Mining Empire: Journalists in the American West, 1870

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Recent studies of nineteenth-century European women's travel writing have found clear and still growing niches in geography, history, literary criticism, and cultural and postcolonial studies. Across disciplines, much of this literature has focused on elite women's complicity with, but also resistances to, European colonialism and imperialism; on intersections between nineteenth-century Western feminism and colonialism; and on representations or experiences of colonized women. As Jeanne Kay Guelke and I point out in relation to the naturalist writing of nineteenth-century British women travellers (2001), much of the feminist and postcolonial work in geography has deployed women's travel narratives to critique 'empire' and patriarchy, for instance, in connecting imperial travel with gendered subjectivity or in questioning how inclusion of women travellers might reconfigure a historiography of the discipline.

However, feminist and postcolonial critiques of Anglophone travel writing (Morin, 1999) have thus far paid little attention to nineteenth-century American women who travelled in, and wrote about, the USA and its empire-building practices. Such closure would seem to be an outgrowth of more general trends in American studies which posit an 'American exceptionalism' to histories of colonialism and imperialism (after Kaplan, 1993). In this chapter I address some of that closure, examining the published volumes of two widely read, influential American magazine and newspaper correspondents of the late nineteenth century, Miriam Leslie and Sara Lippincott (a.k.a. 'Grace Greenwood'). Both of these women took trans-continental tours of the USA in the 1870s and both wrote travel books about their experiences (Greenwood, 1872; Leslie, 1877).

My analysis concentrates primarily on what these travellers wrote about American national consolidation via the development of large-scale industrial mining in the American West. The women discussed the principal site of mining at that time, the Comstock Lode in Nevada, as well as other mines in Colorado and California. Western mining was then entering a new phase of industrial-scale, technologically advanced operations that relied on both large capital investments and waged labourers. I examine these women's writings about the wealthy mine owners and emerging industrialists of the region who served as their hosts and patrons during their travels, as well as the workers they observed. I analyse the writings of Lippincott and Leslie in terms of their feminist 'reform politics' as well as their 'imperial' politics. Among other issues, I am concerned with how the women deployed reform rhetoric in the cause of exploited mine workers, but also how such rhetoric complicates a straightforward reading of their imperial politics. Imperial development of industrial mining depended on the hierarchies produced out of ethnic, class, and gender differences. The 'internal colonization' processes and practices that these texts supported were integral to American continental expansion.

My ulterior motive here is to situate Lippincott's and Leslie's writings within current debates about the meaning and applicability of a postcolonial critique for the USA. In so doing I make the obvious though still contested assumption that 'colonialism happened' in the USA in the nineteenth century. The travel writings of these women demonstrate potential sites of engagement for feminism, US historical geography, and colonial and postcolonial studies. The texts provide useful sites for exploring the intersections between the women's gendered subjectivity and imperial development in the American West, while also demonstrating potential 'postcolonial' sites of opposition to, or support of, that development.

As I examine the gendered and racialized foundations of the American nation through these texts, I further consider how miners seemed to negotiate their place in the emergent American nation. In that sense I am mindfully working against the potential of re-constituting women travellers as autonomous subjects unilaterally projecting metropolitan understandings of themselves and others onto their reading public. Part of my project thus entails being attuned to the constitutive and dialogical role of Western people and places in the production of these colonial discourses. I agree with Mary Louise Pratt who argues that sensitivity to such interactive processes is essential to avoid falling into the trap of the 'self-privileging imaginary that framed the travel and travel books in the first place' (2001: 280).

AN AMERICAN POSTCOLONIALISM?

In attempting to raise the possibility of a postcolonial critique of the writings of Leslie and Lippincott, one confronts a closure around the concept of postcolonialism in the wider American context that has only recently begun to be addressed (Kaplan, 1993; Hulme, 1995; King, 2000; Rows, 2000; Singh and Schmidt, 2000). What can now be considered 'orthodox' postcolonial studies focus on the processes and products of European colonialism and imperialism, while American colonial and imperial relations, and the 'American Empire' itself, has remained nearly invisible within this theoretical orientation. As Kaplan (1993: 11–18) points out, there remains 'a resilient paradigm of American exceptionalism' – an ongoing denial of American colonialism and imperialism within postcolonial studies. Castle's recent (2001) anthology of postcolonial discourses, for instance, promises to 'regionalize' works coming out of that field, yet no sustained reflections about US colonialism or imperialism within the USA appear...
in his book. Instead it focuses on places that are by now familiar case settings for postcolonial critiques – India, Africa, the Caribbean, British settler colonies, and Ireland.

Postcolonialism in an American context is complicated by a number of factors. One is the narrative of heroic Americans who fought a war of independence from Britain and who have thus been seen by many as producing an inherently anticolonial state. When an American 'empire' (of the European sort) is recognized, it is typically only insofar as events that took place from 1898 to 1912, when colonial acquisition and permanent informal control was official US policy, that is, only when US imperialism extended to 'distant' colonizations of foreign peoples such as in the Philippines and Puerto Rico (Kaplan, 1993). To Rowe (2000), however, the USA's experience might best be considered one in which the rhetoric of an 'anticolonial' revolution against the 'old world' was used to justify its own imperial expansion, both against the European powers on the North American continent and in the practice of its own violent internal colonization. In fact, studies of the 'internal colonization' of ethnic minorities and Native peoples have a long genealogy in American Studies, since the 1950s if not before (including Drinnon, 1980, and Tompkins, 1992). The study of American expansionism, empire building, and colonial dispossession is well established in numerous human and environmental fields, including geography (Mitchell and Groves, 1990; Meinig, 1998). Yet these works take little advantage of the insights, theories, concepts, and languages that have come to be associated with postcolonial thought.

The closure around postcolonialism in the US context is further complicated by the contradictions inherent in the 'post' of postcolonialism. If continuing colonial or neo-colonial relations in the former European colonies strain the concept of postcolonial, this is perhaps even more the case in an American context. In the US, formal decolonization and nationalist independence movements of the twentieth century – which arguably initiated the identifiable field of postcolonial studies – have little relevance, at least on the surface. But I would emphasize that the problems and limitations of the linear or chronological approach to post'-colonial relations is not restricted to the USA. Furthermore, there are critics who argue that the mid-twentieth-century resistance movements in the USA with other decolonization movements. Gayatri Spivak, for instance, submits that the civil rights struggles of African Americans, Chicanas, and Native Americans can be considered 'postcolonial', as these movements were modelled on Third World liberation struggles. The 'after' of the colonial in the US context for Jenny Sharpe (2000), on the other hand, represents the neocolonial relations that currently intersect with global capitalism and international divisions of labour, especially with decolonized nations. These theorists, then, collectively focus on the post-war international context in their critique of US postcolonialism, as opposed to the earlier 'internal colonization' models of racial or ethnic exclusions.

It seems essential to keep in mind, nonetheless, that with its historically explicit economic, strategic, and political expansionist policies throughout its history, empire-building in America, if nothing else, has always been 'close to home' (Kaplan, 1993). The consolidation and incorporation of different territories, peoples, languages, and currencies into a 'nation' – making the foreign into the domestic – in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries forms a key aspect to an American postcolonialism that does not rely on a linear or chronological (twentieth-century) frame. A number of American studies and/or ethnic studies scholars consider the USA ripe for such postcolonial analyses, and they approach it primarily but not exclusively through study of literary texts.

Singh and Schmidt (2000:4) argue that Native American and other ethnic fiction in the USA reads much like other 'postcolonial literatures', in their 'textual moods, styles, and tendencies'. The racialized and gendered foundations of the 'American nation', as well as postnationalism, are taken up by several postcolonial critics (Pease, 1994; Moon and Davidson, 1995; Feary, 1999), while King (2000) argues that the postcolonial paradigm clearly applies to the USA simply because colonialism occurred in USA and its aftermath has everything to do with American identities, institutions, and idioms.

Although this chapter does not address the removal of Native and Mexican Americans in the areas of Western mines, nor their re-integration as waged labourers, it must be understood that the mineral resource extraction industry fundamentally depended on their tragic land dispossession, co-ordinated primarily through the efforts of the US government, land speculators, and settlers. That arm of 'internal colonization', however, should not be viewed as separate from other, interrelated forms of American and European imperial expansion of the nineteenth century that involved the integration of mining capital, workers, and technology on global, national, and local scales.

Postcolonial critics' consistent and self-conscious sensitivity to colonial discourses draws attention to the representational and cultural politics involved in the production of knowledges about colonial or imperial underclasses produced by them. Among the goals of such work is to decentre metropolitan thought and discourses, and to highlight resistance as read from colonial texts. The 'colonial underclasses' in the case of Western mining includes European (Cornish and Irish) and Chinese immigrants whose experiences and actions were both constrained and broadened by the colonial spaces of the Western mines. How they strategized their own survival amidst the processes of immigration and diaspora effects, changing mining technologies, and labour relations and practices, can be fruitfully read through the texts of these women. My specific intervention suggests that postcolonial approaches to studying 'relations of difference' in colonial and imperial contexts challenges self-evident claims to American national identity and notions of progress and stability embedded within them. The writings of Lippincott and Leslie, then, can serve as a window into some of the larger processes of American internal consolidation of nation – a window, in other words, into the struggles for power to define whom rightfully belongs to 'nation'.

**AMERICAN WOMEN WRITING AMERICA**

Depending on how one defines 'travel literature', one might usefully expand traditional notions of nineteenth-century American women's travel writing to include narratives that describe minority and ethnic women's experiences of
forced removal, immigration, and diaspora. Hundreds of recently reprinted primary works, as well as critical secondary works on nineteenth-century women travelling in America, currently abound. For my purposes here, Georgi-Findlay (1996) provides a useful overview of 100 years of Anglo-American women’s narratives of American westward expansion. Women’s writing about the American West ranges from immigrant and settler accounts of westward migrations; to the accounts of army wives travelling in an administrative or military capacity with their husbands during the ‘Indian wars’; to accounts by tourists on holiday at the newly established national parks; to accounts of missionaries, teachers, and other ‘frontier’ reformers; to accounts more properly identified as belles lettres or fiction. Other writers fit more squarely within what might be termed ‘booster’ literature – women who travelled with husbands who were hired by the railroads to publicize, promote, and write guidebooks for the western regions, both for future settlers and tourists as well as for future railroad reconnaissance purposes.

In some ways Lippincott and Leslie might be loosely characterized as western boosters, as they both travelled as guests of the railroad companies and their hosts and patrons were among the wealthy mine owners and emerging industrialists of the region. Both were also, though, well-established journalists reporting on the West to their East Coast audiences, and in this sense they were quite exceptional women. In 1880, only 288 of the 12,308 people in the USA identifying themselves as journalists were women (Beasley and Gibbons, 1993: 10). The genre of journalism and travel writing complemented one another during this period, for instance in the ways that women could ‘legitimately’ contribute to both via the epistolary (letter-writing) form.

One might easily frame Sara Lippincott (1823–1904) (see Figure 9.1), as an ‘early Washington correspondent’ sympathetic to reform causes. Writing and lecturing under the pseudonym Grace Greenwood, she was a well-known US East Coast journalist, travel correspondent, lecturer, and feminist of her time. While not an active member of the reform or progressive movement proper, Lippincott spoke and wrote on reform issues of the day, including in support of abolition, women’s rights, prison reform, and against capital punishment (see Gareau, 1997). Lippincott was one of the earliest newspaperwomen in the USA, for, among others, the Ladies’ Home Journal, the abolitionist National Era, the Saturday Evening Post, and the New York Tribune. She was the first woman employed by the New York Times and was also a writer and editor of children’s stories and books of poetry. She supported herself, her daughter, and her husband at times, in a profession that offered few opportunities for women.

Lippincott often wrote in the epistolary form in her newspaper correspondence and travel narratives. A popular speaker, she took several lecture tours through the American West and owned a home in Colorado. New Life in New Lands: Notes of Travel (1872) is a compilation of an 18-month series of articles she wrote about her transcontinental railroad trip from Chicago through Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California between July 1871 and November 1872, originally published in the New York Times. In addition to reporting on Western mining, she described railroad travel, landscape scenery, the situation of Native Americans, local political and economic growth issues, and explorations of Yosemite with John Muir. She also devoted two chapters to Colorado and its future.

Miriam Leslie’s personal flair and marriage to Frank Leslie, founder of a chain of popular magazines and newspapers, catapulted her to national consciousness as both a newspaperwoman and eventually print-culture ‘empress’ (Everett, 1985). Entrepreneur Frank Leslie is known for revolutionizing the illustrated news weekly. His Leslie’s Illustrated Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper were among a chain of his magazines and newspapers popular for the technical and artistic quality of the engraved illustrations.

Leslie’s wife Miriam (1836–1914) (see Figure 9.2), was a controversial figure by all accounts, a flamboyant socialist who spoke five languages and who most critics seem to agree was a woman most interested in ‘conspicuous consumption and personal publicity’ (Reinhardt, 1967: 5; also see Stern, 1953, 1972). Her involvement in the Leslie publishing empire included editing Frank Leslie’s Chimney Corner and Frank Leslie’s Lady’s Magazine. After Frank’s death in 1881 Miriam ‘saved’ the failing business, meanwhile legally changing her name to ‘Frank Leslie’ to protect the publications from claims by Leslie’s sons. In later life she turned to lecturing, apparently beginning her lectures with the acclamation:
'Ladies and Gentlemen, I am Frank Leslie.' Whatever or whomever else she might have been, Miriam was a committed feminist and supporter of women's suffrage. She left her fortune of $2 million at her death in 1914 to the suffrage cause (Everett, 1985).

Miriam and Frank, along with an entourage of 12 editors, journalists, and artists, choreographed a widely publicized five-month grand tour of the American West in 1877. Largely financed by the railroad companies in exchange for Leslie's publicity, the trip promoted both the capitalist development of the railroad and Leslie's own publications. The group published the Illustrated Newspaper en route, with the aid of a small printing press on board (Stern, 1972). Miriam co-wrote a series of articles about this trip with her husband and his assistant, subsequently compiling some of them into her own California: A Pleasure Trip from Gotham to the Golden Gate (1877). Her text covers Chicago, Cheyenne, Denver, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, other parts of California including Yosemite Valley, and Nevada. Leslie interviewed Mormon leader Brigham Young, described visits with railroad magnates and mining speculators in San Francisco, and devoted several chapters to San Francisco's Chinatown. On her return trip she visited the sweltering mines of Nevada's Comstock Lode, and stirred up a 'national scandal' with her negative descriptions of the mining town of Virginia City, Nevada.

Both Lippincott and Leslie were self-proclaimed feminists. At the forefront of their texts were a number of white middle-class women's rights issues such as suffrage, equal pay, and clothing reform. Lippincott asserted that, 'I preach everywhere the gospel of equal wages for equal labour', demonstrating as much when she criticized the unequal gendered wage structure of a watch factory in Chicago (1872: 23–4). Both women praised Wyoming as the first territory to grant women's suffrage (in 1869). In one of the few recent critical analyses of Lippincott's writing, Georgi-Findlay (1996) interprets her persona as that of an Eastern cultured woman travelling alone. According to Georgi-Findlay, Lippincott sought to establish herself within eastern or European literary or journalistic culture, and draws her authority from that speaking position. However, both she and Leslie also deploy the rhetoric of Victorian women's 'moral authority' to speak as feminist advocates of a number of social reform causes.

The social reform causes with which Leslie and Lippincott aligned themselves during their western travels extended to prison reform, temperance, immigrants' and workers' rights, and the rights and conditions of Native women, Chinese prostitutes, and Mormon polygamous wives. Leslie wrote several chapters on San Francisco's Chinatown and condemned Chinese prostitution as the 'enslavement of 1500 women (1877: 165–6). Leslie concluded that the reform of prostitution-slavery ought to rest on converting the slaveowners; as white men 'owed' the most beautiful women, 'let us devote what is left of our money and energy and Christian zeal to the conversion of these gentlemen' (1877: 167).

While scholars have paid a great deal of attention to nineteenth-century feminist reformers' desire to improve the lives of women they perceived as disenfranchised or exploited (including Pascoe, 1990; Morin, 1998; and Morin and Kay Guelke, 1998), one might consider how the logic and rhetoric of feminist reform aligns with reportage of the Western mining industry. How, if at all, did Leslie and Lippincott extend their reform rhetoric to the miners and their working conditions in the mines?

THE WESTERN MINING EMPIRE

American imperialism supported by mineral resource extraction grew at an unprecedented pace in the American West during the period of these women's travels, and their travels were directly supported by it as well. During the California gold rush of the 1840s many miners worked independently and with little capital investment. By the 1860s, a second phase of industrial mining took hold — large-scale, technologically advanced mining operations that depended upon both large capital investments and waged labourers. This second phase of Western mining was key to American empire building and America's entry into the world economy (Limerick, 1987; Robbins, 1994). Richard White (1991) outlines two types of American and European investment in the West during this period, that of buying stocks in
companies and in loaning money, mainly for livestock, farming, lumber, and mining enterprises. While more European money was invested in livestock than mining overall, the move toward large-scale underground and hydraulic mining was accompanied by increased capital input. Numerous scholars have documented the extent to which Western American mining and railroad development depended on capital investments from Europe, mostly Britain, and the cities of the American Northeast. Considerable American, British, and French investments were made in Colorado mining from the 1870s (White, 1991), for instance, and hydraulic mining of gold and quartz in California was heavily capitalized by European and American investors. In Nevada’s gold and silver mines, investments came from Britain and East Coast cities, but returns from the Comstock Lode especially helped concentrate wealth in San Francisco for the first time. San Francisco’s capitalists had provided the bulk of the initial financing for Western mining ventures, but when these proved inadequate the industry turned to other sources, the USA and in Europe (Robbins, 1994).

Thus the development of industrial capitalism in the American West via mining was tied directly to American foreign relations through the mining industry’s dependence on capital from Europe and the American cities of the North East. It was also dependent upon the labour provided by Cornish, Irish, Chinese, and other recent immigrants who worked the mines.

Both Leslie and Lippincott reported enthusiastically on the growth and prosperity of the West. The rhetoric of the ‘wild West’ typified by men of all classes who displayed unrestrained ambition and greed was reserved just for a few mining towns. Most of the region, though, was portrayed as a ‘new West’ characterized by order, economic enterprise, urbanity, and extraordinary engineering feats (Georgi-Findlay, 1996). Both Lippincott and Leslie attributed much of this success to the railroad; it brought tourists and immigrants, increased agricultural output, and was an immense help toward the development of the mines and mineral resources’ (Greenwood, 1872: 115, 388). White (1991) explains that the railroad provided the infrastructure for the economic development of the West generally, both as it demanded timber and coal for its construction, and as it greatly enlarged the West’s access to eastern and European markets. The development of the railroad was inseparable from that of industrial-scale mining, as the latter required the transport of large amounts of lower-grade ores, supplies, and technologies. Positive, enthusiastic depictions of railroad travel, food, and society pervade the women’s texts. Leslie gushed over the ‘national triumph’ of the railroad (1877: 109), and Lippincott’s final chapter was a tribute to the railroad’s role in expanding Colorado’s mining industry.

Both Lippincott and Leslie were tied into a ‘network of patronage’ during their travels (Georgi-Findlay, 1996). Both described numerous encounters with bankers, politicians, executives, industrialists, and especially railroad or mining officials who welcomed them into their homes and invited them on excursions, including into the mines. These men are portrayed as bold, manly, beneficent, paternalistic, and refined. Leslie, for example, visited the San Francisco estate of William Ralston, founder of the Bank of California, who reaped a fortune from Nevada’s Comstock Lode in the early 1870s by integrating mines, mills, smelters, railroads, and timber production into a single company. Although she frames her discussion around Ralston’s tragic death (a probable suicide following an economic crash), she nonetheless characterizes him sympathetically as a ‘self-made man, [who] rose from the smallest beginning’, a man who was ‘princely’ and ‘audacious’ (1877: 123–5). Men of the Bank of California also feature in Lippincott’s text. She described the bank as one of the ‘marvellous growths of this marvellous New World’, and its bankers as ‘distinguished for their uniform courtesy and munificent hospitality’ (1872: 194–5).

While both Lippincott and Leslie knew the development of the railroad, tourism, agri-business, and industry, and the men made rich through them, they also reported sympathetically on the various ‘colonial underclasses’ produced or displaced by them, such as immigrant ethnic groups from Asia and Europe (although they were much less sympathetic to Native and Mexican Americans already inhabiting the region). In this way their writings about American imperialism and the Western mining frontier intersected with tropes of nineteenth-century American feminism. One significant way in which Victorian gender relations and American imperialism intersected in the women’s narratives was in expressions of liberation and/or assimilation of subjugated or oppressed people (Ware, 1992; Burton, 1994). Much of what the travellers wrote about miners drew on this feminist discourse of reform.

The counterpart to the discourse of paternalistic and refined railroad and mining magnates were those of the happy, law-abiding, ‘heroic’ mine workers who were prospering under such industrialists’ care. Lippincott especially invoked the discourse of the romanticized, ideal worker who, like his boss, was first and foremost a gentleman. In Cheyenne, Wyoming, Lippincott claimed that her own escort, who ‘got their weapons ready’ in her defence, were a bigger threat to her safety than the miners she encountered. Rather than fulfilling the stereotypical role of ‘desperados, violent and foul-mouthed’, the miners ‘stepped courteously aside’, and were ‘respectful toward women’ (1872: 45–6, 48). Near the mining town of Central, Colorado, Lippincott dined with a group of ‘honest miners’: men in rough clothes and heavy boots, with hard hands and with faces well bronzed, but strong, earnest, intelligent. It was to me a communion with the bravest humanity of the age — the vanguard of civilization and honorable enterprise mining life here is sober and laborious and law-abiding; we, at least, saw no gambling, no drunkenness, no rudeness, no idleness. (1872: 81)

Not all the news from the Western American mining front was positive, however. In a number of ways both Leslie and Lippincott emphasized the damage enacted by industrialized western mining, on the people and on the land. While on the one hand the travellers praised the beneficence of the mine owners who served as their Western guides, on the other they harshly admonished Western mining speculators who were dishonest and greedy and who conducted business in unscrupulous ways. They were ‘bloated aristocrats’ and ‘elegant idlers’ (Greenwood, 1872: 231).

Lippincott and Leslie also complicated their images of the gallant and heroic mine workers with those of the severe hardships the labouring men endured in
the wretched conditions of the mines. By all accounts the working conditions in some mines of the Comstock Lode were abysmal, with men unable to withstand the heat, ambient air, and labour for more than an hour at a time (Limerick, 1987). Leslie visited the Bonanza gold and silver mine in Virginia City, for instance, witnessing the men enter and return from the shafts, almost suffocated by the hot, oily smell and steam, and the deafening machines, Leslie herself did not descend the mine, although others of her party did. They later produced a wood engraving depicting the thirsty miners for the newspaper (see Figures 9.3 and 9.4). She described the returning miners as ghastly and fatigued: 'Such a set of ghosts one never saw: pale, exhausted, dripping with water and perspiration, some with their shirts torn off and naked to the waist, all of them haggard and dazed with the long darkness and toil' (1877: 282).

Lippincott, too, described the difficult (though aboveground) working conditions at Clear Creek, Colorado: 'Men are kept at work carting gravel, or wheeling it in barrows, for these sluices. In some places they stood knee-deep in water, digging up the precious mud. A more slavish business could not well be imagined' (1872: 73). Lippincott was little distressed that large-scale, consolidated mining operations were replacing small-scale, independent ones, though, and declared that 'only large means can insure large results':

One might characterize this mode of writing as one of 'reconciliation' (Georgi-Findlay, 1996). Lippincott attempts to reconcile both the destruction of nature and oppressive labour conditions with an ultimately positive image of large-scale industrial mining – and its accompanying society – as 'honest', orderly, efficient, and, above all, economically prosperous. The costs of empire-building in industrial mining were worthwhile so long as mining involved lawful, brave miners and paternalistic bosses; the landscape was only ugly when greedy speculators made a profit from it.

For her part, Leslie's mode of writing was ultimately less one of reconciliation than one of friction and hostility towards the people and places associated with Western mining. This is not least demonstrated in her admonitions against injustices to Chinese workers, and her concluding chapter that extensively draws out the stereotype of the rough, lawless western mining town of Virginia City, Nevada. The 'national scandal' that it incited has informed numerous of her biographies (Reinhardt, 1967; Stern, 1972; Everett, 1985).

Leslie wrote disparagingly of the 'immoral' atmosphere of Virginia City, emphasizing the existence of only one church but 49 gambling saloons; and a mostly male population with 'very few women, except of the worst class, and as few children' (1877: 278). (In fact, in the boom years of the Comstock Lode, the population of Virginia City grew from 2,306 men and 30 women in 1860, to a 2:1 ratio by 1870 [Paul, 1963: 72].) Leslie claimed the need for a police escort to walk around the town at night, even though in other towns and cities in the West she scoffed at such advice. In sum, Virginia City had little to recommend itself.
To call a place dreary, desolate, homeless, uncomfortable, and wicked is a good deal, but to call it God-forsaken is a good deal more, and in a tolerably large experience of this world's wonders, we never found a place better deserving the title than Virginia City. (1877; 277–80)

Leslie's attack on Virginia City rested on deploying her own 'moral authority' to speak on issues of temperance, gambling, and prostitution. As such, she aligned herself with reform women who presented themselves as moral guardians of others. While Lippincott closed her book with a 'hopeful' depiction of Western imperial development based on an advancing railroad, prospering resource extraction industry, and heroic workers, Leslie's text ended with an image of an ultimately irredeemable West. Unlike the exploited, 'enslaved' Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco, on whose behalf Leslie readily spoke, the prostitutes in Virginia City are simply 'bad' women. In addition, it is in this context of Virginia City that Leslie described the miserable working conditions of the miners. Leslie's alignment with feminist reform doctrines of the day is, thus, considerably more uneven than Lippincott's. Her depiction of an irredeemable West ultimately raises the question, I think, of whether she might have been as somehow resistant to American imperial development in the West; and alternatively, Lippincott, as more complicit with it.

MINING A POSTCOLONIAL WEST

Western American 'resource bonanzas' have been well documented. William Ralston and a small group of men known as the 'bonanza kings' monopolized Western mining capital in San Francisco during this period. Brechin argues that Ralston and his cohorts accomplished this through cheating and deception: 'If it took insider trading, backstabbing, wholesale political corruption, and looting of the public trough to make San Francisco great, [Ralston] was only following accepted custom' (1999:41). Perhaps as many as 30 per cent of the bonanza kings were foreign born; Paul (1963) characterizes them as superwealthy Irish immigrants who emerged from penniless backgrounds, first coming to California during the gold rush. These are the sort of men whom Lippincott and Leslie endlessly flattered and praised in their travelogues for their honesty, manliness, and paternalism towards workers. The women's texts are thus implicated in struggles for power to define who rightfully belonged to the American 'nation'. Such praise must be viewed as complicit with American imperial development via a particular type of gendered and classed identification with these men.

Lippincott's textual reconciliation of the mining West should also be considered with respect to the class background and ethnic make-up of the labouring miners whom she and Leslie described. At the time of their travels, Cornish, Irish, and Chinese immigrants made up a significant proportion, if not the majority in some locations, of these workers. Bitter resistance to, and exclusions again, Chinese workers infiltrated the most profitable mining areas throughout the mid and later decades of the nineteenth century, in Idaho, Nevada, and California. Robbins asserts that the Western labour movement itself began on the Comstock (1994). Fears of Chinese replacements caused Cornish workers to strike in Sutter Creek, California, and Virginia City, Nevada. The Chinese, who immigrated to the USA in large numbers beginning in the 1850s, by the 1870s provided the main labour force in the building of the Central Pacific Railroad and also comprised up to half of the miners in Idaho and a quarter in California (Paul, 1963; White, 1991). This amounted to 20,000 workers in California alone, men who primarily worked the abandoned 'places' of the first phase of mining (essentially above-ground ores, as opposed to the underground or hard-to-reach deposits mined later).

Leslie described Chinese labourers she encountered in Mariposa, California, later in her text admonishing the western mining establishment for its unfair labour practices involving the Chinese more generally: 'The cry of cheap labour so furiously raised against the Chinese, principally by the classes to whom any labour is abhorrent, is as unfounded as it is malicious' (1877:173). She concluded that the Constitution ensured the right of emigrants to 'a share of that freedom and self-government we are so justly proud of', and that if the Chinese were treated justly, 'Time, the great assimilator' would 'soften the differences' among men (ibid.: 174). Due to exclusions and ethnic prejudices against Chinese workers, however, most of the men that Lippincott and Leslie encountered in the mining camps they visited were recent arrivals from Ireland and Britain.

By 1870, foreign-born workers outnumbered American-born ones in numerous mining centres, including the Comstock Lode and Gilpin County, Colorado. These were principally Cornish and Irish immigrants (Paul, 1963). By 1880 in the Comstock Lode, only 770 of 2,770 mine workers were American-born – the rest were Irish, English, and Canadian. The workers shown in Figure 9.4 (except the Chinese cook) were likely Cornish immigrants, as they dominated both Virginia City and Gold Hill. Paul (1963) explains that mining was a traditional occupation for Cornish men, and by 1881, one-third to one-half of them had left their depressed circumstances in England, readily finding work in places like Virginia City. White (1991) characterizes the men's labour organizing as based on ethnic rivalries rather than class consciousness, as evidenced by Cornish men breaking the strike against the Irish and American born at the Comstock Lode; the anti-Chinese sentiments in the Comstock Lode; and ethnic tensions between the Cornish and Irish in Butte, Montana.

When one considers the ethnic immigrant composition of much of the West's mining population, which both women's texts explicitly did, Lippincott's rhetorical 'reconciliation' of Gallant miners, paternalistic bosses, and difficult working conditions becomes clearer. Industrial mining required formerly self-employed miners and recent immigrants to shift and adapt to a system of waged labour. Lippincott's text can be interpreted as one aiding the imperial development of Western mining in the ways in which she constructs a gendered immigrant workforce: her miners are compliant, hard-working, sober, and lawful. Images of these refined gentlemen, courteous and chivalrous to women, replaced those of the rowdy, roughneck independent miners who would prove too subversive within the new system. Miners' working conditions in Lippincott's text are considerably better than in Leslie's; her own visit to the Comstock Lode
entailed an excursion deep underground, an experience which she described as ‘very interesting, easy, and instructive . . . a pleasant walk’ (1872: 178). Thus in many ways Lippincott’s text fulfilled several tendencies of the feminist reform rhetoric of the day, promising livelihood and prosperity to working-class immigrant men who laboured industriously and adopted temperance and other moral ideals of the middle class. Moreover, continental expansion of the railroad and mining industries was thought to help cultivate these gentlemanly traits.

During their travels, Lippincott and Leslie encountered numerous national, local, and global cultural identities within the borders of the USA, wealthy industrialists as well as working-class men. Rowe (2000) asserts that little has been written connecting American internal colonization with more recognizable colonial ventures in foreign countries. He points out, for instance, that one of the ways that internal colonization moved forward was by aligning certain groups of people with the savagery ascribed to ‘foreigners’.

Leslie’s workers in Virginia City, and their working conditions, do in fact appear quite ‘savage’. While her hopes for the assimilation or domestication of Chinese immigrants demonstrate a link between feminist reform politics and American empire building, the Anglo men and women of Virginia City remain largely un-integrated into that progressive model of empire. One might read Leslie’s unredemptive West in a number of ways. Perhaps she was deploying an oppositional strategy against American imperialism, condemning or resisting the unrestrained greed of the men (and some women) who advanced the Comstock Lode in particular. Alternatively, one might read her as invoking popular racialized discourses about European and Chinese workers. Might the agitating English workers ultimately prove too incorrigible, especially compared to Chinese workers who were stereotyped as docile and apolitical (owing largely to the indentured servitude under which many came to the USA)? Or, finally, one might read Leslie as rather insecure in her own class identity as a property genteel, upwardly aspiring member of the literati, who required unrefined others against whom to define herself. Bourgeois descriptions of working-class people as unrefined and savage can be understood within a broader class politics. Leslie’s attempt to shore up her insecure class identity were even more acute when she travelled to France and returned, declaring herself a baroness (Everett, 1985).

By contrast, rather than reproduce negative stereotypes of lawless, rowdy western men, Lippincott sought to integrate the miners she met into the American nation. Her feminist reform politics work alongside those of empire-building in that Lippincott explicitly domesticated or assimilated the ‘foreign’ immigrant (Cornish, Irish) into a courageous and contented worker, located within hospitable working conditions. Promised national inclusion, these foreign men thereby serve as witness to the type of progress possible and indeed inevitable within the industrial-imperial complex of the West and the internal colonizations at work there. Their labour was essential to it.

Finally, one must consider how the miners these women observed, talked with, and dined with might themselves have envisioned their inclusion in an expanding American Empire as they negotiated their split European and American identities. How these travel texts might provide a window into the ways they negotiated colonial space for themselves — a space that both limited and broadened their opportunities to embody emerging labour force. These recent arrivals to the USA were negotiating both their material and cultural survival in the midst of the changing economic and technological landscape of western mining. Within a limited range of possible ways that they might have occupied such colonial spaces — dealing as they were with forced migrations (both trans-Atlantic and within the USA), insecure labour relations, and wretched working conditions — still it seems that numerous sites of their accommodation, appropriation, and resistance to American expansionism can be read from the travel texts.

A heterogeneous range of miners’ voices appear in these texts, from the courteous, hard-working gentleman miners in Wyoming and Colorado; to the exhausted, fatigued workers at the Comstock Lode; to the rude, drunken gamblers in the other social spaces of Virginia City. As they encountered and addressed Lippincott and Leslie, the men seem to have deployed their own range of classed and gendered constructs. The women appeared on the scene in the first instance as guests of the emerging Western elite, brought into the spaces of the mines by the owners whose wealth depended on these men’s labours. Their attempts to ensure integration into or survival within this uncertain transitional period in Western mining might be achieved through various tactics. For example, to engage a bourgeois gentlemanly demeanour — whether as a straightforward strategy or not — is at once to identify with those owners and travel writers while thereby securing inclusion in the space of the American nation they represented.

On the other hand, to expose the corrupt ‘values’ of elite culture might be another strategy to ensure one’s inclusion in ‘nation’ — by challenging and revising the principles upon which it has been established. Virginia City, as it turns out, rejected Leslie’s depictions of it as a hopeless God-forsaken place and ‘spoke back’ to her. The editor of the local Virginia City newspaper took his revenge in print. In July 1878 he devoted an entire front page article to criticizing Leslie’s character, arguing that she was in no position to judge other women as she herself was (allegedly) illegitimate, engaged in numerous extramarital affairs, and exploited those around her for her own personal gain (Reinhardt, 1967; Stern, 1972). His article was titled, ‘Our Female Slaughters, Mrs. Frank Leslie’s Book Scandalizing the Families of Virginia City — The History of the Authoress — A Life Drama of Crime and Licentiousness — Starring Developments.’

While it was the editor of the local newspaper who spoke through this account (not miners), his actions in support of the miners and their families articulates with the history of political activism at the Comstock Lode, based as it was, albeit, on ethnic rivalries as well as on class conflict. In addition, the basis of his rhetoric is the double standard historically deployed against successful women who do not adhere to the Victorian domestic ideal. Nonetheless, one might also consider the editor’s attempt at exposing and destabilizing Leslie’s own claim to ‘nation’ as opening up a space within which other, alternative paths to it might be imagined. If nothing else, his voice mapped Virginia City as a vortex of competing moralities — and it is clear that the moral high ground
that Leslie earlier claimed was not one that she would sustain for long. The editor contributed a measure of instability to Leslie's already punctured public persona. That said, and despite the scandal that his writing provoked and her legal and financial problems after her husband’s death in 1880, Leslie's print culture prowess remained ultimately undaunted.

I am in agreement with King (2000: 8) in recognizing, accepting, and interrogating 'the conflicted aspects of postcolonial America [that] should energize rather paralyze critical scholarship.' I have taken a provisional step here in linking these women's travel writing about 'home' to some of the insights of what might now be considered an emergent 'American postcolonialism'. My focus has been on how gender, class, and ethnic politics articulated with discourses of American expansionism and nation building via these travel texts. The integration of mining capital, workers, and technology on a range of scales must be understood as deeply linked with other colonial processes taking place in the nineteenth-century American West. This chapter demonstrates connections among aspects of American literary culture, early feminism, and American empire building. My comments on these American women’s writings undoubtedly raise more questions than they answer, and numerous other sites for a postcolonial interpretation of these colonial texts exist. At minimum my point has been to strategically deflect some of postcolonialism's attention onto American soil, where it most certainly belongs.

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