



**HAL**  
open science

**In, Out, and Beyond: Dislocation, Contamination and  
Redemption in California, In-doors and Out by Eliza W.  
Farnham (1815-1864)**

Claire Sorin Delpuech

► **To cite this version:**

Claire Sorin Delpuech. In, Out, and Beyond: Dislocation, Contamination and Redemption in California, In-doors and Out by Eliza W. Farnham (1815-1864). *Transatlantica. Revue d'études américaines/American Studies Journal*, 2018. hal-04272321

**HAL Id: hal-04272321**

**<https://sorbonne-paris-nord.hal.science/hal-04272321v1>**

Submitted on 6 Nov 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **In, Out, and Beyond: Dislocation, Contamination and Redemption in California, *In-doors and Out* by Eliza W. Farnham (1815–1864)**

Claire Sorin

Aix Marseille Univ, LERMA, Aix-en-Provence, France

## **Abstract**

Eliza W. Farnham, who was born in New York State, was the first woman migrant to publish a book on California. Her 1856 account offers a unique insight into the early and essentially male phase of California's settlement, as well as a complex narrative of personal adaptation to a new environment. Its vivid and at times humorous descriptions of agrarian life, embryonic political institutions, social relations and violence, are permeated with the spirit of Manifest Destiny. Yet, the deep originality of Eliza Farnham's account lies in its gendered perspective which combines traditional and radical views of the female sex and disrupts dialectics of public and private spheres. This partly autobiographical book blurs the frontiers between the "in" and the "out" and contains the seeds of the gynecocracy theories that the author subsequently developed in a voluminous work aiming to demonstrate the absolute superiority of the female sex (*Woman and her Era*, 1864).

## **Résumé**

Eliza W. Farnham a publié en 1856 le premier ouvrage écrit de, et sur, la Californie par une femme. Ce récit à la fois personnel et impersonnel offre une plongée unique dans la Californie à la période de la ruée vers l'or et révèle les réactions ainsi que l'adaptation d'une femme originaire de New York à un univers essentiellement masculin. Le portrait du nouvel état et de ses embryons d'institutions sociales et politiques est fortement influencé par les discours de la Destinée Manifeste. Toutefois, Eliza Farnham introduit dans son récit une perspective de genre qui combine une vision à la fois traditionnelle et radicale du sexe féminin tout en brouillant la politique des sphères publiques et privées. Cet ouvrage partiellement autobiographique, qui reconfigure les espaces intérieurs et extérieurs, contient également les germes de la pensée gynocratique que Farnham exposera pleinement dans son oeuvre maîtresse *Woman and her Era*, publiée en 1864.

## **Keywords**

California, public and private spheres, space, frontiers, gender, house, nation, hybridity

## **Mots clés**

Californie, sphères publiques et privées, espace, frontières, genre, maison, nation, hybridité

In 1856, the New York-based Dix, Edwards & Co published an account of California. Entitled *California In-doors and Out; or, How we Farm, Mine, and Live generally in the Golden State*, the book received many favorable reviews, both in the eastern cities and on the newly-settled western coast. Thus, in January 1857, the *Hutchings California Magazine*

recommended the volume for its style and its illuminating treatment of a wide array of subjects:

The volume before us is descriptive of adventure, climate, scenery, soil, population and production, mining, farming grape growing, gardening, milling ranching and dreaming—of men and women, their education, pursuits, social habits, and condition, of what they have been, are or can be. In fact, of almost everything that is interesting in, and to Californians, from digging gold to raising calves; not omitting some suggestions of improvement to men and women. It is an interesting book, fluently and pleasingly written and we commend it to our readers. It is, moreover, the first book that has been written in, or concerning California, by a lady.”<sup>1</sup>

This “lady” was no anonymous pioneer. Although her name no longer sounds familiar today, Eliza W. Farnham was a popular writer as well as a celebrated and controversial reformer in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the late 1840s, she was known as the author of a book on early Illinois and the bold matron of Sing Sing prison where she had introduced original and progressive reforms based on phrenology.<sup>2</sup> After the death of her husband, Thomas Farnham, the explorer and author of the American West, she decided to migrate to California where Thomas had bought land. In 1849, the year of the Gold Rush, Eliza sailed from New York to San Francisco via Cape Horn, with a one-month forced stay at Valparaiso where the captain of the ship, whom she had antagonized, left her stranded, sailing off with her two sons, one of whom was crippled.<sup>3</sup> Once in San Francisco, Eliza Farnham headed for Santa Cruz where she struggled to set up a farm. In 1852, she remarried and had a daughter but her baby died in 1855, shortly after her crippled son had passed away. Eventually, she divorced her abusive and alcoholic husband in 1856. While Farnham’s tragic experience of loss, grief, domestic strife and financial problems was not unique, her public career was notable as she became a respected lecturer and asylum reformer in California in the second half of the 1850s.<sup>4</sup>

In the preface to *California In-doors and Out*, written in 1856, Eliza notes about her personal experience that it was “not more novel than that of scores of my sex who emigrated both before and after 1848” and she thanks God for having been spared the trials of physical suffering and utter destitution (iv). This humble, religious stance characterizing the whole preface—and indeed many female-authored writings of the time—also aims to suspend disbelief in the reader, for her tale, warns Farnham, contains “strange developments” and

---

<sup>1</sup> For a survey of early women’s writings on California, see Baym and Levy.

<sup>2</sup> Eliza Farnham’s first book, *Life in Prairie Land* (1846), was an account of her years in Illinois where she joined her sister and got married in 1836. Back in her native New York State, she headed the women’s division of Sing Sing prison from 1844 to 1848 and was forced to resign because the prison inspectors disapproved of her liberal methods.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson Farnham (1804–1848) published several accounts of his travels across the West in the 1840s. As a fervent supporter of Manifest Destiny, he led a missionary expedition to Oregon and lived for a while in California where he bought land in Santa Cruz. He and Eliza had three sons but only one reached adulthood. Eliza’s hectic voyage to California is related in Levy (*Unsettling the West* 35-39).

<sup>4</sup> For details on women’s experiences in the early phase of California’s settlement, see Levy (*They Saw the Elephant*). In the mid 1850s, Eliza Farnham gave a series of public lectures on spiritualism (of which she was an eager adept), philosophy, contemporary civilization and female valor. She returned to New York City in 1856 and came back to California in 1859 where she resumed public lecturing and became matron of the female department at the Stockton Insane Asylum. During the Civil war, her abolitionist convictions incited her to volunteer as a nurse at Gettysburg. She contracted tuberculosis and died in December 1864.

“grotesque features” (v). Although not unique, the extraordinary narrative of her personal story promises to be “as tamely stated as truth will permit” (iv).

It seems, however, that Farnham’s professed love of truth did not extend to the most painful events of her private life as she writes nothing about the failure of her farming experiment, her unhappy remarriage, the loss of her children, or about her divorce. This silence is all the more striking as the first chapters of the book are openly autobiographical. Emptied of its subjective narrative source, the second half of the volume adopts a journalistic style which strongly contrasts with the vivid, often humorous tone of the previous pages. In the process of writing, which began in the early 1850s and ended in 1856, Eliza seems to have *dis*-located herself, both on a personal and discursive level.

The notion of dislocation—both as process of displacement and state of disruption—is a fit one to describe the dialectics shaping the flesh and skeleton of the narrative. Indeed, as a story of *dis*-location and of attempted *re*-location, Eliza Farnham’s book revisits space and spatial boundaries, picturing, as its title indicates, indoors and outdoors life, but exploring above all the porous nature of these “doors”, and the shifting frontiers between the “in” and the “out” which not only stand for domestic and public spheres but also for the spiritual and the material, the self and nature, nation and world.

It is crucial to point out that the inscription of natural and social spaces is tightly intertwined with questions of gender. Eliza Farnham, indeed, was not simply a woman gone west; she was also a feminist convinced of the superiority of the female sex.<sup>5</sup> Before her emigration to California—and partly with a view to finance it—she tried to set up a project inciting hundreds of poor and virtuous eastern women to move west and civilize “that distant and homeless land” (Levy, *Unsettling* 35). Her project failed but her book contains an appeal to women readers, urging them to come and carry out their redemptive mission. Farnham’s narrative teems with images of contamination and promises of redemption anchored in California’s unique potential for freedom and equality, and in a firm doctrine of female purity. The feminization of California, then, is presented as a prerequisite for its full democratization.

### **“California is altogether anomalous”: spatial and textual dislocation**

Eliza Farnham’s first glimpse of California, from the ship, is marked by a blurring of familiar spatial landmarks:

[...] we dropped anchor somewhere off North Beach, on the tenth evening, after it was too late to see anything, but two or three straggling lights shining dull through the fog that never cleared, and the rain that never ceased pouring [...] the next day [...] we went ashore almost immediately, if that could properly be called shore where the falling flood filled the atmosphere so, that floundering along with a

---

<sup>5</sup> Like other 19<sup>th</sup>-century female reformers, such as Catharine E. Beecher, Farnham promoted the domestic ideology and insisted that woman’s nature was primarily fit for a domestic life. Yet, she was unique in the sense that her belief in the angelic ideal gradually developed, through the 1840s and 1850s, into a radical theory of absolute female superiority. Her 1864 master work, *Woman and her Era*, fully expounds her gynocratic views, arguing that women are not only spiritually but also *organically* superior to men; in Farnham’s utopia, Woman is described as a semi-divine creature destined to redeem the world (for more details on this aspect, see Woodward and Sorin). This differentialist approach, which has been coined “Apocalyptic feminism” (Helsing 52), remained eccentric in the birth and development of American feminism.

strong man at each elbow, we seemed to be almost submerged, and felt thankful for so small a favor as having the upper portions of our persons bathed in a medium somewhat purer than that below. (21–22)

In a scene reminiscent of the deluge, Eliza is introduced into this new land through a somewhat grotesque baptism that leaves her neither pure nor whole. Drenched and half-drowned, she immediately becomes upon landing an object of curiosity, for white women were so rare at the time that they were “uncomfortably stared at.” Forming “little islands” in the streets, men left the gaming houses and the bar rooms to gaze at her (22–23).

The confusion between water and earth, the undefined contours of the shore and the moral impurity of San Francisco all mark a deep contrast with the well-ordered, bright, Eden-like landscape of her Santa Cruz farm where, upon arrival, she experiences a genuine aesthetic and mystical shock. Becoming the gazer this time, she depicts a scene whose epiphanic function is linked to the perfect architecture of the surrounding space:

I look at a picture so filled with repose and beauty, that while I gaze, the hateful stir of the world seems to die out of the universe [...] On either hand, at a short distance from the stream, rise hills, now beautifully rounded, now more abrupt and stern, but all clothed with richest herbage [...] Just back of the house, these hills approach each other so nearly, that what is a broad vale becomes a deep ravine, with wooded banks, upon which a dozen tall redwoods tower above their neighbors, and seem, to my wondering eyes, to be penetrating the very clouds. In front, the hills open generously [...] Beyond this, I gaze upon the sparkling waters of the great bay, whose surrounding coast is diversified by hill and plain, cloud and sunshine, so exquisitely, that I deem it a fairy scene [...] I wonder, while beholding it, that religious and devout thankfulness to God does not continually ascend from the hearts of those who dwell in so fair a portion of his creation. (45–46)

Those two contrasting scenes of fog and sunshine, flood and rebirth, humiliation and revelation, somehow encapsulate the gist of Eliza Farnham’s migration experience as well as that of California itself. Indeed, in this land of unceasing fluctuations, of paradox and distortion (367), norms are constantly disrupted. This is first visible in the gigantic size of nature—the enormous size of the horned cattle, the impressive height of the wheat and the immensity of the trees—that Farnham details for the eastern reader and that she ascribes to “the energy of California soil.” (202–03) California itself is personified as a “young giant but half conscious of its own power” (21) and life in this part of the globe, concludes Farnham, is “altogether anomalous” (28).

The symptoms of this anomalous life affect the frontiers between the “in” and the “out” that the swift-changing 19<sup>th</sup>-century American society carefully erected. The theory of separate spheres, the ideal of true womanhood and the cult of domesticity, all dear to Victorian culture, partook of an attempt to categorize and stabilize the social and economic transformations, as well as the gender relations of the expanding nation. In theory at least, the home was exalted as a walled sanctuary protecting man and woman from the hustle and bustle of the world.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Since the 1960s, historians engaged in the rewriting of women’s history have produced an impressive amount of studies focusing on the shift in gender roles and sexual ideology in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. In the wake of Barbara Welter’s seminal 1966 essay (“The Cult of True Womanhood”), the metaphor of separate spheres was systematically used by critics, to such an extent that its language became “vulnerable to sloppy use” (Kerber 37). Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the rise of queer theory and black feminist criticism, the limits of the metaphor have been pointed out by a number of literary critics and historians denouncing a middle-class white bias that excludes other women and other categories of analysis, such as “race, sexuality, class, nation, empire, affect, region and occupation” (Davidson and Hatcher 9). Post-separate spheres criticism also points at the porous boundaries of gendered spaces. To some extent, the present essay is an illustration of the non fixity of spheres, as

But in California, the home as physical and moral shelter is either absent, dirty—as is the typical Spanish rancho in Farnham’s eyes—or dilapidated. When Eliza arrived at her farm, she found a “casa [...] made of slabs which were originally placed upright, but which have departed sadly from the perpendicular in every direction” (42–43). After discovering the “fairy scene” mentioned above, she describes her coming back to the broken house. Sitting in the ashes, she contemplated her “in-door world” and mentally started to construct a home: “In my meditations, I inverted the black walls, turned them inside out, laid an ideal floor, erected imaginary closets set apart corners for bedrooms” (48).

In reality, the reconstruction of the house was much more painstaking and imperfect. First, she had to sleep in a tent and live in a “half nomadic state”; then, in passages fraught with humor, Farnham depicts her attempts to divide the space of the casa into apartments partitioned by curtains which, like the thin outer walls, failed to provide proper privacy (67). Eventually, Eliza’s home was reduced to a stoveless shelter housing a non nuclear family.<sup>7</sup> Only later in the narrative was a brand new house erected which, at least in imagination, recreated the cozy, genteel space of Victorian homes, neatly divided into sleeping chambers, bathroom, library, parlor and dining room (104–05, 169).

Yet, this recreated home does not become the focus of Eliza’s domestic activities, for the book mainly stages the narrator/character outdoors, engaged in all sorts of physical tasks including plowing, gardening, planting potatoes and building the roof of the house. Farnham readily depicts herself as a house builder rather than a housekeeper, a reversal of traditional gender roles that she attributes to California’s peculiar character: “it is no more extraordinary for a woman [here] to plough and hoe with her own hands than for men to do all their household labor” (28).

Her job as carpenter (a male but holy occupation) enabled her to discard the long traditional dress and don the bloomer costume which she found so comfortable that she eventually decided not to change dresses even when male visitors came (133). While this victory over bodily constraints and genteel expectations signals the greater degree of women’s emancipation in the west, it must be pointed out that Farnham did not openly militate for women’s rights, for she believed—like other contemporary promoters of the theory of separate spheres—that a woman’s nature was essentially spiritual and domestic.<sup>8</sup> When her friend Georgiana Bruce Kirby, a fervent supporter of the newly launched women’s rights movement, noted that her daily life and activities contradicted her principles, Farnham replied

---

well as an attempt to analyze the connections between gendered spaces and issues of race, nation and empire. Yet, this work does not reject the validity of the separate spheres model and considers it as a “useful tool because with an understanding of intended gender boundaries, scholars will be able to continue to identify the expansion of such limits” (Warren 270).

<sup>7</sup> In the early phase of her California years, she lived with her two children, one, then two women friends and the Irishman she hired as help.

<sup>8</sup> While Eliza Farnham was aware of women’s oppression and respected the work of the women’s rights’ advocates, she thought that the fight for suffrage and political equality did not suit a woman’s true mission and nature. Also, since the mid 1840s, she had been developing a theory of female superiority that jarred with the quest for equality pursued by the women’s rights movement. In 1858, she spoke at the National Woman’s Rights Convention in New York City and exposed her views which were not welcome by the leaders of the movement.

that “necessity prescribed [her] practice and only reason, taste and conscience [her] theory” (173).

The pressing demands of her new environment occupy a central place in the first half of the book which reads like a lively, epic tale of war against all sorts of enemies in the shape of fleas, weeds, rain, grasshoppers, and unreliable employees. This “continual external struggle” has mixed consequences on her life and on the frame of her narrative: at one point, Farnham notes that her spirit is so overwhelmed by material concern that despair and social isolation threatened to pervert her soul and her usual wonder at the “visible throne of God” (152). In a land where human society barely existed, the private space of her secluded home became a prison:

Shut up in my narrow house, with the interests and sympathies which had been wont to embrace classes, communities, humanity, chilled and driven back upon myself; unable to approach the social life about me in the way of co-operation or enjoyment, or individuals in the relation of serving or aiding [...] I was, most of all unhappy in finding myself circumscribed in all action to my small family circle and my private interests. (154–55)

This passage, which sheds light on the intricate intersections between the public and the private, confirms that the metaphor of separate spheres must be used cautiously. As an eastern reformer *and* a defender of women’s domestic nature, Eliza Farnham had learned to expand the walls of her house so that it could transcend her own “small family circle”.<sup>9</sup> As is made clear here, the ideal home is not an insulated haven but a private locus connected to and, through woman’s loving and selfless power, devoted to the outside world (“classes, communities, humanity”). In the same way as a world with no homes was likely to degenerate into a masculine jungle, a home cut off from the public sphere could shrink into a prison cell. Farnham laments the loneliness and the lack of social fabric and purpose which made educated and well-meaning females like herself feel “out of place” (155); she concludes this despondent chapter by warning that “none but the pure and strong-hearted of my sex should come alone to this land” (157). It seems, at this point in the narrative, that her social and spiritual identities can neither exist “in” nor “out” and that her sense of self is literally dislocated.

Farnham was redeemed by the coming of a female friend with whom she shared the kind of intense and long-lasting friendship bonding 19<sup>th</sup>-century women.<sup>10</sup> Georgiana Bruce Kirby

---

<sup>9</sup> As many late 20<sup>th</sup>-century studies have shown, since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, a growing number of women had gradually learned to expand their ascribed sphere of action; by anchoring their motives in religious and moral grounds—their legitimate domain—they could get involved in various reform movements meant to cleanse the society of its sins, be they alcohol addiction, sexual license, or slavery. Not all women got committed and only a minority became abolitionists, but the global religious atmosphere pervading the period (Second Great Awakening), vindicated the existence of such attempts at purification. For illuminating surveys of these aspects, see for instance Epstein, Riley, Woloch, Clinton.

<sup>10</sup> Carroll Smith Rosenberg’s 1975 foundational essay (“The Female World of Love and Ritual”) identified a specific women’s culture in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, marked by female bonding, spirituality and occasional homoeroticism. There is no evidence that erotic relations existed between Kirby and Farnham but their mutual emotional commitment to their friendship is obvious through the many letters they exchanged from the 1840s to the time of Eliza’s death. Smith-Rosenberg’s work and many subsequent others, including Nancy Cott’s 1977 *Bonds of Womanhood*, marked a reappraisal of the separate sphere model, arguing that the women’s sphere could be turned into a potentially positive force.

joined her in 1850, worked by her side on the farm and cheered her spirits. Reflecting on her trials in a subsequent introspective passage, Farnham concludes that “each struggle had contributed to my womanhood. Each had helped on my interior life. Are not the internal experiences of like natures like, under all external circumstances, however various? Do not the truly good truly advance in their own souls?” (224).

This passage offers the last insight into Eliza’s interior life, for from chapter 27 to the end, the narrative abruptly changes in focus, tone, rhythm, and characterization. While the first part of the book reads like an entertaining and informative novel, intertwining the adventures of Farnham’s private life with the main features of California’s history, the second half of the volume is a rather terse, somewhat impersonal account of external characteristics. Thus, the mixed population, the evolution of San Francisco, the widespread corruption in morals and politics, and gold mining are documented in a series of shorter chapters where the subjective narrator is replaced by the voice of a witness, reporter or travel guide. This trend climaxes in the last two sections which detail the 1856 activities of the Vigilance Committee and relate the story of a dreadful emigration experience in 1846 (the “Donner Party”). The reader thus perceives a dissonance in the narrative that Farnham never justifies.

Increasingly, the author’s personal voice dissolves into the widely used pronoun “we” which is inscribed in the very title of the book and has fluctuating referents—her own family group, the Californians with whom she identified, or the “old world” to which, as a civilized and educated lady, she still belonged. The recurrence of the first-person plural actually operates like an inclusive and exclusive force that creates an illusion of cohesion while keeping the contours of the narrating subject undefined. Both in and out of the narrative, Farnham’s voice becomes disembodied, more openly didactic and moralizing, and eventually prophetic.

### **Contamination and Redemption**

In the latter part of the book, Eliza Farnham is concerned about the mechanisms of contamination, purification and redemption shaping California’s budding civilization. While the bountiful nature is conceived as a gift of God, the cities and the mining towns are depicted as hellish places where language, manners, and social relations have degenerated into swearing, violence and selfish individualism (271). Farnham notes that the gaming houses, most numerous in San Francisco, also prevailed throughout the country and that the “inland towns were equally infested” (307). Oaths, she laments, “crowded into the commonest conversation” and even women were not immune to impure language (297). Bar rooms thronged and drunkenness was a rampant vice that contaminated even the children (357).

The main culprit for this degenerate society, Farnham claims, is gold, or rather the blind quest for gold which “once tasted, like the fabled leaf, causes forgetfulness of old ties [...] and does not create new ones” (251). While she admits that the Gold Rush marks a revolution in history which will ultimately amount to progress (356), and that gold-seeking fosters the “republican sentiment” by enabling any poor and lucky hardworking man to get rich, she dwells on the immediate negative consequences of the craze for gold (353).

The first one is that it attracts, in the reported words of a white Californian, “all types of rascality” (332). Farnham targets in particular the “foul population” from Australia, those “carrion birds” whose “pestilent presence” invaded the land (332). Chinese emigration is curiously absent from her report which essentially focuses on the different types of European and American migrants in ways that are sometimes surprising. Thus, while the Jews are not



stereotyped as greedy (264), the New England Yankee is censored for his speculative mind, his business talents, and his dislike of hard manual labor; brushing aside the Puritan work ethic, Farnham declares that “the American is not a working animal like the Swiss, the German, the Irishman or the Englishman” and she ironically adds that the Puritan colonial venture might have failed in the mild and sensuous climate of California (265).<sup>11</sup>

The other consequence of the Gold Rush concerns the widespread corruption plaguing politics and justice that the narrative documents with many anecdotes of bribed politicians, immoral judges, swindled elections, and unpunished criminals. The whole public sphere is likened to a sick body contaminated by venality, “the gangrene ever surely eating its way to the sources of vitality” (379).

Yet, the book is altogether permeated with visionary optimism as Farnham sees and foresees redemption for California. This visionary optimism is anchored in a vibrant faith in Manifest Destiny which gives way to flights of lyrical prose strongly reminiscent of John O Sullivan’s glorification of America:<sup>12</sup>

America is young and strong [...] Her civilization, springing from Saxon energy, Protestant Christianity, and social, political and religious liberty, has in it elements of durability never before combined. (331)  
California is the world’s nursery of freedom. The centuries [...] have witnessed no event so significant to the nations as its development under a free government. It marks an era to which, in future years, the new men of nations grown hoary in despotism, will point as the time when the masses began to gather the earth’s treasures and make them their own. The lessons in political and religious freedom learned here will be remembered and repeated beneath the palm trees of India—in the tea-fields of China—among the frozen snows of Russia—in the saloons of the proudest cities of Europe, where dotard monarchy yet hugs his shivering members together [...] What hopes are awakening in these years! [...] What persistency in man toward a high destiny! [...] The march will be onward with triumph into the ages. (327–29)

In this utopia exalting America’s exceptionalism and California’s potential for universal regeneration, California is portrayed as the “theatre of first test” for absolute liberty. Thus, the young state is meant to carry out the original republican experiment to its extreme logic of democracy: “If America is republican elsewhere, here she will be democratic” (277).

Farnham already sees many signs of this new era in the tangible progress that she has noticed over the seven years she spent in California. Thus she notes the diminution of gambling houses, the decline in alcohol consumption, the development of social and educational institutions, and mostly, she feels confident that, once the gold fever has died down, the fertile lands of California will materialize the Jeffersonian dream of a great agrarian republic

---

<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that despite these critics, Farnham assumed that, contrary to the Spanish character, the Americans of Anglo-Saxon origins were also endowed with “unfaltering energy”, self-control”, “personal courage” and “sublime patriotism” (267)

<sup>12</sup> The journalist and editor John O’ Sullivan (1813–1895), who is credited for having coined the phrase ‘Manifest Destiny’ in his 1845 article defending the annexation of Texas, extolled its main themes as early as 1839 in “The Great Nation of Futurity” (*The United States Democratic Review*, Volume 6, Issue 23): “Yes, we are the nation of progress, of individual freedom, of universal enfranchisement [...] We must onward to the fulfilment of our mission— to the entire development of the principle of our organization—freedom of conscience, freedom of person, freedom of trade and business pursuits, universality of freedom and equality. This is our high destiny [...] All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man [...] For this blessed mission to the nations of the world [...] has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs [...]” (429–30).

peopled by virtuous farmers. It is not by chance that the passages describing farming far outnumber those that she somewhat reluctantly devotes to gold mining. She encourages her readers to till the land instead of digging gold, predicting that this will increase health and virtue and “elevate [California] to the level of her elder sisters” (31)

Another sign of social and moral purification is commented upon at great length in the last section of the book devoted to the Vigilance Committee, an association of San Francisco citizens created in response to the widespread crime and corruption. Its well-organized members judged and executed criminals, patrolled the city to protect life and property, and in 1856, they issued a document inspired by the Declaration of Independence which asserted the people’s right to self government and resistance to tyranny and hinted at revolution. Farnham relates the conflict that opposed the Vigilance Committee to the governor of California and she gives her undivided support to the action of the Committee, lauding the nobility, courage and self-restraint of its members whom she extols as the Founding Fathers of California. She thanks them for having taken indispensable “steps of purification” (499) in San Francisco and given examples of republicanism served by “true manhood” (501, 507).<sup>13</sup>

While true manhood is presented as a necessary ingredient for the salvation of California, the book is ultimately a tribute and a call to the redemptive power of true womanhood. The scarcity of women, the impossibility to set up families—especially in the mining towns—the presence of prostitutes and the constant and unjust sexual suspicion bearing on all women are put forth by Farnham as the most serious obstacles to the purification of the social sphere. Through several anecdotes, in particular in the chapter narrating the emigration of the Donner Party<sup>14</sup> that stages the heroic selflessness of a mother—and implicitly through her own story—the author glorifies womanhood. Her praise of female courage, of the almost miraculous power of motherly love, of women’s self sacrifice and unrivaled capacity for survival elevates woman to the level of Christ. The book is finally an invitation to martyrdom:

Come to the country which is the home of those you are bound to adhere to and save [...] I say to my countrywomen that if they have the natures which can pass unscathed through the furnace seven times heated, every sentiment of duty binds them to follow here [...] one suffers with so much more firmness when one feels that good flows from it [...] We see the fruits of the martyrdoms that have been. We feel the pains only of our own.”(301–05)

Farnham, thus, issues a call to the “Angel in the House”, urging her to leave her home and found a purer state. The book ends with a vision of redeemed California which is reminiscent of her initial mystical experience upon discovering the Santa Cruz landscape:

---

<sup>13</sup> Farnham devotes a “supplementary chapter” to the Vigilance Committee, induced by the 1856 conflict that was opposing the second Committee to California’s political authorities. The chapter describes the activities of the first Vigilance Committee, organized in 1851, and then proceeds to analyze the unfolding crisis. It includes the exhaustive transcription of the document addressed by the Vigilance Committee to the people of California on June 9<sup>th</sup> 1856.

<sup>14</sup> The Donner Party refers to the tragic migration of a group of men, women, and children who left Illinois in 1846 and were trapped in the snows of the Sierra Nevada. Half of the group died of exposure, disease or starvation and some resorted to cannibalism. While two-thirds of the males died, two-thirds of the women survived and reached California. Farnham interpreted this gap as proof that women, and mothers in particular, were endowed with a higher capacity for survival conferred by “love’s divine self-abnegation” (422).

When society shall have struck its roots into Californian soil [...] Then the benign summer heavens will smile upon hearts tranquil enough to expand beneath them into charity and love—free enough to be penetrated by the exquisite harmony of the material world—then the glorious hills and teeming vales will be dotted with homes where plenty reigns [...] A country so clothed with majesty [...] must have a hopeful destiny. (377–78)

This civilized, christianized, feminized, version of the picture, which blends the accents of Manifest Destiny with the virtues of domesticity, provides a good illustration of “Manifest Domesticity”, *i.e.* a combined rhetoric of national expansion and domestic ideology that “turns imperial conquest into spiritual regeneration to efface internal conflict or external resistance in visions of geopolitical domination as global harmony” (Kaplan, 190).

*California In-doors and Out* emerges as a non-uniform narrative offering American readers the vision of a harmonized civilization based on the contemporary assumptions of Anglo-Saxon superiority and female innate virtue. In this utopian projection where the Native Americans and the conquered Mexicans are hardly visible, the “other” to be conquered is human (mainly male) moral impurity. As Farnham writes: “The present is a war, not between parties or persons, but between the principles of good and evil” (v–vi). To some extent, this moral war reshapes—and is reshaped by—the tensions between the “in” and the “out” which take on multiple forms and sometimes contradictory values: California is both a home and a strange land, the domestic space a claustrophobic and regenerative haven, the public sphere gangrened and destined to become the vector of universal democracy. Also, porosity between indoors and outdoors spaces may be infectious or healing, constructive or destructive. Ultimately, however, Farnham’s grand scheme is to dissolve the frontiers between the external and the internal, and attain a stage when the soul, no longer absorbed by physical concerns, can be, as is said in the above-quoted extract “penetrated by the exquisite harmony of the material world.”

Farnham’s apocalyptic vision of a new heaven and a new earth is coupled with a final prediction that, once the dark shadow of slavery has been removed, California and the other states will form a great domesticated nation of freedom. Looking beyond the increasing sectional tensions plaguing the country, she inscribed on the book’s last page: “Let the talking wires span free soil from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and let free labor, with its enterprise, progress, and intelligence, possess and build up Kansas and Nebraska, through which California will ultimately be connected, by railroad, with the East and in a few years, she will be the garden of the Union” (507). Interestingly, the final comparison of California to a garden, which echoes the image of the “nursery” of freedom, not only hints at the state’s bountiful and tamed nature; in the House/Nation metaphorical configuration, it also identifies California to a hybrid and fecund space located both in and out of the Union. It seems that Farnham’s gender theory and female experience, professedly anchored in the separate spheres model, actually found their deepest roots in such a hybrid and fecund space, generated by the blurred and moving frontiers of the domestic empire.

## Works Cited

- BAYM, Nina, *Women Writers of the American West*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield, University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- COTT, Nancy F, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780–1835*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977.

- DAVID Lewis, W, "Farnham, Eliza Wood Burhans" in *Notable American Women*, vol. 1, Edward T. James *et al.*, ed, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971, 598-600.
- DAVIDSON, Cathy N. and Jessamyn Hatcher, "Introduction" in *No More Separate Spheres!* Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, ed, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2002, 7-26.
- EPSTEIN, Barbara L., *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York, Wesleyan University Press, 1981.
- FARNHAM, Eliza, *California, In-doors and Out; or, How we Farm, Mine and Live generally in the Golden State*, New York, Dix, Edwards & Co., 1856.
- , *Life in Prairie Land*, New York, Harper & Bros., 1846.
- , *Woman and Her Era*, 2 volumes, New York, A.J. Davis & Co., 1864.
- HELSINGER, Elizabeth K. *et al.*, *The Woman Question, Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837–1883*, vol.1. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- KAPLAN, Amy, "Manifest Domesticity" in *No More Separate Spheres!*, Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, ed, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2002, 183–207.
- KERBER, Linda K. "Separate Spheres, Women's Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History" 1984 in *No More Separate Spheres!*, Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher, ed, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2002, 29–65.
- LEVY, JoAnn, *Unsettling the West, Eliza Farnham and Georgiana Bruce Kirby in Frontier California*, Berkeley, Heyday Books, 2004.
- , *They Saw the Elephant, Women in the California Gold Rush*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.
- O'SULLIVAN, John, "The Great Nation of Futurity", *The United States Democratic Review*, vol. 6, No. 23 (1839), 426–30.
- RILEY, Glenda, *Inventing the American Woman*, vol. 1, Wheeling, Illinois, Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1995.
- SMITH-ROSENBERG, Carroll, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America." 1975, *Disorderly Conduct*, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg. New York, Oxford University Press, 1985, 53–76.
- SORIN, Claire, "Anatomy of the Female Angel or Science at the Service of Woman in *Woman and Her Era* by Eliza Farnham" in *Women and Science, 17<sup>th</sup> Century to Present: Pioneers, Activists and Protagonists*, Donna Andréolle and Véronique Molinari ed., Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011, 55–68.
- WARREN, Kim, "Separate Spheres: Analytical persistence in United States Women's History", *History Compass* 5 (2007): 262–77. Web. 15 Nov. 2016.
- WELTER, Barbara, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860", *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966), 151-74.
- WOLOCH, Nancy, *Women and the American Experience*, New York, Knopf, 1984.
- WOODWARD, Helen Beal, *The Bold Women*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Young, 1953.

Claire Sorin is an Assistant Professor of American Studies at Aix-Marseille University where she teaches courses in American history and women's history. She is the author of a Phd on 19<sup>th</sup>-century American women's diaries and of articles related to women's history, narratives of the self, gender construction and body representation. She has co-edited 4 collections of essays. She is currently working on the biography of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century novelist, prison reformer and advocate of woman's superiority, Eliza Wood Burhans Farnham. She is affiliated with the

LERMA (Laboratoire d'Etudes du Monde Anglophone) and is a member of the AFEA (French Association of American Studies). She is also currently engaged in a project exploring women's resistance to feminism (<https://wfw.hypotheses.org/>)