The Warren McCain Collection for Western Life
Alonzo "Old Block" Delano

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When Alonzo Delano died on 8 September 1874, newspapers throughout the Northern California region lamented the passing of a favorite local celebrity. A death notice issued by the Sacramento Union on 10 September (reprinted a day later by San Francisco’s Daily Alta California), observed that Delano “was known by reputation throughout the State as an author and a man of integrity. [. . .] He was a writer of much native humor and plainness of speech, abounding in facts, anxious to do justice to all and injury to none.” The San Francisco Chronicle echoed this sentiment, adding that he “was a writer of considerable ability.” A longer obituary from the Grass Valley Union, the newspaper in Delano’s adopted hometown, observed that he “was known all over the State as a writer for the papers, and for books which he published. [. . .] ‘Old Block,’ under which name he wrote, is as familiar on this coast as any household word” (10 September, reprinted by the Sacramento Union on 11 September). Even the New York Times, in which a few years earlier Delano had published a series of correspondence about life in California, carried on 23 September a five-sentence obituary that noted, in accord with the others, that upon “Arriving in California without capital, he speedily became one of the most active men in the State, as a writer displaying talent of a peculiar order, over the signature of ‘Old Block.’”

Having joined the great westward movement of gold-seekers in 1849, Alonzo Delano was a member of the class of immigrants whose journey to California had given them the title
“Forty-Niners.” Throughout his career as a writer of the Gold Rush era, Delano expressed an earnest desire to document the full story of those who grew fatigued “toiling through the deep sands of the barren desert, suffering from hunger and thirst; or weary and way-worn in climbing stupendous heights of the Siérra” (Life xiii). The outpouring of both sadness and fond recollection at the news of his passing, evident in newspapers from across the former gold regions of Northern California, testifies to the continuing high regard in which “Old Block” was held by his forty-niner peers. That is, Delano’s contributions to California literature of the time were perhaps most frequently celebrated by those who saw themselves as the subjects of those writings. Thus did Delano aid in creating the very tenor of the Gold Rush’s culture of memory. Additionally, he also worked to establish a number of literary trends, most notably the mixture of humor and sentimentalism, that develop more fully as later writers take up the topic of mid-nineteenth-century California and the West.

Delano wrote about the Gold Rush and post-Gold Rush experience in a variety of modes and genres: satirical and sentimental essays, letters to newspapers and magazines, poetry, promotional pamphlets, an overland diary, and a play. Publishing as both Alonzo Delano and Old Block, he wrote with a fair amount of awareness about the different conventional and rhetorical needs of a wide-ranging mix of audiences. His readers included: his aforementioned peers from the overland journey and the early days of placer mining in the vast Sierra Nevada mountains; newly mon-eyed sophisticates in such nearby cities as Sacramento and San Francisco; readers “back home” in such places as rural Illinois, Ohio, and New York eager for news about the Gold Rush and about their loved ones who had attempted the journey; East Coast consumers of such printed media as the New York Times and the Saturday Evening Post; and anyone who might have sought
entertainment or information by picking up one of the dozens of firsthand accounts published during the 1850s. Taken as a whole, Delano's printed works exhibit a shrewd combination of sensibilities, a mixture that reveals and exploits tensions found in what at the time were still nascent assumptions about the genre of regionalist literature at its very moment of emergence on the broader American literary scene. Exhibiting a distinct outlook on the idea of regional identity; on sentimentalism, satire, and literature; and on the developing treatment of Native Americans, Alonzo "Old Block" Delano helped to establish the California gold country as an integral part of the American literary West.

Alonzo Delano was born on 2 July 1806 in Aurora, New York. The son of Joanna Doty and her husband Dr. Frederick Delano, Alonzo came from a distinguished family tree that found its North American roots in a French émigré named Jonathan De La Noye, Alonzo's great-great-grandfather. De La Noye also happens to have been the great-great-great-great-grandfather of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which makes the Gold Rush chronicler a third cousin twice removed of the former president. At the age of fifteen, Alonzo embarked on a semi-itinerant career as a salesman and merchant, a career that carried him ever westward. He came back to Aurora in 1830 to marry Mary Burt, and the two returned almost immediately to the home he had established in Ohio. In 1841 the couple moved to South Bend, Indiana, where they spent six years and Delano became, as he later recalled, "a citizen of Indiana—a Hoosier by adoption—a dealer in tape, flour, silk, lard, broadcloth, coon skins, delaines, pork, satins, whisky, bank stock, and butter; a politician and man of family, a stump speaker, a fool for meddling with politics [. . .]" ("The Two Dromios" 1). By July 1848, the Delanos and their two young children, Fred and Harriet, were living as a family in Ottawa, Illinois (Correspondence xi-xii). Alonzo's next leap westward, though, would keep him away from
his wife and children for the better part of the rest of his life, as he journeyed to California and established careers both as a merchant and banker and as a writer.

As is the case with any author from the past, and perhaps especially so with one about whom relatively little documentation exists, a number of erroneous stories and misimpressions have crept into Delano's biographical record. For example, Gold Rush chroniclers have often assumed that he began his publishing career on the 1849 overland journey. This assumption depicts Delano as an unpracticed but miraculously gifted storyteller, the right writer at the right time, as it were. However, a play by the title of The Frontier Settlement; or, Scenes in the Far West, printed in 1846 by the firm of Francis Clarke in New York City, bears the name of "Alonzo Delano" as its author. Is this the merchant from western New York who had by 1846 moved to Indiana? From scant existing records it is of course impossible to determine definitively. Nevertheless, several details prove suggestive. For one, bibliographic records fail to reveal any other author publishing under the same name during this period; that is, there was no surplus of "Alonzo Delanos" competing in the 1840s for publication rights to the name. Much more significantly, The Frontier Settlement is set on the very Indiana frontier where Delano the merchant was living in 1846. The text also demonstrates a well-read and learned quality, traits that the future Gold Rush chronicler certainly held. Finally, the script contains several of the key tropes and themes that would become hallmarks of Old Block's writings.

The Frontier Settlement is a fairly typical genre potboiler (of the sort documented by Roger A. Hall in Performing the American Frontier) in which a small group of Anglo-American settlers undergoes a series of courtship mishaps and must withstand, in the play's climactic moments, an attack by hostile Indians. The structure of the play is influenced by the English Restoration and
eighteenth-century comedies of Wycherly, Congreve, and Sheridan, in which two pairs of lovers spar verbally and overcome misunderstandings about intentions and affiliations in their paths to marriage. Characters include the garrison’s Captain Sellman and the local landowner’s daughter Alicia Atwood, the sentimental and heroic couple, as well as comic frontiersman Jacob Jumblejacket and the equally rough-around-the-edges, sharp-tongued Betty Blossom. The villain Munson, unsuccessful in his bid to steal Alicia for himself, betrays the settlement by leading an attack of stereotypically bloodthirsty Sioux against it. And then there is the foppish Nicholas Adverb, whose comic dialogue is pretentious and absurd throughout (“Why, this is the most ungrammatical place I ever saw. Ah! the present tense fills my substantive soul with sad reflections” [I.i, p3]), and Doctor Garlic, who means well with his repeated efforts to provide phlebotomies (no one takes him up on the offer, though). With respect to Delano’s later work, particularly his relatively well-known 1857 play *A Live Woman in the Mines*, *The Frontier Settlement* contains a number of similar details, including a general sensitivity to the working conditions of the lower-class outdoorsman and the figurative pairing of a tough-talking outdoorswoman named Betty with a more genteel, earnest, Eastern-bred middle-class heroine.

The depiction of Native Americans in this play, while generally representative of contemporaneously popular racist attitudes, does not fully reflect the attitude Delano would eventually come to have about their status as human beings. This is probably due to the fact that until his departure on the overland journey, Delano had in all likelihood had very little contact with Natives. In *The Frontier Settlement*, for instance, Delano paints all Natives, both those allied with the settlers and those who would rapaciously eliminate them, as grunting savages who speak in (mostly) short, choppy sentences and in parables replete with nature-based
similes and metaphors. These Indians, in other words, owe more to James Fenimore Cooper, a fellow western New Yorker and author of the immensely popular *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), than to any understanding of what frontier settlement in fact could be like. To be fair, much of Delano’s dialogue in this play, Indian or otherwise, may be construed as stereotypical in its representation of differences in class, race, and ethnicity among the principal characters. But amid the stereotypes, aimed perhaps at simply creating a sensational hit on the popular stage, Delano nevertheless reserves the most one-sided and egregious representations for the Native characters. After just a short time among actual Native peoples on the overland trail and in California, though, he quickly tempers this impression quite significantly, eventually arriving at what one might best describe as a qualified but liberal respect for their human qualities and rights.

If the author of *The Frontier Settlement* is the same person who in California adopts the occasional penname “Old Block”—and there does not appear to be any reason not to think so—then the play’s existence also illuminates a crucial aspect of Delano’s ambitions, namely his interest in the West as a destination. It has become another commonplace of biographical summaries and introductions to observe that Delano left his family behind in 1849 and headed west for medical reasons. Such accounts take him at his word when he states, on the first page of his published journal from the overland trek, *Life on the Plains and Among the Diggings* (1854), that “My constitution had suffered sad inroads by disease incident to western climate, and my physician frankly told me, that a change of residence and more bodily exertion was absolutely necessary to effect a radical change in my system—in fact, that my life depended upon such a change” (13). However, the motivation for Delano’s departure is perhaps not so simple. An unpublished letter dated 12 March 1845 from Delano to Samuel
Parkman, a family friend and prospective business partner, hints at an altogether different (but equally familiar) reason for lighting out for the West:

I have been corresponding considerably with Mr Smith, who has urged me to go to Mexico with him—I have got the fever upon me considerably and it would be no way strange if another year should find me in Santa Fe—[...] If my contemplated arrangements in business are successful & from present appearances they auger well I shall be situated so that I can go out with a stock of Goods next Spring—I do not propose giving up my business here, but shall go out like the merchants of the Middle Ages on Ventures & be governed by Circumstances of trade.

Nowhere in this letter does Delano mention his health. Rather, by using the term "fever" not literally but figuratively, Delano reveals that he feels the lure of the frontier just as strongly as do many other restless men with an interest in frontier adventure. (The Mr. Smith in question is Peter Smith, brother of the legendary frontier trapper Jedediah Smith, an association that no doubt further fueled Delano's interest.) His wife certainly noticed this yearning. In a brief handwritten section added at the end of her husband's letter to Parkman, Mary Delano writes to their mutual friend, "I dont think Alonso [sic] will go to Santa Fe. We have trials enough when we share them together & I shall not consent to separate for such a journey if I can help it[;] as to getting rich I gave that up long ago." Delano's westering ambitions, which had already brought the merchant and his family from western New York to Ohio, Indiana, and, by 1848, Ottawa, Illinois, were clearly a source of tension at home.

Nevertheless, leave he did, for a very, very long time. As he tells us in *Life on the Plains*, on 5 April 1849 Delano hit the trail for
California: “on the day named above, I became a nomad denizen of the world, and a new and important era of my life began” (13). He would not see his wife and children again until May 1852, and then only briefly as he set out without them for California once again after three months, again citing “ill health” (Pen 58). In 1861, having settled as a banker in Grass Valley, California, and become something of a town father, and perhaps concerned by the prospects of an oncoming war, Delano finally sent for Mary and his daughter, whom he affectionately called Hat. Sadly, Fred, who had suffered from an unspecified (or at least undocumented) malady since birth, had died in the intervening years. It must have been equally sad, moreover, to watch Hat suffer a nervous breakdown in 1865. Alonzo brought her back to New York to consign her to the care of a state mental asylum; she would remain a patient in a series of state institutions until her death in 1914. After admitting her, her father returned to California (by way of Nicaragua, from which he sent a series of gloomy travel dispatches to the Sacramento Daily Union). They would not see each other again. Mary remained with her husband in Grass Valley until her death in 1871. However, in April 1849 neither could fully yet know the extent to which Delano’s departure for the West was in some significant way a leave-taking. Mary’s efforts to keep her husband by her side, to weather their “trials” together, clearly had not succeeded.

Just prior to leaving, Delano agreed to supply an account of his overland crossing to the Free Trader, the newspaper in his then-hometown of Ottawa, Illinois. (Once in California, he also contracted almost immediately to send dispatches to the New Orleans True Delta, which had an agent in Sacramento.) Thus, with his departure by steamer for St. Louis and then up the Missouri River to St. Joseph, Alonzo Delano began both his writing and his western careers in earnest. Not surprisingly, his
various published accounts of the journey chart a now-familiar forty-niner progress across the continent. Striking off across the Plains from St. Joe, Delano joined the tens of thousands of California-bound immigrants on an epic journey along the North Platte River through the territories of Nebraska and Wyoming, across South Pass and up to Fort Hall in what is now Idaho, through the heat and aridity and limited grazing resources of the Humboldt desert, and (in Delano’s case) into California by way of the far-northern Lassen Trail. Delano reports that he first set foot in California at the end of August 1849.

One of the more distinctive features of Delano’s forty-niner narrative is the sense of pervasive physical hardship one finds on the trail and in the mines. Having begun by announcing his medical rationale for heading west, Delano continues the theme by revealing an astonishing array of ailments and discomforts suffered along the way. On 22 May he “felt the premonitory symptoms of fever creeping over me, and was compelled to get into the wagon, being too weak to walk, and it became apparent that a thorough course of medicine was necessary to break my predisposition to bilious disease” (Life 48); four days later he felt better thanks to “the apothecary shop in my bowels” (Life 56). A meal of buffalo meat (“coarser grained than that of domestic beef”) on 1 June waylaid the company with diarrhea (Life 61). On 28 July he once again “began to feel cold chills creeping along my back, and became satisfied that a day within the wagon was my fate. I felt almost discouraged when I reflected that that fell disease was gnawing at my heart; but there was no help for it, and when my wagon came up, I turned in under the influence of chill and fever” (Life 158). And on 4 August Delano “was taken with dysentery during the night, and being too weak to walk, I had to take up uncomfortable quarters in my ‘moving lodge’” (Life 166). To be sure, at other times he also feels hale enough to walk and ride ahead of his
party to scout out the route, often for days at a time. During the trek to California, his health swings quite widely from hardiness to infirmity and back again. Altogether, Delano’s appreciation of the overland journey is one that includes the tremendous toll it demanded of the human body.

In the introduction to a recent republication of Life on the Plains (re-titled On the Trail to the California Gold Rush), the historian J. S. Holliday notes that Delano’s account differs significantly from most published overland diaries in that Delano does not end the book with his party’s arrival in California; he continues to describe, for almost one-third of its pages, his experiences in the mines and cities of Northern California (Holliday, “Introduction,” Life ix). Thus he is able to relate how one month after his initial entry into the region he finally comes to Sacramento and, within a few weeks, heads back into the mountains. Beginning with his arrival in the mining camp of Dawlytown and then in places such as Bidwell’s Bar, Stringtown, Independence Bar, and Marysville, Delano recounts his efforts to establish himself as a merchant once again and, with some luck, as a successful miner of gold. And thus he is also able to provide often heartrending follow-up information to experiences that he has had on the Plains. Early in the journey, at his party’s crossing of the North Platte River, Delano meets a Mr. Henderson from New Orleans who “thinking it a speculation [...] resolved to stop and establish a ferry for a time sending his family on, with the intention of overtaking them” (88). Once in California, though, Delano encounters Mrs. Henderson and learns that her husband was never reunited with the family:

By degrees the opinion was formed that he was murdered, and she left among strangers, upon a barren wilderness, with her two helpless children, with a long, doubtful and dangerous journey before her, and all the uncertainty of an unsettled and barbarous country on her arrival in California,
if she should be so fortunate as to reach it herself. In her trying situation she found sympathy and friends in those around her, and every possible attention was shown her by the way-worn emigrants. She reached the settlements in safety, and with acquaintances went to Dawlytown [...].

(274-75)

Delano artfully utilizes this portrait of suffering and recovery to bridge the holes in the usual overland diary account, to allow his readers more fully to connect with the tale as it unfolds and returns upon itself in the diggings. Later, Delano will also greatly elevate the level of sentimental expression in the story, change the name Henderson to Wilson, and publish it in 1856 first as “A Peril of the Plains” in *The California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences* and then as part of *Old Block’s Sketch-Book* (74-79), his second collection of what he called pen-knife sketches.

Perhaps most importantly, though, this structure of maintaining the narrative through to the goldfields enables Delano to document not only the physical traumas of the journey but also those of mining for gold. Introducing this portion of the narrative, Delano begins with a telling disclaimer: “I shall avoid narrating personal adventures as much as possible.” He continues, “In speaking of my own trials, it should be borne in mind that they were common to thousands who went through similar scenes; and although they may necessarily be varied, yet almost every miner, in the years ’49 and ’50, experienced hardships nearly akin to those of others; and shared alike much ill fortune” (258). This deferral to collective experience has by this point already become a crucial move on Delano’s part. He first employs it in the introduction to his first book of Old Block sketches, *Pen Knife Sketches, or, Chips of the Old Block* (1853), and he will repeat the gesture in other collections of writings, in his 1857 play *A Live Woman in the Mines*, and in later newspaper reminiscences (e.g., see “The
Ultimately, Delano determined that the mining life was not for him, that his talents as a writer and a merchant would earn a living much more reliably than could a streamside claim and a gold pan. And so he headed for “the small village of San Francisco” to set up a produce shop, “buying and selling tatures [sic], uniting the Blockheads with the Cabbage-heads, and turnip noses with turn-up noses” (Pen 31).
Jonas Winchester, publisher of San Francisco’s *Pacific News*, recalled that Delano introduced himself and submitted his first sketch on 18 October 1850, the same day on which the steamer *Oregon* famously pulled into San Francisco harbor with news of Congress’s granting of California statehood (Dane, “Foreword,” Pen x). As for his pseudonym, Delano credits his readers with having had a significant hand in establishing it. In a reminiscence published in *The California Farmer* in response to an essay from an admiring fellow contributor named Katie King, Delano explains how, “When I had written my first article, week after, my pen-knife caught my eye whittling followed in the train of thought chips, and then the old, musty saying, current in my boyhood, of ‘Chips of an Old Block;’ and so I carried out the association of ideas on the instant and signed my article thus, ‘By an Old Block.’” However, through the circumstances of publication and reception, the meaning of the phrase “was perverted by the public, and fastened upon the author as ‘Old Block,’ for short” (“The Reason, Katie” 83). And so the name of Old Block was soon known throughout the gold country as that of a humorous writer who knew full well the miner’s woes.

Within a few months of their initial appearance, Old Block’s sketches were being reprinted by the *Sacramento Daily Union*. And in 1853, the *Daily Union* collected the entirety of Old Block’s work in a book: *Pen Knife Sketches; or, Chips of the Old Block*, with illustrations provided by a well-known artist friend of Delano’s from their Rough-and-Ready Camp days together, Charles Christian Nahl. (Nahl provided the images for several of Old Block’s publications.) The first printing of fifteen thousand copies sold out in less than a year, and at the beginning of 1854 a second printing promptly sold out as well (Baker 265 n. 19). *Pen Knife Sketches* includes a number of alternately humorous and sentimental “whittlings” that describe the trials of the newly
arrived greenhorn in the mines, the ongoing industry of placer mining, the work of the mule-train and itinerant merchant, and the deleterious effects of gambling. A second series of sketches describes San Francisco’s diverse populations and its recovery from fire; the pleasures and challenges of crossing to the Pacific Ocean through the Panama isthmus (by which route he returned to California after his 1852 visit with his family); and the “Mountain Village” of Grass Valley, where Delano settled after leaving the Bay Area. A particularly evocative passage in a sketch entitled “Mountain Express” details the effect that a letter carrier’s arrival in camp has on the men: “Say; just look at that rough looking customer. [. . .] Why! he has got a letter, and the tears are streaming down his rough cheek, till they wet his long beard. [. . .] Home and friends are before him; the rest of the world is all a blank” (22). This scene is so crucial to Delano for conveying the emotional state of the average miner that he uses the very same situation in Act II, scene ii, of A Live Woman in the Mines.

The figure of the pen-knife serves Delano as more than simply a clever metaphor to describe the beginning of his career. Developed as a conceit throughout the book, the pen-knife enables Delano to conjure a series of comic meditations on the very craft of writing. That is, Delano is able to incorporate the act of writing into the tale he tells about gold-country labor. Most directly, this conceit is articulated through the narrator’s frequent engagement in conversational asides with the pen-knife. The two often interrupt each other, in asides usually set off with brackets, to comment on the tale at hand or to admonish each other for various writerly transgressions. For example, a sketch about gambling in the mines ends with a parenthetical interruption in which Old Block chides, “Recollect, my Pen-Knife, that we are not writing sermons or criticisms,” to which the Pen-Knife responds, “Then I’ll shut up” (26). A description of a rare visit to the mines by a woman prompts the
narrator to warn, “My Pen-Knife, you had better take that left nib off a little” (13), which begs the question: has writing about the encounter dulled his writing tip too much? That is, is he presumably aroused and thus pressing too hard or over-writing? A similar innuendo arises when Old Block writes about a hilltop of snow that someone had designated as being perfect for laundry use: “I, however, generally contented my plebian disposition with more common water from the river, in my laundry manipulations, and I'll be hanged if I would climb that hill to get snow for the handsomest washerwoman in—tut, tut, my Pen-Knife, you are getting dull” (15). The implication here is that infrequent contact with women has dulled the knife to the point where even honing a writing utensil to describe these events produces unsatisfactory results.

One of the more extensive dialogues between narrator and instrument occurs, not surprisingly, in the self-portrait of Old Block that stands as one of the book’s central and most entertaining sketches. Describing Old Block in the third person, this eponymous sketch gives a quick and ironic rundown of his overland journey: “He was born in New York, brought up in Ohio, educated in Indiana, and polished in Illinois.” Then, in need of “perfecting his education by a traveling tour, he made a pleasure trip across the plains in 1849 [...] by which he became a scientific operator on hawks, crows, rats, and other nutritious vegetables” (30). An etching by Nahl that accompanies this tale shows Delano by a campfire on the prairie preparing to eat a frog impaled upon his knife, an image that further amplifies the text’s comic effect. Notably, Old Block also briefly confesses in this sketch to a motivation for westward migration not founded in health. He writes: “You will perceive from his early career that he always had a great propensity—rather a desire—to see the west, so with a shout of ‘Westward ho!’ he set out determined to find out” (31). This is
perhaps the only instance in all of Delano's published writings in which the motivation to go west is not given as illness; it is especially revealing when considered in light of the comments he makes about Santa Fe in his 1845 letter to Samuel Parkman.

The narrator's verbal skirmish with his pen-knife, however, emerges most dramatically when Old Block has the pen-knife attempt to deliver a physical description of its wielder:

I choose to draw him in his best suit. [Nonsense, my Pen-Knife, you know he has but one.] Fancy to yourself a man somewhere between fifteen and fifty years of age—I like to be particular—dressed in a pair of sheep's grey pants, a half way dread-nought coat of no particular color, rather seedy, and why shouldn't it be?—it has been planted long enough—a dark vest, minus two, essential buttons, a small cap [don't tell 'em I stole it,] and boots, well blacked—in the gutters after every storm. [This is what I call going it, from head to foot.] His head is covered with vegetation—a good grazing ground for—[there, skip that,] his forehead—like some mountain volcanoes—a shell, and long distance to the bottom, his eyes are like rich lead mines, while his nose [let that go, it is so far off you can't touch it.] (31; brackets in original)

Old Block's fragmented self-portrait aligns him visually with the often meagerly dressed miners about whom he writes. It also has the effect of contributing to an ongoing deflation of high-sounding literary language, begun in the book's opening pages when the pen-knife urges the narrator to call a mule a mule instead of a more noble-sounding "weary steed" (3).

The final joke in the portrait, about the great distance to the end of Old Block's nose, alludes to the one feature for which Old Block was most clearly known: his large nose. Often the cause of jokes and teasing, Delano's "phiz," as he called it, served him as
something of a calling card. Indeed, in 1858 Delano sent his sketch “Old Block Resurrected” to Hutchings’ Illustrated California Magazine in an envelope that bore not only a postage stamp bearing the profile of George Washington but also a self-portrait in profile. (The envelope also gave Hutchings’ address not as a street and number but in verse, attesting to the extent to which in 1858 San Francisco was still in many ways a small town.) The editors of the magazine, in printing a facsimile of the envelope for their readers to see for themselves, quipped that “The writer evidently intended to satisfy the express that as Uncle Sam’s letter-stamps were good enough for the postage, his own ‘phiz’ ought to be good for the express charges” (“Our Social Chair” 474). By this time, Delano could count on a certain measure of celebrity throughout Northern California.

But that’s getting ahead of the story. In 1853 “Old Block” published Pen Knife Sketches as well as “The Miner’s Progress,” a verse tale in which he offers, well in advance of Charlie Chaplin, the now-familiar comic image of a down-and-out miner compelled to cook and eat his own boots to survive (“Miner’s Progress” 9). And in 1854, under his given name, Alonzo Delano published Life on the Plains. Which raises the question: how do the two “authors” differ, if at all?

In an 1851 letter to the Illinois Free Trader, Delano begins to describe San Francisco to his readers but then checks himself, pointing out that they have probably already read other writers’ descriptions and that “a bosom friend of mine—yeleped ‘Old Block,’ has ‘done the deed,’ and I hate to write what has been written over and over” (Correspondence 109). Notwithstanding this disclaimer, Delano was not shy about rewriting and republishing earlier texts, and the evidence of his revisings and rewritings speaks to Delano’s keen awareness of audience. That is, an examination of the salient differences in nearly identical passages that
were published in multiple venues reveals how "Alonzo Delano" differs from "Old Block" in both sensibility and style.

In both *Pen Knife Sketches* (signed Old Block) and *Life on the Plains* (signed Alonzo Delano), Delano concludes one of his many sections on physical hardship by describing the hard work being performed near "the mouth of Nelson's Creek" (*Pen* 28; *Life* 348). He then describes in both texts a most curious discovery: in looking over an abandoned camp, he finds

the effigy of a man on the ruins of a shanty. This caricature of humanity was standing upright, rigged out in an old shirt, a very ragged pair of pants, boots which looked as if they had been climbing rocks since leather was invented; in short, the image represented a lean, worn out, meagre [sic], woe-begone miner. On the shirt was inserted "My claim failed—will you pay the tax?" alluding to the tax on foreigners. Appended to the figure was a paper, bearing the following scroll, written in good business hand:—

"Californians! O! Californians! Look at me. Once as fat and saucy as a privateersman; but now—look ye—a miserable skeleton. In a word, a used up man. Never mind, I can sing, notwithstanding:—

'O, Californy! this is the land for me,
A pick and shovel, and lots of bones,
Who would not come, the sight to see?
The golden land of dross and stones!

Oh, Susannah! don't you cry for me,
I'm living dead in Cali-for-nee!" (*Pen* 28-29)

The two versions of this anecdote differ not at all in form and only slightly in diction—Delano shifted a few words and chose alternates for a few others when he revised this passage from *Pen Knife Sketches* for publication in *Life on the Plains*. However, the
difference in tone between these two versions is highly significant, in large part because of the manner in which Old Block/Alonzo Delano frames the tale. In *Pen Knife Sketches*, Old Block introduces the effigy as “a subject of jest,” as evidence of miners’ ability to laugh at themselves (28). However, in *Life on the Plains*, no such framing of the image as humor exists; rather, Delano presents the effigy as an example of their “failures” (348).

The distinction between Old Block and Alonzo Delano emerges most fully in what he writes in each version about the effigy and its accompanying verse after the presentation of the anecdote. In *Pen Knife Sketches*, the concluding remarks speak to sentimentalism, to literary form, and finally to the labor of writing: “Although this doggerel rhapsody does not strike the heart like the chaste tone and beauty of sentiment of that charming celebration ode written by Mrs. Wills, [...] it is not without a moral and deep meaning” (29). In effect, Old Block suggests here that the verse may be crude, but the sentiment is just as genuine, if not more so, than anything found in a gentle woman’s “inklings of leisure” (29). In *Life on the Plains*, however, Delano eliminates the discussion of Mrs. Wills’s poetry and instead follows the anecdote with a claim about the effigy’s realism: “Ludicrous as it may appear, it was a truthful commentary on the efforts of hundreds of poor fellows in the ‘golden land’” (349). After these widely different framing passages, the prose in both versions is once again identical (except for one word) as it recounts how a company of miners “had penetrated the mountain snows with infinite labor, in the early part of the season, enduring trials [or “hardships”] of no ordinary character” (*Pen* 291/*Life* 349). In both passages, the narrator uses the effigy to say something about conditions in the mines. However, whereas the *Pen Knife* example demonstrates a moment of humor as it is practiced in the mines, the second example from *Life on the Plains* reveals a pathetic product of hardship. And the
upshot for each text’s respective narrator? Old Block is thus confirmed as a comic writer and Alonzo Delano as an earnest realist. Not surprisingly, the differences between the two have been taken largely as indicative of two relatively separate sensibilities, a reading first put forward by Delano’s first and only biographer, G. Ezra Dane (Dane, “Foreword,” Pen viii). That is, *Life on the Plains* has often been accorded a discrete status as a realistic account of the Gold Rush, as if it had been written by a different writer (see Walker 37; Kowalewski 217).

And yet, although the differences in sensibility and style sketch out where Alonzo Delano ends and Old Block begins, the two voices are firmly united in their use of a third literary mode: the sentimental. Understood here as an approach to writing heavily inflected with affect and sympathy both in its descriptions and in the effects it hopes to have on its readers, this mode as it appears in Delano’s writings is only just beginning to receive serious attention (see Penry). Even a quick reading of Old Block’s sketches reveals a rather extensive reliance on the sentimental that is no less prominent than it is in Alonzo Delano’s travel reportage. Once again, the salient differences in Delano’s twice-told tales are informative, demonstrating how the sentimental proves to be Delano’s/Old Block’s most powerful tool. Consider, for example, the story of “Peter the Hunter” and his heroic daughters, presented in *Pen Knife Sketches* as largely an adventure tale (48-50). In *Life on the Plains*, though, readers receive additional information about how “Peter’s lip quivered, his eyes filled with tears, and he could not go on” in recounting the frontier heroism of his girls after the passing of his only son (323). In this latter instance, Delano’s is the more sentimental voice. Conversely, when Old Block returns in *Old Block’s Sketch Book* (1856), his second collection of sketches, to the aforementioned account of Mrs. Henderson’s absent husband (who had stayed on the North Platte to make a quick profit
running a ferry), a one-sentence comment of Delano’s about the “helpless children” becomes, in Old Block’s hands, several pages of tears, sleepless nights, and plaintive cries of “Why don’t father come?” (Sketch 78). Suffice it to say, the sentimental mode is arguably both Delano’s and Old Block’s strongest appeal, framed alternately in claims to realism and satire.

Broadly considered, Old Block’s Sketch-Book is a much more earnestly sentimental and thus less humorous set of essays than its predecessor, Pen Knife Sketches. It opens with a sketch about the cozy little cabin where Old Block and his mining partners Ned, Bogue, and Old Swamp go about their daily domestic duties (3-5), followed immediately by a depiction of the men awkwardly but sympathetically consoling Ned after he has sunk “to his seat, buried his face in his hands, and sobbed like a child” at the realization of his folly at a card table (6). Similarly, in a later sketch a letter from Old Swamp’s daughter reduces this stalwart, Jacob Jumblejacket-like frontiersman to tears: “Deliberately he opened it—placed it before the light and began to read. A start—a long breath followed, and—Old Swamp, in spite of all your stoicism, a tear rolled down your sun-burnt cheek—another—another—faster and faster—you drop your head upon your hands. Old Swamp, you are crying. Good Heaven!” (27) As the final interjection indicates, the narrator is hardly immune to the emotions experienced by his cabin-mates. Indeed, when describing the privations Old Swamp has suffered in working to “place his family once more in independent circumstances” (27), the narrator expresses the following lament: “Alas! how many have been wrecked in the strife, how many hopes have been blasted, how many hearts have been broken. Oh! I can’t write it—my own heart is swelling—I—I have seen it—I have felt it—I—I—there—there, let us pass on” (27). By pausing to clear the proverbial lump in his throat, the narrator once again depicts the intrusion of the moment of writing into the narrative. This time, without the brackets familiar to Pen Knife
Sketches, the intent appears to be more earnestly sentimental than humorous.

However, this does not mean that Delano altogether avoids satirical self-mockery in Old Block's Sketch Book. In one tale the narrator finds himself in a dream astride a cat who takes him to the infernal regions below to answer for his crimes as a writer; in effect, Old Block offers to hold himself accountable to his audience and is on the verge of being punished for writing "trash" when he is awakened from his dream by a fellow miner (79-89). In a sketch entitled "Bogue," an attitude toward accountability is even more evident, insofar as Old Block uses a mode of self-deprecation akin to his earlier penknife sketches to paint a portrait of the literary artist as someone necessarily tied to his awareness of audience. Outwardly, "Bogue" tells the tale of a sailor turned gold-seeker who reveals himself to be particularly honorable and, at the same time, quite funny in his speech patterns. However, it is also a tale about the artistic use of a language.

Having gone to sea after being expelled from college for theft, the now-reformed thirty-year-old Bogue challenges a trio of claim jumpers who have infringed upon the digging site of another, much meeker member of the camp. He assails them with the following string of contextually inappropriate words: "'Avast there, ye lubbers [. . . ] you are cruising on ground under embargo without a permit. Up anchor and heave ahead, unless you want to catch a squall'" (10). When the three exclaim, "'what business is it to you,,'" Bogue responds, "'I'm Port Collector [. . . ] and unless you can show clean papers, I'll throw my grapnells [sic] into your bows and take you fore and aft in such a way as not to leave a spar standing'" (13). Such a mixing of metaphors is very much on Old Block's mind, for a few pages earlier he in fact opined at length about the relative appropriateness of regionally specific representations and artistic ambition:
California is composed of all sorts of characters, and a novelist has only to look around and find any desired number of originals at hand, from the solitary horseman, as the sun is declining over the western horizon, of James, to the old miserly scoundrel, Old Death, of Reynolds, or the kind hearted hero in common life, of Boz-Dickens, &c.

At present, however, fiction stands but a poor chance in the field, for facts are so much more strange in this strange land, that if the shade of Walter Scott should lay the scene of a novel in California, it would not be read, for the genius of the great Novel King could conceive no course of events more strange or more interesting than some which have transpired in our mountain land. The length of an age in California is about three years, and the present is an age of facts. (10)

Remembering suddenly that his purpose is to tell about Bogue, Old Block apologizes for this brief "digression" on fiction writing and returns to what he calls the "single anecdote" that will perfectly demonstrate Bogue's character. However, the matter of textual authority and fidelity has been raised, and the narrator, despite his best efforts, returns to the question again and again.

In one respect, the sailor-turned-miner whose figurative language has not yet caught up with his change of profession directly echoes a similarly mixed-up set of figures with which the narrator struggles. The beginning of the tale offers a pair of literary quotations by which Old Block introduces a nautical flavor, in anticipation of Bogue's speech. Quoting first from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar and then from Byron's Don Juan, he writes:

"There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at its flood, leads on to fortune." "There is a tide in the affairs of women, which, taken at its flood"—but neither Shakespeare
Having claimed authority for himself over literary precedent, Old Block nevertheless slips yet again with the very next sentence when he offers that "Bogue was a good fellow, but a 'change came o'er the spirit of his dream'—hang it, there goes Byron again" (9). After this outburst, Old Block succeeds, if only for the rest of this chapter, in suppressing further intrusions by literary classics. However, taken together with this story's ruminations on novel writing, such intrusions lend themselves to the interpretation that the subject of this tale is less its title character than it is its narrator's desire to establish his own authority as someone capable of meeting his audience's expectations for how the gold country region should be represented.

The theme of artistic authority is further emphasized by Charles Nahl's pictorial depiction of the squatters' dismissal. Rather than simply providing a frog on knife-point in support of a verbal joke, Nahl's image of "Bogue" works closely with the text to comment subtly and self-reflectively on the representational authority of the written word. At first glance, Nahl's etching of this scene does little more than portray the main players involved: Bogue is shown raising his fists as the three squatters skulk away, while arrayed around them are those identified in the tale as Symmes (the original claim holder), Ned, and Old Swamp. And then there's Old Block himself with his famously large nose. The most striking aspect of this image, however, may very well be the placement within the composition of Old Block's extended hand. Although Bogue is the champion in the narrative, the illustration provides Delano with the farthest reach through the frame, so to speak, with a gesture that is highly reminiscent of the hands of both God and Adam in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel version of the creation.
This is perhaps no more than a joke on Nahl’s part about the creative powers of the author: framed as firsthand reports from the mines, Delano’s sketches do nevertheless bear the stamp of invention and Nahl may simply be alluding to this creative dimension of the Old Block persona. When considered in the context of the narrator’s extensive deliberations on how California may not meet the needs of the writer of fiction, the image works in concert with the text to demonstrate Delano’s awareness of the writer as both a recorder and an inventor of a regionally specific set of literary conventions.

In a section of Old Block’s Sketch Book set off by itself in the middle of the book, the narrator establishes a contrast between Sunday mornings as they may have been experienced by his readers back home and as they are in California. When invoking the former, he suggests that his readers “Look through the street of your little New England village” (34), and he concludes the comparison by writing that “a Sunday in the mines is more like Pandemonium than the still quiet day of rest of a Sunday at home. Which picture do you prefer?” (39) Old Block’s stated moral is that the responsible miner should work solely with the goal of returning as soon as possible to the family left behind in that “little New England village.” However, framed as Old Block’s advice to a California readership, Delano’s choice of New England over both Illinois and his own native western New York as the contrapuntal region testifies to his awareness not of Gold Rush demographics but rather of the nation’s prevailing literary scene. In effect, Old Block affirms again, as he had done in the chapter on “Bogue,” his understanding that he owes it to his audience to produce regionally appropriate literary representations.

Recent revisions in the scholarly understanding of literary regionalism have essentially stressed two models: that of the dominant marketplace, which places virtually all mid- to late-
nineteenth-century American literary activity in orbit around the centers of Boston and New York City (see especially Brodhead 107-41); and that of gender, which in large part emphasizes who an author is much more than it does where he or she publishes or is read (see Fetterley and Pryse xi-xx). Remarkably, region as such appears not to be a significant factor in either of these models. Alonzo Delano, on the other hand, contributed to a number of different textual renditions of the Gold Rush that were very much dependent on regional publishing and reception—which is to say, as the differences in style and sensibility that separate Old Block from Alonzo Delano begin to suggest (and even as the sentimental mode keeps the two personae from drifting too far apart), he wrote differently depending on where he expected his audience to be. With respect to Delano’s western narratives, every now and then critics will acknowledge Delano’s authoritative role in pioneering a mode of distinctly western humor later made famous by Bret Harte and Mark Twain (see, for example, Walker 29-30, Kowalewski 218, Penry 151-53, Witschi 28-30, Wonham 91). But the full ramifications of this influence still remain to be worked out. As Gary Scharnhorst and others have admirably put it, Harte’s early writings in particular offer a remarkable blend of satire and sentimentalism. Thus, Harte is rightly known not as a chronicler of the Gold Rush but rather as a highly influential commentator after the fact, one whose writings bring together a variety of modes already well-established and exploited by earlier Gold Rush writers. By fully recognizing Delano as one of these earlier chroniclers, and by acknowledging his use of the sentimental in the 1850s as a precedent to both western humor (through Old Block) and western realism (through Alonzo Delano), current models of literary influence and regional production may be reevaluated.
In addition to seeing the publication of his major books, the middle stretch of the 1850s was an especially eventful time for Delano. After returning to California from his three-month visit to his family in Illinois, he settled in the high-mountain mining town of Grass Valley and became a banker. Giving up aspirations for both merchandise retail and active gold mining (he instead became an investor in mines), he went to work for Adams & Company as their clerk in Grass Valley. In February 1855, during a moment of statewide financial panic, he prevented the failure of the bank when he refused to close his doors as instructed and, George Bailey-like, stayed open and guaranteed his neighbors’ deposits. A later stint as a Wells Fargo express agent found Delano, in September 1855, re-opening the Express office literally hours after a devastating fire, the safe still hot to the touch but unbreached. Through such actions, Delano earned the trust of his fellow townspeople, so much that they elected him Grass Valley’s first treasurer and rallied to ensure the long-term success of the bank he opened independently in 1856. (One thing Delano did not do during this decade is write the verses for “The Idle and Industrious Miner,” a Hogarth-inspired and Nahl-illustrated parable often attributed to Old Block but more than likely written by William Bausman [see Cowan 39].)

In early 1856, Delano joined the Ladies’ Department pages of *The California Farmer and Journal of Useful Sciences* as a regular contributor, and for ten months engaged in a sort of printed banter with such fellow contributors as “Mary,” Katie King, “Alice,” and “Bessie.” King, for one, responds wistfully to his “Reminiscences” of New York’s Cayuga region with her own memories of growing up there; Delano, in turn, offers further recollections of New York (“Trifles”) and an essay explaining the origins of his pseudonym (“The Reason, Katie”). Meanwhile, an essay signed “Alice” playfully responds to Katie and Alonzo’s back-and-forth cooing by imagining Old Block as
a tall six-footer, with black, savage, foreign-looking mustache
and whiskers, with eyes to match the same [...] keeping up
a literary flirtation (?) [sic] with roguish Katie King [...] and
finally, rejecting the Woman’s Rights persuasion, and fe-
male fraternity in general, contented to float down life’s
stream in a canoe by himself. [...] Then again, a voice whis-
pers in my ear that Old Block’s portrait is not altogether cor-
rect, which the hand of imagination has drawn; for on the
contrary to the picture before us, he has a good fatherly look-
ing face [...]. (“Who’s Old Block” 150)

Delano’s response “To Alice” affirms, “Ah! Alice—there are in this
world those who love me for myself. There is one whose eyes fill
with tears as she speaks of dear father. [...] Ah! Alice—Baranca
(my present companion,) is wondering what the deuce I am wiping
my eyes for, and—my nose won’t stay blewed; and so I must
change the theme” (166). Such exchanges begin to demonstrate
that although Delano had always framed his writings as being sig-
nificant to the lives of male miners and had assumed their ap-
proval, he was now in a position to hear from his female readers.
And in at least one case, he received an earful.

In the middle of his discussion of Cayuga school days and of how
easy it had been for a boy to “manage” a male schoolteacher,
Delano tosses off the rhetorical query, “show me a man who can
manage a woman” (“Trifles” 27). Bessie, a frequent contributor to
The California Farmer, takes up this assertion not in her regular
magazine but in the more popular Hutchings’ Illustrated
California Magazine, which suggests that she intended to take is-
sue with Old Block before a wider audience, to pillory him more
thoroughly. In an essay entitled “Managing a Woman,” Bessie be-
gins by questioning Old Block’s personal experience: “Do you speak
from experience, Mr. Block?—or, are you so far without the pale of
woman’s influence, that you are a misanthrope?” (319) Without
stopping, she tells the tale of two fine women who had been emotionally brutalized by uncaring, unsympathetic husbands, by men who, respectively, "managed" to "crush the loving, guileless heart" and "squander his own and his wife's fortune" (319, 320). She then tells of a shrewish new wife who, through "sympathy" carefully applied by a caring husband, becomes an ideal love companion. She concludes that with affection and sympathy, "a good man, can make of his wife almost what he pleases" (321). This attack was apparently interesting enough to the editors of The California Farmer, for they reprinted it within a month of its initial publication.

Delano's response to Bessie was not reprinted after its first appearance in print, although it is certainly worth attending to. Also written for and published in Hutchings', Delano's piece opens on a familiar note, with a joke on his name: "Now I think I understand mankind pretty well but old as I am and as much as I have been around the—mountains, I never could get the hang of woman kind" ("Managing a Woman: To Bessie" 360). To demonstrate this perhaps not-too-startling confession, Delano offers a self-deprecat- ing account of his helplessness at the hands of his wife: "How on earth I ever contrived to get married I can't tell—probably my wife asked me if I would have her and continued to manage matters so that I gave up all control over my affections and placed them in her keeping" ("Managing" 360). The bulk of the essay recounts how Mary had once engineered a meeting with the new minister in town, in response to her husband's refusals to go to church (he had apparently claimed the pretext of needing to care for the children). Once again, Delano describes how his wife outfoxes him, this time into becoming an admiring friend of this Mr. Pratt. He concludes by hearkening back, perhaps with a touch of sarcasm, to Bessie's opening query: "There's my Experience, Bessie, and now 'Show me a man who can manage a woman'" (362). Ultimately,
Delano's argument is that a clever man will always be outwitted by an equally clever woman, especially when he thinks he is being the cleverer person.

In 1857 Delano published (but apparently never produced for the stage) his Gold Rush play, *A Live Woman in the Mines*. Structurally similar to but dramatically much more engaging than *The Frontier Settlement*, this play again features two pairs of lovers, one sentimentally drawn (John and Mary Wilson) and the other comically (Pike County Jess and High Betty Martin). These four characters wrestle not so much with each other as with the difficulties of establishing a working livelihood in the mines. "Old Block" gets the credit on the title page, and within the text he includes several episodes from *Pen Knife Sketches*, including the aforementioned postal delivery scene and a segment from his portrait of "The Miner" in which a camp full of men is equally flummoxed and delighted by the presence of a petticoat-wearing woman in the backcountry (*Pen* 13). Mary Wilson, with her innocence and domestic talents, is explicitly identified as the title character. Notably, although High Betty already lives in and around the mines, in her miner's garb and rough diction she does not signify as a "live woman."

It has been suggested that Delano wrote *A Live Woman in the Mines* for Lola Montez, a former mistress of Bavaria's King Ludwig I who in the early 1850s toured the gold country as a performer and became notorious for her "spider dance" Tarantella. In August 1853 Montez established a residence in Grass Valley, and although no evidence of an affair was ever proffered, she and Delano became an item of gossip. Evidently, in the midst of a decade filled with Old Block's playful writings on gender disputes and domestic power, so too was Alonzo Delano caught up in rumors of womanizing. For one, this parallel suggests that the words on the page may have had distinctly personal motivations.
In 1858, the gossip became a national item. In a travel piece on the regions south of San Francisco, a reporter for the New York-based Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper offered a tidbit he’d picked up in Monterey about the man “famous for one of the largest noses in all California”:

There is a spice of romance in his history, which I cannot avoid mentioning. The brilliant but capricious Lola Montez fell in love with his nose, and married him on the strength of it. . . . I will not vouch for the truth of this story, but I give it as I heard it from a friend of Old Block’s. (“A Tour in the Southern Counties of California” 51)

The Sacramento Daily Union issued a swift and mocking rebuttal (see “Old Block and Lola Montez”); as to the facts, there is no doubt that Delano and Montez never married. Nevertheless, Californians, not to mention New Yorkers, suddenly found themselves chewing over a speculative piece of Delano’s “history” that he never seemed fully able to avoid (see also Correspondence 117-18).

Delano issued his own rebuttal, of a sort, in the 10 September issue of the Daily Union, in an essay entitled “The Two Dromios; or, a Duplicate of Old Block.” Beginning with the question, “Honor bright, now; did you ever lose your own identity?” he playfully recounts the salient details of the Montez story and concludes by chiding, “O Frank, Frank, may the ghost of a ‘swill milk’ cow, bestride by your California reporter, haunt your day dreams till you conjure back the fourteen thousand” (1; “swill milk” refers to an ongoing exposé of New York’s corrupt and unsanitary milk distribution system published in the same issue of Leslie’s). Without referring again to the rumor, Delano next weaves a lengthy and humorous tale of his once having been repeatedly mistaken, first in western New York and then in Chicago, for a large-nosed bank cashier named Storms. Eventually he meets his doppelganger and
the two share a laugh over the dilemma: “I wasn’t exactly sure whether I was a cashier, a doctor (for Storms had gone into the patent pill business), an Old Block or a Storms” (2). Delano’s parable of quadruple identity is no doubt intended to deflect attention from the question of his romantic proclivities.

One woman Delano does not appear to have known was his contemporary Louise Amelia Knapp Smith Clappe, an equally compelling Gold Rush writer who published under the name of “Dame Shirley.” No evidence has turned up to indicate that Delano was familiar with her or her work, although both have been credited with influencing Bret Harte and thus the legacy of Gold Rush storytelling.

One thing about which Delano in the mid-1850s and onward does not appear to be at all conflicted is his opinion of Indians. For instance, in 1846 he populated The Frontier Settlement with grunting savages who confirmed just about every negative stereotype available to the American public. A decade later, however, he leaves Natives entirely out of the picture in A Live Woman in the Mines. They are, interestingly, still present in this latter play, but only as an unseen threat: what in Act II, scene iv, at first appears to be a frightening Indian attack is later revealed to have been a comic misunderstanding—two parties of travelers heading for the mines exchange fire because they each think the other is a group of Indians. One might suppose such an elision and deflection through humor to be but a slight improvement over The Frontier Settlement, perhaps even an echo of Natives’ disappearance from the region. However, in the context of other representations rendered since his arrival in California, such elision may very well signify Delano’s refusal to persist in the exploitation of a damaging, unfounded set of ideas. Indeed, in Life on the Plains he offers the following oft-cited assessment:
The Indians of California are regarded as being treacherous, revengeful, and dishonest. This may be so to a certain extent, when judged by the customs and laws of civilization; but it should be qualified by the fact that they are governed by their own sense of propriety and justice, and are probably less likely to break the laws which they recognize as right, than are the whites to break theirs. […] I firmly believe that nine-tenths of the troubles between the whites and Indians, can be traced to imprudence in the former. (309)

An extensive, multi-chapter section of *Life on the Plains* is, in fact, exclusively dedicated to positive descriptions of Native Californians’ lives (292-320).

Of course, Delano’s apparently revised opinion is not one that by current standards would be judged as fully enlightened. Rather, the attitude that emerges in the 1850s is perhaps best described as a respectful imperialist nostalgia. That is, Delano frames his sympathy as a form of tardy regret; he invokes both the tragedy of racist dispossession and the notion that it is too late to do anything for a disappearing people. As he concludes in *Life on the Plains*, soon “these once powerful tribes, like those upon the Atlantic shores, will have passed away, or be but a wreck of miserable humanity” (320).

As the 1850s become the 1860s, Delano continues to revise his stated impressions of California’s Natives. In 1859 he mounts his most vigorous condemnation of the manner in which whites have mistreated them, in an article for the *Hesperian* entitled “Lo! The Poor Indian.” The opening passage begins with a quotation from another writer to the magazine (a woman named “Hattie”) who has apparently said of Natives, “What filthy creatures—what disgusting objects, what horrid specimens of mortality” (13). In response, Delano offers praise for Natives and an unequivocal condemnation of Anglo-European incursions into their territories:
They are a part and parcel of God’s Universe, and being the more ignorant, weak, and helpless, are entitled to consideration from us, the more enlightened and strong. [. . .] We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that we have taken their lands, and appropriated to ourselves all that was theirs, and this too without saying as much as “by your leave.” They are now strangers in their own homes; they live by our sufferance, yet they are more ardently attached to the soil than we are to our homes. (13-14)

Delano then fills out his essay by retelling two stories that had originally appeared in Life on the Plains: an account of his helping to heal a Chief of an ailment (“Lo!” 15-16; Life 296); and a wonderful tale of how, during an extended absence from his dry goods shop above Marysville on the Feather River, his Oleepa neighbors had kept a close eye on his supplies—when Delano did not return on the date he had announced, his friends from the tribe moved every scrap and stick from his shop into one of their own lodges for safekeeping, making for some initial confusion upon his return (“Lo!” 16-18; Life 317-19). At the end of this piece, he does still invoke the vanishing Indian trope: “they disappear before civilization as the grain falls before a reaper’s sickle” (13). However, with the publication of “A Sojourn With Royalty” in 1865 and a series of relatively sober Old Block essays on “The Indians of California” in The Saturday Evening Post in 1870, even this attitude disappears. Delano replaces it entirely with compelling, complex, and at times still mildly humorous accounts of his exchanges and friendships with a variety of people and tribes. Much of the material in his Saturday Evening Post articles revisits earlier tales, expanding upon them greatly by providing largely historical and demographic information about who and where the Natives are.

In the twilight of his career, Alonzo Delano fashioned himself as something of an ambassador for the West, publishing pieces that
were largely informative and corrective in their design. Indeed, among the very last items he published in his life was a series of earnestly descriptive letters from California to the *New York Times*. On 24 June 1872, Delano began his first correspondence by addressing the problem of misinformation in what other writers had said about the far western shores of the nation: “In most cases they do justice to our climate, to the grandeur of our mountain scenery, to the vast wheat-fields they see in our valleys.” “But,” he continues, “of the interior, of the mining region, and of the agricultural part which lie off the main routes of travel, and of the actual financial condition of the State they are ignorant, for they do not have the opportunity to observe them” (“Affairs in California: Letter I” 4). He also chides “Eastern travelers” who “seem to think, that having seen the Yosemite, the Geysers, the Almadin [sic] Mines, San Francisco, and its surroundings, they are prepared to pronounce upon the Golden State.” In a series of eight subsequent essays, Delano seeks rather plainly to address a number of inaccuracies and misperceptions, writing about the economic and agricultural topics noted above, but also about what manner of excellent husbands that women immigrants to California are likely to find. He also shares his opinions on the recent Great Diamond Hoax (in which Eastern investors were bilked by a group claiming to have found a monumental field of diamonds in the West) and on the Modoc Wars in northern California. All of these pieces are signed “Old Block” but are, for the most part, in keeping with the more direct and somber tone familiar to the later Alonzo Delano, the banker and town father who comes out in support of the opportunities offered by his adopted home state.

However, Delano’s letter “From California,” published 3 August 1872, presents a significant departure from the informative, almost boosterish tone of his other *Times* contributions. In this piece, Old Block returns for one more engagement with his
readers. Focused in some measure on the problem of finding suitable husbands among California’s bachelors, this column begins with a letter apparently sent by an admiring reader who wishes to migrate to California to find employment. Full of humorous misspellings and malapropisms and ostensibly addressed to “Mr. Old Block, Esquire,” it is worth quoting in full:

Dear Sur: I take the liberty to right a few lines, and hope youll excuse me for the same.—I don’t kno enny buddy in Cal. but I’ve hearn of you by Mister Smith and he think I will stand a good chance by Righting to you.—I’ve been thinking of coming out to that place and I would like to know if I can git a school in your naborhood, and what the wages is.—I have teachd here three Winters with sucess, and my scollars always made rappid progress under my tooition.

I am reversed in Matthewmattics to some extent, but would prefer a primary school—that is for fitten the scollars to go up hier as they git informed to go into upper classes.—I keep good guvment and don’t have no truble in getten along with my scollars.

Please Right and let me know what chance a literary man stands in Califomy.

Respectfully Yours,  
WILLIAM JONES (2)

Delano also uses Jones to poke fun at the very idea of a “literary man” succeeding in California, a role that Delano has played to regional but perhaps not national success for years. He compares himself to another writer who got his start in California, Mark Twain, whose collection of humorous sketches about the Far West, *Roughing It*, had just been published to national acclaim. He writes: “Dear reader, I wish you could see my photograph. Mark
Twain is the ugliest (homeliest) man I ever saw. Well, I can beat him in facial development. But as this is intended for a serious communication I will not descend to Old Blockisms” (2). From this self-deprecating note Delano shifts his attention to discussing the sorts of men California has and the sorts of women desired. In brief, he asserts that “we want no non-producers,” that women interested only in housekeeping need not apply, that only those willing to enter into a full partnership in aiding in California’s growth should consider moving west. In this letter, Old Block briefly revisits a number of the themes that have served him over the years, most notably the self-aware role of the writer and matters of gender relations and equity. And he does so in a lighthearted and humorous way. It is perhaps worth noting that Delano dates this letter on 18 June, only ten days before he remarries (Mary had died a year earlier). Maria P. Harmon, a 40-year-old from Cleveland, Ohio, had recently moved to Grass Valley, and the couple married soon after their meeting. Self-deprecating jokes in this letter about Old Block’s meager domestic skills thus also assume a particularly relevant piquancy.

Delano’s last letter to the New York Times, dated 26 February and published 8 March 1873, ends on a note similar to that with which he had opened his first Times contribution. Entitled “California: The Modoc Troubles,” much of this piece severely criticizes the U. S. government’s attempts to remove, through a bloody and protracted military engagement, a largely peaceful group of Modoc Indians who had returned to ancestral lands in northeastern California that had lately been occupied by gold seeking families. Delano concludes that “it will be another episode in the history of the Indian race where might prevails. They will be subdued, but there will be no glory attached to the achievement” (3). However, his closing comments return to the theme of the uninformed visitor discussed in his first letter ten months earlier:
I hope I shall be able in future to offer a more pleasant correspondence, not that men are getting more honest, but one gets tired of showing up the dark side always. The description of scenery which you have had is that principally along public thoroughfares, such as travelers on the wing could give. There are multitudes of wild places, strange and interesting scenery, mixed with adventure, which the tourist knows not of, and which would interest your readers. I've seen some of it; in fact I have eaten mule meat, and crow, and tried roast owl among some of it. Didn't like owl. (3)

Does this last revelation mean that he did enjoy eating crow? Subjecting himself (or at least his persona) to ridicule right to the end of his career, Old Block reiterates nicely in this last letter to the New York Times a familiar ending trope of his, an “Old Blockism,” as it were: the invocation of the unspoken and perhaps unspeakable, as a means of both qualifying and certifying those things that have thus far been brought to light.

When Alonzo Delano died, the Santa Barbara Index queried, “who will write his biography?” Clearly, no comprehensive account of this pioneering western writer’s life has yet appeared. Perhaps Old Block himself anticipated this very situation: at the end of Pen Knife Sketches, he comments on his fellow miners’ woes by noting that “What we have whittled, thou knowest is only a shaving of what thou and I have seen and felt; and a tale is still left untold, and always will be” (79). However, perhaps the more useful sentiment is the one that Delano offers at the close of Life on the Plains: “In conclusion, I beg leave to say, that there are many subjects of which it would have given me pleasure to speak” (384), implying that they may yet be spoken.

Indeed, there is still much more regarding Alonzo “Old Block” Delano that is worth saying, of which it would most certainly give one pleasure to speak. For instance, there would be tremendous
benefit to examining still more closely Delano's influence in the use of the sentimental mode, the manner in which he repeatedly makes a theme of food and its consumption, and his complicated understandings of both gender and race. Or, one might ask why Delano appears to invent a family with two daughters (named Hattie and Anne) to whom Old Block tells bedtime stories in Old Block's Sketch Book (57). And then there's that comic tale he tells of being tried for his writerly crimes before a tribunal in Hell (Sketch 79-89). But these stories, like a full account of Delano's life itself, must await another day.
Selected Bibliography

ABBREVIATIONS USED

Correspondence  Alonzo Delano's California Correspondence
Life  Life on the Plains and Among the Diggins
Pen  Pen Knife Sketches
Sketch  Old Block's Sketch-Book
Sojourn  A Sojourn With Royalty and Other Sketches

PRIMARY SOURCES

Whenever possible, references have been made to the more recently published, easily obtained editions. Unless otherwise indicated, all items appeared originally under the name “Old Block.”

Books, Pamphlets, Plays (in chronological order)

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Articles, Essays, Letters (in chronological order)

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successfully located. Most of Delano’s *Pen Knife Sketches* first appeared in the Sacramento *Pacific News* and have thus far been neither located nor catalogued. Most of what follows, however, postdates the publication of Delano’s three major books and is catalogued here for the first time.


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Criticism and History


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Nicolas Witschi is associate professor of English at Western Michigan University. His interests include American realism and modernism, the American West, culture studies, and film. He is the author of *Traces of Gold: California’s Natural Resources and the Claim to Realism in Western American Literature* (2002), and of articles on Mary Austin, John Muir, Sinclair Lewis, and Henry James. At present he is working on a book-length study of the contributions of autobiographical writings by famous gunfighters to the development of the western as a literary genre.

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