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Stephen J. Mexal

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READING FOR LIBERALISM

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Reading for Liberalism



THE OVERLAND MONTHLY
AND THE WRITING OF THE
MODERN AMERICAN WEST

Stephen J. Mexal

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P R E F A C E

AFTER THE United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, it suddenly became popular to refer to the American West—the *Wild West*, technically—as a way of making sense of the two wars. For a number of soldiers, politicians, pundits, and journalists, the mythic language of the nineteenth-century American frontier helped explain twenty-first-century military interventions.

Army lieutenant Hamilton Ashworth, for example, described the Iraqi border town of Rutbah as the “wild wild west.”¹ NBC News bemoaned the “wild west nature” of “lawless” Afghanistan.² A senior official with the Coalition Provisional Authority said that Iraq was a “wild west crazy atmosphere, the likes of which none of us had ever experienced.”³ Senator John McCain claimed that to withdraw the American military presence from Iraq would create a “Wild West for terrorists.”⁴ The signifiers of the nineteenth-century American West were inescapable. Words such as *wild* and *western* became metaphors that apparently helped people understand, and perhaps assign a mythic resonance to, the American military presence in the Middle East.

The frequent association of U.S. militarism with the mythic Wild West was probably attributable to one of President George W. Bush’s first responses to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, in which he explained his new “mission . . . to battle terrorism” with a reference to the myth of the American frontier: “When I was a kid I remember that they used to put out there in the old west, a wanted poster. It said: ‘Wanted, Dead or Alive.’ All I want and America wants him [Osama bin Laden] brought to justice.”⁵

Taken in isolation, this sort of statement is easily written off as bravado. In times of terror sometimes the sharpest sword is the cowboy’s smirk. But the sheer volume of references to American wilderness and westernness, coupled with the many attempts to represent Afghanistan,

Iran, Iraq, and Pakistan using a set of signifiers borrowed from western pulp stories, speaks to a larger and more complicated dynamic about freedom and the West. Six years later, in 2007, President Bush was still characterizing Pakistan as “wild country . . . wilder than the Wild West.”⁶ Even after an interviewer pressed his wife to acknowledge that the president’s “Wild West language” was “unfortunate,” and Laura Bush confessed that to her such language “didn’t sound serious,” the president still did not disavow his use of the metaphor of the American frontier.⁷

What is striking about this pervasive use of the signifiers of the American far West is not its reemergence in the twenty-first century. As Richard Slotkin has shown, the myth of the frontier has been a consistent part of American language and culture for centuries.⁸ But what seemed different about this particular return of the frontier myth was its conflation of the American West, the language of wilderness, and the rhetoric of liberalism, all shot through the prism of imperial conquest.

What seemed unique about the suddenly ubiquitous allusions to American western wildness was the way those allusions were used to justify the imperial export of liberal democracy. After the invasion of Iraq, President Bush insisted repeatedly that the United States had gone to war in order to “help Iraq achieve democracy and freedom.”⁹ The president seemed to regard democratic rule as synonymous with individual freedom, or what we might call “liberal selfhood,” when in fact the two concepts are more often in conflict. In doing this, he evinced a basic misunderstanding of the nature of liberalism as it has been traditionally defined. If democracy implies rule by the demos and liberalism implies self-rule, then there is an irresolvable tension, one common to all modern liberal democracies, between the rule of the people and the rights of the individual. But perhaps more tellingly, the president, like many others who viewed Afghanistan and Iraq as Wild West, seemed to find little distinction to be made between the rhetoric of classical liberalism, the language of wilderness, the signifiers of the American West, and the nuts-and-bolts of conquest.

For the president, and indeed for many people, these things seemed *naturally* to go together.¹⁰

A confusing web of mythic and historic signifiers began to weave complex explanations of both wars. Because Afghanistan and Iraq were wild spaces, it seemed, it was necessary to tame those spaces through invasion and occupation. And because they were spaces similar to the Wild West, it became necessary to impose political order on those spaces. In other words, because the countries were seen as “lawless,” or simply *too free*, it was necessary to conquer them in order to help them “achieve freedom.” Freedom by this logic is a threat, unless it is the specific sort of freedom sanctioned by modern American liberalism. This basic paradox, whereby the unrestrained freedoms of what Locke and Hobbes called the “state of nature” must be subordinated to the particular freedoms of the liberal social contract, seemed to be the unspoken subtext of many of the metaphorical analyses of the Middle East—as-Wild West. This allegorical construct was central to the invasion of Iraq because it meant that the conquest itself was a liberalizing force. Thanks in part to phrases such as *Wild West*, liberalism became a tool of empire.

The language of wilderness was key to this transformation. The language of wilderness is a set of binary oppositions such as *wild* and *settled*, *primitive* and *evolved*, and *savage* and *civilized* that purport to describe the natural world neutrally yet are in fact deeply ideological. Such language is integral not only to our mythic understanding of the American West but also to our mythic understanding of our own liberal selfhood. We come from a wild state of nature and, in entering into social contract, acquire civilized liberal subjectivity.

These are not new ideas. But it is discomfiting to think that the languages of wilderness and liberalism could be so easily lashed together with the signifiers of the West to produce an ideology of conquest. Liberalism especially, one would like to believe, should be antithetical to imperialism and conquest.

Indeed, it is tempting to suppose that some of the failures of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq might have been prevented had there

been a greater public awareness of this confluence of discourses. All of these things—the language of wilderness, the tropes of the American West, liberal selfhood—manifest themselves to us chiefly as narratives in the public sphere. When we read magazine or newspaper stories equating Iraq with the Wild West, we silently repeat to ourselves mythic narratives about the transition from, say, wilderness to civilization, or state-of-nature savagery to civilized liberal selfhood. Afghanistan is made to seem like the Wild West, and the United States like the virtuous sheriff, bringing light and liberalism to the darkness of a savage land. Conquest quickly becomes the height of metaphor.

Although the signifiers of wilderness, liberalism, and the West reemerged as a way of making the American public amenable to invading Afghanistan and Iraq in the first years of the twenty-first century, that same confluence of signifiers also played an important role in shaping the literary sphere of the late-nineteenth-century American West.

In this book I explore the shifting literary and narrative construction of liberal selfhood in California in the late nineteenth century. I investigate liberal selfhood, along with its relationship to the language of wilderness and ideologies of conquest, through studies of a number of canonical and noncanonical western American authors: Noah Brooks, Ina Coolbrith, Bret Harte, Jack London, John Muir, and Frank Norris, among others.

These authors all published in the *Overland Monthly*, a San Francisco-based literary magazine founded in 1868 by Bret Harte. They, along with Mary Austin, Ambrose Bierce, Henry George, Joaquin Miller, Edward Roland Sill, Charles Warren Stoddard, Mark Twain, and others were all members of what California judge and poet John E. Richards once dubbed the “*Overland group*.”¹¹ In part because Harte had a vested interest in encouraging migration and tourism to the West, the essays and short fiction published in the magazine were often keen to present the American West as a civilized evolution of, and not a savage regression from, eastern bourgeois modernity. Central to this project was a vocabulary and a set of narratives that will likely be familiar to careful observers of the wars in the Middle East that

began in 2001 and 2003. The language of wilderness, the production of liberal selfhood, and the ethics of “settling” a wild land were all combined to produce an interrogative, critical liberal aesthetic that emerged through a number of literary forms: short stories, poetry, nonfictional reportage, and essays on politics, race, travel, and the environment in the West.

One of the seemingly surprising features of the Afghanistan and Iraq-as-Wild West frame is how easily the rhetoric of individual freedom—the language of liberalism—can be used to limit individual freedoms. But this is because liberalism, in both its language and its practice, is never only one thing. In their representations of selfhood and the West the members of the *Overland* group explored a multiplicity of liberalisms, asking readers to connect particular enunciations of liberal selfhood to life in the American West. Harte, for example, examines a hard liberal republicanism rooted both in individual rights and civic responsibilities, a type of liberal selfhood that participates in the ongoing conquest of the West by narrating the triumph of liberal “civilization.” Many years later the literary naturalism of Frank Norris and Jack London pointed toward a new liberal imaginary, one rejecting the limitations of classical liberalism in favor of a liberal egalitarianism encompassing justice, rather than mere rights. The *Overland Monthly* is an important site for examining the ways in which certain stories, vocabularies, and tropes were used to interrogate and imagine liberal selfhood in the nineteenth-century West, and it was also a sort of fulcrum upon which members of the *Overland* group leveraged their talents and launched their national reputations.

Harte and the rest of the *Overland* group wrote to make money, not to make citizens. But even so, public texts do help create publics, and the cultural narratives they shape can have lasting effects. When we talk about the American West, we talk about particular things, and one of those things is a certain vision of liberal selfhood. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, intended to bring civilized liberal democracy to a new Wild West, offer a reminder that the vexed relationship between the language of wilderness, the material spaces of

the American West, and the production of liberal selfhood continues to shape our national narrative of liberal selfhood, just as it did in the late nineteenth century, when the primordial cultural narratives of the Wild West were just beginning to take their modern shape.

I am grateful to all those who helped and supported me while working on this book. At the University of Colorado John-Michael Rivera first suggested the *Overland Monthly* to me and guided some of my early reading in liberal theory. Martin Bickman, Anna Brickhouse, Cheryl Higashida, Patricia Nelson Limerick, Sean Purcell, and Matthew Reiswig all provided encouragement and helpful suggestions in the project's early stages.

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PREFACE

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It has been my pleasure to work with excellent editors at the University of Nebraska Press, including Kristen Elias Rowley, Joeth Zucco, and Elizabeth Gratch, who copyedited the manuscript with scrupulous attention to detail.

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But my deepest debts are to my wife, Sharon, as well as to my son, Warren. Their love made writing this book not just possible but worthwhile.

READING FOR LIBERALISM

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Introduction

Liberalism and the Language of Wilderness

IN 1898, long after Bret Harte's literary star had faded, Henry James published a scathing critique of Harte in a London literary magazine. James was concerned with what he called "schools" in American fiction and felt that Harte, who had achieved his "literary fortune" nearly thirty years earlier with a series of western short stories and poems, had among American authors "been his own school and his own pupil."¹ This was not intended as a compliment.

Although Harte's national literary reputation reached its apex with the 1870 publication of his satirical poem "Plain Language from Truthful James," that reputation was launched by "The Luck of Roaring Camp," an 1868 short story about a group of misfit miners living in a crude, gold rush-era camp in California. In the story the residents of Roaring Camp are forced to care for an infant orphan they christen Luck, and the act of caregiving rehabilitates both the individual men as well as the camp as a social organism.

"Roaring Camp," like "Plain Language," was first published in the *Overland Monthly*, the San Francisco-based literary magazine Harte edited from 1868 through early 1871. The story's gentle mix of humor, pathos, and romantic nostalgia for a lost frontier was an immediate sensation on the East Coast. James Fields, one of the proprietors of the *Atlantic Monthly*, dashed off a letter to Harte after it appeared

offering to publish any other “California sketches” he might have.² This economic and cultural validation, coming from the capital of the genteel literary world, had a lasting influence on Harte’s writing. As Gary Scharnhorst writes, Harte’s subsequent work was “pitched in every case to appeal to eastern readers who were intrigued by the romance of the gold rush.”³ It was Harte’s fidelity to his own imagined California and his eagerness to sell that vision to the East that would come to stoke Henry James’s disdain.

The occasion for James’s critique was Harte’s new collection of short stories, *Tales of Trail and Town* (1898), but the complaint by then was a common one. In its otherwise positive review of the book a week earlier, the *New York Times* had anticipated James in noting that Harte “confined himself to practically one class of subjects” and that his “genius can hardly be said to have passed through the various normal phases of development.”⁴ Many of Harte’s colleagues had said similar things over the years. Mark Twain had remarked seven years before that Harte’s early work “put a trademark on him,” such that the public would not let him “introduce anything into commerce without that trademark.”⁵ And even Noah Brooks, Harte’s friend and onetime assistant editor, conceded after James’s review that “Bret Harte’s best work” had been done thirty years earlier, when he was writing for the *Overland*, because his California stories that were actually “written in California” were “the work of a man unaware of any pose of his own.”⁶

In ostensibly reviewing Harte’s 1898 book—but without ever once actually doing that, preferring instead to make critical generalizations about Harte’s entire body of work—James asks his readers to think about the relationship between geographic spaces and literary representations of those spaces. Although Harte early on separated himself from California, “the original fount of [his] inspiration,” James writes, “he has, nevertheless, continued to draw water there and to fill his pitcher to the brim.”⁷ James is referring to Harte’s departure from California in February 1871, when he resigned the editor’s chair at the *Overland*, accepted James Fields’s offer for a one-year exclusive

contract with the *Atlantic Monthly* for ten thousand dollars, and moved to New York. At the time this made him the highest-paid writer in the United States.

But despite having relocated to the East, Harte's subject matter—the West—did not really change. Indeed, at the time of James's review Harte was not even living in the United States and had not been for many years. Yet he was still writing romantic, western-themed stories. This consistency only furthered James's scorn. He imagines Harte having "stretched a long arm across seas and continents," providing a "striking image" of "the act of keeping 'in touch.'"⁸ The writer, James seems to suggest, has a particular mimetic duty to a public and a region, and Harte's physical separation from the American West makes his depictions of that region and its public suspect.

In appraising what he takes to be the whole of Harte's career, James puts his finger on a number of related concepts that intertwine in Harte's work: western regional identification, the language of wilderness, and the formation of a public. James closes out his critique with a question about how Harte's fiction uses the trope of the "Wild West" to mediate between the American citizenry, the state of California, and his own literary prestige. Harte, James claims, has "dealt in the wild West and in the wild West alone."⁹ He wonders, though, if Harte has "continued to distil and dilute the wild West because the public would only take him as wild and Western, or has he achieved the feat, at whatever cost, out of the necessity of his conscience?"¹⁰

This rhetorical question suggests a connection between literary representation and public formation. James casts Harte's subject matter as an abandonment of his literary and moral conscience, largely because it panders to the expectations of the public. Representations of the Wild West, in James's estimation, cultivate a particular public, and to so avidly tend that crop apparently strikes him as a betrayal of the role and responsibilities of the writer. The key point, however, is the assumption of a substantive link between a particular type of regional literary production (that is, stories of the Wild West), and a particular type of political body: the "public."

James's use of the language of wilderness to explain geographic difference—that is, equating westernness with wildness—is also significant, for it harks back to the common mid-nineteenth-century dichotomy in which the “civilized” East Coast is opposed to the “savage” West. Events such as the grisly 1846 tragedy of the Donner party and the 1857 Mountain Meadows Massacre contributed to a widespread, although certainly not a universal, perception that California, and the West generally, was a savage, unsettled land.¹¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson felt he could reasonably claim in 1860 that many of the immigrants to California were little more than “needy adventurers,” a “general jail-delivery of all the rowdies of the rivers,” and at the same time acknowledge that through their greed and violence “California gets peopled and subdued,—civilized in this immoral way.”¹² Reacting to this particular myth of the West, Harte crafted his fiction on a new, foundational myth that California was already civilized, and thus the earlier savagery was now so tame as to be somewhat picturesque. As Kevin Starr writes, “Harte depicted the Gold Rush as quaint comedy and sentimental melodrama, already possessing the charm of antiquity.”¹³ This “comforting fable,” he continues, somehow “mitigated the overwhelming violence and sexual repression of the era.”¹⁴ And yet those late-nineteenth-century “fables,” whether written by Harte or his contemporaries, were not always wholly uncritical. They also offered public stories of the self, the public, and California, all set against a rhetorical backdrop of a wilderness now civilized.

This book examines literary representations of liberalism in nineteenth-century California, using the *Overland Monthly* to frame a series of case studies of the rhetorical and narrative construction of liberal individualism in California. There have been a number of recent scholarly books on liberalism and American literature. Many of them, including those by Neal Dolan, Joel A. Johnson, John Whalen-Bridge, Catherine Zuckert, and most recently Anthony Hutchinson, have found in several canonical American novels and writers an affinity between a liberal political discourse and a novelistic aesthetic discourse. Hutchinson, for instance, extends the work of Zuckert and Whalen-Bridge

in arguing that a number of postwar American novels problematize and affirm American liberalism's "Lockean origins in 'nature' and 'self evident' truths" by creating a "form of novelistic political-philosophical inquiry."¹⁵ Sean McCann and Cyrus R. K. Patell have also focused on liberal theory and the twentieth-century American novel, exploring the ways in which the novel, as McCann writes, "articulates a tension basic to the classical liberal vision of society" or considers, as Patell suggests, the narrative of individual freedom as a "cultural myth."¹⁶

Along similar lines recent books by Arthur Riss and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon have analyzed a number of nineteenth-century American texts to interrogate the cultural production of liberal selfhood. Riss argues that liberalism actively "produces the identity that it professes to merely register;" and this act of production, as Dillon writes, occurs in a "public sphere culture" that "is not only directed toward monitoring the state . . . but toward shaping or constituting private subjects."¹⁷ In considering the relationship between political selfhood, periodicals, and literature, this scholarship on liberalism and literature is particularly useful when read in tandem with the several valuable books on the legal-cultural construction of American citizenship, such as those by Lauren Berlant, Dana D. Nelson, Brook Thomas, and Priscilla Wald,¹⁸ or the useful work on American magazines and literature by scholars such as Margaret Beetham, Ellen Gruber Garvey, Nancy Glazener, Carolyn Kitch, Richard Ohmann, Patricia Okker, Michael Schneirov, and Christopher Wilson.¹⁹

While this book is indebted to all these scholars, it is nonetheless not especially concerned with citizenship as a legal matter nor with specific liberal policy positions but, rather, with the narrativization of liberal political selfhood in the American West through the periodical form. None of the scholars mentioned here, to put it another way, has focused on western literature, magazines, and liberalism specifically. This is a significant gap because the American West is crucial to the way many people imagine liberalism today.

But the West, and the assumption that it was a tangible example of the mythic "state of nature," was also important to the philosophers

whose writing laid the groundwork for what would eventually be called liberalism. Both John Locke and Thomas Hobbes refer several times to the wilderness and “savages” of the western frontier of the United States in writing treatises that are otherwise about individual freedoms and the state. This should underscore the simple but important point that the stories we tell about the American West *matter*. For centuries they have been integral to the way we imagine freedom, the individual, and the possibility for alternate political realities.

Having said that, when people talk about liberalism, whether as a technology of political rule or as a general philosophy of individual rights, they are not ordinarily also talking about literature. Even though a number of scholars have for several decades devoted themselves to explicating how political debates are implicated in various literary texts, it is perhaps worth conceding the obvious point that no one takes a literary magazine with them into the voting booth to apply its ideas about democracy.

Nevertheless, liberalism does chiefly present itself to us as a set of narratives about individuals, nature, and community. It is a set of interlocking stories about free individuals living in a wild state of nature who willingly surrender some of their freedoms to form a civil society. Inasmuch as liberalism is *already* a set of imaginative stories, it is perhaps other imaginative texts that can best engage those foundational narratives of freedom and, in the case of Harte and the other *Overland* writers, affix them to the civic development of California.

LIBERALISM, REPUBLICANISM, AND THE LANGUAGE OF WILDERNESS

Scholars continue to debate whether the political scene in the nineteenth-century United States was best characterized by republicanism, with its focus on civic virtue and on subordinating individual desires to the general good, or by liberalism, with its focus on individual autonomy and the virtues of self-interest.²⁰ Yet this binary logic does not fully capture the complexity of the prevailing political culture in the West. After all, liberalism conceptually precedes republicanism:

individuals must have autonomy before they can enlist that agency in the service of a public. In San Francisco, Philip J. Ethington has argued, a hybrid amalgam of “republican liberalism” characterized the dominant political culture until the mid-1890s, when it gave way to a progressive “pluralist liberalism.”²¹ In the 1850s, he writes, San Francisco’s political culture was constructed through “public deliberation,” and it is this process of deliberation that “elaborated the public context within which liberalism had to operate. Men competed to articulate a universal good that transcended individual gain and yet enabled it.”²² By the end of the century, however, that dream of a single, homogeneous “universal good” had fractured, and an emergent pluralist liberalism, a “politics about social groups and their needs,” began to acknowledge the multiplicity of potential public goods.²³ Although Ethington glosses over the perhaps too-obvious point that political liberalism antedates both political republicanism and economic liberalism—you have to be free and own property before you can do things with that freedom and that property—he nonetheless identifies two key concepts for understanding midcentury western liberalism. First, western liberalism was not a monolithic classical liberalism but, instead, a hybrid liberal republicanism in the process of transforming into a pluralist liberalism. And second, the process of imagining the “public context within which liberalism had to operate” involved what Ethington identifies as a public process of “articulat[ion].”

That process of public articulation, I suggest, is largely a process of public storytelling, one well suited to the magazine form. The short fiction, poetry, travel essays, and political analysis examined here all served as public sites of political imagination, places where liberalism was wed to narratives about land, the self, travel, and the West, such that readers could ultimately envision themselves participating in a culture of liberal republicanism in California.

As Henry James likely realized when he noted that Harte cultivated a particular “public” with his representations of the Wild West, it is difficult to discuss California literary culture, or indeed to discuss liberal publics at all, without discussing the language of wilderness.

Liberalism has its narrative roots in the same natural discourse from which we obtain this language. The language of wilderness is a set of binary oppositions that purport to be neutral descriptors of the natural world—*savage* and *civilized*, or *wild* and *settled*—but in fact sustain the power and privilege of a particular social or political group. Natural law philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, whose writings laid the groundwork for what we now identify as classical liberalism, used the language of wilderness to locate the foundational liberal self in an imagined state of nature.

John Locke's ideas about selfhood were crucial to the emergence of American political liberalism. Although the word *liberalism* would not begin to be widely used until the nineteenth century, its individual- and rights-based principles had their origins in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writings of Hobbes, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and especially Locke.²⁴ As Louis Hartz has argued, the “American Way of Life” generally amounts to little more than a “nationalist articulation of Locke.”²⁵ This dynamic was especially salient in the American West. Stephanie LeMenager writes that much “as ‘America’ functioned for John Locke and Adam Smith in the early modern era as a testing ground or enabler of classical liberalism,” in the nineteenth century the American West functioned as a theater “in which the ancient contest of commerce and virtue had to be played out.”²⁶ More directly put, Lockean individualism *is* American liberalism. And American liberalism depends upon the invention and maintenance of a binary opposition between savagery and civilization.²⁷

Locke's 1689 *Second Treatise of Government* was partly a response to Hobbes, whose *Leviathan* (1651) posited a state of nature in which life is “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”²⁸ For Hobbes, this wild state of nature was a space of absolute individual freedom. Absolute freedom, however, leads to perpetual anarchy, an outcome Hobbes felt could only be avoided by subordinating the self to a strong civil government. In this act of subordination to government, the state of nature dissolves. Hobbes's vision of nature exemplifies what Andrew Light calls the “classical” model of wilderness, in which civilization

and wilderness exist in a binary continuum, with wilderness opposed to civilization but nonetheless able to be settled or tamed into civilized status.²⁹ In this model wilderness is populated by savages, who are axiomatically illiberal, inferior persons. Wilderness, to this way of thinking, is also historical: at one point all spaces were wild and all persons were savages, but those spaces are gradually being replaced by civilized commonwealths. As a result, Hobbes writes, the foundational freedom found in this wild state of nature can still be seen in “the savage people in many places of America.”³⁰ Commonwealths are formed to limit the sort of unchecked freedom enjoyed by the “savage people” of the American frontier. So while the act of subordinating certain state-of-nature freedoms to civil government limits individual freedom, it also ensures the existence of society and thus creates modern, civilized liberal selfhood.

Locke, in the *Second Treatise*, argues for a much more benign vision of premodern nature. Like Hobbes, Locke considers the state of nature to be a “state of perfect freedom,” but he takes pains to distance his notion of wilderness, and the implications it has for political selfhood, from Hobbes’s wilderness.³¹ For Locke, the “state of nature has a law of nature to govern it.” This law dictates that “being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.”³² Locke locates individual freedom in an idealized state of nature that simultaneously commands the independence and the interdependence of individuals, suggesting that even in its genesis liberalism implied a certain kind of republicanism.

An individual, Locke writes, must relinquish “his executive power of the law of nature” and “resign it to the public,” thus forming a “political or civil society.”³³ In the act of resigning the “executive power” of the absolute freedom of nature, liberalism becomes possible. Like Hobbes, Locke theorizes a natural state that is best described as wild: a space presenting itself as untamed or premodern. Yet because the state of nature means freedom, the act of entering into civil society means reducing the freedoms of the state of nature. Under liberalism, civil society may be necessary, but it should also be regarded with suspicion.

As Ruth W. Grant writes, by “identifying the state of nature as the worst case, Hobbes teaches obedience to civil government. By identifying the state of war as the worst case, Locke justifies resistance.”³⁴ This simple Lockean narrative—individuals come from wild nature, where they possess all freedoms; they enter into civil communities, where they give up some freedoms—imagines a perfect, wild liberty at the same time that it explains an ingrained liberal resistance to governmental authority.

But if modern liberalism comes from premodern wilderness, it is also true that wilderness, along with the freedom it represents, poses a threat to modern liberalism. For Locke, even natural freedoms must be “govern[ed]” and constrained by “law.” If liberal civil society involves limiting particular freedoms found in the state of nature, then the continued existence of a state of nature—one perhaps still found, as Hobbes hypothesized, in the “savage” spaces of the United States—is a danger to that civil society. The paradox is an old one: tasked with ensuring freedom, liberal polities can only do so by limiting freedom. If American liberalism comes from Locke, and Lockean natural law places modernity, liberal civil society, and civilization into a binary opposition with premodernity, the violence of Hobbesian freedom, and “savagery,” then liberalism itself cannot be decoupled from this opposition. As a result, the *savage-civilized* binary that is at the heart of the language of wilderness is also at the heart of liberalism.

One outcome of this connection is that American liberal selfhood is predicated on the recognition and containment of wilderness. The first time Bret Harte saw a California mining camp, he marveled at the men living “life in the wilds” and, echoing Locke, declared the space to be a “land of perfect freedom, limited only by the instinct.”³⁵ Of course, this logic (equating degrees of longitude with degrees of freedom) is the same logic underlying the rhetoric of the Wild West. *Wild*, in this formulation, is synonymous with both “uncultivated” as well as “excessively free,” and the act of locating that Hobbesian wildness within the geography of the United States compels a liberal imperative with seemingly illiberal outcomes. The sort of wild spaces

that Locke felt were exemplified by the “wild woods and uncultivated waste of America” must, to this way of thinking, be *developed*.³⁶ After all, if the anarchy of a savage wilderness threatens the security of liberal civilization, then that wilderness must be settled into submission.

If narratives of wilderness were crucial to the invention of liberal selfhood, they are still integral to the ongoing transmission and reproduction of liberalism. As Rogers M. Smith has argued, it is narratives that create an awareness of oneself as a member of a polity. Certain types of stories, he writes, are able to cultivate “membership in a particular people” not only because of their substantive attributes but also because of their formal qualities: because they are narratives.³⁷ Yet unlike conventional stories, liberalism itself is not teleological. Its natural law foundations may offer an origin narrative, but liberalism, like the nature of freedom itself, is perpetually being redefined and rewritten. As Eldon J. Eisenach notes, “our identity—our subjectivity—is construed and understood through stories,” and therefore “any linking of self to others and to the world requires interconnecting narratives.”³⁸ If the formation of a liberal public is first an act of imagination, then the members of that public must engage in a polity building of narrativization, aided by literary representations of space, history, and alterity.

In terms of applied political goals, liberalism today means something considerably different than it did fifty or a hundred years ago. For that matter, liberalism can mean different things to different people at any particular moment in time. Isaiah Berlin famously contrasted classical liberalism’s focus on “negative liberty,” or freedom *from* hindrance, with a different type of liberal practice he called “positive liberty,” or freedom *to* achieve certain goals.³⁹ Both types of liberty can reasonably be cultivated by liberalism, yet the two imply quite different visions for the role of government.

But as a political aesthetic, a set of stories about the individual actor and the state, liberalism is relatively homogeneous. Indeed, insofar as liberalism implies a basic belief in individual freedom and a market economy, everyone from right-wing radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh to leftist scholar and activist Noam Chomsky is a liberal. This

is likely what Lionel Trilling was gesturing at when, writing at the apex of what Geoffrey Hodgson calls the age of “liberal consensus,” he claimed that liberalism is “a large tendency rather than a concise body of doctrine,” the sort of thing produced in part by “sentiment,” which explains the natural affinity between literature and liberal politics.⁴⁰ One might reasonably point out that this characterization simply defines away liberalism: if everyone is a liberal and liberalism is little more than an invisible set of “tendenc[ies],” then is anything *not* liberalism?

Bret Harte and the other members of the *Overland* group work toward making visible this invisible liberalism. Theirs was not an uncritical liberalism of consensus, but nor was it a polemical critique of liberal selfhood. Instead, reading for liberalism of various stripes offers a way to uncover in these texts an insight into the relationship between individual autonomy, literature, race, and the production of wilderness in late-nineteenth-century California.

One theme returned to repeatedly in these authors’ work for the *Overland Monthly* is the idea that liberalism is a system of rule. It is not simply a governmental technology for negotiating power but a coherent, if often invisible, power in itself. It is true that much American political practice is idiosyncratic and that “inegalitarian ascriptive” strains have long accompanied liberal and republican philosophies of governance.⁴¹ But at its core liberalism is a homogenizing force, one that sustains its power precisely through the homogenization of difference. It offers particular narratives of selfhood and freedom, and although those narratives can be heterogeneous when examined diachronically, liberal selfhood is often constructed in opposition to certain spaces, groups, or political philosophies at any particular historical moment. As a result, if liberalism can seem ahistorical and invisible, a set of mere “tendencies,” to read *for* liberalism connects expansive liberal narratives to specific public narratives occurring within history.

This line of thinking relies on a theory of the public sphere as the locus of speech, writing, and politics, a theory described most completely by Jürgen Habermas. Habermas links the emergence of

spaces of open debate—coffeehouses, magazines, journalism—with the emergence of liberalism in the eighteenth century. At that moment, he argues, periodical writers became “spokesmen for the public,” for their articles allowed “the public [to hold] up a mirror to itself.”⁴² Habermas contends that the emergence of mass media in the nineteenth century effectively ended the deliberative public sphere, transforming a critical, engaged public into a passive, consumerist public. Yet Harte and the rest of the *Overland* group, publishing in a California magazine near the end of the nineteenth century, continued to tell stories that engaged with some of liberalism’s master narratives. The authors and texts analyzed in this book not only made those master narratives visible; they also explored liberalism itself as a nonneutral hegemon. As Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has suggested, narratives of liberalism can be directed toward constituting the state, the individual, or both.⁴³ And literary periodicals such as the *Overland*, publishing at the dawn of the age of California mass media, were equipped to examine liberalism not only as an apparatus of rule but as an apparatus of Californian political selfhood.

MAGAZINES AND LIBERAL GOVERNMENTALITY

As Habermas suggested, magazines historically have been central to the creation of liberal publics. Unlike newspapers, which speak to a preexisting regional public (so much so that they are indivisible from their places of origin), magazines typically seek to cultivate a particular demographic based on political, intellectual, cultural, or economic interests. The *Overland Monthly* began life as a regional periodical but eventually acquired subscribers and readers all over the country. Yet if for Habermas early magazines were mimetic—allowing “the public [to hold] up a mirror to itself”—such a diffuse public would have made it difficult for any *Overland* writer to represent a single preexisting public. Many authors published in its pages seem to have imagined a diffuse community of readers that held the potential to become a cohesive liberal public. To put it more strongly, many of the texts published in the *Overland* can be seen as agents of a sort

of liberal “governmentality,” pointing the way toward a new type of liberal public selfhood in California.

Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality refers to the intellectual systems required for existing in political communities. Nikolas Rose writes that governmentality is best understood “as a kind of intellectual machinery or apparatus for rendering reality thinkable in such a way that it is amenable to political programming.”⁴⁴ Foucault developed this theory of authoritarian governmentality by charting the emergence of government as an entity distinct from sovereignty in the sixteenth century. This shift meant that government had to take the populace into account in its governance, in part because it could no longer appeal to transcendent authority. Governmentality is not a single, cohesive machinery of rule but a diffuse set of forces. It is a “triangle,” Foucault writes, composed of “sovereignty,” “discipline,” and “government,” which “has as its primary target the population and as its essential mechanism the apparatuses of security.”⁴⁵ It is not a rational set of individual mental processes but, instead, a confluence of public coercions and techniques—such as legal and professional forces, or surveys and systems of evaluation—that have the sum effect of regulating individual and group action in the interests of the state. This regulation, however, explains the classic, authoritarian form of governmentality, which precedes liberalism as a system of rule.⁴⁶ *Liberal* governmentality is slightly different.

Classical liberalism moves the ultimate locus of political authority from state to citizen, de-emphasizing the role of the state in governance. Under liberalism, citizens are autonomous agents who cede particular foundational freedoms in entering into a social contract that allows for the full exercising of other freedoms. Liberalism emphasizes the preeminence of individual rights: the consent of the governed, the rule of law, autonomy of speech and movement, the primacy of property.

But even though liberalism means individual freedom, its emphasis on the individual does not imply a minimization of governmental authority. Instead, liberal governmentality involves harnessing the autonomy of liberal selfhood such that freedom becomes a form of

authority. Patrick Joyce has noted that liberal governmentality is woven into the fabric of liberalism itself, in that liberalism depends “on cultivating a certain sort of self, one that [is] reflexive and self-watching.”⁴⁷ In order to ensure their own freedom, liberal publics demand constant surveillance. This condition does not have to be quite as nefarious as it sounds; it simply follows from the principles of classical liberalism. If liberalism dictates that individuals are autonomous, and individuals enter into social contract in part to guarantee security that will preserve some of that autonomy, then it makes sense that individuals under liberalism are tasked with patrolling their own liberal selfhood. Liberal governmentality, in sum, is the intellectual apparatus necessary to maintain individual freedom as the ultimate arbiter of governance.

For the literary and nonfictional texts I discuss in this book, cultivating liberal governmentality meant positioning California as a modern, liberal space. Although liberal rhetoric tends to adopt the pretense of universalism, in practice liberalism requires a particular public defining itself in negative opposition to another group. *We know that we are civilized liberal subjects*, goes this definitional logic, *but only because we know that that other group is not*. (This is why, for example, Hobbes required the “savage people” of America to exemplify individuals who have not entered into commonwealths, or why Locke suggested certain criminals should be regarded as “wild savage[s]” with whom “men can have no society nor security.”)⁴⁸ Liberal selfhood works in part by telling stories of negative difference. In creating particular narratives of civilized liberal selfhood, these authors succeed in identifying the political geography of modern California with the United States, and not Mexico, as well as depicting its ecological geography as a tamed wonderland, not a savage wilderness. In narrativizing bourgeois, liberal California, these texts explore liberalism and its aesthetic of individual freedom. Yet doing this often involves the normalization of whiteness, masculinity, and “developed”—that is, conquered—spaces.

The magazine format is implicated in this political dynamic, in part because magazines can facilitate the type of self-watching required for liberal governmentality. As James Carey writes, magazines work

toward the “maintenance of society” by constructing and promulgating “shared even if illusory beliefs.”⁴⁹ Like all magazine editors, Harte and his successors sought to grow the *Overland Monthly*’s readership, and as a regional literary periodical, the magazine was materially invested in the expansion of bourgeois California. This enterprise demanded representations of California and the West that emphasized the region’s safety and sophistication along with its modern, civilized liberal republicanism. Yet the model of liberal selfhood most often explored by the *Overland* group is a self-critical liberalism, one weighted with the knowledge that its ethic of individual rights and freedoms has been purchased with a history of illiberalism and conquest.

“DEVOTED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COUNTRY”

The *Overland* was initially modeled after the Boston-based *Atlantic Monthly*. Harte and publisher Anton Roman wanted the magazine to create in California the sort of bourgeois literary sphere that the *Atlantic*, *Harper’s*, and *Putnam’s* had cultivated in the Northeast. The magazine ran from 1868 until 1875, when the recession caused by the Bank of California’s failure contributed to its collapse. In 1880 Anton Roman founded the *Californian*, which merged with the *Overland* when it was revived in 1883.⁵⁰ In 1923 the *Overland* absorbed *Out West* magazine and officially changed its name to *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*.⁵¹ After recommencing publication in 1883, the *Overland* ran without further interruption until 1935.

Born in Bavaria, Anton Roman migrated to the United States as a young man and came to California in 1849 seeking gold in Shasta County. In 1851 he bought the stock of a bookstore for a hundred ounces in gold dust, and by 1859 he had opened a permanent bookshop on Montgomery Street in San Francisco.⁵² A. Roman & Company booksellers would move several times over the next decade, eventually growing to encompass 417–419 Montgomery Street by the late 1860s.⁵³ It was there, at 419 Montgomery, that Harte, Noah Brooks, and William C. Bartlett put out the first issue of the *Overland* in July 1868.

Roman had begun expanding into publishing as early as 1860,

printing books on Californian agriculture and history, and he worked with Bret Harte on the 1865 poetry anthology *Outcroppings: Being Selections of California Verse*. Harte said that *Outcroppings*—like he would later say about the *Overland*, at that point still three years away—was intended to “foster Eastern immigration by an exhibit of the Californian literary product.”⁵⁴ Roman would go on to be a key actor in the California literary scene, eventually becoming West Coast general agent for all of Mark Twain’s books from *Roughing It* through *A Tramp Abroad*.⁵⁵ Yet by 1868, Roman was convinced that the time was ripe for a literary magazine and turned to Harte as editor-in-chief of his new venture, the *Overland Monthly*.⁵⁶

Harte initially agreed to serve in a joint capacity as editor, along with Noah Brooks, then editor of the *Alta California*, and William Chauncey Bartlett, editor of the *San Francisco Bulletin*. After the first issue, however, Harte said he would do the job full-time if Roman paid him one hundred and fifty dollars a week. Roman agreed, and Harte became editor-in-chief of the new magazine, with Brooks and Bartlett as assistant editors.⁵⁷ Roman saw the periodical as an opportunity to boost travel and business development in California by creating a distinctly western literary aesthetic. He was so keen to use the magazine to, as he put it, “help the material development of the coast” that the slogan “Devoted to the Development of the Country” was printed beneath the title in the magazine’s first issue.⁵⁸ This phrase became the magazine’s unofficial credo, appearing in nearly every issue until 1887, long after Harte and Roman had both left the magazine.⁵⁹ In seeking to aid the development of the state at the same time they sought to establish a western literary sphere, Harte and Roman did both at once. By situating its literary value in relationship to conventional eastern tropes of liberal bourgeois modernity, Harte’s *Overland* group imagined a national western public identity, allowing readers on both the West and East Coasts to read the “West” as a liberal republican entity.

Published in July 1868, the magazine’s first issue contained what would become a characteristic blend of fiction, travelogues, poetry, historical essays, and literary evaluation. The inaugural issue was

composed of W. C. Bartlett's "Breeze from the Woods," an outdoor travelogue set in the mountains of the northern California coast; "Longing," a poem by Ina Coolbrith; "By Rain through France," a travel narrative by Mark Twain (and an essay Harte thought a "disappointment");⁶⁰ "High Noon of the Empire," a historical essay about Emperor Maximilian I of Mexico written by William V. Wells; "Art Beginnings on the Pacific," by Benjamin P. Avery, which proclaimed the sophistication of the art and literature of modern California; M. P. Deady's "Portland-on-Wallamet," an essay about the metropolitan significance of Portland, Oregon; "In the Sierras," a romantic poem by Charles Warren Stoddard; "The Diamond Maker of Sacramento," a short story by Noah Brooks; "Family Resemblances and Differences," by John F. Swift, a sociopolitical analysis of national and racial difference; "San Francisco from the Sea," a short poem by Bret Harte; "Favoring Female Conventualism," by T. H. Rearden, an essay about gender roles and social responsibilities; "Hawaiian Civilization," a travel narrative and historical essay by George B. Merrill; "Dos Reales," a short story by G. T. Shipley set in Chile; "Eight Days at Thebes," a travel narrative about Egypt written by Samuel Williams; "A Leaf from a Chinese Novel," a literary essay by J. T. Doyen about a mid-eighteenth-century Chinese novel; "Etc.," the monthly editor's column penned by Harte; and "Current Literature," the book review section. The mix of genres and topics seen in the first issue—short fiction, domestic and foreign travel essays, poetry, literary criticism, political and social analysis, and regional boosterism—would be returned to time and again throughout the magazine's publication history.

The *Overland Monthly* was certainly not the first California periodical. There had been newspapers since 1846, and a culture of literary magazines had been growing in fits and starts since 1852, when the *Golden Era* commenced publication, targeting "the less exacting portions of the rural and mining population," as H. H. Bancroft put it in one of the earliest appraisals of midcentury California literary culture.⁶¹ But the *Overland* was one of the first magazines to be consciously positioned as a bourgeois periodical. The magazine's first issue contained 105 pages

of text and was printed on thick stock, with a beautiful brown cover. The *San Francisco News Letter's* first issue in 1856, by way of contrast, was a single sheet of blue paper, folded once.⁶² Because of shifting regional demographics and a population boom—the population of San Francisco doubled between 1860 and 1870 alone—the *Overland* achieved success undreamed of by its predecessors.⁶³

The *Overland's* circulation grew from 2,500 copies a month in its early years to 12,000 copies a month by the 1880s. By 1886, one writer estimated, nearly 1.2 million single copies of the magazine had traveled all over the world, and the *Overland* had subscribers or newsstand sales in every state in the Union as well as in Australia, Europe, India, Japan, and South America.⁶⁴ Yet arguably more significant than its cultural impact is the magazine's status as a literary document.

For both Harte and Roman the magazine represented a way to cultivate a bourgeois public in the West. The best way to do that, Harte seemed to feel, was by creating a unique regional aesthetic. Roman thought Harte was trying to accomplish two things at once, goals he viewed as being in conflict: craft “purely literary” articles and “help the material development of the coast.”⁶⁵ (He wanted Harte to focus on the latter.) Yet these aims were not incompatible. The magazine's auxiliary pose—dedicated to “development” of both country and reader—meant that its literary output engaged certain master narratives about liberal selfhood and land use and then localized those narratives in California. The purely literary articles, in other words, served the goal of material development.

Yoking literature to development took a number of forms in the *Overland*, but one of the most common was to unify the contradictory impulses to historicize and romanticize the hard liberalism of the frontier West. Harte's “Luck of Roaring Camp,” published in the second issue of the magazine, tells the story of the transformation of a California mining community in the 1850s. By its denouement, the undeveloped western space formerly composed of “fugitives from justice” has been transmuted into a civil society in which the miners obey “the laws of the United States and the State of California” and

seek to build hotels and streets to encourage “decent families to reside there.”⁶⁶ It is a liberal republican fable, one in which Californian civic identification takes root in the arid climate of an atomistic, unsettled West. The presence of the baby Luck encourages a lawful republicanism, whereby the miners adopt not only federal and state laws but also a certain bourgeois public spirit.

In this sense, the story serves as a sort of sentimental advertisement for Californian political selfhood. Especially in urban areas such as San Francisco, the West by 1868 was nearing the end of its frontier days, and the region, as Franklin Walker writes, “had reached the stage in which its early days became romantic” and thus was ripe for nostalgic as well as historical reimagination by many *Overland* writers.⁶⁷ For Harte and the other members of the *Overland* group, that romance manifested itself in narratives of modern, civilized liberal republicanism that also allowed readers to gaze at the fiction of atomistic individualism that first enabled western “settlement.”

THE BEAR AND THE RAIL

In his original prospectus for the new publication, Anton Roman wrote that he sought to use the magazine to study western manners and civilization.⁶⁸ Later he would say that he personally viewed the venture as “an opportunity for a magazine that would furnish information for the development of our new State and all this great territory” and worried that Harte might be “likely to lean too much to the purely literary articles.”⁶⁹ *Development* is a key term, for it superficially refers to economic development. The *Overland*, like all publications, was a business, and its many articles on travel, land use, and race in the West often seem designed to encourage immigration to California. But development of the state can take many forms: not just economic but intellectual, aesthetic, and political as well. For Roman, the *Overland* was not a “purely literary” enterprise but one in which literary and journalistic texts serviced individual and public development. It is surely not coincidental that the *Overland* made its debut at a time when the transcontinental railroad was poised for completion, ready

to shrink the country and facilitate travel to the West. (A scant ten months separated the first issue of the *Overland* from the conjoining of the Union and Central Pacific rails at Promontory Summit, an occasion celebrated by Harte in his poem “What the Engines Said” in the June 1869 issue of the magazine.)

Harte and Roman seemed to feel that for the magazine to become instrumental in the civic development of the West, it would need to be defined in relationship to the geographic and cultural East. This meant creating a unique western aesthetic at the same time it meant courting eastern esteem and dollars. Roman wrote that everything about the magazine was calculated so it would “make itself of such value that it could not fail to impress not alone the people of the West Coast, but the East as well.”⁷⁰ Harte and Roman felt the magazine ought to be luxurious, something that would materially, not just textually, produce a bourgeois readership. Compared to its contemporaries, the magazine was printed on especially good stock, causing the *Nation* to pronounce it “rather better printed than the *Atlantic*.”⁷¹ *Putnam’s* magazine noted the *Overland’s* “quiet elegance” and declared it superior to many eastern periodicals: “with such beautiful print, inside and outside, as we have nothing to match with in these parts!”⁷² Although the short fiction, essays, poetry, and journalism published in the magazine engaged a number of master narratives about liberal selfhood, wilderness, and the West, its paratextual elements—its paper, binding, and type—conveyed that it was a status marker of the bourgeoisie, one that would not look out of place next to the *Atlantic Monthly* on the parlor table.

The first issue of the *Overland* featured an engraving by one of the Nahl brothers of an image of Harte’s design.⁷³ The image of a single grizzly bear, standing half-turned over a railroad track, would become the magazine’s logo and would go on to appear in nearly every issue throughout its history. The use of the bear image (which echoes the bear flag of the California Republic, with the chief distinction that the *Overland* bear is not in profile) was Harte’s initial idea. The image of the railroad, which he added later, offered a symbolic weight that

complicated conventional representations of western wildness. The icon presents a typical image of both wilderness and rebellion—the bear of the 1846 California Republic—only to undercut that wilderness with the emblem of the railroad, a symbol of union, modernity, and economic growth. The logo also serves as a metaphor for grasping the binary logic framing many nineteenth-century representations of liberal selfhood and the West: as a vacillation between civilization and savagery, between the modernity of the rail and the wilderness of the bear.

The logo was received on the East Coast as a trenchant symbol of the American West, a space widely viewed, as in Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous formulation, as “the meeting point between savagery and civilization.”⁷⁴ In its review of the new magazine New York–based *Putnam’s* took special notice of the icon of the bear and the rail: “This is California, the latest field where savage and civilized, the grizzly and the locomotive, meet in grim encounter. Poor Bruin, he looks brave, and will make a gallant fight, but, who cannot see the end of it!”⁷⁵ Mark Twain echoed this view, arguing that the bear was all but meaningless until juxtaposed with the image of the rail:

As a bear, he was a success—he was a good bear.—But then, it was objected, that he was an *objectless* bear—a bear that *meant* nothing in particular, signified nothing,—simply stood there snarling over his shoulder at nothing—and was painfully and manifestly a boorish and ill-natured intruder upon the fair page. . . . But presently Harte took a pencil and drew these two simple lines under his feet and behold he was a magnificent success!—the ancient symbol of Californian savagery snarling at the approaching type of high and progressive Civilization, the first Overland locomotive!⁷⁶

Harte himself interpreted the logo as a symbol of the triumph of liberal civilization over premodern savagery. In the magazine’s first issue he explained that the bear is a “symbol of local primitive barbarism. He is crossing the track of the Pacific Railroad, and has paused a moment to look at the coming engine of civilization and progress

... and apparently recognizes his rival and his doom.”⁷⁷ Yet in the same breath that he valorizes the triumph of modern “civilization” and declares vanquished any western “primitive barbarism,” Harte also romanticizes that vanishing wild, writing that “there is much about your grizzly that is pleasant.”⁷⁸ This qualification reflects a fundamental paradox in much of the magazine’s fiction and journalism, one in which many *Overland* writers strove to locate liberal selfhood in a “pleasant” history of wilderness at the same time they sought to eradicate any contemporary western manifestations of “primitive barbarism.”

In the same article Harte takes steps to racialize the locus of western “barbarism,” albeit for humorous effect, writing that the bear’s “unpleasant habit of scalping with his fore paw is the result of contact with the degraded aborigine.”⁷⁹ Harte’s “degraded aborigine” links the politics of western wilderness to anxieties about race and white liberal selfhood. Fears of wilderness are always partly racial fears, just as racial fears are always partly fears about the return of a repressed wilderness. The root of these concerns lies in a basic anxiety about the security and privileges of civilized liberal selfhood.

For Harte, however, this anxiety is pointless, as the triumph of liberal civilization is inevitable. The railroad, that “engine of civilization,” will conquer all threats emanating from an untamed western wilderness: “Look at [the bear] well, for he is passing away,” Harte concludes. “Fifty years and he will be as extinct as the dodo or the dinornis.”⁸⁰ Harte framed the magazine’s representations of western wildness with eastern cultural prejudices in mind. The bear, the dodo, and the “aborigine” have all been neatly disposed of, tamed into submission by the engine of civilization.

Harte seemed to recognize that because many people viewed California as a space opposed to eastern civilization, the state presented a site simultaneously resistant to and conquerable by that same eastern liberal modernity. Accordingly, he was keen to present western wildness as something that was still accessible through literature and journalism but which had been ultimately tamed by the forces of modernity. As Jane Tompkins writes, the West functions “as a symbol

of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest,” seeming to offer an escape from “modern industrial society.”⁸¹ The *Overland*’s logo of the bear and the rail references that dream of escape but then undercuts it with the image of the railroad, an image bespeaking modernity, cosmopolitanism, and transcontinental trade. Harte positioned the magazine much as he did its logo: as a stylized, sanitized reproduction of frontier wildness, delivered to an emerging liberal public by the modernity of the railroad.

REALISM AND THE WORK OF THE OVERLAND GROUP

Realism, both literary and journalistic, was an aesthetic shared by many bourgeois nineteenth-century magazines, including the *Overland*. As Nancy Glazener writes, the *Overland Monthly* and the *Atlantic Monthly* had a “shared commitment” to “high realism.”⁸² Franklin Walker has argued that the *Overland* exhibited a broad tendency toward “practical literature.”⁸³ What unites these two literary modes—the auxiliary-oriented practical literature and the aesthetic conventions of literary realism—is Harte and Roman’s insistence that the magazine serve the economic, political, and intellectual development of a liberal California public. As Christopher Wilson notes, the trend toward realism in many nineteenth-century magazines was potentially democratizing.⁸⁴ The particular type of democratizing aesthetic seen in a number of the case studies in this book suggests that these *Overland* texts can be seen as instruments of liberal governmentality, enabling a self-aware liberal selfhood in California.

Put differently, the *Overland Monthly* provides an important site for examining the complex and ever-changing relationship between liberalism and literature in the work of a significant group of western authors. The magazine was a sort of lodestone, attracting and capturing many now canonical authors in their formative stages as writers. Over the years, it published the early work of Mary Austin, Ambrose Bierce, Noah Brooks, Willa Cather, Charles W. Chesnutt, Ina Coolbrith, Henry George, Bret Harte, Jack London, Joaquin Miller, John Muir, Prentice Mulford, Frank Norris, William Saroyan, Charles Warren

Stoddard, and Mark Twain, among many others. Although a number of these authors knew each other and thus can reasonably be said to constitute a literary group in the conventional sense, many others did not, and insofar as the careers of, say, Harte and Frank Norris can be connected, it is largely the figure of Ina Coolbrith that ties them both to the loose-knit *Overland* group. While the magazine offers a useful site for examining western literary culture, it is not, to be sure, emblematic of the entirety of that culture.

At its inception Harte designed the magazine to be a distinct text in itself, not merely a collection of texts. In a convention he borrowed from eastern literary monthlies such as the *Atlantic* and *Harper's*, Harte insisted that articles run without bylines. The author of an article was not revealed until a full volume of the magazine had been published. As Noah Brooks explained, Harte “felt that popular favor would be more readily extended to writers shielded by anonymity than to those whose names were already familiar to a cityful of carping critics.”⁸⁵ Harte also stipulated that there be no subject headings. Articles were not labeled as “fiction” or “history” or “travel.” They were presented with no context or explanation, leaving the sometimes difficult task of distinguishing between journalism, opinion, and fiction to the public, and in the process creating a polyvocal, genre-blurring form.⁸⁶

In this sense the magazine is a unique literary artifact: a seemingly authorless, genre-bending text in which political commentary abuts environmental treatises abuts short stories. This formulation has implications for the way individual articles in the magazine are read. Texts, after all, are consumed differently depending on their publication contexts and presumptive generic attributes. A story in a book of short stories is framed differently than the same story in a travel magazine. Because meaning depends on context, in this book I examine traditionally “literary” texts in conjunction with nonfictional, more traditionally “factual” articles. The magazine form is integral to this project. In the *Overland* and in this book, the nonfiction is not a departure from the fiction and the fiction is not a departure from the nonfiction. Instead, the two forms help explain each other.

The nonfiction analyzed in this book is generally concerned with ethnic, national, or ecological contact, usually as that contact applied to one of four issues: (1) the topographical, ecological, agricultural, horticultural, geological, economic, cultural, or ethnological features of a foreign nation; (2) those qualities as seen in some region of the American far West, typically as they pertained to potential economic or social gains for California; (3) contemporary issues of broad socio-political impact, such as education or Manifest Destiny, and how those issues impacted California specifically as well as the nation; or (4) the ethnology and history of “foreign” or raced groups in American states and territories, often Indians or the Chinese. These topics, juxtaposed with the magazine’s fictional narratives, sustained liberal governmentality inasmuch as they encouraged readers to encounter different persons, places, or cultures imaginatively, framing western liberal selfhood as the by-product of contact between civilized and wild persons or places.

Chapter 1 examines several short stories, travelogues, and a poem published in the *Overland* between 1868 and 1870, including Harte’s own “Idyl of Red Gulch,” “The Luck of Roaring Camp,” and “Plain Language from Truthful James,” alongside two of the magazine’s travel narratives published under Harte’s editorial direction: Edward P. Stoddard’s “Lima” and J. Wassen’s “District of the Lakes.” These narratives reveal some of the ways in which the act of travel is both a foundational liberal right and a tool of conquest. In these narratives, empirical knowledge obtained through travel becomes an instrument of liberal governmentality and imperialism alike.

After the popular eastern reception of “Roaring Camp” and the completion of the transcontinental railroad, and especially after the popularity of “Plain Language from Truthful James,” Harte’s writing for the magazine was crafted with an eye on Boston and New York. His fictional and poetic narratives worked in concert with the magazine’s nonfictional travelogues to yoke liberal selfhood to western expansion, normalizing the imperial gaze of the tourist. These narratives of contact function as *theorias*, or political travel narratives. They suggest

that modern liberal-republican selfhood in the West is produced in part by the touristic gaze of bourgeois easterners. In this imagined dialectic, the atomistic individualism of the West is transformed into modern liberal republicanism through contact with civilized liberal citizens. Liberalism thus becomes a sort of moral imperialism. By framing the frontier geography of California as the next step in the westward progression of eastern liberal modernity, Harte invites readers to imagine participating in the ongoing transformation of California from premodern “wilderness” to liberal “civilization.”

Noah Brooks was the managing editor of the *Alta California* when Anton Roman asked him to serve as a coeditor and advisor to the less-experienced Harte at the *Overland*, and chapter 2 offers a critical introduction to his 1868 western short fiction. Brooks was a close friend of Abraham Lincoln and wrote a number of books on the president, and although there has been some scholarly interest in Brooks as a historical resource, to date there has been little analysis of his role as a literary figure.

Today Brooks is all but unknown as a fiction writer, and yet fiction is primarily what he wrote for the *Overland* between 1868 and 1870. Chapter 2 argues that Brooks’s fiction frames liberalism as a historical construct and, more significantly, suggests that liberal selfhood emerges primarily through narrative. Brooks’s short stories concern the social and political anxieties of modern California and ground those anxieties in the history of the West. “Lost in the Fog” for example, is a short story about a crew of western sailors who become briefly lost at sea before discovering a town in California that does not exist on any map. The sailors soon realize that news of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo has never reached the town: its residents still speak of President Santa Anna and have had their land and national affiliations transferred to the United States without their knowledge or consent. The story engages anxieties of race, liberalism, and nation, interrogating the nature of economic and governmental development in modern California. Brooks is not just an overlooked regionalist; he is a significant American author whose short career as a fiction writer

offers a crucial opportunity to examine the work of the western author in cultivating liberal public selfhood in California.

Along with Harte and poet and novelist Charles Warren Stoddard, Ina Coolbrith was a member of what was often called the “*Overland* Trinity.” Chapter 3 investigates Coolbrith’s special significance in the *Overland* group of the 1870s, focusing in particular on her poetry published in the magazine from 1868 to 1875. Coolbrith’s poetry, though almost entirely unread today, was highly regarded in her own time, yet Coolbrith was never able to maximize her literary and professional potential in the same way many of her male colleagues had. Even though she had no children of her own, Coolbrith was forced to care for her ailing mother, her orphaned nieces and nephews, and friend and fellow *Overland* writer Joaquin Miller’s child, all at a time when her *Overland* colleagues Harte and Twain were building national literary reputations. These gendered obligations certainly shaped her career, but they also formed key liberal ideas about the relationship between the individual and society, ideas that ultimately found their way into her poetry.

Coolbrith lived a remarkable life. She was the niece (and briefly the stepdaughter) of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints founder Joseph Smith, she began publishing poetry in the *Los Angeles Star* at the age of fifteen, and she divorced her abusive husband at a time when California divorce law was not yet ten years old. She did all this before changing her name and moving to San Francisco, where she began writing poems for the *Californian* and later the *Overland*. She was instrumental in nurturing the literary careers of a number of young writers, particularly Mary Austin, Jack London, and Joaquin Miller. And although contemporary critics tend to overlook her earlier *Overland* poems in favor of her later, more overtly political work, her many poems published in the *Overland*, like her biography, are of great interest when considering liberal selfhood in the late-nineteenth-century West. Those poems explore the relationship between nature, liberalism, and labor. Reading them in conjunction with her biographical narrative reveals that the fully agential gendered

self cannot be produced in a political context structured by negative liberties. Instead, this self is contingent on social circumstance, requiring a network of support devoted to guaranteeing freedom through positive liberties.

Chapter 4 considers the problem of liberal homogeneity by surveying select nonfictional representations of Indians and the Chinese in the *Overland Monthly* from 1868 to the mid-1880s. Both ethnic groups were objects of a kind of lurid fascination for many of the magazine's writers, and both played key roles in the economic and political development of California. After the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad, the presence of the Chinese in California became problematic for certain white citizens concerned with the cultivation of a civilized liberal state. And yet however strong the popular desire for an ethnically and politically homogeneous civic scene, that desire was further complicated by a literary sphere convinced of the virtues of cosmopolitanism, as suggested by a number of articles in Harte's *Overland*. As a result, the magazine's fictional and nonfictional narratives about race, liberalism, cosmopolitanism, and California suggest a public deliberation over the nature of liberal selfhood itself. Narratives about race and ethnic identification represent an interrogation of the ethnic and political homogeneity—or, conversely, the cosmopolitanism—required to sustain bourgeois western liberal selfhood.

While narrative representations of Indians, much like narrative representations of the Chinese, were implicated in the binary language of wilderness that buttressed western expansion and white privilege, those representations were also important to the emergence of liberal governmentality in California. To put it another way, literary and journalistic stories about the “raced” bodies of the Chinese and Indians were certainly about race, but they were also about the nature of a liberal polity itself. The tension between cosmopolitan heterogeneity and the homogeneity of political liberalism underlay many of the fictional and factual representations of nonwhite, raced bodies in the magazine. Indeed, the interlocking narratives of race, ethnicity, and nation in the *Overland* are about an emerging western

liberal public confronting and attempting to reconcile the ostensible heterogeneity of liberal theory with the homogeneity of liberal praxis.

In the early 1870s naturalist and preservationist John Muir began publishing in the *Overland*. Chapter 5 argues that Muir's work for the magazine between 1872 and 1875 was central to the imagination of a new type of liberal selfhood in California, one linked to a radical "green liberalism." Writing at a time when his prose was not driven by the sense of political expediency it would exhibit by the mid-1890s, Muir's *Overland* writing draws from a familiar well of literary aesthetics to make important arguments about individualism, land use, and stewardship in California. It also serves to locate the beginnings of the twentieth-century preservationist movement in a western public forum "devoted to the development of the country." Although Muir's attitude toward land use in California is perhaps not easily recognizable today as "conservationist," as the modern use of the term seems diametrically opposed to the magazine's stated goal of development, Muir's *Overland* work nonetheless works toward an ecological and political philosophy that complicates the conventional binary opposition between savagery and civilization.

His writing also reconceives the relationship between liberal selfhood and wilderness. Because Muir's work appeared in a California literary periodical that was read throughout the nation, it reshaped eastern assumptions of an endlessly exploitable western wilderness that could, in Horace Greeley's estimation, act as a "safety valve" in times of national duress.⁸⁷ After Muir, wilderness could no longer only be a space for conquest, development, and civilization. In representing natural aesthetics through literary aesthetics, he interrogates the political centrality of civilization and blurs the division between wild and civilized spaces. He imagines a green liberalism that fuses liberal selfhood with public selfhood, a discursive maneuver anticipating the progressivism of the early-twentieth-century federal parks policy.

Chapter 6 examines the fiction of Jack London and Frank Norris published in the *Overland* between 1893 and 1899, along with the implications their literary naturalism has for western liberal selfhood.

London's and Norris's late-century fiction suggests a move away from both literary realism and the magazine's midcentury "practical" approach to literature. It represents a departure, in short, from Harte's original vision for the magazine. As Norris wrote in 1898, the "possibilities of San Francisco and the Pacific Coast" as a "field for fiction" were still numerous. Yet this new fiction, he clarified, would be "not the fiction of Bret Harte . . . for the country has long since outgrown the 'red shirt' period."⁸⁸ London's and Norris's naturalism revisits the liberal autonomy of the "'red shirt' period" in light of the changing social and political dynamics of personhood, ultimately exposing some of the historical and ontological fallacies underlying classical American liberalism.

London and Norris, like earlier *Overland* writers, suggest that liberal selfhood is produced by the wilderness-civilization dialectic. Yet their literary naturalism demands readers recognize the significant restraints placed upon selfhood, restraints that are ignored under classical liberalism. Ultimately, the naturalist fiction of London and Norris points toward a new model of liberal selfhood, one predicated on the impossibility of Lockean individualism. This model posits instead a liberal-egalitarian individualism oriented toward public justice, rather than individual rights, and thus imagines a new sort of liberal governmentality that encourages citizens to envision a polity taking into account the vicissitudes of luck in determining the agency of the liberal self.

If liberalism has its origins in imaginative narratives about individuals and wilderness and the state, it makes sense that other imaginative narratives, read in a particular way, can be seen as having an ongoing dialogue with those foundational liberal stories. In tracing the shifting ways in which imaginative and factual texts examine the machinations of liberal selfhood in the West, this book suggests that the *Overland* writers narrativized changing discourses of liberalism and, in so doing, enabled the political and cultural development of California. As Rogers M. Smith argues, it is the act of "contestation among multiple constitutive stories of peoplehood" that produces

political selfhood.⁸⁹ The literary sphere birthed by Harte and Roman, and the multiple “stories of peoplehood” it contained, encouraged readers to imagine themselves as members of first a regional and then a national liberal public, in part through the use of the language of wilderness. Such language sustains—at the same time it denaturalizes and renders visible—the emergence of liberal selfhood in the West. In this sense, members of the *Overland* group cultivated a critical liberal imaginary.

AN UNDILUTED WEST

In his critique of Harte, Henry James made use of an apparently fastidious, yet ultimately unstated, set of criteria about what exactly constituted the Wild West. Harte, James wrote, “dealt in the wild West and in the wild West alone.” In making this point, James seems to be objecting to the lack of diversity in Harte’s geographic subject matter (the American West) as well as the particular cultural construction of that subject matter (the “wild” American West). But in an odd contradiction he also criticizes Harte for not being “wild and Western” *enough*. James accuses Harte not simply of representing the West but of misrepresenting it: Harte, he claims, “distil[s] and dilute[s] the wild West.”⁹⁰ Harte is guilty of diluting the West and yet somehow also distilling it. In other words, he diverges from strict mimesis twice, making his literary West at once weaker and ideologically more potent than the real thing.

But how would James know what is genuine and what is diluted? James did not travel to the American far West until 1905, seven years after his critique of Harte. (To his surprise, he discovered he loved southern California.)⁹¹ Why would he think *he* knew what an “undiluted” Wild West was like?

He thought he knew at least in part because he had read Bret Harte, along with many other *Overland* writers.⁹² The language of wilderness is less about ecology and more about power: the power to equate white liberal selfhood with civilization and to equate nonwhite, preliberal selfhood with savagery. Henry James could not know what a Wild

West existing outside this textual power structure looked like largely because there is no such thing.

But James nonetheless was right that Harte, along with other members of the *Overland* group, used the magazine to frame white liberal selfhood as a by-product of western wild spaces. In yoking a set of narratives about freedom and the individual to a set of narratives about California and the West, Harte, Brooks, Coolbrith, and others made the magazine an instrument of liberal governmentality. Their commitment to the “development of the country” fused intellectual and aesthetic development with civic development, making the cultivation of a self-critical liberalism central to the emergence of the American literary West.