

Domesticity and Dispossession: Removal as  
a Family Act in Cooper's  
*The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* and  
*The Pathfinder*

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In *Notions of the Americans: Picked up by a Travelling Bachelor* (1828), James Fenimore Cooper's Belgian Bachelor applauds the American federal government's new plan for "bring[ing] the Indians within the pale of civilization": removal of eastern tribes to territory west of the Mississippi (489). Once the native peoples of America's eastern states are relocated in western territory, the Bachelor suggests, "a nucleus will be created, around which all the savages of the west . . . can rally" (490). That is, the noble western savages and the degraded and decreasing eastern Indians will form a mutually beneficial organization—a family of sorts—that will civilize members and prepare them for what the Bachelor sees as inevitable "amalgamation" with white America (490). Cooper's foreign commentator depicts Indian removal as the creation of a separate and distinct American Indian organization *en route* to the coalescence of all Americans in a single entity. In this odd schema, the benevolent, paternalistic federal government removes native peoples in order to bring them into the national fold.

The treatment of removal in *Notions* is timely and representative. In the 1820s, first President Monroe and then president Adams proposed the removal of Georgia's Cherokees in the face of white encroachment on their lands, but Congress did not act (Prucha 67). With the inauguration of Jackson in 1828, removal of all tribes east of the Mississippi River became inevitable and the argument that removal ultimately benefited those removed entrenched. Like Cooper's narrator, the Jackson administration and its supporters argued that only through removal could the degradation of eastern Indians caused by contact with whites be halted and the federal project of "education, civilization, and Christianization" proceed (71-72). The rhetoric was intensely paternalistic: Thomas L.

McKenny, head of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, compared removal to "tak[ing] my own children by the hand, firmly, but kindly and lead[ing] them from a district of Country in which the plague was raging" (qtd. in Prucha 72). The removal of eastern tribes to western territories depended on a metaphor that, as Michael Paul Rogin's *Fathers and Children* describes it, fashioned the federal government as parent, the American Indian as child, and the dispossession of American Indians as familial act.

This defense of removal contained within it a marked tension between ideology and act. Realistically, the forced separation of Indians from white Americans provided little hope for expedient racial and national amalgamation; conflict over removal would culminate in the violent Indian resistance of the post-bellum era. Further, what was supposedly a benevolent, paternalistic act required military force and led to the dissolution of existing American Indian communities and households and the death of Indian family members. By 1844, between one-fourth and one-third of southern Indians were dead as the result of "the extension of state laws through removal and resettlement" (Rogin 240). As Richard Berkhofer and other critics have pointed out, Cherokee removal stands as a particularly ironic example of this process of civilization considering it was prompted by the nation adopting a constitution modeled after that of the United States in 1827 (159-60). Ultimately, the defense of removal as paternalistic raised questions about the sincerity of America's commitment to the family and the sacredness of domestic space. If federal treatment of the Indian was to be figured as civilizing and paternalistic, white America was left to make sense of (or, perhaps more realistically, *to forget*) the barbaric destructiveness of actual removal.

One means of doing so was through imaginative literature; in poetry, melodrama, and fiction of this period, Americans created and consumed narratives reconciling or obscuring the tensions within the nation's treatment of American Indians.<sup>1</sup> As critics then and now recognize, Cooper was a leading author of such narratives, and his *Leatherstocking Tales* and other historical romances reveal a multiplicity of strategies for making sense of the relationship between whites and Indians in the American past and present. At least two of Cooper's novels attempt to make sense of alternately benevolent and destructive removal through the context of domestic sentiment: *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* (1829) and *The Pathfinder* (1840) portray the white settlement of the American frontier, and all the violence it entailed, as a domestic act, focusing in particular on the role of mothers and homes in prompting and fashioning Anglo-Indian conflict. Such powerful figuring of frontier conflict in domestic terms not only forwarded the project of removal as an off-shoot of feminine discipline, as Lora Romero and Amy Kaplan have argued,

but also revealed the inherent tensions of frontier imperialism. In doing so, these two novels, which frame the decade of eastern removal, animate the tension within the contemporary portrayal of removal policy as a paternalistic act on the part of the nation. They also consider how violence fashioned as domestic or paternal could be turned against whites as Indians retaliated with their own domestic act of capturing whites and incorporating them into their homes.

Reading these historical romances in the context of removal sheds light on the means by which the texts at once reflected or reinforced removal policy and emphasized its violent implications in the process, all the while participating, as Susan Scheckel puts it, in "attempts to articulate a coherent narrative of national identity" (3). This complicates the traditional understanding of *The Pathfinder* as presenting Leatherstocking in love. In this *Leatherstocking Tale*, the mythic Natty Bumppo is a victim of a strategic white domesticity that allures and excludes him. Indianized and displaced, he stands as a loaded symbol not only of a frontiersman superceded by the very settlers he guides, but also of a native member of the American family who is eager to be incorporated but nonetheless is rejected and dispelled. *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* and *The Pathfinder* share the origins of the national family and the fate of those expelled from it.

### I. Strategic and Selective Domesticity in *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish*

In the period surrounding the Removal Act of 1830, American readers were fascinated with the figure of the white woman who, once captured by Indian aggressors, is incorporated by the Indian society and departs from white ways. Interest in this figure could be traced back to the story of Eunice Williams, but this trend perhaps was initiated most directly by James E. Seaver's *A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison* (1824) and included (among others) Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824), Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827), and Cooper's *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* (1829). In the latter, the young Ruth Heathcote is saved from seemingly inevitable destruction by the Indian brave Conanchet, then taken into the Indian village and ultimately into his home. Years later, Ruth, now Narra-mattah, Conanchet's wife, returns to her parents' home yet remains loyal to her husband. Cooper's depiction of the young white woman's transformation echoes Child's and Sedgwick's works as well as *The Last of the Mohicans*.

As critics have theorized the source of this period's fascination with the Jemison figure, readings of *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* have focused on interpreting young Ruth, the source of the novel's title. Some have

suggested that *Wept* reveals a cultural fear of racial mixing. In a highly influential reading, Leslie Fiedler calls *Wept* "the first anti-miscegenation novel in our literature," and proceeds to describe the entirety of the *Leatherstocking Tales* as opposed to Anglo-Indian sexual relationships (205). Leland Person identifies Cooper as part of a masculine literary tradition that expressed "a miscegenation phobia" (672). Yet James D. Wallace has suggested instead that Cooper portrays Ruth and Conanchet's marriage as productive racial "amalgamation" (the word, Wallace emphasizes, that Cooper used in *Notions*) that establishes an ideal the nation will, sadly, fail to foster. Finally, it would seem that either reading—*Wept* as anti-miscegenistic or pro-amalgamation—must be tempered by the source of the Anglo-Indian relationship in the novel: captivity. As Michelle Burnham points out, "captivity literature constructs and reinforces a binary division between captive and captor that is based on cultural, national, or racial difference" (2). Whether the novel smiles or frowns upon Ruth's captivity and subsequent marriage to Conanchet, it places their relationship within the context of violent racial tensions and ultimately condemns the young couple to sylvan graves.

The violent origin and end of Ruth and Conanchet's marriage do not stem from an anti-miscegenistic tendency in Cooper, nor do they clearly promote racial amalgamation. Rather, this particular literary depiction of interracial marriage reflects, with what is at times a disquieting neutrality, the deployment of domesticity as a strategy for obtaining power both on the past frontier of colonial New England and the present frontier of Jacksonian America.<sup>2</sup> The Indians attack Wish-Ton-Wish because the white settlement poses a threat to Indian communities. Conanchet captures the girl, however, because she and the white domesticity she represents have strongly attracted him, proving, as Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola puts it, "captivity (incarceration) can nevertheless turn into captivation" (167). Young Ruth's incorporation into Indian society counters the attempt to incorporate Conanchet into the white community at Wish-Ton-Wish. In this sense, captivity illustrates the Indian and white shared strategic use of domesticity. But the Puritans' moral queasiness over Conanchet and young Ruth's marriage illustrates the limits of white domesticity, which and what kind of family members the white household will not accept. Whites' failure to provide the Indian with promised domestic membership on the frontier lies at the heart of removal, a policy through which white America claimed to be domesticating American Indians for inclusion in the national family, as they destroyed Indian homes and families.

The blockhouse at Wish-Ton-Wish functions as a striking symbol of militarized domestic space on the American frontier. Our first image of

the community, as seen through patriarch Mark Heathcote's eyes, reveals a rambling dwelling "bearing marks of having been reared at different periods, as the wants of an increasing family had required additional accommodation" (28). This awkward family house, other buildings, and two log walls together form a strategic "hollow square," in the middle of which sits the conspicuous blockhouse of stone and wood (28, 29). "[H]exagonal in shape," with "long, narrow loopholes" and a "small canon," the blockhouse is quite different from the rambling family dwelling (29, 75). Yet, the narrative tells us, the glimpse of glass windows, "glittering on one or two small openings in the roof," reveals that this military shelter "was sometimes used for other purposes than those of defense" (29). Indeed, the family has equipped the apartments with "plain domestic furniture . . . should they be driven to the building for refuge," and the attic with a mattress and other "conveniences" to accommodate Mark Heathcote, who regularly uses the room for late-night "secret spiritual exercises" (75, 76). The blockhouse serves as a dwelling *and* a fort, a place from which to worship God above and take aim at enemies below. Its prominence in the opening vision of Wish-Ton-Wish and the first fatal siege on the community emphasizes the aggressive nature of claiming living space on the frontier.

Through the action of mother Ruth Heathcote in the novel's tense opening scenes and the two sieges, the Wish-Ton-Wish compound as a whole—even the less-threatening, sprawling family home—comes to animate the juncture of military and domestic the blockhouse symbolizes so well. Anxious for Content to return from his mysterious night mission into the woods, Ruth wanders out from the compound, leaving the postern open. Her sudden realization of this error sends her hurrying back, and when she catches sight of an Indian lurking around the compound, this "mother of the sleeping and defenceless [*sic*] family" rushes toward the compound only more rapidly (57). When Content does return, Ruth uses her maternal fears to convince him of her experience, challenging, "'Thinkest thou, husband, that a mother's eye could be deceived?'" (63). Thus the most effective watchperson at Wish-Ton-Wish is the anxious mother. During the first siege, Ruth's maternal instincts send her running to her daughters' bedroom where, oddly enough, she entrusts her precious daughter, young Ruth, to Conanchet, the Indian whose captivity has in part prompted the siege. Immediately her daughter cries out that she is being attacked by an intruding Indian, and Ruth turns around to find a striking tableau: "A naked savage, dark, powerful of frame, and fierce in the frightful masquerade of his war-paint, stood winding the silken hair of the girl in one hand, while he already held the glittering axe above a head that seemed inevitably devoted to destruc-

tion" (197). While Conanchet intervenes and saves young Ruth, the nature of this conflict has been made very clear: the Indians seek to violate and destroy the sanctity of the white home and the white female (both the trusting mother and the helpless daughter).

The violence visited upon Wish-Ton-Wish is matched in the violence whites visited upon Indian homes. While the novel does not dramatize any of these attacks, we twice learn of their effects on Indian family members second-hand. The observant and sympathetic Ruth concludes from captive Conanchet's mournful pronunciation of "Miantonimoh!" that "The child mourneth for its parent," specifically that Puritans have killed the boy's father (81, 82). In the second half of the novel, Conanchet aids Philip in an attack on Wish-Ton-Wish because after a Puritan attack, "the women of the Narragansetts have no lodges. Their villages are in coals, and they follow the young men for food" (372). The struggle over territory on which to build homes and villages ironically endangers the very women and children whom homes and villages are designed to protect.

If the establishment of domestic space for white immigrants is the motivation for settling the American frontier, then the frontier home is both the product and a motivating force of domestic imperialism. In *Wept*, Mark Heathcote's reason for taking his family from Hartford to western territory—the desire "that he and his household might worship God as to them seemed most right"—echoes the original impulses for Puritan claims on New England (17). Importantly, the novel figures his possession of the territory at Wish-Ton-Wish as a purely domestic act as Mark claims "an estate that should be valuable, rather from its quality and beauty, than from its extent" and then "contrive[s] to convert [it] into an abode" (21). Later, in describing the restored plantation, the narrative pauses to explain colonial America's difference from mother England in domestic terms: "it was England . . . [but] with a superfluity of space that gave to the meanest habitation in the view, an air of abundance and comfort" (249). A vision of domestic autonomy and comfort drives white claims on America and thus leads to war.

Domesticity is further linked to the war over territory in the novel through the act of *domestication*; in the struggle over home-space, whites and Indians find the incorporation of the enemy into the household a useful strategy. Mark Heathcote has "[a] desire to quicken the seeds of spiritual generation, which, however dormant they might be, . . . exist[ed] in the whole family of man," and so attempts to convert the captive Conanchet from a scarcely clad savage to a clothed Puritan (113). The men do not succeed. While the Puritans are able to detain him within the palisade and require him to attend prayer, "[i]n every instance in which

the youthful captive had liberty of choice, he disdainfully rejected the customs of the whites" (115). Yet the women of the household, namely Ruth and her namesake daughter, do appeal to the stubborn boy and ultimately win some of his loyalty. With "a gentle expression," Conanchet accepts Ruth's injunction to protect her children, young Ruth and the adopted Mary, during the first attack on Wish-Ton-Wish (182). He fulfills his promise first by halting the axe of the young girl's Indian attacker (in a scene reminiscent of Pocahontas's intervention on behalf of John Smith), and then by taking her from the arms of the wounded, soon-to-be captured Whittal Ring (198, 212). Conanchet effectively saves the young girl from what seems to be the family's sealed fate, death by fire in the blockhouse, and his respect for his captors only intensifies once the blockhouse has been burned to the ground. All of the Indians are awestruck by the seeming passivity of the Puritans in death, yet Conanchet is singled out for his response: "he appeared to linger at the spot in the indulgence of feelings that were foreign to those passions that had so recently stirred the bosoms of his comrades" (227). The young chief could not be incorporated by the Heathcotes, but they did plant in him a feeling of "'the power of the God of the Yengeese!'" and an affection for their family and daughter (361). Indeed, we are told, "had Ruth been there to witness the melancholy and relenting shade that clouded his swarthy features, she might have found pleasure in certainty that all her kindness had not been wasted" (228).

Conanchet's attraction to the Heathcote family and their spiritual life does lead to the incorporation of young Ruth into *his* community—and here we return specifically to the girl's central position in the novel. As Renée Berglund points out, Conanchet's captivity foreshadows the girl's and portrays with historical accuracy "the Indian's refusal to be acculturated and the white child's acquiescence" (99). Our first glimpse of Ruth, now Narra-mattah or "'the driven snow'" (375), reveals that she has indeed adopted Indian ways, exhibiting "the modest and shrinking attitude of an Indian girl" and donning calico and skins (369). Still, she is larger and fairer than most Indian women, and her "more elastic" step, "more erect and graceful" gait, and movements as a whole contradict her membership in "a race [Indian women] doomed from infancy to subjection and labor" (370). Yet she shows deference to her sachem husband, Conanchet, approaching him timidly and swearing allegiance, and we later learn that she has borne him a son. The Indian enemy has, in effect, acquired the center of white domesticity, the female child whom the home protects and who matures to become the nurturing progenitor.

Still, Conanchet does not trust this success, perhaps in memory of his own resistance to conversion in captivity. Importantly, he encourages

Narra-mattah to realize her racial/cultural identity by appealing to memories of her parents around the time of the attack:

'Does not Narra-mattah hear her father speaking to the God of the Yengeese? Listen—he is asking favor for his child?'

[Narra-mattah responds,] 'The Great Spirit of the Narragansett has ears for his people.'

'But I hear a softer voice! Tis a woman of the Palefaces among her children: cannot the daughter hear?' (375)

Narra-mattah now admits that she dreams of a white woman whose words she loves to hear because they "'seem to her like the Wish-Ton-Wish, when he whistles in the woods'" (376). Though captured and integrated, Narra-mattah yet retains the memory of her mother and associates her with the place name of her childhood home. Conanchet concludes that their marriage has angered the white man's God and, for the remainder of the novel, promotes her return to the Puritan community (376). The persistence of Narra-mattah's memory confirms the power of one's original domestication.

Conanchet's certainty of the inability of the Narragansetts to incorporate young Ruth might also be linked to the recent destruction of the tribe's village and, in contrast, the miraculous persistence of the Wish-Ton-Wish plantation despite the destructive Indian attack years prior. As mentioned above, the adult Conanchet returns with Philip to attack the new settlement at Wish-Ton-Wish because the Puritans have recently destroyed his people's homes. Conanchet and Philip successfully assail and seize this prospering village only to realize that, like the set of domestic buildings that sprang up after the last Indian attack, the Heathcote family has persisted in defiance of Indian claims and violence. The reader knows that, by hiding in the well at the center of the blockhouse during the last siege, the family convinced the Indians that they had died; now, appearing to the adult Conanchet, they successfully convince him that their powerful God has resurrected them. (Significantly, the narrator attempts to convince the reader as well, describing their reemergence as providential: "Had nature been left to its own work, a few years would have covered the deserted clearing with its ancient vegetation. . . . But it was otherwise decreed" [228-29].) Whether the result of the white God's intervention or human military cunning, the persistence of the white family breaks Conanchet's will. He returns to them his wife Narra-mattah, their child, and Indianized Whittal Ring, and in doing so, Conanchet allows his reverence for the white family to eclipse this military victory and contribute to the final loss of the battle and the territory.



Conancho's reverence for a former fellow prisoner and adopted white father also places his cross-cultural reverence for the familial in stark contrast with the Puritan's disregard for Indian families. Conancho's capture and execution are the direct result of his actions to protect Submission, a Puritan accomplice in the execution of King Charles I and a fugitive from English justice. As Submission and Conancho flee an aggressive band of Pequots in alliance with Mohegans and the Puritans, Conancho refuses to save himself by abandoning the somewhat feeble Submission and then, having hidden the old man in a tree, draws the attention of the pursuing group away from Submission by "rendering his own trail as broad as possible" (438). Conancho's sacrifice for the Puritan is particularly ironic because a Puritan minister, Meek Wolfe, has convinced the other Wish-Ton-Wish leaders to collaborate with the Pequots and Mohegans in capturing Conancho. During the discussion, Content pleads with them to forgive the Sachem because of the mercy he has shown Narra-mattah, but the discovery of the mutilated body of one of their messengers negates his argument (417-19). From this moment on, revenge overwhelms family ties; after the capture, Wolfe argues with impunity that Christian duty requires the sacrifice of the heathen Conancho, using deference to Providence as a disguise for violent action (444). As critics have pointed out, Wolfe represents a hypocritical Christian stance not only of the Puritan era but of later American periods as well, from that of the squatters as portrayed in Cooper's Littlepage novels (House 130) to the "[e]arly national New Englanders" who used republican rhetoric to defend liberal America (Gould 145). The critique inherent in the contrast between Wolfe's and Conancho's actions is clear: in a war over families and family space, the white conception of domesticity in its extreme is narrow and greedy, while the Indian conception at its noblest is inclusive and generous. The inevitability of white possession of the frontier is inextricably linked to the ascendancy of an exclusive vision of the national family.

A series of scenes at the end of *Wept* proclaims the victory of white domesticity. While Meek Wolfe sacrifices Conancho, an Indian significantly compelled by Christian domesticity, to Christian doctrine, Content incorporates Conancho's child into his household, determining, "It is his will that one sprung of heathen lineage shall come beneath my roof, and let his will be done!" (421). In doing so, he rejects Ensign Eben Dudley's more palatable suggestion that Content quietly add the baby to the triplets born to Reuben and Abundance Ring that morning. In the two options for the baby's future, we see yet another direct example of the relationship between domestic life and America's Indian policy: the orphan of the thinned race could be incorporated as an equal as long as

its racial and cultural distinctions are obliterated, or it could be grudgingly taken in by the family patriarch as an accepted sign of God's disfavor. Either way, the white babies are born in remarkable numbers, and the future of the lone Indian orphan is eclipsed in the final pages of the novel by the story of its parents' deaths and the concluding account of a tourist's visit to the couple's graves.<sup>3</sup>

Narra-mattah arrives at the scene of Conanchet's execution in time to assert the legitimacy of their interracial marriage and child, asking the stoic Sachem, "Will not the great Narragansett look at his boy?" and "Why is his face so dark on a woman of his tribe?" (459). To this the Sachem responds that she and their son must return to the whites, a concession of their victory over his family as well as his tribe (460). Once Conanchet is dead, the white victory over this Indian couple is made even clearer, as the grieving Narra-mattah becomes young Ruth again, responding to a prayer by turning to the older Ruth and crying "Mother!" (469). Yet the return to the white perspective is clearly regressive, for Narra-mattah/Ruth takes on the voice of a young girl and recalls the scene of the first attack on Wish-Ton-Wish (469-70). Having prayed a child's prayer at her mother's request, Narra-mattah/Ruth looks around at the faces of those gathered. However, once she finds the figure of the dead Conanchet, she whispers in anguish, "Mother! mother! . . . I will pray again—an evil spirit besets me" (470). As during that first attack (174), Narra-mattah/Ruth expresses her needless fear of Conanchet. Her captivity and their marriage are erased as she dies in Ruth's arms, her face "perplexed, timid, but not without a character of hope" (471). While her mother is happy that her daughter has again recognized her community, the rest understand the tragedy of the scene. In burying the couple side-by-side in the woods and labeling the woman's grave not Ruth but "The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish," the Puritans acknowledge that even in death, the child and not the woman returned to the white fold (474). The woman buried beside Conanchet remains an Indian wife and mother even though she recognized her Puritan childhood in dying.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the second half of the novel, Cooper links white victory in the New England frontier to a vision of family strictly limited by racial/cultural and religious identity. Ultimately, the whites' triumphant domesticity is revealed to be inherently exclusive—Conanchet insists he has no viable place within a family that "burnt the lodges of my people" (458)—and hypocritical—the Puritans protect their homes and extend Christian civilization through the violent destruction of Indians. Philip recognizes this when he questions Content why the white men's hands are dark, and Content replies, "They have been blackened by toil beneath a burning sun . . . [so] that our women and children might eat"

(352). Philip retorts, "No—the blood of the red man hath changed their color" (352). The exclusiveness of Puritan families is further figured as unnatural as the older Ruth Heathcote can offer her interracial grandson only a "cold salute" upon seeing him (408). And, as mentioned above, the novel links the English Puritans' unnatural act of regicide (a figurative parricide) to the American Puritans' attack on Indian families through the figure of Submission. Conanchet's sacrifice for the old man contrasts sharply with Submission's rebellious past and Meek Wolfe's vengefulness. Cooper emphasizes that in Europe *and* America, the impulse to protect the small family of believers leads to extreme acts of violence against noble patriarchs of other families. The perpetuation of the Puritan family, we conclude, entails the exclusion and destruction of non-Puritans.

The opening paragraph of *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish* gives a typical account of colonial New England history, telling us that the Puritans "transformed many a broad waste of wilderness into smiling fields and cheerful villages" (13). Soon, however, the tone of this history has changed, and we learn that the valley of Wish-Ton-Wish "was one of these establishments of what may, not inaptly, be called the forlorn-hope in the march of civilization through the country" (13). In the story that follows, any hope the Heathcotes have for transforming the wilderness is tempered by their sadness over the captivity of Ruth and their isolation in a valley surrounded by hostile Indians. The distinctly mournful tone of this tale about a Puritan family's struggle to maintain a foothold in the New England frontier, "give[s] the romance of American expansion a perversely Gothic accent" (Franklin 123). The title and closing scene remind the reader that the focus of the novel is not on the success of the Puritans in settling the valley but on their loss of home and family.

Through a focus on domestic strategy and destruction in the frontier conflict, *Wept* also reminds the reader of the Indian's loss of home and family. The title of the novel emphasizes the dual nature of domestic loss on the frontier. The captured young Ruth symbolizes a family's sacrifice to the colonial project, the child whose disappearance haunts her mother unto sickness. Narra-mattah is the Indian mother who loses home and husband and whose child is finally taken from her and integrated into white society. In "the Wept" we find the nexus of both the Indian and white use of domesticity in the frontier conflict and the resultant suffering. Here the popular symbol of the white woman in captivity represents not the threat of miscegenation or the promise of amalgamation, but the tragic triumph of a narrow familialism. As America approaches a decade of Indian removal, Cooper writes a novel expressing disappointment

over a nation's inability to imagine honestly an inclusive national family and a benevolent national patriarch.

## II. Dark Domesticity: Returning to Natty Bumppo in the Context of Removal

Between 1829 and 1840, the pessimism of *Wept* with regards to the peaceful integration of the Indian into the American family played out on a national stage. In 1830, Congress passed the Removal Act. The Cherokee challenged Georgia's jurisdiction over their lands and asserted the context of their treaties with the United States in the Supreme Court case "Cherokee Nation vs. Georgia" in 1831. Chief Justice John Marshall expressed the court's concern for the Cherokee but concluded they were dependent on United States government, that their relationship to the United States "resembles that of a ward to his guardian" (qtd. in Prucha 76). While in 1832 with "Worcester vs. Georgia" the Supreme Court denied Georgia jurisdiction over Indian land (Prucha 76), Georgia ignored the ruling, and the federal guardian continued to push for removal. Cherokee leaders controversially signed a removal treaty in 1835, and in 1838 the nation witnessed the tragic Trail of Tears (87). Like other tribes, the Cherokee suffered deprivation and death under the supervision of a government program officially aimed at civilizing Indians for citizenship. Removal forcibly established distinct white and Indian territories and, in doing so, offered only a forlorn hope for a united American family.

In this same period, Cooper was plagued with legal problems and increasing unpopularity in America (Beard xvii-xxxiv, Spiller 252-69, and Grossman 105-41). Returning from Europe in 1833, Cooper was overwhelmed by what he saw as the moral degradation of Jacksonian America. He spent most of the remainder of the 1830s writing satiric and non-fiction works of social critique, and his outspoken position led to harsh reviews and slander in the press. Cooper fought back with numerous lawsuits, but his litigiousness only worsened his public image (Beard xxix). In 1839, needing to make money and please his publisher, and possibly to prove something to his detractors, Cooper decided to return to historical romance, combining the two types about which his early popular novels had been written: "seamen and savages" (Cooper, Preface 1). Removal had not killed the American public's taste for literary depictions of (doomed) Indians, and Cooper determined to tell another story "of the wonderful means by which Providence is clearing the way for the advancement of civilization across the whole American continent" (2). In doing so, he reopened the story of Natty Bumppo, promising to fill in a chapter of the frontier hero's early life.

*The Pathfinder*, like *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish*, tells the story of a frontier struggle for power between whites and Indians that centers around a militarized domestic space (again, a blockhouse) and focuses on the marital destiny of a white woman. Domesticity is strategic in the fight for possession of the frontier in *The Pathfinder*, but it acquires a sinister connotation as Indians and their white allies manipulate rather than instigate domestic relationships to defeat white adversaries. Domesticity becomes further unsettling as Pathfinder determines "it is time I begin to think of a house, and furniture, and a home" but painfully discovers "I have indeed, been on a false trail" when a representative of white domesticity, heroine Mabel Dunham, rejects his offer of marriage (*Pathfinder* 180, 272). In doing so, she reinforces Bumpo's gift as the American frontiersman; thus the darkness of the novel's attitude toward domesticity stems in part from Bumpo's mythic role, which preordains his failure in love.

Pathfinder's inevitable rejection by Mabel Dunham and his exclusion from the realm of white domesticity are linked not only to his role as an asexual loner who forges a nation but also to his role as an "Indianized" white. Pathfinder's lost dream of domestic bliss resonates with the failure of an amalgamated America. The darkness with which Cooper infuses domesticity in the frontier conflict stems at least in part from the course which white-Indian relations had taken in the 1830s. The promise of a national family brought together through paternal benevolence had yet to be fulfilled, and the irony of the Indians' dispossession in the name of civilization was not lost on Cooper-the-historian. In the fourth volume of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, he dramatizes domesticity's role in making homeless the Native peoples of America by focusing on the manipulation of domestic sentiment in defending removal as benevolent. In doing so, the novel remarkably gives its white hero the most significant experience with dispossession and rejection by established domesticity. A reading of *Pathfinder* as experiencing the reality of removal significantly affects the reading of his inevitable, appropriate failure to marry by linking it to the inevitable, appropriate exclusion of Indians.<sup>5</sup>

Though set in the remote country of Lake Ontario during the French and Indian Wars, first at a fort on the Oswego River and then at a garrison on Station Island, one of the Thousand Islands, *The Pathfinder* has a remarkable focus on domestic space. Mabel's presence in particular domesticates the military structures in the novel. Shortly after her arrival at Oswego, Sergeant Dunham hosts a hearty dinner in the fort for his daughter, Pathfinder, Jasper, and various officers, and Mabel, or more accurately, her marital status, is the focus of this domestic gathering (124-28). Speaking with Pathfinder just after this dinner, Sergeant Dunham

proposes a shooting contest in which Pathfinder may demonstrate to Mabel his "'true character'" (133). That marksmanship bears relation to marriage is enforced by the nature of the shooting contest in which Pathfinder "fires at potatoes or drives nails into trees with his bullets to win a calabash [*sic*] for Mabel" (House 312). The association works the other way as well; when Jasper remarks, "'I would lose an arm, Pathfinder, to be able to make an offering of that calash to Mabel Dunham,'" the woman's scarf is associated with the violence of warfare (165). The presence of Mabel, officers' wives, and "some twenty females of humbler condition," or wives of soldiers stationed at the fort, make not only the contest but also the battles a family affair (154).

The British garrison on Station Island, like Wish-ton-Wish, has a blockhouse that serves domestic and militaristic functions, a stout building furnished for dwellers but equipped with a large canon in its roof. Towards the end of the novel, as Sergeant Dunham lies dying of his wounds, the blockhouse witnesses a domestic occurrence that was a staple in sentimental novels of the period: the deathbed scene. Here Mabel serves as the true angel of the house, a gentle leader for a roomful of men who do not know the appropriate social or spiritual response to Dunham's imminent death:

When she kneeled at the bedside of her father, the very reverence of her attitude and manner, prepared the spectators for what was to come, and as her affectionate heart prompted her tongue, and memory came in aid of both, the petition and praises that she offered up, were of a character that might have worthily led the spirits of any. (441)

Washington Irving would comment that the scene "is one of the most affecting things I have ever read" (94). In the American wilds, Mabel transforms military sites into domestic spaces in which the most precious of familial and literary rites are observed.

The domesticity of military space (and vice versa) in *The Pathfinder* takes on a particularly grotesque quality as the very process of courtship has military overtones. *The Pathfinder* has two plots, one involving Mabel's courtship by multiple male characters, the other involving the threat to British claims posed by treachery and Indian-French attacks. Mabel, known affectionately as "Magnet," is the object of at least four men's aggressive romantic assaults, and, as William Owen and Paul Rosenzweig have argued, the process of courtship for her becomes strangely akin to the detection of treachery and the defense of the blockhouse. Dunham is loyal to Pathfinder for rescuing him once in battle, and his promise of his daughter's hand, and Mabel's willingness to entertain the notion, stems from Pathfinder's loyal military service (91, 376). Jasper Western appeals to Mabel's heart not only through his looks

and courteousness, but also through his expert marksmanship and seamanship. Davy Muir courts Mabel as part of his plot to trick Dunham and aid the French and Indians. His military treachery, then, is linked to his romantic treachery, though, Jasper concludes, "his feigning love for Mabel, is worse even than his treason to the king!" (427). Pathfinder and Jasper early on hear a hostile brave note Mabel's presence in the compound and declare, "some of our braves want wives" (63), and Arrowhead himself desires Mabel as an additional wife. Mabel's marital choices all have a martial significance.

Over the course of the novel, military action and domestic action are, increasingly, violently linked. Before the sneak attack on the island outpost, Dew-of-June warns Mabel to retreat to the blockhouse, emphasizing, "Block-house very good—good for squaw. Block-house got no scalp" (323). June and Mabel go on to prove that, in a battle, the "home" is indeed the best place for women—even in the absence of men. When enemies surround the blockhouse, June pushes the muzzle of a rifle through the roof, and Mabel convinces the enemy that Pathfinder is inside to defend her, adroitly militarizing the domestic haven (368). Once Pathfinder arrives, Mabel promises marriage if he saves her father, making the martial-marital relationship explicit (376). Ultimately, the domestic life over which the battle is fought curtails the violence: Mabel halts the fighting, emerging from the blockhouse to declare, "My poor father is approaching his end, and it were better that he should draw his last breath, in peace with the world. Go—go—Frenchmen and Indians; we are no longer your enemies, and will harm none of you" (410). If the battle is fought over the white woman and domestic space, then that woman determines when domestic duties require the end of conflict. The white woman is crucial to the military as well as the domestic plot in *The Pathfinder*.

The association of domesticity and violence in the novel takes its most sinister tone with the murder of a soldier named Sandy and his wife Jennie. Mabel cannot keep Jennie in the blockhouse after the women retreat there. The poor wife rushes out to see about Sandy and, upon finding the corpse, accuses him of playing a trick on her. Discovering that he is dead, she faints and is soon killed and scalped by the Indians (341). To disguise the Indian occupation of the base for the returning unsuspecting Sergeant Dunham and his men, the Indians pose the white corpses in a scene of pastoral and domestic bliss. The soldiers are posed as if socializing and fishing (362-63). Jennie's scalped corpse "stand[s] in the door of a hut, leaning forward, as if to look at the group of men, her cap fluttering in the wind, and her hand grasping a broom," and "the jaw had been depressed, as if to distort the mouth into a sort of horrible

laugh" (363). The irony of Jennie's peaceful pose reminds us of the context and cost of settlement on the frontier. Possession of the disputed territory necessitates violence towards other occupants; thus, others' domestic relations are not sacred and stand exposed to destruction even as they destroy.

As in *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish*, the Indians of *The Pathfinder* attempt to incorporate the white female into their multitude. The novel emphasizes that Mabel and the blockhouse, her "home," are endangered by Indian desire as well as aggression. Just after Jennie's death, Mabel realizes that she is alone in the structure and its door is ajar. To her horror, an intruder enters and "ris[es] slowly through the passage," appearing to be a fierce Indian warrior:

[After the hair] came the dark skin and wild features, until the whole of the swarthy face had risen above that floor. . . . Mabel imagined many additional horrors, as she first saw the black, roving eyes, and the expression of wildness, as the savage countenance was revealed, as it might be inch by inch. (344)

"But," the narration continues, the countenance in its entirety turns out to be "the gentle, anxious and even handsome, face of June" (344). Come to check on Mabel, June has defied the image of the hostile Indian and proven a protector for the white heroine and her domestic space. Like Arrowhead, June is attracted to Mabel, and instead of inspiring June's hatred of Mabel, Arrowhead's desire for Mabel causes June to declare, "If June must have sister-wife—love to have you" (349). Though June is a far cry from the hostile Indian warrior—and though she reassures Mabel, "feel as gal—feel as squaw. Love pretty Lily [Mabel], and put it in my bosom" (357)—she nonetheless poses the threat of incorporation. When Mabel seeks to warn Pathfinder, her father, and their company of the dangerous trap, June declares "with a warmth and earnestness Mabel had never witnessed in her before": "One call from wife, wake a warrior up. June no let Lily help enemy—no let Injin hurt Lily" (359). June will preserve Mabel to be incorporated into the Indian community, but she will not sacrifice her community to her desire for Mabel.

Yet this is exactly what she does unwittingly. Like Conanchet, June undermines Indian victory through a noble loyalty based on love of a white woman. Mabel's feeling "that she was urging a wife to be treacherous to her husband" is accurate; June's aid to Mabel results in Pathfinder's reaching the blockhouse and ultimately defeating the Indian aggressors (322). Arrowhead is killed, and June finds herself turned out from her village (463). Mabel's promise that she "would never take the place that is yours, in a wigwam" proves false in a sense (349), for while Mabel avoids becoming a second wife to Arrowhead, her appeal



leads to June's disloyalty and resultant homelessness. June's desire to protect Mabel is foolish, for as a white woman, Mabel, like Jennie, is inherently linked to the white struggle for control of the frontier. It is only fitting that Pathfinder brings the dispossessed June to Mabel and Jasper, the couple representing the future of American society (467). Suffering "the double loss of husband and tribe"—her personal and national families—June soon dies in Mabel and Jasper's cabin (468). White domesticity, as embodied by Mabel, has overwhelmed Indian culture through its inherent attractiveness, and all that is left is for Indian culture to succumb to the ascendancy of white culture.

Pathfinder's experience on Lake Ontario is remarkably similar to June's: attracted to the white heroine and desirous of joining her in domestic bliss, he ends up betraying his natural attributes, or "gifts." Pathfinder tells Sergeant Dunham early on that if Mabel is willing to marry him, "I would . . . try to humanize my mind down to a wife and children" (129). Domesticity, in Pathfinder's mind, is the natural state for humans, and his abandonment of hunting and trailblazing would be proper in light of marital prospects. Pathfinder dreams of marriage to Mabel as the literal humanizing of nature (the realm of his present life) and the naturalizing of romantic love:

'I imagined I had a cabin in a grove of sugar maples, and at the root of every tree was a Mabel Dunham, while the birds that were among the branches, sung ballads, instead of the notes that natur' gave, and even the deer stopped to listen. I tried to shoot a fa'an, but Killdeer missed fire, and the creatur' laughed in my face, as pleasantly as a young girl laughs in her merriment, and then it bounded away, looking back, as if expecting me to follow.' (275-76)

This oft-quoted transformation of Mabel into a nymph and of the woods into the realm of courtship, with ballad-singing birds, a coquettish fawn, and a phallic rifle, proves not a prophecy of Pathfinder's marriage to Mabel but a representation of the incoherence of a world in which Pathfinder "compliment[s] a silly girl" (110). As Muir betrays the British by aiding the Indians and French, and as June betrays her husband and her people by aiding Mabel, Pathfinder betrays his gifts, early declared to be "'with the rifle, and on a trail, and in the way of game and scoutin' . . .'" (26).

Mabel rejects Pathfinder midway through the novel (270), but later rescinds this statement by offering Pathfinder her hand if he would protect her father. Pathfinder rejects a marriage of loyalty, explaining, "I fear me, Mabel, that man and wife needs be bound together by a stronger tie than such feelings, I do" (451). Female domestic space, the driving force of settlement, will not include Pathfinder readily, and he concludes that despite the dream vision he will not force unnatural accommoda-

tion. As a result, Pathfinder, like June, loses his home—though his is an ideal and not a real one—and responds to his dispossession with a feeling “of deep humility and exquisite pain” (446). It is fitting, then, that Pathfinder empathetically watches over June, the dispossessed Indian, as she keeps a vigil at Arrowhead’s grave (462-63). Never having had a spouse or permanent home to begin with, Pathfinder alternately sees his deprivation as less than and equal to June’s. Watching June grieve, he realizes “how much deeper lay the sources of grief, in a young wife, who was suddenly and violently deprived of her husband, than in himself” (463). Yet upon visiting Jasper and Mabel’s cabin and viewing more concretely the space and relationship denied him, he seems to conclude his an equal tragedy, commenting, “Ah’s me!—What have I to do, with other people’s miseries, and marriages, as if I had n’t affliction enough of my own” (467). Pathfinder determines that he and the Indian widow are both afflicted, yet the difference seems significant: June could not incorporate Mabel into her Indian home and community, but Mabel, before her marriage to Jasper, would not incorporate Pathfinder into her white home and civilization.

This parallel between Pathfinder and June recalls Warren Walker’s suggestion that “Cooper infuses the whole *Leatherstocking* story with the deep tragedy of the dispossession and final destruction of the Indian, a tragedy that the fate of the solitary white scout both represents and parallels” (117). Pathfinder, in association and contrast with June, takes on an Indian role of being targeted for civilizing through domesticity yet ultimately losing a home as a result. He finds the domestic realm appealing and readily pursues marriage and its “humanizing” effects, but Mabel rejects him and cuts off his ability to enter white society. Importantly, this rejection makes of Pathfinder a wanderer in the unsettled territory of the state even as it allows Mabel and Jasper to settle in New York City. Mourning the loss of an ideal, the deprivation of opportunity, Pathfinder rededicates himself to the role of facilitating rather than participating in white domesticity. Years later when Mabel visits the Mohawk River with her sons, “she observed a man, in a singular guise, watching her, in the distance” (468). As Mrs. Mabel Western, the wife of a wealthy merchant and mother of three grown boys, looks west, she represents prosperous, expanding, urban America. Her “distant glimpse” of this old suitor, however, “cast[s] a shade of melancholy over her still lovely face, that lasted many a day” (468). American progress is tempered by its human sacrifices, those who cannot or should not be incorporated into the American family proper. Like the Cherokee, Pathfinder stands west of white civilization, dispossessed and detached despite his desire to grasp the dream of the ideal home.

Of course, Pathfinder is *not* Cherokee, Narragansett, or Tuscaroran. He is, rather, a self-identified white man who does not resist white settlement but regularly promotes westward expansion by guiding and protecting the bearers of "civilization": white women. If Cooper and others in this period presented American guilt over colonial and frontier violence "through the oblique structures of irony, conscious or otherwise, and dramatic presentation" (Dekker 91), the Indianized Natty Bumppo of *The Pathfinder* is Cooper's oblique representation of the undeniable relationship between whites and Indians: the former's possession of American land necessitates the latter's dispossession. In the cultural climate of federal "benevolence" and domestic sentimentalism, the distance between the ideal of racial (as well as cultural and political) amalgamation and the reality of exclusion is measured in the stolen land that the homeless Pathfinder traverses.

At either end of a decade of removal, Cooper wrote novels that brought to life a tension between a vision of western settlement as claiming ground for the increasing numbers of white homes and a reality of the violence against Indian families that settlement entailed. These novels do not necessarily condemn removal as much as examine what was considered its relationship to white American families and the national family. That Cooper simply laments dispossession signals a willed acceptance, but Cooper emphasizes that the acceptance comes at a psychological price. *Wept* concludes with a curious tourist's pilgrimage to Conanchet and Narra-mattah's graves, and *Pathfinder* closes with Mabel's disquiet over the image of the wandering Pathfinder. History and the nation, Cooper reminds us, cruelly, inexplicably, but inevitably exclude even the noble, and we can never forget this. What Honoré de Balzac called the "profoundly melancholy personage" of Pathfinder (75) represents not only the triumph of white settlement—the establishment of white homes and the protection of their matriarchs—but also the narrowness of the white home and heart.

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## Notes

I am grateful to Richard D. Rust, Philip F. Gura, Michael J. Everton, Fiona Mills, and John M. Ware for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

<sup>1</sup>Critical treatments of the reflection of Indian policy in the work of Cooper and other antebellum writers are many. Important to this essay are: the treatments of the active construction of "the Indian" in the process of defining white America in Roy Harvey Pearce's *Savagism and Civilization*; Robert F. Berkhofer's *White Man's Indians*, and Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence and Fatal Environment*; the explorations of American

nationalism's engagement of the Indian figure in Lucy Maddox's *Removals* and Susan Scheckel's *Insistence on the Indian*; and the descriptions of the relationship between imperialism and domesticity in Lora Romero's *Home Fronts* and Amy Kaplan's "Manifest Domesticity."

<sup>2</sup>This reading of strategic domesticity in Cooper draws on a rich critical conversation regarding the role of Cooper's women as the carriers of civilization and establishers, through marriage, of property rights. See especially Kay Seymour House *Cooper's Americans*, Nina Baym "The Women of Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales," Annette Kolodny *The Lay of the Land*, Robert Lawson-Peebles "Property, Marriage, Women, and Fenimore Cooper's First Fictions," and Janet E. Dean "The Marriage Plot and National Myth in *The Pioneers*." This reading is also indebted to both Leslie Fiedler's description in *Love and Death in the American Novel* of a misogynistic Natty Bumppo who desires to escape a feminizing civilization and Lora Romero's updated reading in *Home Fronts* of *The Last of the Mohicans*'s portrayal of a feminine civilization which "legitimizes the technologies of punishment deployed against [Cooper's] red men" (49).

<sup>3</sup>And if, as the dedication suggests, "The Rev. J.R.C., of \*\*\*\*\* Pennsylvania" is the anonymous descendent of that orphan, a white family did succeed in keeping the child's heritage from the public until this moment when Cooper, writing at once to J.R.C. and a Romantic readership, can safely declare, "You have every reason to exult in your descent" (unpaginated dedication). See Renée Berglund's *The National Uncanny*, 107.

<sup>4</sup>In *Marble Queens and Captives*, Joy S. Kasson also considers Cooper's "extremely ambivalent" attitude toward Narra-mattah, pointing out that her loyalty to Conanchet, reinforced by the biblical allusion of her English name Ruth, suggests approval of her adoption of Indian ways, while her regression to "a hysterical infancy" at the close of the novel suggests an unwillingness to allow the Puritan daughter to become fully Indian (96, 97). Such readings stand in contrast to Stephen Carl Arch's assertion that through Narra-mattah's child-like actions, "Cooper suggests that the interracial marriage has not really occurred" (114).

<sup>5</sup>This reading is particularly important since critics so often approach the fourth Leatherstocking Tale as one of Cooper's novels of social manners. For example, Donald A. Ringe argues that, "*The Pathfinder* has less to say about American expansionism than about American social democracy" (64). In doing so, Ringe overlooks the mutual relationship between American social democracy and expansionism in this period of Indian removal: Americans came to believe that the future of the nation necessitated ever-increasing territory and that newly acquired territory required democracy's civilizing forces of public enterprise and the private home.

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