Literature and Visual Arts of the Delta, 1849-1975

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This survey begins in one of the most popular of American genres, the travel narrative, with **Bayard Taylor's *Eldorado: Adventures in the Path of Empire* (1850**). Taylor's book begins the entire tradition of the literature of California as promised—or at least golden—land. Dispatched in 1849 by Horace Greeley to write correspondence from the California gold fields for the *New York Tribune*, Bayard Taylor (1825-1878) spent about four months in California. His book describes the settling of California in Romantic and nationalistic terms, seeing California as the next step in a providential Anglo-American empire straddling the continent. The Delta and Delta towns occupy a very small portion of Taylor's output, but he does specifically celebrate this area's economic and cultural potential. Regarding the economy, he sees Stockton and Sacramento as crucial to supplying the mines, and in the organization of a proto-government in Stockton, Taylor articulates a nationalist idea of "American" superiority, suggesting that the influx of U.S. born immigrants turned anarchy into incipient law.

At about the same time, ***George Horatio Derby (1823-1861)*** published parody travel narratives under the pen names "Squibob" and "John Phoenix. Derby, a West Point graduate who served in the Army's topographical corps, was stationed in California in the immediate aftermath of the Mexican-American War through the 1850s. During these years, he wrote humorous sketches, some of which address the rivalries of California towns that were vying for commercial and political power. His sketches describe the travels of a wide-eyed innocent, whose enthusiasm ironically conveys comic criticism of San Francisco's rivals. "Squibob in Benicia," and "Squibob in Sonoma," (October 1850), convey Derby's false praise of Benicia in the civic campaign for San Francisco supremacy.

Given the dominance of local-color regionalism in American literature of the last half of the nineteenth century, there is a surprising paucity of Delta tales from 1860-1890. As far as I can tell, ***Bret Harte (1836-1902),*** who built his career as a local colorist primarily of the California gold fields, is the only late-nineteenth-century regionalist who wrote anything even tangentially related to the Delta. His "The Legend of Monte Diablo" (*Atlantic Monthly*, 1863), casts a glance from the crest of Mount Diablo, over the Delta, to the Sierra Nevada. Harte's tale presents a prophetic vision of a racial succession, from Native American, to Spanish, to Anglo-Saxon, through the eyes of a Spanish priest. The complex ironies, given Harte's own vexed relationship to American culture, are difficult to read, but I suspect that Harte's contemporaries read the tale through a single turn of irony, seeing it as a validation of a triumphant Protestant empire.

Much deeper and more direct in its moral vision, though once again only tangentially touching on the Delta, is **Josiah Royce's social realist novel, *The Feud of Oakfield Creek: A Tale of California (1887)***. Royce moved the Mussel Slough Tragedy to the south side of Suisun Bay, and postulated the battle not merely as one between competing visions of land rights, but between competing ideologies about America's destiny. Royce's version of the affair compresses stories of individual moral shortcomings into a much larger historical frame, personalizing history in order to insist on the fundamentally ethical challenge each person still must consider even as larger historical forces shape lives.

Jack London (1876-1916), who so often wrote out of his personal experiences, treats the Delta in which he spent much time in two books: *Tales of the Fish Patrol* (1906), a book of adventures stories for the juvenile market, and *The Valley of the Moon* (1913), his visionary novel of California's agricultural reclamation. Both are bizarre books in that they manifest London's puzzling mixture of utopian ideology, Spencerian "social-Darwinism," socialism, and a pure love of money.

From before World War I to the nineteen sixties, the only significant literary figure I have found who treats the delta is ***William Everson,*** the Sacramento-born poet whose nature writings

are very much in a sacramental tradition. The dearth of literature from the 1930s through 1950s frankly surprises me. The area was growing in importance and population, and this was a period in which American literature was really taking off, both commercially and artistically. The 1960s and 1970s mark a turn in literature that treats the Delta in four ways. First, there is more of it. Second, while still mostly in the prophetic tradition, it is mostly skeptical of millennial promises. Third, it embraces, rather than spurns, the multi-cultural heritage of the area. Fourth, some of it is truly focused on the region, not merely with a tangential glance, but considering the communities of the area as worthy of treatment in their own rights.

Joan Didion (1934-) is, so far, the most significant chronicler of Delta life. Like Taylor and Royce, she is concerned primarily to understand California as an extreme example of an American frame of mind, but unlike the other writers I've discussed, she often sets entire works in the Delta. She does not treat the Delta merely as a place to pass through or as a backwater that is only of interest in contrast to something else. She sees it as essentially Californian and uses it to exemplify large questions of cultural identity, heritage, and prospects. Several of Didion's essays, particularly "Notes of a Native Daughter," and "Holy Water," capture some of the importance of the Delta to California as both place and idea. These two essays capture her two dominant moods: melancholia over what she sees as the failure of California's dominant ideology, and enthusiasm over the plain energy that goes into that ideology. Didion's first novel, *Run River* (1963), flows in the melancholic channel. Structurally and thematically, it is an answer to Royce's *The Feud of Oakfield Creek.* Both build against a mythology of a heroic frontier past, but while Royce depicts this heroism as complicated, Didion depicts it as compromised.

***Fat City* (1969), by Leonard Gardner (1933-),** makes a fitting companion piece to Didion's novel. While Didion's story treats the lives of wealthy landowners, Gardner looks at the lives of the itinerant laborers who work the land and of the working class city dwellers whose lives are nonetheless shaped by the agricultural community that surrounds Stockton. While these two writers cover the social class spectrum, they both show people who are remarkably incapable of self-reflection. While Didion blames the lapse on a large-scale cultural mythos that derails effective introspection, Gardner looks at dreams that are more narrowly defined by immediate material needs. Gardner creates characters who have a sense of longing, but their horizons are limited to fantasies of escape having to do with alcohol, sex, money, and—to the extent that they see boxing as their way "out" of menial work—fame. The narrative follows two boxers on different trajectories: one is trying to make a comeback, the other is trying simply to make it. The first fails, finding his life slipping further from his control, barely holding his life together by doing daily field work, and finally surrendering to alcoholism. For the other, younger fighter, boxing serves as an idealized outlet to frustrations with work and family. Yet the parallel structure suggests that the younger man's dreams are unlikely to serve him for very long.

Ernesto Galarza's *Barrio Boy* (1971) provides a refreshing counterpoint. Galarza (1905-1984), broadly known for his practical work as a labor organizer and civil rights activist, has a significant literary reputation for his memoir, primarily of childhood in Sacramento. Coming from a man who had dedicated his life to fighting exploitation and racism, Galarza's memoirs are unexpectedly humorous, optimistic, and supportive of ideals of citizenship that derive more from the Enlightenment than from the prophetic tradition. Most 20th-century American literature that addresses racial discrimination does so in the prophetic strain, and usually focuses on moral and civic lapses. *Barrio Boy* certainly does chronicle the complexities of racial identity in the Sacramento of Galarza's childhood, but Galarza emphasizes the capacity of the public school he attended to build a multi-cultural democracy.

Also addressing the multi-cultural complexity of the area is ***The Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1970), the breakthrough book for Maxine Hong Kingston (1940-).** Kingston's memoirs are particularly literary, enriched both by techniques developed in the so-called "New Journalism" of the 1960s and by literary traditions taken from

Chinese folk culture. While the tension Kingston describes between old and new countries is a thematic long since developed by ethnic writers of America's eastern cities (especially by Irish- and Jewish-American writers), Kingston complicates it with a feminist overlay that arises both from the feminist movement of the 1970s and from the conflicting gender expectations developed in the two cultures.

Visual Arts

Lithographs, wood cuts, and engravings are by far the most common art of the Delta, at least by the standards of availability and accessibility. Many examples are available through the Online Archive of California. These prints fall into four broad categories: fine art, illustrations, promotional art, and commercial art. In the fine art category are lithographs and chromo-lithographs. These, like art prints today, were essential to the development of artistic interests in American culture. They were printed as copies of canonical works of European art and also taken from contemporary works. As such they both educated Americans in the artistic traditions of Europe and provided livelihoods for American artists. Some of these are quite fine; others are fairly crude cuttings of genre paintings and sketches, such as the ever-popular depictions of ships and of shipwrecks. Several of these are specifically of Delta vessels.

The second most widely available are prints that were designed to promote various delta towns and cities. These come in two general types: birds-eye and water-front views. They occupy a mid-point between fine art and purely commercial art. The most readily available are purely commercial prints that decorated fruit and vegetable crates. Growers probably would have been astonished that the art they commissioned to grace fruit and vegetable packing crates would be considered valuable as history, no less as art. To my eye, they are worthy of both. As art, they occupy a lovely liminal space between branding (as in stock branding), caricature, and still life.

I was also able to find a few examples of one-of-a kind paintings and sketches, though a thorough inventory of local museums would undoubtedly be necessary to give a good sense of how artists have depicted the Delta. Among the unusual pieces I found are several sketches ***C.E. Grunsky (1855-19-34),*** a civil engineer, born in San Joaquin County, employed for much of his life by the City of San Francisco. He toured the Delta in 1878 to survey possible water supplies for the city. During that survey, he made a number of lovely pencil sketches of the Delta and one ghastly oil painting on canvas. In each, the artist includes his surveying team's houseboat in the foreground. These are not available on-line, but are, I think, worth considering for Delta exhibits as they show a trained engineer's drafting abilities in depicting a land and waterscape rarely captured.