6 Russia’s Californio Romance

The Other Shores of Whitman’s Pacific

See how the metaphor of the West dissolves into foam at our feet.
—RICHARD RODRIGUEZ, BROWN: The Last Discovery of America

On the morning of March 28, 1806, an envoy of the Russian American Company, Nikolai Petrovitch Rezanov, decided to ignore the Spanish ban on trade with foreign ships and sailed right into the harbor of San Francisco. “Knowing the suspicious nature of the Spanish government,” he wrote, “I thought it best to go straight through the gate and by the fort . . . and decided that two or three cannonballs would make less difference to us than refusal” (Voyage 11). The journey that had brought Rezanov to San Francisco was the first Russian circumnavigation, begun in St. Petersburg in 1803. He had sailed south along the coast of western Africa, around the Cape, and east across the Indian Ocean, then northbound past the Japanese coast to the Bering Strait. Arriving in Sitka three years later, Rezanov found this outpost of the Russian Empire near starvation after an unusually severe winter. He took a handful of reasonably able men with him and proceeded south to Spanish Nueva California and the settlement in San Francisco to try to buy much-needed “breadstuffs” for the starving colony.

A more long-term concern also motivated the trip south, namely, to test the northern boundaries of the Spanish Empire in the Americas and bring Russia into the marketplace of the new world. In his reports back to St. Petersburg, Rezanov would optimistically prophesy that “the industries of interior Russia will receive a new impulse when the number of factories will have to be increased on account of the California trade alone, and in the mean time ways will be found for trade with India by way of Siberia” (Voyage 42). The confidence these lines exude speaks of many things, among them the transnational, indeed trans-imperial char-
acter of California in the early nineteenth century, and the multiplicity of differently originated points of view, imaginations, and imaginaries it already played host to. While it may not have been one of the more momentous historical events in American history, the account of Rezanov’s visit with the commander of the San Francisco Presidio and the governor of Nueva California during those few spring weeks of 1806 meaningfully echoes with what Peter Hitchcock calls “the experience of globality” (7).

In her essay “Place in Fiction” Eudora Welty observes that “to the writer at work, [place] is seen in a frame. Not an empty frame, a brimming one. Point of view is a sort of burning-glass, a product of personal experience and time; it is burnished with feelings and sensibilities, charged from moment to moment with the sun-points of imagination” (114). Welty’s conceptualization of the locale’s import may serve well as an entry point to the relatively little-known encounter between Russian and Spanish plenipotentiaries in what is today the Bay Area. For what she calls a “brimming frame” applies not merely to the artist at work; it is a lens through which other kinds of perspectives can also see. To expand this into the sphere of culture, we may borrow from Bakhtin his conceptualization of situatedness, of (culturological) consciousness as always configured by the specifics of temporal and spatial circumstance and circumscription. Such situatedness consequently generates unique points of view and corresponds to what in Bakhtin is knotted into the chronotope—the organizing principle for narrative, always carried in relation to other, also unique, points of view (Dialogic). Transposed onto the culturological scene where the Russian-Spanish meeting was staged, such chronotopic perspective must, however, be perceived, and tentatively gauged, within the broader framework of the “feelings and sensibilities” that charge the cultural, social imaginaries and thus authorize their “frame,” their unique way of seeing.

I use the concept of social imaginaries here according to what the philosopher Charles Taylor in general terms describes as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (23). Underpinning this seemingly straightforward explication, however, is a wealth of intricate contingencies. The imaginary, Taylor continues, is “carried in images, stories, legends,” “is shared by large groups of people,” and constitutes “that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (23). Taylor’s “sense of legitimacy” aligns closely with Welty’s
description of point of view in a collective context as the “product of personal experience and time,” for we cannot conceive of legitimacy without also inferring a situated consciousness, communal or individual, which provides the “background understanding” necessary in order for the social imaginary to make sense, to be precisely legitimate.

This brings us to the next, crucial node in Taylor’s thesis, that “if the [background] understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding. At any given time, we can speak of the ‘repertory’ of collective actions at the disposal of a given group of society” (25). The social imaginary can consequently be conceived of as a kind of enabling—and enabled—frame, or filter, through which a group, community, or society sees, grasps, and performs an understanding of its own practices. To elaborate a little further on the frame or filter, it may be useful to turn to another thinker whose calibrations of the imaginary interestingly complement those of Taylor. Cornelius Castoriadis talks not about the modern social imaginary but about the more general and always present “instituted social imaginary.” This is specifically “a constitutive faculty of human collectivities, and more generally of the social-historical sphere,” among whose work are institutions, “quickened by—and bearers of—significations.” These significations, Castoriadis continues, “refer neither to reality nor to logic, which is why I call them social imaginary significations” (“Imaginary” 73). The accent on the less tangible elements is more clearly explicated in his suggestion that the imaginary has to “use the symbolic not only to ‘express’ itself (this is self-evident), but to ‘exist,’ to pass from the virtual to anything more than this” (Institution 127). This latter observation is particularly relevant to the focus of this essay: one could argue that it was precisely the varying instantiations and institutions of the symbolic that at least in part would determine the future of Russia’s and Spain’s roles on the Pacific coast. For there is a third party present in the scenario briefly sketched earlier but not yet explicitly mentioned, and that is the newly constituted Americans and their sense of legitimacy, their understanding and practices, and subsequent enabling and enabled (chronotopic) frame. In Rezanov’s reports, however, references to this imaginary are largely absent.

With these conceptual scaffolding preliminaries in mind, I want to explore the Russian-Spanish encounter in northern California along the following itinerary. First, as I show, the exchanges resulting from the visit serve to illustrate the already existing characteristics of the California coast as a node of economic and political transnational matrixes on a
global scale. Second, I want to suggest that this lesser-known relation both exemplifies and, more important, anticipates other social imaginaries’ encounters with the newcomer, which in 1806 was still mostly confined at some distance from the west coast. Finally, “Russia’s Californio romance” speaks to the kind of palimpsesting that processes of transnationalization inevitably bring with them. Key here is, again, perspective and place, and the enabling frames and senses of legitimacy that at any given point lay claim to the overwriting of the frames already present.

**California Songs**

Let me begin with the voice that in the nineteenth century would sing the American imaginary more than any other, and would celebrate *post factum* the locale that once had framed the Russian-Spanish encounter. For, depending of course on the artist, any location can potentially transpire with the promise and wealth Welty speaks of, but when the artist is Walt Whitman and the place is California, “brimming” and “charge” reach particularly intense levels:

> I see in you, certain to come, the promise of thousands of years,  
> till now deferr’d,  
> Promis’d to be fulfill’d, our common kind, the race.  
> The new society at last, proportionate to Nature,  
> In man of you, more than your mountain peaks or stalwart trees imperial,  
> In woman more, far more, than all your gold or vines, or even vital air.  
> Fresh come, to a new world indeed, yet long prepared,  
> I see the genius of the modern, child of the real and ideal,  
> Clearing the ground for broad humanity, the true America, heir of the past so grand,  
> To build a grander future. ("Song of the Redwood-Tree" 465)

“Song of the Redwood-Tree,” from 1874, articulates a vision of the past yielding to the future under the auspices of progress and democracy in familiar Whitmanesque style. The closing lines of the poem capture a sensibility to and a conviction of advancement that suggest the California coast as more than just an emblem of national significance. As we shall see later, it comes to stand as a singular trope of modernity in the “new world,” a harbinger of “a grander future” and “the promise of thousands of years,” thus imagining and inscribing, as happened in so much of Whitman’s work, this new cultural imaginary.

He was of course not the first to imagine and frame California in
triumphant and near-fantastical terms, and neither was he the first (nor the last, for that matter) to prophesy the role it would, or should, have. Centuries before Whitman saw “the genius of the modern” in California, the coast had been host to what James Clifford describes as “the mix of human times we call history: the long span of indigenous traditions and folk histories; the waxing and waning of tribes and nations, of empires; the struggles and ruses of conquest, adaptation, survival; the movements of natives, explorers, and immigrants, with their distinct relations to land, place, and memory; the changing rhythm of markets, commodities, communications, capital—organizing and disorganizing everything” (302).

The twenty or more Indian tribes who lived between what is today Oregon and the Mexican border when Juan Cabrillo made landfall in San Diego in 1542 covered among them six different language families. All the tribes had different names for the places where they dwelled, and hence, “in the tribal mind and in the tribal world, [California] did not exist” (Hicks et al. 2). Indeed, the very name California is, as we know, itself the result of fiction, conjured up in Garcí Ordoñez Rodríguez de Motalvo’s romance Las Sergas de Esplandián (The Adventures of Esplandián), published in Madrid in 1510. Herein is described an island populated by Amazon women who are led by their Queen Calafia, and so, “long before the name appeared on maps, California had a place in the European mind” (Hicks et al. 76–77). Much, much later, in 1850, Marx and Engels would assess the discovery of gold in California:

The Californian gold mines were only discovered eighteen months ago and the Yankees have already set about building a railway, a great overland road and a canal from the Gulf of Mexico, steamships are already sailing regularly from New York to Chagres, from Panama to San Francisco, Pacific trade is already concentrating in Panama and the journey around Cape Horn has become obsolete. A coastline which stretches across thirty degrees of latitude, one of the most beautiful and fertile in the world and hitherto more or less unpopulated, is now being visibly transformed into a rich, civilized land thickly populated by men of all races, from the Yankee to the Chinese, from the Negro to the Indian and Malay, from the Creole and Mestizo to the European. (8)

The emphases on the trade routes that open up, and on the prospect of confluence, prosperity, and movement of peoples and commodities that follow, already define the dynamics of a globalization of economies and cultures at a rather early point. As in Whitman’s “California Song,” as the “Redwood” poem is also called, Marx and Engel’s reflections do not
significantly question the direction of the “transformation” of “the most beautiful and fertile” land into one that is “civilized” and “thickly populated.” And as in Whitman, the direction of the modern, what he calls the “chant of the future,” is not problematized: the lines “Ships coming in from the whole round world, and going out to / the whole world, / To India and China and Australia, and the thousand island / paradises of the Pacific” refract the sentiment celebrating the transnational in strangely similar tenors (465).

These are only a few samples from the vast repository of the chronicles of encounters, sojourns, interpellations, real as well as fictional and mythical, that have furnished the California coast with its complex and rich history. Whether they are actual historical events or the stuff of imagination, they can all be deciphered according to temporal and spatial circumstances. Hence this short list of presences and perspectives already exemplifies the argument Arjun Appadurai makes in relation to area studies generally: “We need to recognize that histories produce geographies and not vice versa. We must get away from the notion that there is some kind of spatial landscape against which time writes its story. Instead, it is historical agents, institutions, actors, powers that make the geography” (9).

One such historical agent on the Pacific coast was the Russian Empire, albeit admittedly not one that would go on to “produce locality” quite as notably as would other agents and powers. This lesser-known history of the encounter and exchanges between the representatives of the Spanish and Russian empires’ outposts at the beginning of the nineteenth century is, however, worth attention, not only, as we will see, because of its dramatic and romantic patina, but also because it is one of those seemingly immaterial accounts that turn out to encapsulate and refract in miniature version larger narratives that more obviously and crucially serve history. One of the lessons we may draw from the story is, as Hitchcock puts it, the way that cultural transnationalism is “first and foremost about the experience of globality”—and “whose imagination?” (7). Russia’s “experience of globality” began in earnest with that first journey around the world in 1803, and it had, as mentioned, several objectives: one was to inspect the Russian Empire’s farthest reaches in today’s Alaska, another to explore trans-Pacific supply routes and the possibilities of opening up trade with China and Japan. According to the tsar’s designs, the northwestern Pacific could be annexed into the Russian Basin, and in this way strengthen the easternmost boundaries of his reign.

The commander of the Presidio, Don Luis Dário Argüello, was away at the time Rezanov and his party entered the port of San Francisco in
full sail, but his son, Don Luis Antonio Argüello, had been notified of the arrival and welcomed the Russians in a most gracious and hospitable manner. There were some initial language problems; Rezanov’s personal doctor, the naturalist Georg von Langsdorff, notes in his journal that “[as] neither Lieutenant Davidov nor myself understood Spanish, the conversation was carried on in Latin, between me and the Franciscan padre, this being the only medium by which either one could make himself intelligible to the other” (*Langdorff’s Narrative* 38). Rezanov’s own account of the visit is heartfelt and enthusiastic, and the renderings in his reports of the exchanges between the two government representatives in these outposts of each one’s empire are almost touching. They speak far away from cosmopolitan and administrative centers in old as well as in new lands, and come across today as strangely unmoored from these other realities, which would come to determine the future of much of the world.

In his letters Rezanov cites several dialogues that wonderfully illustrate this. For instance, on his way to see the recently arrived governor of Nueva California, José Joaquín de Arrillaga, Rezanov asks his companion, one of the mission’s padres, if he has been granted permission yet to buy “breadstuffs” from the Spaniards. The padre, a little uneasily, tells him of ominous reports: “I must answer you in confidence. Previous to his leaving Monterey the Gobernador received news from Mexico to the effect that if we are not at war with you now we soon shall be. ‘What blunder!’ said I, laughingly. ‘Would I have come here at such a time?’ ‘That is what we said,’ the Padre replied” (21).

As news of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe begins reaching San Francisco shortly after this exchange, the disjunction between local, peripheral bonhomie and the rising hostilities among the imperial centers becomes more pressing. The governor is acutely aware of this, and in a very open address to Rezanov in connection with a trade agreement they are negotiating, he tells him very directly: “I acknowledge that I wish you success with all my heart, but I cannot conceal the fact that I hourly expect a report of a total breach of concord between our governments. I do not know how to meet and consider your project, and I must tell you frankly that it would be very agreeable to me if you would hasten your departure in a friendly manner before the arrival of the courier expected by me” (30).

The deliberations between Governor Arrillaga and Rezanov, who would become close friends during the latter’s stay, refract interesting references to the conceptions of global trade routes, international for-
eign policy, and, for the purposes of this essay, their relationship to the United States and the future destiny of the coast. We should bear in mind that Rezanov’s reports were written only three years after Jefferson had secured the Louisiana Territory, and while Jefferson harbored no immediate plan for pushing the boundaries of the new territory farther west at the time, the sentiments that would be collapsed into the powerful trope of Manifest Destiny were already circulating. Several years earlier Jefferson had noted, “Our Confederacy must be viewed as the nest from which all America, North and South, is to be peopled” (quoted in Horsman 86). His Lewis and Clark expedition was in progress while Rezanov was staying in San Francisco, and was completed in the fall of 1806. We may now wonder how these movements could be so absent from the dialogues of Arrillaga and Rezanov, but they seem to have found events in Europe far more relevant than whatever was going on more immediately to the east. The reports Rezanov sent home abound with the exchanges he has with the Spanish governor and commander about European relations, Bonaparte’s forays, trade agreements, and their respective imperial administrations’ unwillingness to bolster their peripheries. The last is a recurring topic of conversation. An exasperated Arrillaga tells Rezanov that quite often when he solicits assistance from Mexico, the answer he receives is a Mexicans cursing of California as “causing nothing but problems and expenses!”—as if the problems were his fault (Voyage 55).

This complaint is connected to the few times their conversations touch on the American states. On a couple of occasions Arrillaga refers to the problems the “Bostonians” are giving Nueva California, confiding that “the audacity of the Bostonians has alarmed us, but the ministers have promised to dispatch a frigate this year to watch the vessels from the American states” (56). Rezanov on his part expresses confidence in the workings of diplomacy, and in reassuring tones reports back to St. Petersburg that the Americans “claim the right to [the northern Pacific] shore, as the headwaters of the Columbia River are in their territory, but, upon the same principle, they could extend their possessions to all the country wherein there are no European settlements. But they will, I think, discontinue making settlements there, for the Spaniards have opened to them four ports on the Eastern coast of America, and they are excluded from touching the western coasts of America by a commercial agreement” (72).

In his account Rezanov thus appears oblivious to the significance of the Pacific in the designs of the newcomer to the east. For as we know, the “audacity” of the “Bostonians” (so called because the majority of early American sea merchants hailed from Boston) would only forty years
later be carried out on a military and ideological scale that realized the mythological quality of California as, the explorer Charles Wilkes noted in 1839, the controller “of the destinies of the Pacific” (McDougall 93). Mexico would gain independence from Spain in 1821, and in 1842 the Russians would withdraw to Alaska. Shortly after, the commander of Northern California, Don Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, would be ousted from his home in Sonoma and imprisoned at Fort Sutter in Sacramento. Two years later Vallejo and his fellow Californios were American citizens; then, in 1849, gold was found, and this, as we saw, would be assessed by Marx and Engels as “the most important thing which has happened in America” (7). The prosperity they prophesied would sure enough come true, but not the coexistence of disparate peoples. The determination of Anglo-American forty-niners overran that of other groups, and Marx’s interracial “rich, civilized” land was soon in the hands of only some. I come back to all of this a little later; for now I want to return to Rezanov, for his visit to San Francisco was not all business.

Rezanov had quite early on fallen head over heels in love with the commander’s daughter, Maria Concepción Argüello. The romance is mentioned briefly in his reports; a little abashedly he tells the minister in St. Petersburg that he apologizes for divulging such personal affairs but that after “associating daily with and paying his address to the beautiful Spanish senorita,” he at last “proffered his hand, and she accepted,” agreeing to move to Russia after the marriage (37). The romance is immortalized in Bret Harte’s long poem “Concepcion de Arguello”:

Count von Resanoff, the Russian, envoy of the mighty Czar,  
Stood beside the deep embrasures, where the brazen  
cannon are.  
He with grave provincial magnates long had held serene  
debate  
On the Treaty of Alliance and the high affairs of state;  
He from grave provincial magnates oft had turned to talk  
apart  
With the Commandante’s daughter on the questions of the  
heart,  
Until points of gravest import yielded slowly one by one,  
And by Love was consummated what Diplomacy begun. (sec. 2)

When Rezanov left the Presidio in the late spring of 1806 it was with the promise of a speedy return to his future wife once the tsar and the pope had blessed the mixed marriage, and a pledge to continue working
on the plans for these fringes of his empire. This was, however, not to be. On the way back to St. Petersburg, traveling across Siberia on horseback, Rezanov suffered from three bouts of pneumonia and died at the beginning of March 1807. Various accounts tell the story differently, but most sources maintain that the news did not reach Doña Concepcion until two years later. She then joined a Dominican order and spent the rest of her life in the monastery, dedicating her life to helping others until her death in 1857. She is, incidentally, buried in the least known of California’s several early capitals, Benicia.

The last stanzas of Harte’s poem tell of the end of the romance. The voice we hear inquiring about the couple is Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company, who visited Santa Barbara early in 1842. These concluding lines also serve to end this part of my discussion:

“Died while speeding home to Russia, falling from a fractious horse.
Left a sweetheart, too, they tell me. Married, I suppose, of course!
“Lives she yet?” A deathlike silence fell on banquet, guests, and hall,
And a trembling figure rising fixed the awestruck gaze of all.
Two black eyes in darkened orbits gleamed beneath the nun’s white hood;
Black serge hid the wasted figure, bowed and stricken where it stood.
“Lives she yet?” Sir George repeated. All were hushed as Concha drew
Closer yet her nun’s attire. “Señor, pardon, she died, too!”

“To You, the Empire New”

The Rezanov story has come down to us as one of California’s great love stories; indeed it is part of California’s “romantic history.” The inscription in The Rezanov Voyage to Nueva California, published by the Private Press of Thomas C. Russell in 1926, reads: “To C.O.G. Miller, Esq. of San Francisco, who, amid his multifarious business interests, is never-failing in his interest in the romantic history of California.” The kind of historiography that casts things past and gone in the Golden State as romantic speaks to an ideologically “soft” overwriting that certainly finds worthy outlets in fictionalized accounts such as Harte’s poem, Gertrude
Atherton’s *Rezanov* (1906), and Alexey Rybnikov’s opera *Juno and Avos* (1981). But if we look at the story as embedded precisely in ideologically circumscribed circumstances premised on Hitchcock’s “experience of globality,” as underlying the geography made by “historical agents,” other and harder lessons may be learned. For it has something to tell us about temporal and spatial realities, and should consequently be considered the material of what Susan Friedman calls “locational ‘thick descriptions’ of historically and geographically specific situations” (90). This approach, she argues, “stresses mutual agencies on all sides, though not necessarily equally unencumbered agencies,” and privileges the multi-temporal and multi-spatial complexities of colonial, postcolonial, and indeed neocolonial practices and stories (90). Thus, the particular situatedness of “Russia’s Californio romance” also details the extent to which the new world served as a stage for the European powers’ scrambling for primacy, at home as well as abroad. It tells us how differently the actors conceived of their geographical and cultural destinations and the routes leading there, and of the kinds of imaginaries in which their expansionist designs were embedded as they encountered one another on California’s shores.

We may begin by noting that for the Russians as well as the Spanish, the California coast was merely a north-south/south-north axis, and the new world simply that, a “new” world, a market to claim. We hear Rezanov cautioning his government, “There is still left an unoccupied intervening territory fully as rich, and if we allow it to slip through our fingers, what will succeeding generations say?” (*Voyage* 45), a warning first and foremost referring to the threat posed by Spain to Russian expansion, not by the United States. This leads to a second consideration, namely, that to Europeans posted in the Americas in the early nineteenth century, the activities of other Europeans were far more critical than anybody else’s. The United States had not yet made much of a dent in foreign policy; Rezanov’s visit is still two decades or so before Monroe declares the Americas to be off limits to European influence. And still, as we have seen, there is evidence of certain worries about the Bostonians in Rezanov’s conversations which direct our attention to problems possibly existing already in 1806. Walter McDougall observes that as early as 1801, Jefferson had marked the continent for his own purposes: “Our rapid multiplication will . . . cover the whole northern if not southern continent, with people speaking the same language, governed by similar forms, and by similar laws” (quoted in McDougall 78). Commenting on John L. O’Sullivan’s coining of the phrase “Manifest Destiny” in 1845, McDougall furthermore points to the much earlier beginnings of what he calls its tradition:
“If the United States was to remain free and independent—the first tradition[,] . . . then it must pursue a unilateral foreign policy—the second tradition. If Unilateralism was to survive, then it must promote an American System of states—the third tradition. But . . . it must preempt European bids for influence over the vast unsettled lands that remained in North America—the fourth tradition” (77–78).

On the one hand, clearly neither Rezanov nor Arrillaga can be blamed for not having spotted this connection; but on the other hand, the foundation of absolute principles that McDougall identifies also lets us see how, and why, the presence of these other nations on the California coast could not last; how, as Whitman would put it in his “Redwood” poem later on, “the New arriving, assuming, taking possession, / A swarming and busy race settling and organizing everything” was not about to be stopped (“Song” 465). Nevertheless, Californio and Russian obliviousness to the particular energy in the East may ultimately also be caused by more elusive rationales, rooted in the imaginaries that embedded their understandings and practices as slightly different from those of the newcomer.

On a basic level, Spain and Russia of course had their own countries and centers elsewhere to worry about, and did not absolutely have to make a go at it in the new world. More crucially, though, they lacked a coherent vision founded in symbolic conceptions of California and the coast as an area providing the newness necessary to a new experiment, a project in the world. This was, after all, what underlay the point of view from the East, what as early as 1786 can be detected in Jefferson’s aforementioned prophecy about the “Confederacy as the nest from which all America, North and South, is to be peopled.”

Distinguishing the instantiation of the American imaginary is consequently a kind of symbolic coherence that already at this stage launches purpose, presence, and perspective radically differently from that of the Spanish and the Russians. Among the central elements of this variable are differing understandings of temporality, as Richard Rodriguez poignantly observes:

The two groups (Spanish and English) had different ambitions. Spaniards dreamt of gold. Spanish settlement was also, of course, Roman Catholic and connected the United States with Mexico, and through Mexico to the court of Madrid and the Church of Rome—a continuous line uniting past with present. Low-church English Puritans tended to be in rebellion against English memory; everything was focused on the future. (20)
A similar link from past to present via religion could be posited in Russia’s case, and, as Gwenn Miller notes, the teaching of Orthodoxy to colonial subjects in the Kodiak Islands was explicitly endorsed by, among others, Rezanov himself (112–113).

Anchoring the future of new worlds in spiritual centers in the old thus forges a kind of continuity that, as Rodriguez notes, envelops the actors of the present in a backward-looking gaze. Related to this temporal enactment of continuity is a spatial one: the overextended Spanish and Russian empires both had rather uncertain edges. By that I have in mind the way centers’ relation to peripheries proceeded along principles of gradation rather than breach. In Russia’s case this was a function of the overland routes early explorers traversed before the circumnavigations started in 1803. Ilya Vinkovetsky notes that “the Russian crossings of Siberia were greatly assisted by the indigenous Siberians who lived along the way. The diversity among [these] cultures is impressive, but what is particularly salient is that some of these cultures . . . bore striking similarities to the indigenous cultures that the Russians would find on the North American side of the Pacific. . . . In a very real sense, in the eighteenth century, for the sibiriaki (the Russians of Siberia) the line between the so-called Old World and New World remained blurred and fuzzy” (196).

Somewhat in the same vein, when Spanish explorers traveled north from today’s Mexico City into the present American Southwest, they, too, traveled through a space of cultural gradation: Native American peoples in New Mexico, for instance, had much in common with peoples farther south. One might also add here that the rate of intermarriage between ethnic Russians and indigenous Aleuts led to the introduction of the term kreoly, and it was in fact Rezanov himself who was the first to use the term, if only informally (Vinkovetsky 201). In the Spanish colonies, of course, the corresponding term was from early on mestizo, the first generation of whom were born in Peru around the mid-sixteenth century. In several ways, then, the routes from the centers of the two empires into the new world marked not a definite breach (with the periphery as inherently and irreconcilably Other, different, and past), but a more blurred and continuous trail that may also have posited frontiers that were more porous.

They were certainly different from the route leading from Virginia to the California coast; that trail blazes through the lands of numerous Others until those lands are collapsed into the nation’s own fold, a “rolling westward” that sets out to erase or accommodate all difference into its own specific vision. In it are the callings of the Exemplary and Des-
tiny, the future-oriented gaze of, as Whitman puts it, “the Genius of the Modern, child of the Real and Ideal,” posed to “build a grander future” (“Song” 465). In the same way that O’Sullivan simply packed a composite of already existing principles into Manifest Destiny, so Whitman gives poetic voice to an energy that long preceded his “Redwood” poem. The history of that energy, if we may call it that, is certainly complex, but in relation to social-imaginary significations and the trajectory of its symbolic institutions, an important trace reaches back to what David Lowenthal locates thus: “In severing imperial bonds, Americans discarded not only the mother country but many of its traditions. Three interrelated ideas helped justify dismissal of the past: a belief that autonomy was the birthright of each successive generation; an organic analogy that assigned America to a place of youth in history; and a faith that the new nation was divinely exempt from decay and decline” (105). Coming to the “new” sense of temporality from a slightly different angle, Lowenthal nevertheless echoes the emphasis on breach rather than continuity, pointing at a frame or a filter predicated on future orientation rather than the previously mentioned backward-looking gaze.

We can tune this perspective further by turning to what Sacvan Bercovitch in a related vein calls the “America game.” “America” is a “language game of malleable beginnings and possible futures,” he says, quite different from its “old world” relatives, where nationality “remains an endgame puzzle: identity to be resolved in three or four moves” (54–55). Instead what we have in the America game, a middle game, Bercovitch continues, is newness as a “continual movement toward endings that issue in an endless affirmation of beginnings” (54). This returns us squarely to a spatial and temporal orientation that sees ahead, unhampered by ties to a past, released from old world imaginaries and their sway. Whitman’s redwoods in northern California thus “leave the field for them / For a superber Race—they too to grandly fill their time” and abdicate “To the new Culminating Man—to you, the Empire New” (“Song” 463). In a game that was begun before the beginning of the nineteenth century, California’s multiple presences and perspectives had little to offer. As we have seen, only four decades after Rezanov’s visit, the space of California was thoroughly rearranged according to “the New arriving, assuming, taking possession.”

The “genius of the modern” thus names a layer in the California transnational cultural palimpsest that would erase most of the presences that had come before. In his time, Rezanov had great plans for Russia in America. “Your excellency perhaps may laugh at my far-reaching plans,” he
tells the minister in St. Petersburg, “but I am certain that they will prove exceedingly profitable ventures, and if we had men and means, even without any great sacrifice on the part of the treasury, all this country could be made a corporeal part of the Russian empire” (Voyage 44). In retrospect, one suspects that more than “men and means” would have been required, and of the Russian presence only a small memento is left. About four hours’ drive north of San Francisco there is a settlement called Fort Ross, the direct result of Rezanov’s negotiations in 1806, and the place that for a short while marked the southernmost point of the Russian Empire in America.² About twenty weather-beaten Russian Orthodox crosses overlook the little fort and the Pacific. Today it is a state park, with volunteers looking after it and tending to the orchards that in their time helped supply the Russian colonists in Alaska with the much-needed “breadstuffs” Rezanov finally was allowed to buy from Governor Arrillaga.

The other layer, the Spanish one, is far more noticeable, and is allowed to be “read” in service to tourism and the romantic Californio history mentioned earlier. The twenty-one missions remain where they were built, and they must be taken care of, not only for the sake of the mythical past they have been relegated to but also in service to the very real present. At least half of them still serve their parishes. Among these is the Misión San Francisco de Asís in San Francisco, or Mission Dolores as it is better known, and this would have been the home of the padres Rezanov conversed with. So Spain and Russia are all but relegated to myth, and it is the “Bostonians’ audacity,” constituted in and by the frame of a “grander future,” that seems to have prevailed in the reality of the present, which has passed from the symbolic into the instituted imaginary. And yet, as with most erasures and overlayers, the underlying scripts, as Sarah Dillon notes, remain. All palimpsests imply the inscription and superimposition of new, emerging worlds and ideas, but built in to the dynamics of this very domination is the observation that palimpsests “paradoxically preserved [ancient texts] for posterity” (Dillon 7). In other words, intended absence becomes unintended presence, and the dual nature of the missions, as simultaneously serving the Spanish mythical past and the very real parishes of the present, is a compelling illustration.

These missions are central tropes now in the Mexican presence on the coast, a presence that surfaced from underneath New Spain’s coating, and even if the American rush toward the Pacific intended to erase this layer, it is there. It does not matter that Senator John C. Calhoun, before his government declared war on Mexico in 1846, predicted that Mexicans would fade away: “We do not want the people of Mexico ei-
ther as citizens or subjects. All we want is a portion of territory, which they nominally hold, generally uninhabited, or, where at all, sparsely so, and with a population, which would soon recede, or identify itself with ours” (quoted in Horsman 241). For all the subsequent erasures after 1848 (breaches of treaties, border policing, fences, deportations), the population would not quite recede, and neither would it identify entirely with the Anglo. Instead, Mexico in the transnational California palimpsest has been preserved despite and because of its overwriting first by Spanish, then by American layers. Imaginaries, therefore, as carriers of background understandings and their practices, as bearers of significations, do not simply supersede and replace, once and for all. Rather, as frames or filters they linger, they overlay one another with various spatial anchorings, testimonies to Bakhtin’s often quoted comment that “at any moment in the development there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings, but at certain moments of the dialogue’s subsequent development along the way they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming festival” (Speech Genres 170).

And consequently, in what Norma Klahn calls the “Mexican social imaginary,” the West poses as North, “offering a re/membering,” as she says, “that re-imagines, recalls and unifies” (167). I want to fasten on to reimagining, and the way that the Mexican imaginary also in a sense interrupts the tropological sway that California as trope of national significance and project of modernity has held and continues to hold in the American imaginary. For if Whitman had it right—and I believe it is fair to say that, from within the imaginary and the vantage point of the Anglo-American rush across the continent from which he spoke, he had it exactly right—California was indeed to be the land of “a swarming and busy race settling and organizing everything.” Both then and later that particular energy can be attributed to what Richard Rodriguez with reference to our own time calls the “Quest for I.” He suggests that one reason why voices are raised in protest against the Hispanification of America is the fear “of losing the individualistic culture . . .—the ‘I’ civilization.” Rodriguez further suggests that “even if most Mexican immigrants coming to the United States, legally or illegally, are in quest of the ‘I,’ though they do not say it, they of course also bring with them aspects of their ‘we’ culture” (Interview 21). Thus the sometimes ironic way of history brushes off some of the veneer from the most recent layer in the transnational California palimpsest and recalls other imaginaries that came before.

Another irony: as a result of the recent financial crisis and numerous
cutbacks in the early years of the twenty-first century, the Russians are back in Fort Ross. In 2009 word reached Moscow that Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger intended to drop the funding for Fort Ross as one of many California state parks. The Russian government promptly sent Ambassador Sergey Kislyak to save the little fort, and on his visit with the California governor, Kislyak “pleaded [with him] to spare the site,” saying it “holds significant cultural, historic and sentimental value for the Kremlin, Russians and Russian Americans” (“Russians Urge Governor”). Although the governor could not make any such promise at the time, a year later the president of the Renova Group, a Russian conglomerate interested in expanding its markets, signed a three-year agreement to sponsor Fort Ross as it was nearing its bicentennial in 2012. While these renewed relations did not mean all that much in the everyday lives of either Californians or Russians, this chapter added to the story of Russia’s California romance, and to the nature of the transnational palimpsest of imaginaries of which it was a part.

By way of conclusion I return to Whitman, singing the nation, the self, and California, but also, as he famously proclaims in “Song of Myself,” contradicting himself. It may be that deep down there was a kind of unease with the canvassing progress he catalogued, for in another of his California poems, “Facing West from California’s Shores” (1860), which was written more than a decade before the “Redwood” poem, he strikes a very different tone. It is a fairly short poem, so I include the whole of it:

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FACING west, from California’s shores,
Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,
I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity,
the land of migrations, look afar,
Look off the shores of my Western sea—the circle almost circled;
For, starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmire,
From Asia—from the north—from the God, the sage, and the hero,
From the south—from the flowery peninsulas and the spice islands;
Long having wander’d since—round the earth having wander’d,
Now I face home again—very pleas’d and joyous;
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(But where is what I started for, so long ago?
And why is it yet unfound?) (114–15)

This final note of doubt and hesitancy, placed in parentheses in the poem, raises some interesting issues pertaining specifically to Whitman’s own vision as well as to more general perspectives on the spatial configurations of California in the American imaginary. It certainly challenges the praise of progress and modernity in his “Song of the Redwood-Tree.” Perhaps Whitman asked, as in this driven paradigm someone at some point would have to ask, where are we going? The perspective facing west casts the “it” that the persona searches for somehow uncertainly in a register of perpetual journey forward.

A very basic fact bears remembering, of course. In the traditional frame, America, as Rodriguez comments, moves from east to west: “Californians have been trying to tell Eastern Americans for decades that our nation is finite” (Brown 174). From east to west, California signifies the end of the land, and consequently, and traditionally, of possibility, and of further quest, as the tentativeness in Whitman’s poem signals. But this is only one perspective, for this space, and any space inflected by hetero-chronic itineraries of projections, movements and encounters, conquests and quests, will present different views depending on which frames, perspectives, and variously originated “burning glasses” and imaginaries we see through and with. Rezanov’s visit to San Francisco consequently epitomizes only one of multiple geography-making (his)stories and imaginaries that contribute to the ever-shifting space of, in this case, California. In this sense perhaps we should approach the study of any area as through a kaleidoscope, only instead of seeing a succession of phases and forms, we see them as coterminous and co-constitutive, and always shifting.

NOTES

1. Taylor’s argument in his Modern Social Imaginaries is far more complex and rich than the quotes I extract here do justice to. The main thrust of his book focuses on what he calls the “long march of modernity,” the delineation of which ends in a profound assessment of Western modernity, an imaginary, a way of being, that solidly breaks with the enchanted embedding of archaic systems. I have written more extensively on Taylor’s specifically modern social imaginary in relation to the American imaginary and what I call its “magic” elsewhere; see Lene Johannessen, Horizons of Enchantment: Essays in the American Imaginary (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press/University Press of New England, 2011).
2. For a marvelous history of Fort Ross and sea otter hunting along the northern California coast, see James Clifford, “Fort Ross Meditation,” in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century, 299–348. Here he traces the history of the Russians and their relations to indigenous peoples in California as well as Alaska.

Works Cited


