

INTRODUCTION

In the Work of Their Hands Is Their Prayer

Desire, History, and the Drama
of the American Frontiers

Lands, boundless in extent, exhaustless in fertility, lying under every variety of climate from the tropical to the arctic; accessible in all their parts by continuous water-courses of magnitude unparalleled on the globe, containing so much to stimulate the nobler faculties and gratify the senses; so much that is calculated to induce a high state of physical development and fine perceptions of the beautiful, the grand, and the true; lands whose primeval glory, when it shall have become ancient, will form the theme of the poet and glow on the page of the historian; though too feebly sung and written to convey to future ages what the present feels. It must be the theatre of a life larger than human prophecy can foretell!¹

These closing words to *Life in Prairie Land* by Eliza Farnham offer a compressed vision of what, by the 1830s, much of the American public had come to believe about the possibilities inherent in the expanses of the western frontiers—fortunate topography, good climate, fertile soil and virile health, fine perceptions, noble faculties—all majestically captured by the memorializing gaze of the poet-historian. For Farnham, the stage had been set for a “theatre of life” to be played out on the great American plains, which had become the privileged ground of national History and the terrain for the emergence of a perfected selfhood. There is the exhilaration of youth and nostalgia written deeply into these lines; Farnham had come to the Illinois prairies in

1835 at the age of fifteen, and *Life in Prairie Land* was not published until 1846, when she was acting matron of the Women's Division of Sing Sing prison.² Doubtless as well the penitentiary's atmosphere of confinement and Farnham's immediate concerns with women whom society deemed flawed affect the expansive and optimistic persona of the passage—Farnham would eventually devote her energies to relocating destitute women to the broad spaces of the American West. However, she could hardly in this instance have overdone a rhetoric of progress that was everywhere in evidence near the mid-nineteenth century; countless others celebrated American cultural ascendancy as the nation pursued the policies of westward expansion, and most would, like Farnham, idealize the promise of the West. Boundless and fertile lands, unlimited physical development, and human reason made “fine” in its relation to the beautiful—these concepts competed for space in the written texts that were testimonials to the project of Manifest Destiny.

Farnham's language expresses a hopeful vision of empire, enabled and ennobled by the blessings of a landscape which, from the depths of prehistory, had vouchsafed the conditions necessary for American expansion. And while it betrays a longing for the realization of a grand future, one senses too the extent to which this rhetoric celebrates the intensity of its “presence”; Farnham may be striking the pose of this prairie persona from the distance of some few years and several hundred miles, yet she seems rapt in the very *moment* of a hopeful gaze, anticipating, rather than belonging to, the scenes of fulfillment that lie at the end of her vision. This is a fascination with the *drama* of expansion, of course; Farnham's “theatre of life” seems more compelling in its progressive acts than in the enlightenment pastoral that is its denouement. Such a perspective is consonant with Americans' longstanding attraction to the “incompleteness” of frontier landscapes; the “significance” of Frederick Jackson Turner's “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” for instance, had lain as much with its mourning knell for “the closing of a great historic movement” as with its celebratory paeans to the success of the venture.³ It was, Turner argued, “the universal disposition of Americans to emigrate to the western wilderness, in order to enlarge their dominion over inanimate nature,” and he assured his audience that this was “the actual result of an expansive power which is inherent in them” (7). But what was to become of American character in the wake of having arrived at those physical barriers that “must finally obstruct its progress,” and in what sense could History continue to be the history of a “universal disposition” and will to power of the national spirit? (7). In other words, if Turner claimed that “at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American his-

tory,” it was hard to see what remained that could be called History at all, and not rather the settled ennui of an American character that had earned the blessings of its destiny, yet felt itself to be beyond its prime (38).

Turner’s remarks were delivered in Chicago to an audience of the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, and the regrets of history were offset by millennial expectations visible everywhere in the “White City” that was built for the event; Gail Bederman suggests the fair offered a vision of perfected white culture, “intended to suggest a millennial future—what a city might look like as advanced white races worked toward a perfect civilization.”⁴ By any reading of Turner’s frontier thesis, the evolutionary and redemptive model of historical process offered therein produced the White City as its logical conclusion, and in some sense his audience sat in the middle of a vast historical consciousness linking past and future seamlessly through a present which was Janus-faced—ambivalent as to what it thought it was leaving behind, yet visually entranced by an event billed as “an exhibition of the progress of civilization in the New World.”⁵ From within the immediacy of this experience the broad vistas of past and future must have seemed radiant indeed; Turner and the White City reaffirmed the very idea of History for a public well schooled in the characteristic designs of American progress. The American citizen had for some time lived and breathed the “spirit” of Manifest Destiny. It “now glows in the bosom of every member of this western commonwealth in America,” wrote J. Sullivan Cox in 1846, it “illumines our faces with hope, lights our eye with enterprize [sic]. . . . Its effects *are* manifest. . . . It whelms and controls us, yet who would stem its rushing stream.”⁶ Turner felt confident he was articulating the end of this vision; it was glorious, to be sure, but its manifest effects on an American spirit suddenly at the end of a great period of history were less certain to gauge.

Arguably, attendees of the Columbian Exposition felt that this celebration of American achievements was a visual wonder; the White City was a “spectacular” testimony to the advance of civilization in the American landscape, and Turner himself wrote history in an extremely corporeal and imagist style. No one in attendance at the fair, in other words, would have felt that the historical consciousness thrived on abstractions. Patricia Nelson Limerick argues that in Turner’s historical writings “abstractions are tangible and virtually animate, right on the verge of speaking for themselves. Conditions, forces, ideals, institutions, traits, types, elements and processes inhabit the Turnerian world like the weightiest and most settled of citizens.”⁷ His writings outlasted the White City, but as had the exhibits themselves, Turner’s prose embraces the material and the physical in its rendering of the ideology of progress. His insights into the mediating effects of wilderness on the American character, for example, are

redolent with the imagery of body and landscape. "The wilderness masters the colonist," he argued in a characteristic passage. "It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting-shirt and the moccasin. It puts him in the log cabin of the Cherokee and Iroquois. . . . Before long he has gone to planting Indian corn and plowing with a sharp stick; he shouts the war cry and takes the scalp in orthodox Indian fashion. In short, the frontier is at first too strong for the man" (4). Body and landscape are regressive in these images, but there lay the healthy rub of progress in the American scene. "Thus the advance of the frontier," Turner argued, "has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines" (4).

Turner's historicizing gaze was nothing new, though the fact that its social evolutionist argument lasted so well into the new millennium is itself significant. Moreover, the practice of advocating theories of history through the imagery of human figures interacting with their landscapes had powerful antecedents in the works of authors like Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose *Letters from an American Farmer* had brutalized frontier bodies by 1782, arguing them to be "no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank." But this too was "America in its proper light," and the frontiers revealed the heart of the civilizing project, "its feeble beginnings," the "first labours of settlement, the mode of clearing the earth," and, in time, the arrival "of more industrious people who will finish . . . improvements, convert the log-house into a convenient habitation, and . . . change in a few years that hitherto barbarous country into a fine fertile, well regulated district. Such is our progress," Crèvecoeur reflected. And so the advance of civilization was a tortured, but redemptive, project, replacing the carnivorous body with its agrarian better and charming the landscape toward its own best nature.⁸

Both Crèvecoeur's and Turner's historical visions were invested in a spatial metaphor that mapped the stages of cultural development across the east-west lay of the continent. Monocultural in outlook, both articulated the ideology of progress from within a nationalist, and essentially isolationist, perspective. True, the long-established doctrine of *translatio imperii* "assumed," as Ernest Tuveson notes, "that in any given period one nation or people will exercise the *imperium* of civilization culturally and politically," and westward expansion was truly world-historical as it sped toward completion of the Course of Empire.⁹ However, once the ties with Europe had been severed and progress became uniquely the progress of American civilization, the evolutionary metaphors inherent in conventional frontier discourse were constrained to the mapping of a historical consciousness essentially bounded by two oceans. So it was that Turner felt com-

pelled to “end” a phase of history by virtue of a census report that had mapped settlement to the Pacific and had filled in the remaining empty spaces, and so too was the student of the frontier thesis constrained in his or her mental constructions of a national-historical process of development. American empire would soon enough find its way to the theater of world affairs, but it is important to note the profound insularity of Turner’s vision, so long as he chose to map the “first great phase of American history” so securely within the American landscape.

This belies the world-historical significance of the American frontier by allowing it to signify *only* as nationalist history, for certainly both the Puritan errand into the wilderness and the republican concerns of the founding fathers were much broader in their perspectives. The redemptive project for global Christian salvation on the one hand and the attempt at founding a lasting and perpetually stable republic on the other were each world-historical in their outlook, and each viewed American progress from within the much broader vistas of the global landscape. Turner had wondered most what the North American continent had forged in the way of an American character, but the puritan and revolutionary fathers had wondered what the “founding” of a republic in North America might accomplish in the way of bringing about the aims and ends of History itself—redemption as the finale of Providential history, or the realization of the endless *bonheur* of the republican dream. In that grander theater of life which was global history, both had been sought for in vain, and while the rhetoric of certainty was imbedded in a doctrine of Manifest Destiny that embraced both Christian and republican values, the significance of the frontier became somewhat less clear the farther one got from the millennial optimism of 1893 and the imperial architecture of Chicago and the White City.

It was not simply that the frontier’s distance from world affairs seemed born of its physical isolation and the comparative “backwardness” of its inhabitants. Rather, it was the much more vexing impression that so much of the frontier had not yet fallen *into* history, as it were, as if its landscape still belonged to prehistory and those dim mental constructs of a time before time. It had been a torturous enough route to trace the development of American civilization in the retrograde spaces of a wilderness landscape, and only the metaphors of a national makeover, of rebirth and regeneration, had kept the expanding West from being cast in the role of an embarrassment to historical process.¹⁰ But there were other methods to resituate the frontier within a world-historical outlook, and for those whose vision reached outside the purview of American settlement and into the fruitful practice of conjecture upon the fates of the continent’s indigenous cultures, Anglo-European progress suddenly appeared both orderly and ordained. History could map the ideology of forfeiture, for example, and the record of civilizations

come and gone in the North American continent revealed the inevitability of processes that had cast the fates of nations from time immemorial. And while it was the prevailing view that the natives had not written history, they had left its ciphers in the landscape and the very “structures” of their being—those sites, ruins, and monuments that had outlasted them as mute testimonials.

Of course poets were as likely as historians to haunt the scenes of vanished cultures, and some individuals purported to be both. William Cullen Bryant, whose 1832 poem “The Prairies” exemplifies the Anglo-European will to write North American “prehistory” as the antecedant of its own destiny, was such an individual, and while that poem fails to range broadly through the east-west panoramas of a Turnerian vision, its persona remains the advocate of a historical agency no less progressive, or expansive. As it speculates freely on the remnants of past civilizations, Bryant’s persona wills its sense of history in a remarkable dream of the frontier as the “thoughtscape” of a historical consciousness—conscious of the ends and aims of history, and ultimately, of the irrevocability of processes that have constructed the very privilege of its gaze.¹¹

“These are the gardens of the Desert,” proclaims the voice of “The Prairies” at the outset; in so doing Bryant inscribes the tense relationship, not only between the cultivated and the uncultivated, but between the complaisant mind of civilization and its less “settled,” primeval nature. The persona of the poem is a “type” of consciousness that advocates the primacy of the visual in the construction of experience; a beholding, “dilated sight / Takes in the encircling vastness” of the prairie, and the sweeping, wind-driven landscape “rolls and fluctuates to the eye.” Born aloft by breezes, the prairie-hawk that “Flaps his broad wings, yet moves not” becomes something of a specular muse, both mirroring and expanding the gaze of the persona. Briefly the poem’s scenes travel the flights of the hawk “Among the palms of Mexico and vines / Of Texas,” along “the limpid brooks / That from the fountains of Sonora glide.” As a well-traveled visionary, the hawk is asked to champion the immediacy of the moment and the transcendence of *this* place. “Have ye fanned,” the poet asks, “a nobler or lovelier scene than this?” The bird’s-eye view is both a vessel for the sublimity of experience and a surrogate for the eye of God, since, from the heights to which the hawk is born, it relates back to the persona its most fundamental knowledge: “Man hath no power in all this glorious work”:

The hand that built the firmament hath heaved
And smoothed these verdant swells, and sown their slopes
With herbage, planted them with island groves,
And hedged them round with forests. Fitting floor
For this magnificent temple of the sky—

This gesture affirms the Christian worldview of the poem, even as it minimizes the narrative voice. However, Bryant's poem remains dedicated to the sublimity of aesthetic experience in the landscape, and the devotional interlude renders these scenes sacred.

The persona returns quickly to its earthbound condition, and perhaps because of the poem's brief speculation on a creative impulse that lies altogether outside of history, the voice expands its own thoughts in the "verdant wastes" of the landscape, wondering as to "the dead of other days" and the fates of civilizations whose ciphers remain as features of the landscape, but whose time has come and gone, their histories as transient as the breezes. The poetic gaze is transfixed on "the mighty mounds / That overlook the rivers, or that rise / In the dim forest crowded with old oaks," and suddenly the poet confronts the evidence of hands besides those of God that have been at work in the landscape. The poet bids the mounds themselves to "answer" for their being, and their mute response is an argument from design: "A race, that long has passed away." This, then, is the poem's striking inauguration of History, and of a historical consciousness at once gifted with a sort of "divine insight" into transcendence and "unsettled" in its awareness of being trapped *inside* time, so to speak—born along the terrain of time's "airy undulations," its "gentlest swell," and the "un-chained" motion of clouds that "sweep over with their shadows."

Bryant's speculations on the mound builders are perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the poem's historicizing project; elsewhere he had argued that "[t]he North American Indians are, as a race, in no higher plane of culture now than they were three hundred years ago," and that if "they have any inherent capability for progress . . . that progress was arrested when they came into subjugation with another and a higher race."¹² He therefore had conjectured, as had others, that the peoples who had built the mounds of the upper Midwest had belonged to a more "civilized" race, and he had "dimly seen the shadowy form of another people who . . . left many remarkable evidences of their habits and customs of a singular degree of civilization, but who many centuries ago disappeared, either exterminated by pestilence or by some powerful and pitiless enemy" (20). Bryant speculated this had been a "numerous and busy" population, and he found the mounds noteworthy as enigmas of historical development (25). "Allied, on the one hand," he stated, "to the rude conditions of the Stone Age, in which the understanding of man does not aim at much," the mound builders were "yet far in advance of that rough childhood of the race" (30–31). Carefully extracting the mound builders from the cultural legacy of indigenous American peoples, Bryant willed their history as the tragic passing away of a brief epoch of civilized life, lost in the dim recesses of North American prehistory.

“The Prairies” rehearses the conquest of this “disciplined and populous race” by the “roaming hunter tribes, warlike and fierce.” Bryant writes history much as would Turner in the years to come—corporeal, imagistic, and ultimately drawn from the material fabric of culture. The mound builders are disciplined bodies that populate the landscape of a bizarre pastoral, where “haply by their stalls the bison lowed, / And bowed his manèd shoulder to the yoke. / All day this desert murmured with their toils,” the persona claims,

Till twilight blushed, and lovers walked, and wooed
In a forgotten language, and old tunes,
From instruments of unremembered form,
Gave the soft winds a voice.

These are the romantic, and romanticized, images of a mode of production and reproduction which would, in time, become the hallmarks of an agrarian republican ideal, and this “race” of a forgotten tongue is more akin to the persona of the poem than are those “roaming hunter tribes” that conquer the mound builders. Bryant hints at what can only be deemed miscegenation; a captive mound builder chooses, after some years,

A bride among their maidens, and at length
Seem[s] to forget—yet ne’er forgot—the wife
Of his first love, and her sweet little ones,
Butchered, amid their shrieks, with all his race.

The gift of a bride speaks to the “better nature” of the native American, though the reader is not to mourn too deeply the currents of historical process that will bring “that advancing multitude” of Anglo-Europeans “which soon shall fill these deserts.” Rather, Bryant’s persona instead reintegrates, by *reclaiming*, both the landscape and the civilized legacy of the lost mound builders, making of westward expansion a rebirth of the past. In a futuristic vision, the poet hears the “laugh of children,” and anticipates:

the soft voice
Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn
Of Sabbath worshippers. The low of herds
Blends with the rustling of the heavy grain
Over the dark brown furrows. All at once
A fresher wind sweeps by, and breaks my dream,
And I am in the wilderness alone.

These social bodies, these scenes of civilization writ as the Christian reclamation of the Old New World, introduce the redemptive optimism of Providential

history into the prairie landscapes. Like the “domestic hum” of those bees that are harbingers of Bryant’s civilizing project, the sounds of a more secure social compact are steady in the background.

However, the poem does indeed conclude with the unsettled image of the solitary voice gazing out into the wilderness; the persona, drawn out of its reverie by “a fresher breeze,” cannot find its ultimate security in the Christian scheme alone. Arguably, the poem fails to exorcise a historical consciousness troubled by its awareness of the world-historical claims of the *translatio imperii*, and by the lack of any assurance that American empire in the West was the true “endgame” of history. Perhaps the poem had overcommitted to that cyclical theory of history against which classical republican thought had so dearly wrestled, yet which had best explained the rise and fall of successive civilizations.¹³ “Thus change the forms of being,” Bryant mused, “thus arise / Races of living things, glorious in strength, / And perish, as the quickening breath of God fills them, or is withdrawn.” These living things, quickened or withdrawn from the theater of life by the breath of God, are also “bodies politic” that betray, in the transience of their being, the complex struggle at the core of a national consciousness whose understanding of Manifest Destiny was, as Anders Stephanson has argued, a “peculiar fusion of providential and republican ideology that took place after the Revolution”: “Visions of the United States as a sacred space providentially selected for divine purposes found a counterpart in the secular idea of the new nation of liberty as a privileged ‘stage’ . . . for the exhibition of a new world order, a great ‘experiment’ for the benefit of humankind as a whole.”¹⁴ Stephanson might have remarked as well that this was to be a tense, if “peculiar,” fusion of the secular and the sacred, whose claims hardly coexisted seamlessly in the discourse of westward expansion. Ernest Tuveson argues a more divisive view of the doctrine, noting that in the popular consciousness, Manifest Destiny referred to “either of two kinds of expectations for the settlements in North America: that they may become a New Rome, or that they may be the new Promised Land of a chosen people. The ultimate effects of these ideas are widely divergent” (96). Writing history in the visceral imagery of the “progressive” body or the “developmental landscape” did not, it seems, ease this tension. Bryant felt it more strongly than would Turner, whose vision was more squarely focused on the progress of a republic whose durability he did not seem to call into question. But in neither case did the tension between sacred and secular ends of history find a comfortable resolution.

THE CENTRAL ENIGMA in what I would now call a “spectacular,” or visual, discourse on history arises from the very problematic of observation. Every Subject

whose vision attempts to mirror, or “image,” historical process is, for all intents and purposes, a *presence*, an embodied historical consciousness making time out of broad vistas, and conversely, making broad vistas out of the sweep of time. The expansive present, the fullness of feeling that goes into such passages, comes to be felt as a sense of the temporal which has become overdetermined, as it were, by the sheer potential of landscape understood as theater, as plot—as narrative. Wherever this *presence* fixes its gaze, there a specific story unfolds, and there too arise the questions of denouement, or the “end” of history. Of course any individual story participates in, and is limited by, the conventions of larger stories; Priscilla Wald speaks of those “official stories through which a nation—‘a people’—[speaks] itself into existence.” Wald argues that “[n]ation-builders in the nineteenth-century United States understood the importance of those stories to the project of nation-building,” though she astutely understands the manner in which narrative forms can introduce “cultural anxieties,” nodes of repression that refuse to acknowledge the logical progression of narrative convention.¹⁵ For the Christian Observer (if I may borrow such a phrase) telling stories in the American landscape, all history tends toward the eschatological and is finally at odds with the very materiality of the processes it depicts. For a more secular, republican Subject of history, who sought in the historical landscape the guarantees of a stable, permanent, and virtuous society, the ends of history simply could not be tolerated as such—the republican vision was an endless deferment of closure to historical process. In this regard, then, the “official story” (doctrine) of Manifest Destiny was torn by and between the very narrative structures it had introduced to speak itself into existence.

To be sure, a long-established millennial rhetoric had mediated the ground of these tensions; Americans could embrace the hopeful and material visions of a thousand-year reign and a flowering of civilization without abandoning altogether the eschatological aims of Providence. These fantasies too were readily available in the representational discourses of perfected republican bodies wandering freely in an idealized *civitas* as broad as the continent itself. Moreover, in the *duree* that was the habitable space of millennial expectations, the teleological aims of both the Christian and republican redemptive schemes could attempt the unification of their social visions—for example, the social gospel of the late nineteenth century, advocated by authors such as Washington Gladden, wrestled with problems of Christianity in an age of expanding wealth, leisure time, and dangerous secular impulses, but did so with an optimistic faith in the perfectibility of the human condition en route to its ultimate salvation.¹⁶ Of course, there were always those who were concerned that the City of Man was being built faster than the City of God, and this book has much to do with the

general appeal of a more secular promise of human redemption. Mark Hanley notes the continuing fears within Protestantism that a secular republican ideology had created a “rising message of popular material redemption that had nothing to do with religion.”¹⁷ This was especially so in the representative space of the American frontier, where there was so much promise, and so much “work” moving individuals toward the aims of the republican dream. But insofar as frontier literature betrayed in such visceral imagery the rudimentary “beginnings” of a cultural work fed by desire, struggle, and collective fantasies of freedom, the terminology of the Christian redemptive scheme remained a powerful symbolic domain for writers’ meditations on social progress and the potential for human perfectibility in the landscapes of the West.

AND SO IN THE PAGES that follow I will try to show how Caroline Kirkland’s attempts to cultivate a market economy driven by a more diversified model of frontier consumption ultimately projected Edenic imagery onto the spaces occupied by women’s domestic economy; how the sacred/profane landscape of Yellowstone National Park figured as a model of wilderness redemption for a growing tourist class “blessed” by the rewards of civilization and citizenship; how written accounts of the Comstock era in Nevada reflect on the individual’s disenfranchisement from the “providential landscapes” of the mining West—increasingly the rationalized and “accumulated” space of capital-intensive mining; how a predominately white male brotherhood of sport fishers increasingly recreated as masculine “bodies of grace” in the waters of the American West; and how the missionary bodies of Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* acted as agents of cultural redemption, dispensing the civilizing influences of European material culture alongside their message of Christian salvation.

All the texts and discourses I take up in this study are invested in the redemptive, and all are equally invested in the materiality of representation as the site for the inscription of historical concerns prevalent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not all are narratives of “faith” in historical process, nor does every text find comfort in its meditations on the ends of a redemptive vision which Fredric Jameson argues forms the “the unity of a single great collective story . . . the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity.”¹⁸ The singularity of Jameson’s assertion here allows me to map the synchronous concerns of the Christian and republican schemes, while acknowledging the various structures of “socially symbolic acts”—for this study, those culturally and historically specific instances of artistic representation produced by or “available” to American frontier writers as they wrestled with the implications of their insights. At the core of these acts lies what Jameson asserts

is “the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of *narrative*, . . . the central function or *instance* of the human mind.”¹⁹ As I argued earlier, the idea of “narrative” as “instance” remains the prerogative of a historical consciousness willing to speculate from within the immediacy of experience; for such a “human mind,” the American frontier was always already an instant in a long collective drama.

I wish to have it understood that the construct of a redemptive, and *collective*, struggle to wrest Freedom from a “naturalized” realm of Necessity remains problematic and largely “imagined”; its effect is often enough an elision of those conflicts which constitute the real, and social, context of a more rational historical worldview. However, it remains the fact that historically, the articulation of redemptive narratives has been laden with rhetorical strategies whose ideological aims are precisely such an elision; in other words, wherever and whenever redemptive narratives make themselves felt as key structures in the production of texts, discourse, images, and so forth within a specific cultural context, they tend, at the expense of alternative worldviews, toward a valorization of a unique social vision, the value of whose attainment is constructed as a universalized good. The claim to a cohesive and collective national narrative such as is implied in Manifest Destiny, for instance, projects the very idea of “nation” as a community governed by similar goals and aims. Benedict Anderson has argued that an “imagined political community” resides at the heart of all forms of nationalism; “*imagined*,” he claims, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”²⁰ In this study, the cohesive force of discourses that were widely disseminated among literate members of American culture is understood to be constitutive of that “image of communion” between citizens of a widely scattered population. That this view implies marginalization, privilege, and race and gender exclusivity will be obvious. Nowhere, for instance, will the problematics of an imagined community be more evidenced than in my chapter on fly-fishing and American leisure. The large body of writing on the sport attests to its role in the construction of an affluent white male “fraternity,” the majority of whose members never met on the banks of a stream, yet who imagined themselves communing with one another through discursive practices.

My own reservations, too, lie largely in the margins. I take up here what I would refer to as nationalist narratives—dominant, hegemonic, and oftentimes exuberant celebrations of American cultural values. My concerns are identical to those Joyce Appleby voices while discussing “ideological historians” who “have created the notion of a collective mind that furnishes the promptings that struc-

ture action.” “Ideologically,” Appleby argues, the prevailing view is that such a collective mind “is undifferentiated. Some may benefit more than others from the distribution of authority built into the society’s conceptual language, but the distribution nonetheless presents itself as a given embedded in the minds of all.”²¹ In the America of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, redemptive imagery remained, for the most part, caught up in that “distribution of authority built into the society’s conceptual language,” and the blessings of civilization were, by and large, the rewards of privilege. There is, then, a myriad of what Priscilla Wald would refer to as “untold stories” haunting the margins of this study.

Historically, the civilizing impulse of Anglo-European culture—its religious, political, aesthetic, and ethical worldview—has operated in the North American landscape as a set of assumptions about the innate supremacy of its own practices and behaviors; the erasure of alternative cultural perspectives has been largely pursued as a program which, quite aggressively, asserts the inherent value of assimilation, mastery over natural resources, Judeo-Christian redemption, capitalist modes of production, and so forth, all as a universally accepted and morally superior worldview. Moreover, as the landscape comes to be remade in the image of the universal good, historical processes come more and more to appear as redemptive in purpose, and essentially driven by the “rational” pursuit of a “shared” goal. Both Christian and republican ideologies inscribe themselves ambitiously, I would argue, into a progressive scheme which charts the distance between a realm of Necessity and a realm of Freedom as a sort of collective journey toward a specific and valorized vision of a social community, a vision of community which in turn implies a determined and desirable set of conditions for individual life *within* that community. This book examines the manner in which these redemptive narratives found their way into a variety of writings on the American frontiers, reflecting on both social relations and individual experience as they unfolded in a unique and diverse physical environment.

Both canonical and noncanonical sources make up the subject matter of this study; in part, this is an attempt to demonstrate the pervasiveness of cultural narratives as they circulated in American culture; from the most personal thoughts of tourists writing in their private journals, to the pages of the popular press, to the celebrated works of authors like Willa Cather, the imagery of redemption occupied a central role in the production of discourse. However, many of the works here have also suffered from a program of literary exclusion which Jonathan Arac takes up in his discussion of the “hypercanonization” of those relatively few, privileged American texts that dominate the American canon. “I find that Americans in the twentieth century,” Arac argues, “have adopted as national exemplars precisely those works that were written at a distance from

national narrative, while great national writers, such as Bancroft, Cooper, and (until recently) Stowe, have been comparatively neglected.” Arac argues that, as a result, “literary culture and national culture may be seriously at odds, and they harmonize only when the nation is given a meaning more psychological than religious or political.”

While no one is likely to argue the greatness of several of the authors who come under scrutiny in this study, it should be clear that my interests are more religious and political than psychological; Caroline Kirkland’s regionalism, for example, operates at a level of social commentary that is hard to overlook, and Arac is astute in his observations that as a genre “local narrative” both “contest[ed] and presuppos[ed] the articulation of national narrative.”²² Moreover, contemporary evaluations of American authors often neglect their status in those periods when they were writing, and when the texts they produced were more likely to circulate as a sort of cultural “currency”—asserting their values in a contested marketplace of ideas. Dan De Quille, whose *The Big Bonanza* occupies space alongside Mark Twain’s *Roughing It* in chapter 3, was as well known in the West as the latter, and common opinion held he was likely to achieve a stronger and more lasting reputation than Twain.²³ Caroline Kirkland, for most of the twentieth century a cipher in American letters, was read widely in antebellum society, was an editor at *Sartain’s Union Magazine*, and, as Annette Kolodny notes, “continued to write and publish actively until her death in 1864.”²⁴ Willa Cather’s critical legacy has been shifting since the early twentieth century, and the juncture of “psychological” readings of her novels with more national, political agendas has largely been a project of feminist and queer theoretical approaches to her art.²⁵ Famous authors recorded their experiences alongside average citizens in the landscapes of Yellowstone and on the banks of western rivers. We can only speculate on the “value” of journals and diaries as they circulated in the narrow confines of personal relationships; however, the mere fact that so many chose to write about their frontier experiences at all is a testimony to the centrality of discourse as a cultural and communal practice.

AT THE HEART OF this body of texts and their fascination with both the Christian and republican redemptive schemes lies a construct of an “exemplary” physical and bodily space that attempted to define the conditions of Freedom as a set of culturally determined ideas shaped by attitudes toward nature, modes of production, types of human activity (moral or immoral, productive or “unproductive,” savage or civilized), and not least, by an idealized image of the redeemed landscape as a sort of eschatological denouement at the “ends” of history. The North American continent itself had been early constructed as the

exemplary site for the eschatological designs of Providence; in many ways the articulation of Manifest Destiny is a continuation of that pattern of representation.²⁶ Such a ground is at once spatial and temporal, insofar as the idea of an “elect” landscape suited to the designs of a specific historical process is fraught with determinist notions about its past, present, and future, as well as the types of human activity which unfold there. The ideology of Manifest Destiny is itself unthinkable apart from a historical worldview that sees little difference between the conquest of space and the chronology of an expansive enterprise.

It seems clear, then, that the policy of expansion guiding westward migration was ideologically a redemptive project, one which sought to alter the face of the landscape in the making of a “proper” ground for an emergent American culture. But representations of the American frontiers had also to contend with human activity as a primary agency in the remaking of landscape. Christian redemption, which charts the body’s path from fallen nature to a state of grace, is writ large with an ideology of human strife transformed to repose—the ultimate denial of the physical. Classical republicanism, too, charts a redemption of physical existence in the ideal of the virtuous citizen, whose freedom from mundane labor creates the civic space in which the performance of public deeds and actions assures a collective remembrance that outlives the physical body.²⁷ The “peculiar fusion” of providential and republican ideologies at the core of Manifest Destiny makes it difficult to separate the notion of Christian virtue from a concept of civic virtue, or a concept of the life of toil from the cursed nature of a fallen human condition. Yet what remains important here is the notion that the ideology of redemption inherent in this complex relationship ultimately suggests that human activity must, irreducibly, create the conditions of its own Freedom. Providence may have secured the North American continent for the unfolding of Christian eschatology. The wealth of nature may have yielded its good(s) for the creation of the great Republic. But however complex the understanding of historical processes at work in an expansive enterprise, a broad array of human activities remained at the core of its realization, as well as at the “ends” of its vision.

This book attempts to understand the redemptive impulse at the heart of representations of the American frontiers, not simply through an examination of a transformative discourse bound up with the alteration of landscape, but also through its implied transformation of specific practices and behaviors, whose place in that landscape is defined by a range of activities which are themselves heavily invested with cultural meaning. Indeed, in William Gilpin’s claim that the “*untransacted* destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent” lies a virtual catalog of the physical body at work in the reconstruction of the landscape, as the American finds virtue in the will

to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean—to animate the many millions of its people, and to cheer them upward . . . —to agitate these herculean masses—to establish a new order in human affairs . . . —to regenerate superannuated nations— . . . to stir up the sleep of a hundred centuries—to teach old nations a new civilization . . . to confirm the destiny of the human race—to carry the career of mankind to its culminating point—to cause a stagnant people to be reborn—to perfect science—to emblazon history with the conquest of peace—to shed a new and resplendent glory upon mankind—to unite the world in one social family—to dissolve the spell of tyranny and exalt charity—to absolve the curse that weighs down humanity, and to shed blessings around the world!²⁸

Rushing, agitating, regenerating, awakening, carrying, shedding—all this terminology of a moral agency at work in expansion is writ large in the images of physical exertion and its cultural work of empire.

The teleological impulse inherent in narratives of redemption not only implies a progressive view of historical processes but also inscribes in the space between Necessity and Freedom, uncivilized and civilized, profane and sacred, labor and the end of labor, and so on, the forms of desire that come to define the nature of historical struggle *itself*, so to speak. Wherever redemptive narratives find articulation in the broadest realms of cultural production, they are charged not only with the representation of the images of redemption but also with the images of desire as a motive force driving individual and social goals.

Speaking religiously and devotionally about the maintenance of civil society in this world, Jesus Sirach had wondered in *Ecclesiasticus* how it was that the physical sustained the intellectual, in both the body private and the body politic. His imagery, gleaned from within the middle eastern world of circa 280 B.C., is itself visceral, and allied to an agrarian ideal. “How shall he become wise that holdeth the plow,” he asks, “that glorieth in the shaft of the goad, that driveth oxen, and is occupied in their labors, and whose discourse is of the stock of bulls? He will set his heart upon turning his furrows, and his wakefulness is to give his heifers their fodder.” Sirach might have been standing next to Bryant’s poet-historian in the undulating landscape of the prairies, the mound builders, and the advancing multitudes of American progress. Bryant’s voice had sought its answers in the abandoned structures of the past, however, and Sirach meant to articulate the structures of permanence in the space between his own time and world-historical redemption. “All these put their trust in their hands,” Sirach stated, “and each becometh wise in his own work”:

Without these shall not a city be inhabited, and men shall not sojourn nor walk up and down therein. They shall not be sought for in the coun-

cil of the people, and in the assembly they shall not mount on high; they shall not sit on the seat of the judge, and they shall not understand the covenant of judgement; neither shall they declare instruction and judgement, and where parables are they shall not be found. But they will maintain the fabric of the world; and in the handiwork of their craft is their prayer.²⁹

The *civitas* as “fabric” is Sirach’s answer to the problems of the aims and ends of historical process, and its maintenance relies on the prayers worked out for the body politic on behalf of the body of labor. Since it had so much “work” to be done, since the very structures of its beginning seemed to be built toward its ends, the rude fabric of frontier society plied its desires in the figures of both those who worked for, and those who ultimately enjoyed, the blessings of that “theatre of life larger than human prophecy.”

What follows here is not in any way meant as a reflection on the historical development of an idea. Redemptive schemes are constantly recycled, put back into play, and resituated with respect to a diverse topography of landscape and the shifting postures of human activity. The historical period under consideration here hardly saw a fruition of either Christian or republican visions. The early twentieth century must have seemed a broken dream to those citizens of the American West who would witness the failure of Populism, the devastations of World War I, the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl thirties. Modernity was in many ways a steady assault on that unbridled optimism which had sustained an energetic and mobile population looking to the frontiers as the landscape of their rightful inheritance—a legacy of the Revolution.³⁰ My intentions have been to examine frontier texts as they meditate on specific “moments” in a progressive narrative scheme; I hope I have been attentive to history, in other words, while engaged in the questions of form. Ultimately, all these texts contain the inscription of desire, a sort of collective “prayer” that human effort be rife with meaning, and the human body a force in the landscape, actively seeking the conditions of its own Freedom.