

# Inter-marriage and *The Last of the Mohicans*, 1824-1992

Anna Scannavini

Intermarriage between European colonizers and the native inhabitants of the Americas can be found in American literature starting from the colonial period, with many different outcomes. In this essay I will consider intermarriage in a group of narrative works all published before the 1830s. The main work will be *The Last of the Mohicans* (referred to as *the Mohicans* from now on) both because of its importance in literary criticism and because of its numerous adaptations, among which Michael Mann's 1992 film. I will define the texts I discuss as "Indian novels."

The theme of intermarriage is important for two reasons. First, it is interesting to see how it was developed in the narratives of the beginning of the 19th century. Second, like inter-cultural marriage, intermarriage is an institution and it has social consequences. The authors of the Indian novels, including James Fenimore Cooper, are well aware of the civil importance of intermarriage. The consequence is that the institutional perspective of the sexual encounter puts into question the mythic and/or symbolic interpretations of *the Mohicans*<sup>1</sup>.

The studies on the civil role of marriage and domesticity came, in the 1980s, from feminist criticism and the recovery of late 18th and early 19th century narratives written by women. Research brought to light two forgotten Indian novels of the early 19th century written by Lydia Maria Child and Catharine Sedgwick — two well-known and prolific writers who were largely successful during the whole century. The recovery of their Indian novels creates a new literary series and also underlines the role of women and of sentimental plots in Cooper's novels. Women have again started studying Cooper's female characters and demonstrated that he created "strong" female characters<sup>2</sup>. The focus on women foregrounds the role that family relationships play in Cooper's novels and makes new readings and links necessary (cfr. Wegener 2005). In particular, in the sentimental

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<sup>1</sup> Slotkin 1973. Contra Slotkin: Rans 1991.

<sup>2</sup> Seymour House 1966. Tompkins 1985. Baym (1971): 698-709.



plot of *the Mohicans*, the problem of miscegenation is embedded in the series of family relationships: between Commander Munro and Cora, between Cora and her half-sister Alice, between the two Mohicans Chigachgook and Uncas, and, metaphorically, between Hawkeye and Uncas.

In other words, the stories of marriage and sexual attraction (both intra- and trans-cultural) do not occur in *the Mohicans* outside of society, but are interweaved within the family space — just like in the sentimental novel. At the same time, the very presence of the family space complicates the discourse about the possibility or impossibility of intermarriage: emotionally we are with Uncas also because he is young and a “son”. I don’t mean to suggest that Cooper defends, perhaps between the lines, mixed marriage – as did, instead, Lydia Maria Child. But I do want to say that in the years of *the Mohicans*, the discourse on Indians was not yet completely closed. There was still a proto-ethnological push which produced, in novels, interesting openings even if they forced their authors to perform almost impossible ideological and narrative somersaults. In Cooper’s case, this is shown by the fact that in the novel *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish* of 1829 (*Wept*, from now on) he dealt again with the theme of intermarriage.

The Indian novels I will consider here, all published before *Wept*, all deal with the theme of intermarriage. The first is *Hobomok* by Child published in 1824, two years before *the Mohicans*. *Hobomok* has all the characteristics of the genre: it is a historical novel which takes place during a critical passage of the nation’s foundation - the foundation of Salem; this critical passage includes the native American populations. The second is *Hope Leslie* by Sedgwick published in 1827, one year after *the Mohicans* came out. Its story takes place against the background of the extermination of the Pequods committed by the Massachusetts Bay Colony (later to become Boston). Two years later, Cooper returned to the same geographic places of *Hobomok* and *Hope Leslie* in a text, which is now almost completely forgotten, *The Wept of Wish-ton-Wish*. The canonic precedent of both Child and Cooper is Chateaubriand’s novel *Atala* (1801). Besides this, I will look at *Yamoyden* an American poem which, at its time, was considered a possible model for the new American literature because it drew on the vast depository of Indian epic<sup>3</sup>.

Here is a summary of the stories of intermarriage in the different texts cited above. Chateaubriand’s *Atala* is the daughter of a mixed relationship. She falls in love with the son of a Spaniard and an Indian.

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<sup>3</sup> Child (1824) 1970, Sedgwick (1827) 1987, Wallis Eastbourn 1820, Chateaubriand 1801, Cooper (1826) 1983, Cooper 1829.

When she thinks she has discovered that she is the half sister of her lover, she commits suicide. The two never had any sexual relationship and obviously they didn't have any children. The plot of *Yamoyden* takes place during the King Philip War of 1674. *Yamoyden's* encounter is similar to the ones that dominate the books published in the 1820s: a white woman and an Indian lover/husband. The sachem nipmuc Yamoyden marries the Bostonian Nora and the two have a son. The couple dies but the son survives.

In *Hobomok*, the protagonist Mary has a son from the Wampanoag Hobomok, whom she has married with an Indian ritual. Mary's ex-lover Charles Brown reappears on the scene and Hobomok nobly lets Mary marry him. Charles adopts the son born from the intermarriage. The son grows up and goes to London to study. He virtually becomes white and once he has returned home becomes a leader. *Hope Leslie* contains the theme of abduction: a white woman being abducted and more or less forced into marriage. Here, Faith, the sister of the protagonist Hope, is kidnapped by Indians but is protected by Oneco, the Pequod leader. The two fall in love with one another and get married. After many events, the two are able to save themselves from the persecutions of the Puritans and escape into the wilderness. Finally, the marriage is accepted by Hope who reluctantly allows them to go away. The novel has an open ending and does not say if they will have any children. But the Indians in the novel are characterized by loyalty and dignity. Furthermore, the sympathies of the author and the full integration of Faith suggest that there will be a child and that he will be loved because Indian societies, more than the white ones, are flexible and able to accept, emotionally and intellectually, the other.

None of these novels has the same ending. Something is always different: all the protagonists die; no one dies; there are children but they die; there are no children. The narrations revolve around the same problem but the different solutions found don't become permanent: they are each time examined and discarded. The only recognizable paradigm seems to be uncertainty and the uncertainty seems to be between a "dialectic of negation" and the "double dialectic" of reciprocal definition and the recognition of the other<sup>4</sup>.

The only text that deals directly with the question of the children of intermarriage is Child's *Hobomok*. Mary and Hobomok's son grows up in England and loses his Indian name. However, he retains Hobomok's strength and nobility. Is it possible to say he adopts the best parts of each culture? Perhaps, but the solution is uncertain. In the first place, Hobomok is an Indian friend. In this light, he leaves space

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<sup>4</sup> Fanon (1961) 1962. For *Atala*, cfr. Moscovici 2001: 197-216.

to his white antagonist. For this reason, he has to accept the tragic necessity of *losing himself* outside the text in the still unexplored continent. Hobomok's loss tells us the European world *has to* absorb the Indian "world," but can't be absorbed by it. In the following years, Child returned to the same problem with much more radical solutions: she would state that Indians have the right to resist and that the only right and creative solution for the country is intermingling. But this is a later development, which the plot of *Hobomok* does not yet support.

In *the Mohicans*, the outcome of the encounter is the death of the two protagonists. The story is well-known. Accompanied by Major Duncan Heyward, Cora and her sister Alice get lost in the forest and risk being abducted by the evil Huron Magua. The white hunter Hawkeye with the Mohican chief Chigachgook and his son Uncas run to their help. Cora and Uncas fall in love, but are killed in the fight against Magua, who wants Cora for himself. Cora, in any case, would not be fit to marry a white man because she has a mixed background. Her parents were the commander Munro and a lady from the West Indies who had a distant African ancestor. Her half-sister does not have the same problem. Alice is the daughter of Munro and his second wife, a Scots woman. For this reason she is allowed to legitimately marry the Virginian Hayward and start a new American line.

The solution of *the Mohicans* expresses an abrupt prohibition, which is very different from the openings of Child or Sedgwick and from the 18th century Romanticism of Chateaubriand. But Cooper returned to the problem with the publication of *The Wept of Wish-Ton-Wish*. I have no proof that he wrote this book in response to Child or Sedgwick or that he had read their works. But he earned his living through writing and lived within the world of publishing around him. Furthermore, *Wept* seems to be a rereading and comment on the previous novels by Child and Sedgwick—and of *the Mohicans*. It was as if, at the end of the decade, this issue needed further reflection.

As I have said, Cooper set the plot of *Wept* outside the geographic and cultural places he was most at home in. The events do not take place in the state of New York but on the Connecticut River, in a frontier household. The household resembles the frontier house from which the Faith of *Hope Leslie* is kidnapped. Like in *Yamoyden*, the story takes place during the war of King Phillip. One of the characters is an Uncas who really existed: he was one of the historical leaders of the Mohegan and was an ally and an accomplice of the Puritans in the war against King Phillip. The ideological context is the doctrinal disputes of the Puritans.

But above all, the story revolves around a kidnapping, followed by an Indian marriage. Just like Sedgwick's Faith, the person "wept of"

mentioned in the title, Ruth, is kidnapped when she is a child and becomes the adored wife of Conanchet, the chief of the Narraganset. Like Faith, Ruth becomes completely Indianized. Despite this, she becomes the object of a feud between two worlds and is loved and wanted by both sides. But in *Wept*, there is no happy ending as in *Hope Leslie*. Conanchet is King Philip's ally and is killed by Uncas, his Mohegan antagonist. Before dying he entrusts his beloved Ruth and the son of their marriage to Ruth's own mother.

Conanchet's death breaks Ruth's heart and she also dies. But before dying she loses her mind and memory. She thinks she is again little Ruth in her mother's arms. She returns to completely trust her mother, and forgets her Indian husband. The outcome of the story at this point should be straightforward: Ruth's son will be brought up by his white grandmother. But an astonishing narrative act occurs: the narrator places Ruth's son besides his dying mother – and leaves him there. The child is not allowed to enter the epilogue. With a last minute elimination, he literally disappears from the text. His erasure allows the author/narrator to not tell us what will happen to the fruit of the intermarriage. Cooper has a reputation for being, at times, imprecise, but this disappearance is very meaningful. It's as if the author had decided to reexamine intermarriage, representing it in the novel, but then is unable to find a solution to the problem he himself has decided to tackle.

I draw two conclusions from this. With *Wept* Cooper reclaims for himself the terrain of the Indian novel and excludes the possibility of solutions different from his. His solutions, however, remain open ones and *Wept* and *the Mohicans* continue to speak eloquently of the ethnic unease concerning the conquest of the New World.

We would expect today's popular culture to accept Cooper's unease and to resolve it by permitting intermarriage and cultural hybridization and reciprocity. On the five hundredth anniversary of the conquest the challenge seemed to be confronted by, among others, the director Michael Mann with his *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), a film "based" on the novel.

The results are disappointing. Mann explicitly uses the script written in 1936 by Seitz. In doing so he closes the elements of aperture present in all the novels we have here considered, from *Hobomok* to *Wept*. Seitz broke up the couples of *the Mohicans* and moved the love intrigue from Cora-Uncas-Magua to the struggle between Hawkeye and Major Heyward for Alice's hand. Mann accepted the variations with just one difference: in his film Hawkeye and Heyward fight over Cora, while Uncas and the blonde Alice fall in love and die together (along with Magua).

In other words, Mann's film changes the end of the book, but the marriage remains between white people – in the film Cora is white. The most important change is that Hawkeye takes the place of the official gentleman Heyward. Even though Mann criticizes Seitz's negative depiction of Indians, he too moves the axis of the story from a trans-cultural encounter to an encounter between Cora and Hawkeye. For the film's plot the trans-Atlantic union of the novel becomes intra-cultural: the union between the English woman Cora and the "American" frontiersman. The revisionist intent is clear: America will be inherited by the two reconciled nationalities.

Barker and Sabin, in their book on *the Mohicans* in mass culture, argue that Mann's film incorporates his environmental preoccupations. The movie's splendid natural scenery (itself a narrative element of the film) makes this hypothesis very plausible. The film implicitly asks how the survivors will treat the New World which is opening up in front of them. It can be seen as a critical reappraisal of the discovery/conquest on its five hundredth anniversary.

But, regardless of his intentions, Mann ends up proposing an idea of foundation which is as imperialistic as the one he is criticizing. A metaphor of this imperialistic foundation is the donation ritual of the last scene: Chingachgook, Cora and Hawkeye are on a ridge looking over the endless continent. By throwing Uncas's ashes into the wind, Chingachgook ratifies the end of his lineage, legitimizes the union between Cora and Hawkeye, and gives the future of the country to them.

In this scene, Mann seems to be referring to the position of the myth and symbol school. The American myth, according to this school, is that genocide is justified by the necessity to devour and absorb Indian virtues. But Mann reverses its critical basis, and openly adopts and re-enforces the myth. He uses it to construct a jeremiad. Apparently, he refuses genocide but his story ends up by justifying and endorsing it (cfr. Bercovitch 1978). This intention is confirmed by the last scene's similarity to the opening one. At the beginning of the film Uncas, Hawkeye and Chingachgook kill a deer in the primordial forest and the two Indians perform a short ritual of gratitude. The ritual killing, the absorption of virtues, and the necessary rite of thanksgiving to the deer, all return in the final donation of the continent by Chingachgook.

If this is true – and I think it is – the last scene's recovery of the two absent subjects, women and Indians, is a fiction. Worse: it is based on their cannibalization. The cannibalization naturalizes conquest and tells us that the only Indian marriage is, in line with the pathetic, that of "Indians in the heart."

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## The author

### Anna Scannavini

Anna Scannavini is Associate Professor of Angloamerican literature at L'Aquila University. Her major research interests are language contact and linguistic varieties in literature; narrative and the novel; the writing of the American frontier. She has studied American non mainstream literatures of the twentieth century and the literature of the "Early American Republic". Among her publications: *Per una poetica del bilinguismo*; *Giochi di giochi: parole e lingua nella letteratura americana*; with Anna Scacchi and Sara Antonelli: *La babele americana*; she has published essays on Fenimore Cooper.

Email: [annascanna@fastwebnet.it](mailto:annascanna@fastwebnet.it)

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