Introduction: Toward a literary history of racial sentiment

> While we know that racial theories have been built on and engendered a range of "scientific" subdisciplines – from Lamarckianism to Social Darwinism, eugenics, degeneracy theory, anthropology, philology, and social psychology – we have not really interrogated the epistemic principles, the ways of knowing – on which racisms rely. Folk and scientific theories of race have rarely, if ever, been about somatics alone. What is so striking as we turn to look at the epistemic principles that shaped nineteenth-century enquiries into race and sexuality is that both were founded on criteria for truth that addressed invisible coordinates of race by appealing to both visual and verbal forms of knowledge at the same time . . . Racism is not only a "visual ideology" where the visible and somatic confirms the "truth" of the self. Euro-American racial thinking related the visible markers of race to the protean hidden properties of different human kinds. Nineteenth-century bourgeois orders were predicated on these forms of knowledge that linked the visible, physiological attributes of national, class, and sexual Others to what was secreted in their depths – and none of these could be known without also designating the psychological dispositions and sensibilities that defined who and what was echte European.
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> It is this combined palpability and intangibility that makes race slip through reason and rationality.
>
> Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*

> There is an important sense, then, in which the question of the color line – Are you white or black? – cannot be answered by an appeal to color.
>
> Walter Benn Michaels, "The Souls of White Folk"

I

Perhaps the most intriguing of the multiple romance plots in Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* is the one that never materializes: the possibility of a romantic attachment between the white hero, Everell

Fletcher, and the "Indian" princess Magawisca. Everell discusses his feelings for Magawisca only once, long after their union has ceased to be narrative possibility, in a conversation with the Fletchers' servant, Digby. "[T]ime was, when I viewed you as good as mated with Magawisca," confesses Digby; "forgive me for speaking so, Mr. Everell, seeing she was but a tawny Indian after all." Everell responds with pique at the premise, and, we can assume, the use of the pejorative epithet: "Forgive you, Digby! you do me honour, by implying that I rightly estimated that noble creature . . . Yes, Digby, I might have loved her – might have forgotten that nature had put barriers between us."[1] The reader understands that this is a barbed exchange between characters opposed in sensibility. While Digby clearly exhibits the familiar form of "Indian-hating" the novel marks as dangerous, Everell is one of those characters, like the eponymous heroine, who is "superior to some of the prejudices of [the] age" and counters them when they arise.[2] Yet Everell's response moves in two directions at once: "Yes, Digby, I might have loved her," on the one hand; "nature had put barriers between us," on the other. Even as he rebukes the suggestion that loving Magawisca is beneath him, he thus grants the premise that the Indian is indeed not a suitable mate. In the transaction between Digby's Indian-hating and Everell's benign exposition of the laws of "nature" lies a logic central to the literary discourse of race in nineteenth-century America. For since this particular "truth" about race comes couched in the language of benevolence, we can only conclude that the suggestion that whites and Indians ought not to marry rests not on prejudice, but rather on natural law. And we are led further to wonder what is it about the Indian that renders her an illegitimate object of desire. The answer offered by the literary narratives I consider here relied substantially on character rather than biology: the races in question are understood to possess incompatible forms of subjectivity.

This book argues that the frontier romance, an enormously popular genre of American fiction born in the 1820s, helped to redefine "race" for an emerging national culture. At a moment when scientific discourse was becoming increasingly concerned with the biological differences among types of bodies, these fictional narratives about racial conflict began to distinguish the "races" on the basis of their emotional rather than exclusively physical properties. By defining the realm of feeling as the most important locus of racial difference, these novels produced what I call "racial sentiment": the notion that members of different races both feel different things, and feel things differently. In accounting for the formation and dissemination of this idea, I place an unconventional focus on

the relationship between frontier fiction with the figure of the "Indian"[3] at its center, the political crisis over slavery at the moment of the genre's emergence, and subsequent literary treatments of slavery itself.

In the 1820s, American fiction-writers turned to the past in order to make sense of the present. If the publication of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814) is widely regarded as the birth of the historical romance in England, the appearance of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy* in 1821 is said to mark its arrival on American shores. Ever since, the "biggest bestsellers, the favorite fictions of succeeding generations of American readers, have been historical romances."[4] During the rest of the decade, Cooper, Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Lydia Maria Child inaugurated what would become an immensely popular subgenre of the historical novel in antebellum America: the frontier romance. During roughly the same period in which this new type of fiction arrived and declared itself to be a distinctly American literary mode, the human sciences saw the rise of a new theory of racial difference which eventually inflected all American political thought. My purpose is to establish the historical link between these two developments in particular. While the new biological concept of race was poised to achieve its dominance in scientific thought, the frontier romances of Cooper, Child, and Sedgwick concerned themselves with the sentimental properties attached to race.

I believe that fiction addressed this question in a context defined at least in part by the contemporary crisis of slavery. By reading the frontier novels of the 1820s alongside the political debates surrounding slavery and the scientific writings on "race," I will try to show how fictional narratives could offer narrative solutions to a political crisis during a period when political discourse was curiously unable to do so – how, by setting contemporary contradictions in a fictive past, these stories could imaginatively resolve them. In a certain respect, then, this book revisits an old question in American literary criticism: what did antebellum stories about racial conflict in the colonial past have to say about the most pressing political issues of their own time? By reading frontier fiction for its connection to the politics of slavery, I attempt to recover an important dimension of these novels that has been overlooked or at least under-emphasized. For while a large and still growing body of scholarship investigates the relationship between the emergence of frontier fiction and early-nineteenth-century racial ideology, this work generally does so in order to fathom the cultural politics of westward expansion.[5]

With a few notable exceptions, American literary criticism has yet to consider the frontier romance in relation to the politics of slavery.[6] Apart

from the obvious thematic disconnect involved in such an inquiry, there is another simple reason why even to pose the question of slavery in the frontier romance somehow seems out of keeping with the genre's predominant concerns. For it is also at odds with the assumptions we make in periodizing nineteenth-century genres. We tend to think of the frontier novel and the novel of slavery as belonging to the first and second halves of the nineteenth century, respectively, as first the "Indian" and then the "slave" occupied the center of American cultural production (and then succeeded, perhaps, by a return to the Indian narrative in the closing decade of the nineteenth century). We might take the figures of Cooper and Stowe as the signposts of the literary genres corresponding to the first two of these historical moments. As Leslie Fiedler put it in 1960: "Cooper tells precisely the same sort of truth about the Indian that Mrs. Stowe was to tell about the Negro; in each it is guilt that speaks, the guilt of a whole community."[7] This is a succinct formulation of a proposition that operated as a kind of critical common sense during the 1950s and 1960s: to Cooper the "red man," to Stowe the "black." Though it is the "same sort of truth" in each case, this very correspondence is based on an implied antithesis so self-evident, it need hardly be argued. This bifurcation persists today as our distinction between "frontier literature" and "the literature of slavery," a division perhaps clearest in the recent surveys of literary history, where such generic distinctions and periodizations are at a premium, for reasons of coverage and editorial organization.[8] The thematics of the "Indian question" and slavery thus come to be treated as moments in a cultural-historical series. But by attempting to recover the actual lines of filiation between Cooper's frontier fiction (with which I begin in Chapter Two) and Stowe's sentimental novel of slavery (to which I turn in Chapter Five), I hope to demonstrate how they might be understood as belonging to the same cultural field despite differences in period, theme, and the gendering of their narrative modes.

I am by no means the first to suggest that there is something compelling about juxtaposing the work of Cooper and Stowe. One critical example which bears directly on my work here is Philip Fisher's seminal and richly layered examination of the two in *Hard Facts* (1985). *Hard Facts* takes up the "cultural work" of the mid-nineteenth century novel, reading the literary forms of Cooper, Stowe, and Dreiser in relation to "three of the central hard facts of American history," Indian removal, slavery and late-century capitalist expansion, respectively.[9] The present work clearly parallels the first two thirds of Fisher's argument, connecting these fictions to political conflicts at their moment of production. But I cross

the wires of Fisher's account, so to speak, by linking the frontier romance to the problem of slavery and the logic of Indian removal to the sentimental novel of slavery, thus intentionally misaligning the "facts" with the usual cultural products in order to see what new insights might result.

To question the assumed ontological priority and thematic singularity of the "Indian" in early frontier romances is not, of course, to deny that the politics of westward expansion and Indian removal were central to the formation of racial categories during the early nineteenth century. Rather, it is to treat the nineteenth-century discourse of race as a system of relationships that cannot be comprehended as the simple supersession of the "white/red" dyad by the "white/black" one. I am not interested in displacing "the frontier" and installing "slavery" as the new master narrative for this period of literary history. I simply want to call attention to their interaction in the formation of American racial categories. I begin by placing my own critical emphasis squarely on the question of slavery in order to supplement the already rich critical literature on the "Indian" and the fiction of the frontier.

During the half-century between the War of 1812 and the Civil War, Anglo-Indian relations were the subject of some seventy-three American novels.[10] It makes perfect sense for us to connect this thematic concern to a set of political practices in need of legitimation, or some form of cultural mediation. "Indian removal" was obviously not the only pressing political issue of the time, however. To early republican statesmen, the "Indian" did present what James Madison called in 1826 a "problem most baffling to the policy of our country." But the problem of what Madison called "the black race within our bosom," no less than that of the "red on our borders," menaced the new nation as Anglo-American politicians understood it.[11] The institution of slavery was an intensely divisive issue for the young republic, and never more so than in the wake of the Missouri crisis of 1819–1821, a dispute over the legality of slavery in the new state that even spawned threats of secession.[12] The most obvious historical lesson that this crisis teaches us is simply that westward expansion and slavery were political problems that could not easily be separated.[13] I want to take this problematic into American literary history and use it to reread the frontier romances of the 1820s against the background of slavery. For as Jared Gardner has pointed out, the period following the Missouri crisis was precisely that during which Cooper wrote and published his first frontier romances.[14] In general terms, it is clear that the "Indian problem" and the "slave problem" were intimately and inextricably linked at the level of cultural meanings. Both were represented as the results of conflicts

between racially incompatible groups, and both conflicts turned on the categories of property, ownership and entitlement – concepts which thereby became racialized by the context. This isomorphism between the Indian question and the slave question, I argue, made it possible for frontier romances to use the figure of the "Indian" to think about the problem of slavery in different terms.

The fiction of white-Indian warfare also engaged contemporary concerns about slavery in a more concrete sense: it raised the specter of "race war," a fear that haunted nineteenth-century debates about slavery. It is easy to imagine how the dispossessed and potentially vengeful Indian of frontier fiction may have evoked the slave insurrections of the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Large-scale slave rebellions and conspiracies were planned and enacted with varying levels of success in Virginia in 1800, Louisiana in 1811, and Florida in 1816. Vesey's rebellion of 1822, a conspiracy of slaves and free blacks organized in South Carolina, provided a particularly immediate backdrop to the emergent frontier novels. Though betrayed and quashed before it could be brought about, a lengthy and nationally publicized trial, followed by public hangings of the conspirators and demonstrations by local blacks that had to be contained by state militia and federal troops, all made this the most highly visible such event until Nat Turner's rebellion some nine years later. Cooper, Child, and Sedgwick would no doubt have had these recent events fresh in their minds, along with the political fallout of the Missouri crisis, at the very moment they produced the first spate of frontier romances – Cooper's *Pioneers* was published in 1823, Child's *Hobomok* in 1824, and Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* in 1827. So, too, would the readers who consumed these romances.

While I make this common-sense appeal to the historical context of the production and reception of frontier romances, I will not offer any analysis of whether authors or readers consciously made these connections. As regards the authors themselves, I am interested only in showing how their works were structured in such a way as to engage some of the contemporary questions about the issue of slavery, not in arguing that they deliberately codified those questions. And while I make passing reference to the readership of these novels, what is at issue in my account is neither individual acts of reading, nor even a general pattern of reception, but rather the "reader" implied or imaginatively addressed by the texts. Thus, while there may well have been occasions when individual authors or readers made explicit connections between the themes I discuss, what interests me are the implicit connections between the

two that it would have occurred to no one to discuss or spell out in the terms I do here. I think of this not as a disavowed knowledge, but quite oppositely as the level of the "everybody knows": everybody knows, for example, that the vengeful Indian of frontier fiction presents a potential analogy to the historical possibility of slave rebellion. This unspoken semantic level need not be conceived as a repressed depth, but rather as something more like what Foucault has termed a "positive unconscious of knowledge," by which I mean in this context, something that may elude explicit awareness of the reader or articulation by the author, but which nonetheless forms part of the understanding of the semantic limits of the text.[15] Undoubtedly this abstract theoretical statement will become far clearer and more concrete in individual interpretive instances in the pages that follow.

Taking the recent works of Russ Castronovo and Jared Gardner as my starting point, I treat "slavery" not only as a presence in this body of writing but also as a significant absence – what we might call an eloquent silence.[16] In Althusser's terms, we might say that slavery operates as structuring absence, an unposed question to which the frontier romance addressed itself as a kind of narrative answer.[17] Fredric Jameson's notion of a "political unconscious" of literary texts famously draws on these notions of Althusser's, along with the structuralist anthropology of Claude Lèvi-Strauss, in order to theorize fiction as a kind of cultural thinking, a process of reworking available cultural materials to classify more adequately and thus "resolve" in symbolic form problems and contradictions within that culture which could not be resolved in real life. As Richard Slotkin has observed in a similar vein, the peculiar power of the genre of the frontier romance lay in its ability to "work out imaginary resolutions" to contemporary social problems.[18]

My task is thus to understand how these texts offered a powerful way of transcoding the crisis of antebellum slavery into fictional narratives of frontier violence. Yet while I will on occasion employ the language of substitution or displacement, I emphatically do *not* mean to imply that the literary "Indian" was merely the slave in disguise nor to assume a hermeneutics of depth where text conceals subtext. In discussing the connections between the literature of the "Indian question" and the politics (and later, literature) of slavery, I mean to explore the semantic, structural, and narrative connections and overlaps between the two. If I nonetheless place my focus on what the literary Indian could do for the issue of slavery, it bears repeating, it is only to emphasize the less apparent semantic work being performed and hence to supplement existing critical

work on the genre. I have chosen to do this, not by offering a comprehensive account of the genre in the antebellum period, but largely through close and thickly-contextualized readings of a select group of frontier novels from the 1820s. I then reread two major works of the 1850s, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, against that literary background in order to show their borrowings from the literary logic of the frontier and to cement the link between frontier romance and the mid-century literature of slavery.

II

While the most concrete intervention I aim to make in criticism of frontier fiction is to make it speak to the politics of slavery, my more important goal is to provide a picture of what these novels contributed to their culture's conception of race. My work on this genre is thus indebted to the large body of work analyzing the centrality of race as a constitutive element of American fiction in general, from Henry Nash Smith and Leslie Fiedler on down to the recent work of Richard Slotkin, Eric Sundquist, and Dana Nelson.[19]

My own project has a distinct emphasis from all of these works, however, in that I am interested in exposing the ways in which fiction itself may have helped to fashion modern notions of race. My founding premise is that if we do not insist on the historicity of "race" itself, we risk succumbing to the mimetic fallacy that it must have existed prior to, and dwells outside of, its representation in writing. For this reason, I am not content to treat race as a "theme" or even constitutive element of American fiction, because to do so may cause us to neglect the possibility that fiction itself was an important cultural site of racial *formation* as much as racial representation.[20] To play on the subtitle of Sundquist's seminal work, *To Wake the Nations*, what concerns me here is not so much the part played by "race in the making of American literature" as the part played by American literature in the making of race. This difference in emphasis may follow in part from the different historical period under consideration here: while Sundquist focused on the period from, roughly, 1830 to 1930, my focus initially falls on the fiction produced immediately prior to this period. Hence, where Sundquist investigated an "ongoing crisis over race in American cultural and political life" during his period, I am interested in the process by which certain crises in the first quarter of the nineteenth century were coming to be understood as *racial* crises, as opposed to political or economic

ones, and indeed in the continual definition of the categories of race itself.[21] As I will suggest, the decade of the 1820s is a particularly interesting moment in this regard precisely because of the nascence – the incomplete formation – of racial ideology so early in the century. For this reason, a focus on the racial discourse of this decade can be a useful supplement to the vast amount of work on the racial ideologies that achieved dominance by the 1840s or 1850s.

I argue that early frontier romances, which appeared merely to thematize race, were in fact an important part of the cultural processes that shaped it. Drawing on the recent work of race theorists, intellectual historians, and historians of science, I begin by charting the rise to dominance of a new scientific conception of human variety during the first half of the nineteenth century, one that differed in nearly all its fundamentals from earlier such theories. The "diversity of nations" presumed by eighteenth-century natural science and the "race" posited by nineteenth-century biology each attributed to human differences an entirely different etiology, epistemological status, and location on the body. Where eighteenth-century science presumed the original unity of the human species and the origin of all varieties in external influences, nineteenth-century scientists argued for multiple "centers of creation" and the original and natural diversity of "the races." Where eighteenth-century thinkers emphasized continuity in the natural world and the mutability of human differences, nineteenth-century theory saw stark discontinuities among races and presumed the permanence and stability of racial essences. And where eighteenth-century natural scientists focused on the visible surface of the body, nineteenth-century biology shifted its gaze to the body's inner structures – its bones, blood, and microscopic depths – and the interior of the subject in order to ground racial differences.

I thus stress the novelty of nineteenth-century race, and tend to speak of its "emergence" rather than its "development," in order to emphasize critical shifts in its definition between 1750 and 1850. After tracing these shifts in general terms, however, I then focus my critical gaze on the decade of the 1820s, which I believe can be regarded as a significant interval in the larger historical period. This conviction first arose from my observation of a peculiar feature of most histories of racial science, namely, that while nearly all accounts acknowledge a sudden proliferation of racial theory in the 1840s, the period of time immediately prior to it receives almost no attention. There is no great mystery here. Stated most simply, this state of affairs indicates only the paucity of important racial-scientific work prior to the discursive explosion of mid-century racial

biology. As I have already suggested, however, I do not regard it as merely incidental that, while the 1820s constitute a decade of little consequence in scientific racialism, it did see the rise of the frontier romance, a hugely popular national literary form which can be seen to thematize questions of human difference related to those treated by science. Emerging, as the genre did, at a moment between the waning authority of an earlier natural science and a racial biology yet to become dominant, the frontier romance bears both traces of the earlier theories and anticipatory gestures towards the later ones. In this respect, the decade of the 1820s may be regarded as a kind of hinge between residual and dominant conceptions of difference.

In focusing on the Janus-faced nature of this literature vis-à-vis human difference, then, I want not only to suggest that the fiction of the 1820s reflects contemporary conceptions at this moment of historical transition, but also to take a hard look at what part this writing might have played in the larger historical and ideological processes I have highlighted here. Ultimately, however, my purpose here is not to claim that race was "born" in the 1820s, or still less that it was my selection of novels that gave it life. Rather, in examining the fictional, scientific and political discourses of human difference side by side, I want to register a change in the way difference itself was understood and how exactly it was thought to mark the human subject. And I do have reason to argue that literary texts may have had a role to play in effecting this change.

By far the most significant development, as far as my project is concerned, is the gradual reconceptualization of human difference from a matter of outward surfaces and somatic textures to an interior property, hidden within the body and revealed through its actions. During the eighteenth century, natural scientists tended to emphasize the visible surface of the body – its "form and color" – in distinguishing the nations of men. By contrast, nineteenth-century biologists shifted attention to the parts of the human body that were hidden from view. In order to differentiate the Negro from the Caucasian, for example, they examined the organization of skeletal and muscular systems, the color of the blood, and the size of the nerves. Even when they did investigate superficial features such as skin and hair, nineteenth-century scientists studied these features under a microscope in order to reveal qualities hidden from ordinary human vision. In this sense, they represented race not as a physical surface but as a physiological depth, thus endowing "race" in the nineteenth century with a kind of thickness that "human variety" did not possess in the eighteenth. So pervasive was the insistence that the truth of the body lay *beneath* its visible surface that the exterior of the body