Chapter Two

“I think our romance is spoiled”

Mixed Marriage and Land Loss in Nineteenth-Century Historical Romances of California

I: Representing the Right of Way: Literary Eulogies and Litigious Novels

While the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo appeared to settle who could cultivate, capitalize, and control the land, literary representations of the right of way continue long after 1848 to adjudicate cultural title to the state. Regardless of their political positioning, fictions produced in the wake of the U.S.-Mexican War struggle to reestablish primogeniture within a troubled space. The editors and writers assembled in San Francisco in 1868 to discuss the inaugural cover illustration of the new western magazine, the Overland Monthly, settle upon “a growling young California grizzly bear, the mascot of the state.”1 The bear is “objectless,” Mark Twain recalls, until Bret Harte draws the lines of a railroad track under its feet. “[B]ehold he was a magnificent success! . . . the ancient symbol of California savagery snarling at the approaching type of high and progressive Civilization, the first Overland locomotive!”(9). Twain’s salubrious recoloring of this icon contrasts strikingly with Mariano Vallejo’s pointed recollections, where the conquering bear, lampooned as an index of American barbarism, looks more like a hog.2 For both writers, however, defining who is “native” means appealing to history.

This chapter surveys California’s turn-of-the-century historical romances to appraise how different writers legitimize their retellings of land loss and social upheaval. It also considers closely two exceptions to the willful amnesia that characterizes much late nineteenth-century fiction: Helen Hunt
Jackson’s *Ramona* (1884) and María Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), narratives that foreground the “land grab” despoiling the state’s natives of territory rightfully their own. By writing history as a phenomenon of the literary present, Jackson and Ruiz de Burton expose the larger narrative project working to produce social stability and cultural authority in a space characterized more by ruptured lineages than by gentle breezes and burgeoning fruit trees. Their own insistence on the unfinished and contentious nature of western social life reveals how literary work at the turn of the century, even as it appears to obliterate history, is constantly rewriting it.

II: Monumentalizing the Past

I would sooner pray under the red-tiled roof of a Southern Pacific railroad station as see the bell tower rising above the cement adobes of Taco Bell as a link to the history of Mexican California. Yet this commercial symbol, ubiquitous along the sprawl of fast-food restaurants and gas stations that run the length of the old El Camino Real, is but the latest in a series of icons that have for a century provided Anglo boosters with a mythic cultural legacy for the state. Less than 30 years after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo consigned Alta California to the United States in 1848, writers for magazines like *The Century Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Overland Monthly* represent the buildings of Mexican California in the style of Shelley’s “Ozymandias”: old as the pyramids, fragile as the crumbling turrets of a crusader’s stronghold, the missions are the “monuments of an epoch already past” “crumbling into ruin,” passing away grandly yet definitively “in the long procession of the centuries.”

More striking even than the undifferentiated uniformity of this kind of representation is its tendency to hurry the passing of the elderly. Or rather, the middle-aged: for when one considers that 40-some years mark our own distance from the civil rights struggles of the sixties, the three decades between the end of the United States-Mexican War and the flourishing of literature celebrating its repercussions hardly seem long enough to justify relegating the culture of the Californios to a dusty museum shelf. Repeatedly, however, as Cecil Robinson asserts in *With the Ears of Strangers: The Mexican in American Literature*, Mexican California is figured as an anachronism, its archaic “Spanish” past revered, its Mexican present “scorn[ed]” or “simply ignore[d]” (67–8). In the South, as Sandra Gunning demonstrates in *Race, Rape, and Lynching*, plantation and local color fiction lullabied white readers jittery over the (temporary) black political gains of Reconstruction. These fictions literally reconstructed the antebellum South’s big houses, celebrating their rigid social hierarchies while vilifying the black men...