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PROLOGUE

Emigrant Song

Within our newly acquired possessions on the borders of Mexico and the Pacific coast, and the recently organized territories in the interior of the continent, are numerous powerful and warlike tribes, of whom little is known, and whose history has no connection with that of the people of the United States, except the fact that they were original occupants of the soil, and that some of them, especially the California Indians, yet dispute our right to sovereignty. | BENSON J. LOSSING, "The Extreme Western Tribes," *A Pictorial History of the United States: For Schools and Families*

In the early 1850s, Olive Oatman was a typical pioneer girl heading west on a wagon train full of Mormons in search of gold and God. By the end of the decade she was a white Indian with a chin tattoo, torn between two cultures. Orphaned at fourteen after her family was massacred by Yavapai Indians in northern Mexico (now southern Arizona), Oatman spent a year as a slave to her attackers before she was traded to the Mohaves, who tattooed her and raised her as their own. Four years later, under threat of war, the Mohaves delivered her back to the whites in exchange for horses, blankets, and beads.¹

This much is true. But the fine points of Oatman's transformation from forty-niner to white savage have been replayed in countless books and articles—modern and Victorian—that read like Rashomans of revisionist history and romantic conjecture. In her day, Oatman was freakish enough to invite speculation and guarded enough

to ensure that the speculation never ended. Because her story was saturated with violence, military intrigue, and sexual innuendo, it quickly became legend. She was the subject of a lurid, best-selling biography published in 1857, called *Life Among the Indians*, by a Methodist reverend named Royal B. Stratton, who stripped her Mormonism from her narrative and portrayed the caring Mohave Indians who raised her as “degraded bipeds.”²

Stratton also launched Oatman’s nearly decade-long public-speaking career. Her experience inspired plays, artworks, and, in the 1880s, theft, when the first tattooed circus ladies used it as a script for their own Wild West fabrications about being taken captive and tattooed by “redskins.” Today, in the Arizona town that bears her name, her cheerless, tattooed face adorns the Olive Oatman Restaurant, across the street from the Oatman Hotel where, in its better days, Clark Gable and Carole Lombard spent their honeymoon.

In 1943 the *Galveston Daily News* claimed that a group of Southwest scholars had voted the Oatman saga Americans’ “favorite Indian story” of the West. “It is still told constantly around campfires, in college lectures, even on radio programs,” the paper asserted, perhaps a bit too promotionally, because this was the reason for telling it again—incorrectly.³

Because the Mohaves have no written language, their impressions of Oatman’s captivity were not recorded during her lifetime. But in the mid-twentieth century, anthropologist A. L. Kroeber published an interview he had conducted in 1903 with a Mohave who had known her that contradicted what Stratton had written about her allegedly shabby treatment by the tribe, as did Kroeber’s publication of Oatman’s first postransom interview, with the military commander, Martin Burke, who retrieved her. What Oatman told Burke (as well as the first journalists to interview her after her ransom) differed markedly from the Stratton account and raised questions about whether she ever wanted to leave the Mohaves in the first place. Today, any Mohave who knows her story will say the tribe

saved her life. “They felt sorry for her,” said Llewellyn Barrackman, a tribal elder and spokesperson who died in 2006. “We have a feeling for people.”⁴

What is merely a historical footnote for the Mohaves has become a lovingly burnished, ever-evolving myth for white Americans. A hundred and fifty years after Oatman’s return, writers—amateur and professional, religious and scholarly—continue to rework it, invariably reflecting their own cultural fantasies as vividly as Oatman’s particular experience. It was the subject of a 1965 episode of *Death Valley Days* (starring Ronald Reagan), an Elmore Leonard story, two novels, and four children’s books, including a Christian title sold with a collectible Oatman figurine (worth \$695)—facial tattoo and all. Since the 1990s, feminist scholars have revisited Oatman, exploring her status as a white captive and her importance as the author of one of the last captivity tales in a literary genre as old as the colonies. In early 2006, on the sesquicentennial of Oatman’s rescue, more than a hundred people met at Yuma, Arizona, and drove eighty miles into the desert to the site of the Oatman massacre, where the family is buried, to hear Olive’s ordeal reprised once again, this time by one of her Mormon descendants.

For all its recycling, the only constant about the Oatman story is that no two authors agree on what happened. It’s as if the minute she stepped back into the white world and rinsed the mesquite dye from her hair, the truth was washed away and fiction would forever infest her biography. When her family was attacked, for example, Oatman’s mother was in labor *or* she was carrying a newborn baby who was skewered by the Yavapais. Before her ransom, Oatman was fully absorbed into the Mohave family she had come to love, possibly with a husband and children *or* she was desperate to return to her own people. The day of her delivery from the Mohaves, she tried to bury herself in the sand on the bank of the Colorado River because she didn’t want to go home *or* because she was embarrassed to appear topless before her white liberators. She was ecstatic to see her

countrymen again *or* she cried hopelessly for two days. She married a wealthy banker and lived happily ever after *or* she died, “physically wrecked and mentally numbed,” in an insane asylum.⁵

Some Oatman enthusiasts boldly wrote themselves into her life. In 1913, a decade after her death, an eighty-five-year-old bailiff in Omaha boasted, in a half-page profile in the *Sunday World Herald*, that he’d single-handedly saved her from the Mohaves by carrying her out of a teepee and delivering her to Fort Whipple, in central Arizona.⁶ Apparently, no one told him that the Mohaves didn’t use teepees, or that Fort Whipple hadn’t been built at the time of her ransom. Five years later in the *Oakland Tribune*, a California farmer made the same claim, but his tall tale ran away with him. He said he had been a scout with Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill, battled Sitting Bull, saw Custer take his last breath and, like Oatman, had been taken captive as a child by Indians who tattooed his chin, conveniently hidden by a full beard at press time. He claimed not only to have rescued the prisoner but also to have canoed three hundred miles through the rapids of the Grand Canyon — “a route that no white man ever traversed before” — to get her to back to civilization.⁷

Why has Oatman commanded so much attention? Unlike more prominent women of the 1850s and ’60s, such as Susan B. Anthony, Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, she wasn’t a social activist, though her public-speaking career pushed the limits of feminine convention. She was no feminist — at least not after her ransom. She had lived with a tribe in which women enjoyed a greater degree of physical, sexual, and domestic freedom than white women in America, as well as higher social status in regard to men, even by Native American standards, but in her lectures, she encouraged women to enjoy their homes and be glad they didn’t live as she had. She was not a defector, like some famous captives who chose to stay with their tribes, such as Mary Jemison, taken by Shawnee Indians a century earlier and traded to the Seneca at about the same age as Oatman, or Cynthia Ann Parker, who lived with the Comanche from

the age of nine until she was forcibly—and tragically—returned at age thirty-four, in 1860.

Oatman's mysterious persona accounts for a small piece of her star power. She had a gothic beauty; the dozen or so surviving photos of her betray a brooding intensity that reads as a reflection of either her lonely trial or her cleaved self. In all the documentation of her life—articles, interviews, reminiscences by friends, and even her biography—she laughs just once, in an interview conducted on the day of her repatriation, and even then, the source of her amusement is unclear. The Mohaves were terrific mimics who loved a good tease and a bawdy joke; almost every description of them before their reservation days mentions their laughter, and they were considered “notoriously outspoken and uninhibited.”⁸ The unanswerable question of whether Oatman ever relaxed into their utterly un-Mormon social style only compounds her mystery.

The greater part of her fascination, however, lies in her unresolved duality. No American immigrants or captives have worn their hybrid identities so publicly. Like the nation's most famous fictional branded woman, Hester Prynne (who also seized the public imagination in the 1850s), Oatman wore a permanent symbol of soul-searing transgression. She was, in the parlance of her day, “redeemed” as a captive, but there's little redemption in her story. She was a half-finished woman who neither fully renounced the Mohaves nor settled back comfortably into white culture, which may explain why she contradicted herself: her affection for her Mohave family, for example, bleeds through the pages of her biography (which includes long stretches of first-person narrative) even as she disparages them, following Stratton's virulently racist agenda.

The Blue Tattoo attempts not only to sift out the truth of the Oatman story but also to offer a historical understanding of it, particularly concerning the Mohaves, a once charismatic and idiosyncratic tribe—the largest in California—now vastly diminished and all but purged from national memory. In the mid-nineteenth century they,

too, were hybrids of a sort, blending Southwest and Californian Indian traditions, such as face painting and tattoo, respectively, and straddling California and Arizona geographically, on either side of the Colorado River. An accidental ethnographer, Oatman recorded her memories of them in their last decade of sovereignty. Soon after she left them, they were forced off their land and pressed into a life of poverty; today, only about a thousand survive.⁹

Oatman stood at the crossroads of history when the West was stolen. At the end of the Mexican War, with the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, half of Mexico was swallowed up by the United States, expanding the nation's girth by 66 percent and pushing its western boundary from Texas to California. "Manifest Destiny," a phrase minted in 1845 by the *New York Morning News* and circulated by an aggressively expansionist president, James K. Polk, of Tennessee, encouraged citizens to stampede toward the Pacific and claim what they believed—and were told—was theirs. For Northerners, this was an opportunity to open the West for democracy; for Southerners, to secure it for slavery. For California Indians, who were in the way, it meant genocide: between 1848 and 1865, an estimated fifteen thousand out of seventy-two thousand Indians were killed in the Golden State. The bloodshed was no accident. "A war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races," California's first governor told the legislature in 1851, "till the Indian race becomes extinct."¹⁰

The land grab that made this extermination possible happened under Oatman's feet, in the space of a decade. She was living with the Mohaves during the signing of the 1853 Gadsden Purchase, by which lower Arizona, formerly part of the Mexican state of Sonora, was ceded to the United States (with a corner of New Mexico) as the last puzzle piece in the map of the Southwest. Americans were now traversing a million square miles of newly acquired land, blind to the borders—cultural, geographical, and psychological—that had previously set them apart from Mexicans and Southwest Indians.

Oatman's story reflects the crossed boundaries and trampled fron-

tiers that marked this transaction. She survived the botched pursuit of the American Dream, arrived at a geographical and utopian terminus—California—where, as Joan Didion famously put it, “we run out of continent.”¹¹ Then, reborn as a white Mohave, she turned around and went east again. Her blue tattoo became a poignant, permanent, ethnic marker, invoking both the cultural imprint of her Mohave past and the lingering scars of westward expansion.

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The challenge of separating fact from fiction in retelling the Oatman saga has not been easy. Debunking the rumors that swirled around her in life and death is a fairly simple matter of fact checking; distinguishing between what she truly experienced in captivity and how Stratton presented it in *Captivity of the Oatman Girls*, the biography he ghostwrote for her, is more challenging. But by analyzing Stratton’s motivations in telling her story, his knowledge of and attitude toward Indians and his theological and colonial vision of the West, and by examining the passages in *Captivity of the Oatman Girls* that are provably false, a clear pattern of manipulation emerges, and it is possible to disentangle—to a degree—his story from hers.

Chapter 1 reconstructs Oatman’s journey west, drawing from Stratton (who had little reason to distort this portion of the narrative beyond excising its references to Mormonism), historical documents, newspapers, and the letters and diaries of people who traveled with the family. Chapters 2 through 10, chronicling Oatman’s time among the Yavapais and the Mohaves, rely on only the parts of *Captivity of the Oatman Girls* that accord with ethnographic, military, and historical records, newspaper interviews she gave immediately after her ransom (before she met Stratton), and the memories of Musk Melon, a Mohave who knew her. Details that cannot be cross-referenced, such as Oatman’s relationship with her Mohave family and her brother Lorenzo’s postmassacre travels alone in the desert (chapter 5), are included only if they contain no historical or ethno-

graphic inconsistencies and if they fall outside Stratton's schema of distortion. Some of Lorenzo's story can be checked against accounts he gave decades later. Chapters 11 and 12 identify Stratton's modifications to the story, his motivations for changing it, and the ethnographic errors that flag his meddling. Chapters 13 and 14, chronicling Oatman's adult life in New York, and later, in Texas, are based on correspondence by, with, and about her, and on newspaper stories about her.

Finally, Stratton's book appeared in three editions from 1857 to 1858, each longer than the last, by three different publishers; in a 1909 edition of the *Oregon Teacher's Monthly*, which was reprinted by Dover Publications in 1994; and also in a 1983 edition published by the University of Nebraska Press. For concision, my citations refer to the latter, comprehensive edition by the University of Nebraska Press, except where I have specifically identified an earlier edition.

I

Quicksand

“It was starvation to stay, and almost inevitable disaster to go forward.”

| J. ROSS BROWNE, “A Tour through Arizona”

The Oatman family spent their last night together marooned on a tiny island surrounded by quicksand in the Gila River in Mexico. California bound, they had left their farm in Illinois in May of 1850, joined twenty other families in Missouri in July, and by February of 1851, they were alone—seven children and their parents, Royce and Mary Ann—in what would become southwestern Arizona, trying to cross the swollen Gila in three-foot water and failing miserably as their cattle foundered on the river floor. An island little bigger than a sand bar would have to do for the night. Royce unhitched the oxen, led them to the land, then waded across the river to gather firewood. With the help of her older children, Mary Ann unloaded supplies and prepared a dinner of bean soup and stale bread, which the family ate by moonlight.

Their situation was desperate. Their horse had died, and their scant remaining cattle were so weak that some of the children, aged two to seventeen, had been forced to walk long stretches of their route from Maricopa Wells, eighty miles back. They were on a barely blazed trail eroded by recent storms. The food they’d packed under the floor of their prairie schooners before starting west was nearly spent—enough jerked meat and dried fruit, flour, meal, bacon, and beans, to last eighteen months, they’d thought. They had abandoned



FIG. 1. Olive Oatman, 1857, by Charles and Arthur Nahl. The engraving appeared at the end of the first edition of *Life Among the Indians: Being an Interesting Narrative of the Captivity of the Oatman Girls* and was moved to the front for subsequent editions.

one of their wagons in New Mexico after their oxen had dwindled to the point where they had no way to pull it. They had no money, nothing to trade, and over one hundred miles to go across the scorched desert before they would reach Fort Yuma, an army post just over the brand new California border.¹ Soon they would have another mouth to feed: Mary Ann was nearly nine months pregnant.

Still, the Oatmans feared one thing more than famine: Indians. Before leaving Maricopa Wells, they had been warned that the Apaches were attacking emigrants up and down the Gila, and their fellow pioneers had urged them to stay. But a famine there made prospects for survival slim, so when a traveling entomologist named John LeConte arrived from Fort Yuma, loaded with fossils and beetle specimens, saying he had seen no trace of Indians on the trail, Royce decided to move on, leaving the remaining two families in his party behind, shaking their heads.

Seven days after the Oatmans left Maricopa Wells, LeConte overtook them on his return to Fort Yuma. By now Royce recognized that his supplies and cattle couldn't possibly carry the family through to Yuma. He wrote a letter to the commander of the fort, asking for help, and LeConte promised to deliver it. "I am under the necessity of calling upon you for assistance," he pleaded, requesting horses and harnesses. "There is my wife & seven children and without help sir I am confident we must perish [*sic*]."²

The next day, thirty miles down the trail, LeConte and his Mexican guide met a band of Indians, four of whom distracted the two men at their camp by feigning friendship and making small talk while others stole their horses from a nearby valley. Concerned that the Oatman rescue would be delayed for days while he walked the remaining one hundred miles to Fort Yuma, LeConte posted a card on a tree warning the family about the Indians.

Though he didn't mention LeConte's card to the children, Royce had probably seen it by the time they reached the Gila, where he

began to fray. At the start of the trip he believed that, treated well, Indians were inherently friendly, and he even blamed their violence on cruel treatment by whites. When he'd worked as a traveling merchant in Iowa, Royce had mastered an attitude of unflappable cool to placate them, and his approach had always worked. But this journey had tested his theory. Some Indians had shared his tobacco and traded with him; others had stolen his cattle or pressured him into bartering irreplaceable pots and pans along with beans and bread. One night, as he and his fellow emigrants camped on the Arkansas River, Apaches on the other side had massacred a group traveling in a government expedition and stolen a hundred mules. Now the information he'd chosen to ignore back in Maricopa Wells was roiling in his mind: though LeConte hadn't been assaulted by Indians himself, he *had* said Apaches were moving in the hills, and Royce knew they were much more likely to menace a family traveling alone than members of a wagon train.

That night, a high wind swept river water onto the two-hundred-square-foot island, threatening to snuff out the fire and forcing the family to move its camp repeatedly. No one, including the spooked cattle, got much sleep. Fifteen-year-old Lorenzo spent much of the night tending to the frightened animals while the older children shivered around the fire and their parents conferred inside the wagon. Mary Ann, who had her own worries, not the least of which was kicking inside her, comforted Royce as he broke down and wept for a solid hour, lamenting the dangerous situation he had brought his family into. She assured him he was simply exhausted and his mind was working overtime. Only seventeen-year-old Lucy, the eldest, heard her father cry.

The gravity of the situation hadn't fully impressed Olive and her younger siblings, Royce Jr., eleven, Mary Ann, seven, and Charity Ann, five, who blithely fantasized about what they would do if Apaches attacked them. One would run; another would "fight and die fighting"; another would hold them off with a gun or a club.