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California: Possibility and Disappointment

California is described as the land of fruits and nuts, blue skies and warm weather; the Golden state. It is a place described in stories and tales as the region to find success, somewhere where anything can happen. The lure of California draws in immigrants from not only around the United States, but also the world. However, all is not as it seems in this west cost paradise. From the Gold Rush to today, people have been drawn in with tales of success and happiness, only to be met with hard work and despair. Possibility and disappointment intertwined create a paradox that defines California like no other place. California's environment breeds an understanding that while promising success to many, only a few will be able to make their dreams come true. It is this very incongruous nature that draws people in, each one individually believing that they will be the one to make it big, when in reality, the state's population growth, in part, is what keeps the individual from realizing the California Dream.

For many people, California has been painted as the land of palm trees and beaches. Southern California in particular has been packaged and sold to the people of the Midwest as early as the 1950s, if not before. Robert Fogelson, as quoted by Denise Spooner, points out that California, specifically southern California, was "initially developed, as a place like the Midwest, but better" (41) This selling of California packaged up the California Dream, transforming the dream into whatever was needed inspire people to move to the golden state. Responses to a questionnaire Spooner sent to people who had emigrated from the Midwest found that "for these

people, southern California in the post war years represented a place where their lives could be different, where they would be free to express their individuality as openly or privately as they wished" (42). This packaging of California helped to diffuse the idealized dream, however, because the dream became more of an individual belief. The California Dream began to mean different things to different people. For some, it was a place to get rich. For others, it was a place to be themselves. Still more people saw California as a place of adventure. According to Rawls, though, "the California Dream is simply a vision of the good life" (23).

As James Rawls states in his essay "California: A Place, a People, a Dream," opportunity and success are the heart of the California dream. In 1949, when men and women came out west, it was to California they came to seek their fortune, with "quick and easy wealth ... the promise of California, yet as more and more hopeful miners arrived, the prospects for the promise being fulfilled dimmed accordingly" (27). Even in its infancy, California promised more than it could deliver. "Hundreds of diaries and reminiscences extol the charms of the golden land, but others speak of the painful contrast between California's vaunted promises and its actual conditions." (26). It is no wonder that California failed to deliver. As people flooded the state, each one looking gold, it became harder and harder to find what they were searching for. As an anonymous writer once wrote during the gold rush, "... those who come here, as many do, and imagine that it [gold] is easily to be picked up, will be wonderfully disappointed" (36). At the same time, while people expected to make it big, "... the Americans have determined to drive from the mines every foreigner speaking the Spanish tongue" (36). Even during the gold rush, individuals realized that the more people there were, the less likely everyone would succeed. Men would later write, "Gentlemen, do not advise a dog to come to California" (37). Even at the height of the

gold rush, people would come to realize that the more people involved, the less success can be guaranteed.

However, this paradox of expectation versus reality isn't limited only to the gold rush. Even today, people come to California looking for the good life, for the life they've always wanted but believed couldn't be achieved anywhere else. Rawls states:

After more than a century of phenomenal growth, California became the nation's most populous state at the end of 1962 ... yet as the California dream succeeds in attracting ever greater numbers of people, the ability of California to fulfill its promises diminishes. (27)

For native Californians, it may be hard to understand what all the fuss is about. Being born into this golden state, it is easy to forget that others have worked hard to get here, and have expectation of reward for their hard work. Natives view California as home, but not necessarily a place where their dreams can come true. For people from other states though, California represents a new twist on the American dream, where not only can one have the house with the white picket fence, they can be rich too. Unfortunately, though, "Despair, isolation, and disillusionment arise out the newcomers' experience, turning would-be dreamers into bitter antagonists who denounce the false promises of the California Dream" (25).

The reason the California dream is so persistent, spanning the life of the state, is because it constantly renews its self. As Rawls says, "it's as though a special deity watches over California, for each generation a new resource or new industry develops, reaffirming once again the identity of California with opportunity" (23). It began with the gold rush in northern California, then the Oil boom in southern California. Following that, there was the citrus growth,

and then the Silicon Valley dot com bubble. Each generation has found a way to make an impact on California, even though the interim years bring recession and depression. Each time a new resource is found, the California Dream rises up again, ready to ensnare new people, drawing them into the state like flies to honey. Rawls observes that "like California and its people, the dream is alive, an ever-changing and turbulent dynamic" (25).

California is a state of paradoxes. It promises success and happiness to all, while at the same time, few rarely attain that goal. It is the hopeful ambitions of a nation, and perhaps the world, that keeps the California Dream alive. For every person who succeeds, there are numerous people who fail. Also, for every person who leaves, giving up on the dream, there are more to take their place. The rate of failure does not curb the enthusiasm of those who seek their dreams. Instead, it drives them to work harder, to find their own version of the dream. The variety of California Dreams available ensures that there is something for everyone; no one will be left out on the quest for success. However, there does seem to be one group of people who don't realize that the California Dream exists. For native Californians, the state doesn't hold a special meaning except that they call it home. The California Dream is decidedly for outsiders. After all, those people born California are born living the California Dream, whether they realize there is a dream or not. Success or failure, the dream is not something to be taken lightly. It is a dream that inspires people to do great things when they reach California.

Work Cited

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