

The origins of the California dream

Interview with Louis Warren

by Nicolas Delalande

The “California dream” does not date back to the Gold Rush of the 19th century, but only to the 20th, and is more a matter of criticism than enthusiasm. Louis Warren invites us to put this myth into perspective, and to be wary of the tendency to see California as the laboratory of the United States.

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Books and Ideas: What are the historical origins of the California dream?

Louis Warren: The term of California dream today is widely discussed in popular media, and politicians talk about it with great regularity. There's a lot of concern about the future of the California dream. And generally speaking, most people trace it to the gold rush. Most of the time when people use the term, they assume that it originated with the gold rush, which is the great burst of production of wealth that announces the birth of America and California, California as part of the United States.

But in fact, the term "California dream" did not emerge until the 1960s. It's quite a fascinating thing that California grew and developed from the gold rush until the era of Sputnik and the Apollo project before ever being, saddled with or being given this term, the California dream. And the California dream represents a sense that California is a place apart.

There's a certain amount of California exceptionalism built into it, but it communicates a sense that life can be better in California in some way. Generally speaking, the dream for most people has included a sense that California offers a place to achieve great riches, but also to achieve leisure, to live in suburban comfort, but also to have a life that has about it something that is authentic and sincere and meaningful in ways that perhaps are more difficult or even impossible in other places.

These are the sorts of elements of the California dream that circulate, usually implicitly, in unspoken ways in the conversation that happens around the term. And most of the time when people invoke the term, they're also either warning that the California dream is about to die or lamenting that it's already past, that it is already gone. So it's an ironic term for many people when they invoke it, both to call it into the mind of their interlocutor and of their audience, but also to mourn it at the same time.

Books and Ideas : Did California wealth start with the mid-19th century Gold Rush?

Louis Warren : Most people, when they think of California today, if I were to say the word California to you or to anyone around the world, it would call up in their mind certain associations: wealth and success among them, because California is the largest State in the United States, it has a population bigger than Canada's population, it is the wealthiest state and in many ways, it has been the symbol of American success at least since the late 20th century. And some would say it was a kind of symbol before that. Most people assume that California's growth and development and success traces all the way back to the gold rush, and that it started there, and California began growing and becoming wealthier, and it just kept growing and becoming wealthier right the way long until we got to today.

And that's completely wrong. California had a burst of growth in the gold rush, which begins in 1848, but the gold rush ends in 1852. It's a very brief period. As I always tell my undergraduates, the gold rush lasted as long as you have been in college.

And then it was over. And once it was over, California did not grow that quickly. Now we look back on the growth figures of that period, and you can look back on the percentages of growth. And they look very high, compared to growth today. But when you have hundreds of thousands of people immigrating to California in the early 1851, 1852, in that period, that's very rapid growth, for an American state in the West.

But then it slows dramatically. And although California's growth looks fast to us today, when we look backwards at the time, in the 1860s and the 1870s and in the 1880s, politicians in California were very worried, because the state wasn't growing as fast as other states in the West. Without, an economy, fueled by gold that's easy to extract for everyday people, without a large economy of farming being open to a kind of broad, middle class public of farmers.

What happens in California is a kind of slow growth and near stagnation for a long time: by the 1890s, California is growing slower than every other state in the West, and the only western state that's growing more slowly than California in the 1890s, is Nevada, when Nevada actually lost population in the 1890s. So this is not a period that inspires some kind of vision of California's success, and California as a place where if you go, you'll get rich. And there was no talk about a California dream in the literature or songs or poetry of that period. People do speak about the golden dream, the Golden Dream is a product of the gold rush,

In the 1840s and 50s, people begin to speak of the golden dream of California, and many people assume that this must be their version. An earlier version of the California dream, and that they mean the same thing.

But in fact, the Golden Dream is almost always invoked as a warning: it was a term that described what took hold of people when they imagined they were going to get rich really quickly, and the sort of frenzy they got into, and the way that they would begin mining for gold anywhere and everywhere began taking out a shovel and taking out a pick and digging out rocks in Maine, looking for gold, for example, rather than in California.

It described people's sense of frustration and disappointment. And it was a warning. Talking about California's golden dream was a warning to people, not to buy into this myth of the gold rush in which everyday people went out, supposedly, and could make their fortune with a little scrabbling in the earth. It's a term that warns people that California is a grand deception, rather than California is a place of success, and wealth and contentment.

One way of thinking about the potency of the term "dream" in the 20th century and how it changes from its 19th century meanings into the kinds of meanings we're talking about with the California dream is to think about the American dream and that term and how that is used.

And there are many people today who will tell you the American dream begins with the founding of the nation in 1776, or even before; they'll talk about it as being part of the New England colonies, or they'll root it somewhere in the quite distant past; the historians who've examined the American dream, Sarah Churchwell, for example, in her book on the American Dream, concludes that the first time the term was used was 1895.

And then it really begins to take on meaning for Americans in the early 20th century. And it's only around the 1930s, in a very famous treatment by the novelist James Truslow Adams, that that dream is actually articulated and evoked and sort of defined as a dream of a country in which people can rise to the level of their merits, rather than a country that is simply driven by material greed.

It actually starts as a dream of a country that is anti-consumerist and rooted in a kind of moral sense of self-worth and personal and individual achievement, and it's open to, James Truslow Adams said, men and women of all walks of life: this was the

articulation of the American dream. Well, that term, as I've just described it, is articulated in a book called *The Epic of America* in 1931.

That gives you a sense of how the term dream itself had shifted by the 1930s. And part of the reason that happens is movies; movies begin to shape the sense of the collective past and the collective future, movies that are very much like dreams in that flickering light on a screen, people begin to compare movies to dreams, and in fact, people begin to discuss the Hollywood dream in the 1920s, that dream of coming to California, coming to Hollywood and becoming a movie star that actually dates to the 1920s.

And it's out of that that these ideas of dreaming as, as being something you need to succeed in the modern world begin to arise. And that's where I think much of the meaning of the California dream is rooted.

Books and Ideas: How did Popular Culture Shape the California Dream?

Louis Warren: The term "California dream" begins to appear in popular literature, appears in newspapers and in magazines, beginning in about 1966, and that corresponds precisely with the release of the mamas and the Papas classic pop song *California Dreamin* which was released in late 1960, 5th December 1965, and became a top ten hit in the United States in 1966, and it's impossible to escape the conclusion that it's the song that inspires use of the term, and one of the things that's so powerful about that kind of evidence for me is that, first of all, songs and the lyrics of songs are historical documents.

They are products of their moment. And you can look at what the songwriter is saying and track the popular anxieties and ideas and influences through those lyrics. Just like any other historical document. But pop songs are documents of a particular order. And, as the historian Josh Kun has written in his book *Audiotopia*, pop songs have a way of getting into a space in our imaginations; that's very different from reading some other kind of historical document, you know, if I'm reading documents from the state Tax Board in 1966, that's a particular kind of document. There might be a lot of things in there that tell me about what things were like in 1966. But those words don't get in people's heads and in their collective sense, and the individual senses of themselves like a pop song does. Pop songs are ways of creating in our minds, and I'm borrowing here from the historian again Josh kun, a space that is kind of an alternative

reality where we reimagine ourselves and our relation to the social order itself, and even reimagine the United States and the world as a very different kind of place.

There's a lot going on when people are singing along to pop songs in their cars and in the shower or wherever, they are in that moment, in a kind of audio topic space where it's an alternative reality in their heads, that is generating a new way of seeing the world. That's what's going on with *California Dreamin'*, which is a song that starts out describing a walk through New York City in the icy cold, and walking past a church, and going inside, and the priest in the church being glad that this person has come in, and glad it's cold outside, because that will keep the person in the church.

And so the singer gets down on their knees and pretend to pray. And the whole song is an indictment of this world that is cold and alien and in which we are part of these institutions that are hollow and to which our devotions, at least in the song, are often empty that we're actually clinging to them for because we have no choice.

And the alternative is California, where we can be authentic and real, where, as the song says, you know, I'd be safe and warm if I was in LA. That's the alternative to this freezing cold New York. It's such a powerful soundscape that is evoked in this song. And it's not just the lyrics, it's the music itself and the kind of emotional registers that the music strikes that carry the listener away.

And it has made that song one of the most enduring pop songs. It has been covered hundreds of times by different artists in the years since it was released, and it really does sit at the center of this moment of reimagining California as a place of material comfort.

I'd be safe and warm if I was in LA, and a place that is also tinged with the foreign, and the exotic, and this hint of a different possible future for the United States in the world. And I think in that there are just many, many hints about the beauty of California and about the perspective beauty of a world, if it could be like California.

Books and Ideas: What kind of anxieties does the California dream trigger ?

Louis Warren: The California dream is such a popular concept when it emerges in the late 1960s - and it takes off like wildfire, there are books being published about it by 1968, and it's invoked all over the place. But again, almost always with an ironic sensibility about it. If I'm going to mention the California dream, I am calling up for

you in your mind this vision of California, a beauty and California success and California growth.

And at the same time, we are invoking it ironically, because we all know in this conversation it's about to fail. California is about to collapse. And what they're worried about when they're worried about the collapse of California, is that California has grown so quickly.

In 1900, there are 45 states in the union, and California ranks 21st in population. It's done pretty well since its gold rush origins. It's respectable, but it's not extraordinary. In 1962, California became the nation's largest state. That's when its population officially surpassed the population of New York State. And it becomes the behemoth of the West Coast and of the entire nation.

And it has retained that status since that time. But in the mid 1960s, as this event happened, as California assumes its status as the largest state, there's a huge amount of concern that this state has grown so quickly. The population would double every 20 years. And it had reached a pop. It had gone from a population of 1.5 million in 1900 to 20 million by 1970.

And the fear was: it's going to hit 40 million pretty quickly, and this seems unsustainable. Right. And there's a sense that there's no way, if we think about it abstractly, that one place can continue to grow like this forever. There's a huge amount of suburban build out in California in this period. A gigantic amount of freeway construction.

There are huge numbers of cars, the air pollution crisis, particularly in Los Angeles, but also in the San Francisco Bay, becomes a pressing, urgent concern. So there's a real sense that California is going to hit a limit here somewhere. And that sense creates a widely shared anxiety. Now, if we just make that widely shared anxiety an umbrella, who fits under that umbrella? Will environmentalists fit under that umbrella? People who tend to be wide open to all kinds of racial and cultural diversity can fit under that umbrella because they're very worried about all of the environmental decay that they do see around them, and are protecting California's beauty. They're very concerned about that.

But there's also a place there for people who are out and out racist, because one of the ways this anxiety about California growth is framed is there are too many people coming here, and we need to stop them. The growth needs to stop. And if you ask

people, which people are too many, too many of whom, you get some very different answers.

There's a lot of anxiety about growing migration from Mexico, for example, and from Latin America. There's always anxiety in California. And when I say anxiety about people migrating from Mexico, I'm obviously speaking about anxiety among certain segments of the white population. There's always anxiety, popular anxiety in California about the proximity of Asia and, and the migrations from Asia as a, as a factor and so that you could start to critique California growth and say, oh, it's the end of the California dream, and you'll have a lot of people with very different views of the world buying into that sentence and agreeing with you. Right. If you start to parse what it is they're actually worried about, you'll get a very different sense from those people about what is the actual threat that is and what is the problem that California faces.

The political utility of decrying the death of the California dream is similarly two sided. You can use it to talk, on the one hand, about a state that has been overwhelmed. And this is a conservative line of critique that one often hears that California, the California dream, is dying or dead, because there's been too much immigration. There are too many immigrants. there are too many Democrats. California is a state dominated by the Democratic Party, at least for the last 30 years.

There are too much regulation. This is another one. Overregulation has caused all of the problems California faces. These are ways that conservative writers have used the death of the California dream as a kind of tool for making these other criticisms.

On the other side, people will often say on the left that the California dream is dead or dying because of the gross social inequalities in the state, and that what we need is a state where wealth is more evenly distributed, where growth is more environmentally sustainable. There's a kind of hopefulness in the critiques that come generally more from the political left, of the California dream these days.

And I should say, the term California dream is something that many people associate with a California, again, from the 1960s, when California was a much whiter state than it is today. In the 1960s, California was about 75% white, non-Hispanic, and today, California is a state in which Latinx people constitute about 40% of the population.

It's a state where some, 40% of the population speaks a language other than English at home. It's an enormously vital and vibrant kind of place. There are ways of calling that a disaster and calling that the end of the California dream and their ways of saying, no, that *is* the California dream. All we gotta do is make it work and make it work better for more people who are here. And we're golden, to borrow a California phrase.

Books and Ideas: What's the dark side of the California dream ?

Louis Warren: I think one way to ask yourself about the complexity of California's history and the meaning of that for people in California today is to ask yourself about this idea of the California dream and to say, well, how popular is this idea, anyway? Do people actually believe it? And interestingly, researchers at the University of California have done polling on this question, and I found this fascinating because I had assumed that white Californians would be the ones who were most convinced still, or the biggest believers in the California dream.

And it's fascinating to me that, over half of white, non-Hispanic Californians in the sample that they polled somewhere around 59, 57% or so, said, yes, the California dream still has meaning for me and my family today. Just pretty good numbers. But actually, when they went to Hispanic Latinx families and African-American families and Asian American families and asked them the same questions, the numbers were much higher.

So that among, among Latinx people and among African-American people, well over 60% of the respondents said the California dream absolutely has meaning for me and my family today. Among Asian American people, over 70% of respondents said California dream has meaning for me and my family today. And one of the things to think about is that all of these people of color in California, in our histories of California there is a consciousness in the way we tell the history today about California's exclusionary past, about its violence, which is profound in the founding of California, violence is such a constant and fundamental, not just thread, but kind of foundation for the dispossession and removal and genocide of native peoples. But also the exclusion of many others, of Mexican American people and Latin American people and people from China and Japan. There's a long history of ferocious race relations in California.

And at the same time, there's a history of California as a place where many, many different peoples have made homes and to which many, many different peoples retain a great degree of loyalty and for which they have great affection. There's a profound and widely shared sense of California's beauty: even that means different things to different people, that people think different places in California.

Some places are more appealing than others, and people have different opinions about which is most appealing. But there's just a widely shared sense that California is still a place that many people not only call home, but hope to call home long into the future, and to which, again, there's for which there's a great deal of affection.

How do you capture all that in the histories that you tell of a place? And I think it's key that no place, no person, no time, no period is all one thing or all another. And that was the best of times. It was the worst of times. those kinds of complexities are essential to telling the histories of any place, really.

They're just so striking in California, where the atrocious history is so dark and the history of the benign, the benevolent, the beautiful is so bright. And when you realize they're all in the same place, and many of these things share common roots, the paradoxes are what provide a certain narrative tension for the histories.

Books and Ideas: What is the role of California in the history of American capitalism?

Louis Warren: On the less optimistic side of California's innovations, we could point out, yes, California today remains the wealthiest state. But once you factor in the price of housing for people, it's also, paradoxically, the poorest state. California has a larger proportion of unhoused people than any other state.

These are innovations that are deeply unfortunate. In terms of violence, many people would point to lots of different trends and developments in California history. California's 19th century is particularly violent. And the threat was especially profound for native people in California in the 1850s, 60s, 70s. And today, people would like again to cite Mike Davis, who point out the size of the police departments in places like Los Angeles and the armaments, that those police departments are, not only carry but that the police department possesses.

There are lots of ways of thinking about California violence and California inequality that, again, return us to this idea of California as a place of noir, which we have to keep returning to, always. It's part of, of the job of scholarship to be in those places. And I think, though, that when we look at the United States as a whole, it is always important to remember that calling out California's failures has been a particularly powerful way of calling out the failures of the United States.

Wallace Stegner once said that California was America only more so, by which he meant that US history seemed to be foretold in California history in even more extreme ways. And that one of the ways many of our authors and thinkers and commentators produce commentary on the American condition, for example, is to criticize California because if it's failed in California, if California is failing, what does that mean for the United States?

If California is the place where in so many ways, American history seems to culminate, where the good life has been possessed by so many people at one time, and if things are dark in some way there, if there is some lurking failure or imminent collapse, then that is a way of warning about the United States as a whole.

And it's both: it's very powerful on the one hand; it can also be very deceptive to use one place as a way of critiquing the larger. And it's something we just have to be cautious with to point to where the violence comes from and where it is, and where the failures come from and where they are, at any one time, rather than singling out a state, a place to be the bearer of all of it for the rest of us.

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