

## Nina Revoyr's Los Angeles

Nina Revoyr describes her novels as love letters to Los Angeles. In *The Necessary Hunger* (1997), set in Inglewood, a Japanese American high school basketball player struggles to come to terms with leaving not only her first love but also the city itself. *Southland* (2003) interweaves the stories of three generations of a Japanese American family and an African American family, in the process uncovering the multiracial history of South Los Angeles. Revoyr's L.A. is complex and joyous, unafraid to confront its dark realities, but ever hopeful. Its multifaceted vibrancy provides a defiant counterpoint to the alienated, dystopic Los Angeles so often represented in popular fiction, much of which has been written by Anglo male transplants from the East).

Revoyr, who is of Japanese and Polish-American descent, was born in Japan and raised in Wisconsin and Los Angeles. *Southland* won a 2003 Lambda Literary Award and was selected as a *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of 2003, among other honors. Revoyr is also currently Vice President of Development and External Relations at Children's Institute, Inc., a service organization in Los Angeles for children and families affected by violence. We met on a sunny Friday morning in Crenshaw, at the former site of the Holiday Bowl.

-Wendy Cheng

*Starbucks, Crenshaw Boulevard, Los Angeles*

**Loggerhead Reading Series:** Can you describe where we're sitting?

**Nina Revoyr:** We're sitting in what used to be the Holiday Bowl, which was this amazing coffee shop and bowling alley that was opened in the 1950s here on Crenshaw Boulevard. This was the actual coffee shop. If you went around through there you would get to the bowling alley. It was a place where folks of all races—but particularly Japanese American and African American people—gathered to eat and bowl. The menu at the coffee shop reflected the clientele, so if you came here you could get yakisoba and hot links, you could get rice or potatoes with your eggs, you could get sashimi and jambalaya in the same place.

It was a really heartwarming, diverse mix of people that was not really replicated elsewhere in the city. It was also a place with major bowling

leagues in the '50s. It used to be open all night, so people would come and bowl after swing shifts at factories. Then as the economy started to change, as it got a little bit rougher in the area, it stopped being open all night, stopped doing so well. Bowling became less popular, and ultimately the place shut down and was boarded up and closed for several years. The property was bought by developers and what used to be the bowling alley was torn down to make room for that Walgreens—the Walgreens is where the bowling alley was, and this façade, which was the coffee shop, has actually remained largely as it was (at least from the outside), and now, as you see, it's been converted into a Starbucks. So on the one hand, it's not as horrible as it could have been because at least this part remains and it's being used, but on the other, obviously, this really unique community gathering, this family restaurant, is gone.

It was really reflective of the community, which was one of the few truly organically mixed racial communities in Los Angeles from a very early time, from the teens and twenties. And as we walk around the neighborhood we'll see that there are still a lot of elderly Japanese living in what most people see as a wholly African American neighborhood.

**LRS:** You've said that the birthplace of *Southland* was the Holiday Bowl. I was wondering if you could say more about how that came about. Did you come here when you were a teenager, or did you come here specifically because you heard it was an interesting place?

**Revoyr:** Interestingly enough I grew up not very far from here, maybe two or three miles—

**LRS:** Culver City, right?

**Revoyr:** Yeah. Culver City is straight down Rodeo, past Dorsey High School. I knew this place existed but I had no idea what it was until I came home from college one time over the holidays and there was an article about Holiday Bowl in the *L.A. Times*. I was so fascinated by the place and everything I just described, largely because my own background in high school was very similar. I went to Culver City High School, which was and still is an extremely diverse place. There's something like forty-three languages spoken there. My social group was largely black and Japanese and our friendships were not always understood by our parents, who themselves tended to be more in single-race social groups. For me to find this place, where suddenly

there were people my grandparents' age who were reflective of my friends and me—it was like finding our own family. I started coming here all the time to eat, and brought more friends here, and it just became the place that I felt was most reflective of my own experience.

**LRS:** Did you actually go bowling too?

**Revoyr:** I suck at bowling. No, I have bowled, but I actually never did bowl here, I just ate.



**LRS:** Were you conspicuously young here? It sounds like it was more of a senior citizens' hangout.

**Revoyr:** We were conspicuously young. As I became an adult and started to work in the early '90s with Head Start I would come here with people I worked with and then I was not conspicuously young, but it was conspicuously less crowded. There was less bowling, there were fewer people in the coffee shop—you could see it starting to change.

**LRS:** Because it was mostly an elderly crowd, and they were passing away?

**Revoyr:** You know, that's a very good question, and actually that's something I haven't thought about. I do think that's a large part of it. A lot of the folks in this community have been here for generations, but their kids moved away. Kids of all races moved away to other parts of Los Angeles, particularly after '92, after the riots when this whole area went up in flames. People left with their children to try and be in quieter places, safer places. Japanese had already started to leave, but then you also had a mass exodus of middle-class African Americans. There wasn't a replacement generation for the sixty- / seventy- / eighty-year-olds who came out here and ate and bowled, who'd been coming here for fifty years.

When you walk around the neighborhood you see that there are a lot of Japanese folks here still. Even though this is kind of the heart of black L.A., there have always been people of all races here, just like in Little Tokyo. Even at the height of Little Tokyo being the center of the Japanese community, there were always Mexicans there, which is something that people don't really know. So I think that when people talk about race in Los Angeles, it's a very simplified reaction to what's out there—not really looking beyond to see what the reality might be.

You know, I would love to walk around when we're done here and kind of see what's out there.

*We walk outside and Revoyr shows me the Walgreens around the back, which used to be the bowling alley. We both take some pictures. Then we walk around the block into a residential area.*

**Revoyr:** This is what Gardena looks like. There are all these modest but nice single-family houses with very meticulous Japanese-style landscaping—you see those trees that are kind of styled as bonsai trees? This is not what you would see in parts of South Los Angeles necessarily, that are not so Japanese influenced. Some of these houses are occupied by older Japanese couples or singles, but also many of them are African American. The people who have grown up in this area have been so influenced by Japanese aesthetics that even black people will have these bonsai style trees outside of their houses. I would venture that most of these families are black. But you see the Japanese influence in the aesthetic.

*We pass by a middle-aged African-American man standing in his driveway.*

**Revoyr:** Hi there.

**Man:** How are you?

**Revoyr:** Pretty good, just admiring the neighborhood.

**Man:** [in a bemused tone] Lots of people do.

**Revoyr:** Yeah. It's a beautiful place. Enjoy the day.

**LRS:** I had no idea this was here, this neighborhood, and it's just on the back side of the big boulevard. When did you find this neighborhood?

**Revoyr:** It was part of the coming to the Holiday Bowl and once I



realized it was here, you know, I just drove around it. What really struck me was how much it looked like Gardena. It's *really* similar: the

size and style of the houses—they were probably built in the same era—the width of the streets, the sunniness is very resonant of Gardena.

**LRS:** What's your connection to Gardena?

**Revoyr:** When I first moved to the US from Japan the first place we lived was Wisconsin. It was not the most racially accepting place, so when we moved to California it was really a mind-blowing, wonderful experience, and it was the first time that I had the ability to be around Japanese people in America. My father, who is my white parent, became the manager of a Japanese restaurant in Gardena. For two or

three years while he was doing that I was in elementary school or junior high. I hung out at the restaurant all the time, but he would come pick me up after school because I was too young to be by myself. I'd hang out at the restaurant and wander around the streets of Gardena after school.

You know, it's funny, the last time I did this walk it was also really unseasonably hot.

**LRS:** Yeah, we should say it's November 17th and it's probably—

**Revoyr:** Eighty—eighty-something degrees? Yes, it is very unseasonably warm.

*Revoyr points out a Japanese name on the watch and jewelry repair sign—now we've rounded and corner and are walking on Crenshaw again past a row of shops.*

**Revoyr:** There used to be several different Japanese-owned businesses here, and then there's this soul food restaurant that clearly used to be a Japanese restaurant.

**LRS:** People always talk about L.A. being a car city, but you wouldn't see all of this if you're just driving by. You really have to get out and walk around.

**Revoyr:** [peeking into a store with an incense display in the front] I thought that was Asian stuff.

**LRS:** Asiany.

**Revoyr:** [laughs] Yeah. Asiany.

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*Little Tokyo Hanaichimonme ramen restaurant in the Little Tokyo mall at 3rd and Alameda*

**LRS:** I read Susan Straight's *L.A. Times* article about regional writers in which she mentions you. She also talks about Joyce Carol Oates, saying that homesickness is one of the impulses for great writing. You've said that *Southland* was in a way a love letter to L.A., but that you can't write about L.A. when you're here. I was wondering how that works out in your life, how you work that out being back here.

**Revoyr:** That's a good question. I totally agree that homesickness and loss are a big part of what enables you to recreate something so vividly. Also, if you continue the love letter analogy, it's very hard to write a love letter to someone when they're sitting in the room with you—it tends to be when you're away from them. So I think that that's definitely true. There's something John Updike wrote in *The New Yorker* recently about this very issue, saying that it's important to be away from a place so that you can remove yourself from the clutter of ongoing experience, which I thought was really interesting. That was definitely true for the first two, three years I was away from L.A., in the mid-'90s. But I was out of town during the time that all of this crazy stuff was happening—Proposition 187, big political and social things happening. My missing L.A. at that point was not just about the town, but wanting to be in the middle of all these fights.

Not only that, but I was kind of losing my edge, I thought, being so far removed from everything. Life in an idyllic little northeast town could not be more different from Los Angeles with the hustle and bustle and craziness. On the one hand, it's good to have peace and quiet, and you just start to really calm down—but it gets boring after a while, and you need to be in the middle of things. I think ideally, I would love to have the kind of life where you just spend part of your time away and then part of your time here in L.A. I still go out of town a lot to work, even

if it's just to the mountains.

**LRS:** I wanted to ask you a little more about something we were talking about earlier—realizing that you love L.A. after you leave it, if that was what your experience was like.

**Revoyr:** I did love it while I was here. But leaving it gave me a greater appreciation, because there are things that you take for granted, things that are less obvious than weather, you know, that—I didn't really feel how different the mixture of people was here until I went to a place that was not so diverse. And then suddenly I really missed Los Angeles, and not just the diversity but the kind of unexpected meetings of people, the unexpected crossings, the access that you have to all different kinds of things. I missed that more when I was gone because you know, you take it for granted. I also missed the landscape a lot. I never noticed that Los Angeles had mountains until I left—actually, until I moved to Japan and lived in a mountain community. I fell in love with those mountains and then I came back and discovered that we have mountains here. It just gave me a different perspective. I've been back for eight years, and I still don't take it for granted.

**LRS:** What was it like going to college in New Haven, to Yale, from Culver City? What was the feel of those first few months?

**Revoyr:** Huge culture shock. Not so much geographically, because I've lived in other places, you know, I lived in Wisconsin, I lived in Japan, but being around the people—it wasn't so much the wealth, because growing up in L.A. you definitely see wealth, you see people with fancy cars. But suddenly going to college where people my age had grown up going to prep schools or you know, who were from the Rockefeller family—it was just unreal. That was the biggest adjustment—having spent part of my life in Japan and being raised by a single parent and going to a large urban public school growing up in L.A., I felt—I don't want to say out of place, because there were other people like me, but I was definitely in a new place.

On the flip side, one of the things that was so positive about being there was suddenly realizing that I could play with those folks, that I could be in classes with folks who'd all gone to Deerfield and Exeter and Andover and do just as well as them in school. Any kind of class intimidation that might have been there at the beginning quickly faded once you realized, okay, these people have fancy backgrounds but that

doesn't mean that they have more smarts... and in fact in many cases a lot of those kids were incredibly sheltered and had very little life knowledge.

**LRS:** When did you know that you wanted to write about L.A.?

**Revoyr:** I don't know that it was a conscious choice. I wrote a lot of other things in college but when I started writing the story that became my first book [*The Necessary Hunger*] it was not a conscious decision to write about L.A. I was trying to capture a particular time in life and a particular area, and it was very important to me in both of the first two books to depict parts of the city that other people—that many outsiders overlook or dismiss as 'ghetto'... or think of as negative and dangerous and bad. I wanted to depict those communities as vibrant interesting places that actually have a lot of good qualities. I wanted to show that even though this neighborhood of Inglewood seemed undesirable from the outside, that people loved it and didn't want to leave it, and to just show this city in a different light.

I don't think it was really until I started working on the second book that I realized okay, this appears to be a repeating pattern for me—trying to write about the city. Since then, again I've written about the city in the new book, and I'm sure I will continue to. I think it's a city of endless possibilities. There are so many different things going on here, that any writer—whatever you're interested in, whether it's politics, race, immigration, labor, the environment, pop culture, or the inner city—all of it is not only happening here, but also seems to be kind of coming to a head here all the time. There are an infinite number of stories that could be told.

**LRS:** From the way that you talk about Culver City, it sounds like that a lot of the things you've written about were at least inspired by your experiences growing up there, but you picked Inglewood and Crenshaw to write about. Were there particular reasons why you did that, instead of just writing about Culver City?

**Revoyr:** I think for me, to do something that is strictly autobiographical is limiting. That little bit of distance created a sense of intrigue or mystery that would not have been as strong if I was writing about my actual neighbor or my actual apartment building.

**LRS:** If you're trying to affect how the general public perceives those

places, the timing worked out well because the *The Necessary Hunger* came out only a handful of years after the L.A. riots. Many people have this sort of solidified image of L.A.—of black L.A.—as an area of chaos and violence, so I was thinking that choosing those places does something politically, too.

**Revoyr:** Right. I'm not sure I was conscious of that, but yes, I was very conscious of trying to show the humanly wonderful sides of parts of the city that people dismiss. This is the other thing—actually the area of Inglewood where the book is set is very much a middle-class area. So part of it [choosing Inglewood and Crenshaw] was also showing in both of these cases, yes there are some challenges, but there are also middle-class, affluent neighborhoods out there, and neighborhoods where just because you have a community of color it doesn't mean that there's going to be chaos and strife, that there's also some stability.

**LRS:** So you're not writing about some kind of generalized idea of Inglewood or Crenshaw, but very specific neighborhoods within it.

**Revoyr:** Right. And even in *Southland*, the reference in the prologue about the people who live in the hills, those who have the money but not the heart to leave the neighborhood completely, cross the boulevard and move into the hills—that's Baldwin Hills and View Park. That's a totally different class situation. In fact, a lot of folks who live there don't spend money on the neighborhood and send their kids to private schools or send their kids to Westchester. There's a very big class divide, even in that small area.

**LRS:** One of the things I appreciate about your writing in both books is that you address these issues, but in really subtle ways. You have Raina and Nancy driving through a friend's neighborhood and going silent as they observe that it's a much poorer, harder neighborhood than the one in which they live. When you're talking about what you just said, I remember that scene, but the socioeconomic point wasn't hitting me over the head. You do that really nicely in a lot of the scenes where you talk about interracial tensions. In meeting you and talking to you, your politics are really clear, but they're more subtly presented in your books, and I wonder if that's something you think about consciously.

**Revoyr:** Sure. You don't, if you're an artist—or a novelist, anyway—start with themes. You start with the particulars of a character or a

place or a story. There's a wonderful quote from Flannery O'Connor—who, of course, always wrote about Catholicism, but you wouldn't necessarily know that if you didn't go into the story knowing it. What she said is if you can separate out the theme as a distinct element of a story, then you've got a bad story, because it takes all of the story to express what it is that you're trying to express—you can't take out separate elements of it. To me, the primary duty of being a writer or an artist is the art. If you want to be active politically, you do that too, but that is not the first function of your art. If something is a polemic, or a statement, then you should write a political paper and not an artwork.

Because my work in the real world outside of writing has been so political—it's been very directly related either to politics or to public policy—I know that in my non-writing time I actually am having an impact on the real lives of people. In my writing I'm really concentrating on the work itself. Obviously, my beliefs about the way that people should relate to each other, about disenfranchisement, or about race, come through. But the primary point of *Southland* is not trying to say something about the relationships of Japanese Americans and African Americans; it's trying to tell a story about Frank and Jackie, and the change in Jackie, and the mistakes of Frank, and the neighborhood.

It's false to say that art is removed from politics, and obviously my work can be classified as dealing with politics, but it's not the first thing you're thinking about. Have you seen the movie *Lone Star*?

**LRS:** Yeah.

**Revoyr:** I think *Lone Star* does a really good job of dealing with racial issues in a similar way, but even though obviously it's all about immigration and race and family and Latino-black-white relationships on the border, it is all told through the lens of a love story and mystery. It's very subtle in the ways that it deals with the more political and racial issues.

**LRS:** I marked some of those moments in your books. There's a really poignant and beautifully written passage near the end of *The Necessary Hunger* where Nancy talks about how she suddenly realizes that she's on parallel tracks with a lot of her teammates—

**Revoyr:** But different.

**LRS:** Yeah, and there's a real respect there, talking about how actually you can be friends and sympathize, but there's something about it—that somebody outside those other tracks can never understand. I wondered if that was a metaphor about being Asian or being mixed-race in some sense. But it could also be about so many other things. That's the really cool thing fiction can do that scholarly work doesn't do as much—to hide the writer's hand a little bit.

**Revoyr:** There's not a thesis in fiction. There should never be a thesis in fiction. Like O'Connor said, it should take the whole of whatever artwork you're doing to say what you're trying to say, but you also want your reader to work a little bit. You want it to be an interactive experience where they're coming to realizations, and not just that you're telling them stuff. Who wants to be told stuff? Often I tend to be interested in things that other people perceive as political, but the bottom line is I want to care about the characters and the story.

**LRS:** I'm still thinking about that moment in *The Necessary Hunger*....

**Revoyr:** What that came from was really growing up, like I was saying, with my friends through basketball. I had mixed-race groups of friends, but primarily black and Japanese.

You read about my childhood—my few years in Wisconsin. Because I was the only person of color there and was living with my white grandparents, there was no way for me to articulate what was happening to me. I could not go home and say to my family, I'm getting beat up on the way to school and people are treating me badly or calling me names or whatever. They could sympathize but they could not really understand what that was like. And so when I came to California and suddenly found myself in a community of people of color, even if a lot of them weren't Japanese, they were able to articulate things about race and racial dynamics that I hadn't been able to speak about.

In a way... my lens through which I see racial things was really shaped by my black friends and their families. It wasn't the white people who were talking about race, and I didn't have Japanese people around me all the time. When I was hanging out with my black friends, they and their parents *were* talking about race. There was such great comfort for me in that. Because of that, my identification with my friends was more than it would have been if I had had nourishment or sustenance

from other sources.

My Japanese friends on the basketball team were part of that milieu, too, but their parents certainly were not talking about the internment camps or racism because of the very intense wall of silence around the experiences that they had had when they were kids. They didn't want to talk about race and they didn't want to talk about prejudice, they wanted to quietly fit in and not be noticed anymore.

It took me a couple years or a few years to realize, okay, yes, there is racism towards Asians and there is racism towards blacks, but there's no comparison in the kind of historical intensity of it. There just isn't. Other than perhaps Native Americans, no one has been shit on in this country more than black people. That's kind of what I was getting at [in that passage of the book]. Yes, there are commonalities because we're people of color and shared histories of racism, but the level or degree is very different.

**LRS:** I was wondering if this idea of parallel tracks is a way to acknowledge the structural forces that would tend to put Asians in the US in situations that make it easier for them to get ahead socio-economically.

**Revoyr:** That's very good.

**LRS:** It's only one way to read that... because it's also that some people have these opportunities because of their athletic ability and other people don't, and it's a class thing too, but it does bring up the larger perception that Asians are somehow becoming 'white,' that they're somehow closer to 'whiteness' than other minority groups.

**Revoyr:** I didn't mean it that way at all. It was not about being closer to whiteness, it was about—both tracks are at the same level and running in the same direction, it's just that they are separate tracks, you know. And that is not even so much where the people on the tracks want to be, because clearly Nancy completely identifies with her black friends. She is *not* trying to get to whiteness.

It's more how society sees ethnicity, right? That's what I was commenting on. Even though she wants to be on the same track—on the same train—she thinks she's in the same place, mentally and emotionally as her friends, the reality is the way that she's going to be received or perceived by the world is very different from how someone

else is going to be perceived. That's what I was trying to get at.

**LRS:** So even if you don't want it, you're going to be grouped and perceived in certain ways, and have access to certain opportunities. But it seems like you're also saying that that's not necessarily how it has to go.

**Revoyr:** Now we're getting to a different level of what it means for me personally to be mixed-race and look like I do. I will be in a place and there's no telling how I'm going to be read. I can be read as white, I can be read as Asian, I can be read as Mexican. What's been interesting for me personally is that I must have begun in my adulthood to look less Asian, because I never used to be taken as white, *ever*, until my late twenties, and then suddenly it was happening more and more frequently. The thing I get most is Native American, when people can tell you're something but they can't tell what you are, so they resort to that. But because of my childhood in Wisconsin, to be dealing with intense racism as a mixed-race person, you can go one of two ways. You can identify with the people who are being so racist, or you can take pride in who you are, and you know, tell them to go fuck themselves, and that's clearly the way I went. ❖