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# When Students Write Literary History: Regionalism, Populism, and Literary Value in a Gold Rush Magazine

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## METHODS AND TEXTS

WHEN STUDENTS WRITE  
LITERARY HISTORY*Regionalism, Populism, and Literary Value  
in a Gold Rush Magazine*

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At my urban university in the Intermountain West, English majors enter a course called Literature of the American West with expectations formed from a global media culture of genre paperbacks and Hollywood films. They are skeptical about the literary value of popular forms such as westerns. Some fear that anything written for wide distribution and money must violate what Henry James called the artist's "conscience." James well knew his own answer when he asked about the nineteenth century Western writer Bret Harte some thirty years after the westerner's first success, "Has he continued to distil and dilute the wild West because the public would only take him as wild and Western, or . . . out of the necessity of his conscience?" (James 512). The opposition troubles both students and faculty at my university: Do literature and intellectual labor have to give up their "conscience" to seek the approval of a wide audience?<sup>1</sup>

Among the various ways to address this question, the digital archive offers access to literary and artistic sources that reveal, in Lawrence Levine's terms, the "permeable and shifting" boundaries of inherited "cultural divisions" such as the popular and the literary, or the aesthetic and the practical (8).<sup>2</sup> In the American West, some periodicals written before the consolidation of the modern mass market—before the age of the cowboy romance, or even dime novels—mix aesthetic with economic discourses and assume that "noble, . . . intelligent, . . . refining" matter in literature can also be "useful" and can generate a "wide circulation" ("Our Introductory"). In one recent assignment using digitized periodicals, I asked students to establish literary boundaries and articulate literary values while reading a periodical text in which modern distinctions between artistic conscience versus economic motives were by no means taken for granted. As curators of literary history, students discovered the difficulty of assigning texts to any categories. They found contributions to the magazine crossing boundaries of artistic pleasure, intellectual cultivation, and practical (how-to) advice about business and leisure. Mirroring the boundary-crossings of our primary text, students drew upon their experience with twenty-first century popular and consumer culture as well as their literary training to describe the magazine contents and explain their value for readers today. Our project found the literary, popular, and com-

1 The question is real and current on my campus, where the Division of Research was recently renamed the Division of Research and Economic Development. Some faculty worry that a greater emphasis on money will inappropriately constrain intellectual activity, while others take for granted that intellectual work should address a substantial audience willing to pay for it.

2 Many colleges and universities teach courses on the popular West that do not begin with an opposition between art and audience. Some alternative approaches are hinted at in course titles on the Western Literature Association syllabus exchange. Titles include Ron Scheer's "Cowboy Up: The American Cowboy in Fact and Fiction," at the University of Southern California, and Alan Weltzien's "Literature as Popular Culture: Montana Noir," at University of Montana Western (Syllabus Exchange).

mercial repeatedly collapsing into each other, revealing the thorough integration of these discourses both in the regional magazine we adopted and in the values that students brought to their analytic work.

The project asked students to analyze and evaluate the contents of an early Western magazine, on a syllabus intended to challenge our perceptions about the American West in a variety of ways. For this venture into student-curated literary history, we limited our field of primary sources to one self-consciously regional San Francisco magazine that predated the development of many genres and tropes we associate with the literary West—no gunfighters, prim schoolmarms, masterful cowboys, or prostitutes with hearts of gold. Students read Bret Harte and Louise Clappe before they began the project, to become acquainted with two genres that did circulate in the time and place of our magazine—the local color sketch and the Gold Rush partnership tale—but I made no further attempt to anticipate what students should expect to find in their reading.<sup>3</sup> The magazine was available to us via the HathiTrust online archive ([hathitrust.org](http://hathitrust.org)).

The assignment called upon students to create both an individual and a group report analyzing the contents of *Hutchings' California Magazine* (1856–1861). Each student read a single issue of the magazine. The individual report was chiefly descriptive and informative; the group report was also evaluative, as groups had to select two to four genres they considered most important in their combined issues, and to provide illustrations and comments in a class presentation. We used a shared Google Doc to sign up for issues so that no two students chose the same number. With twenty-three students completing the course, we had most issues covered between July 1858 and June 1860 (volumes 3 and 4), and a smattering of issues selected from 1860–61 (volume 5). Students sorted the contents of their adopted issues into genres, then met with classmates assigned to adjacent numbers to prepare a PowerPoint content analysis of a cluster of consecutive issues and to share with the class what the group found most valuable about their issues. Questions in an end-of-semester portfolio and in course evaluations asked students to reflect again on their magazine research in the context of the class as a whole. In this article I share some findings from the assignment and brief suggestions for initiating similar work in other classrooms focused on American regional literatures or on intersections between popular and literary culture in archival texts.

The magazine at the center of this inquiry could hardly have positioned itself farther from Henry James' theory of artistic "conscience" as a rarefied spirit remote from business and audience. The founder of *Hutchings' California Magazine*, forty-niner James Mason Hutchings, is best known to historians as a promoter of Yosemite who lost his private claim to a Yosemite hotel in a case decided in the US Supreme Court.<sup>4</sup> Earlier, in the late 1850s, he sold paper and ink, books, periodicals, scenic prints, letter sheets, and his illustrated monthly magazine from a San Francisco storefront. Kevin Starr has praised the "superb illustrations and marvelously detailed essays" with which *Hutchings' Magazine* "encouraged Americans

3 On the partnership tale of the California 1850s, see Penry 151–58.

4 Californians refer to Gold Rush immigrants who arrived in 1849 as "forty-niners." Yosemite historians routinely note the Hutchings case. Among them, Russell is familiar with Hutchings' writing about the valley (147).



to take notice of their natural heritage and to relate to it in pleasure and informed appreciation" (181). But "pleasure," "appreciation," and high quality art were matters of business for writer-editor-entrepreneur Hutchings as much as they were aesthetic ends. Jen Huntley-Smith sees Hutchings' career in print in the 1850s as "boosterish" (46), as the English emigrant was "invested, literally, in the growth of a settled society" (67). In his *California Magazine*, he promised to "tell of [California's] wonderful resources and commercial advantages," as well as "[w]hatever is noble, manly, useful, intelligent, amusing and refining." At its founding, the magazine was "gotten up" in a "costly manner," but at \$3.00 a year—the same price as New York-based *Putnam's* and \$2.00 less than a rival San Francisco monthly with no engravings (Mott 117)—Hutchings admitted that he intended to "rely on a wide circulation" for "pecuniary reward" ("Our Introductory"). Practical and aesthetic, published beautifully and proud to call itself "the cheapest publication on the Pacific coast" ("Ourselves"), *Hutchings' California Magazine* made a *business* of appreciating the beauty of California, a formula that seems to have garnered popular success.

Lacking circulation records to confirm the *California Magazine's* success with readers, we can infer its popularity from internal evidence. In July 1857, at the outset of the second volume, editor Hutchings thanked readers for "unexpected success, so that now there is scarcely a glen or a valley, a settlement or a camp, a town or a city, in California, where our Magazine does not find its way; and thousands every month are sent to distant friends" ("Ourselves" 1). Contributions and reader correspondence—from schoolgirls across the bay in Benicia and miners in the mountains near Mariposa—bear out the magazine's wide reach into northern and central California counties and give some evidence of eastern circulation.<sup>5</sup> San Francisco advertisers favored the magazine. *Hutchings'* carried ads for such local businesses as clothing and dry goods stores, music sellers, photographers, and publishers, and ad pages increased over the magazine's five-year lifespan.<sup>6</sup> The forty-eight page magazine maintained its length, its printed reader correspondence, and the quality and variety of its illustrations over time, all suggesting a steady financial and popular success.

Not all of this, of course, was necessary to our investigation in *Literature of the American West*, as a key aim of the research project was to let students classify and evaluate *Hutchings'* content on their own terms today. Instead of historicizing the primary text, the assignment sheet offered some sample genres for analysis: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, local color sketch, partnership tale. Students were invited to create additional genre categories, and nearly everyone found it necessary to do so. Among the genres students singled out as most significant across multiple issues were: environmental essays, serials/courtship romances, regional histories, travel pieces, music, humor, and treatments of race in California. As it turned out, almost none of the genres I offered in the assignment turned out to be important to students' analyses. Their reports explained why my genres were all but useless. For one thing, students could not always tell

5 Contributions were especially strong from areas in California where Hutchings himself had traveled while printing and selling some 50,000 or more copies of an illustrated letter-sheet, or printed stationery, called "The Miner's Ten Commandments" (Huntley-Smith 50, 80-81). A correspondent from Kentucky and the attention of the *American Phrenological Journal* testify at least slightly to the magazine's reach beyond California ("Editor's Table"; "Our Social Chair"), though by far the greater portion of printed correspondence comes from inside the state.

6 Advertisements did not enter into our classroom project, as they rarely appear in digitized versions of the magazine from HathiTrust, Google Books, or the Internet Archive. Researchers who wish to study the magazine's advertisements must consult print copies, such as the file at the Beinecke Library, Yale University.

whether an item should be considered fiction or nonfiction. Thanks to the uncertain boundaries of nineteenth-century magazine genres, it was not clear whether a sensational first-person narrative about an estranged husband and wife in early San Francisco, titled "The Maniac" and tucked between prose sketches of the California condor and the progress of the state school system for example, counted as fiction or nonfiction. Furthermore, I had not outfitted students with the vocabulary to recognize a sketch that was not local color, so they relied on subject matter to classify many works that scholars would call sketches (i.e., environmental writing, writing about race generally or Native Americans in particular). Since they read only one issue each, they did not know how long the serials continued, and whether they should be counted as novels, novellas, or stories.

It did not much matter to students—possibly because I did not signify that it mattered to me—whether contents were more or less "literary" in any conventional sense. A genre they thought to find most literary—poetry—turned out to be humorous in some issues, conventionally sentimental in others, and on the whole more accessible than they expected, but not (unless humorous) very memorable. With one exception (and that in the case of humor), these literature students did not find what they considered good writing in the poetry columns. Other genres usually privileged in literary history for this period—short fiction and the novel—were equally unimpressive to the class, when discernible at all. Given the choices in this magazine, students overwhelmingly preferred environmental essays and other informative sketches of California. Beautifully illustrated prose articles on California landscapes such as Yosemite, the Big Trees, and other sites of interest to a growing tourist class were a highlight and revelation for almost every group. What James Hutchings selected as his lead articles in the late 1850s continued to earn the approbation of students in this class. From the decade that brought outstanding short stories and novels to American literature, and a decade in which poetry remained a widely shared literary currency, our limited reading of one regional magazine challenged the usual categories of mid-nineteenth century American literature. Students found the most engaging writing in environmental and travel essays that openly encouraged tourism, immigration, and investment, at the same time that the elegant prose lifted them above the level of the magazine's fiction and poetry.

In the group work that I observed in class, students drew upon their literary and cultural expertise to describe the contents of their issues to each other and to determine classifications for their group reports. The task in class was simply to share their individual reports with each other and come up with a short list of the most important genres for their consecutive numbers of the magazine. A sticking point for many groups was what to make of the serial romances that figured prominently in the three volumes we consulted. Other literature classes had taught students that the novel as a genre could be serialized in periodicals, but when they experienced these narratives in serial parts the stories seemed more like TV sitcoms and soap



7 The episodes in *Hutchings'* serials are by no means as self-contained as modern sitcom episodes, nor necessarily as episodic as daytime soaps, but this was not an important factor in students' consideration.

operas.<sup>7</sup> Plots and character types were predictable and formulaic, and students agreed that the stories seemed to be pitched toward a female audience, both features binding them more closely to modern daytime dramas than to the literary novels students had encountered in other college classes. For most groups, the magazine serials made sense as nineteenth-century soap operas, not novels.

One of the most boundary-challenging genres was the one students recognized as "natural history" or "nature essays" or "essays about plants and animals of California." They organized this category to include both a series on California wildflowers whose interest was chiefly intellectual and artistic, and an article providing history and advice to anyone considering the business of bee cultivation. The wildflower series exhibited such prose as: "These ethereal odors induce a corresponding state of serenity and peaceful rapture, entrancing our soul by a magic spell, far away in the sweet elysian fields of fancy" (Kellogg 488). The beekeeping article introduced itself as "a statistical sketch of the rise and progress of this, now quite lucrative branch of husbandry" (J.A.B. 252), and featured passages about the diet of the honeybee in California, the bee's response to hostile species in this area, and the yields of a Sacramento apiary, the last item represented by a chart (J.A.B.). Students drew no genre distinctions between the "peaceful rapture" of wildflowers and the how-to's of beekeeping in part because these articles, like others, drew from multiple discourses, mingling aesthetics, practical knowledge, and more. The wildflower essay mixed "ethereal odors" and analogies from music and painting with advice about which weed would soil the pant leg on a walk (Kellogg 487-88); and the beekeeping article described the simple fact of the California growing season in a melodramatic exclamation: "eight months! two-thirds of the year!" (J.A.B. 254).<sup>8</sup> Other articles on the flora and fauna of California ranged freely between beautiful thoughts rendered in ornamented language and practical considerations touching on how to live and work in California. In a time when students and faculty feel pressure to apply their intellectual powers to profitable schemes, *Hutchings' California Magazine* provides one kind of lesson in the practical uses of literary art.<sup>9</sup> Given the opportunity to sort genres for themselves, students in my course appreciated that they did not have to separate business from art. *Hutchings'* formula of "useful" and "refining" content seemed to students as well suited to popularity today as in 1850s California.

8 As these examples indicate, *Hutchings'* was invested in the project of class formation. Though the magazine encouraged tourism, its leisure class was not that of Nancy Glazener's "Atlantic group," defined by "some combination of philanthropic national citizenship and connoisseurship" (43). *Hutchings'* encouraged bourgeois taste and dignified work.

9 By "profitable schemes," I have in mind not only students' career plans, but also the pressures on faculty to use technology to teach in more efficiently—in online courses that can be administered cheaply, self-supporting degree programs, or other educational fashions.

In post-project reflections and evaluations, students responded favorably to *Hutchings'* in language that expressed both literary and popular/populist values. Individual students made the magazine represent whichever end of the cultural spectrum was most important and illuminating for them. On the populist side, one student drew an analogy between today's technologies that keep "people... just constantly talking" and the magazine in which mid-nineteenth century Westerners shared everything from "adventure tale[s]" to essays about "new plant species." The kinds of writing that helped this student understand the magazine were texting and blogging, not submis-

sions to a literary journal. "The people who wrote for *Hutchings*" found whatever genres they needed to communicate about everything that mattered to them, like "people that write today," concluded this student. For another student, *Hutchings*, more than anything else on our syllabus, "represent[ed] the everyman." Its surprising "literature and literacy" were as valuable and paradigm-shifting for this student as the work of standout contemporary authors such as Edward Abbey, James Welch, and Lawson Inada. Where individual writers changed the way this student thought about the western environment and western racial history, among other topics, *Hutchings' Magazine* showed that western literature is not just a commodity produced by a few for the consumption of many, but in some contexts a joint enterprise produced by westerners of many classes for the consumption of people very much like themselves. For a third student, the connection felt personal, "like I was meeting my great-great literary grandparents." For these students, the primary and populist function of "literature" itself was to connect writers with readers, past to present. A key insight for this group lay in the crumbling of the idea that literary genius is separate from most people—probably located at some remove from westerners in particular. Yet for a classmate, the project and all the course readings could be summed up in terms more traditionally literary: "All these books surprised me by the level of writing in them. Smart, intelligent, organized, humorous writing that will last for centuries, from Clappe to Inada, & writers in the *Hutchings'* magazine." Invoking "level[s]" of writing quality and placing our texts on the "Smart, intelligent" side "that will last for centuries," this student found a way to evaluate the magazine in combination with other works on our syllabus in conventional literary terms.

In reading a Western regional magazine from the 1850s, students in this section of Literature of the American West encountered regional literature in ways that were both consistent with and challenging to existing scholarship. Tom Lutz describes the oscillation of regional art between "aesthetic concerns" and "social commitments" as a "doubleness. . . at the center of what makes regional writing regional literature," and also "at the center of American literature itself for the last 150 years" (12). The inextricable ties of local economy, local racial and gender politics, and aesthetics in our magazine showed us in one sense something typical of US regional and national literatures. On the other hand, American regional literary history has been built around a canon of authors, genres (local color, short story, novel, humorous sketches), and publishers (chiefly those in Boston and New York who tried to assemble a national literature) virtually absent from our magazine. *Hutchings' California Magazine* and many others like it have heretofore had no place in American literary history—even regional literary history. Exceptions like San Francisco's *Overland Monthly* became canonical only because they launched an individual writer onto the national scene. The "pride" and surprise that many students expressed stemmed from their discovery of the West not only as subject matter for artists but as a place where the role of art in life itself was a matter of local negotiation.



The greatest challenge to creating this kind of assignment lies in selecting the right magazine or other primary source that can be available simultaneously to every student in a course. An excellent recent bibliography is the second appendix to volume six of *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture*, focusing on the US from 1860 to 1920, edited by Christine Bold. The volume introduction and chapters suggest additional ways that “rich archival and analytical detail” can complicate longstanding binaries between elite and mass culture (7). The appendix, “Archival Resources” (639–73), identifies both print and digital collections and partially digitized collections of dime novels, comics, juvenilia, and other primary materials that could be mined for a project such as this one, in which students adopt an artifact of popular, regional, or ethnic print culture, describe or analyze its content, and compare notes with other students assigned to other artifacts. The appendix lists major online magazine and newspaper archives, such as the Making of America websites at the University of Michigan and Cornell, the Library of Congress Chronicling America project, and the database maintained by the Research Society for American Periodicals ([periodicalresearch.org](http://periodicalresearch.org)). The RSAP Resources page breaks out periodicals by state, offering a fine point of entry for regional studies. Frank Luther Mott’s five-volume *A History of American Magazines* remains another useful starting point for regionalists interested in identifying magazines worthy of study. One can then look them up in a digital resource such as Google Books, Internet Archive, or the HathiTrust, though this method entails the frustrations and rewards of the proverbial search for a needle in a haystack.

Thanks to the proliferation of digital archives, students in regional universities with modest libraries now have the opportunity to read a wide range of nineteenth-century American periodicals and other artifacts that illuminate the practical aesthetics of American regions. In my course on the Literature of the American West, an 1850s magazine from San Francisco connects the literary and the popular, or commerce and aesthetic appreciation, in ways that resonate with the practical and aesthetic values of literature majors who are wondering what good their love of art and language will do for them in the world.

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