

The California Dream

History of a Myth

ABSTRACT In recent years, press and political leaders have lamented the demise of the California Dream, a vaguely defined, popular ideal of California life that is said to have originated in the gold rush and to have energized California's ascent. This essay argues that the emergence of a national ideal of California life can tell us much about changes in American culture, especially since the actual history of the California Dream departs so widely from popular perception. The concept of a "California Dream" did not emerge in the gold rush, but only after The Mamas & The Papas' smash hit "California Dreamin'" in 1965. It served as both a reinscription of the American Dream and a revision of it to incorporate new social values of the Cold War era, including, among others, the importance of leisure, environmental protection, and healthy living. Warnings of the dream's decline have attended it from birth, and yet it remains surprisingly popular across an increasingly diverse California population. The dream signaled the exceptional growth that distinguished California in the twentieth century and has represented a quasi-national aspiration that both hearkens to older American ideals and implicitly critiques them by offering an ostensible alternative. **KEYWORDS** California Dream, American exceptionalism, The Mamas & The Papas, frontier myth, population, environmentalism, youth culture, pop music, suburban growth

Something stalks the California Dream. Or perhaps it has struck, and the dream lies bloodied and broken and already dead.

The California Dream is a perennial resort for writers, politicians and, as the new "California Dream" fragrance from Louis Vuitton reminds us, branding strategists. When deployed as something more than a product label, at least, the dream is a popular idealization of life in California that echoes the American Dream but also revises it, as we shall see. No other state has a dream of its own, and in this sense the California Dream also expresses California's exceptionalism. In contemporary discourse, the dream evokes a shared aspiration or vision that supposedly energized California's ascent from humble gold rush beginnings to global bellwether, and it also serves as

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a reminder that the state of California—the nation’s largest and wealthiest—can also be a state of mind.

Most historians, of course, will be familiar with the leading scholarly treatment of the California Dream in Kevin Starr’s corpus of books, which began in 1973 with *Americans and the California Dream* and proceeded through seven more volumes by 2009. Known collectively as the *Americans and the California Dream* series, the works together explore cultural shifts provoked by California’s emergence as an American place, while tracking the state’s social and cultural development since the gold rush.¹

Journalists and other writers routinely cite Starr, for whom the California Dream was, like the American Dream, profoundly optimistic. But these days, designer perfumes notwithstanding, discussion of the dream is seemingly fixated on its demise. So poor was the dream’s prognosis in 2018 that Gavin Newsom, elected to the governorship of California that year, made its restoration his top priority, declaring “We can and must reanimate the California Dream.” That same year, a group of California public radio stations joined with CALmatters, a nonprofit journalism organization, to initiate “the California Dream Project,” a series “focused on key issues of economic opportunity, quality of life and the future of the ‘California Dream.’”²

In the few years since, that future has vanished, according to the nation’s press, and a whole range of causes is to blame. “The California Dream Is Dying,” proclaims *The Atlantic*, fingering over-regulation as the culprit. Drought and population decline lead Miriam Pawel to announce in *The New York Times* that “California Wakes Up from Its Dream.” “What California Dream?” asks a commentary in the *Los Angeles Times*, decrying the state’s widening income inequality and lack of upward mobility. Similarly, in a discussion of the state’s housing shortage, wildfires, and power blackouts,

1. Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); *Inventing the Dream: California Through the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); *Material Dreams: California Through the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); *The Dream Endures: California Enters the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950–1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); *Coast of Dreams: California on the Edge, 1990–2003* (New York: Alfred A. Knop, 2004).

2. “California for All,” <https://www.gov.ca.gov/>; “California Dream,” <http://www.capradio.org/news/project/2018/california-dream/>; *CalMatters*, <https://calmatters.org/about/>.

the *Washington Post* concludes “The California Dream Is Over.”³ Given all this anguish, it hardly comes as a surprise that politicians other than Newsom have also put the dream on their agenda. Larry Elder became the most successful GOP candidate in California’s 2021 gubernatorial recall election as he assured voters he was “fighting to keep the California Dream alive,” while another, John Cox, promised that the best way to “restore the California dream” was to recall Gavin Newsom.⁴

To be sure, the California Dream is not universally acknowledged or accepted. Across the nation and even in California (if my own, unscientific polling of undergraduate classes is any indication) many people have never heard of it. But for the commentators above and much of their public, news of the dream’s passing raises troubling questions and provokes almost existential desperation. If the California Dream has been with us since the gold rush, and if it is truly dead, what does that say about the Golden State’s future? And indeed, how are we to interpret the past? What does it mean for our understanding of the American West, where California beckoned as the metaphorical (and sometimes material) gold at the end of the rainbow, and more recently as the West’s and the nation’s greatest economic success? If the exceptionalism of the California Dream betokens the future of American exceptionalism, and if the luster has faded from the state that embodies, as Wallace Stegner put it, “America . . . only more so,” what then of the American promise?⁵ If the California Dream has departed the western shore, well, what of the American Dream?

Such foreboding questions underscore the larger pessimism of our era, in which solid majorities of Americans believe the future will be darker than the

3. Conor Friedesdorf, “The California Dream Is Dying,” *The Atlantic*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/07/california-dream-dying/619509/>; Miriam Pawel, “California Wakes Up from Its Dream,” *New York Times*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/09/opinion/california-drought-housing-prices.html>; Joel Kotkin and Marshall Toplansky, “What California Dream?,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2020, p. A14, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-07-12/income-inequality-california-poverty-housing>; Stacy Torres, “The California Dream Is Over. What Comes Next?,” *Washington Post*, Oct. 10, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-california-dream-is-over-what-comes-next/2019/10/10/3ea8b288-cb8e-11e9-9c6d-436a0df4f31d_story.html.

4. Ad paid for by Elder for Governor 2021; John Cox, “Opinion: I Want to Recall and Replace Gov. Gavin Newsom Because I Won’t Make Problems Worse Like He Does,” *San Diego Union Tribune*, Feb. 12, 2021 at <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/opinion/commentary/story/2021-02-12/opinion-john-cox-california-governor-candidate-newsom-recall>.

5. Wallace Stegner, “California: The Experimental Society,” *Saturday Review*, September 23, 1967, 28.

past.⁶ But the question of the California Dream might become a little clearer, its condition somewhat less ominous, if we explore its surprising history.

This essay argues that the origins and meaning of the California Dream have been widely misunderstood. It emerged much later than commonly thought, not in the tumultuous, violent gold rush but only in the late 1960s, after The Mamas & The Papas' 1965 hit "California Dreamin'." From then until now, although the meaning of the dream has always been contested, extolling it has been a way to assert California's exceptional attractions and wealth. In its early days, commentators and artists could deploy the dream to reinscribe values associated with its antecedent national ideal, the American Dream. But often, conjuring the California Dream was also a way to revise the American Dream. As the California Dream became a quasi-national ambition for richer, more satisfying living informed by values such as environmental protection, leisure, and healthy living, it implicitly questioned the direction of American society and the limitations of the American Dream in the Cold War era.⁷

And yet the newborn California Dream was never strong. More often than not, those who invoked the dream also decried threats to it, especially the unprecedented economic and demographic growth that seemed proof of the state's exceptionalism but also threatened the good living and natural beauty that were central to California's appeal. In its early days, the term "California Dream" was, in fact, more commonly used as ironic shorthand than celebratory rhetoric. From its beginning, it served as a sardonic commentary on the costs of the state's economic success, and the context of the dream has always included widespread anticipation of its failure. The many eulogies for the California Dream, then, actually represent a long-established trope, forged in an era when excessive growth seemed a looming danger to the California good life.

6. Kim Parker, Rich Morin, and Juliana Menasce Horowitz, "Looking to the Future, Public Sees America in Decline on Many Fronts," *Pew Research Center: Social and Demographic Trends*, March 21, 2019, at <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/03/21/public-sees-an-america-in-decline-on-many-fronts/>.

7. Out of the immense literature on the American Dream, the following have been particularly influential in shaping my understanding: John Tipple, *Crisis of the American Dream: A History of American Social Thought 1920–1940* (New York: Pegasus, 1968); Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012); Calvin Jillson, *The American Dream: In History, Politics, and Fiction* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016); Sarah Churchwell, *Behold America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

Some will question the relevance of the California Dream as a scholarly subject. But for historians, a cultural myth of the order of the dream should represent a call to action. The search for origins and meaning of popular myths and beliefs like the Lost Cause, the frontier myth, the American Dream and others has inspired some of the most enduring scholarship in our field.⁸ But when it comes to the California Dream, professional historians have largely deferred to Starr.

It may be that our reticence comes from the dream's resemblance to a booster fantasy, a real estate promotion, perhaps—or a designer fragrance. An ideal that “was primarily lived out by white families,” in the words of a recent postmortem, perhaps the dream suggests mostly Southern California beaches peopled with white bodies at leisure (and non-white people laboring to ensure their comfort) and seemingly obscures more relevant analyses of the state's vibrant, multi-racial society and its contentious development.⁹

But the meaning of the California Dream has ever been plural. To be sure, whiteness was key to some formulations of the dream, just as racial oppression, including genocide of Native Californians, was foundational to the modern state. Through most of the twentieth century, California residents were mostly white. In 1970, white non-Latinos accounted for 76 percent of the state's population. But by 2000, whites had become only a plurality, and California became the first large state to become “majority minority.” In 2014 the white plurality was succeeded by a new plurality of Latinos. Today, California is home to 25 percent of the nation's immigrants and 20 percent of its peoples of color.¹⁰

For people of widely varying political persuasions, the rhetoric of the California Dream has provided a powerful tool for commenting on these changes, sometimes with regret. Mourning “the death of the California

8. See for example Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, eds., *The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988); Sarah Churchwell, *Behold America: A History of America First and the American Dream* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

9. Matt Levin and John Osborn D'Agostino, “Digging into the Data,” <https://projects.calmatters.org/2018/digging-data-attainable-california-dream-today/>.

10. “Majority Minority” in Ruy Teixeira, William H. Frey, Robert Griffin, *States of Change: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1974–2060* (American Enterprise Institute, Brookings Institution, Center for American Progress: Feb., 2015), 3, at <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/SOC-report1.pdf>. For 2014 Latino plurality, see Hans Johnson, Eric McGhee, and Marisol Cuellar Mejia, “California Population,” *PPIC Fact Sheet* (Public Policy Institute of California, Jan., 2022), at <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-population/>.

Dream” can be a profoundly conservative gesture if the dream expresses, as it does for some, a longing for a whiter, less diverse California, or one with fewer Democrats.¹¹

And yet, whatever the currency of this unfortunate racial ideal, a very different California Dream has retained persistent popularity among non-white commentators and artists. In recent years, policy analysts and journalists (including, for example, staff at the above-mentioned CALmatters) have frequently deployed the rhetoric of an endangered California Dream to denounce economic inequality, outsize poverty, and environmental injustice afflicting the state’s majority peoples of color. Reaching further back, investment in the dream by non-white artists has been longstanding, and from the dream’s earliest days, Black and Latino writers and musicians made their own claims to it. The public seems to have followed. Recent polling suggests the notion of the California Dream remains not only popular among all Californians, but especially so among the non-white majority. In one recent survey, 59 percent of white non-Hispanic respondents agreed with the sentence “The ‘California Dream’ still works for people like me and my family.” But about 65 percent of African Americans and 68 percent of Latinos also agreed, as did 72 percent of Asian Americans.¹² Clearly, whatever the California Dream represents, it has a hold on a wide range of contemporary Californians.

As a ubiquitous cultural touchstone, the California Dream also has political implications; many of the laments cited above also call for political remedies, and as we have seen, diametrically opposed politicians claim to stand in its defense. All this makes it more imperative that historians explain it. Such work should not be left to the popular press alone. Discussions in contemporary media usually avoid what, exactly, the California Dream comprises. Governor Newsom defines it in much the same way others have described the American Dream, as a faith in upward mobility, “the idea that every person can achieve a better life, regardless of where they start out.”¹³

11. See for example Victor Davis Hanson, “California Dreamin’,” *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, Nov. 14, 2019, <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2019/nov/14/victor-davis-hanson-california-dreamin-/>, and Michael Reagan, “California Dream Is Dying,” *Bemidji Pioneer* (Minn.), May 5, 2012, <https://www.bemidjipioneer.com/opinion/259307-california-dream-dying>.

12. “Survey: Majority of Californians Still Believe the State Is ‘Golden’,” *UC San Diego Newsletter*, July 7, 2021, <https://ucsdnews.ucsd.edu/pressrelease/uc-san-diego-survey-majority-of-californians-still-believe-the-state-is-golden>; see especially <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/sites/default/files/uc-san-diego-california-exodus-report.pdf>, 10.

13. “Office of Governor Gavin Newsom,” <https://www.gov.ca.gov/>.

Others do not even bother to describe it. And apart from vague gestures in the direction of the gold rush, few ask when the dream originated, how its meanings have differed for different people, and how they have changed over time.

In seeking answers to these and related questions, a few reflections on the general contours of the dream and of attributes commonly ascribed to it will be more useful than a strict definition. Seemingly everyone agrees that the California Dream is a myth of better living in California, and it expresses faith in the state's continuing economic success. As a cultural myth of California, it implies a certain history of the place, in which those eager prospectors who plucked nuggets from the rushing waters also retrieved the dream itself; the dream is universally assumed to have begun with the promise of instant riches in the late 1840s. However, while upward mobility and material wealth (which featured in the gold rush) are central to the dream, laboring in the earth (as in the gold rush) is not. In the California Dream, riches come with personal freedom and individual contentment, especially leisure (enter Louis Vuitton). To listen to debates about the dream today is to learn how much it evokes Southern California's beaches and sun, less San Francisco's summer fog and cold (to say nothing of the muddy, pestilential gold fields). In the dream's warmth, the ideal is luxuriating, not laboring.

Insofar as the California Dream burnished leisure and California living into a national ideal, the story of how that ideal emerged can tell us a great deal about changes in twentieth-century American culture. The myth of a leisured past connects us to a key aspect of California's real history, one that provides us a hint about when the dream, or at least its leisurely aspect, might have originated, and how its development can help us see broader changes in national ideals. Tourist economies took shape in many American places, but it was early twentieth-century Southern California that first presented leisure "as a permanent way of life," in the words of historian Lawrence Culver.¹⁴ Today's California Dream reflects a larger cultural shift away from labor, which was the dominant value in U.S. culture in the nineteenth century, to leisure, which became the primary marker of fulfillment, success, and self-improvement in the twentieth century.¹⁵

14. Lawrence Culver, *The Frontier of Leisure: Southern California and the Shaping of Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3; Alison Rose Jefferson, *Living the California Dream: African American Leisure Sites During the Jim Crow Era* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 19–20.

15. Jefferson, *Living the California Dream*, 19–20.

Believers flock to the dream in part because it echoes popular narratives of America's technological progress and westward expansion. The technological myth suggests grand things foretold in the scraping of gravel from a miner's pan, as a remote wilderness outpost springs into an Information Age citadel and the world's fifth-largest economy. Entwined with this story is the mythology of the westward movement which, at least in the parlance of the dream, culminated in California. The fabulous success of the big state on the West Coast implies to some that America's westward expansion paid off, that whatever went wrong, and whatever the stumbles, failures, and crimes Americans committed along the way, they have for redemption at least this golden shore, with its promise (or dream) of wealth and leisure and emotional fulfillment for the multitudes.

With all of these observations as preface, we can pursue some very straightforward historical questions. To begin, how much did any shared sense of a California Dream actually accompany or inspire California's growth? And if Americans have shared a myth of the California good life, for how long, exactly, have they done so?

Readers who turn to Starr's rightly acclaimed work perhaps will be surprised to find no answers to these queries. With good reason, Starr remains one of the most widely admired of California historians, and his influence is undeniable. His narrative histories have shaped the thinking of many scholars, who have employed the term "California Dream" in their own work, and he has had a rare impact on the broader culture. (His history of World War II California, *Embattled Dreams*, inspired a symphony by the composer John Adams.)¹⁶ But in none of the eight volumes of his Americans and the California Dream series does Starr establish when anyone first imagined something called the "California Dream"—or, for that matter, if they ever did. He asserts the dream's significance without ever proving that contemporaries used the term. An unfortunate result of Starr's work has been nostalgia for a widely shared

16. John Adams, "Works—City Noir," at <https://www.earbox.com/city-noir/> (accessed May 29, 2021). See for example Jefferson, *Living the California Dream*; Glenna Matthews, *Silicon Valley, Women, and the California Dream: Gender, Class, and Opportunity in the Twentieth Century* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002); Char Miller, *Not So Golden State: Sustainability vs. the California Dream* (San Antonio, Tex.: Trinity University Press, 2016); Paul J. P. Sandul, *California Dreaming: Boosterism, Memory, and Rural Suburbs in the Golden State* (Morgantown: University of West Virginia Press, 2015); David Carle, *Water and the California Dream: Choices for a New Millennium* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2003); Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, "California Dreaming: Proposition 187 and the Cultural Psychology of Racial and Ethnic Exclusion," *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (June 1996): 151–67.

California Dream that supposedly existed as a kind of popular belief from the state's earliest days, but without any proof that it did.

To be sure, almost all professional historians of California challenge Starr's sunnier interpretations, seeking instead the state's dark heart, its seamy underside and its many failings and exclusions, perhaps as counterpoint to the dream's optimism.¹⁷ Such work is necessary and important, but so far it has evaded a central question: has the California Dream ever existed as a widely shared ideal, and if so, when did it begin? Indeed, what is the history of the California Dream? When did the term first come into use, how has it been deployed, and how has its meaning changed over time?

IN SEARCH OF THE DREAM

The technologies of optical character recognition and online search engines provide some surprising indications of how youthful the dream actually is. Despite its supposed origins in the gold rush, a digital search of books scanned by Google reveals no reference to the term "California Dream" (or "dream") until the twentieth century, and that mostly in the last sixty years. The results of the search are expressed in the Ngram shown in Figure 1.

Of course, as an historical tool, the Google Ngram has many limitations. The dataset includes scans of 8 million books (only about 6 percent of all books published). It does not include newspapers. In choosing which books to scan, Google has favored scientific publications, so that the Ngram might undercount non-scientific phrases or terms—like "California Dream."¹⁸ Finally, the Ngram cannot reliably tell us the popularity of the term. Google scans one of each book. The database cannot tell us which books were more popular with readers, or sold more copies, or whether one term or another in any given text was more current with readers.¹⁹

17. There are too many works to cite, but a small sample would include Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Verso, 1991), Kelly Lytle Hernández, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771–1965* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina, 2017); Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Richard White and Jesse Amble White, *California Exposures: Envisioning Myth and History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2020).

18. James Somers, "Torching the Modern Day Library of Alexandria," *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2017, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/the-tragedy-of-google-books/523320/>.

19. Eitan Adam Pechenick, Christopher M. Danforth, Peter Sheridan Dodds, "Characterizing the Google Books Corpus: Strong Limits to Inference of Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Evolution,"

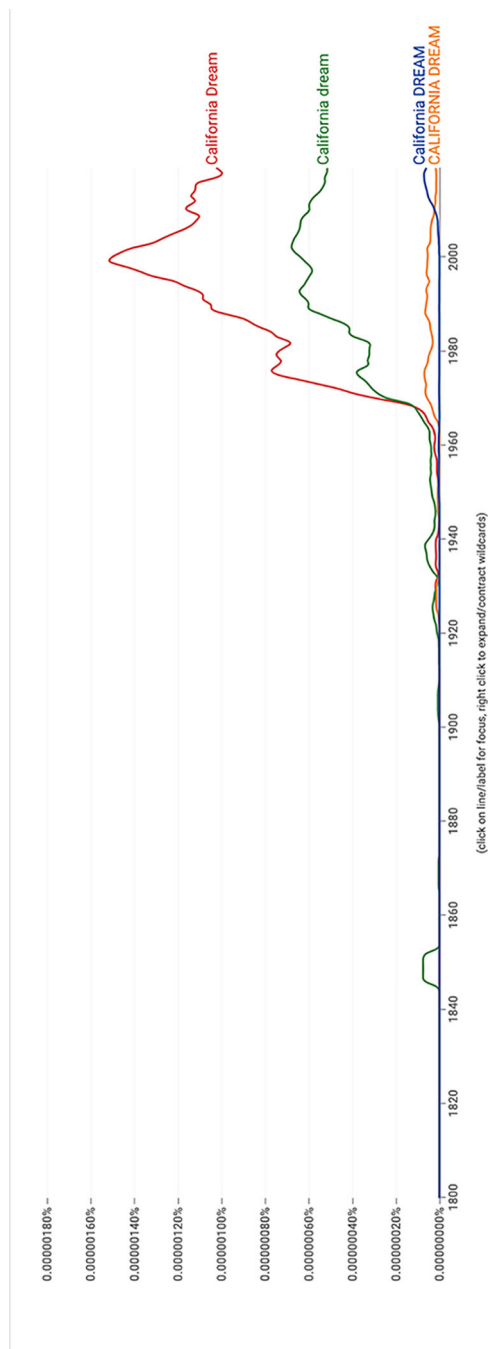


FIGURE 1. The term “California Dream” has appeared mostly in the last sixty years. *Source:* Google Ngram, “California Dream” (case insensitive) on November 12, 2021, https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=California+Dream&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&case_insensitive=true.

However, the absence of a term from the dataset would suggest it was not widely used, or not used at all. This seems to have been the case with “California Dream” before the twentieth century. Although small spikes in the graph occur as early as the 1840s, close examination of the sources referenced by the Ngram show these to be “false positives,” when the program mistakenly locates a reference to something other than the California Dream.

Additional research, including an extensive online search of databases of magazines from the 1850s onward, as well as the writings of Hubert Howe Bancroft, Josiah Royce, and other period authors, combined with digital research in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Sacramento Bee*, and the *New York Times* supports these conclusions. For well more than a century after statehood, none of the multitudes who came to California seem to have thought of their hopes and ambitions as being invested in a larger “California Dream.” Prior to the mid-1960s, no migrant appears to have used the term or anything like it.

To be sure, from 1848 onward, dreams and California were often connected, but usually in unhappy ways. The primary example was the state’s supposed “golden dream.” Unlike “California Dream,” the term “golden dream” appears often in literature and media of the gold rush era. In a recent interpretation, historian H.W. Brands sidesteps the California Dream to argue that the state’s “golden dream” of “instant wealth, won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck” marked the birth of what he calls “a new American Dream.” To Brands, California’s new ethic of fast money stood in sharp contrast to more conventional, agrarian ambitions of gradually accumulated riches.²⁰

But the truth is more complicated. A close reading of contemporary texts reveals the term “golden dream” often signified not just any dream of fast wealth, but an unrealistic and unrealizable dream.²¹ Contemporaries frequently deployed the term as a warning, portraying the golden dream less

PLOS-One, Oct. 7, 2015, at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0137041>; Nadja Younes and Ulf-Dietrich Reips, “Guidelines for Improving the Reliability of Google Ngram Studies: Evidence from Religious Terms,” *PLOS-One*, March 22, 2019, at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0213554>.

20. H.W. Brands, *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream* (New York: Random House, 2002), 442. See also Timothy A. Hodson, “California,” in Donald P. Haider-Markel, ed., *Political Encyclopedia of States and Regions* (SAGE Publications, 2008), 379–80.

21. See for example William Shaw, *Golden Dreams and Waking Realities; Being the Adventures of a Gold-Seeker in California and the Pacific Islands* (London: Smith, Elder, 1851); Hubert Howe Bancroft, *California Inter Pocula* (San Francisco: The History Company, 1888) 356, 385; “The Next Mining ‘Sensation,’” *Mining and Scientific Press*, Nov. 8, 1862, 6.

as a vision of the future than as a figment of the imagination and a path to frustration, or worse. They invoked it as a critique of those deluded, eastern readers of California news who, longing for rich strikes of their own, scrambled vainly for gold in Maine. Others used it to discuss Californians driven mad by “the over anxiety to become rich, and the anticipation of suddenly accumulating wealth.” Just as often, the term refers to a dream that has vanished. By the latter 1850s, the phrase “the golden dream is over” was such a cliché that it was often printed in quotation marks.²² In other words California’s “golden dream” was illusory and deceptive, a reason to ignore the state’s boosters and stay away.

To historians of language, this will not be surprising. Today, “dreaming” in the sense of aspiring to a goal—“to have a dream” of a grand future—can be a virtue. But in the nineteenth century, California’s association with dreams meant it was dangerous, and indeed this was in keeping with most contemporary thinking about dreams. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, through the nineteenth century the word “dream” most often referred to “images, thoughts, and emotions, often with a story-like quality, generated by mental activity during sleep.” Dreams might be prophetic or supernatural, and these kinds of dreams might happen even when awake. But traditionally, dreams were understood as deceptions. At best, they were illusions; at worst, delusions. In a word, they were false.²³

“Dream” might also be associated with an ambition, but until relatively recently to “dream” in this sense was considered vain or foolish. Thus, to dream as Californians might—of sudden wealth—was to play the fool. So it is in one of the few places that the Google Ngram locates the actual use of the term “California dream” in the era of the gold rush: an 1849 memorial from the New York State Agricultural Society extolling the promise of scientific farming. The potential bounty from rationalizing agriculture in the United States, claimed the society, was “no theoretical speculation,” but a goal “surpassing in richness and magnitude the wildest fancies of a California

22. “Gold Mines in Maine,” *Daily Alta California*, 30 July, 1851 at <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DAC18510730.2.4&srpos=7&e=-----en-20-DAC-1-txt-txIN-%22golden+dream%22-----1>; “Letter from Sacramento,” *Daily Alta California*, Jan. 28, 1857, at <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DAC18570128.2.9&srpos=16&e=-----en-20-DAC-1-txt-txIN-%22golden+dream%22-----1>; see also “Tom Orton,” *Daily Alta California*, Jan. 3, 1881, at <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DAC18810103.2.59&srpos=12&e=-----en-20-DAC-1-txt-txIN-%22golden+dream%22-----1>

23. “dream, n.2 and adj.”. OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57600?rskey=eLk9I5&result=2> (accessed June 19, 2021).

dream.” The reprinting of this memorial in other publications apparently accounts for the spike in the Ngram in the 1840s, conveying a key lesson: in the era of the gold rush, a California dream was a foolish pursuit.²⁴

This idea of dreams as unreliable and potentially dangerous persisted throughout the nineteenth century.²⁵ There were ways in which certain aspects of California might be compared to dreams, as in weird and grand—and ephemeral. Gold rush contemporaries remarked on any number of “dreamlike” qualities of California, such as the rapid growth of San Francisco after 1848, which rendered memories of the serene bay and its barren hills “aught but a dream.”²⁶ Bancroft described in 1888 how, as the gold rush receded in memory, “pioneers began to look back upon it as a dream.” Others used the term to describe how features of the state approached ideal types. Thus, in 1895, Charles F. Lummis, the great California promoter, once referred to the glorious California weather and landscape as “California’s dream.”²⁷ In the 1910s, another journalist might acknowledge the tourist attractions of San Diego and other picturesque spots as “California dream

24. *Transactions of the New York State Agricultural Society*, Vol. VIII, 1848 (Albany: Weed, Parson, and Co., 1849), 185, online at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Proceedings_of_the_Annual_Meeting/FchFAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22california+dream%22&pg=PA185&printsec=frontcover, reprinted in Assembly of the State of New York, *Documents of the Assembly of the State of New York*, 72d Session, 1849, Vol. 4, Issue 200 (Albany: Weed, Parson, and Co., 1849), 185, at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Documents_of_the_Assembly_of_the_State_o/1FUbaQAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22california+dream%22&pg=PA185&printsec=frontcover, and *Miscellaneous Documents Printed by Order of the Senate of the United States*, Dec. 2, 1848, Vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Tippin and Streeper, 1849), online at https://www.google.com/books/edition/United_States_Congressional_Serial_Set/wHRHAQAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22california+dream%22&pg=RA9-PA3&printsec=frontcover.

25. See for example Special to The New York Times, “James Owens’s Dream and Its Fulfillment: Planned a Home of His Own for Wife and Children to Be a Christmas Surprise Worked Himself to Death Trying to Finish It—Dying, Told the Story of His Defeated Hopes,” *New York Times* (1857–1922), Dec 26, 1905, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/james-owenss-dream-fulfillment/docview/96519338/se-2?accountid=14505>.

26. Frank Soule, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (San Francisco: D. Appleton, 1855), 507, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Annals_of_San_Francisco/VMYUAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=dream; as another journalist remarked on the growth of San Francisco from barren hills to a center of world commerce, “Verily, has a change come o’er the spirit of California’s dream.” “The Valley of Dry Bones,” *Daily Alta California*, Feb. 21, 1851, California Digital Newspaper Collection, UC Riverside Center for Bibliographical Studies and Research, online at <https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&d=DAC18510221&e=-----en-20-DAC-1-txt-txIN-%22California+dream%22-----1>;

27. Charles F. Lummis, “Down the West Coast,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 1895 (90): 391.

places.”²⁸ In 1921, a consortium of women’s organizations presented a historical pageant at Yosemite called “California, the land of Dreams.”²⁹

Conspicuously absent was any writer who used “dream” in the sense of today’s California Dream, to describe a national or quasi-national aspiration, or in the parlance of the *OED* as “a way of life considered to be ideal” by a nation or group. Such uses of the word began appearing about the time the twentieth century dawned, and customarily their reference point was not California but the United States itself, as in “the American dream,” a term that historian Sarah Churchwell has dated to 1895. As with the later California Dream, few went to any lengths to detail the meaning or, rather, meanings of the American Dream, which were plural and shifted over time. Through the early decades of the twentieth century, the term often implied a set of humanistic values in opposition to American commercialism. The first extended meditation on it did not appear until 1931, when historian James Truslow Adams defined “the American dream” as an ethos surpassing acquisitiveness, “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or his achievement.” Thereafter, the American Dream became common currency in political writing, “primarily to summon principles of liberal democracy and the dreams of the founders,” writes Churchwell.³⁰

And the California Dream? Although the curve of the Google Ngram ticks upward now and again in the 1860s, 1920s, and again in the 1930s, these are instances in which the program’s optical character recognition turns up the words “California” and “dream” whenever they appear side by side, even when separated by punctuation. So, when an 1867 publication lists sequentially the titles of two plays—*Cockneys in California*, and *Dream of Life*—the technology reads it as a single reference to the California Dream. Similarly, the program lists a 1941 publication in which the author hypothesizes that he may, “while asleep in my home in California, dream that I am being chased by an angry bear in the Maine woods.”³¹

28. “Mr. Scripps of San Diego,” *Railway and Marine News*, 1916 (14), 9.

29. “Pageant Drama Opens Meeting of Club Women,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 26, 1921, <https://search.proquest.com/hnpsfchronicle/docview/574955118/E182E50F2542479APQ/7?accountid=14505>

30. Churchwell, *Behold America*, 1–36, 171–72, 199; “dream: n.2 and adj.,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/57600>; James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America* (1931: rpt. Oxford, UK: Transaction Publishers, 2017), 404.

31. Joseph N. Ireland, *Records of the New York Stage* (New York: T. H. Morrell, 1867), II: 535, online at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Records_of_the_New_York_Stage/

A close review of the examples turned up by the Google scan, as well as the aforementioned search through major newspapers and digitized books and magazines, confirms no use of “California Dream” in today’s sense of the term until the 1960s. At that point, the curve of the Ngram bolts sharply upward.

We shall turn to the late twentieth-century arrival of the California Dream, and the reasons for it, in due course. But first, the dream’s late arrival raises the question of why it, or something like it, did not arise sooner. If California was such a success story from 1848 onwards, why did it take so long for its promise to be articulated as the California Dream?

The truth is that while the gold rush and California’s mild winters both made the place distinctive in the minds of many, in the nineteenth century it simply could not attract settlers like other states did, and except for a few years after 1848, its growth was not exceptional in the era. The settler population expanded over 1,300 percent in the first two years after the United States seized California from Mexico, from 7,000 in 1848 to 92,000 in 1850.³² But the gold rush ended after about 1852, when the easier finds were exhausted. Prospective farmers quickly learned that most of the state’s fertile land was already in private hands in the form of Spanish or Mexican land grants that had been consolidated by wealthy absentees, leaving little public domain for smallholders to claim. And the mild weather that seemed like a marvel, with its dry summers and wet winters, was exactly the opposite of what farmers needed: a rainless summer might seem like paradise to most people today, but in a time when most people still worked farms, it meant that crops could not grow in the only growing season. For the most part, only those with money to buy land and pay for irrigation systems could afford to farm in California.³³

354XAAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=%22california+dream%22&pg=PA535&printsec=frontcover; Theodore Meyer Green, *Moral, Aesthetic, and Religious Insight* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1957), 26, at https://www.google.com/books/edition/Moral_Aesthetic_and_Religious_Insight/nIcYAAAAIAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=California%20dream.

32. For 1850–60 growth, see https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/california_res_pop-jan2018.pdf; for more recent figures, James P. Allen and Eugene Turner, “Patterns of Population Change in California, 2000–2010,” *The California Geographer* 51 (2011): 43–69, http://scholarworks.csun.edu/bitstream/handle/10211.2/1893/CAgeographer2011_p43-69.pdf?sequence=3; The growth of the California population in 2010–19 was 7.3 percent. Public Policy Institute of California, “Just the Facts—California Population,” at <https://www.ppic.org/publication/californias-population/#::text=According%20to%20estimates%20by%20the,net%20inflow%20of%201.5%20million>.

33. Paul Wallace Gates, *Land and Law in California: Essays on Land Policies* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991); Pisani, “Land Monopoly in Nineteenth-Century California,” 15–37.

So migration slowed after the early 1850s, and California's rate of settlement, while it might look impressive today, was not even unusual for a western state. This was especially the case insofar as much of today's Midwest was still "West" in the 1850s, and new states had rates of growth that exceeded even California's early years. Between 1850 and 1860, California grew around 310 percent. Ohio (which achieved statehood in 1803), Illinois (1818), and Iowa (1846) all had growth rates of 350–400 percent in their first decade. Wisconsin grew by nearly 900 percent between 1840 and 1850 (with statehood arriving in 1848), and Minnesota grew 2,730 percent between 1850 and 1860 (with statehood arriving in 1858). By 1900, all these states had more residents than California; even Iowa's population was 50 percent larger.³⁴

Clearly, no California Dream enraptured the majority of westward emigrants after the early 1850s, and as the century wore on, California's attractions dimmed. One demographic researcher has concluded that in the 1880s, those states that drew migrants at higher rates than California included Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Oregon, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, Washington, and Wyoming, as well as Arizona and Dakota territories. In the 1890s, California grew more slowly than any other western state except Nevada (which actually lost population).³⁵ If growth captured the national imagination and defined success, then by 1900 Minnesota or Wisconsin would more approximate that ideal than California, which lagged, at least by western standards. In 1955, demographer Warren S. Thompson concluded that "there was nothing particularly distinctive" about California's rate of growth between 1850 and 1900.³⁶

Placing California's nineteenth-century growth in context makes it look much less exceptional, but is not meant to imply that Americans did not regard California as a special place, or that the gold rush was not important. The state's mild winter climate and its natural beauty drew many tourists,

34. Warren S. Thompson, *Growth and Changes in California's Population* (Los Angeles: The Haynes Foundation, 1955), 11; U.S. Census Bureau, *Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1900* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1901) Vol. 1, Pt. 1, xviii, at <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p2.pdf>; <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Article/CS1816>.

35. Lyman Stone, "A Brief History of California Migration," *Medium*, Feb. 23, 2016, available at <https://medium.com/migration-issues/a-brief-history-of-californian-migration-7fe7653ca0d4>; Donald J. Pisani, "Land Monopoly in Nineteenth-Century California," *Agricultural History* 65, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 25; W. Turrentine Jackson and Donald J. Pisani, "The Evolution of California State Water Planning 1850–1928" (UC Davis California Water Resources Center, 1983), 2, at <https://escholarship.org/content/qt0s84j2ww/qt0s84j2ww.pdf>.

36. Thompson, *Growth and Changes*, 12.

even if relatively few stayed on. The burst of gold production on the Pacific Coast kicked off new economic developments in California and a surge in population growth, so that even with comparatively slow growth for the rest of the century, in 1900, the state was still one of the largest west of the Mississippi. It had the same size population as Kansas, and in the West, only Texas was larger.³⁷

But the fact remains that after the early 1850s, emigration to California was relatively slow. In these circumstances, the circulation of some idealized vision of the place would have been strange, indeed. If anything, the darker meaning of California's "golden dream," as a vision that was illusory and deceptive, seemed to endure. By 1900, when there were forty-five states in the union, California ranked twenty-first in population—almost right in the middle.³⁸ This was a respectable showing for a place that joined the union only fifty years before. But it was hardly exceptional, and apparently it did not inspire the birth of any California Dream.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: GROWTH UNBOUND

Then, seemingly overnight, something changed. Migration leapt forward at the turn of the twentieth century, and it surged for decades after. In the short span of six decades, California went from being the twenty-first largest state to the first.

Widespread talk of the California Dream began only after California achieved its leading place among the states. But in the run-up to that moment, the words "California" and "dream" did come into new relations that presaged today's understanding of the term. As the population expanded from about 1.5 million in 1900 to 5.7 million in 1930, Southern California saw the fastest growth. Movies like Charlie Chaplin's 1936 *Modern Times* abetted the vast promotional push of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce (which made the city the best-advertised metropolis in the world) in advancing a vision of leisured bungalow villages amidst the orange groves.³⁹

37. U.S. Census Office, *Twelfth Census of the United States: Population, Pt. I* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Office, 1901), xviii, at <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1900/volume-1/volume-1-p5.pdf>.

38. Frank Hobbs and Nicole Stoops, U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000 Special Reports, Series CENSR-4, *Demographic Trends in the 20th Century* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), 35, available at <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED477270>.

39. Tom Zimmerman, *Paradise Promoted: The Booster Campaign That Created Los Angeles 1870–1930* (Los Angeles: Angel City Press, 2008).

During this period, the word “dream” developed a special attachment to movies. Movies, dreamlike in their glimmering light and movement, were succeeding novels as what Henry Nash Smith called “the objectified mass dream” of the nation.⁴⁰ References to newcomers realizing their “Hollywood dream” began to appear not long after the birth of the film industry in the 1910s, and by 1950, writers would refer to Hollywood as “the dream factory.”⁴¹

But movies were also products for sale in the market, and the phrase “California Dream” also emerged in the first half of the twentieth century as a brand name for other commodities that had become symbolic of California. In these examples, the word “dream” referred to the way these products corresponded to buyers’ ideals, and perhaps ideals of California life—if those ideals were limited to crunchy, sweet foods, like nuts and fruit. In 1927, a dry goods company in Los Angeles advertised a sale on Christmas candy, the “California Dream Pack” (nut-stuffed figs, glacé pineapple, and cherries).⁴² By the following year, one packing company had trademarked a “California Dream” brand of Valencia oranges.⁴³

For all their hardship, the Great Depression years saw continuing growth in California, with the state’s population expanding by 20 percent, to over 6 million, far exceeding the growth of most other states.⁴⁴ All the more surprising, then, that the California Dream did not make its appearance, even in the writings of John Steinbeck. Steinbeck thought a great deal about the hopes of working people for better lives, and particularly of the dream of freehold farms and landed independence. In his view, such dreams usually failed, with devastating consequences, as they do for the Joads in *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Lennie and George in *Of Mice and Men* (1937). Steinbeck used California to meditate on the failure of the American promise, but

40. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 100–101.

41. Orren M. Donaldson, “Hollywood Benefactor,” *Holly Leaves* (Hollywood, Cal.), Oct. 20, 1922, 3; Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1950).

42. “Christmas Candy Section,” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 23, 1927, p. A5, Proquest Historical Newspapers, <https://search.proquest.com/hnplatimes/docview/162039098/A041EDF11A614E48PQ/40?accountid=14505>.

43. Orange crate label at <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p9539coll1/id/23805/>; “Daily Eastern Citrus Markets,” *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 7, 1938, Proquest Historical Newspapers, p. 14; <https://search.proquest.com/hnplatimes/docview/164899536/A041EDF11A614E48PQ/17?accountid=14505>.

44. https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/california_res_pop-jan2018.pdf.

nowhere in his voluminous writings did he pause to consider the 1930s as a failure of some special California Dream.

As the crisis of the Great Depression gave way to the emergency of World War II, the California boom advanced. Vast federal war expenditures for aviation and shipbuilding brought mass migration on a dramatic scale. The population rose by over 50 percent, from about 7 million to nearly 11 million between 1940 and 1950.⁴⁵ Milton Silverman, a journalist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, famously named this era “the Second Gold Rush,” but even he did not mention a California Dream.⁴⁶

Had the term been current, it likely would not have escaped an especially trenchant observer of the California scene in these years, the journalist, lawyer, and sometime head of the California Division of Immigration and Housing, Carey McWilliams. In two prescient books, *Southern California Country: An Island Upon the Land*, which appeared in 1946, and *California: The Great Exception* which he published in 1949, McWilliams explored the rapid growth of California and deplored its many shortcomings. Both books would have a giant, enduring impact on California scholarship, but nowhere in them did McWilliams invoke any “California Dream.”⁴⁷

New formulations of these words continued to appear, though, especially in reference to that most fundamental of California commodities, real estate. Advertisements for a “California ‘dream’ ranch” show up in 1945, and thereafter proliferate notices for “California dream homes.” But dream homes were hardly unique to California. Advertisers in the *New York Times* touted the “dream-home” as early as 1917. The *Los Angeles Times* began doing the same soon after.⁴⁸ To buy a “California dream home” was less

45. U.S. Census Bureau, “Resident Population and Apportionment of the U.S. House of Representatives,” at https://www.census.gov/history/pdf/california_res_pop-jan2018.pdf.

46. Milton Silverman, “Second Gold Rush,” *San Francisco Chronicle* Apr. 25-May 20, 1943, bound edition in Michael Harrison Collection, Special Collections, Univ. of California, Davis.

47. Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country: An Island Upon the Land* (New York: Duell, Sloane, and Pearce, 1946); and *California: The Great Exception* (New York: A. A. Wyn, 1949). The earliest reference to the dream by McWilliams appears to be in his “Is California Still the Great Exception?,” *San Diego Magazine* 28 (1976): III.

48. *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, California), October 14, 1945: 27. *NewsBank: Access World News—Historical and Current*, <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A142051F45F422A02%40WHNPX-150178995AD5578B%402431743-14FFD6A5358ED950%4026-14FFD6A5358ED950%40>; “Display Ad 133—no Title.” *New York Times* (1857–1922), Apr. 22, 1917, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/display-ad-133-no-title/docview/99926957/se-2?accountid=14505>. See also “Classified Ad 130—no Title.” *Los Angeles Times* (1886–1922), Feb. 15, 1920. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/classified-ad-130-no-title/docview/160881540/se-2?accountid=14505>.

a conscious assertion of California's exceptionalism than the acquisition of a dream home that happened to be in California.

Between 1950 and 1960 the population of California expanded almost 50 percent, and it would grow another 27 percent before 1970, when it reached about 20 million people. It was only late in this period that the California Dream made its first appearance: a digital search turns up the first newspaper reference in a *New York Times* article in 1966. Of course, this may not be the *first* mention of the California Dream. There are likely others elsewhere. But if it is not the first mention of the dream, it is at least an early example, and so it is worth pausing on this abrupt, fleeting introduction. Remarkably, the first appearance of the dream manifests not as a bold pronouncement, but as a casual aside in a daily newspaper. It appears not in a place of prominence, but buried in the automotive section, in an article about Los Angeles traffic.

And yet, in two ways, this source hints at the meaning of the California Dream at its birth. "Here in the midst of the California dream gone wild, freeways proliferate almost as fast as contractors can pour cement," observed *New York Times* journalist Bill Becker, "But so do the frustrations." No matter how fast freeways snaked through the city, cars multiplied faster and traffic grew worse. Ultimately, Becker warned, the new freeways would lead only to "the cities of Dreadful Blight, Frustration, and Asphyxia."⁴⁹ The first characteristic we might note of the California Dream is that even in 1966, an author could invoke it in irony, to announce it was already in peril.

Its second characteristic was that it required no introduction. Becker felt no need to explain what he meant by "California Dream." He knew his readers had at least an intuitive understanding of the words before he ever wrote them.

Both these characteristics applied to another mention of the dream that turns up in an article the following year, when Joan Didion published an essay in *The Saturday Evening Post* entitled "California Dreaming." The article indicted the anti-intellectualism and moral vacuity of California life via a visit to a Santa Barbara think tank, which Didion skewered for its casual sexism and celebrity worship.⁵⁰ The term "California Dreaming" appears only in the title of the essay, not in the text, as if Didion was making the ironic point that the dream was an illusion. If the irony is obvious, it is also

49. Bill Becker, "Frustrations of Freeway: The Saga of California," *New York Times* (1923–Current file), Apr 10, 1966, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times, p. 379

50. Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne, "California Dreaming," *Saturday Evening Post*, Oct. 21, 1967, 26–27.

clear that, like Becker, Didion and her editors assumed readers would know the meaning of the term “California Dreaming.” Nowhere does the essay define it or explore it.

A steady stream of publications with the title or subject of the California Dream would follow, and eventually a torrent. We shall return to some specific invocations of the dream and their authors’ intentions. But first, we might consider the second of these two characteristics, the authors’ assumption that readers had foreknowledge of the dream. Why was it that after long years in which the California Dream was never mentioned, in 1966 writers deployed it without introduction? The answer lies in the apparent source of the title for Didion’s article, The Mamas & The Papas’ pop hit “California Dreamin’,” which appeared in late 1965.

THE FRONTIERS OF POP MUSIC

Here we take an abrupt turn and slow our pace, as we consider the role of popular music in creating the California Dream. Pop songs are historical documents of a particular order. As Josh Kun has written, American popular music “is an archive of sound, performance, and culture,” through which writers, musicians, and singers have sought to de-center, rethink, and recast the United States and its meanings.⁵¹ We might describe pop music in the way Stuart Hall assesses popular culture, as “*profoundly* mythic . . . [a] theater of popular desires, a theater of popular fantasies,” where people discover and play with identities and represent themselves to one another and themselves.⁵² If the concept of the California Dream provides a key to the meaning of the United States in the 1960s, the music of California in this period was seminal to the creation of that meaning.

The story of the song “California Dreamin’” begins with John and Michelle Phillips. John Phillips grew up in Alexandria, Virginia, his musical tastes moving from the tight harmonies of his 1950s group, The Smoothies, to the folk scene of New York where he formed a new band, The Journeymen, in 1961. While performing with The Journeymen in San Francisco, the twenty-five-year-old Phillips began a relationship with sixteen-year-old Michelle Gilliam, a Long Beach native then working as a model, and the

51. Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 16.

52. Stuart Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in Popular Culture?,” in David Morley and Kuan-hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 477.

two moved to New York and were soon married. It was there that they composed “California Dreamin’” in 1963, inspired by a winter walk through an icy city.⁵³ Today, it is widely understood as a song about homesickness for California.

Attracted by the burgeoning music industry in Los Angeles, the couple decamped to California in 1965, accompanied by Dennis Doherty and Cass Elliott, who completed their new band, The Mamas & The Papas. The band recorded “California Dreamin’” later that year.

Interpreting lyrics and music of “California Dreamin’” can tell us much about the formulation of the California Dream. The song opens with notes plucked on a twelve-string guitar seemingly in imitation of a sitar (Phillips was a devoted fan of Ravi Shankar), lending an otherworldly, exotic tone that transports the listener to a distant, mysterious land. It then bursts into a simple melody carried by lush harmonies, folk rhythms, and the country-rock beat associated with what would become known as the “California sound” (somewhat ironically, since the song was composed in New York.)⁵⁴ As readers know, the singers open with a description of an eastern winter:

All the leaves are brown

And the sky is gray

I’ve been for a walk

On a winter’s day

I’d be safe and warm

If I was in L.A.

Weather is only part of what the singer longs to escape. The singer opens the second verse by entering a church *I passed along the way*, presumably in order to get warm. There, *I get down on my knees and I pretend to pray*. But *the preacher likes the cold because he knows I’m gonna stay*.⁵⁵

53. Matthew Greenwald, *Go Where You Wanna Go: An Oral History of The Mamas & The Papas* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 27–30.

54. The Mamas and The Papas, “California Dreamin’,” 1966 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-aK6JnyFmk>, accessed Oct. 12, 2022; Michael Roffman, Review of “Love and Mercy,” *Consequence*, June 2, 2015, <https://consequence.net/2015/06/sxsw-film-review-love-mercy/>; “Echo in the Canyon’ Tells the Trippy Story of California Folk Rock,” *DW*, n.d., at <https://www.dw.com/en/echo-in-the-canyon-tells-the-trippy-story-of-california-folk-rock/a-53732212>.

55. John Phillips and Michelle Phillips, “California Dreamin’,” *Songlyrics*, accessed Oct. 12, 2022, <https://www.songlyrics.com/the-mamas-the-papas/california-dreamin-lyrics/>.

A convention of pop songs in this era is a guitar solo providing the bridge to the final verse. But in “California Dreamin’” the bridge is an alto flute, a comparatively rare instrument whose breathy sound adds still more exotic, ethereal tones, as if to underscore the song as a dreamscape.⁵⁶ The last verse repeats lines from the first verse but incorporates another lament

*If I didn't tell her,
I could leave today.*

Cryptic, to be sure, but a sense of regret over a commitment made—and freedom lost—is unmistakable.

The song presents California, then, as a refuge from the cold, hierarchical, institution-bound, and spiritually barren East, where one abides in hypocrisy in order to survive (*I pretend to pray*), a place whose hold on people amounts to a bankrupt commitment (*If I didn't tell her . . .*). Lyrically and sonically, “California Dreamin’” works as what Josh Kun calls an “audiotopia,” or “the space within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world.”⁵⁷ “California Dreamin’” presents California as a romantic haven for sincere people longing to escape the corrupted society of the East. If the sound was new, in another sense the song was a very old one, a re-working of the myth of the Far West as a paradisiacal retreat from a troubled East.

For all that, and for all its later success, the song was hardly an easy sell. John Phillips would recall record executives at first were not interested. “Who wants to hear a song about a state?”⁵⁸ But, of course, the song was less about a state than a state of mind; to be in *California* was to be safe, warm, and free of stifling institutions, ceremonies, hierarchies, and social ties.

It is the wider context of the song that helps explain how this message reached a mass audience, launching the California Dream into popular culture. Like all successful songs, “California Dreamin’” became a hit partly through its timing. It arrived with millions of postwar Baby Boomers in their teens or early twenties, many of them catching a wave of music by folk-rock and pop artists at work in Southern California in the early 1960s, most famously Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys. The Beach Boys drew on

56. “California Dreamin’,” *Songfacts* n.d., at <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/the-mamas-the-papas/california-dreamin>.

57. Kun, *Audiotopia*, 23.

58. Greenwald, *Go Where You Wanna Go*, 26.

complex inspirations that included Chuck Berry, vocal harmonies of bands like the Hi-Los, the doo wop of Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers and The Penguins, and “surf music” by The Ventures and Jan and Dean, all in service of a musical sound that expressed a full-blown mythology of youth culture, beach leisure, and teen romance flourishing in the Southern California sun. By the time “California Dreamin’” dropped onto turntables, an image of California as a teen paradise for the consumer age was already circulating in “Surfin’ USA,” “Little Deuce Coupe,” and “Fun, Fun, Fun.”⁵⁹ In a sense, the Beach Boys and their precursors announced a party; in “California Dreamin’,” The Mamas & The Papas sent their RSVP.

And attend they did. By 1965, when they released the song, The Mamas & The Papas were living in the Hollywood Hills, in Laurel Canyon, where the home of Cass Elliott became a virtual salon in the canyon’s hotbed of musical experimentation and production. In addition to The Mamas & The Papas, the acts birthed from the canyon in the late 1960s included Joni Mitchell, the Byrds, Crosby Stills and Nash, and many others.⁶⁰

The eruption of the Laurel Canyon scene is often presented as serendipitous, the almost involuntary coming together of a generation of young musicians out of some mysterious luck, and proof that there was indeed some magic—or an ineffable dream—at work in this rustic retreat. Luck was certainly involved, and dreaming, too (and of magic, who can say?), but the reasons for Laurel Canyon’s appeal to young musicians in this moment were, like the appeal of California to the millions of others who were moving there, also historical.

Laurel Canyon became the heart of a new music scene in the late 1960s because it combined natural beauty and cheap rent with proximity to an emergent hub of musical recording and performance in nearby Hollywood. The city’s recording industry had taken root earlier, as movie studios began selling soundtracks of popular films. By the late 1950s, industry executives noticed there was money to be made in selling records to youth listeners of

59. For Baby Boomers, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1966*, Washington, D.C. 1966, 23, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/1966/compendia/statab/87ed/1966-01.pdf>; for Beach Boys: Tom Smucker, *Why the Beach Boys Matter* (Austin: University of Texas, 2018), 7–10; Daniel Harrison, “After Sundown: The Beach Boys’ Experimental Music,” in J. Cobach and G.M. Boone, eds., *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33–36; David Leaf, *The Beach Boys and the California Myth* (New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1978), Kevin Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950–1963* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 372–73.

60. Michael Walker, *Laurel Canyon: The Inside Story of Rock-and-Roll’s Legendary Neighborhood* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007).

rock and rhythm and blues. As movie receipts faltered in the 1960s, some studios made up the shortfall by buying or creating record companies. So it was that by the mid-1960s, Hollywood was home to recording studios and record companies like Capitol Records, the U.S. label for many of the era's most famous performers, including the Beatles (who could often be found in Laurel Canyon during their visits to Los Angeles).⁶¹ Hollywood's vibrant club scene (birthed in the 1920s when the county sheriff took a lax approach to enforcing Prohibition) simultaneously developed new attractions with rock venues like the Troubadour, the Whisky-a-Go-Go, and the Roxy. The Laurel Canyon scene emerged, then, as a confluence of affordable housing in a natural setting with leading rock clubs, recording studios, and record companies—and platoons of executives, agents, and producers—only a few miles away.⁶²

All this was what drew The Mamas & The Papas, and it was this, in part, that they were singing about in 1965. But also, clearly, the idea of a California Dream could leap from a pop song into the culture in part because it spoke to pre-existing images. Already by 1940, before any of the Beach Boys even were born, Los Angeles boosters had replaced the old, skeptical vision of California with images of casual, sun-splashed affluence in a land of outdoor recreation and suburban contentment. California had more cars and more miles of highway than any other state, all connecting its ubiquitous ranch home subdivisions with drive-in restaurants and supermarkets that flourished there like nowhere else.⁶³ The new perception of California as exceptional for its growth, success, and material comfort had begun to take root. Representations of the California leisured life reached a culmination in the postwar era of the 1950s and '60s, with teen surf movies like *Gidget* and family television shows set in Los Angeles like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*.

If none of these shows or movies voiced the term “California Dream,” it seemed to articulate at least some of what the shows presented. One of the

61. Cory Messenger, “Record Collectors: Hollywood Record Labels in the 1950s and 1960s,” *Media International Australia*, Aug. 1, 2013, at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1329878X1314800113>; Kent Hartman, “When L.A.’s Recording Studios Ruled the Music Scene,” *Zócalo Public Square*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.zocalopublicsquare.org/2018/03/01/l-s-recording-studios-ruled-music-scene/ideas/essay/>.

62. Messenger, “Record Collectors”; Hartman, “When L.A.’s Recording Studios Ruled the Music Scene.”

63. Roland Marchand, “Visions of Classlessness, Quests for Dominion,” in *Reshaping America: Society and Institutions* (Ohio State University Press, 1982), 167.

features that made the song “California Dreamin’” so popular was how it corresponded to the idea of California advanced by these cultural products as a realm of ease and comfort (*I’d be safe and warm/If I was in L.A.*) but did so in countercultural terms, presenting the place not as the land of suburban consumerism, but as a zone of the authentic, the genuine, and the free, tinged with the foreign and the exotic.

ON THE USES OF IRONY

The birth of the California Dream via pop music and youth culture in the 1960s does a lot to explain its hold on people born in the postwar era. But if it seems like the dream has taken a pounding in our own hard times, it should also be said that from the very beginning, the California Dream was endangered to such a degree that to invoke the dream was to be ironic. When Bill Becker lamented choking traffic as “the California dream gone wild,” and when Joan Didion published an essay about moral emptiness under the title “California Dreaming,” they announced their unwillingness to see the Golden State in the terms laid down by The Mamas & The Papas.

Part of the reason for this, of course, is that pop music and print media work in very different ways. Pop songs do not analyze myth—they produce it. Journalists and writers, on the other hand, traffic in myth but also analyze and subvert it in ways that are necessarily alien to the emotional realm of pop songs.

And for the first few years after the term came into vogue, it is difficult to find any mention of the California Dream in print that accepts it as having a future. To understand why that is, we need to grasp the underlying anxieties that accompanied California’s growth even before 1965. Despite our era’s pervasive nostalgia for postwar California and its heady expansion, the drawbacks of growth provoked doubts in some establishment circles, anxieties that found expression in worries about broad environmental decay. In 1962, the very year that California’s population roared past New York’s to make it the largest state, an organization called California Tomorrow (“a non-profit educational institution dedicated to the problems we face in maintaining a beautiful and productive California”) published a pamphlet titled *California Going, Going . . .*, which called for a comprehensive effort at regional planning and natural resource conservation to stave off suburban sprawl, air pollution, and overpopulation—all consequences of the same rapid growth

that proved California's attractions and reinforced its exceptionalism in the first place.⁶⁴

The effort advanced in 1965, the same year that "California Dreamin'" began its climb up the charts, as California Tomorrow began publishing *Cry California*, a quarterly journal devoted to the environmental anxieties of a broad and influential base of voters and residents. A dreamy publication in its own right—the first issue urged replacing the internal combustion engine with fuel cells—the wide appeal of *Cry California* was reflected in the composition of its advisory board, which included not only Wallace Stegner, the West's pre-eminent novelist and a prominent preservationist, but also Proctor Mellquist, the editor of *Sunset* magazine, Robert Griffin, a progressive Republican and owner of the *Monterey Peninsula Herald*, and a young Caspar Weinberger, chairman of the state Republican Party and future defense secretary for President Ronald Reagan. Fears of environmental decay certainly troubled other American places in the 1960s. But California Tomorrow's bipartisan appeal and vigorous publication agenda reflected the potency of those fears in California, and the way they generated a new appreciation for natural beauty and a pollution-free environment as consumer amenities.⁶⁵

By 1965, the confluence of environmental fears with growing dissent over the Vietnam War and continuing civil rights protests had created considerable social turbulence. That year, upheaval came to California with the mass-expression of Black frustration in the Watts Rebellion, which transfixed the nation in August. The drama of Watts reached Americans in television coverage of burning buildings, police charging crowds of Black youth (who responded with rocks and bottles), and the deployment of fourteen thousand heavily armed national guardsmen. Although Watts was not the first major upheaval in Black communities of the 1960s, it was among the earliest and largest, and it astonished a nation that had come to see California as a golden success story (at least for white people). The message of Watts—that Black

64. Quote from table of contents, *Cry California: The Journal of California Tomorrow* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1965–66); Samuel E. Wood and Alfred E. Heller, *California Going, Going . . . Our State's Struggle to Remain Beautiful and Productive* (Sacramento: California Tomorrow, 1962).

65. For board members, see the table of contents, *Cry California*. For Griffin, see California Press Foundation Hall of Fame at https://cal-press.wildapricot.org/hall-of-fame_robert-allen-griffin; Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

people, especially Black youth, had lost patience with a California that did not include them—was one that Americans could not easily ignore.⁶⁶

And Watts weighed on the minds of the people who created “California Dreamin’.” Just a few months before they recorded the song, in the summer of 1965, John and Michelle Phillips and Dennis Doherty together drove west from New York. They arrived in Los Angeles while the rebellion was in progress, rolling along the freeway under towering clouds of black smoke, dodging columns of military trucks bristling with armed guardsmen. “Welcome to L.A.!” Doherty thought to himself.⁶⁷

“California Dreamin’” was recorded on November 4, 1965, three months after the Watts Rebellion. It debuted in early December and became a top ten hit in 1966.⁶⁸ The California Dream, then, emerged in public consciousness as a golden vision, yes, but one that was already besieged by burgeoning war protests, fears of environmental decline, and racial conflict. As we have observed, pop songs do not work like print media, and the song “California Dreamin’” would continue to evoke the myth of the dream down to the present day without doubts or irony. But it is possible to see the souring of the song’s optimism in the corpus of pop music that followed it.

The late 1960s would be a time of transformative violence and widening social anarchy, and as early as 1966, the Laurel Canyon scene began to wane. That year unrest seized Hollywood itself. The tensions that led to the “Sunset Strip Riots” began with complaints from business owners about illicit drug use and public sexuality among youth rock fans, leading authorities to enforce a 10 p.m. curfew against teenagers. Weeks of confrontations between sheriff’s deputies and young people culminated with some minor lawbreaking on the night of Nov. 12, 1966, when teen demonstrators set off a fire extinguisher on a (largely unoccupied) bus. In the aftermath, rock clubs closed and the Sunset Strip waned as a music venue.⁶⁹

66. Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (New York: Verso, 2020), 203–25.

67. Greenwald, *Go Where You Wanna Go*, 72; elsewhere in Laurel Canyon, TV coverage of Watts inspired Frank Zappa’s “Trouble Every Day,” a bluesy denunciation of racism. See <https://www.songfacts.com/place/watts-california/trouble-every-day>.

68. “California Dreamin’,” *Songfacts*, <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/the-mamas-the-papas/california-dreamin>; <https://www.musicoutfitters.com/topsongs/1966.htm>.

69. Jonny Whiteside, “What Were the 1966 Sunset Strip Riots Really Like? Eyewitnesses Look Back,” *L.A. Weekly*, Nov. 11, 2016, <https://www.laweekly.com/what-were-the-1966-sunset-strip-riots-really-like-eyewitnesses-look-back/>; Davis and Wiener, *Set the Night on Fire*, 349–65.

The unrest on the Sunset Strip was minor compared to Watts, but observers were profoundly affected by its atmosphere of menace. In 1966, after watching sheriff's deputies threaten a crowd of teenagers, another denizen of Laurel Canyon, Stephen Stills, would write "For What It's Worth," a breakout hit for his band, Buffalo Springfield, and a song that posited a California nightmare as converse to the California Dream. In contrast to the rich harmonies of "California Dreamin'," this was a tense warning, with Stills's somber voice intoning over the rasp of a snare drum and a two-note guitar riff (by bandmate Neil Young) that pinged like a radar beacon:

There's something happenin' here

And what it is ain't exactly clear

There's a man with a gun over there

Tellin' me, I've got to beware.

So much for safe and warm in L.A.⁷⁰

The seething confrontation between young people and law enforcement ultimately compelled John Phillips, Lou Adler (producer of The Mamas & The Papas), and others to look north, away from Los Angeles and toward Monterey, for their next grand venture: a concert that they hoped would establish the artistic significance of rock music. Thus was born the "Summer of Love" and the Monterey International Pop Music Festival of 1967—heralded by Phillips's new song, which also marked a turn away from Laurel Canyon and Los Angeles: "San Francisco (Be Sure to Wear Some Flowers in Your Hair)."⁷¹

This archive of rock and pop music suggests how much the California Dream, for all the influence of the utopian "California Dreamin'," was qualified by the darker visions of California that welled up contemporaneously. And it can make the dream itself look like the exclusive province of the relatively comfortable, the affluent, the white. In part, this reflects the gathering whiteness of rock music as a genre. Rock 'n' roll had been created by

70. Buffalo Springfield, "For What It's Worth," 1967, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpsJCrSXkJY>; *Songlyrics*, <https://www.songlyrics.com/buffalo-springfield/for-what-it-s-worth-lyrics/>, accessed Oct. 12, 2022; Domenic Priore, *Riot on Sunset Strip: Rock'n'roll's Last Stand in Hollywood*, Rev. Ed. (London: Jawbone Press, 2015), 363–66; David Brown, "Inside Buffalo Springfield's Classic Protest Song," *Rolling Stone*, Nov. 11, 2016, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/for-what-its-worth-inside-buffalo-springfields-classic-protest-song-106435/>.

71. Priore, *Riot on Sunset Strip*, 246.

working-class, Black musicians like Chuck Berry, Goree Carter, and Little Richard in the 1950s, but in taking the music to white, suburban audiences in the 1960s, the Beach Boys, The Mamas & The Papas, and others inadvertently helped segregate the sound into white-dominated “rock” and Black “soul” or rhythm and blues.⁷²

And yet, we should avoid the trap of believing that visions of safety and warmth and authentic social connection in “California Dreamin’” were attractive only to young white musicians. As the 1960s spiraled into anti-Vietnam War demonstrations and political violence, as the militancy of California’s Black Panthers succeeded the non-violence of Martin Luther King, and as Black communities in Detroit, Newark, and other cities saw uprisings of their own, non-white singers staked their own claims to “California Dreamin’.”

In the cover versions of these artists there is much to hear; but above all, these renditions stand as singularly non-ironic claims to the California Dream. In 1966, the Black jazz guitarist Wes Montgomery released an album called “California Dreaming,” which included a cover of The Mamas & The Papas hit. To the south, the borderlands appeal of “California Dreamin’” spoke to the state’s imminent demographic shift, one that would ultimately bring millions of Latinos, mainly Mexicans, to California. In Mexico, Los Tijuana Five recorded an alternative, Spanish-language cover in 1967, one that replaced the chorus, *California Dreamin’*, with a chorus of *California Mia* (“My California”) as if to suggest that Mexicans could long for their own California—Baja California—even as many passed into U.S. space. In 1968, the blind Puerto Rican singer Jose Feliciano released an acoustic cover of “California Dreamin’” featuring jazz and Latin guitar with improvised Spanish lyrics about his love for a Black woman. Feliciano’s version seems to have shaped the performance of the Black singer Bobby Womack, who in 1969 released a soul version, the longing edge in his voice seeming to suggest that he doubted whether the place he sang about really existed, but that for all that, it was no less beloved.⁷³

72. Joshua Friedberg, “Racializing Rock: The ‘60s and the White Sounds of ‘Pet Sounds,’” *Popmatters*, Sept. 27, 2016. See also Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

73. West Montgomery, “California Dreamin’” on *California Dreaming* LP, Verve Records, 33 1/3 RPM, 1966; Josh Kun, “California Sueños,” *Boom: A Journal of California* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 62–65; Josh Kun, “The Tijuana Sound: Brass, Blues and the Border of the 1960s,” in Alejandro L. Madrid, ed., *Transnational Encounters: Music and Performance at the U.S.-Mexico Border* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 231–51; Jose Feliciano, “California Dreamin’,” by John and

But whatever hope these Black and Latino singers conveyed in their own takes on the song, the California Dream met a very different reception in print media than in music. Among writers, use of the term “California Dream” grew rapidly, and so, too, did the tradition of invoking it not in celebration, but in irony. By 1968, writers were beginning to use the capital D, as in California Dream. That year, it received mention in the influential novel, *The Last Days of the Late Great State of California* by Curt Gentry. A bestseller, *Last Days* is written from the perspective of a future in which a giant earthquake has plunged the coast from San Diego to San Francisco into the blue Pacific. Only this event, the utter destruction of the place known as California, can save the dream, which appears when miners in the Sierra Nevada discover the earthquake has exposed a rich vein of gold. “California as we once knew it may be gone,” writes Gentry, “But the California Dream is indestructible.”⁷⁴

The year 1968 also produced the first book to mention the dream in its title. *The California Dream* was edited by two New Yorkers, Dennis Hale and Jonathan Eisen.⁷⁵ An anthology featuring writers on California, including Josiah Royce and Mark Twain, most of the essays came from the twentieth century, with David Horowitz on the Student Movement, James Q. Wilson on the political culture of Southern California, and Hunter Thompson on the Hell’s Angels. Tellingly, none of the essays that appear in the book actually employs the term “California Dream”—although it was the title of the book, the term had not been in use when the essays were composed.

This absence posed no obstacle to Hale and Eisen, for whom the title was richly ironic. In their view, California’s success had rendered it an alienating, hyperkinetic nightmare, a state whose corruption was the logical progression from its gold rush founding. “The shaggy-haired freak, curled in a corner gazing at a candle and communing with the Deity, may seem an alien figure in the land of the Rand Corporation and the Freeway. But if you listen very carefully you will hear him intoning an ancient and honorable, indeed, an official liturgy: ‘Eureka, Eureka. I Have Found It.’”⁷⁶ Dedicated to Ambrose

Michelle Phillips, 1968, *Songlyrics*, <https://www.songlyrics.com/jose-feliciano/california-dreamin-lyrics/>, accessed Oct. 12, 2022; Bobby Womack, performance of “California Dreamin” by John and Michelle Phillips, 1969, Minit Records, 45 rpm recording, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yEX3IaFHGk>, accessed Oct. 12, 2022.

74. Curt Gentry, *The Last Days of the Late Great State of California* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 391.

75. Dennis Hale and Jonathan Eisen, *The California Dream* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

76. Hale and Eisen, eds, *The California Dream*, xiv–xv.

Bierce, "who had the courage to leave," the authors put the diverse contributions between covers emblazoned with the title "The California Dream" in order to announce that the dream itself was over. In 1968, it was time to wake up.

Joan Didion would observe a decade later that the 1960s ended with the first of the Manson murders (in a house seven miles from Laurel Canyon) on August 9, 1969. The Sixties and the Laurel Canyon scene faded together. As Michelle Phillips recalled life in the canyon that fall, "Everyone was terrified. I carried a gun in my purse. And I never invited anybody over to my house again."⁷⁷

The end of the 1960s and the Laurel Canyon scene did not end the dream. But neither did it end the custom of announcing its end. Just as the dream had been pronounced endangered (or dead) from the moment of its birth, for decades after it remained so: to invoke the dream was to call listeners to imagine it and simultaneously to mourn it. Typically, authors used an ostensibly endangered California promise as a talisman of nationwide or even global decline, as in Michael Davie's 1972 *California: The Vanishing Dream*. Pronouncing California in a "crisis of values," Davie lamented "the outbreaks of student violence, the drug-taking, the acts of violence against (or by) the police, the race riots, and the rest." Of course, none of these events or developments were unique to California. But as the nation's largest, most vibrant state, California's troubles were more indicative of failure and decline than similar signs elsewhere.⁷⁸

This ironic tone of contemporary discourse around the dream underscores the significance of Kevin Starr's contributions. For his *Americans and the California Dream* in 1973 was the first (and then, nearly the only) literary effort to present the dream as authentic historical experience with enduring relevance. Starr—who held a Harvard Ph.D. in literature—asserted the dream's origin in the gold rush and affirmed its continuing value. Gesturing to the "promise" of a young California, he suggested that "In this more complicated time, when hope is not so certain and promise is unclear, the faith of those years must come to our aid."⁷⁹ The California Dream, to Starr,

77. Joan Didion, *The White Album* (1979); Lisa Robinson, "An Oral History of Laurel Canyon, the 60s and 70s Music Mecca," *Vanity Fair*, Feb. 7, 2015, at <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2015/02/laurel-canyon-music-scene>.

78. Michael Davie, *California: The Vanishing Dream* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1972), 91.

79. Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream, 1850–1915* ([1973] Salt Lake: Peregrine Smith, Inc, 1981), viii.

was not just a historical fact, but a tool or a philosophy for grappling with the predicaments of the late twentieth century. To him, the dream remained viable. "Just look around you," he told one journalist, "the same dream that propelled the pioneers to California is still a reality."⁸⁰

Of course, as we have seen already, Starr's body of work is light on proof that anyone before 1966 had ever spoken of a "California Dream." And doubting the California Dream was less a criticism than a congenital characteristic of the dream itself. To Starr, California was a screen on which waves of newcomers from the gold rush onward projected their visions and ambitions, their California Dreams, and tried to bring them into reality. One could question Starr's assertion of California's uniqueness; don't migrants everywhere have plans and ambitions for their new homes? But this approach provided flexibility. Starr could speak of divergent dreams among different arrivals in different eras, without ever having to nail down what the dream was or acknowledging that the dream itself had only emerged in 1966.

Whatever the California Dream can be said to represent, it can only be understood in connection to the American Dream, whose history runs in some parallel channels. The American Dream, too, is often invoked as practically timeless. Many speak of it as having been born at the founding of the nation—or even before. But the fact remains that it is largely a creation of the twentieth century, as we have seen. Like the California Dream, it is a constant reference for writers: the American Dream has inspired libraries of books. But precise definition and rigorous historical analysis have been rare. Of all its treatments, James Truslow Adams arguably produced the most influential, his *Epic of America* (he wanted to call it *The American Dream*, but his publisher felt nobody would buy a book about a dream) kicking off vigorous discussion of the dream and its meaning in the 1930s. Adams intended his restatement of the dream to address the fears of a nation plummeting deeper into its worst-ever economic crisis. To Adams, the American Dream transcended material wealth. "It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." In Adams's view, the Great Depression was

80. Bella Stumbo, "Scholar Renews the California Dream," *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1973, Pro Quest Historical Newspapers.

a result of Americans having abandoned the real American Dream to chase after the false idol of easy money in the 1920s.⁸¹

The fact that it was the Great Depression that sparked Adams's re-statement of the American Dream provides an important perspective on its meaning in American history. For Adams conceived his American Dream in order to speak to the economic and cultural emergency that threatened, in his view, to obliterate the shared ideal of citizenship, opportunity, and meritocracy the term expressed. The American Dream went on to a long career, but its meaning—like the meaning of the California Dream—changed over time. By the 1950s, American officials had consciously repurposed it into a “soft power” weapon in the Cold War, suppressing any hint of its earlier anti-commercialism to render it a glittering brand name for free enterprise, consumer abundance, and a high standard of living.⁸²

And this gives us yet another reason for why the California Dream burst upon the scene in the late 1960s, a moment when much of the public began to question American verities like the necessity of the Cold War itself, as well as racial segregation, the subordination of women to men, paranoia about Communist subversion, the virtues of endless labor, and the equation of environmental devastation with progress. Lacquered to a high gloss, or maybe just encased in amber, the American Dream had become confining to many, and against it the California Dream could serve as a new, quasi-national ideal, one that re-inscribed key components of the American Dream like suburban comfort and wealth, while allowing space for mounting critiques of racial exclusion, and including values that had been absent or undervalued in the old ideal: the social worth of environmental beauty, leisure, healthy living, the continuing desire for a faraway place that was both exotic and domestic, thrilling and home. Its guiding spirit evoked in the hooks of just over two and half minutes of classic pop—an audiotopic imaginary that the American Dream arguably has never had—artists could render their own interpretations of the California Dream with ease, and the enduring popularity of “Califronia Dreamin’” has invited new audiences to dream and re-dream the meaning of California every year since 1966.

The parallels between the respective dreams of America and California extend to the fears that envelop them both. Today, as with the California

81. See Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); quote from Adams, *The Epic of America*, 404; Churchwell, *Behold America*, 160.

82. Churchwell, *Behold America*, 1, 284.

Dream, announcements of the American Dream's demise have become their own genre. The tocsin for the California Dream seems partly to echo alarm bells for the American future and the American Dream.⁸³

But the threats to these dreams have not necessarily been the same. Like the American Dream, the California Dream was born amidst fears of destruction. But the specter haunting California was not economic failure. Rather, it was growth and economic success. Where Didion and others could look on California in the 1960s as verging on collapse from overgrowth, that growth nonetheless continued. Between 1975 and 2000, California's population grew by more than 50 percent, from 21.5 million to 34 million. And even with Starr's books rolling off the presses to confirm the dream, the tolling of its demise went on—and on.⁸⁴ In the 1980s, the California Dream could be questioned as a way of decrying the absence of affordable health insurance.⁸⁵ In 1991, *Time* magazine devoted an entire issue to "California: The Endangered Dream." In 1999, Robert Dawson and Gray Brechin published a powerful book of photographs and essays about environmental destruction in California, *Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream*.⁸⁶

If the warnings receded in the early 2000s, they have returned with a vengeance—but also with a difference. Writers once invoked the dream as ironic commentary on the economic and demographic expansion of a state whose population grew over 2,200 percent between 1900 (1.5 million) and 2000 (nearly 34 million). Then that expansion slowed. Then it ended. Soon after the millennium, growth ceased to trouble the dream. By 2005, the rate of population growth had fallen to 1 percent or less, and in the late 2010s, it slowed more. The year 2019 saw the slowest growth since 1900. In 2020, for the very first time, the state actually lost population.⁸⁷ The California Dream

83. A search for "Is the American Dream Dead?" will turn up hundreds of links, including "Is the American Dream Dead?," *USA Today*, Dec. 9, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/2016/12/09/income-american-dream-kids/95190206/> and "Is the American Dream Dead?," *Reason*, May, 2020, at <https://reason.com/2020/04/06/is-the-american-dream-dead/>.

84. <https://www.macrotrends.net/states/california/population>.

85. *The California Dream, the California Nightmare: 5.2 Million People with No Health Insurance: A Report* (United States: Health Access, 1989).

86. Jordan Bonfante, "The Endangered Dream: The Land of Golden Opportunity Is Becoming the Land of Broken Promises," *Time*, Nov. 18, 1991, at <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,974306-7,00.html>; Robert Dawson and Gray Brechin, *Farewell, Promised Land: Waking from the California Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

87. Julia Wick, "Essential California: Can a State Characterized by Propulsive Growth Redefine Itself?," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 2019, at <https://www.latimes.com/newsletters/la-me-ln-essential-california-20190503-story.html>; Javier Panzar and Sarah Parvini, "California's Growth Is the

was born amidst 1960s social upheaval that aggravated pre-existing fears that growth was too much and too fast. Today, users deploy it to warn of a state that is growing too slow—or even shrinking.

With this shift in concern has come a change in tone. Where writers in the twentieth century frequently used California Dream in an ironic sense as something that was imaginary and might not really exist, today it is increasingly cited without irony but only in mourning, as if it describes a historical reality that has now escaped us. We read that the dream is endangered or dead, as if this had never been announced before, as if we once lived in a healthy dream that was unquestioned and unquestionable. Writers still present the dream almost without introduction, as if we all know what the dream was and we all appreciated it the same way at some point in the past, in some mythical moment when the dream could actually be achieved and was still vibrant, when housing was affordable, say, or when social inequality was less pronounced—even if that moment never actually existed. In passing into history, the California Dream has assumed a kind of historical reality that commentators at its birth would not have recognized.

This fading of the California Dream into history mimics popular understandings of other, older myths of America, and none more than the myths of the nineteenth-century settlement frontier, which Americans always expected to vanish and which finally did in 1890, when the U.S. Bureau of the Census declared it closed. In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his seminal essay bidding the frontier farewell.⁸⁸ The closure of the frontier was one of a host of developments—along with explosive urbanization and the emergence of revolutionary industrial and communication technologies—that saddled American culture with immense anxieties for the future, giving the U.S. fin de siècle a particular component of fear about loss of frontier abundance and American decline.

One way of explaining why Americans created the California Dream is to say that they needed a way to express a key experience of the twentieth century, namely, that the West did not fail the nation, that the closing of the frontier did not bring on the much ballyhooed and widely feared resource scarcity and national decline that seemingly every literate person had expected in the 1890s.

Slowest in Recorded History,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 1, 2019; Julia Barajas and Sarah Parvini, “California Population Growth Slowest Since 1900 as Residents Leave, Immigration Decelerates,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 25, 2019.

88. William J. Cronon, “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1987): 157–76. See esp. p. 167: “For the whole point of the frontier had been to vanish.”

In fact, the reverse happened. Material abundance, rather than vanishing with the frontier, actually *grew* after 1900. For most of the twentieth century, the further the frontier retreated into the past, the richer and more powerful the United States became.

Nor did the closing of the frontier stop the westward movement. In fact, more people poured west than ever. In every decade of the twentieth century, the West grew faster than every other U.S. region.⁸⁹ But the California Dream became necessary precisely because the West did not grow equally. By the year 2000, with California's population well past 30 million, there remained seven U.S. states that never exceeded a million residents, and five of these were in the West: Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, and Alaska.⁹⁰

Myths of the West as a region could no longer capture these disparities. Of all the western states, indeed all the states, California's growth was grandest. Situated at the nation's western edge, it was California that needed explaining. Wyoming and Montana developed tourist industries by evoking the nineteenth century, precisely because so much of their landscape looked much like it had then. California, on the other hand, burgeoned with new population, as it embodied a kind of landed abundance for the modern age, with suburban freeholds in a Mediterranean climate—the Beach Boys' "endless summer"—succeeding independent farms and summer rain as the ideal home. With its new riches seeming like delayed fulfillment of its long-ago gold rush promise, it became a powerful locus for situating a newly idealized American life—the California Dream.

In this sense, the California Dream has been a twentieth-century successor to the nineteenth-century settlement frontier. Sensibly, many doubt that any state can go on forever expanding in the way California has since 1900. California's success has bred a deep unease about its prospects, and a large audience remains receptive to warnings of its demise. The California Dream scarcely resembles the older frontier myth; but it, too, seems fated to vanish.

What will happen to California? Whether the growth that preceded today's stagnation will return in some measure, or whether a period of decline is in the offing is impossible for a historian to venture. Instead of prognosticating, our interests might best be served by examining how the experience of California and its dream(s) have shaped the histories and perceptions of distinctive

89. *Demographic Trends in the Twentieth Century*, 20, <https://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/censr-4.pdf>.

90. *Demographic Trends in the Twentieth Century*, 22, 24.

peoples about their larger world. Historians have illuminated how various minority peoples have unabashedly and unironically pursued versions of the American Dream. It is striking how many of these stories involve people, places, and institutions either in California or with strong California ties: the quest for “the Mexican Beverly Hills,” the development of Koreatown, the pursuit of McDonald’s franchises by Black capitalists. In these and other cases, it might be worth investigating how much the variance between California dreams and American dreams has eroded, to the point that California’s attractions might become synonymous with America writ large, and the American Dream is now entangled and infused with an imagined California. California simulacra are a global phenomenon (Disneyland Paris; Swensen’s in Bangalore and Bangkok draped in 1950s Californiana; the San Francisco Coffee Company decorated with surfboards and mid-century modern furniture in Pfarrkirchen, Germany; and many, many more). For people around the world, apparently to dream of America *is* to dream of California.⁹¹

But here in California, whatever meaning the California Dream retains, perhaps its greatest significance comes from critics who insist not that it be abandoned, not that it is dead, but that it has to be cultivated in order to be fulfilled, and that its culmination will be a California that is not just wealthy but racially and ethnically diverse, socially just, economically equitable, and environmentally sustainable. Like Langston Hughes’s observation that “My America is yet to be,” for these authors the dream can only be realized if it is more widely shared and adapted with care to its natural context. So it is that Olivia Chilcote, of the San Luis Rey Band of Mission Indians, reminds us of the atrocious violence that underlies the original California Dream as she ponders the possibility of a “California Indian Dream.” Black scholars and artists continue to find the dream a territory worth exploring. Alison Rose Jefferson has illuminated how Black Californians fought for their own stake in the leisured California Dream, while Gaye Johnson, George Lipsitz, Clyde Woods, and others have studied other dimensions of “Black California

91. Jerry González, *In Search of the Mexican Beverly Hills: Latino Suburbanization in Postwar Los Angeles* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Jody Agius Vallejo, *Barrios to Burbs: The Making of the Mexican American Middle Class* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012); Marcia Chatelain, *Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America* (New York: Liveright Norton, 2020); Shelly Sang-Hee Lee, *Koreatown, Los Angeles: Immigration, Race, and “The American Dream”* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022); Colin Marshall, “The K-Town Dream,” *Boom: A Journal of California* 5, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 14–19; Anjali Vaidya, “Peering through the Cracks in the California Dream: Bangalore’s Nostalgia for Our Manufactured Past,” *Boom: A Journal of California* 4, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 107–9; Swensen’s Thailand, <https://www.swensens1112.com/en>.

Dreaming.” Tupac Shakur even invoked the dream in 1995 in his classic song “California Love,” claiming the dream not for the privileged, but for the defiant, the beaten but unbowed,

Fresh out of jail, out on bail

*California dreaming. . .*⁹²

Still others probe the meaning of the dream for Asian Americans and Latinos.⁹³

Given that California has been a “majority minority” state since 2000, where people of color outnumber white residents, it makes sense that criticism of the California Dream has focused on the question of its inclusivity. The Watts Rebellion that shadowed those glorious harmonies of The Mamas & The Papas, after all, was not an attempt to bar the door to the California Dream. It was a desperate pounding to be let in. The greatest value of the term “California Dream” may be the way it continues to provoke debate, inviting challenges to the failures of California and the United States, and the continued imagination of a fuller, more inclusive, and more sustainable society.

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92. Tupac Shakur, “California Love,” *Songlyrics*, accessed Oct. 8, 2022, <https://www.songlyrics.com/2pac/california-love-lyrics/>.

93. Olivia Chilcote, “What the ‘California Dream’ Means to Indigenous Peoples,” *The Conversation*, Dec. 21, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/what-the-california-dream-means-to-indigenous-peoples-79889>; Jefferson, *Living the California Dream*; Ingrid Banks, Gaye Johnson, George Lipsitz, Ula Taylor, Daniel Widener, Clyde Woods, eds., *Black California Dreamin’: The Crises of California’s African-American Communities* (Santa Barbara: USCB Center for Black Studies Research, 2012); Lonnie L. Bunch III, “‘The Greatest State for the Negro’: Jefferson L. Edmonds, Black Propagandist of the California Dream,” in Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Los Angeles and Seattle: Autry Museum of Western Heritage and University of Washington Press, 2001), 129–48; Mike Madrid, “Latinos and the California Dream,” *Orange County Register*, Oct. 20, 2019, <https://www.ocregister.com/2019/10/20/latinos-and-the-california-dream-mike-madrid/>; Christine Bacareza Balance and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *California Dreaming: Movement and Place in the Asian American Imaginary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2020).