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The Girl of the Golden West: European and American Fictions of California after the U.S. Conquest

1. Introduction

California functions in the public imagination as the ultimate American space: it is said to be just like the rest of the States, only more so. For Europeans, it is associated with the fulfilled utopias of Disneyland and Hollywood, however problematic these may be. In Michael Davie's words, it remains "the ultimate frontier of the Western world" (qtd. in Haslam 56). Jean Baudrillard talks of its "criminal and scandalous beauty" and evokes its "mythical power" (122, 125). It is a repository of the national and transnational myths of the untamed frontier, of unlimited growth and economic success. The story in which this myth finds its full expression is the story of the Girl of the Golden West known from fiction, drama, film and opera both in the United States and in Europe.

In the present essay I analyze four texts that present the story: David Belasco's original play *The Girl of the Golden West* (1905) together with his novel of the same title (1911), Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Fanciulla del West* (1910), Susan Sontag's novel *In America* (1999) and Jeanette Winterson's short story "Goldrush Girl" (2010).[1]

My reading is premised on the assumption that the story, despite being a story of origins, questions the idea of origins. My analysis is informed by Walter Benjamin's elucidation of the term "origin," which he contrasts with "genesis." Origin, he claims, does not "describe the process by which the existent came into being"—which can be understood as genesis—but rather, it is meant to "describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance" (45). Benjamin thus explains the dialectic of origin: it "shows the singularity and repetition to be conditioned by one another in all essentials" (46). The story of the Girl emerges in constant vacillation between singularity and repetition. In all its configurations, there appear certain elements that testify to the story's uniqueness, but also those that establish a pattern that reappears in all versions.

[1] The play was followed by four movies based on it (1915, 1923, 1930 and 1938); the discussion of a cinematic medium would require a more extensive discussion than the scope of the present text allows.

The aim of my analysis is to look at these constant and repetitive elements. In each version those elements demonstrate the changing demands of the audiences. Such changes are conditioned by the trajectory of the myth: as it travels between continents and between genres, it mutates to answer the demands of the varying audiences. This accounts for the story's polysemy and heterogeneity.

As Michel de Certeau asserts, "Every story is a travel story—a spatial practice" (115). My reading is informed by this assertion: every story, every version of the same story, not only interprets and inscribes space, it also creates it. De Certeau suggests as much when he states that "space is a practiced place" (117). California, the borderland, is a place practiced and claimed by various agents and groups; and, in turn, the story of its origins is a spatially diverse practice.

2. David Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West*

The story of the Girl of the Golden West entered circulation in the American and Transatlantic canon of the twentieth century with David Belasco's play. The critics uniformly greeted it with the highest praise for capturing the spirit of California in the Gold Rush days in its rugged entirety.[2] The characters, their preoccupations, their longings and desires, though presented in a romanticized, idealized way, were said to reflect the existence of California's gold miners in much the same way as the mirror of realistic drama, in a well-worn phrase, is said to reflect reality.[3]

The story line of Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West*[4] is simple, yet dramatic enough to have a recognizable stage potential. An innocent girl, one of the two individualized female characters[5] in the play, works as a bartender in a mining camp saloon, at

[2] In the words of Burton D. Fisher, "Belasco's realism captured the supercharged gold rush craze of 1849-1850, its rugged individualism, and the pioneering spirit of the era" (*Opera Classics Library: Puccini's The Girl of the Golden West*; Boca Raton, FL: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2005, 16). For more on Belasco's realism in "The Girl" see e.g. Margaret A. Estabrook and Lise-Lone Marker.

[3] Lise-Lone Marker quotes Belasco on dramatic art: "If dramatic art is anything at all, and if it is worthy of being perpetuated… the reason is that it is, above everything else—far above the mere purpose of supplying pleasurable entertainment—an interpretative art, which portrays the soul of life" (qtd. in Marker 10).

[4] I am referring to the novelized version of the play, also by Belasco, since it provides the reader with fuller commentary on the expressive measures that in the case of the play are acted out on stage.

[5] The other character is Nina Micheltoreña, a fallen woman with no moral standards who betrays Ramerrez and denounces him to the authorities after he decides to leave her. The Girl is described as one with the "face of an angel," but it is Micheltoreña who is the real beauty. It is the purity of the heart—and that, undoubtedly, is connected with whiteness—that wins. Interestingly enough, Micheltoreña does not appear in Puccini's version of the story: it seems that the myth of California has enough strength on its own not to require a villain to accentuate the virtues of the white protagonist. There is also the character of Minnie's Native American servant, Wowkle; the presentation, however, is nothing more than a stereotype, and a harmful one at that. It would be interesting to analyze the play with reference to other works of fiction (such as

the same time acting as the miners' confidante, their teacher of catechism and a trustee of their gold. Some of them try to win her heart (the most persistent being Sheriff Rance), but Minnie, the eponymous Girl, gives her first kiss and her love to a man considered a fugitive criminal. The couple is forced to flee California, but we understand that they have each other for better or for worse, so the last scene of the play is a bittersweet goodbye to this earthly paradise. The story itself is a mournful farewell to the long lost frontier.

On the surface, then, the story is deceptively trite: it is formulaic and sentimental, with implausibly saccharine characters, yet the reappearance of the theme, its melancholic recurrence, suggests that the work of mourning is not completed. In different configurations of the story, one aspect remains constant: the border is contestable, it requires perpetual renegotiation. The California of Belasco's story is a borderland space constantly coming into being and it is the borderland's mixed heritage that guarantees its success. "*En unas pocas centurias,* the future will belong to the mestiza", asserts Gloria Anzaldúa with respect to the future political potential of the borderland (80), and the same contention can be detected in David Belasco's text. However, as the story crosses generic and geographic borders, this contention changes. Although at first, in Belasco's version, it is the mestiza, like Anzaldúa predicts, who will claim the future, the later versions are more wary of the assumption, in a way admitting the failure of the inclusive stance proposed by Belasco.

The founding myth of California rests on the optimistic vision of the hybrid future: the future of the state, and synecdochically, of the country, depends on its ability to incorporate elements of alien semantic regimes. The story of the Girl mirrors a paradox central to the founding myth of California: on the one hand, it presents the space as unequivocally American, a space awaiting its "inevitable American occupation" (Belasco), on the other, it testifies to the underlying anxiety generated through the silencing of a significant part of the state's population, namely, Native Americans and Californios.[6]

When writing about California and its early post-Mexican period, it is essential to realize the complex trajectories traveled by the stories that explain and create the space in question. Although the stories written from the perspective of the white settlers, such as the story of the Girl, attempt to present California as uniformly American, there is an

Ramona or *The Squatter and the Don*) in which the role of Native Americans, however problematic, provides an important point of reference when it comes to the construction of whiteness; yet the scope of the present text does not allow for such digressions.

[6] Charles Hughes thus explains the term: "It is occasionally necessary to consider a Californio as any non-Indian with a Spanish surname, and born in California, Spain, or Latin America. Strictly speaking, however, Californios were those Mexicans who inhabited California prior to American conquest, and the term also refers to their descendants" (2).

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undercurrent—the silenced, oftentimes unacknowledged presence of the Native population as well as the political disavowal of the Californios—belies this conviction.

In the play, Belasco presents characters that he knew in his youth—gold miners who flocked to California after the discovery of the precious metal in 1848. He romanticizes the era and offers only one explanation for the miners' presence: the enterprising, pioneering spirit of Americans who go west to make their mark in life by releasing the untapped resources of the land and becoming rich. The political reality, however, is less romantic than this individualistic explanation allows. What directly made possible the presence of American miners in California was the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, signed after the Mexican war in 1848. On the force of this settlement, Mexico lost over a third of its pre-war territory, and the vast land of Alta California became open to American settlement. In itself a testimony to American colonial ambitions, the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo had grave implications for those inhabiting the land under the Mexican rule: it meant social, political and cultural marginalization.[7] However, in the story of the Girl, the forces that shaped the history of Alta California at the beginning of American rule remain unacknowledged to fit the triumphant ideology of American expansionism.

Despite its attempts to silence the uncomfortable history, the story still unwittingly testifies to the region's varied origins, and in part provides for the dramatic tension of the story, which rests on the racially charged occupation of the Girl's beloved, Ramerrez. It makes him morally suspect and compromises his chances of winning her heart.[8] On his deathbed, his father makes him swear to the pursuit of the same criminal path as he himself followed. Ramerrez is a descendant of a once prominent Mexican (or rather Californio) family that lost almost everything in an influx of white American settlers, and his father, who used to be an honorable rancher, is reduced to banditry in a hopeless attempt at revenge. Ramerrez himself is half-American, and his loyalty to his "race" seems less steadfast than that of his father. The romance is effectively a test of Ramerrez's ethnic identification, and its outcome indicates the future of California. It suggests, to evoke Anzaldúa once more, that the future belongs to the mestizos.

Within the economy of the romance, Ramerrez must choose his beloved and renounce his Mexican ancestry, and with it, as Belasco's text suggests, his criminal tendencies; only for her sake does Ramerrez decide to relinquish his struggle for the rights of the wronged Californios. But in fact, the damsel proves not so innocent after all: she saves

[7] For historical background of the issue see e.g. Cortes, *Mexicans*; Haas, *Conquests*; and Pitt, *Decline*.

[8] Fisher thus describes the corresponding moment in Puccini's opera: "In Act II… Johnson unmask himself, poignantly and passionately revealing his horrible destiny to Minnie: 'Sono Ramerrez, nacqui vagabond: era ladro il mio nome da quando venni al mondo' ('I'm Ramerrez. I was born a vagabond. My name was thief from the moment I was born'); his inheritance after his father's death was 'a gang of highway bandits!'" (Fisher 18).

her beloved's life when she wins it from Jack Rance, the sheriff, cheating at a card game. Cheating is justified because it is motivated by a romantic interest; yet, Belasco's text makes it clear that such a deceitful act deserves punishment. At the beginning of the story sheriff Rance punishes a dishonest player. The miners demand a severe measure, the punishment, however, is symbolic rather than corporeal.

The turn from the corporeal to the symbolic shows the shift in the meaning of California, from the real land to the land of fantasy. What it also means in the narrative is that the sheriff cannot retreat to the real, so when the girl cheats at cards, the incident should not be assessed in moral but in symbolic terms. Such reasoning obviously favors the symbolic and it justifies the colonization of Alta California and the dispossession of the native population in the process; and that, precisely, might be the rationale behind Belasco's text and the reason for the popularity of the discussed motif.

The retreat to the symbolic is accompanied by a dismissal of the significance of death; sheriff Rance, the figure of authority in Belasco's text, says at one point: "After all, gents, what's death? A kick and you're off" (54). This statement clarifies the frontier ethics: if one's survival depends on the annihilation, or at least the political disavowal, of the Californios as well as of the Native American population, then the meaning of death itself must be diminished to put the political machinations in perspective. On the other hand, this gesture retains its ambivalence because it renders the afterlife unknowable and hence unimportant. Yet, if all we have is this life, then what are the implications of our actions on the earthly plane? Belasco's text provides us with a very American answer: "We must always look ahead, Girl—not backwards. The promised land is always ahead" (344). These words are uttered by Ramerrez and they provide a validation of the frontier myth and an expression of the manifest destiny.

The frontier, in Gloria Anzaldúa's words, is inhabited by "the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, or go through the confines of the 'normal'" (3). Ramerrez and the Girl represent those whom Anzaldúa calls *los atravesados*: they both reject the confines of the worlds they come from and cross the boundaries between them, just as much as the story of the Girl runs across genres.

3. Giacomo Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*

A much publicized premiere of Puccini's opera based on Belasco's play took place in 1910. Puccini was apparently having difficulty finding an appropriate theme for his "American" opera, and it was ultimately to be Belasco's play or, to be more precise, the

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minstrel figure in it, that inspired Puccini and provided him with the subject for his opera.[9] The Metropolitan Opera in New York commissioned the work and both the commissioner and the public expected it to express "Americanness." The opera, in a way, elevated California to the status of an emblematic American place. Though ridiculed by many for its Italian version of America and for being what might be called a spaghetti western of the opera, it still is *the* American opera.[10]

Puccini's work remains faithful to Belasco's text on the narrative plane[11]: it presents more or less the same story line, this time with music, and it is the element of music, or the power of song, that allows us to draw a parallel between *The Girl of the Golden West* and the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The gods of the netherworld allow Orpheus to reclaim Eurydice and to ascend to the earthly domain, back to life, and Ramerrez awakens the Girl to real life from her dreamlike existence in a mining camp. This parallel becomes most visible in the last scene, in which the Girl and Ramerrez say goodbye to California. Minnie knows that what she must reject is irreplaceable: "Oh, that was indeed the promised land!" (344). The stage directions in the libretto describe the scene in the following words: "she clings to Johnson, crying with joy, her face buried on his shoulder" (*La Fanciulla*). Nevertheless, she reacts very expressively to the necessity of leaving her home behind: "Good-bye, beloved country; good-bye, my California, My mountains, my Sierra Mountains—Good-bye!" (*La Fanciulla*). Belasco's text is more explicit: "'Oh, my mountains, I'm leavin' you! Oh, my California—my lovely West—my Sierras, I'm leavin' you!' She ended with a sob; but the next moment throwing her-

[9] "Belasco was first and foremost a writer of realistic melodrama: *The Girl of the Golden West* was 'American verismo,' a stark melodrama involving a love triangle, with fierce and brutal characters overpowered by their monomania for gold and wealth. For Puccini, Belasco's *The Girl of the Golden West* cried out for music" (Fisher 14).
Marker points to the elements in Belasco's play that proved attractive for Puccini: "The thorough musicality and rhythmic integration of his California genre picture was remarked upon by several of the play's reviewers" (146) and she explains what these elements were: "The use of music to create atmosphere in this act was not, however, restricted to the dancehall orchestra. Belasco also inserted a wandering minstrel into the action, a banjo player modelled on an actual local figure whom Belasco had known in his youth" (149). Marker further writes: "When negotiations began between Puccini and Belasco regarding the creation of an opera from *The Girl of the Golden West,* it was the typically Western songs of this local minstrel which initially awakened the composer's enthusiasm" (150).

[10] Fisher thus sums up the opera's premiere: "It was a triumphant success, the composer receiving fourteen curtain calls after the first act, nineteen after the second, and twenty after the finale. Puccini declared it his best opera" (16).

[11] As Mario Hamlet-Metz has it, "Puccini kept the original crust (setting and most of the characters) but handled it with a smoother hand, giving it a very distinctive Italian (Tuscan) flavor, which ultimately explains much of the enduring success of the piece throughout the world" (76).
Fisher points to the differences between the play and the opera: "The libretto stresses Christian ideals of forgiveness and the redeeming power of compassion and love. Minnie represents the overpowering spiritual and moral force of the drama, a preacher and teacher who reads the Fifty-first Psalm of David to the miners of her scripture class, a sublime moment in the opera. In Belasco's play, she reads from a book called 'Old Joe Miller's Jokes'" (15).

self into Johnson's arms she snuggled there, murmuring lovingly: ‘Oh, my home!’” (346).

The Girl recognizes her “home” in her lover’s embrace, which follows the prescribed line of plot development of sentimental fiction. On the other hand, if it is Ramerrez who is synonymous with California—at one point the reader learns that there should be “no difficulty in placing the status of this straight-limbed, broad-shouldered, young fellow as a native Californian” (8)—with the Girl’s home, then this gesture also suggests recognition of the legitimacy of Ramerrez’s claim to the land he and his father fought for. The fact that this seeming acknowledgment takes place when both lovers must leave the state makes it all the more problematic. Ramerrez, who assumes the name “Johnson” to escape his pursuers, reacts to Minnie’s outburst in an emotional way: “Johnson was greatly moved. It was some time before he found his voice” (344). Like Orpheus, he must find his voice again to lead his Eurydice back to the earthly plane.

Minnie, the Californian Eurydice, thus describes her other-worldly experience:

> ‘[A]ll the people there in Cloudy, how far off they seem now—like shadows movin’ in a dream—like shadows I’ve dreamt of. Only a few days ago I clasped their hands—I seen their faces—their dear faces—I—’ She broke off; then while the tears streamed down her cheeks: ‘An’ now they’re fadin’—in this little while I've lost ’em—lost ’em.’ (345)

The moment Minnie envisages herself leaving the valley of the shadows reveals the crucial ambiguity of California: if California is the afterlife that Minnie-Eurydice renounces, then the question remains: is it paradise, or is it hell? This ambiguity is not resolved and we may suspect that the former is not far from the latter.

Leaving California, however, means that the movement is no longer toward the West, but back to the East: hence, it might be seen as a sign of disillusionment with the idea of unstoppable expansion. This direction questions the idea that the westbound progress eliminates the wilderness in its path. What supports this line of reasoning is the fact that it is a Californio character who takes the Girl away from this Eden. Its problematic status signals the impossibility of both living in paradise and descending from it.

The paradox inherent in the presentation of the Golden West reminds us of the Orphic myth as the founding myth of opera as a genre: “The [Orphic] myth is not only about the success of song but just as much about the inability to sustain this success” (Grover-Friedlander 30). Orpheus brings Eurydice back to life but must lose her again. Unlike in the original myth, it is the Girl who turns around to take the last look at what she is about to leave, but that is precisely what is forbidden. Her transgression (her being one of *los*

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atravesados) means that she must remain in the land of the dead, this time with no prospect of salvation. We know as much from the myth, but both Belasco's play and Puccini's opera end as the protagonist and her lover leave California to look for happiness elsewhere, which optimistically presents escape as a viable option. It is in Susan Sontag's and Jeanette Winterson's later versions of the story that the Girl returns, suggesting that Eurydice cannot escape her fate. This mobility indicates apprehension about the success of American continental colonization.

4. Susan Sontag's *In America*

Almost a hundred years went by before the theme was undertaken in fiction again, in Susan Sontag's 1999 novel In America. Although Sontag never states it explicitly, making it the reader's responsibility to supply the necessary connection, the novel features a character that is clearly based on the Girl.[12] This time the Girl, a disillusioned woman, returns to California and to the man she rejected earlier.

In *In America*, Minnie is no longer an innocent girl with "the face of an angel" (Belasco 163, Sontag 287), but a mature, somewhat bitter woman. Her life-after-opera in the novel suggests that the happy ending of the play is impossible. Sontag's salvaging of the character is also a commentary on the nature of the two genres: the drama and the novel. The stage drama, be it the theatre or the opera, is appropriate for the presentation of great discoveries and mass migrations of peoples. It portrays epic themes, grand vistas and characters larger than life. It does not, however, communicate the daily grind of those who no longer make history, but are reduced to making a living.

That the Girl becomes transformed from the heroine of a stage drama and opera into a novelistic figure seems only proper when we consider Bradbury's comments on the connection between the novel as a genre and America: "If the novel is a form of discovery, then one emblem of that is America or the New World itself" (12). Bradbury suggests both that America represents the essence of the novelty and that it delineates the limits of the known. He mentions O'Gorman who states, in Baudrillard-like fashion, "to this day, America is… the greatest example of the Supreme Fiction" (16). Thus, he points to the mythical quality with which America is endowed in the European imagination and in its own imagination. And it is the novel as a genre that most thoroughly expresses this quality.

[12] In *The Volcano Lover,* for instance, Sontag introduces a character inspired by Puccini's *Tosca*: it seems that the author peppered her novels with operatic references as yet another intellectual game in which she engages her readers.

Bradbury's comments on the nature of the cross-connection between the two concepts, that of the novel and of America, would lead us to an assumption that Europe writes America as a novel, but given American individualism we could assume that, in its own assessment, America writes itself. Sontag's reclaiming of the character of the Girl can be understood as her reintroduction to American fiction which reinforces the character's *mestizaje*, her ability to move freely in the borderlands.

In Sontag's novel, the protagonist, the actress Maryna, rests in a saloon and is approached by Minnie, "[f]at, tightly corseted, beribboned, a little drunk, around forty-five or fifty" (284). It is long after the events covered in the play or the libretto, and Minnie narrates her story in a conversation with Maryna. Not only is her monologue a continuation of the events rendered in the play, but it is also a revision of the incidents in Belasco's and Puccini's versions.

The reader learns that Minnie did not stay with Ramerrez, "the bandit," but returned to sheriff Rance. "I left [Dick] and went crawlin' back to California" (288), thus Minnie explains her return. The phrase used suggests that she retreats humiliated: California, then, is not so much an earthly paradise, but more likely the hell on earth. Minnie, like Eurydice, looks back and must stay in Hell.

In America consistently presents a disenchanted version of the story. In Sontag's version, Dick Johnson is a white American who assumes the name of Ramerrez, contrary to the stage versions, where Ramerrez disguises himself as a white man to avoid being caught. Although Belasco's text makes no attempts to explain or validate Ramerrez's cause, it does suggest a certain tragedy behind his choices and the inevitability of failure in following the path of honor, however that may be understood (either honorably obeying his father's deathbed wish and pursuing the robber's path or renouncing his criminal ways). *In America* presents Dick as a mere robber, not a Californio fighting for his rights. The story is deprived of romance, the Girl of innocence, her lover of a just cause, and it seems that California, too, is robbed of its paradisiacal allure.

5. Jeanette Winterson's "Goldrush Girl"

The Girl makes her final appearance in Jeanette Winterson's short story "Goldrush Girl," which is a variation on the same theme. Here, the narrator tells the story of his/her love affair with whom s/he calls "Goldrush Girl"[13]; Puccini's opera provides a parallel

[13] It is often the case with Winterson's fiction that the I-speaker's gender remains ambiguous: if in the case of "Goldrush Girl" the first person narrator is a woman, then it is an interesting departure from the original tale.

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for the romance. The Girl is but a name and a title; no longer animated, she lives on as a textual point of reference.

Winterson's version departs most radically from the sentimental, idealistic perception of California. Here the equation between the Girl and gold is made explicit, but the materialist perspective is complicated by the insistence on a tripartite division of the self: "the mind moves ahead of the flow of life, and the heart hangs back, afraid, and… all you can trust is your body" (192). The story conveys a parallel between the main narrative and Puccini's opera, and this doubling is manifested through the intertwining of the plots: "In the dark I held your hand. Johnson takes Minnie's hand" (194). Puccini's *La Fanciulla* provides not only a point of reference for the narrative, but it also reveals the meaning of "gold" in the story. Now the treasure is love.

Winterson's story, similarly to Sontag's, retreats from the sentimentalism of Belasco and Puccini in the way that it presents a more carnal understanding of love. In "Goldrush Girl" we can trust but the body, and it is the body that provides the link between the material gold of the gold rush days and the metaphorical gold reached through sensuality.

The narrator builds the central parallel between the body and gold as she describes her lover's body: "like a pan of gold that has lain all this time on the riverbed, and now it's in my fingers" (193). This is contrasted with the paleness of her own skin: "like a mine where the sun didn't reach.… Sun on me now… and the gold of it, and these riches" (193). She concludes this comparison with the phrase "Goldrush girl" (193). Whether it describes the narrator or her lover remains vague, and this ambiguity consists in the fact that the eponymous girl can be either the one who carries gold or the one who strikes it, just as gold refers both to wealth and to the body.

In both meanings, gold is not to be acquired by force; an exchange must take place. The narrator gives love, yet "Love is such a difficult gift to accept" (199). Her lover represents the gold that she offers: "anyone who strikes gold can keep it" (199). Minnie's story again helps the narrator understand the meaning of her own story: "Minnie doesn't want to be stolen from; she wants to give. [The gold] is hers to give, not his to steal" (196). Equating gold with Minnie tells us that Minnie, the gold-rush girl who does not dig for gold but has it, is like the gold-carrying mines of California. She is the wealth that seduces and destroys men, a symbol of the land itself.

When we think of the gift in the understanding proposed by Marcel Mauss, which emphasizes the etymological connection between the English word signifying a present and its German equivalent denoting poison (28-32), then the ambiguity of the central symbol of Winterson's story is even more pronounced. "Goldrush Girl" invests too much in the metaphorical dimension of the story to be concerned with expansionism, but its central ambiguity directs us back to Belasco's original story and its discomfort in the

presentation of the Californio characters. If the gold of California proves a poisonous gift, it is because it is California's to give, not the miners' to steal.

As Derrida reminds us, "Lacan says of love: It gives what it does not have" (2). In her story, Winterson conflates the two categories of gold and love, and says of both that they are a gift. The gift, however, as Derrida teaches us, is never unproblematic. This impossible gift that California offers is given although it is not to be received. The political disavowal of the Californios and Native Americans cancels the condition of the gift.

The ending of "Goldrush Girl" stresses circularity: the narrator's description of the last act ends with the lovers leaving and "their tracks disappear[ing] in the snow" (199), and after the reference to the narrator's story, she notes: "But the sun will come again" (199). Such cyclicity points not only to the plot of the story, but to its reappearance in fiction, from Belasco, through Puccini and Sontag to Winterson.

6. Final remarks

The trajectory of the myth traced here starts with a celebration of the borderland (which, nevertheless, displays anxiousness about the legitimacy of American claim on the land). The second stage, in the operatic version, stresses the mythical aspect of the story: this time the borderland is de-realized, and the retreat from the celebratory position might be a way of reducing the status anxiety. In its next cross-generic move, the story becomes a novelistic account, which, as Bradbury explains, corresponds to the novelty of American settlement. The optimism of the original rendering of the story, however, is gone. The last version presents us with a banal equation between love and gold.

The last text credits Puccini's work and is thus a European commentary on an American theme revalidated by another European author. Sontag, on the other hand, seems to be referring to Belasco's theatrical version and not the opera; an American writer refers to the American playwright, whereas the British writer refers to another European's work, the opera. The circulation, though spanning two continents, proves limited. It may suggest that California is a land of fantasy, after all, "lying under an enchantment unlike any other land" (Belasco 3), and that is why it escapes imagination. The image we have of it is conditioned by the vantage point from which we describe it.

The story of the Girl is still an expression of the fertility and creativity of borderland cultures. Crossing between genres and continents allows us to see the story of the Girl as the story of *mestizaje*. It is a story that belies the notion of origins, as there is no state of "purity" before the mixing, crossing over, transgressing. It designates California as the

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borderland, perpetually reinventing itself. It is de Certeau's "practiced place," acted upon by *los atravesados* who deny one interpretation and singular understanding of the story of origins. The story of the Girl of the Golden West places *mestizaje* at the centre of the mythical beginnings, but it also denies the understanding of origins as a singular source of history, and, in a way that is limited by the historical moment, it celebrates multiplicity.

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