Opinion: The slaves of ‘La La Land’—and South L.A.

By Joe Mathews

The new film musical “La La Land” is being celebrated as a love letter to L.A. But the darker heart of the movie lies in a brief and devastating critique of Southern California, delivered by the jazz pianist played by Ryan Gosling.

“That’s L.A.,” he tells his lover, an aspiring actress played by Emma Stone. “They worship everything and they value nothing.”

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There has been no better recent summary of the California struggle—with the very notable exception of the 2015 novel, “The Sellout”, whose author Paul Beatty recently became the first American to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize for Fiction.

“La La Land” and “The Sellout” seem very different. The film, an Oscar favorite, can be seen as a glossy escapist romance about white artists who live around Griffith Park. The novel is a taboo-trashing racial satire about an African-American urban farmer of watermelons and artisanal weed who reintroduces segregation to his South L.A. neighborhood, in hopes of putting it back on the map.

But the film and the novel are two of the most thought-provoking and entertaining documents of today's California. And both are about the same big problem: that for all our celebration of game changers in this state, we offer precious little space or support to those who dare upset our status quo.

The film and the movie also make the same provocative argument about how to break through the Golden State's stacked deck: Don't be afraid to do things that are totally nuts. Both works specifically champion a self-sacrificing craziness, a willingness to surrender yourself and the people you love to focus on making your mark.

"La La Land" makes a straightforward case for crazy. Gosling's musician is the film's romantic hero, because of his uncompromising commitment to restoring traditional jazz even though he can't pay his bills since the world is abandoning the form. Stone's frustrated actress only inches closer to the red carpet when she devotes herself to producing a one-woman play in a theater she can't afford to rent. In the audition scene in which she finally breaks through, she embraces the virtues of craziness in song: "A bit of madness is key to give us new colors to see. Who knows where it will lead us?"

Beatty's novel similarly suggests that, to smash through the California looking-glass world, the sanest course is to go over the edge. After the city of L.A. removes his minority neighborhood from the map, the farmer fights this fire of systemic discrimination by violating legal and cultural norms. Most outlandishly, he takes a slave, who helps him segregate the local school, hospital, bus line, and businesses with signs reading "Colored Only" and "No Whites Allowed."

Two provocative parts of the plot stand out—how long it takes for anyone to notice the farmer's segregation edicts, and how, through the farmer's unconstitutional acts, seeds of tolerance (and lower crime, higher test scores, more polite behavior)

take root.

“The racism takes them back,” the farmer explains. “Makes them humble. Makes them realize how far we’ve come and, more important, how far we have to go.”

Both the film and the book, for all their high ambition, fall back on some wondrous magical realism as an escape hatch from the difficult political juggling acts they perform. The “La La” lovers literally float into the stars through the ceiling of the Griffith Park Observatory, while “The Sellout” Metro bus becomes a rolling party that ends with the vehicle being driven into the Malibu surf.

Both works wrestle with the conflict between loyalty to one’s dreams and selling out—and in the process point out just how hard it has become to tell the difference between the two. And both get at a painful paradox. We know we must hold onto real people and real things, to be truly human. But in L.A., we learn we must loosen our grip on reality to get ahead.

In this way, both masterpieces ultimately raise the question of whether making your mark here is worth the cost. No character in the book or the movie is happier than the farmer’s slave in Beatty’s satirized world, an aging actor from the 1950’s TV show “Little Rascals” who refuses all efforts to free him. Trying to be a star in L.A. is so confounding that he comes to prefer the simplicity of quiet servitude.

“I’m a slave. That’s who I am,” he insists to the farmer. “It’s the role I was born to play.”

After all, if you’re going to live in a place that values nothing, why fight so hard to be something?

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.