California: Critical Histories

Teacher: Bob Nowlan, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Critical Studies, Department of English, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

A San Diego Free University Class

Sponsored by Democratic Socialists of America, San Diego

Endorsed by Social Justice Executive Team, First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego

Sundays, 6 to 8 pm, Common Room,
First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego Hillcrest Campus,
September 13 through November 1, 2026

Class Description:

Kevin Starr, University of Southern California professor from 1989 through his death in 2017, and California state librarian from 1994 through 2004, famously identified *The* California Dream as the principal unifying dimension in the history of California he recounted over the course of nine books: *Americans and the California Dream, 1850–1915* (1973 and 1986); *Inventing the Dream: California through the Progressive Era* (1985); *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (1990); *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (1996); *The Dream Endures: California Enters the 1940s* (1997); *Embattled Dreams: California in War and Peace, 1940–1950* (2002); *Coast Of Dreams: California on the Edge, 1990–2003* (2004); *California: a history* (2005); and *Golden dreams: California in an age of abundance, 1950–1963* (2009). Starr defined 'The California Dream' broadly and diffusely, while readily acknowledging 'The California Dream' amounts to a synthesis of many California dream*s*, yet Margaret Crable, writing for *USC Dornside*, in 2024, provides us an effective summary of Starr's overall conception:

> California's spirit is one of boundless optimism, where dreams of freedom, fortune, and reinvention continue to inspire new generations. From its endless freeways symbolizing personal liberation to the creativity of Hollywood and the resilience of aspirational newcomers, the state remains a beacon of possibility. Even in the face of challenges, Californians persist, embodying the enduring belief that with grit and vision, a better future is always within reach. It is this unshakable pursuit of the California Dream that defines the Golden State, ensuring its story continues to inspire future generations.

The crux of this conception of *The* California Dream is its emphasis on California as a place where people can not only imagine but also achieve a good life far better than they can realize elsewhere, and as a place, what's more, where people can successfully reinvent themselves.

Starr recognized 'The California Dream' represents an ideal that has often fallen short, even far short, from reality, but he nonetheless champions the aspirational value of this Dream. As Starr writes in the "Preface" to *Americans and the California Dream 1850-1945*,

> Of course, the dream outran the reality, as it always does. California experienced more than its share of social problems because its development was so greedy and so unregulated. No evocation of imaginative aspiration can atone for the burdens of the California past, especially the violence and the brutality. Acknowledging this tragedy, however, Californians must also attune themselves to the hope. The struggle for corrective action in the face of history put earlier generations in touch with their best selves. What they attained, attained in the struggle and the dreaming, deserves our respect–and our most sincere celebration. (viii)

Nevertheless, for a great many people who have lived and do live in California, 'The California Dream' is largely if not entirely irrelevant–or simply altogether inaccessible. Many have not chosen, of their own volition, to come here, motivated by the conviction that in California they would gain the opportunity to achieve a far better life. And many who have come here, or who have been brought here, or who have always lived here, have not experienced a life of 'freedom, fortune, and reinvention' in California. Certainly, a class titled "California: Critical Histories" does focus upon, and emphasize, 'The Dark Side of the California Dream'. However, our focus, and our emphasis, will not be that simple. 'The history of California' is multiple, complex, contradictory, and dynamic. We who live in California today are participants and contributors to, not mere inheritors of this history. We can learn from California's past–especially from the worst greed, cruelty, and violence that this past has encompassed–in striving to transform California, in the present, and especially for the future, so it becomes possible for a great many more people to enjoy an equitably inclusive and long-term sustainable 'California Dream'.

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Critical histories, of California and otherwise, question and challenge triumphal accounts that privilege the vantage points, and the achievements, of groups of people who have exercised dominant social, economic, political, and cultural power. Critical histories, in contrast, champion the stories and perspectives representative of groups of people who have faced substantial marginalization, exclusion, oppression–and elimination. Critical histories foreground considerations of social justice–and injustice. Critical histories inquire into complexities and

contradictions involved in technological development. Critical histories inquire into complexities and contradictions involved in intervention within and transformation of nature. Critical histories inquire into complexities and contradictions involved in changing forms of organization of life as lived in human communities. Critical histories inquire into complexities and contradictions involved in the rise and spread of ideologically influential myths and dreams. Critical histories complicate narratives and explanations proffered by established, official, mainline histories. And critical histories support ongoing struggles, even against enormous odds, for social transformation, in the interest of human emancipation, collective equality, ecological sustainability, and a peaceful world.

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In this class we will focus on Indigenous Histories of California and what we can and should learn from taking these into account, Immigrant Histories of California especially from Asia and in particular from China and what we can and should learn from taking these into account, Latino/Latinx/Latine histories of California and what we we can and should learn from taking these into account, diverse histories of struggles for civil liberties and human rights in California and what we can and should learn from taking these into account, and histories of California's capitalist development in particular centered around Stanford University/Palo Alto/Silicon Valley and what we can and should learn from taking these into account. But we will also keep coming back to why are we here, in California, each of us, what has brought us here, what do we find attractive/appealing about living here as well as what we find the opposite and what are our hopes and dreams for our future in California as well as for California's future/the future for Californians yet to come.

Schedule:

* All readings for this class will be available in dropbox folders which I will give students enrolled in this class permission to access. Note well, I have carefully excerpted selections from much longer books in the readings for weeks two through eight, scanning pages to pdf and then whiting out material on scanned pages that I am not asking you to read. I have tried to select key passages from these books, while maintaining as much coherence as possible, but I have had to leave out a great deal, because I respect I can only ask you to read so much each week. For those who are interested, you may certainly seek out the entire books to read on your own. *

Week One, 9/13: Introductions. Initial Discussion of 'The California Dream'. **Read *before* class meets:**

1. Class Syllabus.

2. Margaret Drable; "California Dreaming"; *USC Dornsife Magazine*, USC College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences; December 20, 2024; https://dornsife.usc.edu/magazine/california-dreaming/.

3. William Deverell; "Imagining the 'California Dream'"; *USC Dornsife Magazine*, USC College of Letters, Arts, and Sciences; November 2, 2017; https://dornsife.usc.edu/news/stories/imagining-the-california-dream/.

4. "A *Boom* Interview: Kevin Starr"; *Boom California*; January 15, 2017; https://boomcalifornia.org/2017/01/15/a-boom-interview-kevinstarr/.

Week Two, 9/20: Discussion of Readings, and Issues Prompted by Readings, from Deborah A. Miranda, *Bad Indians (Expanded Edition): A Tribal Memoir*, 2024, Supplemented by Readings from Damon B. Atkins and William J. Bauer Jr., *We Are the Land: a History of Native California*, 2021. **Read *before* class meets:**

Selections from *Bad Indians (Expanded Edition): A Tribal Memoir* **and** from *We Are the Land: a History of Native California*, Available via Dropbox.

Week Three, 9/27: Discussion of Readings, and Issues Prompted by Readings, from Erika Lee and Judy Yung, *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*, 2012. **Read *before* class meets:**

Selections from *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*, Available via Dropbox.

Week Four, 10/4: Discussion of Readings, and Issues Prompted by Readings, from David E. Hayes-Bautista, *La Nueva California: Latinos from Pioneers to Post-Millennials*, 2017. **Read *before* class meets:**

Selections from *La Nueva California: Latinos from Pioneers to Post-Millennials*, Available via Dropbox.

Week Five, 10/11: Discussion of Readings, and Issues Prompted by Readings, from Elaine Elinson and Stan Yogi, *Wherever There's a Fight: How Runaway Slaves, Suffragists, Immigrants, Strikers, and Poets Shaped Civil Liberties in California*, 2019–Part A. **Read *before* class meets:**

Selections from *Wherever There's a Fight: How Runaway Slaves, Suffragists, Immigrants, Strikers, and Poets Shaped Civil Liberties in California*–Part A, Available via Dropbox.

Week Six, 10/18: Discussion of Readings, and Issues Prompted by Readings, from Elaine Elinson and Stan Yogi, *Wherever There's a Fight: How Runaway Slaves, Suffragists, Immigrants, Strikers, and Poets Shaped Civil Liberties in California*–Part B. **Read *before* class meets:**

Selections from *Wherever There's a Fight: How Runaway Slaves, Suffragists, Immigrants, Strikers, and Poets Shaped Civil Liberties in California*, 2019–Part B, Available via Dropbox.

Week Seven, 10/25: Discussion of Readings, and Issues Prompted by Readings, from Malcolm Harris, *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World*, 2023–Part A, Available via Dropbox. **Read *before* class meets:**

Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World–Part A, Available via Dropbox.

Week Eight, 11/1: Discussion of Readings, and Issues Prompted by Readings, from Malcolm Harris, *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World*, 2023–Part B, Available via Dropbox. **Read *before* class meets:**

Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World–Part B, Available via Dropbox.

Prospective Supplemental Field Trips: If interest is sufficient and we can agree on days and times, we may take 'field trips', most likely on Saturday afternoons, lasting approximately two hours each, to San Diego History Center and/or San Diego Chinese Museum and/or Chicano Park and Museum.

Format for Class Meetings:

I as the teacher will lead discussion while pursuing a variety of formats. Yet typically the class will proceed as follows. In the first part of the session students will divide into small groups to discuss questions related to the reading for the week, questions provided by me along with questions students come up with yourselves. In the second part of class, each group will share the gist of their discussion and we will talk together about the questions as a whole class. In the third part of class, as time permits, we may pursue an additional creative exercise, designed by me. I likely also, from time to time, will share video clips or short videos, songs, images, and other objects relevant to the focus of our discussion in helping us make further useful connections. At the beginning of each class session I will provide each student with an outline of class activity for that class session, and I will also make these texts, and others as useful, available for you to access in a dropbox folder I will share with you. I will, in addition, send you a follow up message after each class meeting offering further reflections on and sharing further resources related to what we just read and discussed.

About the Teacher:

I worked for 38 years as a university-level faculty member, including the last 27 years as a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, concentrating in critical studies, from 1985

through 2023. More specifically, I taught critical theory; critical studies in literature, film, television, sports, popular music, and popular culture; LGBTQIA+ studies; modern to contemporary drama; modern to contemporary British literary and cultural studies; and critical studies in disability and in mental health and illness. Throughout that time I taught all my classes by way of discussion, not lecture, and through allied forms of active and interactive learning. I also organized and taught classes as part of two free universities, one in Syracuse, NY, and one in Tempe, AZ, as well as organized and led multiple community-based film festivals and series, with every screening followed by facilitated discussion, as well as multiple other public educational events. You can read more about me at: https://people.uwec.edu/ranowlan/PROFILE_.htm

The Role of the Teacher in this Class:

I will direct, and facilitate, our discussions. But I assume, approaching teaching this class, that all of you bring to bear considerable knowledge, experience, talent, and insight that will be relevant to the focuses of our discussions and enabling of what we accomplish in working together. I expect to learn with and from you, as well as vice-versa. More specifically, my aims as the teacher in this class, will be as follows:

1. To provide a general, flexible structure for our discussion and activity.

2. To help insure as many people as possible get a chance to participate and contribute, and reasonably equitably so. To help insure no one is silenced and no one unduly dominates.

3. To help insure we don't become excessively or obsessively focused on any one singularly minute area of concern, especially of a tangential nature.

4. To help insure people speak to each other and to the readings, as well as draw connections with what we talk about from week to week.

5. To help us recognize major lines of convergence, and of divergence, in how we make sense of and respond to specific issues that come up in the course of our discussion.

6. To introduce and model making connections with other texts–written, audio, audio-visual, etc.–as useful.

About the Concept of a Free University:

A free university provides a community-based alternative to established universities. At free universities classes are free of charge in contrast with established universities where people must pay for access. Free universities often offer classes not taught, or not often, within established universities. Free universities often have been conceived not only as leftist interventions versus

established institutional modes of 'higher education' but also as sites for engaging with leftist ideas and as allied with leftist praxis.

About Democratic Socialists of America San Diego:

DSA San Diego builds progressive movements for social change and works to establish an openly democratic socialist presence in area communities and politics. Democratic Socialists of America is the largest socialist organization in the US, with well over 100,000 members and chapters in all 50 states. DSA believes in economic and political democracy–in society organized and run to meet human needs, not profits for a few. DSA is an activist organization, rooted in the work of its chapters, that each pursue specific programs, strategies, and tactics in support of broadly common goals. DSA San Diego, which itself now includes over 1300 members, is working in collaboration with me to make this class possible, including by taking charge of publicity and promotion, recruitment and assessment of applications for enrollment, and assisting with costs involved in participating in this class. More information about DSA San Diego is available via this link: https://dsasandiego.org

About First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego:

First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego has offered a religious voice of freedom, reason, and tolerance in San Diego since 1873. Unitarian Universalists' covenant is expressed through shared values of interdependence, pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity, and equity–all centered around love. Although Unitarianism and Universalism both have origins as liberal Christian traditions, today Unitarian Universalism embraces diverse teachings from many different global religions and philosophies, and welcomes many members who identify as atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists as well as many who identify with other than Jewish and Christian religions traditions such as Buddhism and Paganism. Unitarian Universalists likewise share commitment to eight overarching principles: The inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth; A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process; The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; Respect for the interdependent web of all existence; and Working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions. More information about First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego is available via this link: https://www.firstuusandiego.org

Non-Discrimination:

We expect all enrolled in this class to treat everyone else enrolled in the class, and the teacher, with respect, recognizing and accepting we learn and grow through taking the time and investing the care to genuinely seek to understand and appreciate differences, while not discriminating against others in the course of carrying out the collective work of this class, in discussion or

otherwise, on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, ancestry, disability, medical condition, genetic information, or age.

Other Expectations of Students:

Try to do the best you can to help make these genuinely collective discussions, equitably inclusive of everyone. Please be respectful of the facilities at First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego. Observe all signs instructing what the church expects people to do and not do. Help put chairs back to where they were at the start of class if you can. During class you may feel free to stand, walk about, even lie down, as well as sit, if need be, and you are welcome to bring in and make use of anything that helps you stay focused and not become agitated, as need be. Use of the Common Room allows for you to bring and consume snacks. Please let me know if you have any additional accommodation needs, and I will do my best to work with you. I myself have lived, long-term, with multiple chronic illnesses, that amount to real, albeit largely invisible or non-visible disabilities, so I can and do empathize.

Concluding Comment:

DSA San Diego and I are partnering in offering this free university class and others to come in order to create brave spaces where San Diegans can work to collectively understand issues of vital interest and urgent concern, while practicing forms of learning and interaction that move from individualism toward collaboration, participation, and responsibility to another and to the larger communities we live in and share together. Thank you for joining us and contributing to these ends!