

Californian Exceptionalism and the Cracks in the Dream: An Introduction

Vincenzo Bavaro

This brief introduction presents the issue of Californian exceptionalism – how both the representation and the cultural history of the Golden State emphasize its uniqueness and its difference from anywhere else – and the concept of “Jeremiad”, which the editor borrows from Sacvan Bercovitch’s classic articulation. Acknowledging and lamenting disaster and the apparent damnation of a people, Californian Jeremiad functions as an assertion and a reinforcement of a radical exceptionalism: there is nothing more American than California, or alternatively, this is not America at all. The introduction then provides an overview of a few classic works of literature from/about California highlighting the recurring dialogue between dreams and nightmares, utopia and dystopia, and finally claiming, with Mike Davis, that the “imagination of disaster” has long been at the heart of Californian culture.

Golden Hills: C Pam Zhang’s Chinese-American Extractive Fiction

Elisa Bordin

This essay analyzes the novel *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* (2020) by Chinese-American writer C Pam Zhang and how it provides a fresh and much-needed account of Californian history and the disastrous consequences of the 19th century Gold Rush, an activity that forever changed the demographic composition of the region. Both a historical novel and a western, *How Much of These Hills Is Gold* is a sad reflection on human extractivist activity on the landscape and its inhabitants; in particular, Zhang focuses on the legal and affective consequences of Californian laws that cut Chinese immigrants out of the regional official history. Because of its stress on issues of belonging, extraction, and immigrant labor, Zhang’s novel can be read as an innovative example of Californian extractive fiction, which deconstructs the American exceptionalist narrative of one of its most-mythologically charged states by unveiling its many contradictions and its history of landscape and human disaster.

Dynamite, Class Struggle, and Aqueducts: Louis Adamic's Critical Narratives on Los Angeles

Enrico Mariani

Starting from Mike Davis's portrait of Louis Adamic, the essay traces a wider overview of the latter's books and articles centered on Los Angeles by emphasizing their debunking of the myths which surrounded the Southern Californian city in the 1920s. Inspired by the works of Upton Sinclair, H. L. Mencken, and Sinclair Lewis, Adamic's representations of Los Angeles contrasted the "good climate & profit" propaganda by depicting the city as the site of class and racial oppression, as a "modern" metropolis driven by small-town men and spiritual gurus, and whose ecosystem was put in danger by unscrupulous businessmen. His socio-cultural portraits of 1920s L.A. population and the framing of the city as always on the verge of social and natural disasters have been an inspiration for contemporary fellow writers such as John Fante, Nathanael West, and Carey McWilliams. Adamic's writings, eventually, can be said to contribute both to the literary and cinematic *noir* and hard-boiled imaginary of the city and to the city's ecocritical discourse.

The Camps Go Mainstream: The Japanese American Internment in James Ellroy's *Perfidia* and *This Storm* and in Marguerite Bennett's *Bombshells United*

Nicolangelo Becce

The essay focuses on the choices made by James Ellroy in his novels *Perfidia* (Alfred A. Knopf 2014) and *This Storm* (Alfred A. Knopf 2019), and by Marguerite Bennett in the superhero comics series *Bombshells United* (DC Comics 2018-2019) in terms of representation of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. More specifically, the essay points out how the two authors respectively re-evoked, in their fictional works, the Japanese American incarceration and the context in which it took place by revising the historical facts to suit their artistic needs, and how such representations can impact contemporary readers who often learn for the first time about this tragic historical event through mainstream products such as Ellroy's and Bennett's works.

Spatiality and Racial Conflicts on the Buses in Hisaye Yamamoto's and Brando Skyhorse's Short Stories

Vincenzo Bavaro

In contrast with the traditional image of private mobility and car culture in Los Angeles, this essay focuses on two short stories set on public transportation: "Wilshire Bus" by Hisaye Yamamoto (1950) and "Rules of the Road" by Brando Skyhorse (in *The Madonnas of Echo Park*, 2010). Both stories stage episodes of racial conflict on buses and highlight explosive ambiguities in two separate historical moments that share a similar rhetoric of progress and racial integration. Through these two texts, the essay focuses on the representation and articulation of urban space, historical memory, and social crisis in the city of Los Angeles, exploring the ways in which they manifest themselves in the cracks of utopian narratives surrounding social integration and multiculturalism.

Sunshine and Noir: the Manson Murders in the Contemporary 1960s Narratives

Antonio Di Vilio

In 2019, when Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time...in Hollywood* was released, it was 50 years since the night of August when members of the Manson Family drove to 10050 Cielo Drive in the Benedict Canyon and committed multiple homicides. By analyzing Tarantino's movie as well as other two fictional works, Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009) and Steve Erickson's *Zeroville* (2007), this essay tries to problematize the way in which mainstream culture and political forces have used this episode in order to dismiss and subdue the Sixties countercultural experience as intrinsically nihilistic and destructive. In these 21st century noir narratives, in fact, the Manson murders serve as the basis for a revisitation and a reconstruction of the broader political and social atmosphere of late Sixties Los Angeles, and crime fiction becomes the ideal site in which the history of Californian sunshine-to-noir myth can be temporarily challenged.

From the Ghetto to the Mainstream: A Story of Redemption

Marta Ciccolari Micaldi

Starting from the identification of some manifestations of the disaster in the city of Los Angeles as related in the essay *Everything Now* by Rosecrans Baldwin, this short writing offers an alternative look at the mainstream narrative of the city and of the whole region of California. In particular, it proposes to turn it into a Black narrative and to look at the mostly unknown experience of the Compton Cowboys and at the pop culture stories that accompanied their rise over the last couple of years as a sign of revival and redemption.

“The Upside of Chaos is Freedom”: A Conversation with Steve Erickson

Antonio Di Vilio

Born and raised in Southern California, Steve Erickson is one of America’s greatest contemporary writers. Mostly associated with postmodernism and the Avant-Pop experimental artistic movement, Erickson is the author of thirteen books, including *Days Between Stations* (1985), *Tours of the Black Clock* (1989), *Arc d’X* (1993), *Amnesiascope* (1996), *Zeroville* (2007), and *Shadowbahn* (2017). During his long career he has received multiple awards, such as the American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature and the Guggenheim Fellowship. In this interview held in Hollywood in February 2023, the writer discusses his deep tie with the city of Los Angeles, the relationship with his writing and various issues which populate his literature, such as music, cinema, politics, history and art.

Emptiness and Form to Make Room for the Voices of Things: Ruth Ozeki and the Remediation of the Materiality of the Book for the Digital Age

Serena Fusco

This essay discusses Ruth Ozeki’s most recent novels, *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013) and *The Book of Form and Emptiness* (2021), in the light of several recent theoretical strands, thus indirectly showing

the interconnectedness thereof. Such critical discourses include, on the one hand, theories of multimediality, intermediality, and transmediality; and, on the other hand, theories of relational comparison and the Pacific which elaborate on Édouard Glissant's ideas of archipelagos and Relation. I argue that Ozeki's novels deploy the motif of reading, and especially of the book, as ways to re-imagine the book and its function in and for our present, planetary, transmedial condition. Ozeki responds to the crisis of the printed book, and of the institutions traditionally accompanying its centrality, by imagining and articulating forms of alternative materiality and concreteness for it, grounded in Buddhist strategies of non-attachment and a historically situated ecology of matter.

Wild, Wicked, and Crazy Brave Tongues: Locating the Collaborative Origins of Sandra Cisneros' and Joy Harjo's Poetic Voices

Audrey Goodman

This essay explores the generative potential of intimate contact zones in the careers of Chicana poet Sandra Cisneros and Mvskoke poet Joy Harjo. It maps key locations in both poets' creative itineraries from the time of their graduate training at the Iowa Writers' Workshop through the present and considers how the relationships forged in many different locations shaped their imaginative lives and poetic personas. By writing about common places such as bars, city streets, hotel rooms, rented houses, and kitchen tables, Cisneros and Harjo invent poetic voices and literary forms in which intimate, cultural, and generational knowledges intermingle; read together, their published collections foreground the conditions in which women artists of color in the United States live and work.

Those Things Can Be Fun Too: A Conversation with Robert Gipe

Mattia Zoppetti

The article is the account of a written conversation the curator had with writer Robert Gipe, author of a trilogy of novels set in the *hollers* of Southern Kentucky. Following the tight connection between Gipe's fictional books and the actual socio-cultural substratum of the Appalachian region, the account explores some of the main issues

that are unfolding in today's Appalachia. Gipe's original viewpoint about the history and present of a place and its people, its economy, politics, culture, way of life, old and new struggles, is broadly discussed and analyzed. Gipe's experience as an artist so deeply rooted in the local context where he lives and works, constitutes a first-hand contribution to delve deep into the major topics that come from the past and define both modern-day Appalachia and its future developments.