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PART I  
Historical and Cultural  
Contexts



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# National Narrative and the Problem of American Nationhood

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In circumstances singular in the history of modern nationalism, the American colonies of the Atlantic seaboard achieved political sovereignty decades before they approached national solidarity. Most subsequent national revolutions in Europe involved the overthrow of dynastic aristocracies by common people already unified by history and tradition. The incongruous beginnings of the United States, however, complicated and indeed obstructed the development of national identity. Geographically far-flung and demographically as well as religiously diverse, the states were “united” (as Jefferson asserted) mainly by their opposition to royal tyranny, and after the British surrender at Yorktown the inherently disunited states confronted a myriad of difficulties on the level of practical governance that long occluded the problem of nation-building. Jefferson had in a sense invented an American nation in the Declaration’s sweeping first sentence, which invokes “the laws of nature and of nature’s God” to justify the separation of “one people” from another (Jefferson 1984: 19). Yet “the people” rhetorically reified by the pronoun “we” were hardly “one”; the putative nation that transcended the individual states existed nowhere except in Jefferson’s eloquent fiction of self-creation. The former colonies could be organized constitutionally into a republic taking its place “among the powers of the earth,” but the United States were not a nation in 1776 or in 1787 or even in 1800.

Unlike France, Greece, Germany, or Italy – all of which underwent national revolutions in the wake of the American Revolution – the several states lacked a language uniquely their own, a shared legendary past, or a binding traditional culture. About their want of a metropolitan center James Fenimore Cooper remarked in 1837: “It is not easy for any but close observers, to estimate the influence of such places as London or Paris. They contribute, essentially, to national identity, and national tone, and national policy; in short, to nationality – a merit in which we are almost entirely wanting” (Cooper 1982: 264).

Unlike the emerging nations of Latin America that likewise overcame colonial origins, the United States possessed no dominant religion and its European population was decidedly less homogenous, composed (as Crèvecoeur observed) of a “promiscuous breed” of “English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” (Crèvecoeur 1981: 68). In 1790, 40 percent of the white population was non-English, and within a few decades arriving Irish immigrants faced nativist hostility. Spread across disparate states stretching 1,500 miles from north to south and often 300 miles inland, the populace additionally included vast numbers of non-citizens – the folk dismissively termed “merciless Indian savages” in the Declaration, as well as many thousands of black slaves whose very presence could not be acknowledged in that document’s final draft. In sum, Jefferson’s imagined nation comprised only a portion of the domestic population. Eleven years later, the Constitution’s opening phrase (“We, the people of the United States”) again begged the question: Who belonged to this problematic “people” aspiring to nationhood?

The issue of national belonging presumed a more basic question, however: the one later posed by Ernest Renan in his lecture “What is a Nation?” Demonstrating by examples from Europe and the Middle East that neither race, language, religion, nor geography – alone or in combination – sufficed to explain the kinship inherent in national belonging, Renan suggested that the nation is ultimately “a spiritual principle” drawn from “a rich legacy of memories” and manifesting itself in a “present-day consent, the desire to live together” (Renan 1990: 19) Yet the assent to communal life, to what Benedict Anderson has called the “imagined community” of the nation, depends not only upon memory but also, as Renan concluded, upon its suppression:

Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality. Indeed, historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took place at the origin of all political formations, even of those whose consequences have been altogether beneficial. Unity is always effected by means of brutality. (Renan 1990: 11)

Individuals live within national communities precisely because “they have forgotten many things” (Renan 1990: 11) that constitute sources of potential resentment and division. Yet the imperative to reconstruct a national past, to venerate what Anthony D. Smith calls “the myths and memories of the nation” (Smith 1999: 104), ensures that remembering and forgetting will always be locked in a reciprocity fraught with cultural danger and charged by the politics of belonging. And so the nation proves ultimately to be a provisional collectivity, a “daily plebiscite” in Renan’s formulation (1990: 19), a virtual community differently conceived by different internal groups, its operative sense of connection depending on a precarious historical consensus secured by forgetfulness, on an official story always threatened by indignant recollection.

Renan's claim that nations arise from "brutality" possesses obvious implications for the singular formation of the American nation – the colonists' wresting of land from a Native population, their subjugation of African Americans, and their simultaneous, contradictory appeal in the Declaration to universal principles of liberty and equality as well as to an exclusionary vision of citizenship. The ethnic heterogeneity, geographical dispersion, religious diversity, and systematic racial oppression (in slavery and Indian removal) that defined the young republic also deeply complicated the forgetting crucial to national unity. Those who produced the images, emblems, songs, and stories of American nationhood found themselves obliged not only to rewrite the past, effacing all that was shameful, but also to ignore or dismiss continuing indignities within the would-be nation. Others, marginalized by national mythology, refused to forget past injustices, instead stirring memory and conscience.

Arguably, nation-building – the multiform, self-conscious construction of ideas and images of nationhood – did not become a general project until the formation of an American mass culture around 1820. And by then the social factors that belied the notion of "one people" made it anything but a unified undertaking. Correcting the view that American literary nationalism was mostly a reaction to British condescension, Robert S. Levine has examined sectional tensions over slavery exposed by the Missouri Compromise of 1820, and he underscores "the crucial role of internal conflict in the formation of the new nation's literatures" (Levine 1998: 225). Regional attachments and varying moral convictions disposed mainstream writers to different degrees of historical candor. Contested from the outset, the vast effort to articulate the identity of an American nation engaged individuals of all regions, classes, and positions. For several decades it absorbed the first generation of native-born professional writers, many of whom labored to create a national literature in the absence of a perceptible nation. The campaign also generated principled opposition: among others, Poe decried the "misapplied patriotism" that cajoled readers into "liking a stupid book the better, because, sure enough, its stupidity is American" (Poe 1984: 506). Literary nationalism likewise inspired counter-narratives by Native American and African American memoirists, insistent upon claiming a place in the nation or challenging the official, self-justifying narratives of the dominant culture.

Nation-building, or what Eric Hobsbawm has wryly called "the invention of tradition," encompassed an array of cultural activities. It encouraged the formation of an education system to inculcate an American ideology; the creation of ceremonies and celebrations to glorify national history; and the erection of monuments to commemorate a heroic past. It hastened the adoption of "America" as the common name of the nation after the popular and poetic "Columbia" had been claimed by a South American nation in 1819. It inspired the compilation of Noah Webster's dictionary of American English (1828) and generated early biographies by Mason Locke Weems, John Marshall, and Jared Sparks that apotheosized George Washington as the nation's savior. It promoted the study of American geography, history, science (native flora and fauna), and archeology. It determined the iconography of the Capitol rotunda in the 1820s and motivated the composition of songs such as Frances Scott

Key's "Defence of Fort McHenry" (1814) and Samuel Francis Smith's national hymn, "America" (1831), defiantly set to the tune of "God Save the King" while extolling the "pilgrims' pride" in a "sweet land of liberty." Within the literary sphere, nation-building also fostered the creation of poems, tales, memoirs, and novels that collectively contributed to an overarching national narrative, whose loosely connected elements made up a popular fable representing the struggle for land and freedom by motley Euro-American settlers, even as it obscured their oppression of non-European peoples and masked rifts along lines of region, religion, and ethnicity.

Launched after the War of 1812 by such organs as *The North American Review* in Boston, the call for literary nationalism acknowledged the weight of British cultural authority and the relative immaturity of American culture, but insisted on the worth of native subjects and the imperative to convert them into distinctive works of literature. In an 1820 essay on "National Literature" James Kirke Paulding remarked:

It has been often observed by such as have attempted to account for the scarcity of romantic fiction among our native writers, that the history of the country affords few materials for such works, and offers little in its traditional lore to warm the heart or elevate the imagination . . . , though it seems to be without the shadow of a foundation. (Paulding 1976: 132)

By then, unfortunately, American cultural achievement had become a matter of jest; British reviewer Sydney Smith provoked a furor when he asked, "In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue?" He concluded a series of derisive questions by demanding, "under which of the old tyrannical governments of Europe is every sixth man a Slave, whom his fellow creatures may buy and sell and torture?" (Smith 1976: 157). To assuage self-doubt and proclaim the distinctiveness of their own culture, Euro-Americans turned to literature and the arts in the 1820s to affirm a civic faith in liberty, equality, and opportunity. They underscored the nation's difference from Europe by centering their culture not in metropolitan capitals but rather in relation to the natural wilderness; America was (as Perry Miller observed) "nature's nation." Yet efforts by American novelists to construct stories of national identity often exposed an insistence upon racial superiority as a "chosen people" of Anglo-Saxon origin, especially in stories of early struggle with Indian tribes. A closer examination of a few such works will illustrate the unresolved contradictions that beset other versions of the American national narrative.

Irving's *The Sketch-book* (1819–20; see Irving 1983) offers a prologue. Conceived to reaffirm Anglo-American kinship, the volume flatters British readers with appreciative views of English scenes as it incorporates a handful of pieces suggesting the worth of American materials. Two well-known humorous tales, "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow," project the rise of a Euro-American nation from the storied Hudson valley landscape associated with Irving's Diedrich Knickerbocker. In contrast, however, the Indian sketches "Traits of Indian Character" and "Philip of Pokanoket"

raise unsettling questions about the fundamental nature of that nation. Susan Scheckel has observed that, for white Americans of the early nineteenth century, "Indians provided a crucial site of reflection on national identity" (Scheckel 1998: 12), and though Irving does not explicitly ponder American nationhood, the subject haunts his meditations on Indian life. He inserts these sketches (reprinted from the *Analectic Magazine*) into a volume that, in an act of unconscious exclusion, celebrates England as "the land of our forefathers" (Irving 1983: 791), and Irving's own rhetoric inadvertently exposes his racial bias. Although he insists in "Traits" that "the unfortunate aborigines of America" have been "doubly wronged" by white settlers who have called Native people "savage and pagan" (p. 1002) in order to demonize and dispossess them, Irving himself cannot refrain from references to the "savages." Noting that in *The Sketch-book* the Indian pieces follow a description of "Stratford-on-Avon," William L. Hedges has suggested that Irving intended them "to do in some way for his own country what he felt Shakespeare had done for his" (Hedges 1965: 114), to invest the national past with memorable imaginative appeal. But if so, Irving adopted a peculiar strategy: he represents King Philip, or Metacomet, as a proto-national hero, "a patriot attached to his native soil" (Irving 1983: 1028), and Native Americans generally as both courageous and aggrieved, thus implicitly rebuking English and American readers, whose common ancestors perpetrated unspeakable injustices. Insofar as Irving evokes his country's past, he outlines a narrative of persecution too scandalous to be written. He concludes "Traits" by suggesting that should the American poet

venture upon the dark story of their wrongs and wretchedness; should he tell how they were invaded, corrupted, despoiled; driven from their native abodes and the sepulchres of their fathers; hunted like wild beasts about the earth; and sent down with violence and butchery to the grave; posterity will either turn with horror and incredulity from the tale, or blush with indignation at the inhumanity of their forefathers. (Irving 1983: 1012)

Here Irving identifies the ethical dilemma between shameful remembrance and stubborn denial faced by Euro-American writers of his generation. Compared to his genial sketches of English life, the Indian memorials thus mark a puzzling gesture. If Irving meant to appease nationalists at home and to show British readers the rich material available to American writers, he simultaneously raised troubling questions about the emerging nation and its patently disunited people.

In the decades that followed, a plethora of writers nevertheless took up the challenge of producing tales and novels to articulate a larger narrative that would explain the nation to itself and the world. Homi K. Bhabha insists that the "strange forgetting" observed by Renan "constitutes the *beginning* of the nation's narrative" (Bhabha 1990: 310); if so, the Indian stories of this generation often revealed symptoms of occupational amnesia. The conscientious Hawthorne could publish "Roger Malvin's Burial" (1832), for example, only by "casting certain circumstances

judicially into the shade” (Hawthorne 1982: 88), suppressing the bloody details of a preceding militia raid on a local tribe. Cooper, Catharine M. Sedgwick, and Lydia M. Child were among the earliest to produce Indian novels conceived as national stories.

Cooper was the first to embrace fully the challenge of national narrative, and his novels of frontier struggle, beginning with *The Pioneers* (1823), adapted the historical romance popularized by Sir Walter Scott to the vast, complex subject of frontier settlement – the relentless incursion of Euro-Americans into a wilderness inhabited by Native tribes. Inevitably Cooper told the story from the perspective of the dominant culture, yet he decried what was euphemistically called the “disappearance” of the Indian, and his backwoods hero Natty Bumppo (nicknamed Hawk-Eye or Leatherstocking) preferred the company of Chingachgook, his Indian companion, to life in the settlements. As in *The Pioneers* when he denounces the wanton slaughter of passenger pigeons, Natty repeatedly voices Cooper’s scorn for the ravages of so-called “civilization.” The scout emerged from a minor role in that novel to become the central figure in four subsequent Leatherstocking novels that display his sagacity and self-reliance as they transform him into a distinctive national hero. From *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) and *The Prairie* (1827) to *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), Cooper portrayed different historical phases in the westward advance of Euro-American settlers, capturing as well particular epochs in their hostilities with Native Americans. Revealingly, his heroic frontier scout suffers from both indignation at the decimation of Native tribes and fits of racial pride in which he rails against Indian savagery while boasting of his Anglo-Saxon bloodlines. From such unrecognized contradictions the narrative of the nation began to emerge.

Motivated by Cooper’s example, Child launched her literary career with the 1824 novel *Hobomok*. Reared in Massachusetts, where Daniel Webster and others were extolling the Puritans not simply as New England’s founders but also as the fathers of the nation, Child felt obliged to honor their “persevering fortitude” (Child 1986: 6) in a historical narrative that nevertheless exposed, in the person of Mr. Conant, the patriarchal harshness of their theology. Deriving her plotline from *Yamoyden*, a narrative poem about King Philip’s war, she tells the story of Mary Conant, a free-thinking Puritan daughter who becomes an outcast, marrying an Indian named Hobomok after Charles Brown, her banished Anglican lover, has been reportedly lost at sea. Child casts Hobomok as a “good” Indian who warns the Puritans of impending attacks by local tribes; as Carolyn L. Karcher explains, the author “had not yet begun to contest the Puritan chroniclers’ version of the wars that decimated the Indians, as she would five years later in a book aimed at arousing opposition to the U.S. government’s ‘crooked and narrow-minded policy’ toward Indians: *The First Settlers of New-England* (1829)” (Karcher 1994: 22).

The unexpected reappearance of Brown, however, produces a turn reflective of the buried racial politics of literary nationalism. Deferring to Brown’s prior claim on Mary’s heart, Hobomok privately arranges an Indian divorce and abandons his wife (and their infant son) to disappear into the wilderness, leaving Brown and Mary free to wed. As critics have noted, Hobomok thus personifies the vanishing American, and

young Charles Hobomok Conant, as Brown's adopted son, meanwhile matriculates at Harvard (and an English university), drops his Indian name, and rarely mentions his father, concealing his mixed blood in acts of forgetfulness that signify his repudiation of Native American ethnicity and his identification with an ostensibly superior Anglo-Saxon culture.

Two years later in *The Last of the Mobicans* Cooper revisited many of the same problems. Nina Baym argues that the novel challenges the representation of "gender relations" in *Hobomok* and aims to correct Child's "dangerously mistaken view of female generic power" as it relates to interracial relationships (Baym 1992: 22, 25). In Cooper's tale, set in New York during the French and Indian War, Cora and Alice Munro, the daughters of the British commanding officer at Fort William Henry, create most of the plot's narrative complications by traversing dangerous terrain and exposing themselves to capture by Indians. Around a bloody historical event, the massacre of surrendering British troops by vengeful Huron Indians, Cooper weaves a harrowing tale of capture, disguise, and rescue. Significantly, the budding romance between fair Alice and a Southern colonist, Major Duncan Heyward, projects the incipient formation of a Euro-American people. Conversely, the attraction of the Huron chief Magua to dark-haired Cora poses the national threat of miscegenation, and though Cooper also hints that the heroic and worthy Uncas, son of Chingachgook, secretly loves Cora, he disposes of the problem of interracial marriage by staging the deaths of all three characters in the novel's climactic struggle. As if to explain the attraction of two Indians to Cora, the author reveals that Colonel Munro's elder daughter was the product of his first marriage in the West Indies to a woman of mixed (white and African) blood. Thus, despite the fact that Cooper (through Munro) laments slavery and (through Magua) recites manifold injustices heaped upon Native people by Euro-Americans, he still refuses to envision a future American nation – the progeny of Cora and Uncas – uniting European, Native American, and African blood. In fact, he has Natty Bumppo repeatedly proclaiming himself "a man without a cross" (mixed blood) to valorize the principle of racial purity for an emerging American people. Published just after Congress approved the policy of Indian removal, *The Last of the Mobicans* overtly mourns the disappearance of Native people and covertly rationalizes their elimination.

Responding to both Child and Cooper, Sedgwick conceived a somewhat more liberal vision of a multicultural nation in her 1827 novel, *Hope Leslie*. Set in New England at the time of the Pequod massacre by the Puritans, the narrative graphically recounts that atrocity to explain the attack on the Fletcher household where two young Pequod captives, Oneco and his sister Magawisca, have been informally adopted. In the assault, which claims the lives of Mrs. Fletcher and an infant child, Chief Mononotto reclaims his two children and takes young Everell Fletcher captive, intending to sacrifice him. The novel's defining symbolic moment occurs when the heroic Magawisca saves her beloved Everell from a violent death but loses her arm in the process. Her mutilation signifies both her devotion and the contaminating influence of Anglo culture. In a scene reminiscent of Hobomok's renunciation, she later

blesses Everell's union with Hope Leslie, the plucky English lass who rescues her from prison, and withdraws into the forest, concluding that "the Indian and the white man can no more mingle, and become one, than day and night" (Sedgwick 1998: 349). Yet the destiny of Hope's sister Faith (or Mary) somewhat qualifies this gloomy augury of national disunity. Taken captive in the raid that ended Mrs. Fletcher's life, Faith weds Oneco and embraces Native American life so completely that she even forgets the English language. Sedgwick (like Child) thus uses interracial marriage to challenge the notion of Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority and to suggest a viable bond between white women and Indians, both victims of patriarchal Puritan authority. Like Cooper, however, she cannot conceive of a multicultural nation, and her Indians at last vanish into the wilderness. Yet her tale of early America balances respect for certain Puritan figures (notably John Winthrop and John Eliot) with a frank revelation of the dominant culture's misdeeds as well as a poignant representation of American history from an Indian perspective.

Child, Cooper, and Sedgwick responded to the call for national narratives with works that located in the complicated, often bloody relations between white settlers and Indians a defining story that helped to explain what made the proto-national American culture of the 1820s different from English culture. So too did William Gilmore Simms, whose 1835 novel *The Yemassee* portrayed the destruction of a South Carolina tribe by English colonists as a solemnly tragic event. Others, however, conceived of the Indian novel in a more zealously nationalistic (that is, ethnocentric) fashion. Robert Montgomery Bird's *Nick of the Woods* (1837) demonizes Native Americans while revealing the genocidal terrorism of the aptly named Nathan Slaughter, who passes as a non-violent Quaker but proves to be the murderous "Nick of the Woods," a legendary Indian hater. The real menace of the novel, according to Joshua David Bellin, is an "interculturalism" that "defies racial, cultural, and even individual purity and integrity" (Bellin 2001: 27); Bird sees extermination as the final solution to threatened admixture.

The Cherokee controversy of 1829 (which inspired Child's *First Settlers*) and Andrew Jackson's implementation of Indian removal in 1830 seemed literally and figuratively to deny Native Americans a place in the emerging nation and thus raised the stakes of literary nationalism. Although few Indians had access to formal education or literacy, Native voices entered the debate that hinged on whether America was to be a civic nation, defined by equal constitutional rights, or an ethnic nation, rooted in a Eurocentric idea of cultural identity. One early Native participant in this conversation was David Cusick (Tuscarora), whose *Sketches of Ancient History of the Six Nations* (1827) traced the development of the Iroquois Confederacy as a significant example of representative government, refuting white stereotypes about Indian lawlessness. Another arresting intervention was James Seaver's 1824 biography of Mary Jemison, a white woman who (like her fictional counterparts, Mary Conant and Faith Leslie) had renounced Euro-American "civilization" for a Native American life and identity. Even more important for the construction of a national narrative were the writings of William Apess, a Pequot Indian of mixed blood who traced his ancestry to

King Philip. Apess's *A Son of the Forest* (1829) presents an autobiographical memoir of American self-making that highlights the author's service during the War of 1812 (in the face of the government's denial to "Natives" of "the right of citizenship") and his subsequent conversion to Christianity (Apess 1992: 31). As Cheryl Walker notes, Apess's own deeply conflicted writing depends on "irony and mimicry," and his "Eulogy on King Philip" (1836) occupies a crucial place in Native American counter-narratives of the nation, for there, perhaps taking a cue from Irving's "Philip of Pokanoket," Apess compares King Philip to George Washington, extolling the chief as "a personification not only of Indian America but of the nation America should aspire to become, a nation of justice for both whites and peoples of color" (Walker 1997: 167). While the US army waged war in the 1830s and 1840s on such tribes as the Sac, Fox, and Seminoles, Native Americans such as Black Hawk and George Copway also published personal narratives that in different ways challenged exclusionary national fables.

The campaign to construct a national literature produced many narratives concerned with other aspects of American history and cultural development. Cooper's first important novel, *The Spy* (1821), unfolding the story of the mysterious double agent Harvey Birch, ushered in a vogue for historical romances set during the American Revolution. Eliza Cushing and John Neal both soon contributed narratives evoking the national rebellion that profoundly divided the American people into rebels and Tories. Cushing's *Ticonderoga* (1824) underscores these internal divisions: though a "lover of freedom," Captain Courtland feels bound to serve the King, while his daughter Catherine ardently supports the American cause; she finally weds the brave American officer Captain Grahame, who saves her father from the hatchet of Ohmeina, a Mohawk fighting with the Americans. On the eve of America's golden jubilee, Cooper's *Lionel Lincoln* (1825) looks back exactly fifty years, as does Child's pre-revolutionary historical romance, *The Rebels*. Like *The Spy*, Sedgwick's *The Linwoods* (1835) incorporates the larger-than-life figure of George Washington; the plot illustrates the way such novels tended, in Shirley Samuels's view, to project the Revolution as a family conflict fusing "politics and domesticity" (Samuels 1996: 62). The subject of the American Revolution also attracted John Pendleton Kennedy, the author of *Horse-Shoe Robinson* (1835), and prompted a spate of novels by Simms, which included *The Partisan* (1835) and *The Kinsmen* (1841). Novels of the Revolution served several cultural purposes: they evoked the nation's founders at a time when the last survivors of the "heroic generation" were passing from the scene; they permitted the fictional differentiation of American national character from that of England; and at the same time they paradoxically reminded many Americans of their blood kinship with the Anglo-Saxon English.

Kennedy and Simms also helped to articulate a version of the national story especially concerned with the history of the American South and its "peculiar institution," slavery. Conceived in response to the rise of abolitionism, Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832) exemplifies the plantation novel, idealizing the Virginia estate of Frank Meriwether as a scene of "feudal munificence" (Kennedy 1986: 71). There, gracious

repasts and genteel diversions advance the halting courtship of Bel Tracy and Ned Hazard. A late chapter connects the putatively chivalric world of the plantation with the beginnings of the nation through the figure of Captain John Smith, dubbed “the True Knight of the Old Dominion” (p. 500). Kennedy represents Meriwether’s slaves as “happy under his dominion” (p. 34), and while the master later concedes that slavery is “theoretically and mortally wrong” (p. 455), he paternalistically deems it necessary to the ultimate welfare of his servants. Beverley Tucker’s *George Balcombe* (1836) and Caroline Gilman’s *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1838) both project similar visions of gentility and comfort, contingent upon slave labor. Many of Simms’s novels also express, as Mary Ann Wimsatt observes, “the ideals of the ruling class” (Wimsatt 1989: 38). In response to Stowe’s anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Simms revived a popular figure from his early work, Captain Porgy, to produce, in the 1850s, a handful of comic Revolutionary War novels, such as *Woodcraft* (1854), which extract humor from the vociferous, doglike loyalty of Porgy’s faithful slave, Tom. The plantation novel tacitly appealed to Jefferson’s notion of the yeoman farmer as the quintessential American democrat; the freedom and autonomy enjoyed by the plantation owner seemed, in the Southern narrative, a realization of the Declaration’s promises. Northern, abolitionist versions of plantation life painted a different picture.

Slave memoirists and autobiographers likewise challenged the pastoral ideal with jarring counter-narratives of bondage, cruelty, and humiliation. As we see in William Grimes’s 1825 narrative, former slaves often played upon the rhetoric of American nationalism to underline the monstrous irony of their unfree condition. In closing his account, Grimes mordantly remarks:

If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will, leave my skin a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious happy *and free* America. Let the skin of an American slave bind the charter of American Liberty. (Grimes 1999: 232)

Moses Roper concludes his 1838 narrative by insisting that whatever cruelties he has experienced, he loves the free institutions of the nation and hopes that America will “soon be indeed the land of the free” (Roper 1999: 520). The most famous of all slave memoirs, the 1845 narrative by Frederick Douglass, recounts a tale of Franklinesque self-education and Emersonian self-reliance, thus consciously Americanizing his transformation from a degraded slave to a free man. Douglass would later pen a novella, “The Heroic Slave” (1853), which boldly conjures the legacy of the Revolution in the slave rebellion led by Madison Washington, whose very name recalls Virginia’s tradition of patriotism. Through such rhetorical moves, African American writers attempted to insert their own story of struggle within a larger national narrative.



Figure 1.1 “Uniola Cottage: Mrs. Gilman’s Summer Residence, Sullivan’s Island.” Frontispiece from Caroline Gilman, *Recollections of a Southern Matron and a New England Bride* (Philadelphia: J. W. Bradley, 1860). Collection of Shirley Samuels.

The clamorous project of American nation-building reached a crescendo during the presidential election of 1844, when James K. Polk scored an improbable victory by campaigning for the annexation of Texas and territorial expansion. The following year, John L. O’Sullivan popularized the belief that America had a “Manifest Destiny” to occupy the continent, and the subsequent Mexican War confirmed US imperial ambitions. But nationalistic fervor did not produce national unity; Thoreau and Douglass were among many writers who opposed the war. In “Some Words with a Mummy,” Poe satirized the arrogance of a nation that imagined itself the epitome of progress and cultural superiority, slyly alluding to the disconcerting election of Polk. The Compromise of 1850, a last maneuver in the attempt to save the Union, marked a historical turning point and heralded a brief, spectacular flood of national narratives – Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851); Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851); Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853); Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854); and John Rollin Ridge’s *The Life and Adventures of Joaquín Murieta* (1854), among others. In diverse ways all construct quintessentially American stories to articulate judgments about the underlying nature of the inchoate

nation – some, perforce, from the perspective of minority exclusion. In retrospect, the implicit narrative of Whitman's poem "Song of Myself" (1855) marks the first compelling evocation of a democratic, multiracial America. Soon eclipsed by the spectacle of civil war, Whitman's precarious vision of national unity resolved the conflicts and contradictions that had from the outset bedeviled novelists, haunted literary nation-building, and thwarted the achievement of American nationhood. Whether the multicultural population of the United States could finally achieve the oneness of its motto (*E pluribus unum*) by rectifying those past injustices that impeded forgetfulness would be the test of the modern era and the burden of all subsequent narratives of the American nation.

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