Introduction

"BOHEMIA ONLY EXISTS AND is only possible in Paris," declared Henri Murger, the writer credited with popularizing and largely inventing the romance of Bohemia in mid-nineteenth-century France.[1] Yet, a decade later, a group of U.S. writers, painters, and actors assumed the mantle of Bohemianism and sought to create a self-consciously American version of *la vie bohème.* The irony of this endeavor appealed to U.S. Bohemians and informed their own self-representations: from its beginnings, American Bohemianism has seized upon the foreignness of Bohemia as a means of launching cultural criticism, expanding aesthetic possibilities, and promoting cosmopolitan aspiration. "Transplanted from the mother asphalt of Paris," Bohemia entered American culture, first becoming the province of small artistic coteries and ultimately inspiring a popular vogue replete with "Bohemian" restaurants, clubs, neighborhoods, hotels, novels, poems, paintings, and periodicals.[2] By the 1890s, the recitation piece "I'd rather live in Bohemia than any other land" could be heard in even the most decorous bourgeois drawing rooms.[3] Part literary trope, part cultural nexus, and part socioeconomic landscape, *la vie bohème* existed both within and without literary narrative, enabling and shaping dramas of artistic and countercultural experience.

Murger immortalized Bohemian Paris in a series of sketches written in 1845 and 1846, and in *La Vie de Bohème*, a popular musical melodrama staged in 1849. Defying convention and poverty, dedicating themselves to love and creativity, transforming necessity into art and carefree abandon, and outwitting *les bourgeois* (in the form of soulless landlords and creditors), Murger's Bohemians set the stage for an enduring romance that has

spurred countless representations and lived experiences, inspiring endless convolutions of art imitating life and life imitating art. Transposed into U.S. contexts, this literary romance quickly became an integral part of America's social and cultural geography.

Despite its vibrant presence, however, previous literary histories have minimized the role of Bohemia in the United States. Most commentators view American Bohemianism as a feeble imitation of a more vital European phenomenon (at least until the Greenwich Village of the second decade of the twentieth century). In Robert E. Spiller's *Literary History of the United States* (1948), Harry T. Levin articulates this perspective: "The *vie de Bohème* was deeply rooted in the interstices of European society, in the rift between artists and Philistines, between a radical intelligentsia and a predominant bourgeoisie. In America, where expansion left further room for individualism, the tensions were less explicit and the protests more superficial."[4] For Levin, the concept was simply redundant in a nation that gave the "bourgeois" a greater scope for individuality. In the recent *Cambridge History of American Literature* (2005), Richard H. Brodhead also insists that "in comparison with contemporary France, which had a stratified reading culture, nineteenth-century America is conspicuously lacking a Bohemia, a prestige-bearing *milieu artiste* defined in opposition to social respectability. In America high art was founded within, not in opposition to, the milieu of an *haute bourgeoisie*."[5]

Yet Bohemianism did take root in nineteenth-century American culture, and the very popularity and mobility of the phenomenon suggests that we should take it more seriously—without discounting its value as a form of play and humor. Alongside the revisionist histories that have dismantled the mythos of American "consensus," a new history of *la vie bohème* in the United States must address the many social and cultural differences that Bohemia both shaped and dramatized. Though comparatively mild when measured against some European varieties, American Bohemias offered a variety of oppositional standpoints. In America, as in Europe, Bohemia charted and tested "the boundaries of bourgeois life." Always opposed, the Bohemian and the Bourgeois nonetheless occupy "parts of a single field" of overlapping trajectories: they are, as Jerrold Seigel reminds us in his study *Bohemian Paris* (1986), the "positive and negative magnetic poles" that "imply, require, and attract each other."[6] In the U.S. context, I argue, the persistent differences between (and within) the categories of the Bohemian and the Bourgeois—including those based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and regional identity—ever complicate the

familiar opposition. Foregrounding these many differences, the cultural geography of Bohemia has subjected the traditional binary to many temporal, ideological, and aesthetic remappings.

Some critical accounts exaggerate Bohemian oppositionality, while others collapse the Bohemian into the Bourgeois.[7] This study reveals that, in all its manifold forms, the Bohemian and Bourgeois opposition produced important material and symbolic effects: it must be questioned but not elided. In all its many expressions, "Bohemia" never became an arbitrary or empty signifier. Instead, Bohemia offered a second and even a third term, continuing to challenge dominant ideologies and to mediate a series of social and cultural divides. Navigating between naturalistic "real life" and romantic enchantment, Bohemia moved in and out of literary genres, styles, cultural institutions, and social geographies. Bohemia appears in the writings of such disparate figures as Walt Whitman, Bret Harte, William Dean Howells, Willa Cather, Frank Norris, Henry James, Abraham Cahan, and James Weldon Johnson, as well as in numerous guidebooks, periodicals, popular novels, and memoirs. This study investigates the many textual and geographic spaces in which Bohemia was conjured.

How did these American Bohemias reinterpret *la vie bohème*? What was the role of Bohemia in negotiating between diverse cultural formations, both within and outside the United States? To answer these questions, we must pay close attention to how participants and critics imagined "Bohemia" and to how they charted its textual, visual, and performative coordinates. As Seigel has argued, "defining Bohemia's significance was a crucial way of participating in it"; *la vie bohème* was "at once a form of life and a dramatized interpretation, both of itself and of the society to which it was a response." Proceeding inductively, Seigel's study admits:

> There is no action or gesture capable of being identified as Bohemian that cannot also be—or has not been—undertaken outside of Bohemia. Odd dress, long hair, living for the moment, having no stable residence, sexual freedom, radical political enthusiasms, drink, drug taking, irregular work patterns, addiction to nightlife—all were Bohemian or not according to how they were meant or how they were taken, Bohemian at some moments and not at others.[8]

Like Seigel, I have also eschewed the search for an essential "Bohemia" or "Bohemian," focusing instead on the types of cultural work that these terms enabled.

Albert Parry, still the foremost chronicler of U.S. Bohemianism, recognized that "a book on Greenwich Village and what came before Greenwich

Village must necessarily discuss all those who designate themselves or were designated by others as Bohemians." His flexible approach was hobbled, however, by his conclusion that such analysis shows "that many of these were mere poseurs or slumming bourgeois rather than true gypsies of art."[9] In effect, Parry presupposed that we knew what Bohemia was, or at least what it should have been. His *Garrets and Pretenders: A History of Bohemianism in America* (1933) recounts many amusing anecdotes of Bohemian "pretenders" (and has been indispensable for my own research), yet, measuring all successors against Murger's prototype, he dismisses most as inauthentic or hypocritical, thus failing to analyze their social and cultural import. For Parry, as for other literary historians, "the mighty development of capitalism" in the United States impeded the development of Bohemia and muted its radical potential.[10]

There was, of course, a world of difference between the "Bohemian" as starving, consumptive artist and the "Bohemian" as consumer of exotic commodities and racy leisure activities. This study will not try to minimize the socioeconomic chasms that existed between these and other Bohemian prototypes. Yet it is only by exploring what Bohemia meant to both the putative "poseurs" and the "true gypsies of art" that we can understand why the concept of Bohemia has had such multiple resonances and lasting effects. By reconstructing what Bohemia meant in a variety of literary and social contexts, we gain a better understanding of how the mythic territory of *la Bohème* reconfigured social and cultural divisions, anticipating ongoing countercultural ideals and heralding new social expectations. Whether invoked in Richmond, Fort Worth, or Cincinnati (via literary periodicals) or in restaurants, clubs, and cafés in San Francisco and New York (by way of guidebooks, club annals, city sketches, stories, and novels), Bohemia amply demonstrates one of the central axioms of cultural geography: "place making always involves a construction, rather than merely a discovery, of difference. . . . Identity neither 'grows out' of rooted communities nor is a thing that can be possessed or owned by individual or collective social actors. It is, instead, a mobile, often unstable relation of difference."[11]

Bohemia stood for and produced such mobility and internal difference. Metonymically linked to the Gypsies (once thought to have migrated from the central European country of Bohemia), *la Bohème* moved within and without national borders: in the spirit of Shakespeare's famous "mistake" in *The Winter's Tale*, Bohemia might have a seacoast,[12] exist amongst the struggling artists and writers of the nineteenth-century Pari-

sian Latin Quarter, or take up residence in Walt Whitman's "Vault at Pfaff's," the German beer hall that housed the first self-proclaimed American Bohemians. Always portable and shape-shifting, Bohemia was the place that, for many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Americans, promised to connect (and at times disconnect) the regional and the national, the national and the cosmopolitan, the modern and the traditional. During a period in which national boundaries and populations were in a state of flux and constant redefinition, Bohemia—that "wonderful land in which all conventions are despised and art and genius take precedence over rank, wealth and fashion"—was repeatedly called upon to chart a wide range of social and cultural destinations.[13] "The strange career of American Bohemia" becomes even stranger and more interesting when we explore the "lanes and byways" of this expansive cultural geography.[14]

Part I of this study investigates how the earliest groups of U.S. Bohemians defined themselves through the imagined community of Bohemia, first in New York City and then in San Francisco. Chapter 1 details the emergence of New York's Bohemia in the late 1850s. This Bohemia clustered around Henry Clapp Jr., an iconoclast who had recently returned from Paris with the idea of recreating *la vie bohème* in Pfaff's beer cellar. His circle included Walt Whitman, whose unfinished poem "The Vault at Pfaff's" gives the chapter its title. By comparing the Bohemians' self-descriptions to less favorable representations of the group, the chapter provides a case study in the (mutually constitutive) relationship between the Bohemians and their "bourgeois" antagonists.

Chapter 2 moves to the West Coast and explores how "Bohemia" figured in the early writings and careers of Bret Harte and other *Golden Era* authors, including the "Sage-Brush Bohemian," Mark Twain. The chapter focuses on Harte, who from 1859 to 1863 used the pseudonym "The Bohemian" in a regular column. Styling himself a Bohemian flâneur, Harte approached San Franciscan life through the discursive framework of Bohemian-Bourgeois opposition, all the while recognizing both the allure and the impossibility of positing a distinct, aestheticized realm "above and beyond convention." His columns ironize and critique the city's emerging commodity culture, question bourgeois divisions between the "separate spheres," and express a fascination with such ethnic enclaves (and alternatives to the city's dominant ethos) as Chinatown and the Mexican Quarter. The columns promote the increasingly potent, and popular, ideology of the alienated, unconventional Bohemian artist—an ideology that such

writers as Harte and the Pfaffians used to express and renegotiate the relation between artists and their culture.

Part II explores the romance of Bohemia after it had become more broadly disseminated throughout the United States. After 1870, Bohemia ceased to be the exclusive province of struggling artists and writers. *La vie bohème* gained an ever wider appeal, entering both art studios and genteel drawing rooms, leaky garrets and opulent club rooms, popular novels and little magazines, ethnic quarters and the lush redwood forest of Northern California's "Bohemian Grove."

Chapter 3 introduces the stock Bohemian settings and plots that American writers and artists sought to dramatize and experience. In increasingly greater numbers, novels, dramas, and city sketches recycled and recontextualized Murger's *Scenes*; this popular vogue culminated in the "Trilbymania" of the 1890s and the revival of Murger in Puccini's *La Bohème* (first performed in New York in 1898). These narratives all convey a consistent message: to live with the utmost intensity and spirit, one must live in Bohemia. When the title character of *Phyllis in Bohemia* (1897) demands "a plot to live around," she knows where she must go. Most travels to Bohemia first occurred through the medium of print. These many narratives demonstrate the wide range of social conflicts that "Bohemia" continued to chart and negotiate: Bohemian plots routinely involve overlapping tensions between artists and "Philistines," wealth and poverty, women and men, "feminine Bohemianism" and traditional womanhood, propriety and license, America and Europe, and art and life. In all cases, Bohemia is either identified with one of these binary terms or it functions as a third term, capable of mediating (if only temporarily) between these conflicting forces. Highlighting these conflicts, the chapter weaves together such canonical texts as Henry James's *The Ambassadors* (1903) and numerous stories, sketches, and popular novels.

The Bohemian "plot to live around" continuously moved on and off the written page and took root in contemporary social geographies. Chapter 4 concentrates on the elite, all-male Bohemian Club of San Francisco, a group that included wealthy businessmen, leading politicians, Stanford and Berkeley professors, and such writers and artists as Frank Norris, Jules Tavernier, and Jack London. The formal invitations to the club's midsummer encampments at what would soon become known as the "Bohemian Grove" all proffer hope of a personal and collective transformation. The emphasis and imagery shift over the years, yet each invitation promises that the annual encampment will redress psychic strain, and answer long-

ings for a world elsewhere—both within and without the self. Analyzing the club's rhetoric and rituals, recorded in its yearly annals, and focusing on its summer retreat to the "Bohemian Grove," the chapter demonstrates how the promise of "Bohemia" intersected with a range of emerging therapeutic discourses. Most commentaries on the Bohemian Club stress only the irony of the club's name. Yet in a limited and contradictory way, the club fostered alternatives to dominant cultural norms. An answer to fin-de-siècle malaise, this "Bohemia" (and other such clubs) became a locus of bourgeois desire and social experimentation: it enabled a rethinking of bourgeois work and leisure ethics, gender roles, and spiritual commitments.

During the heyday of the Bohemian vogue, the desire to "live in Bohemia" extended throughout the country and appeared in a number of unexpected locales. Chapter 5 demonstrates the extent to which Bohemia functioned as a liminal terrain, mediating between national and regional cultures, and, in so doing, complicating standard literary and social geographies. In most accounts, the regional metonymizes the provincial and upholds traditional values, while Bohemia represents urbane and risqué metropolitanism. Mapping a spatial and temporal split between the rural/regional and the urban/national, Bohemia aligns with the latter. Yet, during this same period, Bohemia also functioned to reject such antinomies. Regional variants of *la vie bohème* often took the form of periodicals, ones that flaunted "Bohemia" in their very titles. These regional *Bohemians* aggressively and explicitly sought to counteract the cultural hegemony of the Northeast; they also proved to be especially important to a number of women writers, enabling them to embrace the modernity of the "New Woman" from within their local cultures.

At the turn into the twentieth century, Bohemia mediated between the regional and the national. During the same period, I argue, this mobile geography also functioned to articulate and displace the cultural divide between the national and the global. Chapter 6, "Cosmopolitan Bohemias," focuses on the territories that contemporary guidebooks designated as "neither strictly native nor wholly foreign."[15] From its very beginnings in the 1850s, American Bohemianism had represented an international mixture of cultural styles. Invoking the Gypsies by way of the Parisian Latin Quarter, Bohemia signified both sophistication (for supporters) and cultural decadence (for critics). The stakes behind these two opposing views of *la vie bohème* only increased at the turn of the century, a period in which twenty million "new immigrants" entered the nation and Jim Crow laws reinstitutionalized the color line. In this cultural climate, the standard

opposition between the Bohemian and the Bourgeois often functioned to underscore a conflict between more restrictive and more cosmopolitan and multicultural visions of national identity.

The final chapter examines what remains the most legendary of American Bohemias. The much-touted Bohemian "spirit" promised to defy geographic boundaries, even as it became increasingly identified with Greenwich Village. Here, many of the trends pioneered by earlier American Bohemias came to fruition. Negotiating between art and life, capital and labor, women and men, the modern and the genteel, the spiritual and the commercial, the Village popularized new forms of political activism, artistic expression, and "free love." Though variously contained and co-opted, the "spirit" of the Village nonetheless continues to inspire new countercultural visions and adventures.

From the basement at Pfaff's to the redwood forest of the Bohemian Grove, the cultural geography of Bohemia has occupied a vital intersection between the romantic and the real. Both a "real-and-imagined" place (in geographer Edward Soja's terms), Bohemia marks the crossroads between "the forms and patternings of 'real' material life" and the "mental and ideational worlds of abstract or 'imagined' spaces."[16] As such, Bohemia has offered its citizens (as it still offers its historians) an important site for the "encounter between geography and literary history"—a meeting that, as Sarah Blair has recently argued, "holds out the possibility for more intimate and more precise understandings of human praxis and of imaginative productions as social forces."[17] Because "living in Bohemia" was, by definition, an encounter between geography and literary history, *la vie bohème* helps us to think about how the categories of the mimetic, the material, and the imaginative continually inform one another. By complicating and defamiliarizing "traditional categories of US space and place, [including] nature, region, landscape, pastoral, the frontier,"[18] and even "America" itself, Bohemia offers a site from which to replot these territories, situating them along both national and transnational axes.

A mythic "republic within the republic," Bohemia provides a particularly useful standpoint for thinking outside the constraints of the American liberal consensus. Whether or not such a cultural position exists in American literary history remains controversial. In an influential argument, Sacvan Bercovitch maintains that the limitations of our classic American writers relate to their inability to imagine "perspectives radically other than those implicit in the vision of America": instead, "their works are character-

ized by an unmediated relation between the facts of American life and the ideals of liberal free enterprise." This study argues that for some American writers, "Bohemia" provided one form of mediation, however partial and limited. It was a realm within and without the United States where a "symbolic play between cultural options" could be performed.[19] Never admitting easy resolution, the dialectics of Bohemianism destabilize any reduction of the real to the ideal, the Bohemian to the Bourgeois, the ethnic to the national, the regional to the provincial, the gendered to the biological, or the aesthetic to the commercial. This book seeks to restore this complexity to the counterculture known and experienced as Bohemia.