

# Living Too Long: Republican Time in Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels

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*A*UTHOR, educator, and reformer Emma Willard had high hopes for the American republic. In a pamphlet titled *An Address to the Public; Particularly to the Members of the Legislature of New-York, Proposing a Plan for Improving Female Education* (1819), Willard mounts a forceful argument for establishing seminaries devoted to the instruction of women, suggesting that “such institutions, would tend to prolong, or perpetuate our excellent government.”<sup>1</sup> Immediately after making this claim, she anticipates an objection overheard among the luminaries of her day:

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Willard, *An Address to the Public; Particularly to the Members of the Legislature of New-York, Proposing a Plan for Improving Female Education*, 2d ed. (Middlebury: J. W. Copeland, 1819), p. 29. I thank Denise Gigante, Gavin Jones, Nancy Ruttenburg, Alex Woloch, and the anonymous reviewers for their extraordinary guidance throughout the writing of this essay.

An opinion too generally prevails, that our present form of government, though good, cannot be permanent. Other republics have failed, and the historian and philosopher have told us, that nations are like individuals; that, at their birth, they receive the seeds of their decline and dissolution. Here deceived by a false anal[o]gy, we receive an apt illustration of particular facts, for a general truth. The existence of nations, cannot, in strictness, be compared with the duration of animate life; for by the operation of physical causes, this, after a certain length of time, must cease: but the existence of nations, is prolonged by the succession of one generation to another, and there is no physical cause, to prevent this succession's going on, in a peaceable manner, under a good government, till the end of time. (Willard, *An Address to the Public*, p. 29)

Willard's ingenuity here lies in her clockwork thinking. Where these nameless intellectuals have been satisfied to set "the existence of nations" and biological life next to one another, relating them only by analogy, Willard fits them together in a single mechanism. Suddenly the transience of living creatures, far from dimming the likelihood that a nation will last much longer, assures its survival. This is nowhere clearer than in the phrase "prolonged *by* the succession" (emphasis added): for Willard, the republic will live on specifically because each individual generation does not. Death, no less than life, holds America together and propels it forward.

Willard is not nearly so isolated in these convictions as her gesture toward a chorus of philosophers and historians might suggest. Granted, her views clash with those of European thinkers like Nicolas de Condorcet and William Godwin, both of whom portray the steady improvement of modern societies as both a cause and an effect of human lifespans increasing without any upper limit, until mortality itself has all but disappeared.<sup>2</sup> But American republicanism founded itself on the

<sup>2</sup> In his *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), Condorcet posits that "as prevent[ative] medicine improves and food and housing become healthier, as a way of life is established that develops our physical powers by exercise without ruining them by excess, as the two most virulent causes of deterioration, misery and excessive wealth, are eliminated, the average length of human life will be increased and a better health and a stronger physical constitution will be ensured" (Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet, *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*,

dream of each new generation's uninhibited self-fashioning, and many of Willard's most illustrious countrymen are no less careful than she to emphasize how much that dream depends on older generations not only going to the grave, but also taking their influence with them. "Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, *in all cases*," declares Thomas Paine, "as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow."<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson, whose father-in-law left him considerable debt, likewise embraces the position that every American generation must have its rightful freedom from the past, even insisting in a July 1816 letter to Samuel Kercheval that the U.S. Constitution should provide a "solemn opportunity," every twenty years, for each new generation to accommodate its inherited government to the circumstances of the present era, "so that it [the government] may be handed on, with periodical repairs, from generation to generation to the end of time, if any thing human can so long endure."<sup>4</sup> While James Madison deplored the idea as impracticable, since the modern generation is a mathematical abstraction without any fixed limits in nature, Jefferson's view is consistent with an Enlightenment-era contempt for tyrannous posterity that gives rise to the American republic. "Individuals," says Michael Warner of this era, "having ceased to be sons or

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trans. June Barraclough [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1955], p. 199). Similarly, in the more prosperous future that Godwin envisions, the human mind will develop ever more complete mastery of the body, turning involuntary modifications, like aging, into voluntary ones. This appendix to Godwin's *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) makes clear that such prolongation of life will require, among other things, a radical transformation of the "mistaken institutions" that trouble people's minds ceaselessly (William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on Morals and Happiness*, 3d ed., 2 vols. [London: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798], II, 522). Better lives, less tyrannized by oppressive forms of government, will be longer ones as well.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution* (London: J. S. Jordan, 1791), p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Jefferson, letter to Samuel Kercheval, 12 July 1816, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, ed. J. Jefferson Looney, et al., 17 vols. to date (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004-), X, 227.

fathers, now belong, by the abstracting magnetism of averages and nations, to a more grandly conceived succession, that of generations. Generational belonging is the essence of the modern. The dead are dead.”<sup>5</sup>

These are exhilarating thoughts, provided that one is young. To an aging citizen of the republic, the foreclosure of posthumous influence, however much it once looked like a promise, might increasingly come to resemble a threat. It seems worth pointing out that Jefferson wrote his letter to Kercheval quoted above, describing at length his ideal system of government, at Monticello in 1816, when Jefferson was seventy-two years old and, he claims, departed from the political scene: “but I am now retired: I resign myself, as a passenger, with confidence to those at the present helm, and ask but for rest, peace and good will” (Jefferson, 12 July 1816 letter to Kercheval, p. 222). In his winter years, no less than in his prime, Jefferson makes a poor passenger. If the perpetuation of one’s will after death, a kind of secular immortality, cannot be relied upon, then mortality becomes simultaneously the last refuge of the aged and a potential danger to the republic they inhabit. What would happen if the country were not handed on peaceably, as Willard and others prescribe? Is it possible for a generation to outstay its welcome and, by opposing, mount some kind of revolt against republican time, throwing it into disorder?

In posing these questions, I draw from scholarship of the temporal turn in American studies. Over the last twenty years, Americanists have probed the many ways that temporality shaped nineteenth-century Americans’ perception of the nation and their belonging to it. Thomas Allen, for example, has found in the writings of Willard and numerous other sources—Thomas Cole’s *The Course of Empire* series of paintings (1833–36), the journalism of John O’Sullivan, George Bancroft’s wide-ranging historiography—signs of time’s paramount importance for the antebellum American imagination. As witnesses to the confusing rise of a republican empire, in which America’s recent liberation from British rule coincided

<sup>5</sup> Michael Warner, “Irving’s Posterity,” *ELH*, 67 (2000), 779.

with its own accumulation of colonial holdings, intellectuals of the period escape into time, trusting that future developments will resolve the seemingly intractable contradictions becoming ever more apparent across space. Complicated though their national identity often appeared in the present moment, Americans could assure themselves that necessary changes to the republic would come about in the fullness of time. Such a process would depend, they either imply or declare outright, on the peaceful and timely decline of every generation before its successor.<sup>6</sup>

I also benefit from critical perspectives found under the capacious canopy of biopolitics. From Michel Foucault onward, critics of biopower have understood that its goal of “the maintenance and expansion of life” is inherently selective, and that protecting the continuity of one organism—whether a person or a political entity—entails letting others die, if not actively exterminating them.<sup>7</sup> When Willard and Jefferson exhort each generation to “hand on” the republic to its successor, one hears the subtle menace of biopolitical thinking—“thanatopolitics,” as Robert Esposito calls it.<sup>8</sup> In this view, dying is both an aspect of living properly and the final cure for a breach of that proper conduct.

<sup>6</sup> See Thomas M. Allen, *A Republic in Time: Temporality and Social Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2008), pp. 17–56. See also Lloyd Pratt, *Archives of American Time: Literature and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); and Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> See Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 9; see pp. 110–45. See also Brett Levinson, “Biopolitics in Balance: Esposito’s Response to Foucault,” *New Centennial Review*, 10 (2010), 239.

<sup>8</sup> See Esposito, *Bíos*. According to Levinson, Esposito offers the following examples: “the post-9/11 bombing of Afghanistan, in which war is waged in the name of the defense of humanity rather than of a state, nation, ethnicity, or religious group; the Russian police force’s use of lethal gas to overcome Chechen kidnappers in a Moscow theater, an episode that resulted in 128 fatalities (of hostages and insurgents); the 2003 drawing of blood (for pay) from Chinese peasants: the plasma is separated from the red globules and sold to the affluent as a vaccine, and the globules are reinserted into the donors, resulting in the production of large seropositive populations; and a complex 2000 (non)abortion case in France, in which a genetically abnormal child sues to assert his right *not* to have been born” (Levinson, “Biopolitics in Balance,” pp. 239–40).

I choose to explore this intersection of temporality and biopower in American literature through the genre of historical fiction, which, from its inception in Europe, forges connections between national and personal development, and thus becomes an ideal laboratory for American authors' experiments in both temporal and biopolitical thought.<sup>9</sup> In particular, I focus on several of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels, whose superannuated hero, Natty Bumppo, refuses time and again to subside from the foreground of the text—or that of American life. Seen in this light, Natty, once the poster child for what was considered American literature's violently regenerative relationship to space, becomes less the ultimate rugged woodsman than American literature's first, unlikeliest, and possibly most subversive time traveler.<sup>10</sup> Two discoveries obtain from this exercise: that longevity is at some level un-American; and, somewhat paradoxically, that American literature derives much of its unique aesthetic force from dramatizing the peculiar plight of long-lived characters.



Few American literary corpuses are more thoroughly asymmetrical than Cooper's. His works are divided and redivided into two camps: the five so-called Leatherstocking novels, and twenty-seven others. Within the Leatherstocking saga a similar imbalance predominates: there is Leatherstocking/Hawkeye/Natty Bumppo himself, and there is everyone else. "One of the most fascinating sights in American literary history," says Stephen Railton of Cooper's first

<sup>9</sup> Maria Edgeworth's founding contributions to the genre are illuminating in this regard. Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent* (1800), in the words of Ian Duncan, "plots loss of national identity through a family history of ruin and extinction," while her *Ennui* (1809), by depicting a dilapidated Irish estate finally improved by a Scottish estate manager, "casts national improvement as a Scottish topos and Scotland as Ireland's future" (Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007], pp. 74, 76).

<sup>10</sup> The view of Natty as symbol of American violence finds its prime example, of course, in Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1860* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1973).

Leatherstocking book, *The Pioneers* (1823), “is watching how over the course of the narrative Natty’s character commandeers more and more of Cooper’s attention.”<sup>11</sup> In most accounts, Natty gradually transitions from minor character to protagonist status because he is the most unconventional character in the novel, or the most distinctly American, or both. His unlikely ascendancy is inconvenient to other elements of the text that also have a just claim on our interest:

When the novel arrives at its structurally predestined conclusion, the wedding of Oliver and Elizabeth as the promise of a more enlightened national future, there is no narrative place for Natty. But when the book ends with him disappearing one last time into the woods, leaving the newlyweds in, of all symbolic places, a cemetery, he takes the reader’s sympathy with him. (Railton, “James Fenimore Cooper,” pp. 4–5)

“No place for Natty” could be the mantra of much Cooper criticism, according to which Natty, lacking all the prerequisites of an English romance hero, and thus not qualified for any well-defined role in Cooper’s romance, trails around without much purpose, disrupting the best-laid plans of others, like the punctilious sheriff Richard Jones, instead of undertaking his own.

In arguing that neither Cooper nor any of his characters knows quite what to do with the unruly and resilient figure of Natty Bumppo, many scholars have seemed almost to volunteer their services in bringing him down. For all the old trapper’s skill and experience, which Cooper’s novels continually emphasize, scholarly evaluations often fixate on his losing strength, passing away, or having nowhere left to go. “In each book,” says Kay Seymour House, taking a broad view of the Leatherstocking saga, “Natty finally chooses between the alternatives left him by the action; but while *The Pioneers* exhausts Natty’s limited ability to adjust to settlement conditions and *The Last of the Mohicans* elaborates on the potential being expended, *The Prairie* is needed to exhaust the character

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Railton, “James Fenimore Cooper,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Novelists*, ed. Timothy Parrish (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), p. 4.

itself.”<sup>12</sup> According to this assessment, the five novels in which Natty figures become a gauntlet designed to “exhaust” him—to leave his character without alternative or resource. It is unusual to see a protagonist’s trajectory described in these agonistic terms, and yet in Natty’s case it has become a commonplace. Even in D. H. Lawrence’s classic, lyrical formulation, the older Natty Bumppo of *The Pioneers* is an “old skin” whose sloughing off in subsequent books achieves “the true myth of America.”<sup>13</sup>

William Kelly adopts the strategy of containing Natty’s personality by making as little reference to him as possible. According to Kelly, Natty’s “antisocial temperament and his celibacy limit his status to that of a precursor, but the cultural synthesis he achieves inaugurates the historical process which Temple extends and Effingham completes.”<sup>14</sup> The syntax here anticipates Kelly’s participation in limiting Natty’s “status” (*Plotting America’s Past*, p. 7): Kelly devotes almost his entire chapter on *The Pioneers* to the passing of the torch from Judge Marmaduke Temple to Oliver Effingham, since for him the relationship of those two characters captures the tension between Cooper the novelist’s present and the world of forty years prior, as well as between American individualism and the teleological implications of historical fiction. Natty is almost nowhere to be seen in this framework: though Kelly acknowledges that “Natty and Chingachgook remain more attractive figures than Temple or the settlers who supplant them,” still he considers their supplanting as by far the main event in their narrative arc (*Plotting America’s Past*, p. 29). In short, Natty has a protagonist’s power to hold our attention, but no more than a minor character’s role to play in *The Pioneers*’ more important work as a founding document of national identity. Not until Natty is tamed can the novel fulfill its important mission of establishing an American teleology where “design replaces chaos and ordered development becomes a certainty” (Kelly, *Plotting America’s Past*, p. 12).

<sup>12</sup> Kay Seymour House, *Cooper’s Americans* (Ohio: The Ohio State Univ. Press, 1965), p. 264.

<sup>13</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature* (New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1923), p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> William P. Kelly, *Plotting America’s Past: Fenimore Cooper and the Leatherstocking Tales* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1983), p. 7.



Let us consider the emphasis that such readings have placed upon Natty's exhaustion, superannuation, and removal from the scene of *The Pioneers*, and the compartmentalizing of his character that such processes generally serve. For one thing, what makes Natty so exceptional among all the characters that inhabit Cooper's American landscape? Contrary to popular belief, it is not his ability to hear a dry twig snap underfoot a mile away, or to follow the path of a cannonball through dense fog to discover the fort where that projectile originated. Feats like these, lampooned by Mark Twain in his landmark 1895 essay on Cooper's "literary offences" (in which Twain proposes that "the Leather Stocking Series ought to have been called the Broken Twig Series"), had also been criticized much earlier, if also much less hilariously, in the novels' first American reviews.<sup>15</sup> The reviewer for the *United States Literary Gazette*, referring to *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), writes:

One thing, however, is carried somewhat too far, and occupies too much time, the trail hunting. With due deference to the better judgment of our author, we must venture to express our incredulity with regard to some of the wonders performed by Hawk-eye and his Indian friends. Had we been barely told of their results, it might have passed off very well.<sup>16</sup>

What these critics, like Twain, cannot accept is Natty's apparently superhuman mastery over space. Valid though this complaint may be, its constant repetition has long preempted analysis of the character's other attributes. Far more important to Natty's character than this mastery of space, I argue, is his mastery of time. It is only when the old scout draws upon his vast experience that Cooper shows us the full measure of the man.

To clarify what I mean requires looking less at Natty's actions than at his language. In moments where the scout asserts himself as the ultimate survivor, his most valuable tool becomes not his rifle or his gun, but his grammar. In addition

<sup>15</sup> Mark Twain, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences," *North American Review*, 161 (1895), 4.

<sup>16</sup> [Anon.], rev. of *The Last of the Mohicans; a Narrative of 1757*, *United States Literary Gazette*, 4 (1826), 91.

to being “one of the great No-sayers in literature” (Railton, “James Fenimore Cooper,” p. 6), Natty exhibits another quirk that bears significantly on his character: his mastery of, and extreme partiality to, the present perfect. Time and again he deploys this verb tense to prove himself and to increase the authority of his own voice, even in the midst of otherwise self-deprecating remarks. Consider the following example from Cooper’s first Leatherstocking tale, *The Pioneers*, a novel that finds old Natty living on the fringe of a frontier settlement called Templeton in 1793, when Natty says:

“But I am a plain, unlearned man, that has sarved both the king and his country, in his day, ag’in the French and savages, but never so much as looked into a book, or larnt a letter of scholarship, in my born days. I’ve never seen the use of sich in-door work, though I’ve lived to be partly bald, and in my time, have killed two hundred beaver in a season, and that without counting the other game. If you mistrust what I’m telling you, you can ask Chingachgook there, for I did it in the heart of the Delaware country, and the old man is knowing to the truth of every word I say.”<sup>17</sup>

That a local minister triggers this speech merely by inviting Natty to Christmas dinner shows how little provocation it takes to start the old hunter reminiscing about his long past—though, as we will see, he is provoked severely at other moments. For now, the form is what concerns us. Notice how the present perfect tense runs through this brief, boastful monologue, holding it together. The phrase “I have”—variations of which occur four times across these unwieldy reminiscences—shifts our focus to the next achievement in the series, while at the same time holding our attention on the “I” common to all of them. With this phrase Natty distinguishes himself as a consummate survivor by gesturing to what he has left behind him in the course of time: the king and country that he defended as a colonial woodsman; the “French and savages” who opposed him in this effort; the game that he has slain; and, less dramatically, even the hair that

<sup>17</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers*, in his *The Leatherstocking Tales*, ed. Blake Nevius, 2 vols. (New York: The Library of America, 1985), I, 135. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

he has lost. In the moment when he boasts of these inarguably bygone experiences, Natty shows himself to be still present—*not yet* of the past. In this way, Natty's "I have" statements are indispensable to his character throughout *The Pioneers*.

A few more examples will underscore not only the frequency of Natty's recourse to this verbal tool, but its effect—at least in theory—on his social surroundings:

"The meat is none of mine to sell," said Leather-stocking, adopting a little of his companion's hauteur; "for my part, I have known animals travel days with shots in the neck, and I'm none of them who'll rob a man of his rightful dues." (*The Pioneers*, p. 22)

"I have known the Otsego water for five-and-forty year," said Leather-stocking, "and I will say that for it, which is, that a cleaner spring or better fishing is not to be found in the land." (p. 294)

"No, no, Judge," interrupted the Leather-stocking; who was hitherto unseen, or disregarded; "take him into your shanty in welcome, but tell him truth. I have lived in the woods for forty long years, and have spent five at a time without seeing the light of a clearing, bigger than a wind-row in the trees, and I should like to know where you'll find a man, in his sixty-eighth year, who can get an easier living, for all your betterments, and your deer-laws; and, as for honesty, or doing what's right between man and man, I'll not turn my back to the longest winded deacon on your Patent." (p. 202)

For this last comment, spoken as a defense of rugged living, the comparatively civilized Judge Marmaduke Temple has a pat response: "Thou art an exception, Leather-Stocking . . . for thou hast a temperance unusual in thy class, and a hardihood exceeding thy years" (p. 202). This is always at least partly the point of Natty's "I have" statements: to impress upon others the exceptional duration and caliber of his life experience. As speech acts, they convert past experience into present authority, calling attention to events that occurred in a life that has continued unbroken through every hardship, right up to the current moment—a life that is right before us, curating itself here and now. Whatever else it may do throughout Cooper's

fiction, the present perfect serves as the ideal tense for a self-proclaimed survivor.

But this is true only if that survivor is Natty, for he alone wields this language to any great effect in *The Pioneers*. Chingachgook, the Mohican warrior who could theoretically boast of as long and eventful a life as Natty, is here relegated to the function of confirming what his old ally says, thereby adding just the right emphasis to Natty's remarks—the white man *has* done these things. Somewhat later, a character very different from either Natty or Chingachgook, the black servant and supposed ex-mariner Benjamin Pump, tries using his own “I have” statements, only to have them backfire embarrassingly in his unskilled hands. During the fishing expedition, in chapter 23, Benjamin passionately swears to having seen “whales and grampuses” the size of New York's tallest pine trees, a claim that fellow characters, even with all the generosity of spirit they can muster, find impossible to accept:

“Softly, softly, Benjamin,” said the Sheriff, as if he wished to save the credit of his favourite; “why some of the pines will measure two hundred feet, and even more.”

“Two hundred or two thousand, it's all the same thing,” cried Benjamin, with an air which manifested that he was not easily to be bullied out of his opinion, on a subject like the present—“Haven't I been there, and haven't I seen? I have said that you fall in with whales as long as one of them there pines: and what I have once said I'll stand to!”

During this dialogue, which was evidently but the close of a much longer discussion, the huge frame of Billy Kirby was seen extended on one side of the fire, where he was picking his teeth with splinters of the chips near him, and occasionally shaking his head, with distrust of Benjamin's assertions. (*The Pioneers*, p. 256)

Natty's usual formulation of “I have,” confident and declarative, is twisted into the shrill “Haven't I?”—a change that emphasizes Benjamin's excessive dependence on the credulity of others, which they do not requite. His rhetorical questions (“Haven't I been there, and haven't I seen?”), failing to impress Billy or anyone else, only precipitate even more futile language from himself. Later in this same chapter, Natty saves Benjamin

from drowning, an episode that severely undermines Benjamin's claim to long nautical experience. Being the trusted majordomo of Richard Jones, Benjamin is a confirmed minor character and a proud fixture of the Templeton community. His many self-defeating references to life at sea form a rather cruelly ironic running joke that keeps him in line, denying his character any of the remarkable power with which Natty's genuine life experience supplies him.

One last example shows what role the "I have" statement plays as Natty's link to an increasingly remote past. Having been arrested for striking a magistrate, Natty is placed in the stocks. When Ben Pump tries to point out the futility of such punishments, saying that "clapping a man in the bilboes" "does no harm, and it only keeps a man by the heels for the small matter of two glasses," the scout will have none of it:

"Is it no harm, Benny Pump," said Natty, raising his eyes with a piteous look to the face of the steward—"is it no harm to show off a man in his seventy-first year, like a tamed bear, for the settlers to look on! Is it no harm to put an old soldier, that has sarved through the war of 'fifty-six, and seen the inimy in the 'seventy-six business, into a place like this, where the boys can point at him and say, I have known the time when he was a spectacle for the county! Is it no harm to bring down the pride of an honest man to be the equal of the beasts of the forest!" (*The Pioneers*, pp. 379–80)

Natty expresses the gravity of his humiliation by pointing to his long life, drawing attention to the most notable historical points through which it has passed: the so-called French and Indian War for one, the Revolutionary War for another. In living so far beyond the era of these conflicts, Natty, by his continued existence, exerts an uncomfortable pressure on the community that would much rather press forward without him. It is notable how the old warrior bristles particularly at the thought of "boys" making his imprisonment the subject of their own inane excuse for an "I have" statement: "I have known the time when he was a spectacle for the county!" Confined bodily to an instrument of humiliation, Natty implies that his childlike

captors suffer a more debilitating confinement within the span of their short lives.

If we linger on this contrast, it seems highly significant that this most indignant performance of Natty's temporal mobility happens during the most forceful effort yet to control his spatial mobility. Throughout *The Pioneers*, Cooper portrays the frontier town of Templeton as a place obsessed with space: the ownership, clearing, and improvement of land is the obsession of the day, whose worst excesses even Judge Temple can only mitigate so much. Natty's profound understanding of nature, though always compared flatteringly with this land mania in his fellow citizens, cannot possibly prevail against it. With space increasingly lost to the old hunter, time becomes both his medium and his message. It is in Natty's criticism of reckless land improvement, and in his numerous invocations of time and experience as the root of authority, that we may observe an older generation saying "No, no" to the prospect of peacefully relinquishing its grasp on the republic and handing it on to the present generation. Even as younger men, frustrated by Natty's inconvenient refusal to die, would strong-arm him into submission (or rather succession), he continues to act as the surviving voice of a generation that has not yet finished taking its turn with the republic.

To call Natty a rebel against biopower would be only half-true, since, in his capacity as a soldier and servant of Major Effingham (Oliver's grandfather), he has previously made himself complicit in the machinations of that power. Surveying the "district of Country" in New York State where this novel takes place (Cooper, introduction to *The Pioneers*, p. 7), Cooper's narrator describes a population that numbered around two hundred thousand before the Revolutionary War, but that "has spread itself over five degrees of latitude and seven of longitude, and has swelled to a million and a half of inhabitants, who are maintained in abundance, and can look forward to ages before the evil day must arrive, when their possessions shall become unequal to their wants" (*The Pioneers*, p. 12). While Maxim Gorky reads Natty's denunciation by the very settlers for whom he blazed a trail through the wilderness as emblematic of all "pioneers and pathfinders, men who in their

knowledge of life are in advance of their contemporaries," it serves this reading as a prime example of biopower's twosidedness.<sup>18</sup> As Sergei Prozorov has observed:

While biopolitics is conventionally understood as positive and productive, numerous studies of biopolitics, both theoretical and empirical, suggest that this claim is by no means unproblematic. . . . Biopower, however we define it, is always already a power of life *and* death, not only in the sense that fostering the life of some presupposes the death of others but also in the more ominous sense that the life fostered, amplified, and optimized in biopolitical practices remains in proximity to death precisely by being enfolded in an apparatus of power, whose biopolitical productivity does not exclude sovereign negativity.<sup>19</sup>

Once Natty is placed in the stocks, any possibility of his allyship with the prevailing biopolitical regime is permanently severed. While assaulting a civil officer precipitates his arrest, Natty's crime is being conspicuously old—an extant figure—in a young nation that professes to run on the propulsive power of generations succeeding one another. In maneuvers consistent with Foucault's account of how post-classical Western nations wield biopower, the state in Cooper's novel exercises its right to life over Natty not by killing him, but rather by stripping away the means of his life's sustainment—namely, his access to the forests where he lives and hunts. This modern state punishes him, that is, through “the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life.”<sup>20</sup> Yet Cooper does not allow his protagonist to be victimized by thanatopolitical machinations. Far from accepting Elizabeth Effingham's offer to live and die with his newlywed companions, whose union symbolizes the future of the settlement, Natty abandons them—in a burial place. Considered alongside the fact that Cooper's next Leatherstocking novel would depict Natty's life in 1757, nearly forty years before *The Pioneers*, this ending turns upside

<sup>18</sup> Maksim Gorky, *Literature and Life: A Selection from the Writings of Maxim Gorki*, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Hutchinson International Authors, 1946), p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Sergei Prozorov. “Editor's Introduction: Powers of Life and Death: Biopolitics beyond Foucault,” *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 36 (2013), 191.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 136.

down the republican expectation of power peaceably transferred from old to young. Against all possibility, it is the young in Cooper who are left to die, and the old who somehow persist.



Once *The Last of the Mohicans* is published in 1826, Cooper's narrative of Natty Bumppo changes from an insular creation into something more modern and unwieldy: a serial. Indeed, it is arguably by returning to Natty's life story that Cooper exerts his greatest influence on the historical novel. Contrasting Cooper with Walter Scott, Fiona Robertson describes Cooper's decision to build a series of novels around one character as "an act of centripetal and accumulative, rather than historical and expansive, imagination."<sup>21</sup> According to Robertson, "Scott imagined creating a series of novels depicting different periods in Scottish history, while Cooper created a single character around whom an American history could be written" ("Walter Scott and the American Historical Novel," p. 116). She interprets this major literary innovation as expressive of the American "novelist's desire to center and ground the nation" ("Walter Scott and the American Historical Novel," p. 116).

Yet that grounding gives us surprisingly little stability. Even the correct order in which to read these works has always been at issue. Once Cooper had written what was to be this series' final installment, *The Deerslayer* (1841), which portrays Natty at his youngest, he repeatedly advised readers to begin with that one, as when he wrote to publisher Richard Bentley: "The order of the books, as regards time, will be, this book [*The Deerslayer*], Mohicans, Pathfinder, Pioneers, Prairie."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, by the end

<sup>21</sup> Fiona Robertson, "Walter Scott and the American Historical Novel," in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English, Volume 5: The American Novel to 1870*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy and Leland S. Person (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), p. 116.

<sup>22</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, letter to Richard Bentley, 31 January 1841, in *The Letters and Journals of James Fenimore Cooper*, ed. James Franklin Beard, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1960–68), IV, 112. Cooper also dispenses this advice in the 1841 preface to *The Deerslayer*, calling that novel "the last in execution, though the first in the order of perusal"; as well as in his 1850 "Preface to the Leather-Stocking Tales," where he observes: "Taking the life of the Leather-Stocking as guide,



of his life Cooper had come to regard rather negatively the disorienting movement of the novels through time, even questioning whether they finally constituted a series at all.<sup>23</sup>

Disorientation is certainly part of the experience. Even the reader who follows a chronological course through these five novels will encounter, in each of them, uncounted unchronological moments like those we have observed in *The Pioneers*: Natty, in the face of challenges to his authority and constraints upon his freedom, all of which are associated with forces of progress and homogeneity, habitually counters with statements about what he has seen, where he has lived, whom he has known—words that wrench us decades into the past and then return us to the moment in which he currently lives, so that we have traveled far through time and yet progressed not at all. We should take the novels in their unchronological order of publication, I believe, because that order amplifies the unchronological energies that suffuse each work in the series. Like Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), but with far greater agency, Natty is "unstuck in time": he darts back and forth between different periods of his life, thus turning from linear progress itself as he turns from so much else throughout Cooper's novels.<sup>24</sup> Walking alongside Natty Bumppo means following the erratic trajectory of a character who belongs more to time than to space—for whom time, in fact, *is* space.

In some ways, Cooper's de-aging of the woodsman does surprisingly little to change how his character operates. Even decades before the events of *The Pioneers*, it seems that Natty in *The Last of the Mohicans*—now called Hawkeye—can boast long experience that sets him apart as a consummate woodsman and survivor. And boast he certainly does: "I remember to have fout the Maquas hereaways, in the first war in which I ever drew

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'The Deerslayer' should have been the opening book" (Cooper, quoted in Robert S. Levine, "Temporality, Race, and Empire in Cooper's *The Deerslayer*: The Beginning of the End," in *The Oxford Handbook of Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, ed. Russ Castronovo [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012], p. 166).

<sup>23</sup> See Wayne Franklin, "'One More Scene': The Marketing Context of Cooper's 'Sixth' Leather-Stocking Tale," in *Leather-Stocking Redux; Or, Old Tales, New Essays*, ed. Jeffrey Walker (New York: AMS Press, 2011), p. 225.

<sup>24</sup> See Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969), pp. 25, 26.

blood from man; and we threw up a work of blocks, to keep the ravenous varments from handling our scalps.”<sup>25</sup> An earlier moment, however, reveals one interesting difference between the previous *Leatherstocking* novel and this one. In chapter 6 of *The Last of the Mohicans*, an unknown cry disrupts the stillness of Natty’s camp at Glenn’s Side. Asked to identify the sound, Natty can only plead ignorance: “What it is, or what it is not, none here can tell; though two of us have ranged the woods for more than thirty years!” (*The Last of the Mohicans*, p. 536). This is a failure of the “I have” statement not seen in *The Pioneers*, and Natty, whose surprise rivals the reader’s, immediately puts a finer point on the besting of his experience: “I did believe there was no cry that Indian or beast could make, that my ears had not heard; but this has proved that I was only a vain and conceited mortal” (*The Last of the Mohicans*, pp. 536–37). This precise positioning of Natty’s character between innocence and experience is important enough that Cooper allows Natty to explain it a third time, in the following chapter, when Cora again questions whether the mysterious sound is something to fear:

“Lady,” returned the scout, solemnly, “I have listened to all the sounds of the woods for thirty years, as a man will listen, whose life and death depend on the quickness of his ears. There is no whine of the panther; no whistle of the cat-bird; nor any invention of the devilish Mingoos, that can cheat me! I have heard the forest moan like mortal men, in their affliction; often, and again, have I listened to the wind playing its music in the branches of the girdled trees; and I have heard the lightning cracking in the air, like the snapping of blazing brush, as it spitted forth sparks and forked flames; but never have I thought that I heard more than the pleasure of him, who sported with the things of his hand. But neither the Mohicans, nor I, who am a white man without a cross, can explain the cry just heard. We, therefore, believe it a sign given for our good.” (pp. 540–41)

Here Natty’s slew of “I have” statements, testifying to his vast store of long practice in the art of survival, are more than

<sup>25</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Last of the Mohicans*, in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, I, 613. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

counterbalanced by a single weighty admission of what he does not recognize—a “never have I” statement. Exposed as having a little more to learn, despite his thirty years in the wilderness, Natty then finds his embarrassment compounded when someone fills the gap left by his failed expertise:

“Here, then, is one who can undeceive you,” said Duncan; “I know the sound full well, for often have I heard it on the field of battle, and in situations which are frequent in a soldier’s life. ’Tis the horrid shriek that a horse will give in his agony; oftener drawn from him in pain, though sometimes in terror. My charger is either a prey to the beasts of the forest, or he sees his danger without the power to avoid it.” (p. 542)

Significantly, it is not Natty’s failure to identify the noise himself that unsettles him the most, but someone else’s having convincingly identified it. We have seen that Natty’s experience, confidently performed, is the source of his power; conversely, an admitted lapse in that experience places him entirely at the mercy of both his fellow characters and the plot unfolding around him. If his long practice deserted him altogether, he would be lost in the woods.

Natty recovers from this lapse by exercising his control over Chingachgook and Uncas, treating the two Native warriors like attendant spirits: “‘Uncas,’—he spoke in Delaware—‘Uncas, drop down in the canoe, and whirl a brand among the pack; or fear may do what the wolves can’t get at to perform, and leave us without horses in the morning, when we shall have so much need to journey swiftly!’” (*The Last of the Mohicans*, p. 542). Soon after the younger Delaware has unquestioningly followed his command, Natty’s sense of self-worth is restored:

The manner of the scout was seriously impressive, though no longer distinguished by any signs of unmanly apprehension. It was evident, that his momentary weakness had vanished with the explanation of a mystery, which his own experience had not served to fathom; and though he now felt all the realities of their actual condition, that he was prepared to meet them with the energy of his hardy nature. (p. 543)

This sequence could hardly connect more explicitly the measure of Natty's life experience and his capacity to function as a character in this novel. When time itself is for Cooper's protagonist, in the form of long practice put to good use, nothing can be against him.

As surely as the "I have" statement directs our gaze into the past, this "never have I" statement compels our attention toward a future time (that of *The Pioneers* or *The Prairie* [1827]) when there really will be "no cry that Indian or beast [can] make" beyond Natty's powers of identification—and when the elder Natty will spend much of his time directing our gaze back toward his earlier adventures. Taken together, these two phrases, "I have" and "never have I," reveal the circular nature of Natty's existence. His course is not an endless retreat into the past, as has sometimes been suggested, but a wily, vacillating movement from past to present and back again.<sup>26</sup> Instead of marching dutifully toward death, Cooper's most enduring character, using the same dexterity that he shows in countless woodland fight scenes, zigzags through his eighty-seven-year lifespan, forestalling his own mortality and the rising of a new American generation that would supplant him. An old man refusing to relinquish his property in this life, Natty is Thomas Paine's worst nightmare.

Then again, perhaps Paine would be most horrified by the final chapters of *The Last of the Mohicans*, which provide an even more extreme case of old age unwilling or unable to subside for youth's sake. There we encounter Tamemund, the Delaware patriarch who has reached "an amount of years, to which the human race is seldom permitted to attain" (*The Last of the Mohicans*, p. 810). Everything about this character, from his "long white locks" ("generations has probably passed away, since they had last been shorn") to his robe (depicting "various deeds in arms, done in former ages") to his eyes ("closed, as though the organs were wearied with having so long witnessed the selfish

<sup>26</sup> Chad T. May, for example, describes Leatherstocking's "continuous retreat before American expansion" (May, "The Romance of America: Trauma, National Identity, and the Leather-Stocking Tales," *Early American Studies*, 9 [2011], 183). Yet, taken in their order of publication, the novels block Natty from moving in any direction continuously for very long.

workings of human passions”), exists for the sole purpose of announcing his “vast age” and experience (pp. 810, 811). He is Natty, only far more so. As Tamenund summarizes the Delaware people’s core beliefs about creation, history, and race, Magua tries to curry his favor with the most calculated “I have” statement anywhere in these novels:

“But why should I, a Huron of the woods, tell a wise people their own traditions? Why remind them of their injuries; their ancient greatness; their deeds; their glory; their happiness—their losses; their defeats; their misery? Is there not one among them who has seen it all, and who knows it to be true? I have done. My tongue is still, for my heart is of lead. I listen.” (p. 821)

After telling Magua to “depart,” Tamenund resumes his seat and closes his eyes, “as if better pleased with the images of his own ripened experience, than with the visible objects of the world” (p. 822). His contemplation is finally broken by an urgent plea from Cora: “Thou, that hast lived long, and that hast seen the evil of the world, should know how to temper its calamities to the miserable” (p. 823). Most important, Cooper grants Tamenund the final lines of this novel, with which he transforms all boasts of long experience into a mournful exhortation spoken from the depths of experience itself:

“It is enough!” he said. “Go, children of the Lenape; the anger of the Manitto is not done. Why should Tamenund stay? The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again. My day has been too long. In the morning I saw the sons of Unâmis happy and strong; and yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans!” (pp. 877–78)

This is a strain worthy of Last Man literature, a tradition that extends as far back as Genesis and courses through Thomas Burnet, Daniel Defoe, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Edward Bulwer Lytton, and Charles Darwin. Fiona Stafford has defined Cooper’s own contribution to this heritage as the addition of acute race consciousness: “In *The Last of the Mohicans*, there is no Apocalypse, because only

one race has ended.”<sup>27</sup> But perhaps white American settlers do not reach the final chapter of this novel so unscathed as Stafford argues. Reaching out to the reader across a seventy-year historical divide, and defying the racist complacency that Cooper elsewhere gratifies, the end of *The Last of the Mohicans* murmurs under its breath that Tamemund’s wretched condition, that of a voice crying out from beyond the crumbling of a great nation, might become Natty’s as well. Extending across the colonial period, the Revolutionary War, and settlement processes that have already transformed the land irreversibly, by 1793 Natty’s day has already been too long, and it is far from over.



It is Cooper’s third Leatherstocking novel, *The Prairie*, published in 1827, that brings about the death of Natty Bumppo. This novel sees him join forces with Captain Duncan Uncas Middleton, grandson of young Major Duncan Heyward and Alice Munro of *The Last of the Mohicans*—an unlikely alliance that accents how many generations of young people have had to contend with the trapper’s influence. The long shadow cast by Natty over succeeding generations is literalized in the novel’s famous opening scene, during which we observe the nomadic Ishmael Bush leading his caravan across the Great Plains, when suddenly the narrator relates:

a human form appeared, drawn against the gilded background, as distinctly, and seemingly as palpable, as though it would come within the grasp of any extended hand. The figure was colossal; the attitude musing and melancholy, and the situation directly in the route of the travellers. But embedded, as it was, in its setting of garish light, it was impossible to distinguish its just proportions or true character.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Fiona Stafford, *The Last of the Race: The Growth of a Myth from Milton to Darwin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 260.

<sup>28</sup> James Fenimore Cooper, *The Prairie*, in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, I, 893. Further references are given parenthetically in the text.

From these “colossal” proportions, Natty soon shrinks to the size of “a frame, that had endured the hardships of more than eighty seasons,” and in the fullness of the narrative is cut down further still (*The Prairie*, p. 895). In the novel’s final scene, having lain for hours on the point of death, Natty suddenly grasps the arm of Middleton, rises to his feet, assumes a posture of vaguely military grandeur, and exclaims one final word—“Here!”—before expiring at last (p. 1317). This enigmatic statement “produced a short period of confusion in the faculties of all present” (p. 1317), and it continues to elicit a similar reaction from readers. “Unstable in meaning and incomplete in thought,” Natty’s last monosyllable could be an adverb or an exclamation, and the double meaning of here/hear is in play as well, all the more plausibly so because Natty speaks this single word and provides no context whereby his listeners might distinguish between homophones.<sup>29</sup> In this way, the word seems emblematic of how the novel’s seemingly uncomplicated concern with place becomes quite complicated on closer inspection—even giving way, as we have seen, to questions of time and tense.

Natty’s death proves no more fixed than the significance of his dying word, and, contrary to Kay Seymour House’s reading quoted above, the novel does not ultimately “exhaust the character itself.” At one level, Natty cheats death by returning in two more adventures published after this one, first as a middle-aged man and then as a youth. Before those much later volumes were ever planned, however, Cooper grants the character another kind of victory over his own mortality, and in the process further develops his unique faculty for frustrating the steady movement of time and national progress. During chapter 7 of *The Prairie*, after the Sioux led by Mahotree have plundered the camp of Ishmael Bush, Natty confers with Ishmael and his cohort about their plans for recovery or retribution. When Ishmael laments his losses and the harness of this untouched prairie terrain, Natty assures him that more fertile

<sup>29</sup> John Engell, “Reading and Hearing Natty Bumppo’s Last Word in *The Prairie*,” presented at the 13th Cooper Seminar, July 2001; available online at <<https://jfcopersociety.org/articles/SUNY/2001sunny-engell.html>>.

places lie ahead, in the process revealing the full extent of his experience:

“There is, then, a better choice, towards the other Ocean?” demanded the squatter pointing in the direction of the Pacific.

“There is; and I have seen it all,” was the answer of the other, who dropped his rifle to the earth, and stood leaning on its barrel like one who recalled the scenes he had witnessed, with melancholy pleasure. “I have seen the waters of the two seas. On one of them, was I born, and raised to be a lad, like yonder tumbling boy. America has grown, my man, since the days of my youth, to be a country larger than I once had thought the world itself to be. Near seventy years, I dwelt in York, Province and State, together.” (*The Prairie*, p. 962)

At a glance, “I have seen the waters of the two seas” might appear no more or less remarkable than the other present perfect boasts that we have heard from Natty, whether in this novel or prior ones. A closer look, however, reveals hidden significance. In the chapter before Natty describes these past exploits, the naturalist Dr. Battius reads aloud several excerpts from his notebook written the previous night, and does not fail to begin with the date: “Oct. 6, 1805” (p. 956). On that same day, the Lewis and Clark expedition had only just reached the Lolo Trail, and was facing what they accurately computed to be a one-hundred-and-sixty-mile trek over mountainous terrain. Enduring frostbite, severe hunger, and fatigue during this portion of the journey, they would not reach the Pacific Ocean until 7 November 1805, when William Clark reports: “Great joy in camp we are in *View* of the *Ocian*, this great Pacific Octean which we been So long anxious to See. and the roreing or noise made by the waves brakeing on the rockey Shores (as I Suppose) may be heard disti[n]ctly.”<sup>30</sup> In Cooper’s fictive world, this achievement is dampened by another, earlier journey. His waves make quite another sound, a kind of proclamation: Natty Bumppo was here.

<sup>30</sup> William Clark, journal entry, 7 November 1805, in Merriwether Lewis and William Clark, et al., *The Lewis and Clark Journals: An American Epic of Discovery: The Abridgement of the Definitive Nebraska Edition*, ed. Gary E. Moulton (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2003), p. 236.



Why should Cooper confer this counterfactual achievement on his old trapper? At a glance, it sounds like yet another of the unbelievable abilities and achievements for which Twain and others skewered Cooper's arch-frontiersman. A reading like Gorky's would take this detail as crowning evidence that Natty is the trailblazer of trailblazers, the vanguard of colonial civilization. I want to volunteer almost the opposite reading, in which Natty finally transcends this ideology. Twenty years before John O'Sullivan called for "the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence," Cooper's novels were already deeply alive to the conflating of space and time in America's settler colonial consciousness, and Cooper increasingly used the novel form as a space where that conflation could be magnified, studied, and critiqued.<sup>31</sup>

In the world of *The Prairie*, moving westward means moving forward in time. In claiming to have seen the Pacific Ocean, Natty is effectively claiming to have seen the future—and not only to have seen it, but to have traveled there and back. At the point when his path crosses that of Ishmael Bush and his caravan, the ancient trapper has moved—is moving—backward through time. Natty heightens this impression in this chapter by speaking in a prophetic strain about those who will one day stand where he has already stood:

“Look around you, men; what will the Yankee choppers say, when they have cut their path from the eastern to the western waters, and find that a hand, which can lay the 'arth bare at a blow, has been here, and swept the country, in very mockery of their wickedness. They will turn on their tracks, like a fox that doubles, and then the rank smell of their own footsteps, will show them the madness of their waste. Howsom'ever, these are thoughts that are more likely to rise in him who has seen the folly of Eighty seasons, than to teach wisdom to men still bent on the pleasures of their kind!” (*The Prairie*, p. 963)

Natty describes the dismal recognition that awaits these young men like someone who has already witnessed their future with

<sup>31</sup> [John O'Sullivan], “Annexation,” *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 17 (1845), 5.

his own eyes. Having become a solitary wanderer between past and future, he is able to look with ironic, even satiric, detachment upon the project of civilizing the continent through progressive slaughter and deforestation. It is his unique relationship to time that enables this critical viewpoint. Every movement of Lewis and Clark is freighted with the oppressive burden of what will be called Manifest Destiny; Natty, as a fictive explorer unbound by the spatiotemporal ideology of real explorers, travels much lighter, wandering toward the nation's end and then back toward its beginning, all the while raising questions about how America's dominion over the continent is being achieved and what alternatives were possible.

Much like Robert S. Levine's reading of revisionist strategies in *The Deerslayer*, my interpretation of temporality in these novels has strived to focus on "the complicated temporality of the Leatherstocking series in relation to the chronology of its composition history, raising questions about the less complicated temporality informing current discussions of Cooper as a writer who allegedly used the series to champion white U.S. empire" (Levine, "Temporality, Race, and Empire in Cooper's *The Deerslayer*," p. 164). But this complicated temporality, as we have seen, is not limited to the order in which the novels were published or the intertextual references between them; rather, it suffuses each novel down to the level of verb conjugation. The critique of violently tidy national narratives is ingrained in the very genetic material of these books, manifesting through their relationship to time. While it is undoubtedly true that nineteenth-century Americans "sought to escape the political paradoxes of space by conquering time," as Thomas Allen finds them doing (*A Republic in Time*, p. 13), Cooper's novels show that experiments in time could also be used to confront the brutal paradoxes of a burgeoning republican empire.

Cooper published his final novel, *The Ways of the Hour*, in 1850, sixteen years after announcing his retirement from the craft of fiction.<sup>32</sup> His career had followed the example of his most famous character by stubbornly refusing to end in a timely

<sup>32</sup> On Cooper's announced retirement, see Stephen Railton, *Fenimore Cooper: A Study of His Life and Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), pp. 142–43.

manner. Its twilight coincides with the dawning of an American Renaissance in which younger novelists strove to cast off the old skin of Cooper's cultural hegemony and achieve America's most golden youth yet.<sup>33</sup> Though critics rightly no longer regard Cooper as the sole dominating figure of antebellum American historical fiction (having learned to appreciate the work of novelists like Lydia Maria Child and Catharine Maria Sedgwick, among many others), his influence and legacy remain such that any revision of the Leatherstocking model opens new possibilities for our interpretation of the genre as a whole. Recovering Natty's subversive streak—his unceasing destabilization of republican time and the expansionist project that orders itself by such time—suggests the extent to which American historical fiction more generally could empower itself to question, rather than merely reinforce, oppressive ideologies of colonialism. Natty levels at the republic a disorienting challenge that, like himself, can never fully die.

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ABSTRACT

Matthew Redmond, "Living Too Long: Republican Time in Cooper's Leatherstocking Novels" (pp. 29–55)

This essay first suggests that antebellum America's cultural imagination was organized around patterns of generational succession unfolding across what I call "republican time," and then explores the ways that James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking novels cross-examine and destabilize that pattern. Reading *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), and *The Prairie* (1827) through the dual lenses of biopolitical criticism and temporality studies, I treat Natty Bumppo, with his stubborn refusal to die or even fully subside into the background of American life, as a friction against the machine of republican time and the idea of steady national progress it implies. With his peculiar perspective on national events, manifesting in a singular use of grammar, Natty's character opens to Cooper's readers certain alternative approaches to being in American time. Cooper's writings thus demonstrate some of the ways that nineteenth-century American historical fiction, far from uncritically celebrating the forces of U.S. expansionism and imperialism, delivers an incisive critique of them.

Keywords: James Fenimore Cooper; temporality; nationalism; biopolitics; American literature

<sup>33</sup> See Perry Miller, *The Raven and the Whale: The War of Words and Wits in the Era of Poe and Melville* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1956), pp. 24–26.