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Contents

List of Figures viii
Notes on Contributors ix

Introduction xiii

Part I Introductory Essays 1

1. Beyond Dreams and Disappointments: Defining California through Culture 3
   James Quay

2. Rereading, Misreading, and Redeeming the Golden State: Defining California through History 22
   D. J. Waldie

3. I Thought California Would Be Different: Defining California through Visual Culture 40
   Catherine Gudis

4. At the Crossroads: Defining California through the Global Economy 75
   Richard A. Walker

Part II Early California 97

5. Junípero Serra across the Generations 99
   Steven W. Hackel

6. Alta California, the Pacific, and International Commerce before the Gold Rush 116
   David Igler

7. Licit and Illicit Unions: Engendering Mexican Society 127
   Rosamaría Toruño Tanghetti
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Race and Immigration in the Nineteenth Century</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Omar Valerio-Jiménez</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part III Conquest and Statehood</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The 1850s</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>William Deverell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Douglas Cazaux Sackman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Native Californians in the Nineteenth Century</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>William Bauer, Jr.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Transformations in Late Nineteenth-century Rural California</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David Vaught</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Transnational Commercial Orbits</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert Chao Romero</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Reconsidering Conservation</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Benjamin Heber Johnson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Religion in the Early Twentieth Century</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Darren Dochnik</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Immigration, Race, and the Progressives</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lon Kurashige</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>New Deal, No Deal: The 1930s</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rick Wartzman</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Modern California</td>
<td>309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>World War II</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arthur Verge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daniel Hurewitz</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Making Multiculturalism: Immigration, Race, and the Twentieth Century</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kevin Allen Leonard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>The Long 1950s</td>
<td>358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shana Bernstein</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Apportionment Politics, 1920–70</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Douglas Smith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Under the Warm California Sun: Youth Culture in the Postwar Decades</td>
<td>Kirse Granat May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>At the Center of Indian Country</td>
<td>Nicolas G. Rosenthal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Sexual Revolutions and Sexual Politics</td>
<td>Josh Sides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>A Generation of Leaders, but Not in the Fields: The Legacy of Cesar</td>
<td>Miriam Pawel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chavez</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Hollywood Changes its Script</td>
<td>John Horn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part V</td>
<td>California Prospects in the Twenty-first Century</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Immigration and Race in the Twenty-first Century</td>
<td>Bill Ong Hing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Political Prospects in the Twenty-first Century</td>
<td>Raphael J. Sonenshein</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Environmental Prospects in the Twenty-first Century</td>
<td>Jon Christensen</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Index 499
Figures

2. Promotional brochure, California Parlor Car Tours Company, c.1930
3. Cover of *The Official Guide and Descriptive Book of the Panama California International Exposition, San Diego, 1916*
4. Santa Barbara County Courthouse, built 1926–9
5. Dorothea Lange, “Billboard along US 99, behind which three destitute families of migrants are camped, Kern County, California,” 1938
6. Dorothea Lange, “Mountain View, California. Scene at Santa Clara home of the Shibuya family,” 1942
7. Still from *Double Indemnity*, 1944
8. Von Dutch (Kenneth Howard) custom-painted car for Barris Kustom Industries, 1960s
15. Protestors led by César Chávez, leader of the United Farm Workers, rally on behalf of striking grape workers, Delano, California, 1966
16. Esteban Villa/RCAF Mujeres Muralistas, *Cosmic Woman/Mujer Cósmica and Female Intelligentsia (The Women Hold Up the Universe)* mural at Chicano Park, San Diego, 1985
17. Rubén Ortiz-Torres, *California Taco, Santa Barbara*, 1995
18. Highway sign near California border with Mexico
Contributors

**William Bauer** is an Associate Professor of American Indian history at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. He is an enrolled member of the Round Valley Indian Tribes and author of “We Were All Like Migrant Workers Here”: Work, Community and Memory on California’s Round Valley Reservation, 1850–1941 (2009).

**Shana Bernstein** is Associate Professor of History at Southwestern University, where she teaches classes on comparative race and ethnicity, the U.S. West, gender, and the environment. She is the author of *Bridges of Reform: Interracial Civil Rights Activism in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (2011), and is currently working on a project on environmental health in progressive-era Chicago.

**Jon Christensen** is an adjunct assistant professor in the Institute of the Environment and Sustainability, Department of History, and Center for Digital Humanities at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is editor of *Boom: A Journal of California*, published by the University of California Press.

**William Deverell** is Director of the Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West and Professor of History at the University of Southern California. He is the author of *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past*. He edited *The Blackwell Companion to the American West* and, with Greg Hise, is co-editor of *The Blackwell Companion to the History of Los Angeles*.

**Darren Dochuk** is Associate Professor in Humanities at the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, Washington University in St. Louis. He is the author of *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* and co-editor of *Sunbelt Rising: The Politics of Space, Place, and Region*.

**Catherine Gudis** is Associate Professor of History and Director of Public History at the University of California, Riverside. She is the author of *Buyways: Billboards, Automobiles, and the American Cultural Landscape* and editor of *Cultures of Commerce: Representations of Business in America*, *Helter Skelter: LA Art in the 1990s*, and *A Forest of Signs: Art and the Crisis of Representation*. For 20 years she has worked as a curator, with socially engaged art collectives, and in historic preservation. She was a scholar at the Getty Research Institute, and she is working on a book entitled *Curating the City: The Framing of Los Angeles*.

**Steven Hackel** is Associate Professor of history at the University of California, Riverside, where he specializes in the Spanish Borderlands, the colonial West,

**Bill Ong Hing** is a Professor of Law at the University of San Francisco, where he teaches Immigration Policy, Evidence, and Negotiations. His books include *Ethical Borders – NAFTA, Globalization, and Mexican Migration* (2010), *Deporting Our Souls: Morality, Values, and Immigration Policy* (2006) and *Defining America Through Immigration Policy* (2004). He was also co-counsel in the precedent-setting Supreme Court asylum case, *INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca* (1987), and he is the founder of the Immigrant Legal Resource Center in San Francisco.

**John Horn** is a staff writer at the *Los Angeles Times*, where he covers the film business for the Calendar section. Before joining the *Times* in 2002, Horn was a senior writer for *Newsweek* magazine, a senior editor for *Premiere* magazine, and served as the entertainment writer for The Associated Press and as a staff writer for *The Orange County Register*. He was a recipient of a fellowship under the National Arts Journalism Program.

**Daniel Hurewitz** teaches in the history department at Hunter College in New York City. His book *Bohemian Los Angeles and the Making of Modern Politics* (2007) examines the cultural milieu that gave birth to the American gay political movement. He has also written a book about New York’s LGBT history.

**David Igler** is Professor of History at the University of California, Irvine, where he teaches courses in U.S., environmental, and California history. He is the author of *The Great Ocean: Pacific Worlds from Captain Cook to the Gold Rush* (2013), and *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850–1920* (2001).

**Benjamin H. Johnson** is Associate Professor of History and Global Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he teaches classes on environmental history, borders, and globalization. He is the author of *Revolution in Texas: How a Forgotten Rebellion and Its Bloody Suppression Turned Mexicans Into Americans* (2003) and co-editor of *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*. Johnson is writing a synthetic history of environmental politics and culture in the Progressive-Era United States.

**Lon Kurashige** is Associate Professor of History and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. He is author of the award-winning *Japanese American Celebration and Conflict: A History of Ethnic Identity and Festival in Los Angeles, 1934–1990* (2002) and co-editor of *Major Problems in Asian American History* (2003). He is currently researching the history of Asian immigration exclusion in the United States, as well as working on a new United States history college textbook.


**Kirse Granat May** received her Ph.D in history from the University of Utah. She is the author of *Golden State, Golden Youth: California Youth Images in Popular Culture, 1955–1966* (2002). She has taught at the University of Utah, the Massachusetts College of Art, and Clark
College in Vancouver, Washington, where she currently resides.

**Miriam Pawel** is a 2013 National Endowment for the Humanities fellow, completing a biography of Cesar Chavez to be published in spring 2014. She is the author of the critically-acclaimed *The Union of Their Dreams* (2009), a narrative history of the farm worker movement. She worked for more than two decades as a journalist at *Newsday* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

**Dr. James Quay** was executive director of the California Council for the Humanities from 1983 until 2008. A native of Pennsylvania, he and his wife moved in 1970 to California, where he earned a Ph.D. in English literature from UC Berkeley. Prior to joining CCH, he was a lecturer at UC Santa Cruz and an associate producer with California Public Radio. He is co-editor of *California Uncovered: Stories for the Twenty-First Century* (2005). He is currently a facilitator and board member with the Center for Courage and Renewal.

**Robert Chao Romero** is an Associate Professor of Chicana/o Studies and Asian American Studies at UCLA. He received his Ph.D. in Latin American history from UCLA and his J.D. from U.C. Berkeley. His book, *The Chinese in Mexico, 1882–1940*, received the Latino/a Studies Section Book Award from the Latin American Studies Association in 2012.

**Nicolas G. Rosenthal** is Associate Professor of History at Loyola Marymount University and the author of *Reimagining Indian Country: Native American Migration and Identity in Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (2012). His current research is on Native American artists, writers, and performers in the early twentieth-century.


**Josh Sides** is the Whitsett Professor of California History at California State University, Northridge. He is the author of *L.A. City Limits* (2004), *Erotic City: Sexual Revolution and the Making of Modern San Francisco* (2009), and editor of *Post-Ghetto: Reimagining South Los Angeles* (2012) and the journal *California History*.

**Douglas Smith** is the Executive Director of the Los Angeles Service Academy and the Director of Humanities at the Colburn Music Conservatory. The past recipient of fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the John Randolph and Dora Haynes Foundation, he is the author of *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia*, which received the 2003 Virginia Literary Award in Nonfiction, and *On Democracy’s Doorstep: One Person, One Vote and the Quest for Equality in Twentieth-Century America*, which will be published by Hill & Wang in 2014.

**Raphael J. Sonenshein** is the Executive Director of the Edmund G. “Pat” Brown Institute of Public Affairs at California State University, Los Angeles and Director of the Pat Brown Poll. He received his B.A. in public policy from Princeton, and his Ph.D. in political science from Yale. His book *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (1993) received the 1994 Ralph J. Bunche Award from the American Political Science


**Omar Valerio-Jiménez**, an Associate Professor of history at the University of Iowa, teaches courses on borderlands, Latinas/os, and immigration history. He is the author of *River of Hope: Identity and Nation in the Rio Grande Borderlands* (2013), and the co-editor of *Major Problems in Latina/o History* (forthcoming in 2014). His next project examines the history and memory of the U.S. conquest of Mexico’s Far North.


**Arthur Verge** is a Professor of History at El Camino College in Torrance, California. He is the author of *Paradise Transformed: Los Angeles During the Second World War* (1993), and with Andrew Rolle, co-author of *California: A History* (7th and 8th editions).

**D. J. Waldie** is the author of *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* and other books that deal with the history of southern California.

**Richard Walker** is Professor Emeritus and past Chair of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley. He holds a B.A. from Stanford and a Doctorate from Johns Hopkins, and is a past recipient of Fulbright and Guggenheim Fellowships. He is author of two books on California, *The Conquest of Bread* (2004) and *The Country in the City* (2007), as well as essays on the state’s economy, cities, natural resources, race relations, and politics. He is co-author of two books on economic geography, *The Capitalist Imperative* (1989) and *The New Social Economy* (1992).

**Rick Wartzman** is the executive director of the Drucker Institute at Claremont Graduate University and a columnist for *Time* online. He is the co-author (with Mark Arax) of *The King of California: J.G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire* and the author of *Obscene in the Extreme: The Burning and Banning of John Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath*. 
California holds a more prominent place in national and international affairs than any other state in the Union. Whether measured by familiar yardsticks of population, electoral weight, global economic power, and cultural production, or the less common meters of political eccentricity, environmental innovation, social heterogeneity, and immigrant nexus—California’s influence is impossible to ignore around the globe.

California has played this role for a very long time. Place-named by the feverish imagination of a sixteenth-century Spaniard who dreamed of Queen Califia’s gold-laden island paradise, California was simultaneously conceived in very different ways by its indigenous inhabitants who could not have imagined the future of their ancestral homeland. Between then and now, California has been endlessly re-envisioned and reinvented as an imaginary island, as Alta California, as the thirty-first state of the Union, as Gam Saan, as a critical Pacific entrepôt, as Tomorrowland, and as Turtle Island. Each of these designations, and countless others in turn, expressed ambitions and realities that reached well beyond the physical terra of the place.

Coming to terms with the history of California has occupied writers for centuries. In recent decades such writings have grown to a cottage industry of the historical profession through the combined output of academic presses, mass-market publishers, and independent houses. *A Companion to California History* reflects this growing interest in, and serious engagement with, the state’s remarkable past. But more than mere interest, this volume reflects the way that the study of California intersects with and influences historical scholarship and contemporary issues well beyond its boundaries.

What does this mean? Most directly, it means that many if not most of the essays in this volume attempt to reconceptualize key California events, social groups, and issues in broader and interconnected ways. It means that much of California history has regional, national, and international dimensions in addition to local roots. And it also means that many key
characteristics of California – such as the ever-growing population, the technological innovations, even much of the flora and fauna – are transplants or reconfigurations with origins outside or beyond the state’s borders. Rather than an exercise in historical exceptionalism, this volume traces California history as part and parcel of related geographies, different historical scales, and critical scholarly currents.

The 30 chapters in this volume are organized into five parts. Four introductory essays in Part I offer broad syntheses and analyses of California as a whole. We asked James Quay, D. J. Waldie, Catherine Gudis, and Richard A. Walker to do something exceedingly difficult: to define California through distinct prisms of culture, history, visual culture, and the global economy. The resulting essays thoughtfully propose innovative and exciting ways to understand the state’s past and present. Designed as overarching statements about their respective topics and disciplines, each essay also suggests a myriad of subjects for future research and analysis. Similarly, the three “prospects” essays in Part V are designed to forecast developments for the twenty-first century in the realms of immigration and race, politics, and the environment. While historically minded scholars usually shy away from forecasting the future, essayists Bill Ong Hing, Raphael J. Sonenshein, and Jon Christensen have embraced their respective challenges; their fascinating prognostications demonstrate the need to understand the past in order to grapple with the future. These two bookends – the introductory “defining” and closing “prospects” essays – showcase the promise and vitality of California studies today.

The middle three parts of this volume periodize California history into “Early California,” “Conquest and Statehood,” and “Modern California.” We have deliberately tweaked conventional periodization with these three temporal assignments, in that we have stretched out the conquest and statehood period well into the twentieth century and, in consequence, narrowed the era in which California has been “modern.” And, while the greatest number of essays delve into twentieth-century topics (certainly a reflection of recent scholarly interest and emphasis), we have made every effort to cover nineteenth-century California with inventive approaches to a wide range of issues. We both believe that many, if not all, of the momentous developments in twentieth-century California are deeply rooted in the history of the previous century, if not earlier. The volume also links the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through a number of paired essays on the topics of race and immigration, Native Californians, the 1850s/1950s, and environmental transformations.

A Companion to California History highlights numerous arenas of innovative scholarly focus on American and global issues in recent years. We believe that a focus on California and its historical trajectories can serve to further illuminate these themes. Transnational and global history is
certainly one such trend, reflected in this volume with essays by Richard A. Walker, David Igler, Robert Chao Romero, Lon Kurashige, and Kevin Allen Leonard. The critical study of gender and sexuality represents a second area of tremendous scholarly growth, as illustrated by essayists Rosamaria Toruño Tanghetti, Daniel Hurewitz, and Josh Sides. Environmental history, an already well-established field by any measure, has matured alongside the study of California during the past three decades. In testament to this overlapping scholarly maturity, this volume includes creative approaches to the environment for the nineteenth century (Douglas Cazaux Sackman), twentieth century (Benjamin Heber Johnson), and twenty-first century (Jon Christensen). Finally, some of these essays examine vitally important topics that have simply not gained the attention they merit: Catherine Gudis’s essay on visual culture, William Deverell’s work on the “lost” 1850s, David Vaught’s attention to rural California, or Miriam Pawel’s re-examination of Cesar Chavez’s legacy, among others.

The study of California is no longer just the study of California. Critical scholarship on California has shed its vestiges of parochialism and now represents one of the most innovative arenas for studying the past beyond regional or national boundaries. California history speaks to the region, the nation, and the world on some of today’s most pertinent topics – including the struggles of a pluralist society, immigration debates, political reform, religion, and globalization. A Companion to California History attempts to reflect that engagement within and beyond the state by showcasing the work of 30 scholars who are deeply invested in the question of what compels them about California. We hope you appreciate and learn from their answers.

William Deverell and David Igler
Part I

Introductory Essays
Chapter One

BEYOND DREAMS AND DISAPPOINTMENTS: DEFINING CALIFORNIA THROUGH CULTURE

James Quay

Anyone who knows enough to define California through culture knows better than to try. California is too large, too diverse, and too dynamic to be defined. Transposed to the east coast of the United States, California would stretch from Charleston to Boston, encompassing all or part of 11 states from the Atlantic Coast to the Appalachian Trail. It contains a greater range of landforms and more species of plants and animals than any area of comparable size in North America, with a human population equally as diverse. Santa Clara County, now better known as Silicon Valley, by itself has residents from 177 of the 194 nations of the world (Moriarty 2004: 8). California is home to sizable immigrant communities from 60 different countries.

As someone who has spent more than two decades supporting public programs in which Californians describe and analyze life as it’s lived in California, I have experienced this cultural diversity firsthand. In groups large and small Californians have shared how and why they or their ancestors came to be here, discussed issues both historical and contemporary, and shared their hopes and fears for communities both ethnic and geographic. Listen to California Native Americans collecting stories of their ancestors’ encounters with Europeans in the nineteenth century, residents of the Sierra Nevada foothills discussing the population boom they face, Japanese Americans recalling their internment during World War II, Afghan artists recently displaced by war to the San Francisco Bay Area, and you can’t help but recognize that California doesn’t have a culture, it has many cultures.

The state is also too dynamic to define. As the California economy cycles through boom and bust, today’s confident definition becomes tomorrow’s embarrassment. In November 1991, Time magazine dedicated an entire issue to examining “California: The Endangered Dream,” observing how
drought, traffic, sprawl, and economic downturn were driving people out of the state. Four years later, the California economy was ascending up the side of the dot-com bubble and by the decade’s end the state’s population had grown by more than four million people and California boasted the fifth highest gross domestic product in the world. Five years after that, the dot-com bubble burst and the state plunged into fiscal crisis once again. “California defies efforts to characterize it as a single state,” complains Peter Schrag, who has been studying California for three decades, “even as you describe it, it seems to obey some geographic uncertainty principle, and changes” (2006: 40).

Then there’s the problem of “culture.” If we take culture in its anthropological sense, as the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all of the products of human work and thought, the task of defining California expands well beyond the limits of my expertise and space. Nearly 50 years ago, two dozen scholars, writers, and critics assembled in Carmel, California to discuss the question, “Has the West Coast an Identifiable Culture?” One of the group, the novelist Wallace Stegner, summarized the group’s findings:

Two days at Carmel convinced most of us that we felt pretty much like the rest of the United States, only more so. Our language is a representative amalgam almost undistinguished by local dialectal peculiarities; ethnically we are more mixed even than the eastern seaboard cities; in a prosperous country, we are more prosperous than most; in an urban country, more urban than most; in a gadget-happy country, more addicted to gadgets; in a mobile country, more mobile; in a tasteless country, more tasteless; in a creative country, more energetically creative; in an optimistic society, more optimistic; in an anxious society, more anxious. (1982: 106)

If you’re looking for a shorthand definition of California by culture, “America only more so” is as good as any.

But the most striking thing about defining California by culture is that despite the impossibility of the task, commentators both glib and serious persist in trying to do so. Why? No one seems to think it important to define the culture of my home state of Pennsylvania, or Iowa, or Arizona. Why California? Of the many places in the world blessed with natural wonders, favorable climates, energetic economies, and dynamic populations, why should California hold such a distinctive place in the national and global imagination?

The question leads us to California’s defining cultural feature: its persistence as a location where the deepest human yearnings can be realized. “California” has sometimes been a blank screen onto which people have projected their desires, sometimes a real place that promises opportunity
never before imagined, and sometimes a bitter example of disillusion and
disappointment. But a definition of California always refers not just to the
real place called California, but to an imagined place of the same name.

When commentators attempt to define California, they use powerful
human metaphors such as Paradise, Eden, El Dorado – all places that exist
in the imagination, places challenging people to find them, to lose them,
to regain them. As a consequence, defining California by culture means
encountering a perpetual tension that exists between California the imag-
ined and California the real. In other states, serious culture can be created
without reference to the images promoters concoct to attract new business,
tourists, and investments. In California these images are always there, to
be dismissed, qualified, ridiculed, or embraced, perhaps, but always there
and demanding attention. I know of no other place whose culture is created
by such a tension. But as a result, California affords observers here and
abroad an opportunity to think upon human possibility and its limits.

Tension between the imagined and the real begins the same instant
California is named. Other American states derive their names from their
indigenous inhabitants, from descriptions of tangible natural features, or
from people to be honored. California alone is named for a completely
imaginary place. No one has found a convincing etymology for the
name, but “California” first appears in a popular romance, Las Sergas de
Esplandian, written by Garci Rodriguez Ordonez de Montalvo and first
published in Madrid in 1510:

Know, then, that, on the right hand of the Indies, there is an island called
California, very close to the side of the Terrestrial Paradise, and it was
peopled by black women, without any man among them, for they lived in
the fashion of Amazons. They were of strong and hardy bodies, of ardent
courage and great force. Their island was the strongest in all the world, with
its steep cliffs and rocky shores. Their arms were all of gold, and so was the
harness of the wild beasts which they tamed and rode. For, in the whole
island, there was no metal but gold. (Hicks et al. 2000: 76)

Edward Everett Hale, best known as the author of “The Man without a
Country,” offered a plausible explanation in 1862 for how this imaginary
name came to be fixed to a portion of the Pacific coast. Montalvo’s
romance, which went through several editions, was popular enough to
remain in the memory of some unknown member of a naval expedition
sent by Cortés to explore the northwest coast of Mexico in 1533, and when
he saw what he thought was an island with steep cliffs and rocky shores,
the name stuck (Hart 1978: 398).

No less than two defining metaphors for California make their appear-
ance in this single passage: California as paradise and California as El
Dorado. Also making its immediate appearance is the disjuncture between the imagined destination and the real place. The land the unknown explorer called California had “steep cliffs and rocky shores,” to be sure, but it turned out to be the peninsula of Baja California, not an island, and it fostered no black Amazons and contained no gold. In a pattern that would be repeated by many individuals looking for “California,” disappointment came soon after discovery. Spanish explorers found nothing that resembled a terrestrial paradise in California and, after a few sixteenth-century expeditions, Spain sent no more for nearly two centuries.

If there were ever a people who experienced California as paradise, it was the indigenous people who had been living there ten thousand years before their encounter with Europeans. They were hunter-gatherer cultures who had no metal tools and left no written records. Social classes hardly existed and communities were small. Except for tribes along the Colorado River, they appear to have been a peaceable people, though conflict was not unknown. We need not place them into an alien mythic place to acknowledge that conditions in what became California must have favored them, for at the time when European colonization began in 1769, they are estimated to have numbered 300,000, the densest concentration of Indians north of Mexico.

California’s indigenous people spoke over a hundred different mutually unintelligible languages and Rawls notes that “elements of culture occurring only in part of California, most of them only in a small part, greatly outnumbered those that were universal” (Rawls & Bean 2003: 15–16). The only feature common to both indigenous and contemporary California culture is its diversity. Unfortunately, much of this cultural richness has been lost. Disease and confinement brought by Europeans halved their numbers to about 150,000 by the mid-nineteenth century. Then came the catastrophe that decimated California Indians, the event that fixed California forever in the world’s imagination: the Gold Rush.

The Gold Rush was a defining moment for California, one that turned a sleepy province on the far edge of the continent into a true El Dorado. The search for gold had motivated Spanish explorers since the sixteenth century, but no one could seriously identify California as El Dorado until James Marshall’s discovery of gold in January 1848. As news and evidence overcame initial skepticism, men poured into California, first from Oregon and Hawaii, then Mexico and Chile, and finally from the east coast, Europe, and Asia. In 1847 San Francisco had a population of 800 and California’s non-indigenous population was perhaps 13,000. Eighty thousand men arrived in 1849 alone and by 1854 there were upwards of 300,000 in California. It was the greatest mass migration in American history and vaulted the state into national and world attention (Rohrbough 1997: 8).
For sheer drama the Gold Rush is hard to beat. Hundreds of thousands of men, and a much smaller number of women, crossed oceans or a continent to test their individual wills against nature and fortune. It was “the adventure of a lifetime and the journey of the century,” and the experiences of the Argonauts filled personal diaries and letters and made newspaper copy for years, but the reality was that the discoveries of successful claims that inspired gold fever lasted less than three years. Most miners eventually returned to their homes without realizing the fantasies of wealth that had once motivated them. In their diaries and letters, California became an archetype for possibility and for disappointment (Rohrbough 1997).

The California Gold Rush also became an archetype for California’s pattern of development as it was succeeded by a series of speculative booms that brought more attention and more migrants to California. “Elsewhere the tempo of development was slow at first, and gradually accelerated as energy accumulated,” wrote Carey McWilliams a century later, “but in California the lights went on all at once, in a blaze, and they have never been dimmed” (1949: 25).

The most recent assessment of the Gold Rush came during California’s Sesquicentennial which began, appropriately enough, in 1998 when California was enjoying yet another boom – the dot-com boom of internet technology companies – and ended in 2000 as that boom went bust. The new social history made it impossible to ignore the dark side of the Gold Rush – its racial violence, its catastrophic effect on Native Americans and the environment, the dislocation of families throughout the nation – and historian Kevin Starr, then chair of the Sesquicentennial Commission, accepted such revaluations as a necessary acknowledgment of California’s “sin.” Yet he insisted that in the Gold Rush lay the genes of California’s cultural DNA: exploitation of technology, a pattern of booms, a multicultural population, intense entrepreneurial energy, liberation of women, and an opening to Asian influence (1998: 61).

One Gold Rush feature that has persisted throughout California’s subsequent history is immigration. Immigration rates have waxed and waned with fluctuation in the economy and legal restrictions, but it has averaged 1,000 people a day since 1920 and, since the turn of the new century, the daily average increase is 1,670. The year my wife and I moved here, 1970, there were 20 million people living in California. In 2010 that number is expected to be 40 million. Since 1980, California has been receiving an average of 300,000 immigrants per year.

Underlying the diversity of immigrants to California is one feature universal to all: the decision to leave one’s home and the decision that California is where one wants to be. One of the few common threads of California identity is this exercise of choice: at some point everyone in California is – or is related to – someone who left his or her home and
came to California looking for something better. Immigrants have come to California to pursue many versions of “gold”: opportunities, artistic or economic; freedoms, political or sexual; or openness, geographical or intellectual. These diverse motivations get lumped into a single term, “the California Dream” – a term often invoked and seldom defined.

Kevin Starr is the great chronicler of the California Dream. The title he chose for the first volume of his magisterial history of California, *Americans and the California Dream: 1850–1915*, announces the trope that has carried his history through six volumes and a century of California’s history. In succeeding volumes Starr has chronicled the dream invented, endangered, embattled and enduring. “While yet barely a name on the map, it entered American awareness as a symbol of renewal,” he writes in his preface. “Obscurely, at a distance – then with rushes of clarity and delight – Americans glimpsed a California of beauty and justice, where on the land or in well-ordered cities they might enter into prosperity and peace” (1973: vii–viii).

When the Santa Fe railroad arrived in Los Angeles in 1887, it broke the monopoly of the Southern Pacific, briefly lowering the one-way fare from Kansas City from $125 to $1 and creating the first land boom in Southern California (Barron et al. 2000: 54). Almost immediately, California was portrayed as a natural paradise, an image that prevailed into the first decades of the twentieth century (ibid.: 100). The rise of Hollywood as the center of motion pictures added images of urban glamour to the definition of California, while the Great Depression of the 1930s added images of rural misery and labor struggle. In the aftermath of World War II, California was no longer seen as a pre-industrial Garden of Eden. Driven by scientific and technological advances during and after the war, California was the place where the future begins.

This was not the claim of promoters and boosters. As that group of scholars that assembled in Carmel discussed West Coast culture – its architecture, its opera and jazz, its painters and theaters and museums – their confidence grew. Never mind, Stegner reports, that “half of the people cited as signs of great creative growth were in-migrants, as were half of ourselves.” That was simply the defining feature of West Coast culture. They have come to prepare the coast “as a launching platform for the future” (Stegner 1982: 108). When Stegner’s article appeared in late 1959, the idea of California as the future may have looked attractive. The state’s freeway system was not yet clogged with traffic, its master plan of education was widely admired, and its legislature was seen as a model. But the Golden State’s golden age could not last. Enter Joan Didion, the great chronicler of California disappointment.

A California native whose parents arrived in California in the years just before and after statehood in 1850, Didion and her husband, John Gregory Dunne, began writing a column called “Points West” in 1967 for the
Saturday Evening Post. She published some of these columns in *Slouching towards Bethlehem* in 1968, the same year that California officially adopted “The Golden State” as its state motto. Didion’s lead story, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream,” announces itself as “a story about love and death in the golden land,” but, typically, Didion is being ironic. It is a story of unhappy marriage, adultery, and murder in San Bernardino. In “Notes from a Native Daughter,” she writes to those who have visited Los Angeles or San Francisco and believe they have been to California, whereas it is her hometown, Sacramento, that really is California and “California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension” (1968: 172). We are a long way from Starr’s view of California as a symbol of renewal. If California be the future, Didion warns, the nation and the world were in trouble.

Joan Didion left California for good in 1988, but she returned to the subject of California again 15 years later with *Where I Was From*. When her husband protested that the title should properly be “Where I Am From,” she insisted on “Where I Was From” as more accurate, more definitive in its separation. Yet even in this final work, she pays tribute to the compulsion to make something of the state, a compulsion that survives even the most severe disappointment. “California has remained in some way impenetrable to me, a wearying enigma, as it has to many of us who are from there,” she writes. “We worry it, correct and revise it, try and fail to define our relationship to it and its relationship to the rest of the country” (2003: 38). Her critique of California is a serious contribution to California’s literature of disappointment, but the California she writes about no longer exists, for in Didion’s book you will find not a single person of color.

Didion’s omission is the more astonishing given the dramatic impact of immigration: the most important definer of California in the last few decades has been the growing diversity of its population. In 1962, when Governor Edmund G. Brown proclaimed “California First Days” to celebrate California’s passing New York as the nation’s most populous state, the state had nearly 17 million people, of whom 14 million were non-Hispanic white. The primary language of foreign-born Californians was English, as most had come from either Canada or Great Britain. Now, one-fourth of California’s schoolchildren come from homes where English is not the primary language (Schrag 2006: 22–4).

Late in 1999, California officially became a majority–minority state, a state in which no ethnic group was a majority. According to official estimates, California’s current population is 45 percent Anglo, 35 percent Hispanic, 11 percent Asian, 6 percent black, 2 percent multi-race, and 1 percent Native American and Asian Pacific Islander (State of California, March 2006). As of 2000, nearly nine million California residents (26
percent) were born outside of the United States (compared with 12 percent nationally) and nearly 60 percent are from Latin America – 44 percent from Mexico alone – while 33 percent are from Asia. By 2011, Latinos are projected to surpass Anglos as the largest minority group.

Mexicans account for 44 percent of the foreign-born population in California, six times the percentage of the next highest group, Filipinos. The fact that two-thirds of foreign-born families are from Mexico and other Spanish-speaking countries has sparked concern, fear, and reaction. During the 1994 election, California Governor Pete Wilson’s campaign ran a television advertisement that showed Mexicans running across the California border while a voiceover ominously repeated, “They keep coming.” He endorsed a ballot initiative denying public education and other services to undocumented residents. Wilson was re-elected and Proposition 187 passed with nearly 60 percent of the vote. Four years later, California voters passed Proposition 227, which dismantled the state’s existing bilingual education programs and decreed that public school children be taught in English only. Cultural conservatives warned that Hispanic immigrants were not learning English and were not assimilating to core American values and that California was in danger of becoming “Mexifornia” and the US a “bilingual, bicultural” society (Hanson 2003; Huntington 2004).

The debate rages on – about how many illegal immigrants are in California and their impact on local economies and services – but some studies suggest that such fears may be based on demographic trends which are temporary. The foreign-born presence in California was 15 percent in 1980 and 26 percent in 2000, much higher than in any other state, but immigrants are now increasingly migrating to states other than California. Even if the number of immigrant arrivals in California were to remain constant, the share of Californians who are foreign-born in 2030 will still be less than 30 percent. In addition, the immigrants’ average length of residence is increasing. From 1970 to 1990, during the phase of accelerating immigration, half of all the foreign born each decade were recently arrived, but that fraction is receding to only one-third or one-quarter of the total foreign born. English proficiency increases significantly between first-generation immigrants and those in the second generation and the proportion speaking English exclusively rises from 10 percent in the first generation to 29 percent in the second generation to 94 percent in the third generation (Ramakrishnan & Johnson 2005: 11).

Meanwhile California’s culture is becoming increasingly and unselfconsciously multicultural and no recent survey of California culture that I have seen ignores this. In late 2000, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art mounted “Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000,” a comprehensive exhibition that explored the diversity of California art in the twentieth century. Essays that accompanied the exhibition repeatedly
acknowledged the importance of immigration in the creation of California’s art, music, and literature. The University of California’s definitive anthology of California literature to 1945 contains only a few non-Anglo voices – William Saroyan, Carlos Bulosan, Toshio Mori, or Jade Snow Wong – whereas a recent anthology contains native Californians like Maxine Hong Kingston, David Mas Masumoto, Yxta Maya Murray, Richard Rodriguez, and Gary Soto, not to mention immigrants like Khaled Hosseini, Chitra Divakaruni, or le thi diem thuy (Divakaruni et al. 2005).

The Next California Culture

In California, traditional cultural forms are transplants which adapt to local conditions, while modern cultural forms are often invented here. The list of items invented in California includes Barbie dolls and the hula hoops, the Frisbee and the freeway. California is the source of trend-setting environmental regulations and low emissivity windows; digital video recorders and computer-generated imagery; iPods and search engines; the discovery and treatment of AIDS and state-sponsored stem cell research; and venture capital and venture philanthropy (California 2007: 14–34). The three major entertainment media of the twentieth century – radio, television, and motion pictures – depended on technologies which developed in California, flourished here as industries, and changed the way America experienced culture.

Now the new media of the twenty-first century – the internet, search engines and web.2.0 – are again developing and flourishing as industries in California and changing patterns of cultural consumption once more. In a recent article, Bill Ivey and Steven Tepper argue that nineteenth-century inventions like the phonograph, the motion picture camera, and radio broadcasting made it possible for Americans who had no access to symphony halls or theaters to experience cultural performance, albeit performances packaged by others at a distance. “Local and vernacular art and entertainment were eclipsed by a culture that was increasingly defined by the tastes of a national elite at Columbia Records, or Universal Studios, or nonprofit arts organizations,” they argue, “the amateurs at home were overshadowed by the new class of creative ‘professionals,’ and audiences were increasingly socialized to be passive consumers, awaiting their favorite radio broadcasts or sitting in darkened theaters and concert halls, applauding on cue” (Ivey & Tepper 2006).

The new technology is reducing the high costs of artistic production and the challenges of finding an audience. Computer software enables people to compose their own music, make their own films, compose their own books and then distribute them over the internet. At the same time,
thanks to the iPod or TiVo (both invented in California), cultural experiences which could only be had from one source at a specific time can now be captured for consumption when and where the consumer wants. “The combination of the rise of serious amateur art making, the explosion of choice, and the sophistication of Internet-savvy consumers will create new micromarkets, challenging the dominance of 20th century mass markets” (Ivey & Tepper 2006).

The promises of this new cultural delivery system are many: decentralization of cultural authority and production, greater opportunities for people to express themselves culturally, more exposure to cultural products from others and especially from people in distant places, and more opportunities for direct connection between people. There are also concomitant dangers: a growing divide between people who have access to these resources and people who do not, a flattening out of cultural quality, and the demise of some of the cultural organizations that have provided much of the “live” culture in recent decades. This last development has already caught the attention of Californians.

There are an estimated 10,000 cultural organizations in California, ranging in size from the multi-billion-dollar endowment of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles to small non-profit cultural organizations living from performance to performance. As their name suggests, many of these organizations cannot support themselves on the strength of ticket sales alone, but they have proliferated because of support from private foundations and public cultural agencies. Such support was justified because the commercial market was widely viewed as unable to produce cultural products of sufficient quality, ethnic variety, and popular access. While their numbers have grown since the 1960s, a recent study shows they are now challenged by shrinking audiences and diminishing funding. “Audiences at nonprofit arts organizations are generally flat or shrinking,” the report warns, “and it is generally assumed that the field of cultural institutions is overcrowded” (AEA 2006: 6).

Unlike their counterparts in Canada and Europe, California cultural organizations cannot look to government agencies for significant support. California has a population slightly larger than that of Canada, but while Canada spends $243 million on the arts at the federal level, more than $7 per capita, the state of California spends $2.1 million, about 6 cents per capita (California Arts Council 2006). State support for the California Arts Council, which averaged $21.5 million annually for the period 1997–2003, was slashed to $1 million in the wake of fiscal crisis following the dot-com bust. Only the personal intervention of the Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts prevented California’s Arts Council funding from being zeroed out, and though the state’s economy has recovered, funding to the Arts Council has not. More than half of the agency’s current $3
The California Hope

I am not a disinterested observer of this experiment. I have a personal stake in how California’s culture is defined. Several years ago, I interviewed Californians from different parts of the state and different walks of life – writers, artists, scientists, activists, educators, public officials – some prominent, some not, some natives, some not. I wanted to know what, if anything, it meant to be a Californian. The state’s diversity showed itself in the answers I heard, of course, but after the first dozen or so, I found that one particular word kept surfacing: hope. These people or their parents or grandparents may have been drawn to California because of a dream – something as glorious as gold or as modest as a good job and good weather. They often encountered realities that tested or even destroyed those initial images or dreams. But those who stayed – and everyone I interviewed had obviously stayed – spoke about the persistence of hope which they identified with California.

As a result of the answers I heard, I can no longer think of California as a culture defined by dreams. A dream is somehow too insubstantial, too subjective, to propel and sustain a living culture. A dream is what people project on to the state before they arrive here, and the only thing that makes it a California dream is their chosen destination, their belief that California is a place where one can change one’s place, one’s neighbors, and make a new start. This has proven to be true often enough to encourage many to come here, but disappointment is what they feel when those dreams are not confirmed by their experience here. Those who try to
impose their dreams on the landscape, who meet neighbors they do not like or who do not like them, who never make California home, find the California dream turns into the California disappointment. This too has proven to be true often enough to drive people from the state. But dream and disappointment do not and cannot define California culture. Something more durable defines the culture that people who live here are creating, and hope is as good a word for this as any.

California has no special claim to being a culture of hope, of course. Every culture is necessarily a culture of hope, for every culture offers its people stories about what is worth living for, exemplary lives, resources for explaining and living through misfortune. But because people from so many parts of the world have come to California, because it remains at the forefront of so many technological innovations that will shape the culture of the future, and because it has a long history as a showcase for individual and social possibility, the contours of California hope continue to interest and influence the world.

In order to see all of California, you have to rise more than 1,000 miles above its surface. I have spent most of this essay defining California from a great distance in order not to be overwhelmed by the diversity of its surface features. In order to see examples of hope, however, we need to meet a few real Californians. These people are not particularly powerful or influential people, but the lives they are living accurately reflect the fundamental hope that is defining contemporary California’s culture.

Pai Yang doesn’t know the exact year of her birth; it was either 1969 or 1970, when what Americans call the Vietnam War spilled into Cambodia and Laos as well and her people, the Hmong, were fighting a secret war for the United States. When the Americans withdrew, her family fled to a refugee camp in Thailand, from where they were flown to Oregon under the sponsorship of a church. After five months as the only refugee family there, they moved to Iowa where there was a large Hmong community. When she was 10, the family came to Fresno to participate in the first Hmong New Year celebration there. They decided to stay in California because for Hmong elders, used to a warm climate year round, Fresno’s midwinter sunshine was far preferable to the snows of Iowa.

The Hmong had not left their homeland voluntarily, but fled the aftermath of the war in 1975 as refugees. They came not intending to stay and talked always about returning, a thought that sustained them through the prejudice and discrimination they had encountered in Fresno. By the 1990s, though, their children had begun calling America home and the elders began to realize they were not going to return. Like other immigrant communities before them, the Hmong community began to organize itself to obtain the economic and social services it needed in this new land, and they began to make a home in California.