



## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# The Not-So-Golden State



Katherine Streeter for The Chronicle Review

By Mikita Brottman | JANUARY 02, 2011 ✓

PREMIUM

In John Frankenheimer's 1966 movie *Seconds*, Arthur Hamilton, a middle-aged businessman stuck in a rut, is offered the chance to start over as a "reborn." With a new, youthful physique and a stylish California beach house, Arthur (Rock Hudson) regains his vitality. His adventure

begins with a nude frolic among local pagans at a wild bacchanalia.

When I first saw *Seconds*, in June 2008, the film had particular relevance for me, because I had just accepted an offer to direct a new graduate program at an institute in Southern California—let's call it Sacred Grove—and was planning to move, with my partner, from Baltimore to the Santa Barbara area. As we watched the movie, we wondered if our new life would resemble that enjoyed by Rock Hudson, who moves from a bleak nowhere into a world of wine, sunshine, and parties on the beach.

This, we knew, was a common stereotype of life in Southern California. Another was that, despite the lush weather and gorgeous landscape, the cultural environment was sleepy, even sterile. I found this difficult to credit. After 25 years in academe, teaching on three different continents, I assumed that as long as I was working at a university, I would feel at home. Sacred Grove proved me wrong.

True to the stereotype, life moved much more slowly in California. The internal bureaucracy at Sacred Grove seemed antiquated; hard copies and snail mail were used for transactions that I had long been used to conducting online. The mood of the place

was both relaxed and oddly rule-bound. Everyone dressed casually and used first names but meetings always began with a minute's silent meditation, sometimes involving hand-holding.

The denizens of Sacred Grove seemed healthier, more attractive, and less neurotic than the kinds of people I was used to. But I found all that casual wholesomeness bland and oppressive. It made me miss the edgy art students I'd been teaching on the East Coast, who were casual in a very different way, with their homemade clothes and paint-splattered hair, and their fascination with steampunk aesthetics and man-made environments rather than moon cycles and compost.

Another problem was the difference in the cost of living. (How does anyone on an academic salary afford to own a home in the Santa Barbara area?) True, my job offer came with a salary raise, but that nowhere near covered the increased living expenses. The housing crisis meant we were unable to sell or even rent out our Baltimore apartment, so we ended up having to keep up with our mortgage payments on top of paying substantial California rent. Extra stress was caused by the fact that, despite plenty of close contacts and well-meaning promises, my partner was unable to pick up any adjunct teaching. California budget cuts were causing layoffs right and left, and Sacred Grove had a strict policy against spousal or partner hires, even at the adjunct level (and the adjunct pay was the lowest I've ever heard of anywhere, ever).

I accept that my experience may well have been unique. I realize that California is home to some of the best universities in the world, and I have met academics on the West Coast who could never imagine living anywhere else. Perhaps my discomfort stemmed from spending most of my life in cities, or maybe two years was just not long enough to really get to know a place and settle down.

The truth is, I felt utterly out of place at Sacred Grove. Accustomed to having my social and academic lives woven inextricably together, I was not used to the distance—geographical, but in other senses, too—between my life and my work. On the East Coast, my closest personal relationships had been with my colleagues, usually from my own department. My students, both present and past, have often been my closest friends. Now I was living in a small, rural town 30 miles from the university, making

impossible that kind of web of relationships. Instead of seeing my students everywhere I went, I never saw them at all.

Before we moved, we had been told that Southern California is one of the most beautiful places on earth. True, it is highly diverse in its natural beauty. The house we were finally able to afford to rent, in Ojai, came with a large backyard full of coconut palms, bird-of-paradise flowers, California poppies, and—naturally—a swimming pool. I sometimes saw coyotes on the way to work, and at night one of the trees in our yard was a haven for barn owls.

Certainly we noticed and appreciated the natural beauty that surrounded us, but, like many academics, we are indoor types. We spend most of our time sitting at our laptops, surrounded by piles of books. We are not people who enjoy regular hikes in the hills, and—in this eco-conscious climate, I am almost ashamed to admit it—we have no interest in the natural environment.

As I soon came to discover, that attitude is unthinkable in California. The Sacred Grove campus was lovingly integrated into its natural surroundings, between foothills and ocean. The plantings and structures were designed to blend in with the environment in such a way as to invite birds, insects, and other animals to make their homes there. Fruits, herbs, and vegetables were grown on the campus in organic gardens and orchards. So omnipresent was nature, in fact, that it became part of almost every academic discussion, no matter what the subject. And by "nature," I mean not just the state of the planet, but also lawn growth, plant care, birdseed, and sprinkler systems.

Yet the nature worship at Sacred Grove seemed perplexingly inconsistent. After reading at length how the sustainable campus had been populated with "animal-friendly plants," I was taken aback to learn that the animals to whom the plants were friendly did not include my bulldog—a faithful companion in my Baltimore classes—who was not even permitted on the campus at Sacred Grove.

Moreover, the stretch of U.S. Highway 101 between Ventura and Santa Barbara may have been idyllic, but I soon discovered that when you are stuck in traffic every day, the sight of the ocean can become, like the glimpse of sky through the window of a prison



cell, a source more of frustration than of pleasure, especially in extreme heat. And extreme weather, of course, is something else California is famous for. In our two years in Ojai, we experienced shelf-rattling earthquakes, road-blocking mudslides, and out-of-control wildfires. By the time our cat was killed by one of the barn owls nesting in our yard, Baltimore was looking like a sanctuary.

In the end, our experience was, in fact, quite similar to that of Arthur Hamilton in *Seconds*. In the second half of the film, the Californian bacchanals take on a nightmarish tone, and Arthur starts regretting his decision to become a "reborn." He feels undignified amid the casual ease of the hippies and pagans, and he yearns for his old, genteel life. But at the end of the film, he realizes, to his horror, that there is no exit; failed "reborns" are turned into corpses.

Fortunately, our predicament was less bleak. We returned to Baltimore last fall.

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