





ALEXANDER I. OLSON

with art by Guillermo Nericcio García

## *El Grito* and the Tea Party

Recalling diversity

Less than a month after California's hotly contested midterm election in November 2010, the *Sacramento Bee* reported that local Tea Party activists had begun gathering signatures for a ballot measure modeled after Arizona's notorious SB 1070—the law requiring state and local law enforcement officers to check the immigration status of suspected “illegals.” It is no surprise that the craze for border enforcement has again swept California. Although the Pew Research Center has found that the flow of undocumented workers into the United States has actually decreased in recent years, and despite the estimated \$253 million in lost economic output that Arizona has endured since the passage of SB 1070, polling has suggested that a majority of California voters support the Arizona measure.<sup>1</sup> As Michael Erickson, the Tea Party activist behind the California measure, explained in the *Bee*, “it's going to be we the people who are going to make it happen.”<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the fate of Erickson's signature drive, his populist rhetoric mirrors that of the national Tea Party, with its emphasis on “taking back” the country and “restoring” American democracy. Despite imagery that would suggest a preoccupation with contesting the meaning of the American Revolution (witness the Minutemen at the United States-Mexico border and the revival of the Gadsden flag), the Tea Party has proven itself to be a potent force in contemporary US politics, drawing together diverse conservative ideologies.<sup>3</sup> The movement's fusion of past and present can be seen in the writings of former Fox News personality Glenn Beck, whose revision of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* spent four months atop the *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller list in 2009.<sup>4</sup> Readers can enroll in “Beck University” to take lessons in topics that include “Divine Providence vs. Manifest Destiny” and “Presidents You Need to Hate.”<sup>5</sup> Such lessons portray the United States' claim to Alta California—a northern territory of Mexico ceded to the United States in 1848 by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War—as justified by divine sanction. Particularly in the US Southwest, the Tea Party's emphasis on border enforcement is as much about defending an embattled white American heritage as more widely cited

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reasons such as preventing unemployment and terrorism.<sup>6</sup> In the dystopian vision of Beck and his compatriots, Mexican immigrants and their “anchor babies” will shove aside the rituals of the Fourth of July in favor of *el Grito*—the cry of September 16th, or Mexican Independence Day.<sup>7</sup>

As California voters contemplate the wisdom of racial profiling and mass deportation, it is worth looking back to another aspect of California’s heritage: the multicultural towns of Owens Valley in the late nineteenth century. These isolated communities in the eastern Sierra Nevada were remnants of the complicated demographics of the Gold Rush and, indeed, the forty-niners were late arrivals in a region with a long history of migration—Native American, Spanish, Mexican, and Russian.

Some of the first Anglo visitors to Alta California were convicts dumped on the beach in Carmel in 1796. According to Doyce Nunis, Jr., they proved to be “hard-working and docile” laborers under the Spanish colonial regime before being sent to Spain the following year. After Mexican independence in 1821, the naturalization process was made “fast and easy” for migrants from the United States and around the world, many of whom intermarried with locals. An exciting body of literature in recent years—including Louise Pubols’s masterful study of the de la Guerra family of Santa Barbara, *The Father of All* (2009)—has deepened our understanding of the complex social and economic world of the Californios.<sup>8</sup>

All this was threatened when Mexico lost Alta California to the United States in 1848. Although wealthier Californios remained active and savvy players in the new political system, the American Invasion ushered in an era of state-sponsored racial violence, as Anglos sought to drive Mexican, Chilean, and other “foreign” families from mining country through such measures as the Foreign Miners Tax of 1850. By sanctioning white supremacy, such laws eroded the land claims and citizenship rights of racialized “others” who were recast as “illegal aliens” in the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Anglo dominance was “difficult to enforce, and groups of people united by shared interests could create for themselves spheres of autonomy and strategies for interdependence.”<sup>10</sup> The Owens Valley became such a sphere. For Anglos no less than Mexican, Basque, and Cuban families in the late nineteenth century, the towns of the Owens Valley were motley communities of exiles hoping to make a living in their adopted home.

By 1903, when Mary Hunter Austin published *The Land of Little Rain*, many of these towns were dwindling, if not vanished, and Los Angeles had already begun to eye the Owens Valley’s water resources.<sup>11</sup> Rather than emphasizing decline, however, Austin painted a portrait of a vibrant, transnational, and deeply Californian culture where borders meant little, languages blended, and the chance to celebrate *el Grito* sparked joy, not fear. Every year on September 16, in her telling, shouts of ¡Viva la Libertad! and ¡Viva Mexico! resounded through the “Little Town of the Grape Vines.”<sup>12</sup> From the *grito* itself to the hoisting of “the red, white, and green of Old Mexico,” the entire town joined in the festivities. At midnight, according to Austin, as the singing and dancing drew to a close, the flag was taken down. But this was not the end of the celebration. As “shepherd fires glow strongly on the glooming hills,” the music began “softly and aside,” playing “airs of old longing and exile.” Next, and suddenly, the music struck “a barbaric swelling tune,” and the Star Spangled Banner was raised above the camp. The same people who had shouted the *grito* joined in singing the US national anthem. As Austin put it, “They sing everything, America, the Marseillaise, for the sake of the French shepherds hereabout, the hymn of Cuba, and the Chilean national air to comfort two families of that land.”<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, Austin’s vision of harmony passes all too easily over the darker sides of life in the Owens Valley in the late nineteenth century—the misogyny, the poverty, the endemic violence. Austin herself escaped this world for the literary communities of San Francisco and Santa Fe, and her portrait of the “Little Town of the Grape Vines” might be understood as an example of what Renato Rosaldo has called “imperialist nostalgia,” an ethnographic stance and mode of cultural production in which “people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed.”<sup>14</sup> Austin never mentions efforts to erode multiculturalism through public health policy and anti-immigration measures such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.<sup>15</sup> Yet unlike other examples

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of such nostalgia—including the ongoing fascination with the Gold Rush legend of the Mexican bandit Joaquín Murrieta, a figure who turned the tables on white colonial violence in attacks aimed at Anglo invaders—Austin’s story does not position the Owens Valley as a culture of the past, but as a vision for the future that inspired her later work on regionalism.<sup>16</sup> Romanticized as her version of the *Grito* celebration might be, it offers a powerful corrective to the Tea Party’s campaign for harsh new immigration restrictions, reminding Californians of all stripes that our multicultural present has roots in many decades of migration—east, west, north, and south. **B**

## Notes

- 1 Jeffrey Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “U.S. Unauthorized Immigration Flows Are Down Sharply Since Mid-Decade,” Pew Hispanic Center Report, 1 September 2010. A *Los Angeles Times*/USC poll of California voters showed a split of 50%–43% in favor of the Arizona measure. Seema Mehta, “Voters Split on Arizona Law,” *Los Angeles Times*, 31 May 2010. A Field Poll in June 2010 found a similar split of 49%–45% in favor of the measure. Shelby Grad, “Arizona Immigration Crackdown Divides California Voters, New Poll Shows,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 July 2010. The lost economic output figure is based on an estimate of conference cancellations. Marshall Fitz and Angela Kelley, “Stop the Conference: The Economic and Fiscal Consequences of Conference Cancellations Due to Arizona’s S.B. 1070,” Center for American Progress Report, November 2010.
- 2 Susan Ferriss, “Tea Party Activist Launches Arizona-style Immigration Initiative for California,” *Sacramento Bee*, 24 November 2010.
- 3 For the Tea Party’s role in a longer cultural struggle over the meaning of the American Revolution, see Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party’s Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). The Tea Party’s ideological composition is surveyed in “The Tea Party, Religion and Social Issues,” Pew Research Center Report, 23 February 2011.
- 4 Glenn Beck, *Glenn Beck’s Common Sense: The Case Against an Out-of-Control Government, Inspired by Thomas Paine* (New York: Mercury Radio Arts/Threshold Editions, 1999). For number of weeks on the bestseller list, see *New York Times*, 18 October 2009. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/18/books/bestseller/bestpaperfiction.html> [accessed 1 March 2011]. For Beck’s connection to the Tea Party, see Sean Wilentz, “Confounding Fathers: The Tea Party’s Cold War Roots,” *The New Yorker*, 18 October 2010. Wilentz identifies Beck’s role in the movement as “both a unifying figure and an intellectual guide.”
- 5 Beck University. <http://www.glennbeck.com/becku/about.php> [accessed 1 March 2011].
- 6 On TeaParty.org, a group with offices in California and Texas, the first item in a list of “Non-negotiable core beliefs” is “Illegal Aliens Are Here Illegally.” <http://www.teaparty.org/about.php> [accessed 1 March 2011].
- 7 Jorge Rivas, “Fox News: ‘Penélope Cruz Is Having an Anchor Baby,’” *Color Lines: News for Action*, 13 December 2010. [http://colorlines.com/archives/2010/12/fox\\_news\\_penelope\\_cruz\\_is\\_having\\_an\\_anchor\\_baby.html](http://colorlines.com/archives/2010/12/fox_news_penelope_cruz_is_having_an_anchor_baby.html) [accessed 1 March 2011]. See also “Beck Embraces ‘Anchor Babies’ Slur,” *Media Matters*, 6 May 2010. <http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/201005060042> [accessed 1 March 2011]. Michael Erickson, sponsor of the SB 1070-style measure in California, has styled himself as a voice of reason by opposing state legislative attacks on “anchor babies”—even while arguing for judicial solutions and warning against the “ravages of crime and welfare dependency” supposedly encouraged by birthright citizenship. See Michael Erickson, “Birthright Citizenship: The Latest Gimmick of Immigration Enforcement Advocates,” 7 February 2011 (quotation by Erickson is located in comments section). <http://www.rniamerica.org/node/589213> [accessed 1 March 2011].
- 8 Doyce B. Nunis, Jr., “Alta California’s Trojan Horse: Foreign Immigration,” in Ramón A. Gutiérrez and Richard J. Orsi, eds., *Contested Eden: California Before the Gold Rush* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 302–305. For intermarriage of Anglos and Californios before the Gold Rush, see Louise Pubols, “Open Ports and Intermarriage,” in *The Father of All: The de la Guerra Family, Power, and Patriarchy in Mexican California* (Berkeley: University of California Press and Huntington Library, 2009), 105–148, and María Raquel Casas, *Married to a Daughter of the Land: Spanish-Mexican Women and Interethnic Marriage in California, 1820–1880* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2007). For conflict with Native Americans, see Michael González, *This Small City Will Be a Mexican Paradise: Exploring the Origins of Mexican Culture in Los Angeles, 1821–1846* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005).
- 9 Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
- 10 Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 51. For racial conflict in the Santa Clara Valley, see Stephen Pitti, *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).
- 11 Construction on the Los Angeles Aqueduct—which devastated the remaining farms in the Owens Valley by diverting their water—began in 1908, and led to decades of conflict. See William Kahrl, *Water and Power: The Conflict over Los Angeles’ Water Supply in the Owens Valley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), and John Walton, *Western Times and*

*Water Wars: State, Culture, and Rebellion in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

- <sup>12</sup> The modern celebration of *el Grito de la Independencia* begins the night of September 15, with the shouting of *el grito* (“the cry”) resounding near midnight. The festivities continue on through September 16.
- <sup>13</sup> Mary Hunter Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (New York: Modern Library, 2003 ed.), 106–107.
- <sup>14</sup> Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia,” *Representations*, no. 26 (Spring 1989): 108.
- <sup>15</sup> For efforts to curb or contain racial diversity in California through public health policy, see Natalia Molina, *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), Alexandra Stern, *Eugenic Nation: Faults and Frontiers of Better Breeding in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

2005), and Nayah Shah, *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco’s Chinatown* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). Austin’s portrait echoed the efforts of boosters to celebrate a sanitized version of the region’s racial history, a marketing strategy that “allowed easterners to luxuriate in the Southern California so brilliantly advertised: exotic, semi-tropic, romantic.” William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of Its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 28.

- <sup>16</sup> John Rollin Ridge, *Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, The Celebrated California Bandit* (San Francisco, 1854). Susan Lee Johnson links the Murrieta legend to the concept of “imperialist nostalgia” in *Roaring Camp*, 49. Murrieta’s ongoing cultural resonance can be seen in Isabel Allende’s *Daughter of Fortune* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) and the Hollywood blockbuster *The Mask of Zorro* (1998).