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***Scharmann's Overland Journey to California:  
A German-American Travelogue***

In 1852, the German-American newspaper *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*<sup>1</sup> published a travel account by Hermann B. Scharmann, a resident of New York City, who had moved overland from New York to California during the 1848 Gold Rush. The travelogue was based on the journal that Scharmann had kept during his travels and was compiled after the author's return to New York. The account was later published as a book, its first edition appearing in 1905 (in German), followed by a second edition, in English, in 1918. It was reprinted as late as 1969.

At the beginning of the Gold Rush, the United States was still an overwhelmingly agricultural nation and the majority of Americans lived in rural areas. The Gold Rush of 1848, falling between the First and Second Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century, played a crucial role in changing the American economy and society on the West Coast and beyond. Benjamin Mountford and Stephen Tuffnell, in their recent publication on the global history of gold rushes, observe that the discovery of gold in California, South Africa, and Australia had a significant effect on “processes of global connection and redistribution” which worked in tandem with a series of powerful countercurrents: “of the destruction of indigenous communities; of the erection and policing of material and mental frontiers from threatening ‘others’; of the protracted consolidation of capital and elaboration to class hierarchies; and of the rapid but long-term loss of ecological stability.”<sup>2</sup> To varying degrees, Scharmann's travelogue represents a first-hand, albeit not exactly self-reflexive, account of these processes. In this respect, the publication presents a valuable primary source for our understanding of the social and environmental impacts of the California Gold Rush of 1848 from a particularly German-American viewpoint.

The California Gold Rush also had an impact on the literary and publishing scene: by 1860, hundreds of emigrant's guides, pamphlets, and literary melodramas about Gold Rush California and the journeys taken to the goldfields were in circulation. In Europe, too, Gold Rush stories, alongside tales from the American "wild west," became popular with readers and served as literary material for many authors.<sup>3</sup> Among this literature, Scharmann's is unique for several reasons: Unlike many of his contemporaries that wrote novels set in Gold Rush California from the safety and comfort of their homes, Scharmann was an active participant in its history. His travelogue is based on his journey, making his observations personal and infused with a sense of immediacy. At the same time, his writing style contains a degree of emotional distance from much of the suffering he encounters, suggesting that Scharmann was attempting to keep a critical distance and present a truthful and informative account of his experiences. The extent to which he succeeded in this is, of course, a different question. Also uncommon is the travelogue's German-American vantage point, that of a first-generation immigrant to the United States who had built a life for himself in New York City and was well established in the German-American community there. In fact, Scharmann was not just a solo traveler, but was also responsible for a group of seventy-two individuals from his community that commenced on the journey west together. Scharmann's travelogue reflects his personal experience as a relatively well-to-do German-American New Yorker, a father of two teenage sons and an infant daughter, whom he chose to bring on the journey together with his wife.

Additionally, this travelogue is interesting for its position as an informative piece—arguably, even a warning—to the German-American community of New York not to believe in the stories of incredible riches and fortunes for the taking that were being sold in newspapers at the time. Another noteworthy aspect is that the travelogue was published in four different editions over the course of 150 years. It is thus an example of the continued fascination we hold with the American West, as well as the romanticization of frontier life and the colonization of Native lands which usually did, and oftentimes still does, go unquestioned.

Scharmann's *Overland Journey to California* underwent a genesis in which the text served different functions for different historical audiences. The original publication fulfilled an important informational and educational role for its mainly German-American contemporary readerships, acting as an antidote to more positive stories about Gold Rush California and the allure that the discovery of gold had on many. In its subsequent 1905 and 1918 editions, this function was no longer part of the text. Instead, I argue that the successful re-publication of the travelogue was likely based, at least in part, on the

romanticization of and yearning for a presumed authenticity of feeling and experience that modern society seemed to be lacking. In his study of the history of anti-modernist groups in the United States, Timothy Jackson Lears has argued that “the older morality embodied the ‘producer culture’ of an industrializing, entrepreneurial society: the newer nonmorality embodied the ‘consumer culture’ of a bureaucratic corporate state. Antimodernists were far more than escapists: their quests for authenticity eased their own and others’ adjustments to a streamlined culture of consumption.”<sup>4</sup> Scharmann’s travelogue offered a narrative full of authentic experience, complete with a hero that displayed qualities of the self-made man—attributes that seemed to be lacking in a bureaucratic modern society.

In some ways, Scharmann’s travelogue is similar to other accounts of Gold Rush California from the era. His writing includes many of the common tropes we have come to associate with literature set in an (often imaginary) “wild west”: endless treks of emigrants making their way through the Great Plains; encounters with Native Americans that range from friendly to apprehensive and fearful; rugged, adventurous men settling the West, signifying the ideal of manifest destiny; but also hunger, thirst, disease, death, and villains of every pattern that complicate the journey.

While Scharmann’s book is a rich text to analyze—if less for its literary value than for its position as a first-hand account of a significant historical event—it has so far not been studied by historians or scholars of German-American literature. As Winfried Fluck has pointed out in his analysis of Ferdinand Kürnberger’s 1855 novel *Der Amerika-Müde*, there are some methodological problems inherent in the discussion of literary texts such as this one. Says Fluck, “The greatest danger such a project faces is the uncritical pursuit of an approach in which the recovery of forgotten texts or literary traditions is justified merely on the grounds that they have been forgotten or neglected.”<sup>5</sup> Placing Scharmann’s travelogue in the larger context of the history of the Gold Rush and concurrent social and political developments will hopefully avoid this potential shortfall.

### **The Scharmanns in New York**

The Scharmann family arrived in the United States before the first big wave of migration from Germany, which historians have defined to the years between 1845 and 1858, when around 1.3 million Germans came to the United States.<sup>6</sup> The Scharmanns’ relatively early arrival in New York may help explain the significant role that the family acquired within their community of German immigrants. The Scharmanns’ home served as a nexus for the organization and planning of the trip to California. The fact that the family



**H. B. SCHARMANN, SEN.**

**H. B. SCHARMANN,                      JACOB FRIEDR. SCHARMANN.**  
**Jugendbildnis des gegenwaertigen  
Praesidenten des „Liederkranz.“**

Fig. 1. Hermann B. Scharmann Senior and his two sons, both of whom accompanied him to California. Scharmann's wife and his infant daughter did not survive the journey. Illustration from the 1905 edition of the travelogue.

had only immigrated to the United States five years before the Gold Rush but was already becoming the center of activity for the group of travelers setting out to the Pacific Coast suggests that the Scharmanns had a significant social standing in the German immigrant community of New York. Tragically, of the seventy-two individuals who set out on the overland journey mainly organized by Scharmann, only eight survived and reached the gold fields. Both Scharmann's wife and his youngest daughter, still an infant, were among those who perished.

In its original publication in the *Sonntagsblatt* of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, Scharmann's travelogue provided more than an entertaining piece of adventure literature: it served as a first-hand account of the perils of the trek to California and the miseries of the gold fields, and thus as an explicit warning to its readership not to make the same mistake of getting swept up by the gold fever. As such, Scharmann's narrative had an important informational role for the German immigrant community of 1850s New York.

It was Scharmann's oldest son, carrying his father's name, who initiated the first publication of the travelogue in book form in 1905. The younger Herman B. Scharmann was born in Gießen, Germany, in 1838, and came to Williamsburg, Brooklyn, with his parents when he was only five years old.<sup>7</sup> He had been 12 years old at the outset of his family's journey in 1848, and over fifty years later, by chance came across the Sunday editions of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* in which the story had originally appeared. Excited about this find, and moved by the memories it triggered, the younger Scharmann wondered whether a re-publication of this travelogue would be welcomed by a contemporary audience. As he explains in the preface to the 1905 German-language edition, he decided to ask his "friend and Menschenkenner" Carl Schurz in a letter to review the account and gauge potential interest in it. In his response, Schurz observed that the travelogue offered a highly illustrative, life-like (*lebenswahr*) image of a period in America's cultural development whose adventurous character could hardly be imagined, were it not for descriptions such as the one at hand.<sup>8</sup>

Around the same time Scharmann's *Overland Journey to California* was published in the United States, at first for a German-American, then also for a wider English-speaking readership, the *Amerikaroman* had become a literary staple back in Germany as well. America and the Wild West were well-received topics and settings that frequently appeared in travel books, novellas, fictional stories, publications in newspapers, and many other forms. As Jerry Schuchalter notes, popular authors concerning themselves with stories set in or about America were regarded as *Erfolgsautoren*, highly successful authors, and, while mostly catering to a reading public rather than aiming for high literary accomplishments, some of the authors, such as Balduin Möllhausen

(1825–1905), also enjoyed the respect of the critics.<sup>9</sup> Many of these authors based their depictions of America not on first-hand experiences, but on impressions they attained through letters of those who had immigrated to the United States, as well as through accounts of “Rückkehrer,” individuals who had returned from a stay in the United States. Alexander Ritter has wondered: “Can one talk about an independent German-American minority literature or should we rather say literature in the German language written in the United States?”<sup>10</sup> The rubric of German-American literature can indeed be slippery. Schuchalter agrees with this observation, pointing out that scholars have failed to draw clear boundaries between works written in Germany and those written in America by German-Americans.<sup>11</sup> It also remains unclear in how far German-Americans were aware of these literary trends, and whether they read the same authors as their German peers on the other side of the Atlantic. One can assume, however, that some of this literature did make it to German-American cultural centers like the Yorkville neighborhood in Manhattan, and that German immigrants had been exposed to such literature whilst still in their home country, as well as in correspondence with family members and friends in Germany. As such, Scharmann’s readership was possibly familiar with *Amerikaromane* and might have understood his travelogue in that light, being attracted to its air of adventure. However, in contrast with some German-based authors writing about the American West, Scharmann provided a mostly accurate account of his experience during the trek to California, while many popular German authors of *Amerikaromane* never set foot on the American continent and rather synthesized anecdotes and mixed factual information with fantastic ideas about the United States in their writing. At the same time, we do not know if Scharmann’s account ever made it to Germany; however, given the general interest in America at the time, it is likely that it did. Especially in the nineteenth century, America and the immigration there was prominent in public discussion in Germany, given the profound effects the migration out of Germany had on German society.<sup>12</sup>

As Andrew P. Yox notes, “We know much about the likes and dislikes, the religions, and the ideologies of German Americans during the nineteenth century. We know less about their mentality.”<sup>13</sup> Through a close reading of Scharmann’s *Overland Journey to California*, some of the lacunae in our understanding of the German-American mentality may be filled. Especially when it comes to attitudes towards the land and its native inhabitants, this travelogue proves to be a rich text; similarly, the author’s interactions and confrontations with fellow travelers and miners, as well as his adversaries, can display a kind of morality particular to this German-American author. At the same time, however, Scharmann’s approach is very much reminiscent of other Gold Rush accounts, including the dismissal of the human and en-

vironmental consequences that gold mining and the settlement of California by new emigrants brought with it. While it would be dangerous to generalize the mentality of one author to be that of the whole of the German-American immigrant community, we can assume that this travelogue, published in a widely read German-language newspaper of the time, transported a specific mentality to its readership, performing an important role in the understanding of the American West, Native Americans, and the Gold Rush in the minds of its readership, while at the same time being informed by a long literary tradition that was pervaded by a fascination for the American West and its Native population.

### **The Environment as Emotional Canvas**

California! With that name now ringing in the ears of millions throughout our land. California! That now sounds so sweetly, when pronounced by thousands of the soft and gentle voices of those we love. Why should that fair land be doomed! Why should that name be destined to be pronounced with the curses of dying thousands, and the horrible denunciations of millions, who will have some dear and loved friend's bones lying bleaching on its valleys and on its mountains, victims to the lust of gold who have perished by the foul hand of murder, assassination or starvation?<sup>14</sup>

The idea of a paradise or Eldorado somewhere in the West is a notion as old as Roman and Greek mythology; it found its immediate fulfillment, at least in the imagination and hopes of many people all around the globe, in the discovery of gold in California in 1848.<sup>15</sup> The Gold Rush drew tens of thousands of new immigrants from all corners of the world, and also attracted immigrant groups already settled in the United States.<sup>16</sup> The first miners to arrive in California were actually coming from the West—Hawaii, Chile—rather than from the East, but soon after the discovery of gold, thousands of Americans and people across the Atlantic began their journey to California, which at the time was not yet part of the United States. This unprecedented international migration lasted only a few years, but it would irreversibly change the natural landscape of California and its society and politics.

Scharmann's travelogue can roughly be divided into two parts. He spends as much time recounting his journey to California as he does bemoaning his negative experiences in the gold fields. The descriptions of the landscapes that Scharmann encounters run parallel in their downward trajectory to the author's emotional landscape as the journey becomes increasingly difficult. In the first few chapters, which describe in detail the route that Scharmann and

his travel companions took from New York over Philadelphia, along the Mississippi and the Great Plains—following large sections of the Oregon Trail—, he repeatedly describes the rich fertile soils among the river banks with a sense of awe and an eye to their usefulness for agriculture. For example, towards the beginning of their journey, the group stops at a German-American settlement along the Mississippi to stock up on provisions and rest before beginning the march westwards across the plains. Scharmann notes the promising quality of the soil there. As the company travels up the Mississippi toward St. Louis, Scharmann observes the banks of the river: “The land on either side is level and is barely cultivated. Yet here the best soil is found both for settlement and agriculture, as is provided by the strong growth of the trees, especially the oak. Further up, as the land becomes more hilly and undulating, more settlements and brick farmhouses are seen.”<sup>17</sup> At other times as well, Scharmann scans the landscape for its usefulness and potential for agriculture. About Fort Kearney, Nebraska, Scharmann reports: “The site is on an immense plateau thickly covered with grass which could serve as a dwelling-place for an almost unlimited number of human beings, since the cultivation of this land and the raising of cattle would amply recompense them all within a few years.”<sup>18</sup>

Upon arrival in Independence, Missouri, he again excitedly describes the fertility of the land, and references what were arguably the main reasons for most German immigrants to come to the United States—the promise of owning and working their own land, rather than toiling under the servitude of aristocratic landowners, combined with the prospect of a life free of political persecution. “Here, in the sunshine of political and civic freedom, work becomes pleasure, and its proceeds, instead of enriching the princely throne, are the reward of the worker.”<sup>19</sup> Even the view of the prairie between Independence and the Kansas River, though not useful for agriculture, still impresses him: “From Independence to the Kansas River, a distance of 130 miles, there is only a boundless prairie of the best grass land, but this landscape is so novel that you never tire of looking at it.”<sup>20</sup> This kind of optimism and excitement for opportunity stands in contrast to Scharmann’s descriptions of California’s mining regions. As the trek moves through geologically vastly different zones on their way to California, nature becomes increasingly bleak, vegetation scarce, and a sense of novelty ultimately gives way to fatigue and desolation. Provisions grow scarcer by the day, and a sense of impending doom starts to fill Scharmann’s narration.

At Fort Laramie, Wyoming, Scharmann decides to part with the rest of the company, as they were moving too slowly in his opinion. While up to this point, Scharmann’s journey had been largely bearable, the journey becomes increasingly more difficult from here on out. From Fort Laramie to the South Pass, “the land is only sparsely covered with grass, in altogether insufficient



quantity for the countless crowds of emigrants that must pass over it.”<sup>21</sup> Along the way, the family group now starts coming across broken wagons scattered over the land that travelers before them had left behind. Of most of the land between Fort Laramie and California, Scharmann believes it to be worthless, describing it as a desert land covered in red soil and bare mountains.<sup>22</sup>

As Scharmann and his companions travel through the deserts, nature turns against them. Crossing what seems to be the Black Rock Desert on the Eastern side of the Sierra Mountains, wagons are in the back and front of the Scharmann's as far as the eye can see, and they become enveloped in alkaline desert dust. No longer showing any signs of fertility, nature becomes a death trap. In this desolate place, Scharmann counts eighty-one shattered and abandoned wagons, and 1,633 oxen, either dead or dying, as the trek marches on towards the West.<sup>23</sup> Several of Scharmann's oxen, too, are beginning to lose their strength. Unlike many travelers before him, who had left their oxen behind to die, Scharmann decides to release his oxen from their suffering, and orders them to be shot. Given the general distress and pain at this stage of the journey, Scharmann employs the description of his oxen's death as an allegory to the general condition of the travelers' health and morale. As his wife and son are weeping in unison, and with the oxen “freed from their last struggle,” Scharmann continues the journey “with a heavy heart.”<sup>24</sup>

By the time Scharmann reaches California, his wife and infant daughter have both tragically succumbed to malnutrition. The author does not dwell on these traumatic deaths. Rather, his narration begins to focus on the struggles that him and his sons encounter as they settle into life in the gold fields, which are busy with emigrants toiling to make a living. In order to wash out the gold from the riverbed's soil, dams are built and the flow of rivers artificially changed. Instead of the untouched nature he encountered on his journey, as well as the small-scale agricultural usage of the fertile soil in the East, which he welcomes as a way to self-sufficiency, what Scharmann witnesses in California is an exploitation of natural resources and a violent taming of nature—in which, however, he is himself complicit. Sucheng Chan has argued that the California Gold Rush can be divided into three periods: “the first mining season of 1848, when surface gold was abundant; (2) the period from 1849 to the early 1850s, which was dominated by labor-intensive placer mining, and (3) the years after 1852, when mining became increasingly industrial and capital-intensive.”<sup>25</sup> Scharmann and his two sons arrived in the gold fields during the second of these phases, and the travelogue goes into much detail about the trials and tribulations of trying to find enough gold to make ends meet. Instead of striking it rich, Scharmann and his sons are just trying to survive and save up enough money to return home to New York.

In his comparison between the two mining regions of California and the Ruhr (Germany) in the second half of the 19th century, Andrew Isenberg has pointed out that, while capital and labor were in short supply in California, the abundance of natural resources led to an importation of investment capital and industrial laborers to the mining regions. Due to these higher costs, industrial growth in the mining regions of California as well as the Ruhr “exacted significant environmental costs. Waterways in both the California gold country and the Ruhr were significantly polluted with debris from industrial mining. In both places, waterways as well as fisheries and the atmosphere were extensively polluted with highly toxic mercury.”<sup>26</sup> Because gold can no longer easily be found by washing the sand of the banks of the rivers, and Scharmann is feeling increasingly ill, he pays a group of men to diverge a stream, investing a lot of time and money in the construction of this technology—with no noteworthy success. He also reports on the use of quicksilver mining, explaining this as the only viable option for the future of gold mining—though he does not himself plan to invest in these technologies. Even though Scharmann elaborates on the techniques of quicksilver mining and hydraulic mining, he does not discuss the environmental costs. This is maybe not surprising for a man trying to strike it rich in the gold mines, for which the diversion of rivers and other changes to the natural environment seemed a necessary part of his job. Additionally, Scharmann judges California to be wholly useless for agriculture, arguing that places that could be used to grow crops are far and few between.<sup>27</sup> He also describes the Sacramento region to have extreme drought conditions in the summer, during which creeks and rivers dry out, that alternate with wet winters during which most trails turn into mud that slows down miner’s movement around the gold fields. Nature, then, is less a thing to be marveled at, or a source of sustenance, but closer to an unforbidding environment useful mostly, if not only, for the extraction of gold.<sup>28</sup>

It has been claimed that German-Americans exercised superior stewardship over the land they used for agriculture, mostly in comparison to their Anglo-Saxon contemporaries.<sup>29</sup> Scharmann is an interesting case in this regard: on the one hand, he does not seem to fall under this positive stereotype, given that his exploits in the California Gold Fields include environmentally harmful techniques such as the diversion of rivers. On the other hand, he constantly evaluates the land he travels through on his way to California, judging it by its usefulness for agriculture, and potential to feed larger settlements. In these observations, however, Scharmann neatly ignores the fact that indigenous communities had already been living off the land for centuries. This is only part of his wider ignorance of Native American culture.

Towards the end of his travelogue, Scharmann all but wallows in despair, his nerves strained by the tormenting heat of the Californian summer. He complains that everything is dead and barren, all vegetation burned by the sun. Scharmann shares his excitement over the agricultural potentials of certain regions of the United States, displaying a vision of ideal, self-sustained agricultural communities of free individuals. But his hopes of finding gold in California are crushed, and remaining in this heat-plagued, drought-ridden state seems to him worse than a life of slavery: "If ever—which God forbid!—a court were to condemn me and I were to be given the choice of being banished to California or of working as a galley-slave, I would unhesitatingly choose the latter punishment."<sup>30</sup>

### **Between Ignorance and Fascination: Native Americans in Scharmann's Travelogue**

Throughout his journey to and his stay in California, Scharmann comes in contact with various groups of Native Americans, and he devotes considerable time explaining these encounters. Edward D. Castillo has pointed out that:

In popular literature and school textbooks the events that followed the discovery of gold have for too long been portrayed as a great adventure, luring American males to the far west in search of personal fortunes and validating the hysterically popular doctrine of Manifest Destiny. The predominate theme in these representations has been the personal sacrifices, hardships, and ultimate disappointment in the great enterprise. The fate of the California Indians was like Indian futures everywhere, doomed and dismissed into the waste bin of history. After all, these writers reasoned, the Indians were a stone-age people who, in social Darwinistic dogma, must inevitably yield to the overpowering force of a technologically superior people.<sup>31</sup>

While Scharmann's relationship to Native Americans is not hostile—instead, it is relatively multi-faceted in terms of personal encounters—it becomes clear throughout his travelogue that his thinking falls into the categories criticized by Castillo. Scharmann displays respect for certain individuals of Native American heritage, but he does not ponder the morality of the settling of Native lands, nor of the destruction of hundreds of cultures and valuable natural resources on which Native tribes depended.

Whilst traveling along the Kansas River, the author and his companions have their first run-in with Native Americans. Scharmann describes this

encounter briefly: "Men and women ride; they wrap themselves in woolen blankets, wear beads on hands and feet, and put them around their horses' necks; they paint their faces red and blue. But not withstanding all their barbarous customs, they act in a fairly decent way. These Indians live mainly on the money which the United States pays them for their ceded territory."<sup>32</sup> The most significant encounter between Scharmann and Native Americans takes place about 115 miles from Fort Laramie.

We met a band of Indians which, counting women and children, numbered 230 persons. The chief handed us a document, signed by the commander of the fort, which stated that the Indians of this branch of the Sioux were not hostile, but most friendly, and that therefore every traveler should avoid insulting them. We soon learned that they had come in order to get some of our provisions, but our company was not very abundantly provided and could give them very little. I camped about fifty yards away from the general camp, with my wagon of provisions. Soon I counted thirty-six Indians around my wagon. Among them was the chief, with his squaw and three children. Naturally I was curious to learn something of their customs. So I gave orders that the wash-kettle should be filled with tea and all other available vessels with coffee; also I had three large pancakes baked. My cows still gave quite a bit of milk, and so a supper was prepared for the Indians. The chief thought that he had more rights than the others, so he and his family sat close to the wagon. The others lay around the fire in a circle.<sup>33</sup>

As the Indians enjoy their dinner, several more begin to join them, of which Scharmann disapproves. Indicating to the chief that the additional guests are not welcome, the latter tells them to stay away. After the meal, the chief and his family remain a while longer. Scharmann here admits that he was "very much drawn to this man, because of his unusual physiognomy and behavior."<sup>34</sup> It is clear that Scharmann sees the chief as his equal, respecting him for his good manners, generosity, and the authority the chief has over his fellow men. As the two sit together and smoke, they communicate through "silence and signs." Gifts are exchanged between the wives. The next morning, before heading out, Scharmann stops by the Indians' camp, where he "verified the truth that all good deeds are rewarded, for these savages strived earnestly to repay everything that they had received at my hands."<sup>35</sup> The chief presents Scharmann with dried buffalo meat, and the chief's daughter lays a rope of pearls around Scharmann's son's neck. Upon leaving, Scharmann even

feels “real regret at having to leave these savages who appeared to me to be more civilized than many so-called civilized men.”<sup>36</sup>

Scharmann's next encounter with Indians is described as surprisingly different, and in fact shows a certain disdain for this particular group of Indians that he meets along the Snake River, and which he describes as being “closely related to the Sioux Tribe.” The Indians ask for food, but as Scharmann shares some with them, he discovers that “if you give something to one of them all the others come running to you.” Worse yet, “their intellectual faculties are probably of the very lowest, as their language consist of an extremely limited vocabulary.” How Scharmann is able to make judgements about their language in such a short time of being in contact with them is questionable. However, he does not dwell on this encounter too much, as it did not provide him with sufficient stimulation and did not satisfy his, earlier clearly demonstrated, curiosity in meeting Indians. Instead, as Scharmann puts it, the travelers do not “bother very much with them [the Indians], simply giving them something and then going on.”<sup>37</sup>

After passing the Sierra Nevada mountains, Scharmann meets another band of Native Americans, “five of the original natives of California, armed with bows and arrows, but without any clothing.”<sup>38</sup> Similar to the previous interactions, this encounter mainly consists of the Natives asking for gifts; however, despite their potentially threatening nature—after all, they are armed—they contend themselves with a few portions of bread, as they understand that Scharmann and his family do not have much more to give them. While this is where the interaction between Scharmann and the California Indians seems to end, he continues to describe for his readers the life of these people as he understands it, pointing out, not without sympathy, that “although their country is so rich, there are no poorer Indians than the Californians.”<sup>39</sup> Scharmann states that they possess nothing, live in very simple dwellings reminiscent of haystacks, and wear no clothes; their main form of nourishment consists of acorns and acorn bread. While Scharmann points out the poverty in which California Indians live, he does not make the connection between the Gold Rush and the poor state of Native communities. Miners brought with them non-native plants and cattle that altered California's environment significantly, negatively affecting the natural food supply on which California Indians relied.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, thousands of Native Californians were driven from their lands, murdered, and displaced. In fact, during the years of the Gold Rush alone, the indigenous population of California declined by two-thirds.<sup>41</sup>

E. A. Stevenson, a Special Indian Agent to the Department of Indian Affairs, reported from San Francisco to his superiors in 1853: “The Indians in this portion of the State are wretchedly poor, having no horses, cattle or

other property. They formerly subsisted on game, fish, acorns, etc., but it is now impossible for them to make a living by hunting or fishing, for nearly all the game has been driven from the mining region or has been killed by the thousands of our people who now occupy the once quiet home of these children of the forest." It is worth pointing out that even this clearly sympathetic observer provides a solution based entirely on the presumed superiority of white Americans and the inevitability of their domination of California's resources and Native peoples, rather than showing any effort in preserving natural resources and the rights of Indigenous people to their home: "In concluding this brief report I deem it my duty to recommend to your favorable consideration the early establishment of a suitable reservation and the removal of these Indians there to, where they can receive medical aid and assistance which at the present time they so much require."<sup>42</sup>

In Scharmann's travelogue, like in most other accounts of the Gold Rush written from a Euro-American perspective, California is not described as the home of its native inhabitants, but rather as a space to be used for economic and agricultural exploits, exploits that did not leave room or respect for Native Californians. Scharmann did not presume Indians to be violent, aggressive or threatening, even when armed—counter to the gruesome stories of bands of Indians attacking white travelers that were also common at the time. If we believe Jeffrey L. Sammons's assessment of representations of Indians in nineteenth-century German literature, Scharmann's account falls in line with similar accounts that were based on the direct experience of Germans in the United States. These generally tended to show sympathy for the plight of the Indians, and an acute sensibility for their fate; granted, these were sometimes mixed with a sense of impatience, and at worst, hostility—but what, according to Sammons, they all had in common was their "shared conviction that nothing could be done, that the cause of the Indians was doomed, a verdict of history that no imaginable force could reverse."<sup>43</sup> In Scharmann's writing can be found a sentimentality for the American Indian and their way of life, but Scharmann never questions any of the Indian policies enforced upon Native tribes by the federal or local government, or the exploitation of Native knowledge, land, and labor on which the Gold Rush was largely founded. Native Americans were instrumental in helping white settlers discover new gold veins. California Indians who were tasked with building a well on John A. Sutter's property made the gold discovery that ultimately sparked the Gold Rush. Sutter was a German-born Swiss pioneer who employed hundreds of Native Americans under a sort of credit system, in which he paid his workers with a fake currency that they could only spend in Sutter's stores. He also fueled disputes between different groups of California Indians in order to exert control over them.<sup>44</sup> Scharmann turns a blind eye to the atrocities committed

against Native Americans, as he fails to mention the rape, murder, exploitation, and enslavement of Indians that occurred frequently during the Gold Rush years. By overlooking this, Scharmann's account is somewhat complicit in the dismissal of the Californian Indian's fate and future that is typical for many of his contemporaries' accounts. The author also fails to reflect on his own role in this exploitative system.

As will become clear in the following discussion of the villains in Scharmann's travelogue, Indians and their customs are presented as much less of a threat to civilization than the deceitful, uncultured, greedy white men he meets. Indeed, compared to the exploitation, lynch justice, and violence that Scharmann encounters in the gold fields, the Native Americans he meets really do appear to him as "more civilized than most so-called civilized men"—an assessment we can understand as truthful, given the various negative experiences Scharmann makes with white men on his journey. In his disdain for many of his fellow men, Scharmann seems to want to set himself apart from the same. Yet arguably, in the context of the gold fields, Scharmann's experience was not so much specifically German-American, but rather white.

### **Greed, Deceit, and Lynch Laws: Gold Rush Society in the San Francisco Region**

All are now pushing forward to this gold region, urged thither by the basest, lowest, and most growelling passion that disgraces man's character. 'Tis man's destiny to earn his livelihood by the sweat of his brow. When he forgets this, and rushes madly into the vortex that will swallow him up, and destroy hundreds of those we have loved, who have lived so long among us. There never was, and never will be, a gold region where crime will not stalk forth unrestrained, and where blood and murder have not reigned supreme.<sup>45</sup>

As we have seen, Scharmann shows varying degrees of fondness of and interest in the Native Americans he meets. While his writing displays a lack of understanding for Native culture, Scharmann does not perceive American Indians as a threat, nor as completely uncivilized or uncultured. The true villains in this story are not groups of Indians attacking wagon trains, but other white men. This happens mostly in individual and personal interactions with Scharmann, and relates to the deceit and financial exploitation of miner's misfortunes by so-called doctors, men selling necessary mining provisions, and generally people working in the industry built around gold mining—hardware stores, medicine, food—more so than originating with miners themselves. Even before he reaches California, Scharmann has several

negative interactions with other Euro-Americans abusing the precarious position of emigrants on their journey westward.

The first moment of consequential deceit marks the part of Scharmann's journey that takes him from Fort Laramie to the South Pass. Still five hundred miles from California, the company runs into a Captain Palmer, who had been accompanying a government supply train from Oregon to Fort Hall. It is this figure of a rather high official standing, with a title that one would lead to trust his judgment and recommendations, that turns out to be one of Scharmann's most dangerous encounters. Falsely claiming that he knows a faster way to get to California, Captain Palmer sends Scharmann on a trail that turns out to be a lot farther and a lot more strenuous than the originally planned route. Because of this deceit, their journey takes significantly longer than expected, and as they cross the Sierra Nevada mountains, the family's provisions begin running low. Here, they meet the next villain: Scharmann shares the narrow path sloping through the mountains with the "Western Train," a set of five wagons which are carrying beans, flour, and bacon. Owned by a Missouri company, these supplies are meant to be sold in the gold fields for high profit, so when Scharmann's son and then his wife beg the overseer of this train, a Mr. Kelle, to sell them some of the provisions, Mr. Kelle refuses. His patience running low in the face of impeding sickness and disease of his family caused by malnourishment, Scharmann suddenly turns into a rugged frontiersman: He pulls his pistol on Mr. Kelle and swears that he will shoot him before letting his own family die of hunger. Sure enough, Mr. Kelle gives in and sells the Scharmann's seventy-one pounds of flour. Scharmann's stoic commentary concludes the narration of this suspenseful incident: "so this trouble was over."<sup>46</sup> This remains the only incident in which Scharmann uses violence, or the threat of violence, throughout the account.

The second half of the travelogue mostly concerns itself with the devastating and demoralizing experiences of the actual gold digging endeavors, which, if anything, were barely successful enough to pay for lodging and a meal a day, with prices in the mining regions of California being ridiculously high. A contemporary of Scharmann's noted: "But how fickle is the Goddess of Fortune. A few realized their most sanguine expectations whilst much the largest number, (perhaps four-fifths) after having spent an immense amount of labor and money in building dams and digging ditches never realized a cent in return."<sup>47</sup>

Scharmann's descriptions of his life as a gold miner in this region are presented in an increasingly annoyed and frustrated tone of writing; the sometimes lyrical descriptions of the different landscapes he had passed through on his travels are replaced with an almost suffocating feeling, as Schamann and his two sons try to make a living in the gold fields, frequently relocating



in hopes of finding gold. But, as Scharmann bluntly notes, "A few [of those who came in the first period of the gold rush] of course found nuggets, valued at one thousand to five thousand dollars, but to look for such treasures or even to expect to find them would be just as stupid as to try to find a new road while blindfolded."<sup>48</sup> Scharmann also sympathizes with his fellow gold miners, though he does not appear to make friends with any of them. What he despises are those who make a profit off other people's immediate needs, and whose greed increases their fellow men's misery. Scharmann describes a Danish man, Mr. Lassen, that sells overpriced provisions to travelers in the first settlement they reach in California as the most "covetous and heartless man" he has ever seen.<sup>49</sup> It is greed that rules both this first settlement and all the other settlements that Scharmann traverses. He is exasperated by the level of exploitation and heartlessness displayed by those who run the settlements and by the emigrants themselves, who are crowded and suffering. With no respect for individual lives, human or animal, emigrants are left to die of common diseases such as diarrhea, and wild oxen, though known to be government property, are shot ruthlessly by the emigrants. Scharmann is highly disappointed in these lawless conditions of the Californian settlements of gold miners and condemns the lynch law that leads thieves to be hanged quickly, often without due process. In the gold fields, it seems that everyone is out to exploit another man's misfortune. Scharmann falls sick with scurvy and needs medical attention, but three of the doctors appear not to "understand enough about medicine to give a cat an enema, much less to treat a human being. However, they knew how to get at my purse."<sup>50</sup> During a short stay in Sacramento City, Scharmann feels "disgusted by this profligate life" of gambling and drinking, and sees no future for himself and his sons, leaving the city as quickly as possible.<sup>51</sup> Summing up his experiences, Scharmann proclaims about California, "At present it is only a land of vice and gruesomeness. There are almost as many thieves as honest men; one will murder the other for the sake of gold, they rob and steal whenever they can, and the only thing which preserves a semblance of justice is the Lynch Law."<sup>52</sup>

One aspect curiously missing from Scharmann's account is the racism that was prevalent among white settlers and miners. Especially in the first two years, the community of gold miners was characterized by a multinational, multiethnic makeup. But soon, Yankee miners began driving out foreigners and anyone they deemed to be the "other." Sucheng Chan has noted that at first, the nativist sentiment was even applied against British and Germans. But, while individual exceptions surely apply, in general, the English, Irish, and Germans soon lined up alongside the Yankees, who strove to drive foreigners out both by physical intimidation and by discriminatory rules and laws.<sup>53</sup> None of this is mentioned in Scharmann's travelogue. It is likely that

Scharmann kept to himself and chose not to report on these issues because he was not directly involved with them. Even so, it is another example for the German-American author's blindspots, which could be attested to his relatively privileged role within Gold Rush society, as well as to the nature of the travelogue, which was not meant to be a social critique.

For a few weeks, Scharmann settles twenty-five miles outside of Sacramento, an area where gold first was found, and decides to try his luck once more. Here, half-way between the sinful city and the desperately crowded gold fields he had escaped from, Scharmann briefly focuses on the romanticism of the rather unstable life of a gold miner, living in a tent sheltered by trees. It is the only spark of optimism during the entire description of his life in California. "The payment of rent has always annoyed me, and I had often wished that I could turn into a snail and carry my house on my back. In California, my wish came true; for everyone arrives with his blankets slung over his shoulder and immediately sets up his hotel wherever he pleases."<sup>54</sup>

The immediacy of this type of independence, in which a man works for himself, without any immediate authorities to regulate him, is dear to Scharmann, and certainly was for many of the German immigrants, many of whom had fled the conditions of servitude in their home country, only to settle in crowded tenements in cities such as New York. Of course, in the gold fields reigns a different kind of exploitation; one not ruled by the aristocracy of old Europe, but instead by uncontrolled capitalist ventures; an exploitation done unto man by his fellow man for the sake of money. The gold miners are enslaved by their inability to collect enough gold to even pay for their trip home, as the prices for daily food and lodging can barely be covered by the little bit of gold dust they find.

Scharmann sees the source of all this evil, and the reason for much of the suffering that people endure on their way to and in the gold fields of California, in the false advertising infecting people with the gold fever: "Those miserable liars . . . who raised such a great hue and cry about the inexhaustible riches of the new Eldorado. They did this because of their covetousness and their desire for speculation."<sup>55</sup>

These people and businesses, Scharmann makes it clear, are responsible for the death and misery of thousands. In Sacramento City, he obtains a copy of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, featuring "an account of the finding of many new gold veins reported by the steamer Pacific. . . . Speculators always know how to entice people and then empty their purses."<sup>56</sup> It is a tragic irony that Scharmann initially was one of the individuals in his community that helped organize a trip to the promised Gold. Towards the end of the book, Scharmann repeatedly warns his readers of what he essentially sees as an advertising fraud. However, he does later feel compelled to say about the

*New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* that this particular newspaper “has kept aloof from these exaggerations and has come nearer to telling the truth about the California gold-mines than all the English papers.”<sup>57</sup> Scharmann's own account, of course, adds to this critical reporting. Thus, the German immigrant community and press is depicted as more calculated, rational, and less exploitative than the English-speaking press of the time.

However, not all newspapers limited their Gold Rush coverage to promising reports from California; publications such as the *New York Herald* at once shared in the excitement of the promise that the discovery of gold brought with it, but also left room for more critical views on the mining for gold. On February 19, 1849, for example, the *New York Herald* printed a piece titled “A Man Who is Not Going to California,” which described the unnamed author's experiences in the Georgia gold mines. Similar to Scharmann, this writer bemoans the human misery and crime that seems to go hand in hand with the search for gold.

Oh, this lust of gold! What unforeseen miseries it is destined to bring! How many friends we have parted with, since we wrote the last chapter, we shall never meet again this side of their distant graves! They leave this city to go forth on a dangerous mission, in search of what? Gold, nothing, but gold. It is not to earn an honest, substantial livelihood, by labor, which blesses him who labors. It is to grasp the shining metal, which, for past ages, has been the fruitful cause of untold murders, and the massacres and crimes which have stained the annals of every nation on God's earth, that ever possessed mines.<sup>58</sup>

Scharmann ultimately comes to a similar conclusion. After finally returning to his home in New York after a tiring journey by ship, canoe, and mule that takes him through Nicaragua and the Gulf of Mexico, Scharmann concludes that he will never again seek out the Pacific Coast. He declares that his gold fever is gone, and he will from then on be content making a living through honest hard work, and concludes his report by urging his readers to stay home and do the same.<sup>59</sup>

The publication of Scharmann's travelogue in the *Sonntagsblatt* of the *New Yorker Staats-Zeitung* was at once an entertaining piece of adventure literature and a cautionary tale against the lure of gold mining. Accounts like Scharmann's warned readers not to trust blindly the tales of easily attainable riches and unlimited quantities of gold that were appearing in the press. Even as gold fever was raging all over the world, contemporaries—thanks to foresight or thanks to painful first-hand experience, like Scharmann—warned their fellow men not to follow the treks of miners-to-be, and instead, remain

industrious at home. Only with historical hindsight can we evaluate the full scale of economic progress and population growth, alongside the devastating and lasting environmental effects and the humanitarian crises, that marked the California Gold Rush. Unfortunately, a crucial issue of historical representation remains: the majority of writings that have characterized the Gold Rush and have become part of our cultural and historical imagination are based on the experiences of white settlers such as Scharmman. Though his perspectives are enlightening and a valuable historical source, the multinational, multiethnic experiences of the California Gold Rush remain to be discovered and brought into our understanding of this historical event, which had lasting consequences for Californian and American society.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Originally published for the *Sonntagsblatt der New-Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, Jahrgang 182, Number 15, 16, 17 and 19, from April 10, 17, and 24 and May 1, 1852.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Mountford and Stephen Tuffnell, *A Global History of Gold Rushes* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Examples for “Amerikaliteratur” are the famous Leatherstocking Tales by James Fennimore Cooper, which served as the basis for many other adventure novels set in the American West that followed. Two of the most prominent German authors in this genre were Friedrich Gerstaecker and Balduin Moellhausen, and later, Karl May. Heinrich Boernstein was a German-American publisher, activist, and author of *The Mysteries of St. Louis*.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace. Antimodernism and The Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Winfried Fluck, “The Man Who Became Weary of America: Ferdinand Kuernberger’s Novel *Der Amerika-Muede* (1855),” in *German? American? Literature?* ed. Winfried Fluck and Werner Sollors (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 175.

<sup>6</sup> Juliane Mikoletzky, *Die deutsche Amerika-Auswanderung des 19. Jahrhunderts in der zeitgenössischen fiktionalen Literatur* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1988), 3.

<sup>7</sup> An obituary in the *New York Times* states that the Scharmanns came from Giesse. However, there is no city or town in Germany called Giesse, so we can assume that the author of the obituary was actually referring to Gießen, in the state of Hessa. “H. B. Scharmman dies,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1929, 11.

<sup>8</sup> “Sie bieten ein höchst anschauliches und lebenswahres Bild einer Periode in der Kulturentwicklung Amerikas, die nun schon weit hinter uns in der Vergangenheit liegt und deren abenteuerlichen Character wir uns kaum noch würden vorstellen können, hätten wir nicht solche Beschreibungen, wie die vorliegende, zur Hand.“ Hermann B. Scharmman, *Scharmman’s Landreise nach Californien* (n.p., 1905), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Schuchalter, *Narratives of America and the Frontier in Nineteenth-Century German Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 2.

<sup>10</sup> Alexander Ritter, “German-American Literature: Critical Comments on the Current State of Ethnic Writing in Germany and its Philological Description,” in *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred-Year History*, ed. Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 344.

## Scharmann's Overland Journey to California

<sup>11</sup> Schuchalter, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Mikoletzky, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew P. Yox, "The Fate of Love. Nineteenth-Century German American Poetry," in *Traveling between Worlds. German-American Encounters*, ed. Thomas Adam and Ruth Gross (Arlington: University of Texas Press, 2006), 124.

<sup>14</sup> [n.a.] "A Man Who Is Not Going to California," in: *New York Herald*, February 19, 1849.

<sup>15</sup> Wilfried Malsch, "Einleitung. Neue Welt, Nordamerika und USA als Projektion und Problem," in *Amerika in der deutschen Literatur*, ed. Sigrid Bauschinger et al. (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph J. Roske, "The World Impact of the California Gold Rush 1849–1857," *Arizona and the West*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Autumn 1963), 187–232.

<sup>17</sup> Hermann B. Scharmann, *Scharmann's Overland Journey to California* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1918 / reprinted 1969), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Scharmann (1918), 16–17.

<sup>19</sup> Scharmann (1918), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Scharmann (1918), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Scharmann (1918), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Scharmann (1918), 26.

<sup>23</sup> Scharmann (1918), 30.

<sup>24</sup> Scharmann (1918), 32.

<sup>25</sup> Chan elaborates: "This periodization scheme is based on three criteria: changes in mining methods and business organization, changes in class relations associated with the respective methods and organization, and changes in the pattern of race and ethnic relations among the various [emigrant] groups." Sucheng Chan, "A People of Exceptional Character: Ethnic Diversity, Nativism, and Racism in the California Gold Rush," *California History*, 79, no. 2 (Summer, 2000): 50.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Isenberg, "Mercurial Nature: The California Gold Country and the Coalfields of the Ruhr Basin, 1850–1900," in *Historians and Nature. Comparative Approaches to Environmental History*, ed. Ursula Lehmkuhl and Hermann Wellenreuther (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 126.

<sup>27</sup> Scharmann (1905), 90.

<sup>28</sup> Scharmann (1905), 59.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Lekan, "German Landscape. Local Promotion of the Heimat Abroad," in *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness*, ed. Krista O'Donnell, Renate Briendenthal, and Nancy Reagin (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 141–66.

<sup>30</sup> Scharmann (1918), 111.

<sup>31</sup> Edward D. Castillo, "Foreword," in *Exterminate them! Written Accounts of the Murder, Rape, and Enslavement of Native Americans during the Gold Rush*, ed. Clifford E. Trafzer and Joel R. Hyer (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1999), ix.

<sup>32</sup> Scharmann (1918), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Scharmann (1918), 21.

<sup>34</sup> Scharmann (1918), 22.

<sup>35</sup> Scharmann (1918), 22.

<sup>36</sup> Scharmann (1918), 23.

<sup>37</sup> Scharmann (1918), 26–27.

<sup>38</sup> Scharmann (1918), 37.

<sup>39</sup> Scharmann (1918), 38.

<sup>40</sup> Clifford E. Trafzer and Joel R. Hyer, *Exterminate them! Written Accounts of the Murder, Rape, and Enslavement of Native Americans during the Gold Rush* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1999), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "Indian-White Conflicts over Yosemite," in *Green versus Gold: Sources in California's Environmental History*, ed. Carlyn Merchand (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1998), 299.

<sup>42</sup> From "A letter from E. A. Stevenson, Special Indian Agent to Hon. Thomas J. Henley, superintendent of Indian Affairs, San Francisco," in *The Destruction of the California Indians*, ed. Robert Heizer (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 15–16.

<sup>43</sup> Jeffrey L. Sammons, "Nineteenth-Century German Representations of Indians from Experience," in *Germans & Indians. Fantasies, Encounters, Projections*, ed. Colin G. Calloway, Gerd Gemuenden, and Susanne Zantop (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 185–94. Quote on p. 185.

<sup>44</sup> Albert L. Hurtado, "John A. Sutter and the Indian Business," in *John Sutter and a Wider West*, ed. Kenneth N. Owens (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 51–75.

<sup>45</sup> [n.a.] "A Man Who Is Not Going to California," in: *New York Herald*, February 19, 1849.

<sup>46</sup> Scharmann (1918), 42.

<sup>47</sup> "A Writer Recounts the Difference a Year Makes, 1851," from Franklin Street, *California in 1850, Compared with What it Was in 1849* (Cincinnati: R. E. Edwards, 1851), quoted in Merchand, *Green versus Gold*, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Scharmann (1918), 62.

<sup>49</sup> Scharmann (1918), 47.

<sup>50</sup> Scharmann (1918), 63.

<sup>51</sup> Scharmann (1918), 69.

<sup>52</sup> Scharmann (1918), 82.

<sup>53</sup> Chan, 60.

<sup>54</sup> Scharmann (1918), 73.

<sup>55</sup> Scharmann (1918), 58.

<sup>56</sup> Scharmann (1918), 91.

<sup>57</sup> Scharmann (1918), 112.

<sup>58</sup> [n.a.] "A Man Who Is Not Going to California," in: *New York Herald*, February 19, 1849.

<sup>59</sup> Scharmann (1905), 125.