mulwray is one of anxiety and concealment. Sounds like a haunting to me! In true noir form, Polanski doesn't focus on the successes of Mulwray, although Towne describes him as a man who quote "moves with surprising fluidity" end quote and shows all the signs of monetary and occupational success. Instead, the film focuses on the way the system has eaten away at Mulwray; the fatalist lens of noir frames his life, foreshadowing the evil that lies below the surface of all of Chinatown and Los Angeles.

While we often think of photographs as evidence of what's real, Hollis Mulwray can never be seen clearly; he is constantly distorted no matter what the medium or lens, which plays on motifs of anxiety and concealment in relation to corrupt Los Angeles. Other than the brief medium close-ups mentioned earlier, Mulwray is viewed strictly through distorted lenses. Mulwray is either spoken of by other characters or seen from a distance, often through binoculars, mirrors, and photographs. Let's look at an example. As Gittes follows Mulwray to the dry riverbed, he peers at him through binoculars. He then follows Mulwray to the seaside, where he first watches him from afar through the bounded lens of a rear-view mirror. Finally, of course, Gittes views Mulwray through the camera lens, first in wet and freshly developed photographs of Mulwray arguing with Noah Cross, images distorted and obscured by a steering wheel and other car parts in the foreground. The next photographs are by Gittes himself, incriminating evidence of an affair that will end up in the newspapers. Gittes never meets Mulwray, and thus, the audience never meets him. His presence drives the events of the two-hour movie, yet we only see, to speak figuratively, the ripples in the water.

Camera techniques are incredibly important in showing the viewer the limitations and anxieties of truth-telling in a city that likes to keep its secrets, but Robert Towne's script makes an equally significant contribution to motifs of dark mystery.

Let's look at Mulwray again, but through the lens of the script. In the screenplay, Towne crafts Mulwray as a character who can only be known and accessed through reference and speculation, suggesting the presence of hidden histories or truths within this fictional world. Towne, like Polanski, makes careful choices in crafting the script to conceal Mulwray from the viewer even before the discovery of his body in the river. When Gittes attempts to meet with Mulwray, he instead speaks to Russ Yelburton, who says of the affair,

RY: You know, after you work with a man for a certain length of time, you come to know him, his habits, his values, you come to know him — and either he's the kind who chases after women or he isn't.

AB: Yelburton is suggesting that Mulwray isn't the kind who chases women. The pictures Gittes has taken, of course, tell another story. In another attempt to find Mulwray, Gittes speaks to Eveyln, who claims her husband is quote "at the office," end quote a fact Gittes can once again refute. Mulwray is frustratingly inaccessible to Gittes until his untimely death, when he takes the unfiltered truth to the grave. This is, of course, what his murderers want: for the corrupt truth to drown in the newly abundant waters of Los Angeles.

Like Mr. Mulrway, Chinatown itself is viewed from a distance, accessible only through distorted impressions and veiled dialogue until the traumatic end. Chinatown is a concealed city, one that is discussed as if it belongs elsewhere, both temporally and spatially. For a film called *Chinatown*, very little screentime is devoted to explorations of this part of LA. Chinatown is quite

literally shrouded in darkness. In the script, the only scene officially set in Chinatown is the disturbing final scene, and it takes place at night. It is not until viewers are allowed into Chinatown that they are able to face the violence of corruption head-on, even if it is still by artificial light. Towne's dialogue makes it clear that Chinatown is haunted— not just by the mysterious business history of Gittes or by the corruption of business and government, but by the racism and class inequities that segregate the city. The first mention of Chinatown in dialogue is on page 32 of the script. Until this point, most exterior shots have been of the LA River and the Mulwray mansion, so the city itself has had a marginal presence. To put it simply, we know almost nothing about Chinatown, but the suggestive power of Gittes' short conversation with Escobar tells us this is not a place characters want to be:

Gittes: Yeah. Tell me. You still throw Chinamen into jail for spitting on the laundry?

Escobar: You're a little behind the times, Jake -- they use steam irons now -- (smiles) And I'm out of Chinatown.

Gittes: Since when?

Escobar: Since I made Lieutenant --

AB: It's apparent Gittes is impressed despite himself.

Gittes: Congratulations.

AB: Though neither men say it explicitly, a promotion in the police force clearly means a ticket out of Chinatown. There's also racism in Gittes and Escobar's discussion of putting quote on quote "Chinamen" in jail for quote "spitting on the laundry". The men seem self-aware of their own involvement in corruption, but they diffuse it through humor. Escobar simultaneously jokes about his treatment of Chinese Americans and buries his questionable conduct in the past when he says, "You're behind the times, Jake -- they've got steam irons now." He then brags about making Lieutenant, suggesting that a rise in job status means he no longer has to deal with low-class places like Chinatown. In spite of the characters' proximity to Chinatown and its significant involvement in the Mulwray case, the language always situates this part of the city in the past and as a place of the Other. By compartmentalizing this part of the city, the characters can also compartmentalize the suffering associated with all modes of business in Los Angeles. Chinatown is again discussed as back then and over there in the scene where Evelyn asks about the cut on Gittes's nose. She wants to know if he gets cut up often, and he responds:

Gittes: -- Actually this hasn't happened to me in some time.

Evelyn: -- When was the last time?

Gittes: Why?

Evelyn: It's an innocent question.

AB: Gittes touches his nose, winces a little.

Gittes: It was in Chinatown.

Evelyn: What were you doing there?

AB: (taking a long drink)

Gittes: -- Working for the District Attorney. Evelyn: Doing what?

AB: Gittes looks sharply at her. Then:

Gittes: As little as possible.

Evelyn: The District Attorney gives his men advice like that?

Gittes: They do in Chinatown.

AB: She looks at him. Gittes stares off into the night. Evelyn has poured herself another drink.

AB: In the film itself, this conversation takes place mostly in a two-shot, medium close up, showing the intimacy between the characters as they discuss this touchy subject in Gittes's past. Just as he says he worked "as little as possible" for the District Attorney, he seems to say as little as possible about his time in Chinatown. This is a place and time in his life he would rather conceal, especially the "little" he did for the dishonorable office he once worked for. This scene mirrors an earlier one in which Gittes questions Evelyn about her father's relationship with her late husband. She can barely talk about her father, making it seem like she's hiding something about his business dealings. In reality, her relationship with her father is harrowing, so much so that she accidentally lights two cigarettes at once while trying to speak about him. The concealed pasts of J.J. Gittes and Evelyn Mulwray are both haunted by the corruption of Chinatown and the men in power who let it be lawless. These parallel hauntings merge when, in the following scene, Evelyn helps Gittes clean up his cut nose with hydrogen peroxide. He stares at her and finally says,

JG: Your eye…

EM: What about it, what?

JG: There's something black in the green part of your eye

AB: This something she calls a quote "flaw," which prompts him to kiss her (91-2). In this exchange, Gittes sees that Evelyn is also a flawed person, working within her means to survive a hostile world. Their relationship is thus built on carrying a common ghost, and on the fatalist perspective that film noir casts on Los Angeles.

[cool jazz]

AB: In *Chinatown*, the presence of noir tropes is a bold reminder that all artistic accounts must be told— in the words of Emily Dickinson— slant. Very rarely can we face our ghosts head-on. When we do, we come out of it permanently altered. This is especially poignant in the history of hyperreal Los Angeles, where icons like citrus fields, movie studios, and the LA river remind us of the artifice embedded in the city's very existence. A story is nothing but a series of lenses, of light and shadow, of camera angles. But stories exist beyond fiction. What about the lenses of LA we can access through libraries, the archives we think of as quote "truth"? Let's take a look at some of these documents, these angles of LA, their limitations and their opportunities for storytelling.

[music fades out]

[Chinese string music]

AB: While many Angelinos are well aware of the dim sum houses, bakeries, and pagoda-style buildings of Chinatown, most do not know the history behind this iconic place, nor do they know that Chinatown's central plaza today is located about a mile north of the neighborhood's original location.

[music fades out]

AB: Before the late 1930s, Chinatown was located at Olvera Street and Union Station, the construction of which displaced the entire community. According to Liz Ohanesian for LAist, Old Chinatown was (quote) "born out of necessity for a community displaced by racism and civic development" it (quote) "had its heyday from 1890 to 1910, when it could count approximately 15 streets and about 200 units in various buildings," (end quote) but most if it was leveled during the building of Union station. All that is left of Old Chinatown is one building called the Garnier Building, which now houses the Chinese American Museum. So how do we connect with a neighborhood so obscured and transformed by the forces of industry? One way in is through photographic archives. The Los Angeles Public Library's digital collections contain a number of photographs of Old Chinatown that provide a glimpse into the neighborhood's cultural endurance and socioeconomic hardship. In one dingy black and white photograph, a man assists a child across the unpaved street. A worn wooden plank connects the dirt road to the sidewalk, allowing pedestrians to avoid the sludge and trash that has built up in the edges of the road. In the background is a brick building with a precarious-looking wood structure jutting out from its second story. Another photograph, a 1937 view of Alameda street, shows a similarly worn building with a leaning balcony and tattered awning. A Chinese shop sign is flanked by a CocaCola logo and a hand painted advertisement for King Edward Cigars. Dented trash cans decorate the sidewalk, and the brick walls are adorned with weathered paint. These photographs show the economic hardship and lack of access to infrastructure that Chinese Americans faced in early Los Angeles. The use of the Chinese language on the storefront exposes two realities: that stereotypes and racial discrimination forced Chinese Americans into segregated neighborhoods, and that these neighborhoods resulted in some sense of cultural preservation for Chinese immigrants.

[drums and crowd noises, calls of "yay" and "happy lunar new year" followed by music]

AB: In another photo of Old Chinatown from the LAPL collection, a Chinese dragon is paraded through the dusty streets. It's a powerful demonstration of Chinese American identity and perseverance in the face of immense hardship. These images do not show everything. They give only a glimpse into outspoken threats and unspoken barriers faced by residents of Old Chinatown. But viewed together, and in conjunction with other records, the camera lens can enhance, even complicate, our understanding of history. It's one thing to hear the word "poverty" and another to see the leaning bricks.

[Chinese string music]

AB: It's one thing to hear about the origins of the Golden Dragon Parade, and another to see the toothed beast, writing through the city, dust rising like steam from the unpaved streets. Though the archival photographs can't give us context, they can engender empathy and inspire

further research. While Detective Gittes experiences the limitations of photos as the anxiety of concealment, these LAPL archives show the potential for photographs to enhance what we know and to expose aspects of history that could have been paved over and lost to time.

[music fades out]
[fade in Woody Guthrie's "Dust Bowl Blues"]

AB: Further archival treasures from Los Angeles history can be found in CSUN's very own Oviatt Library's Special Collections, particularly (in the interest of today's podcast) the Andrae B. Nordskog Collection.

[music fades out]

AB: Nordskog was an activist and writer who published papers promoting utility reform and collected extensive documentation on water in California and Colorado. This collection documents Nordskog's interest in materials related to quote-on-quote "water frauds" in the Owens Valley and other locales. While the collection features a variety of archives, including Nordskog's unpublished book-length manuscript, we're going to focus on two newspaper clippings that excerpt discourses around the controversial process of bringing water to LA.

In our first newspaper archive of interest, from June 17, 1927, a yellowing front page of Nordskog's own weekly paper, *The Gridiron*, displays a bold headline: CIVIL WAR THREATENED, L.A. Faces Water Famine. This marks the beginning of Nordskog's active involvement in the Los Angeles-Owens Valley water controversy. The article reads very much like a memoir, a firsthand account of traveling through Lone Pine, Manzanar, Independence, and other towns in the Owens Valley to see the wreckage and to talk with the citizens. Nordskog writes: "As I entered the valley, I talked with people at Lone Pine, which is just North of the poisonous Owens Lake. At first, they were reluctant at saying much about the situation; they claim that there are two or three hundred city of Los Angeles detectives operating in the valley, so they are careful when they meet strangers. When I produced credentials in the form of newspaper articles from San Francisco and Los Angeles, showing that I was interested in public utility problems and had been fighting for two years for an adjustment of the telephone rates in Los Angeles, they became friendly enough to talk freely. When their hearts were laid bare, they revealed the real tragedy of the matter." Nordskog's description of the plight of Owens Valley citizens is sometimes plain and honest, sometimes florid and sensational. He makes it perfectly clear that he is advocating for these (quote) "pioneers whose lives have been spent in making a veritable God's country out of what was previously a desert waste" (end quote). What's wonderful about the plain sensation, the proud bias, of Nordskog's writing is how it illustrates his activist perspective while simultaneously suggesting the stance of big business and common belief. He states: "Those of you in Los Angeles who think that it is only a handful of unreasonable men in Owens Valley who are trying to blackmail our city into submission, should change your minds." By sharpening the lens of his own perspective, Nordskog helps us to glimpse the full view of the political climate around water in 1920s California.

Our next archive, also from 1927, is a reprint from the Sacramento Union, an article by Frederick Faulkner entitled OWENS VALLEY: Where the Trail of the Wrecker Runs. This digital copy from the Nordskog collection is annotated, quite probably by Nordskog himself. One of the annotations points to this quote from a Sacramento newspaper advertisement that says "We, the farming communities of Owens Valley, being about to die, salute you!" Faulkner goes on to explain that this advertisement inspired the Sacramento Union to investigate the plight of the Owens Valley further, and found (quote) "the ruins of homes and farmholds" (end quote). Like

Nordskog, Faulkner shares both the facts and his emotions toward them plainly, writing “The whole thing is ghastly, depressing, disheartening. There is one primary reason for the present plight of Owens Valley: The city of Los Angeles wanted and needed to augment its water supply.” Later in the article, Faulkner discusses the divide between urban and rural interests, a divide that has grown even wider since the early days of building LA infrastructure. This paper provides important insight into the origins of this decades-long conflict of resources, the destruction of the agricultural landscape and way of life in favor of urban development. This is, of course, only one side of the story, but it is a side that was silenced by the power and influence of urban developers and landowners. This newspaper provides important evidence of what was done to Owens Valley residents and prevents the facts of their history from being drowned out by those who continue to benefit from stolen water.

[noir jazz]

AB: That’s all we have time for today, but if you want to learn more about Los Angeles history, especially LA water, Chinatown, and other aspects of the noir past, there are several notable collections at the Oviatt. The Catherine Mulholland Collection contains a wealth of documents on the personal and professional life of Catherine Rose Mulholland and the life of her grandfather, William Mulholland, who loosely inspired *Chinatown’s* Hollis Mulwray with his involvement with LA’s water wars. In the Special Collections and Archives, you can also find the *Chinatown* script signed by Robert Towne. For more noir LA, check out the Agness Underwood Collection, featuring the tabloid writing style of Agness Underwood and her sensational subjects such as the Black Dahlia (Elizabeth Short). You can also check out the Water Works digital collection for an assortment of digitized archives from a combination of the Oviatt’s collections.

Though archives in film, photographs, and papers only give us fragmented glimpses into history, when viewed together, like a puzzle, the bigger picture begins to emerge. This kind of documentation, artistic and journalistic, allows for interpretation, making room for discovery that more authoritative or sweeping narratives might gloss over. The hot sun can shine on every inch of Los Angeles, but there will always be shadows. And as noir filmmakers or archivists tending to the deep stacks so often remind us, there’s always something more to be seen if you turn your eye in the right direction.

That’s all for today.

Thank you to Kevin McLoud and OrangeHead for the music. You also heard a clip from Woody Guthrie’s “Dust Bowl Blues” and audio from the 2019 Golden Dragon Parade. Thank you to Wind Walk Travel Videos for documenting and sharing that event. The film clips from the beginning are from The Big Sleep, Double Indemnity, and The Maltese Falcon. Thank you to Dr. Colleen Tripp for assigning this project and for all the support and inspiration and to the Oviatt Library Special Collections and Archives, particularly to David Sigler for his detailed research suggestions. A very special thank you to all the artists, educators, and librarians who keep LA history alive. Bye-now!

[End of Transcript]