



Photograph by Matt Gush.



D.J. WALDIE

What Does It Mean to Become Californian?

What does it mean to become Californian? It means being witness to an epic bender—a 169-year binge lubricated by gold, cattle, wheat, oil, suburban housing, the Cold War, and a marketing campaign of seductive power. At every stage of its history, each of the state’s exploitable ecologies has been dressed up as another paradise, pandering to the latest wave of hopelessly intoxicated newcomers. The come-on that seduced them—the elemental promises of health, wealth, and happiness in the sunshine—is the California Dream. For Joan Didion, the state’s renowned exile, there is in that dream a “dangerous dissonance . . . a slippage” between what we desire and who we are.¹

The official story of California is told as a pageant of bonanzas, but belief in the official story requires forgetting so much. We want the story to record what had been hard won, but it’s actually full of lucky accidents. We bought the Californian sales pitch, but we became remorseful buyers afterward. We want to be Californian, but we don’t want to earn it.

These paradoxes were built into the subdivisions that absorbed thirteen million dream seekers between 1940 and 1970—the great years when California retailed to America its mix of Arcadian ease and technocratic élan. The greatest paradox is, of course, that the success in getting so much from California has been turned into so much loss. Californians tend to use the state’s compromised environment as the screen on which to project what they can no longer find in California—something missing from becoming Californian—and the suburbs, the traffic, and the presence of too many of us are said to be the cause. But perhaps what Californians can no longer find is in themselves, in what they lost by becoming Californian. We forget that the California Dream didn’t come with a moral compass.

I cannot say that the dream did not serve us. It provided the goods of a middle-class life to millions, including me. It remixed popular culture in exciting ways. It built

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beautiful and lasting things—and the dream still inspires. A neighbor of mine—with a tract house, two grown daughters, and a husband who is a teacher—wonders if it means anything to say that the dream is ending. “They’ve been saying that for thirty years at least. It hasn’t ended yet,” she told me.

Kevin Starr has written nine volumes of history about California and America’s feverish dream of it, and in 2009 he hadn’t yet reconciled whether California would become a “failed state” or would reinvent itself again, and if reinvention would be another arc of boom to bust to regret. Starr’s faith was in the state’s genetic and cultural rambunctiousness and the possibility that a retooled dream, suitable for a less-Anglo California, will replace the parts of the dream that served us so poorly. But Starr, like many of us, had his doubts.

Californians had presumed that California would always deliver whatever they deserved. Now we know California can’t. Even more self-knowledge is needed, now that our

revels are ended. If we are to become brave, new Californians, we will begin to dream differently.

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What does it mean to become Californian? It means seeing nature without romance or despair. California has been uniquely intoxicating, but it was also a place on the national periphery in the nineteenth century and far from the familiar place where hearts might feel at home. Merchandising the state’s natural grandeur answered some of Californian longing. From William Henry Jackson in the 1870s through Ansel Adams in the 1950s to the latest coffee-table book, California has produced gorgeous and misleading environmental photography, promoting the view that sacred wildness is out there, unmarred by our presence and ready for our contemplation.

The iconic photographs make the rapturous assumption that none of us was ever here—but we were! We’re sluicing mountains into rivers to get at the gold, taking down

forests to build a wood and iron technology gone before our parents were born, erecting groves of derricks over oil fields, extracting harvests from the compliant ground, and assembling communities from tract houses and strip malls. I'm tired of my own sentimentality for landscapes that are rendered either as an open wound or a throat pulled back, ready for the knife. Pity is misplaced if there is no place in it for you or me.

The choice for Californians north and south after the Gold Rush cataclysm was not between nature and its despoiled remnant, but the terms on which our encounter with nature would be framed. The environmentalist John Muir gave nature a privileged autonomy, a kind of green divinity. Frederick Law Olmsted, a builder of New York's Central Park, concluded that nature in California would never again be sublime, despite what the photographs implied, and that nature must be enmeshed in the community of people living here. Olmsted struggled for a word to describe the tie that might bind a place and its people. He settled on "communitiveness." It's an awkward word for something that tries to define both loyalty to one's neighbors and trusteeship of the land. Olmsted, as Muir and others did, sought to read a redemptive narrative—and something of the wider American experience—into the landscape of California. The Californians who were led here by their longing for the redeeming qualities Muir and Olmsted saw in California's nature—qualities variously ennobling, consoling, and therapeutic—unalterably changed California.

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What does it mean to become Californian? It means finding that California is increasingly ordinary (for which I'm grateful, because the commonplace is necessarily the place where we find love and hope). But if California isn't the "great exception," isn't the best or worst of places, then how do we describe California when it is not exactly "Californian" anymore, not as alluring or lurid as the clichés of the utopian or dystopian accounts said it was? California is riven—north and south, coastal and inland, urban and rural, valley and foothill—but that which unites these "islands on the land" is the question of what had been gained by becoming Californian.

For Joan Didion, becoming Californian was a prize for leaving the past behind, although the result would be brokenheartedness. For essayist Richard Rodriguez, becoming

Californian meant becoming mingled, impure, heterogeneous, and discovering that your color, whatever it is, is just another shade of brown. For the novelist and playwright William Saroyan, becoming Californian was to see this place, finally, as "my native land." For the two million or more Californians who, in the past two decades, have migrated to "greater California"—which is now located in Texas, Arizona, Washington, Oregon, and Nevada—becoming Californian meant finding some measure of inadequacy in California. Maybe becoming Californian means laboring to undo the toxic effects of what California has been: a commodity, a trophy of Anglo privilege, and a place of aching, unmet desires.

The Anglo possessors of California after 1847 took on habits that began with the first gold claim staked on the American River and continue each time a house lot changes hands today. Imagine considering those habits with a "truth and reconciliation" commission whose members are a skateboarder, a "mow and blow" gardener, a rap artist, a real estate agent, a vintner, a Gabrieleño elder, a Chinese immigrant, and someone employed in the adult entertainment industry. Maybe becoming Californian means facing a ravenous "hunger of memory"² and having only California's clichés to offer.

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What does it mean to become Californian? It means locating yourself, according to environmental historian Stephanie Pincetl, in a panorama that includes Hollywood, the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Big Sur, San Francisco, Disneyland, the redwoods, and Death Valley.³ She might have added Compton, Route 99 from Fresno to Bakersfield, the Silicon Valley, the San Fernando Valley, the Central Valley, and the whole of *la frontera* from Yuma to the Tijuana. Pincetl included in her list the seductive mirage of El Dorado, the folly that led to all of the state's ruined paradises. An imagination so spacious as to dwell in all of these Californias requires a different kind of intelligence, attuned to many vernaculars. The alternative is living daily with the experience of estrangement, discontinuity, and forgetfulness.

Californians who need something to stand with them against these disorders might find it in Michel Foucault's notion of "a particular, local, regional knowledge, a differential knowledge incapable of unanimity."⁴ The desire to sustain "ecologies of the vernacular" and live in "habitats



Photograph by Matt Gush.

of memory” may be the new requirement for becoming Californian.

Foucault distantly echoes Josiah Royce’s notion of a Higher Provincialism,⁵ which finds the potential for moral order in a shared sense of place and in the common habits of being there. This embodied knowledge becomes “critical regionalism”⁶ in turning away from the comforts of nostalgia toward “interrogating the local and proximate precisely in order to demonstrate its universality, its connectedness, and its differences with the wider world.”⁷

California happened to the world in 1849, and in the rush to extract something from becoming Californian, the world—in the form of every race and ethnicity—met itself here.⁸ The meeting was chaotic, brutal, often tragic, and sometimes redemptive, and its energies are not yet spent. For all its potential to create a hybrid American (and, I believe, a better one), the collision left Californians haunted by the spirit of El Dorado—the illusion that being Californian requires being perpetually the object of someone else’s desire.

To become truly Californian, dwellers here will recover from that malign dream to “awaken the stories that sleep in the streets”⁹ and pick up the burden and gift of making their place a home for every kind of Californian. **B**

Notes

* A longer consideration of the themes in this essay can be found in “Rereading, Misreading, and Redeeming the Golden State: Defining California Through History,” in *A Companion to California History*, William Deverell and Greg Hise, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

- ¹ Joan Didion, *Where I Was From* (New York: Vintage, 2004), 48.
- ² The phrase is specifically Richard Rodriguez’s lament for a misplaced language.
- ³ Stephanie S. Pincetl, *Transforming California: A Political History of Land Use and Development* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), vii.
- ⁴ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 82.



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- ⁵ Josiah Royce, "Provincialism," *Race Questions, Provincialism, and Other American Problems* (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 65.
- ⁶ Neil Campbell, "Introduction," *Affective Critical Regionality* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 1–25.
- ⁷ Campbell, *Affective Critical Regionality*, 81.
- ⁸ The image is Richard Rodriguez's (paraphrasing Karl Marx) in "The North American" from *Public Discourse in America: Conversation and Community in the Twenty-First Century*, Judith

Rodin and Stephen P. Steinberg, eds. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 69.

- ⁹ "Through stories about places, they become habitable. Living is narrativizing. Stirring up or restoring this narrativizing is thus among the tasks of any renovation. One must awaken the stories that sleep in the streets. . . ." Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Vol. 2, *Living and Cooking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 142.

Photograph on following page by Anthony Samaniego.

