

SEARCH/IUF seminar on the spatial imagination in American literature and art,
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“Imagining Elsewhere: Space, Possibility, and California in African American Fiction”

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Abstract. In 1902, Black newspaper editor Jefferson Edmonds triumphantly declared California “the greatest state for the Negro,” and the promise of an integrated El Dorado indeed renewed its appeal to successive generations of Black migrants from emancipation to World War II. By the 1960s, California had established itself as a hub of radical African American politics, a place to imagine Black futures. Yet California is also the state of the Watts Rebellion and Rodney King, of the most restrictive historical redlining practices in the nation, of Bobby Hutton shot down with his hands up. This talk will explore how Black writers of fiction have considered the Janus-faced role that California has played in the history of African American life, demonstrating the central but understudied role played by California in the African American literary imagination—as a speculative space where alternative possibilities for Black existence can be hypothesized and, perhaps, made real.

Post-1960s African American fiction, this talk will argue, responds both to California’s contested and ambiguous role in histories of African American liberation and to a dichotomous sense of extreme possibility (at once utopian and apocalyptic) that defines the cultural construction of California. For authors from Ishmael Reed to Wanda Coleman, Al Young to Dana Johnson, California enables new ways of thinking about Blackness. Though their approaches and conclusions differ, these writers share a sense that California’s unique spatial imaginary provokes new possibilities in the U.S. racial imaginary: as the symbolic last frontier, a vision of both American triumph and American tragedy, California is built upon a conviction that meanings of space are intrinsically and insolubly contestable. Exactly that contest is taken up by California’s contemporary Black authors. Apprehending a place whose role in American self-narrative has *always* been uncertain, they ask why that role might not be as a fulfilment of Black possibility, an inexhaustible elsewhere.

Bio. Michael Docherty is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Innsbruck. His research primarily considers how California has been constructed in American (and indeed global) imaginaries, and how fiction has both shaped and been shaped by California’s unique spatial, racial, and cultural histories. Michael’s work has appeared in *Crime Fiction Studies*, *Textual Practice*, *Comparative American Studies*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Post45 Contemporaries*, which he also co-edits. His first book, *The Recursive Frontier: Race, Space, and the Literary Imagination of Los Angeles*, will be published in April 2024 by SUNY Press, and he is currently co-editing *Los Angeles: A Literary History* for Cambridge University Press. Michael’s second monograph, in progress, is titled *Black Horizons: African American Literature and the Possibility of California*.