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*Vanishing Americans:
Gender, Empire, and New Historicism*

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CULTURAL historians have identified James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* as one of approximately forty novels published in the U. S. between 1824 and 1834 that together suggest the existence of a virtual "cult of the Vanishing American" in the antebellum period. Requisite to membership in this cult was a belief that the rapid decrease in the native population noted by many Jacksonian-era observers was both spontaneous and ineluctable.¹ Cooper would seem to betray his indoctrination in the cult of the vanishing American when he states in the introduction to the 1831 edition of his novel that it was "the seemingly inevitable fate of all [native tribes]" to "disappear before the advances . . . of civilisation [just] as the verdure of their native forests falls before the nipping frost."² The elegiac mode here performs the historical sleight-of-hand crucial to the topos of the doomed aboriginal: it represents the disappearance of the native as not just natural but as having already happened.³

¹ Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U. S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1982), p. 2. Dippie borrows the phrase from G. Harrison Orians, *The Cult of the Vanishing American: A Century View* (Toledo, Ohio: H. J. Chittenden, 1934).

My own essay grows out of talks I gave in 1988 at the University of California at Los Angeles, Northwestern University, Princeton University, the University of Rochester, and at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association in Miami Beach, Florida. The current version is based on talks delivered at the University of Texas, Austin, in 1989 and at a conference sponsored by The Center for the Critical Analysis of Contemporary Culture at Rutgers University in 1990. I wish to thank Ann Cvetkovich, Walter Michaels, Jeff Nunokawa, Michael Rogin, Eric Sundquist, and Lynn Wardley—each of whom offered indispensable advice on one of the multitude of earlier drafts of this essay.

² *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757* (Albany, N.Y.: State Univ. of New York Press, 1983), pp. 6–7. Hereafter quotations will be taken from this edition and cited parenthetically in the text.

³ In fact, the rise of the cult of the Vanishing American corresponds roughly with the

In the novel itself, of course, Cooper's Indians "vanish" in somewhat more spectacular fashion than the introductory invocation of forest and frost leads us to anticipate. However pacific the introduction's simile, in the narrative proper individual representatives of the *doomed* race expire in utterly sensational ways. Indeed, the frequency with which Cooper's Indians plunge to their death from great heights is positively dumbfounding.

The most memorable instance of this is the villainous Magua's spectacular demise at the end of the novel. Evading pursuit by Cooper's white hero Hawk-eye, Magua attempts to leap from the brow of a mountain to an adjacent precipice, but he falls "short of his mark" and finds himself dangling from a "giddy height," clinging desperately to a shrub growing from the side of the precipice. Bent on destroying his enemy, Hawk-eye fires. The wounded Magua's hold loosens, and "his dark person [is] seen cutting the air with its head downwards, for a fleeting instant . . . in its rapid flight to destruction" (p. 338).

To claim that Cooper earlier *foreshadows* Magua's Miltonic fall would grossly understate the case. Indeed, the fall of dark persons from on high is a virtual *theme* in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Similar rapid flights to destruction abound, for example, in an early confrontation between whites and enemy Indians that takes place in the vertiginous topography of a huge cavern. One Indian plunges "into [a] deep and yawning abyss" (p. 69). A second hurls "headlong among the clefts of [an] island" (p. 70). A third tumbles down an "irrecoverable precipice" (p. 71), while yet another drops "like lead" into the "foaming waters" below (p. 75).

Mere sensationalism does not quite account for Cooper's fascination with the precipitous dark person. The figure sometimes surfaces in relatively banal forms—for example, when the noble savage Uncas at one point darts "through the air" and leaps upon Magua, "driving him many yards . . . headlong and prostrate"

rise of the U. S. government's policy of Indian Removal, a massive military campaign of systematic dispossession and effective extermination begun in the late 1820s. According to Francis Paul Prucha in *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984), "the military phase of Indian relations" would not end until the early 1880s (p. 560). Thus we see just how much effort went into effecting the "inevitable."

(p. 113), or later when, in his fatal attempt to save Cora Munro's life, Uncas leaps between her and Magua in an act of what Cooper calls "headlong precipitation" (p. 336). And perhaps the most banal reiteration of the figure occurs when the novelist describes a Huron, tomahawk in his hand and malice in his heart, rushing at Uncas. A quick-witted white man sticks out his foot to trip the "eager savage" as he passes, and the Huron is "precipitated . . . headlong" to the ground (p. 238). Etymologically considered ("precipitation" is from *praeceps* or "headlong"), the phrase is as peculiarly reiterative as the headlong aboriginal it describes.

I would like to suggest that the redundancy of both phrase and figure in Cooper's novel signals that text's participation in and instantiation of a larger antebellum cultural discourse in which the ethnographic and pedagogic overlap. Cooper at one point refers to an enemy Huron who is about to plunge down a precipice as a "prodigy" (p. 69). An educational treatise written by a doctor and appearing six years after *The Last of the Mohicans* discusses the phenomenon of precocity and provides a compelling if unlikely analogue to Cooper's precipitous native. In his *Remarks on the Influence of Mental Cultivation and Mental Excitement Upon Health*, Dr. Amariah Brigham records the case of a white prodigy, one William M., born in Philadelphia on the Fourth of July, 1820. While still a toddler, William M. astonished those around him with his musical talents, his conversational skills, and his lofty moral sentiments.

According to Brigham, "the heads of great thinkers . . . are wonderfully large." At birth William M.'s head "was of ordinary size," but "very soon, after an attack of dropsy of the brain, it began to grow inordinately." Indeed, by the time the child learned to walk, his head had grown so large that "he was apt to fall, especially forwards, from readily losing his equilibrium." This tendency proved to be more than a minor annoyance. At eight years of age he suffered a precipitous demise—a death both untimely and literally headlong. Losing his balance one day, he fell headfirst against a door, bruised his forehead, "became very sick, and died the next evening." William M.'s fatal loss of equilibrium evinces the thesis advanced in this section of Brigham's treatise, namely, that "mental precocity is gener-

ally a symptom of disease; and hence those who exhibit it very frequently, die young." A "passion for books" and other mental excitements may, in the doctor's opinion, presage early death.⁴

The ethnographic subtext of Brigham's thesis (and hence the treatise's relevance to Cooper's novel) becomes more legible when William M.'s story is juxtaposed against Margaret Fuller's discussion of equilibrium and race in her account of a journey into Indian territory in *A Summer on the Lakes* (1844). In fact, the case of William M. reads like a curiously materialist interpretation of what Fuller calls "civilized man[']s larger mind." Fuller sees the difference between "civilized" and "savage" as in part a matter of proportions, a difference of relative development of mind and body. Civilized man "is constantly breaking bounds, in proportion as the mental gets the better of the mere instinctive existence." In the process, however, "he loses in harmony of being what he gains in height and extension; the civilized man is a larger mind but a more imperfect nature than the savage." What Fuller calls "civilized man[']s larger *mind*," Brigham translates into civilized man's larger *head*—but even Fuller's analysis has a materialist component. She asserts that Indian tribes subjugated by whites cease to bear physical resemblance to members of their race as yet uncontaminated by civilization. Unlike other natives, members of conquered tribes, she writes, are "no longer strong, tall, or finely proportioned."⁵

Whereas Fuller imagines that physical degeneration in the form of disproportion is desirable because it fosters spiritual development, Brigham believes in "the necessity of giving more attention to the health and growth of the body, and less to the cultivation of the mind . . . than is now given." But Brigham's concern extends beyond individual bodies and their well-being. Educational treatises published in the U. S. in the antebellum period slide easily from the individual to the race. Brigham's preface declares, "The people of the United States ought to become the most vigorous and powerful race of human beings,

⁴ *Remarks on the Influence of Mental Cultivation and Mental Excitement Upon Health*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1833; rpt. New York: Arno, 1973), pp. 49, 42, 36, 45.

⁵ *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown; New York: Charles S. Francis, 1844), pp. 221, 182.

both in mind and body, that the world has ever known."⁶ William M.'s significant birthplace (Philadelphia) and birthdate (the Fourth of July) render him the local instance of an alleged racial defiance of Brigham's imperialist imperative.

The same entanglement of child-rearing and empire-building surfaces in the work of Catharine Beecher—whose popular advice to housewives and whose former position as head of the prestigious Hartford Female Seminary guaranteed her pedagogy both domestic and institutional influence.⁷ Like Brigham, Beecher worried that Anglo-American children were "becoming less and less healthful and good-looking" and that they were every year producing children even "more puny and degenerate" than themselves. Beecher contrasts puny Anglo-Americans with the robust ancient Greeks, who, she asserts, were of a stock so vigorous that they "conquered nearly the whole world."⁸ This last comment suggests the way in which early nineteenth-century educational treatises—characteristically if not constitutionally—traverse the discursive registers of home and empire. The figure of the prodigy, one may conclude, organizes into a single discursive economy two distinct cultural arenas expressed through binarisms of feminine and masculine, private and public, suburbia and frontier, sentiment and adventure.⁹ Expressing these binarisms in somewhat different terms, I would claim that the prodigy illuminates the affiliations of the micro- and the macro-political.

⁶ Brigham, pp. vii, viii.

⁷ For a relevant discussion of the intersecting rhetoric of domesticity and imperialism see Amy Kaplan, "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s," *American Literary History*, 2 (1990), 659–90.

⁸ *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1855), pp. 8, 10, 8.

⁹ The criticism on the Leatherstocking tales has played a crucial role in establishing for us a sense of ideological distance between the frontier and the home. Since D. H. Lawrence's famous analysis of Cooper's Leatherstocking series appeared in 1923, Cooper criticism has taken as one of its perennial themes the anti-feminine (if not outright misogynist) sensibility compelling Natty Bumppo's flight from the civilized society of women into the savage society of the red man. See, for example, Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951) and Leslie A. Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Meridian, 1960).

I

Michel Foucault supplies a model for uncovering the connections between micro- and macro-politics when (in anticipating objections to his characterization of modern government as "power organized around the management of life rather than the menace of death")¹⁰ he concedes that the modernity of the genocidal might seem to suggest that the life-destroying power of the sovereign not only survived his decapitation but actually *escalated* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Conceiving of modern power as the power to administer life rather than the power to inflict death would seem to require ignoring the genocidal animus which has characterized Western interaction with both Jews and people of color in the modern era. By emphasizing production, Foucauldian theory would seem unable to account for the racial holocausts that have punctuated the modern era and hence would seem necessarily to marginalize (if not to erase altogether) an important part of the history of Jews and the Third World.

Yet, even if race remains a largely undeveloped category of analysis in the history it traces, still *The History of Sexuality* does theorize interracial conflict as an inevitable component of modernity. Foucault asserts that precisely inasmuch as power legitimates and incarnates itself through "the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life," racial holocaust becomes "vital" to its expression. Arguing for the simultaneity of productive technologies that promote the well-being of the individual and deductive technologies that ensure the well-being of the race, he writes that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe "precocious sexuality was presented . . . as an epidemic menace that risked compromising not only the future health of adults but the future of the entire society and species."¹¹ Modifying Foucault's analysis slightly, I will be locating antebellum representations of the prodigy—a less explicitly sexualized relative of the precocious child—on the discursive axis of two distinctive forms of power in modern Western societies.

Foucault's remarks on genocide unsettle the thumbnail liter-

¹⁰ *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), p. 147.

¹¹ Foucault, pp. 136–37, 146.

ary history proposed earlier in *The History of Sexuality*. There Foucault proposes that the rise of the micro-political corresponds roughly with the displacement of narratives of adventure by narratives of sentiment: "we have passed from a pleasure to be recounted . . . centering on the heroic . . . narration of 'trials' of bravery . . . to a literature ordered according to the infinite task of extracting [truth] from the depths of oneself."¹² Perhaps one consequence of this statement is that Foucauldian criticism has concentrated on domestic, realist, and sentimental fictions to the neglect of adventure fictions (which, because they so often unfold on borders between "civilized" and "savage," frequently engage questions of the survival of races). Foucauldian New Historicist critics writing about the nineteenth century—particularly, Richard Brodhead, Nancy Armstrong, and D. A. Miller—have constructed the home and its narratives as, in Miller's words, the domain of an "extralegal series of 'micro-powers'" and hence the proper sphere for Foucauldian inquiry.¹³ But if we take seriously Foucault's comments about the involution of micro- and macro-powers around questions of race, then we would expect to uncover not the superannuation of heroism by sentiment but rather their simultaneity and co-implication. The ease with which educational treatises like Beecher's and Brigham's oscillate from the individual to the race suggests the pertinence of Foucauldian analysis to race relations. Similarly, analysis of the figure of the precipitous aboriginal whose precocity signals his *inevitable* demise in *The Last of the Mohicans* suggests that this type of analysis is as relevant to imperial fictions as it is to domestic ones.

Such a reading of the relation between home and frontier, however, suggests more than the need for simple expansion of the domain of New Historicism. I would like to use this reading as an occasion to interrogate the politics of Foucauldian analysis itself. Uncovering the interaction between micro- and macro-political concerns raises some questions about the gender and racial politics of the Foucauldian "shift" from which New Historicist criticism on the nineteenth century proceeds.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹³ *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1988), p. viii.

A shift from an economy of punishment to one of discipline is not just passively evidenced but rather *actively deployed* in early nineteenth-century U. S. representations of the prodigy. It is not simply that antebellum texts like *The Last of the Mohicans* either prefigure or preempt contemporary theoretical and critical developments (although I *would* claim that New Historicism of the Foucauldian variety has in its discussion of power recapitulated more than it has analyzed an important component of nineteenth-century discourse). More importantly, I would argue that a reading of antebellum texts demonstrates that narratives of the shift from punishment to discipline (like the one Foucauldian New Historicism has given us) have, historically, operated to the detriment of both white middle-class women and people of color. Whatever its politics within its own cultural setting, Foucauldian knowledge does not encounter a political vacuum when it enters contemporary U. S. critical discourse. Instead it meets with a history extending back to the antebellum period in which intellectuals have deployed narratives of a shift in the nature of power toward politically suspicious ends. For this reason contemporary intellectuals in the U. S. whose work has been influenced by Foucault (myself included) need to historicize their own discourse by reconstructing its genealogy and inquiring into the rhetorical work performed by the Foucauldian shift that supplies their work with its hard historical foundations.

II

Just as Brigham encodes in William M.'s brief life the ethnographic logic supporting an account of the decline of Anglo-Americans, compacted within Cooper's precipitous aboriginal is a logic ensuring the ideological transformation of Native Americans into Vanishing Americans. Despite the spectacular nature of their individual deaths, Cooper's natives, every bit as much as his introductory reference to the "verdure . . . fall[ing] before the nipping frost," expunge imperialist conflict from the Jacksonian cultural memory. They do so by foregrounding issues of proportion and equilibrium so crucial to antebellum accounts of the *disappearance* of races.

Cooper incorporates the racial other as an earlier and now irretrievably lost version of the self. Perhaps this is part of the

reason why our culture has come to regard *The Last of the Mohicans* and other nineteenth-century Anglo-American frontier fictions as “children’s literature.” Just as Freud in his essay on “The Sexual Aberrations” collapses the “primitive” or “archaic” and the infantile,¹⁴ Cooper conflates racial difference and temporal distance on an evolutionary continuum of human history. In other words, it is as though for him aboriginals represent a *phase* that the human race goes through but which it must inevitably *get over*. Regardless of whether the ethno-pedagogic text celebrates equilibrium (in the case of Cooper and Brigham) or disequilibrium (in the case of Fuller), in equating the savage and the juvenile it starts by assuming that certain Americans must vanish.

Cooper’s concern with proportion registers his debt to ethno-pedagogic thinking. The novel’s white characters marvel over the “perfection of form which abounds among the uncorrupted natives” (p. 53), and the narrator himself praises what he calls Uncas’ “beautiful proportions” (p. 275). Uncas is “an unblemished specimen of the noblest proportions of man” and resembles “some precious relic of the Grecian chisel” (p. 53). In the Western tradition the ancient Greeks had long represented the ideal of physical beauty, but in the antebellum U. S. their beautiful proportions had become the *sine qua non* of a call for educational reform. Beecher, for example, launches her critique of the U. S. educational system with the observation that the Greeks “were remarkable, not only for their wisdom and strength, but for their great beauty, so that the statues they made to resemble their own men and women have, ever since, been regarded as the most perfect forms of human beauty.” “Perfect forms” here conveys roughly what “beautiful proportions” connotes in Cooper: a balance of intellectual and physical culture—hence Beecher’s interest in the Greek educational system as a model for contemporary times. According to her, the Greeks’ perfection of form derived from the fact that “[t]hey had two kinds of schools—

¹⁴ Freud writes, “In inverted types, a predominance of archaic constitutions and primitive psychological mechanisms is regularly to be found.” See “The Sexual Aberrations” in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. and revised by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1962), p. 12n. My belief in the relevance of the Freudian developmental narrative to genocidal thinking grows out of discussions with Jeff Nunokawa about his work on the figure of the doomed male homosexual in British Victorian literature.

the one to train the minds, and the other to train the bodies of their children."¹⁵

Whatever nostalgia Cooper expresses for savage equilibrium in his description of Uncas, he imagines that civilization necessarily spells the end of archaic proportions. Hence Cooper contrasts Uncas' "beautiful proportions" with the white man David Gamut's "rare proportions" (p. 17). Gamut, writes the novelist, possesses "all the bones and joints of other men, without any of their proportions." While Cooper reassures us that Gamut is not actually physically "deformed," his description of Gamut does little to assuage his reader's anxiety on that score: "His head was large; his shoulders narrow; his arms long and dangling; while his hands were small, if not delicate. His legs and thighs were thin nearly to emaciation, but of extraordinary length; and his knees would have been considered tremendous, had they not been outdone by the broader foundations [i.e., his feet] on which this false superstructure of blended human orders, was so profanely reared" (p. 16).

Gamut's peculiar proportions are just one sign that he is the vehicle by which civilization is carried into the wilderness. Around him also accrue linked images of language, femininity, and power. Referring to Gamut's annoying habit of bursting into song whenever the proximity of enemy Indians demands absolute silence (Gamut is a psalmist by profession), Hawk-eye laments the fact that, as he puts it, although the "Lord never intended that the man should place all his endeavours in his throat," Gamut had "fallen into the hands of some silly woman, when he should have been gathering his education under a blue sky, and among the beauties of the forest" (p. 224).

While perhaps Cooper, like Hawk-eye, believes that God never intended that *man* privilege language at the expense of the development of the body, both seem to believe that the Supreme Being intended that *woman* do so. This is suggested by Cooper's habitual association of feminine control over education in the settlements with both the proliferation of words and with precipitous behavior. For example, as darkness begins to settle on his party's search for clues to the whereabouts of the captive Munro sisters, Hawk-eye advises his companions to abandon the

¹⁵ Beecher, p. 8.

trail until morning. "[I]n the morning," he insists, "we shall be fresh, and ready to undertake our work like men, and not like babbling women, or eager boys" (p. 189).

Hawk-eye's association of loquacious femininity and headstrong boys has antecedents in Rousseauian notions of noble savagery. In *Émile* women's control over the education of children threatens the survival of the white race: "[P]uberty and sexual potency," according to Rousseau, "always arrive earlier in learned and civilized peoples than in ignorant and barbarous peoples," and this explains why Europeans (unlike noble savages) are "exhausted early, remain small, weak, . . . ill-formed" and die young. "Man's weakness," he writes, proceeds from "the inequality between his strength and his desires."¹⁶ Only in boyhood and savagery is there an equilibrium of body (what we can get) and mind (what we want), and for Rousseau equilibrium is synonymous with nobility—a quality whose residual existence in civilized societies boyhood guarantees.

Émile's anti-feminism derives from Rousseau's belief that, because their lack of physical strength prevents them from attaining self-sufficiency, women inevitably want more than they can get. The satisfaction of even a woman's most basic wants necessarily requires that she defraud her constitutional destiny by using words to persuade others to do for her what she cannot do for herself. Women, Rousseau feels, must and should rely upon men to get what they want. The problem arises when women are given unsupervised control over the education of boys. Whereas the father can discipline the child through simple physical coercion (which Rousseau heartily recommends), the mother must resort to complex sentimental manipulations expressed in words. Individual pedagogical errors are revenged upon the race as the son discovers that the efficacy of the verbal tool obviates the necessity of bodily vigor. The boy too learns how to defraud the body through "feminine" acts of representation, destroys the juvenile balance of needs and strength, and thereby becomes a prodigy. Put in Cooper's terms, in *Émile* babbling women yield eager boys.

Cooper's Rousseauian subtext emerges when one of his noble

¹⁶ *Émile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), pp. 215, 216, 165.

savages asserts that "Men speak not twice" (p. 314). Real men do not need words because they have physical strength. Women and precocious sons, however, require verbal prosthetics to get what they want. Furthermore, for Cooper as well as for Rousseau, words represent a whole economy of power marked as feminine. Thus, after declaring himself a warrior not a reader, Hawk-eye asserts that he, unlike Gamut, is no "whimpering boy, at the apron string of one of your old gals" (p. 117). Free of books, Hawk-eye liberates himself from the power that nineteenth-century domesticity gave to women—liberates himself from what Leslie Fiedler calls the "gentle tyranny of home and woman."¹⁷ Hence when Gamut demands that Hawk-eye buttress one of his numerous philosophical speculations with some authoritative textual prop, the enraged scout demands: "[W]hat have such as I, who am a warrior of the wilderness . . . to do with books! I never read but in one [that is, the book of nature], and the words that are written there are too simple and too plain to need much schooling" (p. 117). I would argue that the fiction of the "plainness" of the book of nature in this passage supports another fiction: that of the legibility of paternal power imagined as simple physical force. Cooper attempts to differentiate between knowledge gained from experience on the trail and "bookish knowledge" (p. 189) in order to create the fiction of power relations "plain" as nature itself.

Both the disregard for books and the association of them with the newly-empowered antebellum woman are staples of the period. Although *the book* is usually associated with the reign of the father, in the antebellum period *books* seem to be associated with the reign of the mother. The pervasiveness of this association is suggested by Thoreau's chapter on "Reading" in *Walden*. There the author expresses his disgust not just over the *quality* of popular books but also over their *quantity*. Embedded within Thoreau's anxiety about multiplicity lies an anxiety about the mother's assumption of the educational duties formerly administered by the father—or so Thoreau's confusion of mechanical production and female sexual reproduction leads one to suspect.

Thoreau confuses the printing press with the womb when he derides the "modern cheap and fertile press." Machine-like lit-

¹⁷ Fiedler, p. 189.

erary mothers produce not only insubstantial volumes (like the popular series called "Little Reading," which the author came across one day in his local library); they also produce insubstantial people. Thoreau characterizes the readers of "Little Reading" as themselves little, like the "modern puny and degenerate race" described by Beecher. They are "pygmies and manikins" and "a race of tit-men." Thoreau distinguishes this modern race from the archaic, athletic, and robust race of men nurtured by literary fathers before the age of mechanical reproduction. According to "Reading," in a heroic age long past it "require[d] a training such as the athletes underwent" to read literature. Whereas the modern press is "fertile," "the heroic writers of antiquity" produced works which were "solitary."¹⁸

Thoreau's opposition of the feminine, the diminutive, and the multiple against the masculine, the massive, and the singular serves a Rousseauvian distinction between power conceived of as a physical force and power conceived of as verbal and sentimental manipulation. The *solidity* of the paternal book in "Reading" symbolizes the visibility of power relations under the patriarch, and the robustness of the (male) reader of the (male) classics denotes his ability both to see and to fight whatever threatens his autonomy. Hence Thoreau writes that, even if read in translation (in what he calls "our *mother* tongue") the massive "heroic books" are written in a language alien to the modern reader. They "will always be in a language dead to degenerate times," and therefore they require their readers to seek "laboriously . . . the meaning of each word and line." The laboriousness of the reading preserves the autonomy of the subject. The classics speak in a "*father* tongue, a reserved and select expression" that does not compromise volition because, rather than lulling the reader to sleep, it demands that he "devote [his] most alert and wakeful hours" to reading. By contrast, we learn our "mother tongue . . . unconsciously" and hence read popular books like sleepwalkers. In "Reading" the smallness of books written by women suggests not just their trivial contents, but also the microscopic scale of maternal power. Thoreau's comment that readers of little books are "machines" anticipates the Foucauldian anxiety over a

¹⁸ *Walden* in *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: Norton, 1966), pp. 72, 68.

power whose invisibility (accomplished through domestication, decentering, and proliferation) only augments its efficiency.¹⁹

Although Thoreau's chapter reads like an attempt to disempower the domestic woman, the same disparaging association of mass-production and female generativity made by Thoreau surfaces even in the texts apparently most instrumental in instituting the reign of the mother. Domestic ideology's demonic double, what Michael Paul Rogin dubs "momism,"²⁰ is if anything even more evident in the work of Hannah More, the British author generally credited with the founding of domestic ideology. Her influential treatise on female education was reprinted in numerous editions in the U. S. between 1800 and 1826 and helped determine the shape of domesticity in this country as well as in Britain.

In *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, More, like Thoreau, expresses anxiety about the quantity of "little books" on the market. "Real" knowledge and piety, she writes, have suffered from "that profusion of little, amusing, sentimental books with which the youthful library overflows."²¹ After questioning the pedagogical value of multiplying the number of books students read, More is overcome by a proto-Malthusian vision of the uncontrollably generative popular press. She writes: "Who are those ever multiplying authors, that with unparalleled fecundity are overstocking the world with their quick-succeeding progeny? They are the novel-writers; the easiness of whose productions is at once the cause of their own fruitfulness, and of the almost infinitely numerous race of imitators, to whom they give birth." More's nightmare vision collapses the mechanical production increasingly characterizing the book industry with female sexual reproduction. Mass-production of children

¹⁹ Thoreau, pp. 67 (my italics), 68 (my italics), 70, 68, 71.

²⁰ "Momism" is Rogin's term for a "demonic version of domestic ideology" that expresses anxiety over the "maternal power generated by domesticity." Whereas Rogin discusses momism as a twentieth-century response to the revival of the domestic ideal in the 1950s, I am suggesting that domesticity and its demonic double arose simultaneously in the antebellum period. See Michael Paul Rogin, "Kiss Me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies," *Representations*, No. 6 (1984), 6-7.

²¹ *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 3rd American ed. (Boston: Joseph Bumstead, 1802), p. 97. My argument here has been influenced by Mark Seltzer's analysis of the deployment of gender in literary naturalism in his "The Naturalist Machine" in *Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), 116-47.

(the creation of a "race of imitators") is the evil twin of domestic ideology's attempt to standardize child-rearing practices. The hysteria over the abundance of books in the antebellum period both represents and creates an anxiety over the violation of the independence of the subject by disciplinary methods directed at the interior rather than at the body. An anxiety over the decorporalization of power compels the advice offered time and again in educational treatises in the early nineteenth century: more emphasis should be placed upon the cultivation of the juvenile body and less upon the development of the juvenile mind. The excessively cerebral Anglo-Saxon in More's text stands on the verge of disappearing as power disappears. The Anglo-Saxon race, she writes, is threatened with the same "quick succession of slavery, effeminacy, . . . vice, . . . and degeneracy" that overtook the inhabitants of ancient Rome.²²

For Cooper, to read in the book of nature is to be educated through the paternal apprenticeship system rather than the maternal representational system. Cooper suggests this when at one point in the narrative Chingachgook and Hawk-eye lose Magua's trail. Uncas, who has long since uncovered the proper path, nevertheless assumes a "calm and dignified demeanour" suggestive of "dependen[ce] on the sagacity and intelligence of the seniors of the party" (p. 213). Savage society, in Cooper as in Rousseau, does not produce prodigies. According to the novelist, when members of Indian tribes convene to confer on matters important to the whole community, "there is never to be found any impatient aspirant after premature distinction, standing ready to move his auditors to some hasty, and, perhaps, injudicious discussion, in order that his own reputation may be the gainer. An act of so much precipitancy and presumption, would seal the downfall of precocious intellect for ever. It rested solely with the oldest and most experienced of the men to lay the subject of the conference before the people" (p. 292). Indian society then offers a highly visible version of power. According to the narrator, the power of the Indian leader is the power of physical force: "the authority of an Indian chief [is] so little conventional, that it [is] oftener maintained by physical superiority, than by any moral supremacy he might possess" (p. 92).

²² More, pp. 104, 48.

If basing power on physical superiority prevents aboriginal precocity, it also makes the patriarch's control over the tribe tenuous. Even Cooper's most noble savages seem barely restrained by the father. Uncas' "dignified and calm demeanor" disappears at a moment's notice. As soon as Chingachgook solicits his help, Uncas bounds "forward like a deer" and directs his elders to the proper trail (p. 213). The young Mohican's sudden shift from rock-like self-restraint to frenetic activity is one that characterizes natives whether represented individually or in groups. Such fluctuations in Indian demeanor suggest what Cooper imagines as the fundamental exteriority to the self of power legitimated by physical superiority. Despite its patriarchal nature, Indian government permits radical independence because, like the authority exercised by Foucault's sovereign, that restraint is imagined to be of a strictly corporeal nature.

Fiedler's "gentle tyranny," on the other hand, would subvert radical native independence and undermine native proportions. This is in fact what happens to Uncas. Aware at some level of Uncas' admiration of her, Cora gains an "intuitive consciousness of her power" over the young Mohican (p. 79). Like the ethnologists of his day, Cooper believed Indians experienced no romantic passion.²³ Hence he calls Uncas' enamored ministrations to Cora both a "departure from the dignity of his manhood" and an "utter innovation on . . . Indian customs" (p. 56). His love "elevate[s] him far above the intelligence, and advance[s] him . . . centuries before the practices of his nation" (p. 115).

It seems that Cooper imagines that Cora's gentle tyranny "seal[s] the downfall" of Uncas' "precocious intellect." Falling under Cora's power, educated without his knowledge, Uncas dies a racial prodigy. Hawk-eye notes the Mohican's uncharacteristic precipitancy during their search for the captive Munro sisters. He chastises Uncas for suddenly becoming "as impatient as a man in the settlements" (p. 185). The noble savage turned eager savage repeatedly puts himself at risk in pursuing the cap-

²³ In *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1968), Winthrop D. Jordan notes that early U. S. ethnographers frequently represented the Native American as "deficient in ardor and virility" (p. 162). Cooper's contemporary Henry Lewis Morgan claimed that "the passion of love was entirely unknown among" among the Iroquois. See *Morgan's League of the Iroquois* (1851; rpt. New York: Coriath, 1962), p. 322.

tive Cora Munro: "In vain Hawk-eye called to him to respect the covers; the young Mohican braved the dangerous fire of his enemies, and soon compelled them to a flight as swift as his own headlong speed" (p. 334).

Significantly, it is this precocious development under woman's invisible tutelage that makes Uncas the *last* of the Mohicans. At the end of the novel, he stands upon a ledge overlooking Magua who is threatening Cora with a tomahawk. The impassioned Mohican leaps "frantically, from a fearful height" and falls between Magua and his intended victim, but only to fall victim himself to his enemy's tomahawk (p. 337). Cooper reports Magua's headlong death at Hawk-eye's hands on the very next page of the novel and the language of precipitancy, the reiteration of the image of the headlong Indian, encourages us to confuse the two red men. Invoking the antebellum figure of the prodigy, Cooper's text replaces Hawk-eye's rifle with the middle-class woman's apron strings.²⁴ It translates firepower into mother power.

The Last of the Mohicans deflects attention from the macro-political realm represented in the text by the army (for which Hawk-eye is a scout), and upon women falls the responsibility for the *disappearance* of the native. But the prodigy's presence does more than deflect. The threat that woman's invisible power poses to the male subject produces the need for some space (the frontier) to elude her miasmatic influence and hence makes imperative the macro-political controls effecting Indian removal from contiguous territories. In other words Cooper's "discovery" of the discipline deployed against his white men legitimates the technologies of punishment deployed against his red men.

III

Antebellum discourse, I have argued, uses images of the modern proliferation of words as a sign that feminine words have

²⁴ My identification of Cora with the middle-class woman is complicated by the fact that, even though she has been raised white, she is in fact mulatta—the product of the British imperialist effort in the West Indies. It might be more accurate to say that Cora represents the Third World woman through whose agency the colonial power exerts its influence. In Frantz Fanon's analysis of "the colonialist program" in Algeria, "it was the woman who was given the historic mission of shaking up the Algerian man." One could argue that Cora performs a similar function for Uncas. Fanon's analysis appears in *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove, 1965), p. 39, and is quoted in Kaplan, 673.

replaced masculine muscle as the basis of authority. Momist imagery of the loss of autonomy resulting from this feminization of power expresses nostalgia for a form of power whose lack of psychic consequences guarantees that it does not compromise the autonomy of the male subject. Yet neither this subject nor this form of power ever existed. Because it is administered and experienced by human agents, even "simple" brute force must have psychic consequences and must produce subjectivities particular to it.

The myth of simple brute force in antebellum discourse generates what Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia." "When the so-called civilizing process destabilizes forms of life," writes Rosaldo, "the agents of change experience transformations of other cultures as if they were personal losses."²⁵ Developing Rosaldo's point, Amy Kaplan suggests that such nostalgia makes aggression against Third World peoples the logical consequence of anti-feminism directed against First World women because in it "the empire figures as the site where you can be all that you can no longer be at home—a 'real live man'—where you can recover the autonomy denied by social forces of modernization, often aligned in this way of thinking with feminization."²⁶

Following Rosaldo and Kaplan, I would argue that in our own time scholarship on the alleged feminization of society itself participates in the imperialist nostalgia of the discourse it analyzes. Traditionally, momist texts like Cooper's were seen as evidence of a historical "feminization of American culture" in which expanded female leisure and literacy permitted Hawthorne's "scribbling women" to usurp the cultural offices once occupied by less prolific but more profound male authors.²⁷ More recently, New Historicist criticism of the Foucauldian variety has encouraged us to regard the feminization of culture as a symptom of a larger feminization of power. Yet, the novelty of New Historicism does not reside in its emphasis on power. Earlier

²⁵ Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," in *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p. 70.

²⁶ Kaplan, p. 664.

²⁷ The classic statement of this position is, of course, Ann Douglas' *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977). For a more developed critique of claims for the feminization of U. S. culture in this period, see my essay "Novels and Domesticity" in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott (forthcoming, Columbia Univ. Press).

cultural analysis also equated feminization with normalization. Richard Brodhead's recent characterization of the modern ideal of maternal love as a power whose "silken threads are harder to burst than the iron chains of authority" employed by "old-style paternal discipline" recalls Fiedler's analysis of the rise of a "gentle tyranny of home and woman" in the nineteenth-century.²⁸ D. A. Miller's revelation of a nineteenth-century "field of power relations" masquerading as a "domesticating pedagogy" harkens back to Ann Douglas' discussion of the "manifold possibilities" offered by Victorian maternal influence for "devious social control."²⁹ Nancy Armstrong's assertion that domestic ideology provided the "logic" that permitted women to enter the world of work through social services and thereby extended "subtle techniques of domestic surveillance beyond the middle-class home and into the lives of those much lower down on the economic ladder" mirrors Christopher Lasch's claim that the "rise of the 'helping professions'" allowed "society in the guise of a 'nurturing mother' [to invade] the family, the stronghold of . . . private rights."³⁰

Neither the poststructuralist upheaval that divides the cultural analysis of the 1960s and 1970s from that of the 1980s nor the feminist critiques to which these analyses have been subjected have altered the basic narrative: normalization is still women's work. What is even more startling is that this narrative appears to date back to antebellum times. Yet, the failure of New Historicists to articulate a genuinely novel reading of the nineteenth century troubles me far less than their apparent obliviousness to the rhetorical content of what they present as historical facts.³¹ Even if exposing the rhetorical work of Foucauldian history does

²⁸ "Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America," *Representations*, No. 21 (1988), 87. Actually, this characterization of maternal love appears in an antebellum publication entitled *Mother's Magazine*, which Brodhead quotes; however, it is clear in context that Brodhead regards the quote as an accurate description of maternal authority.

²⁹ Miller, p. 10; Douglas, p. 81.

³⁰ *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987), p. 93; Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 18.

³¹ I admit that "obliviousness" is probably too strong a word to use in Armstrong's case. On p. 26 of the introduction to her book she manifests a good deal of self-consciousness about the gender politics of her own claims, even if she seems not to recognize the way in which they implicate her in the historical discourse she analyzes.

not *in and of itself* undermine the facticity of New Historicist claims (all facts require human interpreters and so all truth is necessarily rhetorical), still its practitioners cannot possibly hope to direct their own rhetoric toward progressive ends without first inquiring into the gender and race politics perpetuated by their use of Foucauldian knowledge.³²

New Historicists' dependence upon Foucault's narrative of modernization would seem to account for their apparent obliviousness to the way in which they have been engaged in the retelling of a politically suspect nineteenth-century narrative of modernization. Despite the emphasis I have put on it, Foucault's assertion that the West's commitment to managing the life of its own population also entails a commitment to massive destruction of populations designated as "other" is parenthetical to the history outlined in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Whereas his brief comments on modern racial holocausts suggest the simultaneity of deductive and productive manifestations of power, Foucault's larger historical narrative (as represented by both *The History of Sexuality* and *Discipline and Punish*) is founded upon a temporal distinction between them such that the deductive (punishment) represents the pre-modern and the productive (discipline), the modern form of power. Hence Foucault's own narrative is subject to the same critique to which I have subjected antebellum narratives of modernization. Inasmuch as he defines modernity as the decorporealization of power, he participates in the construction of an utterly mythic time in which authority represented simple physical superiority (an era personified in *Émile* by the father who governs by means of the lash). Foucault's temporalization of the difference between discipline and punishment suggests that even contemporary images of modernity collaborate in the production of the imperialist nostalgia I have been describing.

³² Previous feminist critiques of New Historicism include Judith Lowder Newton, "History as Usual?: Feminism and the 'New Historicism,'" in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeger (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 152-67 and Carolyn Porter, "Are We Being Historical Yet?" *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 87 (1988), 743-86. For reasons I explain in my article "Bio-Political Resistance in Domestic Ideology and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*" (*American Literary History*, 1 [1989], 715-34), I do not endorse the view shared by Newton and Porter that by subscribing to theory that (in Newton's words) "den[ies] the possibility of change and agency" (p. 118) New Historicism disallows the possibility of political resistance.