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Subversive Voices:
The Interplay between Race and Gender
in *The Last of the Mohicans*

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I . Introduction

At a cursory glance, the Native Americans and women in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* appear to inhabit separate spheres. Their paths cross only by sheer coincidence, and even then the heroines and the Native American protagonists (both hero and antihero) are constantly forced apart as soon as they are united. In fact, the middle portion of the narrative presents only the male characters as they frantically track down the kidnapped Munro sisters, who completely disappear from the text for several chapters. Yet from the very beginning, an almost uncanny connection between woman and native is implied. We are told that a "sudden and startling movement of the Indian" Magua causes "an indescribable look of pity, admiration and horror" to cross the features of Cora Munro.¹⁾ This reaction might be dismissed as the typical fascination and dread of a European woman encountering an Indian for the first

time, if not for an unusual detail that follows: the woman is said to smile, “as if in pity at her own momentary forgetfulness.”²⁾ The phrase “momentary forgetfulness” suggests a fleeting sense of transgression caught just in time, perhaps referring to an undercurrent of attraction. This faintly provocative scene foreshadows other episodes to come, in which women and Native Americans are jointly involved in violating, albeit in a “momentary” manner, the hegemony seized and perpetuated by white males.

To be sure, Cooper is no proponent of indigenous rights, and his views regarding women are conventional at best. In *Notions of the Americans*, one of his prose writings laced with racist opinions, Cooper denigrates Native Americans as “all alike a stunted, dirty and degraded race.”³⁾ As Sangjun Jeong notes, the opinions and beliefs that Cooper affirms in his body of nonfictional work are relevant to both the construction and interpretation of his novels.⁴⁾ Feminist critics have likewise balked at his fictional treatment of women, and even James Russell Lowell derides Cooper’s female characters as being “sappy as maples and flat as a prairie.”⁵⁾ Thus, if the Native Americans and women in *The Last of the Mohicans* come together to undermine the dominant, white–male–oriented discourse that pervades the novel, it is not due to any conscious realization on Cooper’s part that all forms of minority oppression hinge on the same mechanism: “the

1) Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans* (New York: Viking Press, 1986), 19.

2) Ibid.

3) Cooper, *Notions of the Americans: Picked Up by a Traveling Bachelor* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 486.

4) Sangjun Jeong, “Cooper’s Indians: *Leatherstocking Tales*,” *Studies of English Languages & Cultures* 7 (1999), 163.

5) James Russell Lowell, *A Fable for Critics* (New York: Bibliobazaar, 2009), 66.

subject' who holds 'sociosexual-racial-power' over marginalized others."⁶⁾

Rather, the alignment of natives and women as antipodal beings to white men is a reflection of historical and social reality that subconsciously works itself into the text. More modern-day writers have often purposely stressed this connection. Virginia Woolf, for one, quips that "it is one of the great advantages of being a woman that one can pass even a very fine negress without wishing to make an Englishwoman of her."⁷⁾ As Woolf implies, women and nonwhites, though suffering distinct forms of oppression, have long shared the experience of being appropriated, marginalized, or repressed. Although white women may be complicit in imperialistic racial policies and Native Americans may engage in misogynistic discourse among themselves, it is impossible to deny that they are one-half of different binary pairs in relation to the white male. This point is well-illustrated by Hongsang Yeo in his schematization of racial and sexual relationships in *The Last of the Mohicans*.⁸⁾ Cooper's own awareness of this affinity is only half-developed and does not evolve into a sustained authorial denunciation of white male authority. Yet through its faithful representation of social conditions and plausible plot, Cooper's novel ends up still providing scope for the interaction of two distinctly disenfranchised identities; and from there the two entities take on

6) A da Hurtado, "Multiple Subjectivities: Chicanas and Cultural Citizenship," in *Women and Citizenship*, ed. Marilyn Friedman (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 125.

7) Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 8th ed. Vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2006), 2118.

8) Hongsang Yeo, "Inter-cultural and Inter-racial Problems in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* and Silko's *Ceremony*," *Journal of American Studies* 25 (1994), 51-52.

meaningfully subversive lives of their own.

Finally, in speaking of the relation between Native Americans and women within the framework of Cooper's novel, an important qualification is needed. Native American in this context is usually limited to the Native American male, while the term woman extends only so far as those who can be identified as belonging to the white community (although Cora's mixed race presents problems, as we shall see). Neither category, then, accounts for the Native American woman, who does not feature prominently in *The Last of the Mohicans*. This absence in the text itself is not sufficient to justify a lack of critical response thereof, although it is surely harder to discuss a subject that the author has left out completely. Perhaps the real underlying issue is the imbalance in the degree of generality we can each attribute to race and gender. In reading the novel, one instinctively feels that while Chingachgook, Uncas, Magua, and Tamemund are individuals in their own right, they are also representative of a wider community or way of life. It is less compelling to view either Cora or Alice as being generically representative of womankind, for slightly different reasons: Cora because she has a highly atypical history; Alice because she does not appear to possess (or more exactly, is not allowed sufficient space to express), in a sense, the appropriate gender-consciousness. Even so, their words and actions are conditioned by the fact that they are women, and by the fact that they are treated as such. If this study can be justified in minimizing discussion of the native woman, it is because it focuses on how gender operates through specific women, and not on how it operates across the board.

II. Savages, Noble Indians, and the Subversion of Racial Ideology

Cooper's narrative reflects a pervasive ideology that posits Native Americans as racially inferior and degenerate. The novel's first reference to America's native population shows them in a stereotypically fiendish role. Cooper writes that "the yells of the savages... increased, immeasurably, the natural horrors of warfare" and that "the natives of the forests were the principal and barbarous actors" of "numberless recent massacres."⁹⁾ In ensuing battle scenes at Glenn Falls and Fort William Henry, the narrator elaborates on the "monstrous" nature of the Indians. On advancing towards their foes near the falls, the Hurons are described as emitting "horrible cries and screams, such as man alone can utter, and he only when in a state of the fiercest barbarity."¹⁰⁾ The Indians' brutality culminates in a mad frenzy when they inexplicably surprise and slaughter numerous whites, including women and children, at the already surrendered English fort. We are told that "heated and maddened by the sight" of blood, "many among them even kneeled to the earth, and drank freely, exultingly, hellishly, of the crimson tide."¹¹⁾ As the tale progresses, the natives are also frequently characterized as unenlightened beings clinging to "vulgar superstitions"¹²⁾ or as "lying and deceitful varlet[s]."¹³⁾ Such "innate" deficiencies extend in part to the entire Indian race, regardless of tribe or political alliance. Even Uncas is suspected of "being

9) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 13.

10) *Ibid.*, 84.

11) *Ibid.*, 176.

12) *Ibid.*, 261.

13) *Ibid.*, 114.

partially benighted in the vale of ignorance,"¹⁴⁾ until his sustained loyalty and valor convince "Duncan *to forget* the character and condition of his wild associate."¹⁵⁾ It is almost as if the essential constitution of a "red skin" must be forgotten in order for the white man to commune with him.¹⁶⁾

Such deeply ingrained racial beliefs, echoed by many of Cooper's contemporaries, constitute part of a wider national myth. According to Richard Slotkin, "myth... provides a scenario or prescription for action, defining and limiting the possibilities for human response to the universe."¹⁷⁾ Namely, myth constructs a shared identity that empowers the individual within certain boundaries and differentiates him or her from those operating outside the same framework of ideas. In his novel, Cooper relies on familiar "intellectual constructions" involving race to express the emergence of an inchoate American identity.¹⁸⁾ From the novel's beginning, he goes to great lengths to distance the American colonists from the "blunders" and "imbecility" of Great Britain, "which, reverencing as a mother, they had blindly believed invincible."¹⁹⁾ He is also full of praises for George Washington, the quintessential American hero, who with "the coolness and spirit of a Virginian boy" saved the British from an embarrassing defeat by the French.²⁰⁾ But suddenly the narrative shifts from

14) *Ibid.*, 53.

15) *Ibid.*, 73 (my italics).

16) *Ibid.*, 78.

17) Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 7.

18) Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), xi.

19) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 13.

commending the “innocent... and humble” qualities of the colonists to denouncing the vile depravity of the Indians.²¹⁾ Although the mention of hostile natives in the context of war is not unusual, the degree and length of the invective suggests a deeper psychological motivation. Here we may apply Slotkin’s observation that the colonists, in “adjusting the mores and world views of one’s native culture to the requirements of life in an alien environment,” found it “far easier to define their cultural identity by negative means, through attacking or condemning alien elements in their society.”²²⁾ Although Cooper himself is several centuries removed from the Puritan colonists that Slotkin discusses, the same mechanism of “definition by repudiation” still appears pertinent.²³⁾ As John Neal aptly notes, Cooper “has made a picture, the plan, the drawing, the rough outline of which is American.”²⁴⁾ To do so, he seems to have partially inscribed the contemporary racial myth that consolidated a coherent and moral American self by vilifying or at least degrading the Indian race as a whole.

However, even though Cooper is influenced by the racial prejudices of his day, equally strong is the literary impulse to admire individual Native Americans for their virtues and talents. Like most non-primal motivations, the literary impulse cannot plausibly exist in a vacuum isolated from contemporary social ideologies; yet it operates on a

20) Ibid., 13.

21) Ibid., 13.

22) Slotkin, *Regeneration*, 22.

23) Ibid.

24) John Neal, Review of *Lionel Lincoln*, from *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (September, 1825), reproduced in *James Fenimore Cooper: The Critical Heritage*, eds. George Dekker and John P. Williams (London: Routledge, 1973), 82.

plane distinct from that of the generic political stance. One can be political in a literary manner, but simply asserting oneself and listing convincing grounds does not qualify as “literary,” or at least it should not. The truly literary impulse is what drives us to explore the ambiguities, inconsistencies, and dissenting forces within or beyond ourselves, and to construct a sphere where these murky, conflicting drives may crystallize into an arresting image or composite narrative. Richard Drinnon alludes to this mechanism when he writes that “for Natty to have any authenticity, Indians had to have real space, if not equal time, in his novels.”²⁵⁾ A narrative may “self-correct,” requiring the writer to address certain aspects of his subject matter unless he wants his narrative to falter and ultimately collapse.

For Cooper, the complex issue that he had to sift through was the Indian-as-Other, whose presence was an inevitable yardstick against which to measure the stature of the white man (a role, apropos, also filled by women). Drinnon notes that “Cooper was not an impassioned advocate of Indian rights... Yet the same man created a handful of exceptional red men, the Delawares of Chingachgook and Uncas.”²⁶⁾ In *The Last of the Mohicans*, these two are mostly drawn with great dignity and affection. Their prowess in battle and acute “Indian senses”²⁷⁾ in perceiving the laws of nature are portrayed positively; but such bodily qualities are generally granted to even the most “savage” of Indians and may be perverted by some to “prove” the animality of the natives. Where Cooper parts from the usual

25) Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-hating and Empire-building* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 161.

26) *Ibid.*, 160–61.

27) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 192.

stereotype of the war-like or sensual Indian is his insistence that the Delawares' merits far exceed simple physicality. Indeed, on several occasions, the author illuminates the judicious nature of Mohican father and son through their ready willingness to engage in rational discourse, not only with each other but also with the white man. One example is the scene in which Chingachgook, Uncas, and the "white-Indian"²⁸⁾ Hawk-eye deliberate on the wisest means of rescuing the Munro sisters from their Huron captors:

Notwithstanding the increasing warmth of the amicable contest, the most decorous christian assembly, not even excepting those in which its reverend ministers are collected, might have learned a wholesome lesson of moderation from the forbearance and courtesy of the disputants. The words of Uncas were received with the same deep attention as those which fell from the maturer wisdom of his father; and so far from manifesting any impatience, neither spoke, in reply, until a few moments of silent meditation were, seemingly, bestowed in deliberating on what had already been said.²⁹⁾

In the preceding excerpt, Cooper details the restraint, civility, and mutual respect of Chingachgook and his son. He even implies that such good breeding is rarely found among "the most decorous christian assembly" of whites.³⁰⁾ This blend of "sagacity and intelligence"³¹⁾ with "reverence to the other's character and years"³²⁾ is consistently repeated in the author's characterizations of the Mohicans.

Admittedly, the author's portrayal of Uncas and his father may be

28) *Ibid.*, 161.

29) *Ibid.*, 198.

30) *Ibid.*

31) *Ibid.*, 213.

32) *Ibid.*, 310.

criticized as a superficial rendering of yet another European stereotype, the “noble savage.” Yeo notes that in comparing the two Mohicans to “perfect images of Hellenistic sculpture,” Cooper propagates “an ideal projection of the white man’s racial prototype.”³³⁾ As implied in Yeo’s comment, actual anthropological evidence shows that the “noble savage,” uncorrupt by civilization and living “in peace and balance with nature”³⁴⁾, is in fact a European invention that “has resulted in a well-developed myth... widely believed in many camps.”³⁵⁾ If remnants of the myth are still compelling even today, one can only imagine the imprint it must have left on Cooper, considering the fact that “metaphor and the pattern of daily activity refuse to be separated” in early America.³⁶⁾ That is, the Americans’ immediate experience with the natives animated and reinforced racial formulas that were likely to be considered stale “truisms” in the Old World, where such firsthand observation was unavailable.³⁷⁾ By the time *The Last of the Mohicans* was published, the natives had been decimated to “only about one-third of one percent of America’s population”³⁸⁾; still, they continued to occupy a substantial share of the American consciousness, as suggested by their recurring literary incarnations, including the *Leatherstocking Tales*. *Although Cooper’s exposure to*

33) Yeo, “Inter-cultural Problems,” 53.

34) Steven LeBlanc and Katherine Register, *Constant Battles: The Myth of the Peaceful, Noble Savage* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 12.

35) *Ibid.*, 18.

36) Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 9.

37) *Ibid.*, 8–9.

38) David Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 146.

*Indians appears limited—he writes in the 1826 introduction to *The Last of the Mohicans* that “the red man has entirely deserted this part of the state”³⁹⁾—he nonetheless had access to materials written by those who came in direct contact with them, such as John Heckewelder’s *History, Manners, and Customs of the Indian Nations*.⁴⁰⁾*

Yet if such real-life observations may be used to fabricate a false image of the “noble savage,” it is just as likely that they may also be used to formulate a more precise and truthful understanding of the Indian, which is what Cooper accomplishes. One of the ways in which the author demystifies Native Americans is by meticulously delineating how they discover and follow the trail of their objects. W. H. Gardiner argues that “the tracking feats of Cooper’s heroes... has occasionally exaggerated Indian ingenuity, and taxed white credulity a little too far.”⁴¹⁾ But the actual scene that he objects to, in which Uncas diverts the course of a stream to uncover a moccasin track, is not as outrageous as Gardiner makes it out to be. On the contrary, the young Mohican is seen carefully testing out reasonable speculations based on prior knowledge and probability, much in the vein of a modern-day crime scene investigator. The scene’s close association with the scientific method is further suggested by the comparison of Hawk-eye, who assists Uncas in his endeavors, to “a naturalist” examining “the tusk of a mammoth, or the rib of a mastodon.”⁴²⁾ One anonymous reviewer of the novel complains that by

39) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 8.

40) Drinnon, *Facing West*, 161.

41) W. H. Gardiner, Review of *The Last of the Mohicans*, from *North American Review* (July, 1826), reproduced in *James Fenimore Cooper*, eds. George Dekker and John P. Williams, 115.

42) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 216.

giving such a detailed description “of the particular methods employed, signs observed, and processes of reasoning entered into by the savages,” Cooper sacrifices “the obscure and mysterious... which has an imposing effect.”⁴³⁾ Conversely, this could also mean that Cooper dissolves the uncanny inscrutability typically associated with Indians, instead portraying them “in the form of straightforward and matter-of-fact report.”⁴⁴⁾ Thus the Indian is not reduced to a simple vehicle of prevalent myths but imbued with a more realistic, three-dimensional existence. Such measures, although subtle, undermine the same racial prejudices that Cooper is sometimes guilty of supporting. Paradoxically, the novel’s narrative and realization of characters contain elements that threaten to overturn the dominant racial discourse that sustains it.

III. “Lifeless Heroines” and the Subversion of Male Authority

Generally, *The Last of the Mohicans* is not known for its strong portrayal of women. To begin with, Cora and Alice Munro, the novel’s sole female characters, are not complexly drawn. Signe O. Wegener notes that Cooper “has often been accused of creating wooden and lifeless heroines.”⁴⁵⁾ Indeed, many passages rely on the familiar

43) Unsigned Review of *Last of the Mohicans*, from *United States Literary Gazette* (May, 1826), reproduced in *James Fenimore Cooper*, eds. George Dekker and John P. Williams, 101.

44) George Sand, “Fenimore Cooper,” from *Autour de la Table* (1862), reproduced in *James Fenimore Cooper*, eds. George Dekker and John P. Williams, 265.

45) Signe Wegener, *James Fenimore Cooper Versus the Cult of Domesticity: Progressive Themes of Femininity and Family in the Novels* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2005): 171.

image of an angelic woman helplessly awaiting male deliverance, such as the following:

It appeared as if the delicate and sensitive form of Alice had shrunk into itself, as she listened to this proposal. Her arms had fallen lengthwise before her, the fingers moving in slight convulsions; her head dropped upon her bosom, and her whole person seemed suspended against the tree, looking like some beautiful emblem of the wounded delicacy of her sex, devoid of animation, and yet keenly conscious.⁴⁶⁾

Here Cooper painstakingly elaborates upon Alice's "delicate and sensitive form" and concludes that her physical vulnerability turns her into "some beautiful emblem... of her sex." Similar language and imagery is later evoked to describe her sister Cora who, when pleading with the Delaware patriarch Tamemund, "remained like a beauteous and breathing model of her sex."⁴⁷⁾ In these scenes, Cora and Alice are drawn not as autonomous individuals, but as generic "emblem[s]" and "model[s]" of womanhood. The author often describes Cora as comporting herself with "the dignity of her sex"⁴⁸⁾ and Alice as "yielding to the emotions common to her sex"⁴⁹⁾; yet he does not trouble to explore what these feminine qualities are and how they are specifically embodied by the Munro sisters. As Kyung-Taek Min observes, "by typifying his female characters, Cooper simplifies their traits and strengthens the ideology of male dominance over women."⁵⁰⁾

46) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 110.

47) *Ibid.*, 103.

48) *Ibid.*, 102.

49) *Ibid.*, 260.

50) Kyung-Taek Min, "Gender and Racial Discourses in *The Last of the Mohicans*," *Modern English Literature* 46.2 (2002), 100.

Such passive female figures mirror a cultural context that subordinates women to men by endorsing male-oriented values. Wegener notes the predominance of a “cultural demand for female piety, modesty, and decorum,” adding that these attributes were often understood “not as ends in themselves but as means to entice an eligible suitor.”⁵¹⁾ Their independent voices silenced, women are easily objectified as simple instruments of a domestic ideal. More problematic, this conspicuous lack of autonomy allows males to arbitrarily project their own negative aggressions on the image of woman: man is empowered as the definer of gender dynamics; woman is subjugated as the merely defined. Interestingly, this inequality of the sexes occurs across racial boundaries. In one conversation between Magua and Heyward, the two men appear to express a shared code that casually diminishes women as weaklings or second-class beings. When Heyward wishes to provoke the Huron chief, he taunts Magua that the Mohawks “will make him petticoats and bid him stay in the wigwam with the women, for he is no longer to be trusted with the business of a man.”⁵²⁾ Heyward then cajoles Magua by proposing that they not lose time “in talk like wrangling women,” to which Magua disdainfully responds that “the pale faces make themselves dogs to their women.”⁵³⁾ In this short exchange, women are deemed incompetent and given to meaningless quarrels, while men are endowed with agency and initiative.

Yet the individual women in *The Last of the Mohicans* are not invariably characterized as dependent or fragile; their resilience and

51) Wegener, *James Fenimore Cooper*, 25.

52) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 42.

53) *Ibid.*

fortitude are illustrated in several passages. As Wegener notes, "often overlooked is the fact that Cooper almost immediately stresses that the two sisters are familiar with the harsh realities of frontier life."⁵⁴ When Montcalm urges surrender by reminding Heyward of the presence of "the daughters of the commandant," the latter retorts that

"But so far from weakening our efforts, they set us an example of courage in their own fortitude. Were nothing but resolution necessary to repel so accomplished a soldier, as M. de Montcalm, I would gladly trust the defence of William Henry to the elder of those ladies."⁵⁵

Here Cora in particular is granted resolve and perseverance rivaling that of men; she is acknowledged as a woman worthy "to be trusted with the business of a man."⁵⁶ One chapter later, when Munro gives his blessing to the union of his eldest daughter and Heyward—who is actually asking for the hand of Alice—he declares that "Cora Munro is a maiden too discreet, and of a mind too elevated and improved, to need the guardianship, even of a father."⁵⁷ Thus the colonel displays an unusual respect for the independently sound judgment of Cora, appearing to relinquish orthodox paternal authority that dictates unquestioning filial obedience. Certainly Cooper's original rendering of Cora and Alice endows them with greater dignity and common sense than some latter-day film makers have chosen to see in them. One example is the film *Last of the Redmen* (1947), where the Munro sisters make their entrance dressed in elaborate gowns more befitting a societal ball than the harshness of the American wilderness. At times, they appear quite oblivious of the dangers of the situation,

54) Wegener, *James Fenimore Cooper*, 152.

55) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 154.

56) *Ibid.*, 42.

57) *Ibid.*, 158.

indulging in petty jealousies over the affection of Heyward. Unlike the original, the cinematic versions of the male characters often speak slightly of the two women's capacity for survival and endurance. At one point, Hawk-eye even comments that Alice would "make a good squaw" with "the weight of her husband's hand now and then." Such negative portrayals of and dismissive attitudes toward Cora and Alice greatly differ from the novel's more generous stance on the same female individuals.

To be sure, Cooper's sporadic praise of the Munro sisters, either through the narrative voice or through the words of his male characters, may be considered condescending concessions from a male viewpoint that still believes in its own supremacy. One could argue that almost every positive description of Cora and Alice contains some negative qualification that threatens to subtly undermine the projected compliment. The sisters' apparent readiness to face the perils of the woods, "apparent by their dresses," may in fact be misleading appearances that are later proved false by their actual physical delicacy.⁵⁸⁾ Heyward's boast to Montcalm that Cora and Alice hold their own in terms of spirit and tenacity, and that Cora especially is even capable of commanding the defense of Fort William Henry, sounds a bit too much like impulsive rhetoric from someone who wishes to maintain his pride, not a firmly held conviction.⁵⁹⁾ At any rate, the moment is undercut by Montcalm's sexist rejoinder that "the crown of France shall never degrade the lance to the distaff," to which Heyward makes no significant objection.⁶⁰⁾ Finally, Munro's

58) *Ibid.*, 18.

59) *Ibid.*, 154.

60) *Ibid.*

seeming recognition of Cora's discernment and intellect implies the undoubted premise that she will adhere to his expectations and standards. Moreover, the adjectives that he uses to depict his daughter, such as "discreet"⁶¹⁾ or "lovely and virtuous"⁶²⁾, reflect the predominant ideal of a chaste and docile woman. That the male voices in *The Last of the Mohicans* often commend the Munro sisters is true; yet their respectful sentiments seem to extend only so far as Cora and Alice meet the accepted norms of contemporary gender roles and traits.

However, there are certain moments when Cooper's female characters, particularly Cora, escape from the male-oriented nature of the novel's narrative. Such instances occur when the two sisters oppose the dominant discourse imposed upon them by male authority, embodied in the text by Duncan Heyward. Alice, on gazing at the "free air and proud carriage" of Uncas, remarks, "surely, Duncan, those cruel murders, those terrific scenes of torture, *of which we read and hear so much*, are never acted in the presence of such as he!"⁶³⁾ In the italicized portion, Alice incidentally refers to the existence of a prevalent racial ideology of which she is mostly a passive receptor. Interestingly, it is Duncan to whose attention she calls the fallible nature of this ideology; Duncan, who as a white male in charge of British troops and "a young gentleman of vast riches" possibly represents the privileged in terms of race, gender, and class.⁶⁴⁾ Alice's exclamation could simply be understood as rhetorical, but her tone suggests an implicit anticipation of and objection to what

61) *Ibid.*, 157.

62) *Ibid.*, 159.

63) *Ibid.*, 53 (my italics).

64) *Ibid.*, 38.

Duncan might likely tell her. Indeed, Heyward gently “corrects” Alice by instructing her that they should not expect “any other exhibition of what [they] esteem virtue, than according to the fashion of a savage.”⁶⁵⁾ That is, he steers Alice’s potentially unconventional view to a more acceptable, orthodox perspective. But in this he is challenged by Cora, who cynically observes, “now Major Heyward speaks, as Major Heyward should, who, that looks at this creature of nature, remembers the shades of his skin.”⁶⁶⁾ This acerbic comment is followed by “a short, and apparently an embarrassed, silence.”⁶⁷⁾ Cora’s mockery has created an uncomfortable pause by identifying the flaws in Heyward’s conventional assumptions, an awareness shared by her sister, albeit at a more unconscious level. Thus, although for the most part typically unassuming and acquiescent, Cooper’s female characters sometimes initiate small but significant breaches in well-established modes of thought.

IV. Hawk-eye vs. Cora: The Dynamics of Race and Gender

Intriguingly, subversive elements concerning race and gender constantly intersect in the novel. Chapters ten and eleven reveal contrasting episodes in which Magua contends with Heyward and Cora, respectively. In both of these scenes, the Huron chief rebels against white dogma that single-handedly smears Indians as evil wretches. He asserts that it was the white colonists who first “filled the bushes with creeping enemies,” “who drew the knife,” and “whose

65) *Ibid.*, 53.

66) *Ibid.*

67) *Ibid.*

tongue was peace, while his heart was coloured with blood.”⁶⁸⁾ Revisionist historians such as David Stannard would agree, noting that “colonial leaders... never failed to regard the Indians themselves as peoples fated for conquest”⁶⁹⁾ and that they showed “disproportionate responses to supposed affronts.”⁷⁰⁾ Magua’s heated claim that “the pale-faces” were the ones “who made him a villain” by teaching “him to drink the fire-water”⁷¹⁾ is also supported by Nicholas O. Warner, who refers to “the dishonor of whites irresponsibly or maliciously plying Native Americans with liquor.”⁷²⁾ Thus Magua’s invective is neither an overwrought response nor manipulative rhetoric, but valid criticism reinforced by historical fact. Indeed, the defiant Magua partly resembles actual Indian dissidents such as the famed Shawnee leaders Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, under whose influence other natives were able to internalize a sense of “racial solidarity.”⁷³⁾ Heyward, however, is less than impressed with the Huron chief’s legitimate grounds for resistance, “disdain[ing] to deprecate his resentment by any words of apology.”⁷⁴⁾ Thus, their “short dialogue”⁷⁵⁾ grinds to an abrupt halt; the white man and the Indian fail to reconcile or to even fully air their views against the other’s.

On the contrary, Cora sustains an active conversation with Magua

68) Ibid., 90.

69) Stannard, *American Holocaust*, 104.

70) Ibid., 105.

71) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 102.

72) Nicholas Warner, “Firewater Legacy: Alcohol and Native American Identity in the Fiction of James Fenimore Cooper,” in *High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction*, eds. Janet Farrell Brodie and Marc Redfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 110.

73) Drinnon, *Facing West*, 92.

74) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 90.

75) Ibid.

in spite of their sharp differences. When Magua finishes his tirade on the unjustness of the whites who supplied him with liquor and caused his inebriated self to be driven out from his own tribe, Cora responds with the careful words, "something like this I had heard before."⁷⁶⁾ She also closely "observ[es]"⁷⁷⁾ her interlocutor instead of simply dismissing his argument as Heyward does. After Magua questions the "justice" of Munro, demanding, "is it justice to make evil, and then punish for it!", Cora admits to herself the "imprudent severity on the part of her father."⁷⁸⁾ Of course, she does not unreservedly accept Magua's reasoning, often rebutting the Huron chief with a strong counterargument, as in the following lines:

"And am I answerable that thoughtless and unprincipled men exist, whose shades of countenance may resemble mine?" Cora calmly demanded of the excited savage.

"No; Magua is a man, and not a fool; such as you never open their lips to the burning stream; the Great Spirit has given you wisdom!"

"What then have I to do, or say, in the matter of your misfortunes, not to say of your errors?"⁷⁹⁾

Here Cora maintains that she is not accountable for the "thoughtless and unprincipled" actions of certain hypocritical "pale-faces" that have treated Magua unfairly.⁸⁰⁾ While correct, in a wider sense this could be criticized as an evasion of social responsibility on her part. Yet Cora's rejoinder that she is not directly "answerable" for the atrocities committed by several others of her

76) *Ibid.*, 102.

77) *Ibid.*

78) *Ibid.*, 103.

79) *Ibid.*

80) *Ibid.*, 102.

race has historical implications.⁸¹⁾ Although women inevitably contributed to the dissemination and internalization of social discourse in early America, they were rarely the principal agents who originated, promulgated, and acted upon these ideas; that role almost always belonged to the white male population.

Such discourse depends upon refiguring certain minorities as passive figures, both in terms of race and gender. Nowhere is this more evident than in the dominant mythological stance towards nature. Kolodny argues that “when America finally produced a pastoral literature of her own, that literature hailed the essential femininity of the terrain in a way European pastoral never had, explored the historical consequences of its central metaphor in a way European pastoral had never dared, and, from the first, took its metaphors as literal truths.”⁸²⁾ *The Last of the Mohicans* also reproduces the contemporary conceptualization of nature as a feminine entity inviting penetration and domestication. Kolodny’s assertion that the novel’s cave imagery parallels the female body may seem strained; but her interest in the narrative’s opening passage that “there was no recess of the woods so dark, nor any secret place so lovely, that it might claim exemption from the inroads of those who had pledged their blood to satiate their vengeance,” is certainly relevant.⁸³⁾ Here the language has sexual undertones, as the word “inroads” posits an aggressive male force that encroaches upon the “dark,” “secret,” and “lovely” cavities of the wild forest. While such wording and the ideas behind it indirectly reflect upon gender dynamics, they may have

81) *Ibid.*, 103.

82) Kolodny, *Lay of the Land*, 6.

83) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 98.

more direct, real-life consequences for racial relationships and the standing of Native Americans. Although the Indians seem to share a similar code of manhood and masculinity with the whites, their relation to nature is not one of violent intrusion but of harmonious co-existence. Such manifest lack of destructive impulses on the part of the natives, almost approaching the feminine rather than the masculine, was fully exploited by whites in order to violate and subordinate them. Closely allied with the feminine earth, Indians easily became the target of deliberate depredation.

The unexpected connection between race and gender is further revealed in the character of Hawk-eye, who is a sort of hybrid Indian himself. On his first appearance, Hawk-eye is described as bearing "a girdle of wampum, like that which confined the scanty garments of the Indian," and his moccasins are likewise "ornamented after the gay fashion of the natives."⁸⁴) Not only his outer appearance but also his accustomed way of life, down to the subtle nuances, resembles the Mohicans with whom he roams the forest. Although the scout is proud of his heritage, frequently insisting that he is "a white man without a cross,"⁸⁵) he is decidedly the most vocal critic of the many evils practiced by white civilization. For instance, he readily acknowledges that "[his] people have many ways, of which, as an honest man, [he] can't approve."⁸⁶) On hearing the Delawares wrongfully slandered by David as "the profanest of the idolatrous," he is quick to denounce it as "a wicked fabrication of the whites."⁸⁷) Perhaps his sharpest condemnation of the overall repercussions of civilization can be found

84) *Ibid.*, 29.

85) *Ibid.*, 63.

86) *Ibid.*, 31.

87) *Ibid.*, 226.

in a long, impassioned response to Heyward:

You see before you, a chief of the great Mohican Sagamores! Once his family could chase their deer over tracts of country wider than that which belongs to the Albany Patteroon, without crossing brook or hill, that was not their own; but what is left to their descendant! He may find his six feet of earth, when God chooses; and keep it in peace, perhaps, if he has a friend who will take the pains to sink his head so low, that the ploughshares cannot reach it!⁸⁸⁾

Here Hawk-eye's criticism of the whites' unlawful, unrestrained exploitation rings true precisely because he is a participant in, and thus direct witness of, native life. This white man of the forest often gives voice to a sense of injustice and loss left unarticulated by even the Indians themselves.

Yet as a scout for the British army, Hawk-eye unwittingly functions as a propagator of civilization even as he seeks to escape its clutches. Kolodny writes that in order to avoid the paradox of aligning Hawk-eye with the very values that Cooper censures, Cooper must "disassociate Natty from the modes of activity that Magua declares characteristic of the whites."⁸⁹⁾ But it is essentially impossible to sustain the image of Hawk-eye or Natty Bumppo as one who is acted upon by nature rather than one who acts upon it⁹⁰⁾ without outright denying the overtly masculine potency of his character. Indeed, an aggressive mettle typically more reminiscent of the white colonist than of the Indian sometimes surfaces in both Hawk-eye's bearing and language. This is strikingly apparent in

88) *Ibid.*, 127.

89) Kolodny, *Lay of the Land*, 101.

90) *Ibid.*, 100-01.

Hawk-eye's own description of his many years of "service on this frontier."⁹¹) The scout is seen "erecting his tall person with an air of *military pride*," a detail that seems to confute the peaceful rapport with nature attributed to him in other passages.⁹²) Similarly, Hawk-eye exhibits great satisfaction in his rifle "killdeer," observing that there is hardly "the space of a square mile atwixt Horican and the river, that 'kildeer' hasn't dropped a living body on, be it an enemy or be it a brute beast."⁹³) These words, spoken in the context of recollecting British victories against the French, place Hawk-eye in the incongruous position of European invader and trespasser. As Yeo puts it, "Hawk-eye is not completely free from the corruption of the colonial war."⁹⁴) That is, as a white male who values the experiences exclusive to his race and gender, Hawkeye's limit is that he can never truly approach the issue of race from a minority standpoint, at least not without contradicting his own identity and past history.

On the contrary, the character who carries greater potential for achieving a genuinely radical communion with the natives is Cora. As the colonel expounds to Heyward at the beginning of chapter sixteen, his eldest daughter is, on her mother's side, "descended, remotely, from that unfortunate class, who are so basely enslaved."⁹⁵) Cora's complexion, one "charged with the colour of the rich blood, that seemed ready to burst its bounds" is likewise an external indicator of her mixed heritage.⁹⁶) Cora herself recognizes the imputations against

91) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 136.

92) *Ibid.*, (my italics).

93) *Ibid.*, 136.

94) Yeo, "Inter-cultural Problems," 51.

95) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 159.

96) *Ibid.*, 19.

her racial constitution, testifying before Tamenund that “the curse of [her] ancestors has fallen heavily on their child.”⁹⁷⁾ Here “the curse of [her] ancestors” almost certainly refers to Cora’s mixed maternal ancestry, since she immediately differentiates herself from Alice, “who has never known the weight of Heaven’s displeasure until now.”⁹⁸⁾ Cora’s subliminal equation of the darker race with the disfavor of God may be criticized as resembling typical white justification for subjugating people of color. The first colonialists, for example, in determining whether “God intended them [the Indians] to be permanent slaves of their European overlords,”⁹⁹⁾ relied heavily on the archetypal idea that “the ‘race of the infidels’ would be sufficient to justify their enslavement.”¹⁰⁰⁾ Yet Cora’s speech rather suggests a more visceral understanding of racial discrimination; it is a factual statement of how prejudice is personally felt (a curse), and not a value judgment conspiring to degrade nonwhites. Such firsthand experience of bigotry—suggested by her father’s heated response that no one should hold his daughter’s race against her “as a reproach” (an astute anticipation of Heyward’s subtle but “deeply rooted” bias)—endows Cora with greater capacity to sympathize and communicate with the Indians, who are themselves the victims of racial injustice.¹⁰¹⁾ That Cora is of mixed race in no way undercuts the surprise element or subversiveness of her sympathetic stance, since one can plausibly imagine a counterfactual situation in which Cora, even with her inborn heritage, accepts the normative, racist ideologies set down for her.

97) Ibid., 303.

98) Ibid., 305.

99) Stannard, *American Holocaust*, 210.

100) Ibid., 208.

101) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 159.

Not only Cora's racial makeup but also her gender better qualifies her to relate to the natives. The predominant masculine values assimilated by men of the period, such as patriarchal authority, militancy, sexual potency, etc., significantly crippled them in forging truly egalitarian relationships. In contrast, women were less encumbered by both external and internalized pressure to wield oppressive power, and were thus considerably less accountable for many of the criminal brutalities hitherto wrought upon the Indians. It is telling that Cora, in a tense dialogue with the ancient Delaware, begins her response to Tamenund's "what art thou?" with the words, "a woman."¹⁰²⁾ Subsequently, she assumes the Indians' point of view by acknowledging that as "a Yengee [Yankee]," she may appear to him as "one of a hated race."¹⁰³⁾ She then stresses the fact that she is "one who has never harmed [him], and who cannot harm [his] people, if she would."¹⁰⁴⁾ Such emphasis on the pliability and innocuousness of femininity, both in individual and collective terms, gives Cora greater license to approach the natives without hypocrisy. Whereas Hawk-eye's bond with the Indians is limited to the personal friendship he shares with Chingachgook and Uncas, Cora strikes an almost immediate connection not only with the amicable Mohicans but also with the hostile Magua and initially indifferent Tamenund. In particular, the articulate criticisms of contemporary racism voiced by Magua are reinforced by the startlingly trenchant opinions that Cora utters throughout; in turn, her subversive potential within the schematism of gender is dilated through her link to the defiant Huron

102) *Ibid.*, 304.

103) *Ibid.*

104) *Ibid.*

chief.

Cora's feminine empathy, compassion, and tolerance allow her to cross racial barriers at critical moments in the narrative, a transgression culminating in the subtle possibility of romance with Uncas and/or Magua. This framework of heterosexual romance is what heightens the weight that Cora's gender carries, as opposed to her sympathy simply being conditioned by a common racial denominator. One may object that in spite of these "violations," Cooper's storyline is conventionally self-contained; but even plot-wise the involvement of Cora, Uncas, and Magua triggers "a subversive subtext undermining [Cooper's] ideological closure,"¹⁰⁵ expressed through Tamenund's warning of the white man's eventual downfall. Although this "threat" of miscegenation is ultimately integrated into the prevailing ideology through the tragic death of all three, the moral ruptures incited in the process endure; and the contemporary white-male-oriented discourse on race and gender is irreversibly disrupted.

V. Conclusion

Ian Watt argues that unlike other literary genres, the novel "works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration."¹⁰⁶ *The Last of the Mohicans* proves an apposite example, where contrary voices on race and gender strive to be heard. Cooper's narrative is permeated by hierarchical ideologies that depreciate Indians as inferior to whites and women as subordinate to men; yet the same

105) Yeo, "Inter-cultural Problems," 57-58.

106) Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 30.

narrative often undermines its own underlying myths by juxtaposing significantly progressive images of these two minorities. In fact, the author's respective portrayals of Native Americans and women exhibit similar patterns. That is, in illustrating the generic Indian or female, the conventional discourse that reduces them both to weak or recalcitrant beings comes into play. But when Cooper shifts his glance to the individual native or woman, the end result is much more liberal: Chingachgook and Uncas are imbued with "enlightened" virtues such as reason, loyalty, intelligence, and leadership; Cora and Alice Munro are more resilient than they first appear, proving through their conduct "equal to the dangers and daring of a life in the woods."¹⁰⁷) The import of such positive representations may be minimized as insignificant concessions within an ideological structure as intolerant and chauvinistic as ever. But there are moments when Cooper's Indian and female characters escape the authoritative discourse that entraps them and materialize as autonomous entities capable of causing fissures in prevalent American mythology.

Such subversiveness is maximized in the novel through the juncture of race and gender. Susceptible to oppression and disfranchisement, the natives and women are inextricably linked together as analogous entities in diametrical opposition to the powerful and privileged white males. Although the character Hawk-eye is often regarded as the mediator of two worlds, Indian and white, his failure to completely relinquish his male-oriented identity limits his capacity to connect with the natives on a genuinely even-handed plane. In contrast, Cora, as a woman of mixed heritage, carries greater promise of attaining a fundamental accord with the Indians. That is, she not

107) Cooper, *Last of the Mohicans*, 343.

only has an instinctively personal basis for sympathizing with the natives, but also belongs to a historically collective feminine identity that has by turns struggled against or been stifled by diverse forms of marginalization. Never the oppressor but always the oppressed, Cora is able to subtly transgress or obviate the barriers externally imposed upon her by white male ascendancy; and the result is a rare sense of affinity with not only the "good Indians" Chingachgook and Uncas but also with "the Prince of Darkness," Magua.¹⁰⁸⁾

Cooper's limitation is, of course, that he does not thoroughly explore these transgressions nor push them to the extreme, and although a detailed exploration of why goes beyond the scope of this study, perhaps a brief addendum is in order. Understandably, Cooper cannot completely divest himself of the racial and gender doctrines in which he is deeply embedded; but in formulating a concretely tangible narrative such as *The Last of the Mohicans*, he must necessarily draw upon a myriad of ambivalences and conflicts latent in these ideologies, or he would be stranded with an extremely flimsy account. Thus it is much to Cooper's credit as a writer and intellectual that he grants meaningful room in his narrative for such dissenting voices, which reflect upon the dimensions of his consciousness. One dimension, to quote Drinnon, may be called "the subversive side of Cooper."¹⁰⁹⁾ And these utterances, however feeble or dispersed by themselves, strongly cohere to reflect the moral injustices involved in America's westward expansion.

108) *Ibid.*, 284.

109) Drinnon, *Facing West*, 162.

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Abstract

**Subversive Voices:
The Interplay between Race and
Gender in *The Last of the Mohicans***

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This study explores how the Native American and feminine voices in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* engage with one another to create a subversive dialect that "violates" the racial and gender doctrines imposed upon them by white male authority. Cooper's novel reveals contradictory strains regarding both Native Americans and women in that he inscribes contemporary racist and misogynistic views but at the same time exhibits criticism of these intolerant ideologies. In his non-fiction work, Cooper unequivocally vilifies or disparages Native Americans in order to endorse America's westward expansion. But in writing this novel, he is prompted by what may be called a "literary impulse," which both frees and constrains him to address the latent ambivalences and conflicts of the ideologies that underlie his narrative so that it might acquire some form of authenticity.

The Native American and feminine elements present subversiveness in themselves, but on intersecting with each other throughout the novel, they carry greater potential to rupture the dominant hegemony. Contrary to the familiar view that Hawk-eye is the novel's most prominent transgressor, this study aims to give that role to Cora. Unlike Hawk-eye, whose masculine potency and implication in American imperialism impede a genuine communion with the Indians, Cora's racial background and gender allow her to relate to the natives on a more egalitarian basis. Personally experienced racial discrimination and identification with a collective

feminine identity facilitate such transgressive relationships. This is exemplified by the fact that whereas Hawk-eye consistently paints Magua as a demonic reincarnation, Cora not only succeeds in communicating with the Huron chief but also embodies the possibility of a romantic union with him. Namely, the transgressions on part of the Indians and those on part of the female characters reinforce and amplify each other. The result is a rich narrative that carries the potential to undermine itself, truly a fitting analogy to the history of American colonization.

Key Words

Subversion of White-Male Dominance, Westward Expansion