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Sentimental Mexicans in Nineteenth-Century California

BY MARISSA LÓPEZ

No es la raza Mexicana diferente de la Americana para que se crea que solo en nuestro cuerpo se recontaran las enfermedades.

(The Mexican race is not different from the American race and one should not think that disease only takes hold in our bodies.)

– Mexican Laborers' Petition to the Mexican Consul in the United States (quoted in Molina, 67)

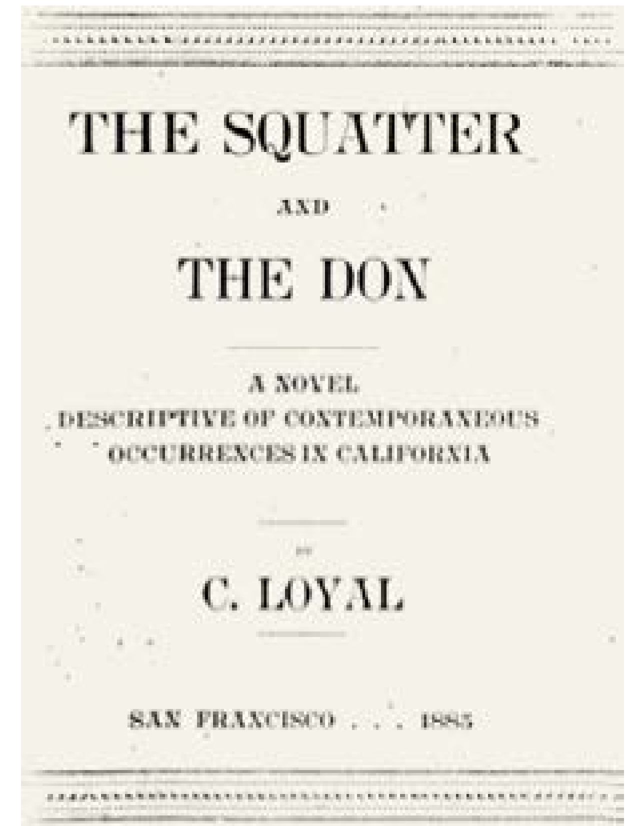
I AM VERY GRATEFUL to the Center for the Study of Women for awarding me a Junior Faculty Development grant to fund my research for "Feeling Mexican: Ruiz de Burton's Sentimental Railroad Fiction," an article about *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), the English-language novel by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton (*shown at left*) about the aftermath of the Mexican American War, the building of the Southern Pacific Railroad, and the racialization of Mexican Americans in California. When I began this work on Ruiz de Burton, I intended to investigate the correlation the novel sketches between the railroad's re-shaping of Mexican land in the 1870s and the re-making of the Mexican American body as raced and debased in the Anglo American imaginary during this same period. *Squatter* posits a womanly sentimentality against male physicality in making its argument for ethical citizenship and racial reconciliation, so I was particularly interested in whether Ruiz de Burton sees gender and race as immutable, physical characteristics, and if so, how these ideas might fit into

broader discourses of citizenship and Mexican American community at the turn of the last century.

While I did get the chance to explore those questions, my research plan hit a few bumps in the road and some dead ends. I applied for the grant to fund a research assistant who would help me with what I imagined was going to be the core of the project: archival research into public health policy and popular discourse about the railroads in late-nineteenth-century California. Initial explorations at the Huntington yielded interesting discoveries, but nothing that helped me dig deeper into Ruiz de Burton's text, and records of the Public Health Departments of Los Angeles and San Diego counties yielded no information about Mexican Americans for the latter part of the nineteenth century. Reading Natalie Molina's excellent study *Fit to Be Citizens,* I learned that Mexican Americans made no appearance in official public health documents until the twentieth century, which helped explain my fruitless archival sleuthing, but meant that I needed to find another way, besides emergent public health discourses, to explain Ruiz de Burton's conspicuous attention to the body.

Scholars before me had written about the body in *Squatter* largely in sentimental terms. They used the linkages between whiteness and feeling, forged by such canonical sentimental authors as Helen Hunt Jackson and Harriet Beecher Stowe, to argue against a reading of *Squatter* as a resistant text, a turn that David Luis-Brown complicates in *Waves of Decolonization*. Though Luis-Brown calls sentimentalism a "highly protean form" (47) whose politics shift with the social location of its author, a key assumption with which he must contend, and which *Squatter* blithely reinforces, is that the capacity to feel is congruent only with whiteness. Thus, sympathetic as he is with Ruiz de Burton's project, Luis-Brown, along with others who have written about it, reads *Squatter* as complicit with, rather than resistant to, Anglo American imperial racism.

Their readings of *Squatter*'s sentimental turn as meant to align the Alamar family with Anglo gentility, to reify, rather than unsettle, whiteness, are not incorrect, but such arguments are made wholly within the confines of the sentimental, and a playful, tongue-in-cheek tone lurks beneath the surface of the novel's dalliance with it as well as with the tidy resolutions of the historical romance, its sister form. "Really, I think our romance is spoiled," jokes one character after a couple have overcome the girl's mother's objection to their relationship. "It would have been so fine—like a dime novel—to have carried you off bodily," he quips,


THE SQUATTER

AND

THE DON

A NOVEL

DESCRIPTIVE OF CONTEMPORANEOUS OCCURRENCES IN CALIFORNIA

BY

C. LOYAL

SAN FRANCISCO . . . 1885

The Squatter and the Don was published in San Francisco in 1885 by María Amparo Ruiz de Burton using the pseudonym of C. Loyal. The English-language novel addresses the aftermath of the Mexican American War, the building of the Southern Pacific Railroad, and the racialization of Mexican Americans in California.

Anachronistic though it may have been, and despite Mexicans' absence from nineteenth-century public health discourses, I remained convinced that the railroad was my way into understanding the corporeality of *The Squatter and the Don*. This feeling was fueled by an incident that Molina documents: in June of 1916 a Mexican laborer living in a camp for railroad workers in Palmdale, California, came down with a case of typhus. This caused no small amount of anxiety in the city, spurring a rash of hygiene education programs aimed at the laborers, and providing ammunition to those arguing for tighter controls on Mexican immigration...

playfully diffusing the melodramatic potential of the scene (132).

The Squatter and the Don thus keeps the sentimental at arm's length, simultaneously seeking access to its white privilege while conceiving itself as generically distinct in key ways. The reader is meant to take *Squatter* seriously, which begs the question: what work is the body doing in *Squatter* if we are to consider it beyond the confines of the sentimental? As both John González and Jesse Alemán have noted, the novel deploys the body—specifically, as González argues, the body's ability to blush—in order to assert the Alamares' whiteness, but the novel's assertions are fraught and not entirely successful. In turning to public health as a lens through which we might read Ruiz de Burton, my aim was to radically shift the ways in which we understood the racialized body to be working in the novel.

Anachronistic though it may have been, and despite Mexicans' absence from nineteenth-century public health discourses, I remained convinced that the railroad was my way into understanding the corporeality of *The Squatter and the Don*. This feeling was fueled by an incident that Molina documents: in June of 1916 a Mexican laborer living in a camp for railroad workers in Palmdale, California, came down with a case of typhus. This caused no small amount of anxiety in the city, spurring a rash of hygiene education programs aimed at the laborers, and providing ammunition to those arguing for tighter controls on Mexican immigration (Molina 61). As several of the laborers noted, however, in a petition to the Mexican consul from which I take my epigraph, disease is not a feature endemic to Mexican bodies at the exclusion of Anglo Americans. Poor sanitation and squalid living conditions, rather than a genetic tendency towards slovenliness, rendered the Mexicans in Palmdale more vulnerable to typhus, the laborers argued. These petitioners were seeking help ameliorating the situation in the camp, while also objecting to the ways in which public health programs had taken control of the socio-political meaning of *mexicanidad*. To be Mexican, at this moment in Palmdale, was to be diseased.

Such a convergence of race and rail in the Southwest has a long and multifaceted history. It does not begin in 1916, nor does it affect only Mexicans. I see *Squatter* as offering a prehistory to this linkage as well as a means for combatting it through its deployment of the feeling body; feeling, in *Squatter,* is emotional as well as physical, and it crosses conventional, nineteenth century, gendered boundaries of sentiment. Situating *Squatter* in the broader context of U.S. literature, as I do, deviates from

the fair amount of critical attention *Squatter* has received in terms of the novel's relation to later Chicana/o literature. While some scholars have attended to the novel as a work of sentimental fiction, fewer have discussed *Squatter* specifically as a railroad novel.[1] In the article I ultimately completed, with the invaluable support of CSW, I do just that, asking what we learn about the nineteenth century when we consider particular kinds of genre fiction from a Mexican American perspective.

Certainly the genteel Mexican American protagonists at the heart of *Squatter* appear far removed from the Mexican workers in Palmdale, but are they really so very different? One might assume, as the characters in *Squatter* do, a clear distinction between the laboring bodies of the rail workers and the feeling bodies of *Squatter*'s protagonists, but both find themselves in a similar philosophical bind. In asserting their humanity—the universality of the physical, against corporate objectification—the rail workers can only reify corporate power as the agent of public discourse about the raced, Mexican body. Similarly, though *Squatter*'s protagonists would be loath to associate themselves with the rail workers, setting the feeling body in opposition to apathetic capital serves only to codify rather than dismantle the categories with which the novel takes issue.

This is, in fact, the crux of critiques that have been leveled against *The Squatter and the Don* since its republication by Arte Público Press in 1992. The novel has, however, had its champions. In their introduction to the 1992 edition, for example, Beatriz Pita and Rosaura Sánchez read *Squatter* as resistant to the encroachments of Anglo America, and they depict Ruiz de Burton's as an oppressed voice speaking truth to power. José Saldívar takes a similar approach in *Border Matters* where he reads *Squatter* as offering "readers a subaltern literature of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands" (168). Saldívar acknowledges Ruiz de Burton's own conflicted connections to Anglo power but values *Squatter* nevertheless for its ability to "track the almost forgotten histories of the cultures of U.S. imperialism" (183). Marcial González, likewise, argues that a text's self-consciousness should not limit our readings of it (54). Because it "initiate[s] a tradition of novels that respond specifically to the racialization of Mexican Americans in the United States," González considers *Squatter* a resistant, Chicano text (65).

Squatter's response to this racialization is admittedly uneven, though, as scholars like Jesse Alemán have pointed out. Alemán argues that *Squatter* "relies on strategies of class distinctions and regional alliances to naturalize the whiteness of Californios [the wealthy class of ranchers to which Ruiz de Burton belonged] against Indians and blacks," (59). He and others have noted that *Squatter* takes pains to identify the Alamares, the Mexican family at the center of the novel, as white, and to align them with the Anglo Americans of whom the novel approves. The novel does little to dismantle racial hierarchies, instead spending its energies proving the whiteness of Mexicans who, as one character notes, look English or German (Ruiz de Burton 85). Even so, in its conscious drive towards assimilation, *Squatter* reveals a Mexican American particularity. In this way, the recuperation of novels like *Squatter* does not just expand and bolster the literary history we already think we know; instead, these novels invite a fundamental rethinking of basic analytic categories such as, in *Squatter's* case, nations and nationalism.

Parallel to the novel's desire for the Alamares to be fully incorporated into U.S. social and political life is its desire to be understood in the context of U.S. literature, a desire manifest in its participation in the conventions of railroad and sentimental fiction. This literary turn reveals the impossibility of such integration, not in the overt workings of the plot, but

1. Amelia Montes is a notable exception, reading *Squatter* against Frank Norris's treatment of the railroad in *The Octopus*. "Whereas [Norris] plows the literary landscape clean of everything except the Anglo-American voice," writes Montes, "Ruiz de Burton embodies and embraces—fuses their cultures into her own brand of what contemporary Chicana scholars have now termed 'mestizaje'" (209).

in the physical details of the bodies that hover along the plot's margins. In putting pressure on these bodies my reading attempts to move discussions of *Squatter* away from a focus on the particularities of Mexican American experience and towards a theoretical focus on dismodernity. As Lennard Davis has defined it, the dismodern relies on the malleability of the human body and identity (239). If postmodernity destabilizes the self, in other words, dismodernity destabilizes the body, emphasizes physical difference and disability as a unifying, ethical norm from whence new subjective categories and political identities will emerge. Dismodernity disavows the intact, self-sufficient human body, arguing instead for an ideology of connected, interdependent bodies enjoying a symbiotic relationship with technology (240). Considering the bodies in *Squatter* as instances of a Latino dismodern enables a categorical reconsideration of U.S. literature wherein the frailty of characters' bodies is a direct reflection of the frailty of nations.

The Squatter and the Don is only indirectly about national unity, however, concerned as it is with the impact of the Central Pacific on the elite Mexican American *ranchero* class. These genteel families are figured in opposition to the new social institution of rail primarily in terms of their feelings, their capacity for an emotive humanism meant to offset rail's rapacious capitalism. Attention to the body and feelings in *Squatter* is a means to assert clear distinctions between human and machine. In my article, however, I pay the most attention to places where the opposition of body and machine breaks down, particularly in moments of human frailty and illness. For scholars of nineteenth-century Latina/o literature and for readers of *The Squatter and the Don*, dismodernity makes possible such a metahistorical reading of the physical travails of *Squatter's* characters. That is, rather than reading Mariano's, the Alamar patriarch, death or his son Tano's crippling as Mexican American political grievance, an ethics of the dismodern means that we can read *Squatter's* broken bodies and sympathetic machines as arguments about the frailty of nations. The body is always already imperfect, and the nation is always already composite, multiform, and interdependent.

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