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“A” for Atlantic:  
The Colonizing Force of  
Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

In *The Scarlet Letter*, colonization just happens or, more accurately, has just happened. We might recall, by contrast, how Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s novel *Hope Leslie* elaborately narrates the sociopolitical process of making an Indian village into a native English spot. Hawthorne eclipses this drama of settlement. Although Hawthorne, like Sedgwick, sets his plot of sexual crisis in the early colonial period of Stuart political crisis and English Civil War, he places these events in the distant backdrop, as remote from his seventeenth-century characters as his nineteenth-century readers. Meanwhile, he recasts Sedgwick’s whimsical heroine, Hope Leslie, as a sober, already arrived, and already fallen woman.

In beginning from this already fallen moment, Hawthorne keeps offstage both the “fall” of colonization and its sexual accompaniment. He thereby obscures his relationship to a long Atlantic literary and political history. But if we attend to the colonizing processes submerged in *The Scarlet Letter*, we discover the novel’s place in transatlantic history—a history catalyzed by the English Civil War and imbued with that conflict’s rhetoric of native liberty. We see that Hawthorne’s text partakes of an implicitly racialized, Atlantic ur-narrative, in which a people’s quest for freedom entails an ocean crossing and a crisis of bodily ruin. That is, *The Scarlet Letter* fits a formation reaching from *Oroonoko*, *Moll Flanders*, *Charlotte Temple*, and Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* to *The Monk* and *Wieland* and continuing through such divergent yet fundamentally Atlantic texts as *Billy Budd*, *Of One Blood*, *The Voyage Out*, and *Quicksand*.<sup>1</sup>

Critics have long noted the offstage locale of Hester Prynne and

Arthur Dimmesdale's act of passion and Hawthorne's choice to keep us at one remove from its catalyzing force. But no one has noted the novel's elision of the original condition for that passionate act: the transatlantic migration of Hester Prynne *alone*. It is this fact that prepares Hester's "fall." And if Hester's journey alone, and into a deeply solitary interiority, emblemizes the exilic effects of Atlantic modernity, the aborted journey of Roger Prynne (aka Chillingworth) into "grievous mishaps by land and sea" and "bond[age] among heathen-folk" emblemizes its violent encounters.<sup>2</sup> But these conditions are placed in the past and only alluded to, so that, as Leslie Fiedler notes, the characters' "whole prehistory remains shadowy and vague."<sup>3</sup> Instead, within the novel, the punishment for adultery becomes the point of origin. This way of placing key events at one remove, gestured toward yet submerged, characterizes the novel's historical method and its repressed relation to Atlantic history.

At the same time, Hawthorne does implicitly make matters of removal and habitation important to Hester's fall. He does so first, albeit indirectly, in "Introductory: The Custom-House," where he prefaces his story of Hester's "sin" with an account of his own troubled relation to his "native spot," what he calls his "unjoyous attachment to my native town" (11). He more directly sets up a correlation between Hester's departure from home and her loss of innocence (and thus conforms to an Atlantic narrative tradition that merges sexual and colonial ruin) when, as she stands on the scaffold in Boston, Hester looks back to her "village in rural England" where "stainless maidenhood seemed yet to be in her mother's keeping" but which village is now "foreign to her, by comparison" (56).

Yet Hawthorne most directly points to the Atlantic coloniality that issues in Hester's fall when his narrator announces that "[Hester's] sin, her ignominy, were the roots which she had struck into the soil" (56). I suggest we take him literally. His words echo those in the "Introductory," when he confesses guilt about "the deep and aged roots which my family has struck into the soil" (8). Perhaps, after all, the "sin" with which Hawthorne is most preoccupied is neither adultery nor his ancestors' whipping of adulterous women but, rather, colonization itself. Hester's "A" is a layered code. Under "adultrous" lie the merged meanings of Anglo-Saxon and Atlantic. And under Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* lie many English-language narratives in which sexual

plots of undoing carry, like silenced cargo, transatlantic stories of violent colonization that give rise to an Anglo-Atlantic freedom.

To appreciate the palimpsest that is Hawthorne's narrative, we must first turn back to early-seventeenth-century England, when the story of a potentially ruinous liberty became racialized under revolutionary, transatlantic conditions.

### Replotting Race on the Atlantic

During the English Civil War, race unfurled as a freedom myth. Witness Englishman John Hare's Civil War pamphlet in 1647, *St. Edward's Ghost or Anti-Normanism*:

There is no man that understands rightly what an Englishman is, but knows withal, that we are a member of the Teutonick nation, and descended out of Germany: a descent so honourable and happy, if duly considered, as that the like could not have been fetched from any other part of Europe. . . . In England the whole commonalty, are German, and of the German blood; and scarcely was there any worth or manhood left in these occidental nations, after their long servitude under the Roman yoke, until these new supplies of free-born men from Germany reinfused the same. . . . Did our ancestors, therefore, shake off the Roman yoke . . . that the honour and freedom of their blood might be reserved for an untainted prey to a future conqueror?<sup>4</sup>

Hare joins many others who yoke freedom and race in an Anglo-Saxon discourse of resistance to conquerors and tyranny. Over the next century, this discourse yielded the notion that some races are born to seek freedom—and therefore deserve it—and others are not. By the later eighteenth century and until today in Iraq, peoples or races must, from a Western point of view, demonstrate their “capacity” for freedom, or be ruined. In the Western idea of freedom, race and modernity join hands, for the will to freedom is the very essence, according to Hegel and others, of “world-historical,” modern races.<sup>5</sup> In modernity, it is above all the capacity for freedom that measures a race.

Yet it's important that we recognize this seventeenth-century rhetoric not just as the seedbed for slavery, Nazism, and U.S. imperialism but also as the postcolonial revolutionary resistance it was intended to

be. The early fashioners of the discourse of race and freedom understood themselves to be reclaiming their trammled native rights from foreign usurpers—Norman, French, and popish. Only when we recognize this old and dissenting genealogy of race and freedom do we understand fully the seductive power and social dynamics of race in the modern West. Herein lies race's promise to offer affiliative bonds, exercised in the quest for freedom. As we attend to this genealogy, we begin to glimpse the depth at which English-language narratives are racial narratives and, in their Anglo-Atlantic forms, hegemonically so—exactly because they are structured by a freedom plot.

It was the Reformation that first gave rise to the Saxonist refashioning of English identity. The search for links to the “primitive” German church predating Christianity's dependence on bishops and popes initiated the turn toward an Anglo-Saxon lineage that would eventually become insistently racialized.<sup>6</sup> Henry VIII authorized Matthew Parker to gather from England and abroad all documents revealing the Germanic and Anglo-Saxon origins of the “true and primitive” Church that predated popery (*OES*, 11). In his preface to *A Testimonie of Antiquities* (1566–67), Parker draws on Saxon materials to offer, he says, “testimonie of verye auncient tyme, wherein is plainly showed what was the judgement of the learned men in thys matter, in the days of the Saxons before the Conquest.”<sup>7</sup> This notion of a return to the Saxon ancestors' pre-Catholic simplicity laid the foundation for the later, secular notion of Anglo-Saxonism.

We can trace the turn from more strictly religious Anglo-Saxonism to legal, cultural, and racial Anglo-Saxonism by way of the Society of Antiquaries, originally founded by Tudor kings for religious purposes. Under the Stuart king James I, however, the Society of Antiquaries turned its attention increasingly to old Saxon legal documents. As the Stuarts spoke more and more insistently of their divine right to absolute rule, Parliament members made increasing use of the legal documents being unearthed and translated by the Society's scholars. Invoking the pre-Conquest Magna Carta and common law traditions, and gathering evidence of Anglo-Saxon law-making councils, which fueled the arguments of Parliamentary lawyers, scholars such as John Selden found themselves censored and imprisoned along with Sir Edward Coke and other Parliamentary lawyers.<sup>8</sup> The Society of Antiquaries was finally disbanded by royal decree.

Matters reached a critical turning point—and the rhetoric of ancient

Saxon rights found its legs—when in 1620 the King issued a proclamation restricting Parliament’s right to discuss high matters of state. Parliament responded directly, coining a language that would not only become the basis of its 1628 Petition of Right but would also create the heart of Whig politics and Saxon myth that lasted well into the twentieth century:

The privileges and rights of Parliament are an ancient and indubitable birthright and inheritance of the English, and all important and urgent affairs in Church and State as well as the drawing up of laws and the remedying of abuses, are the proper subjects of the deliberation and resolutions of the Parliament. The members are free to speak upon them in such order as they please, and cannot be called to account for them.<sup>9</sup>

In further exchanges with the King, the Parliament reasserted its “Ancient and Undoubted Right, and an Inheritance received from our Ancestors,” until the King “publicly tore these protests from the Journal of the House of Commons and dissolved Parliament.”<sup>10</sup> Throughout the 1620s and 1630s Parliament and the Stuart kings reached several such moments of impasse. Finally, in 1629, Charles I dissolved Parliament—and it did not reconvene until 1640.

Meanwhile, however, other forces were gathering. Across the Atlantic, a group of men was building a new commercial network that would eventually help to break the impasse. Ultimately, this development would make the racialized rhetoric of liberty a transatlantic phenomenon, embedding it deep in the structures of English-language narrative. In a sense, the English Civil War and its aftermath, from Cromwell’s Commonwealth to Queen Victoria’s empire, find their necessary cause in the 1610s and 1620s, in the form of this group of “new men,” middling-class and eventually Puritan-affiliated, who initiated the activities and alliances that would reshape the economic balance of power.<sup>11</sup> For with the Parliamentary crisis from 1628 to 1629, culminating in Charles I’s eleven-year dissolution of Parliament and renewed persecution of Puritans, a small group of Atlantic merchants who had been accruing land, power, and wealth in the west Atlantic throughout the 1620s joined hands with those interested in building colonies as safe havens for religious refugees. Together, in effect, these men overthrew the King.

This colonial development formed a crucial condition for the Civil

War in England; its tobacco and sugar profits, in fact, eventually fueled Parliamentary warships.<sup>12</sup> As Robert Brenner has documented, there evolved “growing ties between the American merchant leadership and the great Puritan aristocrats who ran the Bermuda and Providence Island companies, as well as the lesser gentry who governed the New England colonies” (*MR*, 149). Men such as Maurice Thomson and his brother-in-law William Tucker, who had begun as ship captains, entered the breach left by the retreat of the King’s trading companies in Virginia. The absence of Royal Company rules allowed these men to run both exports and imports and to set up shop on both sides of the Atlantic (a practice prohibited in the royal companies). As a result, they quickly monopolized the import of supplies for settlers as well as the export of tobacco, and they accrued huge profits. Working together with a handful of others, they extended their reach south to the West Indies (where they headed interloping invasions against the colonies of other European powers) and north to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, financially backing the Puritan settlement of Massachusetts and helping to organize provisions for colonies both north and south.

These ties eventually laid the foundation for the “transatlantic network of Puritan religio-political opposition to the crown” that included Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and, in the West Indies, Bermuda Island and Providence Island, all of which drew investors for religious and political reasons as well as for profits and all of which served as both “ports of exile and staging posts for revolt” (*MR*, 113, 110). Under these conditions, the pursuit of religious freedom, so touted in American history books, was utterly involved with the pursuit of mercantile freedom, for even when religious motives were paramount, economic “freedoms” were requisite to make the colonial settlements viable, as Karen Kupperman has shown.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it was from this base, and for this base, that Thomson and his circle became interlopers in the slave trade and the East Indies trade and then, in turn, began to build the enormously profitable West Indies sugar plantations during the 1640s (*MR*, 161–65).

When Parliament finally reconvened in 1640, a new coalition of members, including Puritans backed by these merchants, succeeded in abolishing the Star Chamber (which had handled licensing and censorship since 1586); purging those members they considered popish or unlawful; exerting powerful resistance to the King’s demands; and

eventually declaring war. They spoke a liberty rhetoric that loosely blended religious and economic meanings, casting both forms of restriction as “infringements of our Native Liberties.”<sup>14</sup> Via the notion of native liberty, the Atlantic economy joined the nation, and, in turn, native liberty extended across the Atlantic.

At the same time, throughout the 1640s, contemporaneous with Hester Prynne’s ordeal, liberty rhetoric spread “downward” because of the uncensored press and the unregulated preaching of ministers; and its nativist overtones became louder. The Long Parliament had not immediately replaced the Star Chamber with any equivalent censorship organ, and so there circulated increasing numbers of polemical newspapers, pamphlets, and petitions that eventually made it impossible for the entrepreneurs and the Puritans to maintain control of the liberty discourse. Indeed, this is the moment when the Habermasian public sphere becomes a reality in England—briefly yet influentially.<sup>15</sup> Especially as the Puritan-slanted Parliament gained the upper hand in the war, numerous petitions were presented to the House of Commons, expressing the desire of soldiers, soldiers’ wives, tradespeople, religious sects, and laborers for relief from painful economic conditions and for fuller representation of their voices. But relief and representation were not forthcoming, and so “the public” printed, agitated, and formed new coalitions. By 1647, the failure to hold new Parliamentary elections with an expanded electorate, to pay soldiers their arrears, to finance support for widows and orphans or for citizens who quartered the soldiers, to break up monopolies of trade in an already debilitated postwar economy, to allow for full religious toleration instead of new preferential treatment of the Puritans, and to repeal the tithes and taxes that weighed heavily on the poorest—all of these failures fed widespread disenchantment among a people who had sustained years of war for the sake of better living conditions.

Increasingly politicized middle-rank women as well as men wrote petitions, held meetings, and joined or led public protests to address these injustices. That is, the Civil War was an event in the history of gender politics as well of class, religious, and racial politics. Early in 1641, 400 women gathered at Parliament to demand a response to a petition on the loss of trade. When they received no satisfactory attention, they penned the “Humble Petition of many hundreds of distressed women, Tradesmens wives, and widdowes” in which they claimed that “we have an interest in the common Privileges with them [who have peti-

tioned for the] Liberty of our Husbands, persons, and estates.”<sup>16</sup> Such demonstrations continued to occur, as when in August 1643, some 5,000 to 6,000 women (as numbered by their critics) marched on the Commons for peace. By 1647, petitioning women appeared frequently on the steps of Parliament until the House of Commons enacted an ordinance to clear away “those clamourous women, which were wont to hang in clusters on the staires.”<sup>17</sup>

All of these groups, women as well as men, spoke continually of “native rights,” “the people’s just rights and liberties,” the “Nation’s freedoms,” “the free-born people of England,” and the “free-born People’s freedoms or rights.”<sup>18</sup> Like John Hare, Nathaniel Bacon elaborately laid out the Saxonist historical narrative underlying this nativist rhetoric that would become Whig orthodoxy by the early eighteenth century—including reference to Tacitus. In his *Historical and Political Discourse of the Laws and Government of England*, which addresses the “Debate concerning the Right of an English King to Arbitrary Rule over English Subjects, as Successor to the Norman Conqueror” (1647), Bacon remarks that it is

both needless and fruitless to enter into the Lists, concerning the original of the Saxons. . . . They were a free people, governed by Laws, and those made not after the manner of the Gauls (as Caesar noteth) by the great men, but by the people; and therefore called a free people, because they are a law unto themselves; and this was a privilege belonging to all the germans, as tacitus observeth. . . . The Saxons fealty to their King, was subservient to the publick safety; and the publick safety is necessarily dependant [*sic*] upon the liberty of the Laws.<sup>19</sup>

Such pronouncements opened the way to more radical thinkers such as the Diggers, who nonetheless invoked the same nativist rhetoric. The Digger Gerard Winstanley echoed it in pronouncing that “the last enslaving conquest which the enemy got over Israel was the Norman over England.”<sup>20</sup> The many migrations, rebellions, ironies, crimes—and texts—of English-language Atlantic history (including *The Scarlet Letter*) follow from this inextricable intertwining of the colonial, revolutionary, and nativist roots of the modern notion of freedom.

Equally important to Atlantic history and to Hawthorne’s novel, the liberty rhetoric also took what we might call an interior turn. Leveller pamphleteer John Warr signalled the shift when he claimed that



“[j]ustice was in men, before it came to be in Laws.”<sup>21</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to consider the long path by which such claims led to the interiorization of both racial identity and modern narrative, and to the forms of power Michel Foucault analyzes, but suffice it to note that the work of Hegel gives a glimpse of the way the revolutionary nativist vision became an interiorized, racist one. As it did for Gerard Winstanley, for Hegel, too, “Reason” drives the “Universal History” of the world toward “Freedom,” but Hegel more hubristically declares German culture to be the ultimate incarnation of this process. “The German spirit,” writes Hegel, “is the Spirit of the new World. Its aim is the realization of absolute Truth as the unlimited self-determination of Freedom. . . . The destiny of the German peoples is to be the bearers of the Christian principle . . . of Spiritual Freedom.”<sup>22</sup> The movement from the Reformation to the Civil War to Hegel neatly encapsulates how a discourse of race merged, including through this inward turn, with a discourse of freedom and, via the prosperous Atlantic economy, gave rise to an imperial chauvinism.

But in the 1640s no such grand visions were yet conceivable. With the monarch under arrest, women protesting in the streets, families fleeing to colonies across the Atlantic that were themselves in struggle with the Indian peoples whose land they seized, all while at home the problems of poverty, homelessness, and hunger were finding unbridled expression in a new world of print—under these conditions, as contemporaries reported, “There is a great expectation of sudden destruction” for “the greatest powers in the kingdom have been shaken.”<sup>23</sup> It is this crisis—in which English society seems teetering on a cliff—that racialism works to contain and that, in his own period of political and racial crises, Hawthorne kept off of his page.

### **Hawthorne’s Puritan Palimpsest**

Criticism on *The Scarlet Letter* makes clear that the novel is a historical palimpsest—with a surface as illegible and in need of translation as the archaic, “gules” *A*. Not just one but two histories are submerged here, one contemporary with Hester and one with Hawthorne. Or rather, as I will argue, what is ultimately submerged is the deep connection between these two histories—that is, the uninterrupted project of colonization.

Many earlier critics of the novel consider it both a critique and an expression of American Puritanism, and most of these critics share Hawthorne's sense of that legacy as *the* cultural origin of U.S. national history. In his 1880 book, *Hawthorne*, Henry James helped to establish the identification between Hawthorne and the Puritan tradition, invoking the notion of a racial inheritance when he concludes that *The Scarlet Letter* is utterly "impregnated with that after-sense of the old Puritan consciousness of life" and that indeed the "qualities of his ancestors filtered down through generations into his composition," so that "*The Scarlet Letter* was, as it were, the vessel that gathered up the last of the precious drops."<sup>24</sup> This sense of the book as a racial expression hereafter found an echo in critics from William Dean Howells, who suggests that "Hawthorne was writing to and from a sensitive nerve in the English race that it had never known in its English home," to Carl Van Doren, who sees in Hawthorne "the old Puritan tradition that, much as he might disagree with it on occasion, he had none the less in his blood," to Elizabeth Deering Hanscom, who in her Macmillan introduction to the novel concludes that "in his attitude toward life, in his inner thought, [Hawthorne] was bone of the bone, blood of the blood of Puritan New England."<sup>25</sup> By the time of Lloyd Morris's 1928 biography of Hawthorne, *The Rebellious Puritan*, this lineage for Hawthorne had become a critical orthodoxy in the form of the idea that Hawthorne "had sought to liberate himself from his origins and environment, but they and not he had determined the character of that effort for emancipation."<sup>26</sup> Building on the notion that Hawthorne's very dissent made him the child of Puritan America, early-twentieth-century scholars tracked Hawthorne's knowledge of Puritan sources and studied his main characters as they suffer under and, perhaps, redeem that legacy.

More recently, however, an increasing number of scholars place the novel explicitly within the political concerns of the volatile 1840s. These critics call attention to the fact that in the decade leading up to Hawthorne's writing of *The Scarlet Letter*, the nation was embroiled in conflict over a range of issues—the Indian Removal Acts, the annexation of western territories and war with Mexico, the Fugitive Slave Law, the 1848 Women's Convention in Seneca Falls, and the spectre (as many felt it) of the European revolutions of 1848. Accordingly, they have considered the novel's drama of law, punishment, dissent, and consent as a coded exploration of a citizen's proper response to these

matters. In many of these readings, Hawthorne's vanishing allusions to Indians, his absence of allusions to slavery, and his conservative closure with Hester's final return appear as evidence of his investment in what Sacvan Bercovitch deems a liberal process of compromise and consensus, which ultimately advises that obedience to the law, however flawed the law may be (even if it meant sending escaped African Americans back into slavery), ultimately sets the nation free.<sup>27</sup> Others, however, have highlighted the same ambiguity earlier critics celebrated, finding in the narrator's sinuous movements and undecidable equivocations an invitation to readers to become active interpreters and, by extension, sympathetic, questioning citizens, including of the law.<sup>28</sup>

Rich as these many readings are, in substituting Hawthorne's historical surround for Hester's, they risk overlooking the most deeply historical dimension of Hawthorne's novel—his brooding on the relation *between* the 1640s and the 1840s. The research of Michael Colacurcio and Laura Korobkin (extending the suggestions of Amy Schrager Lang's scholarship on Anne Hutchinson and Hawthorne) helps to right this imbalance.<sup>29</sup> Colacurcio and Korobkin bring into sharp relief the work of Hawthorne's text in its own historical present by meticulously probing the (non)correspondence between the facts of seventeenth-century Puritan history and the picture of it that Hawthorne creates. While Colacurcio sees Hawthorne quietly indicting the Puritan elders more than we might at first think—and he crucially unveils the troubled coupling of sexuality and governance in the Puritan period—Korobkin argues that Hawthorne softens the portraits and punitive practices of the Puritan rulers in a way that makes more palatable his closing turn—Hester's resubmission to the law. It is worth briefly considering their arguments, for taken together with scholarship focused on the 1840s, they allow us to place Hawthorne's novel within the history of Atlantic modernity reaching from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Most crucial in Colacurcio's and Korobkin's work is their identification of the "constitutional crisis" troubling the colony in the 1640s, the period of the novel's action.<sup>30</sup> Although neither gives any attention to the transatlantic nature of this crisis, their emphasis on Hawthorne's handling of the colonial side lays the foundation for a transatlantic view of Hawthorne's historical work. Colacurcio concludes that Hester is "caught up in the midst of a constitutional crisis," in which sexual

misconduct by John Winthrop and others in the colony had thrown the authority of the governors into turmoil, so that, as he puts it, “the whole crisis seems to take Hester’s ‘adultery’ as its fitting symbol.”<sup>31</sup> He convincingly suggests that these political conflicts of the 1640s provide the context for “the sex-freedom link in *The Scarlet Letter*” (“F,” 188). Yet what Colacurcio never sufficiently acknowledges, but Laura Korobkin explores, is the way that these connections are buried in Hawthorne’s novel—so much so that no critic before Colacurcio had unearthed them.

By contrast to Colacurcio, Korobkin argues that Hawthorne suppresses rather than signals the political turmoil of the Puritan community. According to the laws of the day, the nature of Hester’s punishment would not have been at the discretion of the magistrates—who, in Hawthorne’s rendering, appear as mercifully lenient. There would have been a jury, and the jury would have insured that the magistrates followed the punishment preset for any particular crime—a procedure that had been arranged, after political wrangling, exactly so as to limit the discretion of the magistrates. In the case of adultery, Hester would, at minimum, have been publicly stripped and whipped. As Korobkin sees it, Hawthorne is “hard at work rewriting history to improve [the magistrates’] authority and compassion.”<sup>32</sup> In short, while for Colacurcio, the details of Puritan history establish that Hawthorne was a closet rebel and woman-sympathizer, for Korobkin they reveal him as an ameliorating apologist for authoritarian law.

It seems clear to me that in *The Scarlet Letter* at least, Hawthorne stills the volatility and veils the violence of the Massachusetts Puritan community for his readers, even as he may coyly signal their suppressed presence. Indeed, he suppresses history even more thoroughly than Korobkin suggests. For operating hand in hand with his muffling of political instability in Massachusetts are his suppressions of this colony’s involvement not only in Indian wars but also in a transatlantic political crisis that would culminate with a king’s beheading in 1649—the very year that Hester and Dimmesdale’s relationship comes to its final crisis and Hawthorne’s story-proper ends.<sup>33</sup> In short, Hawthorne’s story, as he well knows, takes place in a colony flanked on one side by the peopled and troubled nation of England and on the other side by the peopled and troubled nations of Indian America, but as I will show presently, Hawthorne largely de-peoples these adjacent, interlocking communities. His softening of the violence (toward

a woman such as Hester) within the colony extends to making absent the foundational violence of colonization.

That is, just as Hawthorne lifts the magistrates up onto a balcony and lifts Hester up onto a scaffold—neither of which is historically accurate—so he raises his history up out of the mess of Atlantic maneuvering in 1642—and, by extension, also keeps it at one remove from what Bercovitch characterizes as the “deep cultural anxiety” circulating in the 1840s.<sup>34</sup> This process of the “removal” of transatlantic history under the cover of an apparent immersion in history begins in his “Introductory,” where he creates a virtual allegory of romance writing as sublimated colonial violence.

### **Garrison Republic, Native Spot**

Hawthorne’s “Introductory” tells the story of his own story, the Alpha-origin of his writing and of Hester’s “A,” as critics have noted. But it does so at one remove, through a logic of substitution and a rhetoric of exposure and confession that veils as much as it reveals. Hawthorne’s “Introductory” marks Salem as a native spot that is no longer native and a scene of violence that is no longer violent, productively so for Hawthorne’s authorship. His once-removed relation to this violent natality prefigures Hester’s removal from her native spot in England while it also narrates such removals as journeys into a native freedom—and, in Hawthorne’s case, native writing.

Readers have long recognized that Hawthorne both judges and praises his Puritan ancestors, but he is not simply being judicious. He is carefully managing the “ancestors.” When he speaks of his “grave, bearded, sable-cloaked, and steeple-crowned progenitor” as a man “of war and peace . . . soldier, legislator, judge” with “all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil,” Hawthorne at once registers and smoothes over the inherent tension between the qualities of legislator and soldier, and between their conflicting principles of freedom and colonization (9). Likewise in the novel, after mentioning that Governor Bellingham had led a regiment in the Pequod War, the narrator remarks: “For, though bred a lawyer, and accustomed to speak of Bacon, Coke, Noye, and Finch, as his professional associates, the exigencies of this new country had transformed Governor Bellingham into a soldier, as well as statesmen and ruler” (73). Much is compacted in the word “exigencies.”

Even though Hawthorne makes these passing references to soldiering, neither his story nor his “Introductory” gives any attention to wars between Puritans and Indians; rather, he directs our gaze strictly to intra-community Puritan violence toward religious and moral transgressors like Hester Prynne. Hawthorne decoys any interest in the warring colonial surround exactly by emphasizing the Puritans’ “persecuting spirit” (9). Thus one ancestor, he admits with seeming openness, “made himself so conspicuous in the martyrdom of the witches, that their blood may fairly be said to have left a stain upon him”—“So deep a stain, indeed, that his old dry bones, in the Charter Street burial-ground, must still retain it” (9). Hawthorne avows that “I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take upon myself shame for their sakes, and pray that any curse incurred by . . . the race . . . may now be henceforth removed” (9). He seems unflinchingly to expose ancestral and Puritan violence among a tribe of “Britons” set down in a lonely wilderness.

But of course the “wilderness” was inhabited and the blood soaking the soil was more frequently that of Indian Americans. It is after all because of *this* blood-soaked soil that the Anglo-Saxons’ primary “sin, [their] ignominy, were the roots which [they] had struck into the soil” (56). His rendering performs a double displacement of violence against Indians, in both the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. The “removal” he achieves is nicely expressed in his quaint use of the word “race” and in his wish to “henceforth remove” the curse on his own “race.” He conjures the word’s more archaic, kinship connotations and looks past its contemporaneous saturation by ethnographic, racist meanings. Via such substitutions, Hawthorne does indeed undertake the work of “removing the curse” from his race, but in a different sense than he implies.

At the end of his “Introductory,” Hawthorne completes this equivocal turn by which he simultaneously condemns, cleanses, and lays claim to membership in the Anglo-Atlantic community. In the same bantering tone he has used all along to affiliate with while distancing himself from his ancestors and their contemporary incarnations in Salem, Hawthorne describes his relation to the republic that has employed him. In particular, he stresses the bureaucracy’s demasculating effects, comically fashioning himself as its victim, now “decapitated” (33). In these descriptions, and in his allusion to the “political guillotine” (33), Hawthorne implies his awareness of a long Atlantic

history that begins with Charles I's beheading in 1649 and reaches through 1789 and 1848. He takes the role of the decapitated king whose spectacular death unleashes liberty, launches colonial "surveyor" projects, and generates history. Although he seems to affiliate himself with the king, by the end of his introduction he will have positioned himself as the republic's renewed native man.

To arrive there, Hawthorne again works through a number of submerged removals, as indicated by his private letters about his loss of position at the Custom House. While in his "Introductory" he uses a revolutionary republican vocabulary, in his private writing, as Renée Bergland has pointed out, he adopts quite a different metaphor for his response to his dismissal: that of an avenging Indian (*NU*, 157). Much of his anger was of course directed at Charles Upham, a one-time friend who had become leader of the Whig party in Essex County and had actively lobbied against Hawthorne's reinstatement.<sup>35</sup> Writing to Horace Mann, Hawthorne reports that he planned to "do my best to kill and scalp him," a plan he carries out in the "Introductory" by exposing the corruption in this key institution in Upham's district.<sup>36</sup> In a letter to Longfellow, Hawthorne similarly shares his plans to "immolate one or two of them,"<sup>37</sup> and in the letter to Mann he again invokes Indian-associated imagery in suggesting that the public responded, he says, as if he had "burned down the Custom-house and quenched its last smoking ember in the blood of a certain venerable personage" (*NU*, 157). In these fantasies, the author himself becomes the "removed" victim (as he similarly identifies with a fugitive slave when he reports that "it stirs up a little of the devil within me, to find myself hunted by these political bloodhounds").<sup>38</sup> This is the complex layering of Hawthorne's colonial work: identifying with the "removed" and violated outsider, taking up the very weapons of that wronged figure, he then occupies the place of that "vanishing" figure. In this way, the founding national violence against Indians is submerged into the story of abused *Anglo* native energy, with Hawthorne as the mock-hero who overcomes this injustice.

The benefits of this substitution are displayed by the fact that Hawthorne's ejection from the Custom House ultimately recovers the native man in himself and in turn enables his creation of the novel *The Scarlet Letter*. He explains that whatever the custom officer's former bravery on the battlefield or at sea, because the officer ensconced at the Custom House "leans on the mighty arm of the Republic, his own

proper strength departs from him" (30). In this state, a man may lose his soul's "sturdy force, its courage and constancy, its truth, its self-reliance, and all that gives emphasis to manly character" (30), for he becomes a servant with "the hang-dog look of a Republican official" (26). And yet "[i]f he possesses an unusual share of native energy, or the magic of place do not operate too long upon him, his forfeited powers may be redeemable. The ejected officer . . . may return to himself, and become all that he has ever been" (30). Implicitly, of course, Hawthorne is such a man who gets "ejected" only to discover enough "native energy" and "manly character" to "return to" his Anglo-American self and become again "all that he has ever been." While seeming to understand his ejection as a casting out *from* the republic, Hawthorne at the same time reaffirms a republican individualism in which "self-reliance" makes the native man.

Furthermore, it is within the republic's Custom House that Hawthorne discovers the native past that regenerates his writing, a past that once more sublimates an Indian presence within his own. Before he loses his post, he spends his time looking through old records kept in the second story of the Custom House, regretting the absence of records from the days of Cromwell, which would have "affected me with the same pleasure as when I used to pick up Indian arrow-heads" (23). The parallel signals the American colonist's double origin in a republic turned military protectorate and a deracinated native culture (23), both of which have now become identity-forging pasts for the republican citizen. Although Hawthorne finds no old records, he is nonetheless pleased to find a substitute (and the logic of substitution, particularly substitution as the work of history, is everywhere): a packet of papers belonging to an eighteenth-century man, Mr. Pue, who is, tellingly, both a surveyor and "local antiquarian" (24).<sup>39</sup> By way of Mr. Pue's papers, Hawthorne gains access to the drama of Hester Prynne and her embroidered scarlet letter, which takes place exactly in the Cromwellian period to which Hawthorne longs to return.

The beautiful red letter at first strikes Hawthorne as "one of those decorations which the white men used to contrive, in order to take the eyes of Indians,—I happened to place it on my breast" (25)—a juxtaposition that, together with his earlier allusion to Indian arrow-heads, prefigures the full import of his story of the "wild" white colonist, Hester (whose free spirit will be repeatedly compared to that of American Indians). On his chest, the letter burns and it seems to him



that the “ancient surveyor” Pue with his “ghostly voice” (who actually is of the eighteenth century but whom Hawthorne now antiquates) exhorts Hawthorne to tell Hester’s story: “[D]o this, and the profit shall be all your own! You will shortly need it; for it is not in your days as it was in mine, when a man’s office was a life-lease” (26). Indeed. This republic, which first makes Hawthorne dependent and drains all of his manly strength, will after all present him with a native history and an alternative income. It passes on to him the red “A,” this “sign” of a fallen woman, whose story will not only replace and “take the eyes” of the Indian but will also thereby accrue a profit “all your own” to the white male author. The allegory Hawthorne writes is undoubtedly deeper than he realizes.

### Interiority as Native History

Hawthorne begins his tale at “The Prison-Door.” At this door, we join “[a] throng of bearded men . . . intermixed with women,” awaiting the appearance of a fallen woman before the public eye (35). Our gaze is drawn to the legendary rose bush said to have “sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door” (36). The mention of the antinomian rebel Hutchinson as the ghost who presides at the prison door—a threshold between interior and exterior as well as captivity and freedom—calls to mind Colacurcio’s comment that “at one primal level, the whole antinomian controversy is about the inner and the outer, the private and the public person,” for Hutchinson raised the question of what “our outward works, positive or negative, really reveal about our salvation status” (“F,” 193). If so, Hawthorne’s novel does not simply allude to the antinomian controversy; it enacts it in its ambiguous play at this threshold.

The female prisoner who emerges, although led by the beadle, shows herself akin to the native author, for at “the threshold of the prison-door, she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free-will” (39). Like many an Atlantic protagonist before her, including Ann Hutchinson, Hester exudes a natural dignity that is the mark of her free self. Indeed her dignity seems to lift her “out of ordinary relations with humanity, and inclos[e] her in a sphere by herself” (40). We are given this image of a free, female self absolutely apart, and then, after several pages (during which the narrator hovers

outside her, fixed like the spectators by the scarlet letter, and simultaneously piquing his readers' desire to enter, to make that boundary between inner and outer as transparent as ever "our fathers" could wish), the narrator finally takes us—not the townspeople—across the threshold into Hester's consciousness, her interior prison and freedom. Impossibly, we witness her aloneness—an image of our own—and so too receive a reassuring image of our interiority as something witnessed, communal, and free.

And native. For this interior is not only "marked with natural dignity and force of character" but it also contains a history, a familiar Anglo-Atlantic history that has become Hester's and the Anglo reader's psychological history. As Hester stands on the scaffold, the narrator makes us privy to her memories of the modest cottage of her childhood "retaining a half-obliterated shield of arms" in her "native village in Old England" (43). With her natural dignity and force of character, she is the effaced, perhaps pre-Norman nobility of English history.<sup>40</sup> It is because "the tendency of [Hester's] fate and fortunes had been to set her free" that this Anglo-Atlantic woman crosses the Atlantic, has an affair with the minister, gives birth to an illegitimate child, and nonetheless "step[s] out into the open air" of the New World and lives a long life in the colony (136, 40). Hester's native self, like that of many an Anglo-Atlantic traveler, manifests a freedom-hunger that appears as essentially interior, individual, and ahistorical.

Only by such a fashioning can Hester stand in her raised position as a paragon of the modern Anglo-Atlantic and national self, implicitly carrying forward the colonizing project with impunity. The novel casts her as a figure of both release and lonely subjectivity living on the colonial Atlantic seashore:

Standing alone in the world,—alone, as to any dependence on society, and with little Pearl to be guided and protected,—alone, and hopeless of retrieving her position, even had she not scorned to consider it desirable,—she cast away the fragments of a broken chain. The world's law was no law for her mind. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before. Men of the sword had overthrown nobles and kings. Men bolder than these had overthrown and rearranged—not actually, but within the sphere of theory, which was their most real abode—the whole system of ancient prejudice, wherewith was linked much of ancient principle.

Hester imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter. In her lonesome cottage by the sea-shore, thoughts visited her. . . . (112–13)

By way of this characterization of Hester's isolation and *imaginative* freedom (of a piece with that of the free-thinking men whose revolutions are mainly in "the sphere of theory"), Hawthorne makes the colony a more innocent place than it was and makes freedom a less materially "levelling" force. In isolating both Hester and the colony, he occludes the active world of transatlantic trade, travel, interloping, and political maneuvering. As we have seen, the Massachusetts colony was fully involved with events and people in England and on the continent; and the rebellious events in England rocked the Puritan colony at every turn. In fact, indirectly and sometimes in body, the Puritan colonists were the very men who, by sword and print, were at this moment overthrowing nobles and kings. While Hawthorne might not have had full knowledge of these networks, his text erases them altogether. The narrator not only places all such rebels "on the other side of the Atlantic," he characterizes "our forefathers" as relatively ignorant of their free thinking. But Puritanism itself entailed "freedom of speculation" in religious as well as legal practice, which is why it was so difficult to draw the line against antinomian innovations—because they were actually extensions of Puritan innovations. And the Puritan freedom of "speculation" was economic and geographical as well as spiritual, legal, and intellectual.

In other words, Hester's new-world adultery—far from representing something the "forefathers" could not in their pristine innocence grasp—is of a piece with this speculative venture that searches out and claims possession of new-world sources of political, financial, and sexual liberty. The fact that Hester comes to live at the center of the community (sewing the official garments of the Governor, presiding at births and deaths, drawing the gaze and taunts of children) taken together with the text's hints about colonial politics and corruption that Colacurcio and Korobkin trace, indicates that Hawthorne at some level understood such women's pivotal role in the colony as embodiments of a "sex-freedom link" requiring carefully contained manipulation.

That is, by making Hester a singular and radically interior self, by

quietly dehistoricizing her and casting her as one who doesn't actually want social membership in this blood-tainted and hypocritical community ("In all her intercourse with society, however, there was nothing that made her feel as if she belonged to it" [59]), Hawthorne allows us to embrace her as the rebel-progenitor of "our" community. Thus the seductive if paradoxical racial dream takes hold: as isolated soul, she expresses the essence of the race and becomes the avatar of a free community of readers. And in a further irony, her race essence finds expression exactly insofar as she absorbs and sublimates the "freedom" of American Indians.

### Indian-Saxons

It is the ability to live in isolation, to survive in a cottage alone on the shore of a strange continent, with all of her freedom interiorized, that makes Hester the most successful colonist and the queenly ancestor of an Anglo-American reading community. After her public humiliation, as the narrator emphasizes, Hester remains in her community even though she is "free to return to her birthplace, or to any other European land, and there hide her character and identity under a new exterior, as completely as if emerging into another state of being" (56). But Hester has already emerged into another state of being, and it gives her power in the colony—not least because this new state of being entails her internalization and sublimation, in Hawthorne's rendering, of Indian powers.

With varying degrees of critical distance, readers have remarked on the novel's affiliation of Hester with Indians, beginning at least with Leslie Fiedler, who calls Hester "the wildest Indian."<sup>41</sup> Parallel to the operations of what Toni Morrison calls Africanism in other Anglo-American fiction, *The Scarlet Letter* is one founding text for the practice of Indianism: the Indian's freedom or "wildness" gets absorbed into the stories of white characters, in a racial sleight of hand that enhances, ironically, the nativeness of the whites' free interiors.<sup>42</sup> Hawthorne first of all conjures the possibility that Hester could escape her shame by traveling west, for "the wildness of her nature" is such that it "might assimilate itself with a people whose customs and life were alien from the law that had condemned her" (56). Hawthorne makes the American Indian a model for Hester's freedom, remarking that "[h]er intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert

places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods” (136). And so she adopts the Indian perspective on her culture: “For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fire-side, or the church” (136).<sup>43</sup>

And paradoxically, exactly because she adopts the Indian point of view, she is at home as a colonist, so that “[i]t was as if a new birth, with stronger assimilations than the first, had converted the forest-land, still so uncongenial to every other pilgrim and wanderer, into Hester Prynne’s wild and dreary, but life-long home.” In fact, “even that village of rural England . . . like garments put off long ago—[was] foreign to her, by comparison.” Hester is an Anglo-Atlantic creature of modernity who can travel if she chooses, but she does not do so because “[h]er sin, her ignominy” and her emergence “into another state of being” were “the roots which she had struck into the soil” (56). Much as she seems an outsider to the community, this is not strictly so: “The very law that condemned her—a giant of stern features, but with vigor to support, as well as to annihilate, in his iron arm—had held her up, through the terrible ordeal of her ignominy” (55). As such, she is the paradigmatic figure for an Anglo nation’s future on this land.

While some readers continue to consider the affiliation of Hester with Indians as a mark of her position as a “non-citizen” who “threatens the hegemony” of the Puritan ideology,<sup>44</sup> other recent critics, Bergland most astutely, understand Hester as one of Hawthorne’s vehicles for instilling Indian presence into his own writing in a way that authorizes his role as national author. Bergland persuasively argues that “the internalization of Native American qualities was central to [Hawthorne’s] process of writing” (*NU*, 156). She tracks the process from Hawthorne’s observation (laced with resentment) that “no writer can be more secure of a permanent place in our literature than the biographer of Indian chiefs” through his writing of the next two decades in which Indian characters appear as catalyzing spectres—exactly during the period in which the policy of Indian removal was put into law and, in Illinois, Florida, and Oklahoma, violently enforced, amid loud voices of dissent in Massachusetts.<sup>45</sup> Bergland finds a combination of attraction and repulsion toward Indian “wildness” in these stories,

tamed by closing tropes of vanishing Indian presences. In “The Old Manse,” where the surrounding land is scattered with Indian relics and haunted with Indian presences, Hawthorne and his companions emulate what they imagine as “freeing” Indian ways: “Strange and happy times were those, when we cast aside all irksome forms and straight-laced habitudes, and delivered ourselves up to the free air, to live like Indians.”<sup>46</sup>

Bergland further suggests that in *The Scarlet Letter* “each of the main characters is transformed into an Indian, or at the very least, described as internalizing Indian consciousness” (NU, 157). I would add that all three main protagonists follow an Atlantic trajectory that brings them from Europe to America and into association with an Indian presence that at least temporarily enhances their quests for freedom—religious, scientific, or sexual. Reverend Dimmesdale, whom Hawthorne casts as a quintessentially pure Protestant Anglo-Saxon,<sup>47</sup> had come to what the narrator calls “our wild forest-land” from one of “the great English universities”; once arrived, he of course makes his regular visits into the forest to redeem Indians—along the way meeting with Hester Prynne (48, my emphasis). Roger Chillingworth comes from England via Germany to America, where, like Hester and Dimmesdale, he mingles his old-world knowledge with his “potent” new-world discoveries. Some colonists imagine that Chillingworth has been “transported . . . bodily through the air” by heaven from “a German university” to work his “cure” upon Reverend Dimmesdale (which Claudia Johnson argues is a potion to induce impotency).<sup>48</sup> He strengthens his scientific powers by combining “knowledge of the properties of native roots and herbs” gained during his “Indian captivity” (82) with the “antique physic” of “European Pharmacopoeia” and his “old studies in alchemy” (51). As Chillingworth and Dimmesdale take “long walks on the seashore” and Chillingworth gathers native “plants with healing balm in them,” Dimmesdale finds himself attracted by the “range and freedom of ideas” that Chillingworth exhibits as “a man of science” (85). These two men share the impulse to invigorate their free-thinking knowledge through encounters with the “savage.”

Yet in the end, Dimmesdale’s English “native” interior cannot sustain the encounter with America—at least not insofar as it also entails a homosocial struggle with Chillingworth, especially as the latter draws on the powers of his hybrid “Pharmacopoeia.” Indeed, in this

struggle between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale over Hester—the woman who most enduringly strikes roots into the soil and most successfully makes the colony a place where she can cultivate her free interior—Hawthorne begins to sketch the sexual predicament of the colonial Anglo-American man, including himself.

### Sex in the Colony

*The Scarlet Letter* may after all be most fundamentally concerned with the crisis that colonization provokes in Anglo-Atlantic heterosexuality. From one angle, the novel narrates the aftermath of an Atlantic rupture in which each of the main characters becomes an isolated individual with an interiority that exceeds community membership and so, particularly in the woman, threatens proper patriarchal coupledness. Certainly, among its other effects, colonization created a margin of possibility for being single and for other sexual choices among Anglo women as well as Anglo men, epitomized in the so-called “New England marriages” of single women who chose to live together as well as in those scribbling women Hawthorne lamented. As usual, Hawthorne turns his gaze to what most worries him, for these new-world conditions do seem to bring what, in the essay “Mrs. Hutchinson,” he feared would be the end of a “race” of “domestic” Anglo-American women, which occurs by their adoption of an “Indian” freedom, an outcome figured, in that essay, as the independent woman’s ultimate “ruin” by Indians and, in the novel, by Hester’s lonely but dignified life.<sup>49</sup> The increased independence of women seems required for colonization, however, and colonization is a project that Hawthorne embraces by instinct if not by love. Hawthorne wrestles with this trade-off required by the continuing project of colonization, including in Hawthorne’s own day the implicit exchange wherein Anglo-Atlantic men’s hold on Indian lands entailed some loosening of their hold on (“Indianized”) Anglo-Atlantic women.

In key scenes throughout the novel, we glimpse Hawthorne’s narrator grappling with the transformation of women and the reach of his heroine’s freedom, especially insofar as, like the writing women of his day, Hester’s freedom of thought rivals his.<sup>50</sup> At one point, Hester fully explores in her mind how the ideal of freedom has implications for “the whole race of womanhood” and sees the need for “the whole system of society . . . to be torn down, and built up anew” (113). In

particular, she touches exactly on the distinction between nature and culture on which the system rests, for, she thinks, “the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become *like* nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position” (113, my emphasis). Yet as the narrator also tells us, Hester fears the danger that along the way “she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change; in which perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated” (113).

Here is the abyss that opens up under liberty in this colonized land, native only by force and interior fabrication. In this world that seems to offer complete freedom, perhaps eventually no one will have an essential and permanent self. Perhaps we will discover that we have no ultimate bond to, or steady identity within, a community that remains intact over time. Perhaps we will find that what seemed like “nature” is only “hereditary habit.” So if we “tear down” the hereditary habit, including the habit of “the opposite sex”—which is exactly what Hawthorne has done—we may lose our moorings.

Tellingly, however, it is at this moment that our narrator steps abruptly out of Hester’s consciousness to announce that “[a] woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought,” having suggested a bit earlier that Hester had already undergone a “sad transformation,” in which “some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman” (113, 112). At this point we may wonder if it is our narrator, more than Hester, who is “wander[ing] without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind” (114)—exactly the labyrinth of a mind that on the one hand seeks an attribute “the permanence of which had been essential” and yet on the other unsettles the possibility of that permanence precisely in this restless “wilderness” seeking.

In response, Hawthorne, to steady his hold, imitates Hester’s most successful colonial strategy: keeping interiority contained, maintaining a threshold between private and public, and only very selectively opening the door to cross it. All of Hawthorne’s tales ultimately rest on a narrative opacity, keeping the veil over an obscure interiority. On one hand, his narrators pursue enigmatic characters with the tenacity of Chillingworth, who “strove to go deep into his patient’s bosom.” Hawthorne similarly seems to seek what this novel’s narrator calls Chillingworth’s “power . . . to bring his mind into such affinity with his



patient's, that this last shall unawares have spoken what he imagines himself only to have thought" (86). On the other hand, Hawthorne also practices a more measured artistry that succeeds where Chillingworth's fails. Dimmesdale collapses under Chillingworth's too-close scrutiny. Hawthorne, by contrast, never takes us over the threshold into Dimmesdale's interior. In the crucial scene in which Dimmesdale falls asleep over his ancient "black-letter" book, Chillingworth thrusts back the vestment and sees, apparently, a sign, but we readers never do. Hawthorne shows us only the disturbingly gleeful face of Chillingworth as it comprehends what he sees. Hawthorne shows us, that is, the *desire* to penetrate to the deepest interior, simultaneously heightening and constraining his (and our) desire to see, by keeping that interior cloaked. Similarly with the meteoric sign in the sky, we learn only the townspeople's fully cathected speculations about it. Hawthorne keeps uncertain the reality of the meteor, and in the process keeps open the question of God's endorsement or condemnation of Dimmesdale, and, by extension, keeps in shadow the degree of Dimmesdale's colonial guilt. Hawthorne *keeps* the secret of these characters' "sin"—the colonial one, that is, of striking roots into stolen soil—and he accordingly does the same for his audience.

In short, by emulating not Chillingworth but the diffident Hester, Hawthorne finds a more effective way to write his way into Atlantic modernity as a man. Like Hester, he successfully re-nativizes this New England colonial spot and keeps its protective threshold intact. He understands that in founding a native community on stolen soil, one may penetrate a woman's interior in order to establish and protect a man's. Fictional women may be cast as having a free interiority, and that free interiority may justify colonization, all of which—if distilled into allegory—can accrue to the male author, just as Surveyor Pue promised.

Thus I suggest that we might read the final image of Hester as she returns—an image in which her interior remains inaccessible—as an image of our author, Hawthorne. For after all, as he confesses in his "Introductory," it is he who must return and plant himself in the New England village if he is to write a myth of Anglo-American origins. Appropriately, in the novel's final scene, Hawthorne positions us once again at the threshold, on the Atlantic shore, with Hester at her cottage door. We meet her as the figure turning between two worlds, a woman choosing the abode of colonization but whose free interior after

all remains mostly in shadow—apolitical, latent. Hawthorne makes a “native” woman’s interior freedom the veiled vessel of Anglo-Atlantic colonization.

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### Notes

- 1 I trace this extended narrative in my forthcoming book *Freedom's Empire: Race, Rape, and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2007).
- 2 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 1988), 44. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion, 1960), 131.
- 4 John Hare, *St. Edward's Ghost or Anti-Normanism* (1647), quoted in Samuel Klinger, *The Goths in England: A Study in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1952), 136–37.
- 5 W. G. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (1899; reprint, New York: Dover, 1956).
- 6 For discussion of how the Reformation in England led to the antiquarian interest in Anglo-Saxons, see Klinger, *The Goths in England*; Roberta Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1932); and Eleanor Adams, *Old English Scholarship in England from 1566–1800* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1917), 24–25. Further references to *Old English Scholarship* will be cited parenthetically as *OES*.
- 7 Matthew Parker, preface to *A Testimonie of Antiquities* (1566–67), quoted in *OES*, 24–25.
- 8 See Klinger, *The Goths in England*, 126.
- 9 Quoted in Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend*, 38.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 More accurately, these developments consolidated a shift that had begun with sixteenth-century land redistribution, privatization, and enclosure. My discussion draws from Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders, 1550–1653* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as *MR*.
- 12 On this point, see Robert M. Bliss, *Revolution and Empire: English Politics and the American Colonies in the Seventeenth Century* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester Univ. Press, 1990), 48. Bliss gives a useful overview of these transatlantic conditions, with a more cultural emphasis than Brenner's *Merchants and Revolution*.

- 13 See Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Providence Island, 1630–1641: The Other Puritan Colony* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 142.
- 14 See William Haller, ed., *Tracts on Liberty in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–1647*, 3 vols. (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1933), 3:358.
- 15 For discussion of how such publications shaped the pivotal role that the media would play in modernity, see John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995). For literature's development of this public sphere in the seventeenth century, see David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric, and Politics, 1627–1660* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).
- 16 "Humble Petition. . . ." quoted in Ann Marie McEntee, "The (Un)Civil Sisterhood of Oranges and Lemons: Female Petitioners and Demonstrators, 1642–53," in *Pamphlet Wars: Prose in the English Revolution*, ed. James Holstun (Buffalo: State University of New York Press, 1992), 93–94.
- 17 The ordinance is dated 26 August 1647, quoted in McEntee, "The (Un)Civil Sisterhood," 96. McEntee's source is Patricia Higgins, "The Reactions of Women. . . ." in *Politics, Religion, and the English Civil War*, ed. Brian Manning (London: Edward Arnold, 1973), 179–97.
- 18 See the documents quoted in Stuart E. Prall, ed., *The Puritan Revolution: A Documentary History* (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1973), 134, 129, 134, 127, 128, respectively.
- 19 Nathaniel Bacon, *Historical and Political Discourse of the Laws and Government of England*, quoted in Kliger, *The Goths in England*, 139.
- 20 William E. Gerard Winstanley, "The True Levellers' Standard" (1649), quoted in *The Puritan Revolution*, ed. Prall, 179.
- 21 John Warr, *The Corruption and Deficiency of the Lawes of England* (London, 1649), quoted in Kliger, *The Goths in England*, 269.
- 22 Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 10, 19, 341.
- 23 See the transcripts of the Putney debates, as presented in A. S. P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty: Being the Army Debates (1647–49), from the Clarke Manuscript* (London: J. M. Dent, 1938), 42, 20.
- 24 Henry James, *Hawthorne* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1880), quoted in *The Critical Response to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter,"* ed. Gary Scharnhorst (New York: Greenwood, 1992), 79. See also Scharnhorst's discussion of James's biography in his introduction (xvii–xix).
- 25 William Dean Howells, "Hawthorne's Hester Prynne," in *Heroines of Fiction* (New York: Harpers, 1901), 1; Carl Van Doren, "The Flower of Puritanism," *Nation*, 8 December 1920, 649–50; and Elizabeth Deering Hanscom, introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Macmillan, 1927); all reprinted in *The Critical Response*, ed. Scharnhorst, 102, 140, 146, respectively. As Scharnhorst discusses, other critics who made similar suggestions include Herbert Schneider, *The Puritan Mind* (1930), Yvor Winters, *Maule's Curse* (1938), and, of course, F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (1941).

- 26 Lloyd Morris, *The Rebellious Puritan* (London, 1928), quoted in Jane Lundblad, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Tradition of Gothic Romance* (New York: Haskell House, 1964), 10.
- 27 For Sacvan Berkovitch's argument, see his *The Office of the Scarlet Letter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991). Most readings acknowledge the ambiguity of voice and position in Hawthorne's work, but for critics who, like Berkovitch, align him most fully with a traditionalist orientation, see, for instance, David Leverenz, "Mrs. Hawthorne's Headache," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37 (March 1983): 552-75; Myra Jehlen, "The Novel and the Middle Class in America," in *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 125-144; Jennifer Fleischner, "Hawthorne and the Politics of Slavery," *Studies in the Novel* 23 (spring 1990): 514-33; Larry J. Reynolds, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1988), 79-96; Deborah Madsen, "'A' for Abolition: Hawthorne's Bond-Servant and the Shadow of Slavery," *Journal of American Studies* 25 (August 1991): 255-59; Gillian Brown, "Hawthorne, Inheritance, and Women's Property," *Studies in the Novel* 23 (spring 1991): 107-18; Deborah Gussman, "Inalienable Rights: Fictions of Political Identity in *Hobomok* and *The Scarlet Letter*," *College Literature* 22 (June 1995): 58-80; Lucy Maddox, *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991); Laura Hanft Korobkin, "The Scarlet Letter of the Law: Hawthorne and Criminal Justice," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 30 (winter 1997): 193-217; and Renée Bergland, *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2000); further references to *The National Uncanny* will be cited parenthetically as *NU*. See also Jamie Barlowe's study of the ways Hawthorne criticism has perpetuated this conservatism in overlooking the work of women scholars on Hawthorne (*The Scarlet Mob of Scribblers* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 2000]).
- 28 Critics who acknowledge Hawthorne's conservative gestures of containment but nonetheless consider his ambiguous narrative voice or his romance form an expression of subversive impulses include Michael Bell, *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971); Evan Carton, *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialectic and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985); Gordon Hutner, *Secrets and Sympathy: Forms of Disclosure in Hawthorne's Novels* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988); Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989); Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), although Berlant seems to give equal emphasis to

- Hawthorne's double impulses to subvert and conserve; Richard Millington, *Practicing Romance: Narrative Form and Cultural Engagement in Hawthorne's Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992); Emily Budick, *Engendering Romance: Women Writers and the Hawthorne Tradition, 1850–1990* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994); Brook Thomas, "Citizen Hester: *The Scarlet Letter* as Civic Myth," *American Literary History* 13 (summer 2001): 181–211; and Peter J. Bellis, *Writing Revolution: Aesthetics and Politics in Hawthorne, Whitman, and Thoreau* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2003).
- 29 See Michael J. Colacurcio, "Footsteps of Anne Hutchinson: A Puritan Context for *The Scarlet Letter*," in *Doctrine and Difference: Essays in the Literature of New England* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 177–204; and Korobkin, "The Scarlet Letter of the Law," 206–7. Further references to "Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson" will be cited parenthetically as "F." See also Amy Schraeger Lang, *Prophetic Woman: Anne Hutchinson and the Problem of Dissent in the Literature of New England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1987).
  - 30 Michael J. Colacurcio, "'The Woman's Own Choice': Sex, Metaphor, and the Puritan 'Sources' of *The Scarlet Letter*," in *Doctrine and Difference*, 211.
  - 31 *Ibid.*, 210–11.
  - 32 Korobkin, "The Scarlet Letter of the Law," 206.
  - 33 The novel opens in June of 1642, and it is "seven long years" later, in 1649 (as Hawthorne mentions more than once), that Dimmesdale gives his Election Day sermon (101, 153).
  - 34 Bercovitch, *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*, 152.
  - 35 See Thomas Woodson, "Hawthorne, Upham, and *The Scarlet Letter*," in *Critical Essays on Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"*, ed. David B. Kesterson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988), 186–87.
  - 36 Hawthorne to Horace Mann, n.d., in *The Letters, 1843–1853*, vol. 16 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1997), 293; quoted in *NU*, 157.
  - 37 Hawthorne to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 5 June 1849, quoted in Woodson, "Hawthorne, Upham, and *The Scarlet Letter*," in *Critical Essays*, ed. Kesterson, 183.
  - 38 *Ibid.*
  - 39 For a full contextualization of the work of surveying and its influence on American literature, see Myra Jehlen, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987).
  - 40 Frederick Newberry stresses Hawthorne's evocations of "old world" England, noting that "Hawthorne regularly surrounds Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale with Old World motifs . . . to emphasize positive historical and cultural continuities" (*Hawthorne's Divided Loyalties: England and*

- America in Hawthorne's Works* [Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987], 173). Newberry's study reinforces my transatlantic emphasis, although our interpretations differ.
- 41 See the excerpt from Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel in Hester Prynne*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), 69.
- 42 For Toni Morrison's discussion of "American Africanism," see *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
- 43 Hawthorne may also gesture toward the slave economy "holding up" Hester's interior freedom in his reference to the "iron" arm of the law and in the later comment that "[t]he chain that bound her here was of iron links, and galling her to the inmost soul, but never could be broken" (56). On Hawthorne, Hester, and slavery, see Fleischner, "Hawthorne and the Politics of Slavery"; Madsen, "'A' is for Abolition"; and Korobkin, "The Scarlet Letter of the Law." For discussions linking Hawthorne's text to slave narratives, see Mara Dukats, "The Hybrid Terrain of Literary Imagination: Maryse Condé's *Black Witch of Salem*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Hester Prynne*, and Aimé Césaire's Heroic Poetic Voice," in *Order and Partialities: Theory, Pedagogy, and the "Postcolonial,"* ed. Kostas Myrsiades and Jerry McGuire (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 325–40; and Jane Cocalis "The 'Dark and Abiding Presence' in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," in *The Calvinist Roots of the Modern Era*, ed. Alik Barnstone, Michael Tomask, and Carol J. Singley (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1997), 250–62.
- 44 See, for instance, Gussman, "Inalienable Rights," 9.
- 45 Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Our Evening Party among the Mountains" (1835), in *Tales and Sketches/Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (New York: Library of America, 1982), 342–43; quoted in *NU*, 145.
- 46 Nathaniel Hawthorne "The Old Manse," in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882); quoted in *NU*, 155.
- 47 The narrator also associates Dimmesdale with a native Anglo-Saxon legacy of pristine, pre-Catholic innocence. Like the poetic, brooding, yet honest Anglo-Saxons, he prefers "seclusion," which "kept [him] simple and childlike" and gave his sermons "a freshness"; meanwhile his "high native gifts" and his "dewy purity of thought" are expressed in a voice that sounds "like the speech of an angel"—or perhaps, a sublime Angle, for there was a widespread misconception that the Angles of England first got this name because their blond hair made them look like angels (48). Furthermore, Dimmesdale's interior, like Hester's, is betokened by ancient Protestant nativeness, as suggested in the scene in which Chillingworth enters Dimmesdale's study to discover his innermost secret. Dimmesdale has been reading a book in the vernacular: a "large black-letter volume [lay] open before him on the table" (95). In the seventeenth

century, “black letter” print was used for the vernacular and was closely associated with the Reformation (starting with the vernacular Bible through which it came into use), and thereafter with the “recovery” of “ancient” native identity through native-language literacy. Dimmesdale’s “deep, deep slumber” over the book implies his seduction by the Anglo-Protestant dream of a fully manifested interior, which in turn confirms his native character (95). On black-letter print, see Charles Mish, “Black Letter as a Social Discriminant in the Seventeenth Century,” *PMLA* 68 (June 1953): 627–30; and Gerald Newton, “*Deutsche Schrift*: The Demise and Rise of German Black Letter,” *German Life and Letters* 56 (April 2003): 183–204.

- 48 See Claudia Durst Johnson, “Impotence and Omnipotence in *The Scarlet Letter*,” *New England Quarterly* 66 (December 1993): 594–612.
- 49 For these phrases in Hawthorne’s essay, see “Mrs. Hutchinson,” in vol. 23 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. Thomas Woodson et al. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1994), 66–67. For a full consideration of “Mrs. Hutchinson,” especially the closing scene in which Hawthorne imagines Hutchinson’s death in an Indian attack, see my *Freedom’s Empire*.
- 50 In “Mrs. Hutchinson,” Hawthorne deplores the increasing number of “ink-stained Amazons” because these “prolific” writers threaten to “expel their rivals”—that is, male writers (*Centenary Edition*, 23:67).