

# Anachronistic Imaginings: *Hope Leslie*'s Challenge to Historicism

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The defiance voiced by Catharine Sedgwick's seventeenth-century Indian heroine Magawisca to a tribunal of Puritan magistrates near the end of *Hope Leslie* (1827) at once distills the novel's major preoccupation—with the nation's history and with historical authority in general—and recapitulates its primary narrative strategy—the self-conscious use of anachronism—in a single utterance: "I demand of thee death or liberty!" (309). This act of ventriloquy, throwing Patrick Henry's iconic eighteenth-century voice simultaneously into the seventeenth-century world of the novel and the nineteenth-century world of Sedgwick's readers, performs a double service. First, the quintessential expression of the spirit of the Revolutionary moment, Henry's famous locution is recontextualized when articulated by an Indian woman, just as the figure of the Indian woman is transformed by drawing on the power of American nationalist rhetoric. That is, the fervor of the Revolutionary fathers, their oratorical authority, suddenly appears autochthonous, as if somehow *native* to the land itself, while the native Magawisca becomes a protonationalist, less an enemy than a source of founding principles. This explains why Magawisca appears at her trial with her "national pride . . . manifest" (297) in her native Indian dress and why her first words to the judges echo the political philosophy of the Declaration of Independence: "I am your prisoner and ye may slay me, but I deny your right to judge me. My people have never passed under your yoke—not one of my race has ever acknowledged your authority" (302).<sup>1</sup>

Second, by evoking simultaneously several distinct periods in time, the linearity of historical time becomes entangled, like a triple helix, a strand of DNA, as three different historical moments are woven together: within the present of the novel's colonial narrative instance its Revolutionary future is recalled, all from the vantage point of the third decade of the nineteenth century when Sedgwick wrote the novel. Yet, for reasons I will explore below, recent critics

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of the novel have overlooked *Hope Leslie*'s complex reimagining of historical time, treating as authoritative only one of these moments: its time of production—the context that has become fundamental to the kinds of historicism that currently predominate among Americanist literary scholars.<sup>2</sup> As is by now well known, the historicist tendency is to treat literary characters and their creators alike as the property of the moment in history that called them into existence. In this sense, historicism is dedicated to precisely the obverse of the procedure Sedgwick here employs; not to contravening the linearity of historical time, but to keeping texts assigned to their proper place in history.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, while the historicist procedure of reading a text in relation to its context often yields valuable insights, it also necessarily imposes a certain conception of history on the texts of the past—even when, as in the case of *Hope Leslie*, the text itself is intent on calling into question precisely that concept. To take seriously *Hope Leslie*'s critique of conventional history's before-now-after sequence would be to allow the novel to put considerable pressure on any historicist frame (old or new) brought to bear on it.

This essay thus has two interrelated concerns: first, to offer a close analysis of *Hope Leslie*'s metahistorical discourse, what we might call its de-formation of history. Not only do I take seriously the novel's many historical and temporal entanglements; I view them as its most salient feature. *Hope Leslie* provides an alternative conception of what history *is*. My second aim here is to explore the way in which the novel's implied theory of history engages and challenges current historicist practice. Because the novel's "historical" footing is always slippery and because it imagines history anachronistically, it seems to resist and confound that most basic of historicist moves: the attempt to place it "in context." This resistance, I want to suggest, is something that we historicists can learn from. For it points the way past some of the limits and theoretical inconsistencies of our historicist methods and presuppositions.

In order to see how *Hope Leslie* challenges fundamental pre-conceptions about history, it's useful to begin with the judgments of early critics of the novel, who viewed it as a text that simply evaded history. For instance, in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1977), Ann Douglas characterized Sedgwick's body of work as an "apostasy from history" (185), a view echoed by Lawrence Buell in *New England Literary Culture* (1986). Buell claimed that *Hope Leslie* does "little more, by way of touching base with history, than invoke the Puritan era as a symbolic backdrop against which to lay out a melodrama, pitting individual against society, that belongs to no particular realm of time except the realm of romance" (242). If these critics failed to see the seriousness of the novel's engagement with history, it is because they assumed they knew what history was

and where to find it in the text; that is, history was the past, and it could be found in the novel's representation of that past. Thanks to the readings produced by a number of historicists, however, we are now in a position to appreciate how deeply engaged with history the novel is. And we are able to do so because historicist critics have looked for history in a different place: not just in the past represented in the novel but in the history of the novel's moment of production, what we historicists have learned to call the text's context.

Hence more recent commentators generally agree that questions of "history" are in fact central to *Hope Leslie*. So much so that it has become something of a critical commonplace to assert that the novel presents an "alternative history" to those written by the Puritan historians.<sup>4</sup> Consider, for example, Philip Gould's important essay "Catharine Sedgwick's 'Recital' of the Pequot War" (1994), which, like my own reading, is centrally concerned with the novel's historiographical discourse. Like a number of other critics, Gould focuses on Sedgwick's revisionary writing of the history of the Pequot War. By "situating the novel in the context of contemporary histories written during the early republic," Gould attempts "to locate the immediate political and cultural stakes in writing revisionary history" (642). Historicizing the novel in this way, Gould finds that Sedgwick's alternative history of the Pequot War functions as a "subversion of the masculine ideologies promoted by her own era's political culture" (644). But crucially, this context reveals "two inconsistencies" in the novel (644). First, Sedgwick's representation of the "racial 'other' reveals simultaneously a rejection of and entrapment in this classical republican ideology" (644). And second, Sedgwick's attempt "to bestow full authority on Magawisca" is undermined by the text's argument "for historical relativism" (644); historical relativism, that is, "stymies [Sedgwick's] capacity to award Magawisca full narrative authority" (653).

Clearly, Gould's emphasis on *Hope Leslie's* contemporary context has a great deal to teach about the politics of early national historiography and the role Sedgwick played in it, especially with regard to the cultural significance of the Pequot War among early nationals. His characteristically New Historicist assumption that history is found in the novel's moment of production also serves a less visible but no less important purpose: to protect the text against relativistic readings and, in particular, against *presentism*, the naive tendency of critics to read their own period's assumptions and values into the texts and events of the past.<sup>5</sup> Presentism, of course, represents the very antithesis of historicism insofar as it fails to properly contextualize. Instead, the presentist begins with a premise (typically characterized as partisan or political) and looks for—or distorts—evidence from the past to confirm that premise. Or similarly, the presentist judges

one era using the methods, standards, and criteria of another, thus projecting modern concepts and beliefs onto the texts of the past. In this sense, presentism is simply another word for anachronism and, as the historian Robert Berkhofer has put it, “No greater historiographic sin exists than committing anachronism, by representing something outside the supposed context of its times” (32).

There is no question, of course, that the historicist emphasis on returning texts to their historical contexts has been productive. It’s the very move that has made the recovery of a work like *Hope Leslie* possible in the first place. Yet no less than earlier critics, historicists, too, assume to know wherein history lies: because the history of their moment of production always speaks through them, it provides a priori literary texts’ historicity. But what if *Hope Leslie*’s engagement with history lies elsewhere as well? What if the novel demands that we question not just which events are authoritative in history, but whence derives the authority of history itself? What if it posits that events can and do exceed their containment within discrete moments in time? Or what’s more, what if it questions the very notion of time—chronological succession—that makes such containment imaginable? I raise these questions for an obvious reason: they are questions the novel puts before us, questions we can only see if we have traveled this far with historicism but which we can struggle with respectfully only if we are ready to travel a bit further without some core historicist assumptions, in particular, the New Historicists’ injunction to keep each historical event (and text) assigned to *its* proper temporal slot in the past.

To put this in slightly different terms, because New Historicism depends upon the proposition that texts “belong” to particular moments in time, moments that historicists attempt to re-create, it must also posit that moment’s individuality, its difference—its “otherness”—in relation to earlier or later moments in time.<sup>6</sup> To contextualize, in other words, is to attend to the particularities, the uniqueness, of discrete moments in history; it is to distinguish between a *now* and a *then*, thus avoiding both the pitfalls of New Critical ahistoricism and the “sin” of presentism. The analogue to this conception of history, of course, is the discourse of *otherness*, of racial, gender, and class difference, that has, not accidentally, developed in tandem with historicism in American literary studies. And indeed, one of the most important achievements of Americanist New Historicism (in contrast to older historicisms) has been to turn this greater awareness of and attention to both historical and cultural difference toward a more complex understanding of US literatures and cultures. Presentism, by contrast, decontextualizes and subsumes difference; it co-opts the past in the service of current (ideological) interests and thus amounts to a historiographical form of assimilation, colonization, or imperialism.

Yet New Historicism has something of a paradoxical relationship to the old problem of presentism (or anachronism): it is at once that which its contextualizing procedure is designed to avoid and that which, because of its frequently announced political commitments and its self-consciousness about the representational function of every act of historical (re)creation—its engagement with the political and critical present—it is often accused of.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, New Historicism's historiographical principles are not always so compatible with its political commitments. After all, our heightened awareness of both cultural and historical difference (especially insofar as this awareness serves the interests of promoting pluralism and multiculturalism) is itself the product of a particular historical moment (our own). Moreover, a too strenuous insistence on what historians call the "otherness of the past" risks rendering the past completely unknowable, just as emphasizing radical alterity risks making the gulf between the self and the other unbreachable.<sup>8</sup> To the extent, then, that New Historicist work engages the present, it may well compromise its fealty to historical context, whereas to the extent that it focuses its interests on historical difference, it may well compromise its politics.

*Hope Leslie's* anachronistic imagining of history attempts to negotiate these paradoxes. It does not share, and therefore challenges, historicist assumptions about historical time; its historiographical discourse questions the very contextualizing procedure employed by New Historicists. By deploying anachronism as both method and trope, *Hope Leslie* challenges fundamental conceptions of the form and shape of history that are as prevalent today as in Sedgwick's time. Put plainly, a noncolonizing form of presentism is precisely what the novel invites its modern readers to experience. And it does so, I suggest, because it is enlisted in a larger project coming into being in the antebellum period as authors and historians alike grappled with the perils and potentialities of a nascent multicultural democracy: the project of imagining an open-ended and nonteleological process of national- and self-fulfillment—what Walt Whitman would later call a "New World metaphysics."

### 1. *Hope Leslie's* Strategy of Anachronism

I begin my discussion of *Hope Leslie's* resistance to historicist assumptions, then, with an unabashedly presentist claim: *Hope Leslie's* insight into the narrative character of history anticipates postmodern theories of history by more than a century and a half, emphasizing the mutability of historical truth, challenging the scientific objectivity claimed by twentieth-century historians, and affirming

textualist versions of historical representation. Here is one example: in the novel's remarkable preface, as rich and provocative as any in American literature, Sedgwick begins a discourse on the question "what is history?" that the remainder of her novel expatiates. The opening lines of her preface assert what her novel is not: a "historical narrative, or a relation of real events" (3). Yet "real characters and real events are . . . alluded to" (3). They are employed, however, only insofar as they serve the "author's design," which was "to illustrate not the history, but the character of the times" (3). Operative at the start of the preface is this doubling of the term *character*, which Sedgwick deploys twice for its dual meaning. "Character" thus becomes both integral and opposed to "history": integral in that historical narrative transforms "real" personages (John Winthrop, Thomas Morton, Pocahontas) into "characters"; and opposed insofar as "history" is always in danger of slipping back into chronicle when it only enumerates—or "relates"—facts and does not capture the character—the spirit or moral qualities—of an age. At the same time, her deliberately slippery language suggests playfully that her work of fiction "alludes to" "real" moral qualities—as opposed to fictional ones.

Given my own training, both direct and indirect, by a generation of New Historicist critics, my initial impulse when confronted with Sedgwick's preface was to explore neither the implications of the apparent doubling of the term *character* nor the preface's linguistic play, but to place it in "its" context by considering the meaning and function of the term *character* in Sedgwick's day; in the context of, for example, early republican historiography. I might have argued, for instance, that history-writing in the early republic was often driven by two contradictory impulses. The first is what Michael Kammen has called the "documentary" impulse—the desire for historical authenticity, the scrupulous investigation of primary sources (243). But at the same time, both readers and writers in the early republic were often far less interested in *facts*—in history for its own sake, as we might say today—than in the uses to which history was put. For instance, a principal interest among historians and novelists alike in the early republic was the elucidation of the spirit of the American people, the characteristics and virtues that were believed to constitute that "chimerical thing" known as *national character* (Kammen 248). Thus the filiopietistic biographies of Revolutionary heroes like George Washington did more than just praise the founders; they were also meant to provide citizens with representative portraits of character that would stand, synecdochically, as illustrations of the American character. In this sense, the term *character* refers not to an individual or a fictional personage, but, as Kammen describes it, to "a particular constellation of ethical qualities" deemed admirable in the republican citizen (249).<sup>9</sup> Sedgwick's

interest in the character of colonial America, then, might be viewed as simply extending this investigation into national character farther back into the American past.

Yet placed in this context, Sedgwick's preface is stripped of much of the theoretical sophistication I now see in it and becomes, instead, a somewhat more pedestrian statement, the mere expression of convention—representative of its time. It is, so to speak, put in its place. And it's a tempting move, for once having established *the* context, a reading of the rest of the preface falls neatly into place. Take, for instance, the following passage: "The only merit claimed by the present writer, is that of a patient investigation of all the materials that could be obtained. A full delineation of these times was not even attempted; but the main solicitude has been, to exclude every thing decidedly inconsistent with them" (3). *In context*, it seems obvious that Sedgwick here perfectly expresses her era's contradictions with regard to history-writing. Her disclaimer serves to preempt criticism from her readers. Positioning herself as a "patient investigat[or]" of historical "materials," she satisfies the demand for authenticity in historical fiction. At the same time, humbly begging pardon for any potential misrepresentations by confessing that her "delineation" is inevitably incomplete, partial, she carefully distinguishes her fiction from "historical narrative." Thus, the preface might appear to be Sedgwick's attempt, at once, to show deference to history proper—the most valued genre of her time—and to claim a privilege for fiction in relation to more conventional histories. After all, as a number of critics have pointed out, fiction and history were intimately related genres in the early nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Readers demanded accuracy from historical novelists, just as they demanded narrative drama from historians. But fiction, Sedgwick seems to imply, is better equipped than history to capture "the character of the times."

This is clearly a potentially productive reading, especially for what it reveals about the development of both US historiography and the genre of historical romance. However, when a New Historicist (like myself) reads in this way, seeking to implicate the text in ideologies proper to its historical moment, what is missed is what I now believe is the preface's more important theoretical point, which concerns not the unique historicity of fictions set in the past, but the fictive qualities of history proper. A slight shift of emphasis—attending not to the nouns ("investigation," "materials," "delineation"), but to the verbs in this passage—brings the preface's historiographical disquisition into relief. That is, the passage quoted above first acknowledges what modern historians call the *plenitude* of the past—in this case seventeenth-century reality—emphasizing both the inadequacy of the historical record ("all the materials *that could be obtained*") and

the difficulty of capturing the past in its totality (“A full delineation . . . was not even attempted”). Second, in an extraordinary admission of historiographical partisanship, it frankly draws attention to the inevitable (often willful) blindnesses that always attend historical investigations, including the present one (“exclud[ing] every thing decidedly inconsistent with them”). The passive voice in these predicates, moreover, lends these statements an ambiguity that broadens them beyond the particular case of the novel: the second sentence may refer equally to “the materials” and “the present writer.” Thus, the implication is not simply that Sedgwick avoided attempting “a full delineation” and “exclud[ed]” every thing deemed “inconsistent” with her “design,” but that the authors of “all the materials that could be obtained”—meaning the Puritan historians—did so as well.

In any case, it is to this last fact that the remainder of the preface—and much of the novel—pertains: “In our histories, it was perhaps natural that [the Indians] should be represented as ‘surly dogs,’ who preferred to die rather than live, from no other motives than a stupid or malignant obstinacy. Their own historians or poets, if they had such, would as naturally, and with more justice, have extolled their high-souled courage and patriotism” (4). *Hope Leslie*’s narrator will thus act as a surrogate historian—or poet—to the Indians. The point, however, is not only, as most critics agree, to provide a counterhistory that undermines the authority of the Puritan historians and, in particular, their representations of Native Americans. The larger point to be taken from the preface is that what historical fictions and proper histories share, inevitably, is a dependence upon representation.<sup>11</sup> So rather than asserting the unique possibilities of fiction as compared to history proper, the preface actually calls attention to their affinities. This is why, for instance, no distinction is made between Indian “historians” and Indian “poets”: both employ narrative to construct worlds, worlds that are “naturally” partial and interested. In other words, the “historical relativism” that Gould ultimately finds problematic is not so much an implication of Magawisca’s revisionist history of the Pequot War as it is the starting point of the novel’s metahistorical discourse.

I am not ascribing to Sedgwick here some remarkable powers of prescience, casting her as a proto-post-structuralist. Nineteenth-century writers of fiction were far more sophisticated about the relationship between history and fiction than they are sometimes given credit for. Like postmodern theorists of history, a number of early American writers challenged historical truth by calling attention to the literary qualities of history-writing. For instance, Washington Irving’s first major work, *A History of New York* (1809), literally straddles the boundary between history and fiction and meditates self-consciously and at length on the contradictions in historiographical practice. And Charles Brockden Brown, in the later years of his



career, stopped writing novels and became a remarkably astute theorist of the interrelations between fictive and historical narrative.<sup>12</sup> And while neither Irving, Brown, nor Sedgwick equates history and fiction, all of them wrestled—as do historians and literary critics in our own day—with the problem of representation common to both genres. In doing so, and in very different ways, they illustrate an important theoretical point: history and fiction aren't different because they belong to different genres; critics assign texts to distinct genres in order to establish their differences.

Which is not to say that the differences aren't important, only that the historicist insistence on the uniqueness of moments in time often prevents the recognition of certain kinds of affinities even when they are in plain sight; in the present case, this means overlooking how *Hope Leslie's* self-consciousness of its own historicity can engage current interest in the problem of representation (of the past and of the other) common to both history and fiction. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the novel's deployment of anachronism. "The antiquarian reader will perceive," the second paragraph of the preface begins, "that . . . a slight variation has been allowed in the chronology of the Pequod War" (3). The variation to which Sedgwick refers concerns the events surrounding the famous Puritan attack of the Pequot Indians at Mystic, Connecticut, in 1637.<sup>13</sup> Puritan historians (among them William Hubbard, Benjamin Trumbull, and John Winthrop) claimed that the attack was in retaliation for the murders of the traders John Stone, John Norton, and John Oldham. Sedgwick, however, reverses this chronology, alluding to these deaths only after Magawisca—one of the few surviving members of the Pequot tribe—narrates her own version of the attack.<sup>14</sup>

More important than this variation as it occurs in the novel, however, is Sedgwick's admission of it in the preface. It signals *Hope Leslie's* thematic concerns with authority—those who claim it, abuse it, grant it, or resist it—by omitting the agent of that authority, even constructing authority as passive, if not altogether absent. (Who, after all, has "allowed" this chronological variation—this anachronism? Sedgwick herself? Or the unnamed keepers of "official history"?) Admitting to this self-conscious manipulation of the *facts* of history, and in particular their sequential ordering, Sedgwick preempts criticism from those who affirm the authority of "our early annals" (58). Thus, the admission in her preface is actually a critique, emphasized covertly in her grammatical structure and sustained explicitly by the narrative which is to follow. The present perfect tense in the construction "has been allowed" serves to mitigate the liberty she takes with chronology, just as it normalizes the very practice to which she calls attention. Among historians and novelists alike, she implies, such narrativization has *always* been allowed.

The novel's "variation . . . in chronology," then, speaks directly to how historians have constructed the causes and effects of the Pequot War and, in doing so, it forms a remarkably clear demonstration of how historians and novelists alike employ what Hayden White calls "emplotment" (*Metahistory* 7). Sedgwick's preface effectively positions *Hope Leslie* in a kind of interstitial space between these two roles: while the novel is a fictional representation of history ("not an historical narrative")—and is thus (arguably) granted license to alter the ordering of events in a way that historical writing is not—the admission in the preface forms a metacommentary on this very issue. Such commentary becomes even clearer once the reader realizes that the chronological "variation" forms only a part of the text's deployment of anachronism. As we'll see, the novel's narrative discourse hinges on the broader notions of anachronism (or presentism) I have already discussed: judging one era according to the values, standards, and criteria of another and disrupting the unidirectional course of history.

## 2. News from the Present

But recognizing the temporal complexity of that discourse and the experience of history that emerges from it may well require dislodging historicist methodology from some of its more entrenched principles, in much the same way that historicists themselves have learned to peel the method of close reading away from the principles of the New Criticism.<sup>15</sup> In other words, I think one can continue to use careful textual analysis to explore text-context relationships without making rigid assumptions about the historicity of texts, about which context is to be construed as the privileged site of textual meaning, and slipping back to a now discredited ahistoricism. After all, while the historical person named Catharine Sedgwick has long since passed, her text remains, which is only to state the obvious: *Hope Leslie* no longer occupies the same moment in historical time, the same context, that its creator did. Unlike people, texts (of all sorts) are not temporally finite. This is not to suggest, of course, that (certain) literary texts are timeless and universal—a notion anathema to historicists; rather, it is to recognize the ways in which texts are (potentially at least) continually present. In what follows, then, I shift focus away from the novel's author—the locus of its nineteenth-century context—and toward its narrator, concentrating less on the instance of the novel's writing, its moment of production, than on the instance of its *narrating*. But in turning toward the novel's narrator, I do not mean, in New Critical fashion, to restore the primacy of the text over history.<sup>16</sup> Rather, I mean to call attention to the narrative experience the text provides—an experience to be found in every

history. This experience is of particular importance in *Hope Leslie* since, as we will see, it is through the discourse of the narrator—which is characterized by critical irony and linguistic play—that the novel's preoccupation with historical time and the distinctive experience of history it offers to the attentive reader become clear.

Benignantly sarcastic and gently ironic, Sedgwick's narrator, rather than action (though there is much of it) or plot (which is intricate, to say the least), drives *Hope Leslie*. Yet curiously, few critics have commented on the novel's narrative voice, tone, and positioning.<sup>17</sup> Sedgwick's narrator strives neither for objectivity nor transparency of representation; she makes clear from the earliest chapters set in America that the reader will not be allowed direct access to the historic past. Rather, throughout the first volume of the novel, the narrator acts as a mediating presence, continually interrupting the movement of the story with news from the "present." For instance, at several moments the narrator pauses to draw comparisons between "the girls of today" and her heroine, Hope. At one point, realizing that Hope has yet to be "formally presented" to her readers, the narrator begins to correct this oversight by remarking that "[n]othing could be more unlike the authentic, 'thoroughly educated,' and thoroughly disciplined young ladies of the present day, than Hope Leslie" (126).<sup>18</sup> Now as a single instance, it might be easy to dismiss this comment as a conventional—perhaps even awkward—authorial intrusion, but as I will show, the accumulation of such instances (there are many) in *Hope Leslie* works to establish both the narrative persona and the novel's complex temporal registers.

The function of these intrusions is most apparent when the novel's action shifts to Boston, seat of Puritan authority. The rebellious Hope is sent there to live with Governor Winthrop and to learn from his wife "that passiveness, that, next to godliness, is a woman's best virtue" (160). Critically ironic and laced with double meanings, the narrator's language and tone become increasingly sardonic: "We hold ourselves bound by all the laws of decorum, to give our readers a formal introduction to the governor's mansion and its inmates" (149). In a text filled with prisoners and imprisonments (the old Indian woman Nelema, Faith, Magawisca, Everell, Thomas Morton, Master Craddock, even Roslyn, metaphorically, are all prisoners at one time or another in the novel), it is difficult not to view the narrator's choice of terms as an elaboration on this theme. The very point of sending Hope to live with the Winthrops in the first place is so that she, too, may be "bound" by the Puritan "laws of decorum." In this sense, Hope herself is a kind of "inmate" in the governor's mansion.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it becomes increasingly clear as the chapter proceeds that the narrator sees Mrs. Winthrop, too, as an inmate—if not worse: Mrs. Winthrop "recognised . . . the duty of unqualified obedience

from the wife to the husband, her appointed lord and master” (151).<sup>20</sup> Like most Puritan wives, the narrator continues, Mrs. Winthrop never questioned this role; “the only divine right to govern, which they acknowledged, was that vested in the husband over the wife” (151). But in Mrs. Winthrop’s case, at least, such devotion never “degenerated into the slavishness of fear, or the obsequiousness of servility” (151). Instead, the narrator wryly notes Madam Winthrop was guided “like a horse easy on the bit” by “him who held the reins” (151).

Again, it would not be difficult to locate the concerns of Sedgwick’s culture in passages like these. In the present instance, her playfulness of language allows the narrator to comment not only upon the position of women in marriage but on the proto-nation as well. Her description, in fact, repeats but reverses Rip Van Winkle’s famous escape from “petticoat government” (Irving 783): here the husband is not a freedom-loving symbol of pre-Revolutionary longing, attempting to throw off the yoke of tyranny, but a tyrant himself invested with a “divine right to govern.” Further, Madam Winthrop’s subordinate position evokes not just colonial oppression, but the American national sin by verging on “slavishness” and “servility,” insofar as she is treated as a beast of burden—a “horse easy on the bit.” In this way, the narrator develops one of the novel’s most powerful subtexts, rendering colonial women—rather than the Puritan fathers—as America in embryo. This is evident from the opening chapter of the novel when the tyrannical Anglican William Fletcher denigrates his nephew’s Puritanism by casting freedom as female: “Liberty, what is it! Daughter of disloyalty and mother of all misrule” (6).<sup>21</sup>

More important for my purposes, however, is the narrative function of the news from the present that Sedgwick’s narrator delivers, which is to help forge a kind of “imagined linkage” between periods in time (Anderson 33).<sup>22</sup> For instance, in another comparison, the narrator remarks that “it has been seen that Hope Leslie was superior to some of the prejudices of the age” (127). But to what “age” does the narrator refer? Sedgwick’s choice of the definite article here (“*the* age”), rather than the more precise pronoun (*her* age), is telling. Historical time in the novel, it suggests, is *not* possessive. The effect of this imprecision is a purposeful ambiguity. The readers the narrator explicitly addresses are asked to compare Hope both to her Puritan peers and to the “thoroughly disciplined” young ladies of the present age (both the narrator’s and ours) at once. The result is that the reader must think both historically and presently about Hope; she signifies in two different temporal registers at once. Placing Hope in relation to both her fictionalized seventeenth-century world and the reader’s own (future) world, the novel asks the reader to imagine a kind of cross-temporal community, a simultaneity among historical periods.

In other words, the narrator's discourse should not be read as simply using Hope as a "foil" for a past age that has been superseded (Bell 218). Again, historicist assumptions—notably, the emphasis on the novel's contemporary interests—would probably likely lead to the conclusion that what is under discussion here is historical advancement. But I am suggesting, by contrast, that what is at stake here is the meaning of history itself.<sup>23</sup> After all, the narrator's comparisons do not always—or at least not simply—favor the "present age." Quite the contrary: the critical irony of the narrator is often most devilish when engaged in the kinds of comparative histories I've been considering. Typically, these are used as occasions to cast a skeptical eye on just how much progress has really been achieved. Or, to put this another way, although Sedgwick may often seem *progressive* politically (in terms of gender relations anyway), progressive does not exactly describe *Hope Leslie's* implied theory of history; it does not capture the novel's variations in temporal register.

For the narrator's temporal juxtapositions work in a much more complex way, disrupting the unidirectional course of history and reminding the reader to view even the present historically: "It must be confessed that the tendency of the [present] age is to laxity; and so rapidly is the wholesome strictness of primitive times abating, that, should some antiquary, fifty years hence, in exploring his garret rubbish, chance to cast his eye on our humble pages, he may be surprised to learn, that even now the Sabbath is observed, in the interior of New-England, with an almost judaical severity" (164). In this instance, the narrator projects a future in relation to which her own present is past. Yet this is not an ordinary example of prolepsis, or temporal anticipation, for it does not refer to the story at all. Rather, it is a metacommentary on the text itself: imagining the novel's reception "fifty years hence," the narrator projects a moment when her "antiquary" learns something not about colonial New England, but about (what is to him) some future period ("even now")—a period that the narrator's statement calls into existence.

Or consider just one more example. Here the narrator describes the temperament of the Massachusetts Bay colonists: "The character of man, and the institutions of society, are yet very far from their possible and destined perfection. Still, how far is the present age in advance of that which drove reformers to a dreary wilderness!—of that which hanged quakers!—of that which condemned to death, as witches, innocent, unoffending old women!—But it is unnecessary to heighten the glory of our risen day by comparing it with the preceding twilight" (15). Because Sedgwick was also a writer of didactic fiction (and to be sure, *Hope Leslie* is not without strains of didacticism) it is tempting to read such lines as moral earnestness. Viewed in this light, this passage reveals Sedgwick's commitment, as Michael

Davitt Bell has argued, to historical progress (214), suggesting an incipient Romanticism that anticipates the great nineteenth-century historians, like George Bancroft, who came to dominate American history-writing in the years just after *Hope Leslie*'s publication. But when we take note of the narrator's characteristic irony and her tendency to refuse to privilege "the present day," such earnestness instead seems purposefully exaggerated by the narrator's exclamatory phrasing, which undermines her rhetoric of advancement as it pertains to the "present age"—whatever that age might be. The nineteenth-century reader, for example, might immediately recognize "the glory" of her own day by thinking of Indian removal and slavery, while the twentieth-century reader might make similar comparisons in light of any number of atrocities from the Holocaust to the racial inequity of the death penalty. Thus, again, while it is tempting—and perhaps even intuitive—to read this passage as simply a presentist editorial intrusion on the part of the author, I am suggesting that these moments actually create a peculiar kind of historical experience, that they are important not simply for what they reveal about Hope or about the historical Catharine Sedgwick's view of colonial America, but for the way they position both the novel's narrative voice and the reader in relation to time.

For her part, the narrator locates herself in a kind of present without clear boundaries; she is not confined to a particular age (which is not to say that she stands outside of history—only that she is embedded within it in complex ways). So while Sedgwick's story—her narrative discourse—concerns Puritan New England, she situates her narrator—the text's narrating instance—at some indefinite moment in the future she merely calls "now": "Where there are now contiguous rows of shops, filled with the merchandise of the east, the manufactures of Europe, the rival fabrics of our own country, and the fruits of the tropics . . . were, at the early period of our history, a few log-houses, planted around a fort, defended by a slight embankment and palisade" (16). Carefully distinguishing between the *now* of her narration and the *then* of her story, the narrator emphasizes the relation between these two periods in time, a relation that might be described as an awareness of the *present-within-history*. And this awareness is central to *Hope Leslie*'s imagined experience of history. After all, what usually links a text to "its" context, what has allowed historicists to imagine a connection between more or less arbitrarily selected historical artifacts (say, *Hope Leslie* and post-Revolutionary history-writing) is really nothing more than "calendrical coincidence" (Anderson 33). But the narrator of *Hope Leslie* forges a different kind of linkage by juxtaposing not coeval events, but now and then, or more accurately, by making now a part of the present of then. That is, as the narrator's interruptions from a

future moment in time accumulate, the narrative voice gradually becomes an integral part of the experience of the text, a presence whose existence the reader remains constantly aware of even in her absence. So while on some imaginative level, we, as twenty-first-century readers, conjure for ourselves the reality of a distant past, simultaneously we remain cognizant of other periods in time (Sedgwick's and our own) passing alongside of it.<sup>24</sup>

This simultaneity, in turn, shapes not just the reader's experience of the novel, but the novel's narrative representation of history, which is not progressive, but *anachronistic*, what I have already called a kind of cognitive (or imaginative) constellation of historical periods. Or to put this another way, by always positioning herself in the present as a means of imagining historical experience, the narrator also positions—or constructs—an implied reader of the novel for whom historical knowledge is not only mediated, but brought into relation with present knowledge. What historical experience means in *Hope Leslie*, then, is not just that one is able to imagine a past that, as nineteenth-century Americans were fond of saying, has been lost to oblivion, but that one can imagine history as an experience encompassing both past and present at once, dissolving the historicist opposition between historical- and present-mindedness. This is why the past in the novel is always filtered through the ambiguously situated narrator who, for her part, invites the reader continually to juxtapose “our” day and colonial America.

The peculiar way the reader experiences history in *Hope Leslie* becomes even clearer when one realizes that the narrator's news from the present typically comes at crucial moments in the narrative, often those very moments when the reader is most likely to have forgotten the present and to have entered into the seventeenth-century world of the novel, becoming imaginatively or emotionally absorbed in the novel's projected past. For instance, at the end of the fourth chapter—the chapter in which Magawisca narrates her version of the Pequot War—the narrator abruptly reminds the reader of the murders of Stone, Norton, and Oldham in a voice far removed from the novel's seventeenth-century setting. Both the war and its (possible) causes, she reminds the reader, belong to “our early annals” (58). Bulletins such as these not only disrupt the story's movement, they disrupt, too, the reader's experience of it. The emotional involvement that Magawisca's story elicits from her auditors—Everell and the reader alike—is tacitly called into question by the narrator's discourse. Readers are reminded not to lose themselves in the (narrowly historical) lives of the characters represented.<sup>25</sup>

These reminders occur repeatedly in the novel, such as later when it turns out that Magawisca's moving tale has simply prepared the reader for another scene of horror. With Mr. Fletcher away in

Boston, Magawisca's father, Mononotto, a Pequot chief, attacks the Fletcher homestead, killing Mrs. Fletcher and taking as prisoners Everell and the young Faith Leslie, the daughter of Alice sent to America following her parents' untimely deaths. Upon learning the news of the slaughter, Mr. Fletcher receives "such moral, consoling, and pious reflections as usually poured forth from the lips of the spectators of sudden suffering" (74). And at this dramatic point the narrator intrudes again: "We hope our readers will not think we have wantonly sported with their feelings, by drawing a picture of calamity that only exists in the fictitious tale. No—such events, as we have feebly related, were common in our early annals, and attended by horrors that it would be impossible for the imagination to exaggerate" (75). In this interruption, the narrator explicitly draws attention to narrative's capacity for emotional manipulation while at the same time engaging in that very practice. That is, the narrator here does not suggest that she has *not* "sported with [readers'] feelings," only that she has not done so "wantonly." Readers are thus cautioned to be wary—or at least aware—of their own emotional and imaginative involvement in such tales of horror in a way that Everell, for example, is not. Similarly, despite what appears here to be an appeal for the reader's credulity based on a commitment to verisimilitude ("such events . . . were common"), the accumulation of such narrative commentary has a radically different effect. Not only does it form a critique of historical representation by refusing to allow the reader entrance into an extralinguistic seventeenth-century reality, raising the very (post)modern question of whether we can ever access the *real* past, or whether our present-day reconstructions of it, our narratives—our language—always stand between that past and ourselves. But more importantly, it provides the possibility for a way out of the representational conundrum, suggesting that *history* is not *either* a unique and distinct past *or* our present-day reconstructions of it, but a negotiation, a contact zone, an imagined experience born of the interaction between the two.

### 3. On the Uses of Anachronistic Imaginings

I suggested at the start of this essay that this means of conceiving history is enlisted in a larger, nonteleological democratic project. Imagining history anachronistically provided antebellum writers like Sedgwick with a way of dealing with both cultural and national identity in a pluralistic culture. If America, then as now, was in the process of becoming, what it would become was for Sedgwick, as for Whitman, an open question; they viewed the American past as a perpetually unfinished project. In this respect, anachronism served



for antebellum writers as a means of working through the process of historically constituted self-realization. Rip Van Winkle, for instance, experiences time not logically or chronologically, but as ruptures, fissures which initially leave him with a crisis of identity—"every thing's changed, and I am changed, and I can't tell what's my name or who I am!" (Irving 781)—but finally suit him ideally, ironically, for the role of historian in the newly nationalized village—a "chronicle of the 'old times' before the war" (783). Ralph Waldo Emerson argues in his essay "History" that once one "transfer[s] the point of view from which history is commonly read" (152), past thoughts, figures, and events "live again to the mind, or are *now*" (154). In this convergence of past and present, chronology becomes useless: "When a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me,—when a truth that fired the soul of Pindar fires mine, time is no more. When I feel that we two meet in a perception . . . and do as it were run into one . . . why should I count Egyptian years?" (164). In a similar vein, the narrator of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Custom-House" experiences "a sort of home feeling with the past" (9), playfully imagining "the compliments bandied about between my great-grandfathers and myself, across the gulf of time" (10). And in that text's most famous instance—which echoes the firing of Emerson's soul—he places the scarlet letter on his breast only to experience "a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but of red-hot iron" (25). History, for each of these writers, as with Sedgwick, was incomplete; it was something more than knowledge of the past. Their texts present it instead as an experience, a palpable sensation, something approximating the paradoxical feeling of *déjà vu*—the memory of an experience one has not had, but a memory nonetheless real because felt.

Modern Americanist historicists, too, link questions of historiography to questions of cultural identity—a fact which their critics often attribute to presentist politics. Historicist investigations into the social, cultural, and political forces that shaped, and were shaped by, American literary texts have proven a powerful weapon for revising the literary canon, recovering works by women and minority writers, and raising important questions about the role of racial and gender ideologies in the formation of disparate American cultures. But unlike *Hope Leslie*, this narrative—what might be called the *historicist narrative of American literary criticism*—does not reject so much as it reinstates history as linear progression. That is, while historicist work has effectively exposed the ideological foundations of the nineteenth-century rhetoric of historical progress, the story of the historicist enterprise itself is cast as what Brook Thomas has called a "narrative of progressive emergence" (32)—feminists loosening the stranglehold male modernist critics once held on the literary

canon, African Americans and other minorities struggling to gain literary independence and emancipating themselves from Eurocentric literary values, marginalized authors and texts being freed from oppressive ideologies and finding their way to the center.

And like all narratives of emergence (which imply a progression), the historicist narrative of American literary criticism depends upon chronology; it necessarily construes historical time possessively, as a succession of receptacles each containing certain texts (and events, discourses, beliefs, personages). This view of history requires that each historical event (and text) be assigned to *its* proper receptacle in the past. Thus, to historicize is often to show how authors and texts are *subject to* or *constrained by* their own moment in history. For instance, commentators have generally agreed that the most problematic moment in *Hope Leslie* is the scene in which Hope is reunited with her sister Faith, who was abducted as a child during the Indian raid on the family's home. Reading this scene, a number of critics have ascribed to Sedgwick the beliefs of Hope, whose "heart die[s] within her" (237) when she and Faith meet again several years later. Upon seeing Faith dressed "in savage attire," Hope is overcome with "a sickening feeling," "an unthought of revolting of nature" (237). Judith Fetterley argues that this scene is the moment where *Hope Leslie* becomes "Hope-lessly"; it marks the limits of any radical politics one might find in the novel because "Sedgwick's narrative voice doubles Hope's" in this scene ("My Sister!" 504). Similarly Stephen Carl Arch asserts that "Hope's individualism is constrained by Sedgwick's culture" (118), and Carol J. Singley argues that Faith's conversion and marriage to the Indian Oneco is finally "constrained by [Sedgwick's] own position in history" (121). And noting that "the text is subject to the discursive materials of its own era," Douglas Ford suggests that this scene may be one place where the novel "inadvertently undercuts the progressive mission its preface has outlined" (84).

Yet all these assertions seem to me to misread the novel. Certainly, that the otherwise "progressive" Hope views her sister as transgressing against "natural" racial boundaries the scene leaves little question. That this view is shared by Sedgwick, however, is arguable. After all, in an effort to recover her sister, Hope resorts to bribery, offering Faith "jewels from head to foot" (240) if she will return to her English family. In reply, Magawisca admonishes Hope in terms that Sedgwick's narrator (and her readers) clearly value: "Shall I ask your sister to barter truth and love, the jewels of the soul, for these poor perishing trifles?" (240). In other words, the voice that the narrator's "doubles" here, if any, is Magawisca's. Indeed, the scene is powerful precisely because it criticizes its heroine. That critique is made even more apparent when we consider that the action in the novel that most closely parallels Hope's desperate appeal is the

villainous Sir Philip's equally desperate attempt to barter Magawisca's freedom for the life of the pathetic Roslyn.

But why would the narrator take such pains to criticize the tale's heroine? The answer to this question lies, once again, in the preface. A closer look at the grounds of Hope's disgust upon seeing her sister dressed as an Indian shows that this scene actually illustrates, rather than undercuts, the progressive argument set forth in the preface. Further, it effectively links the novel's racial politics to its historiographical interests; that is, the text argues not just for historical relativism, but for a brand of cultural relativism as well. In the preface, for instance, Sedgwick takes what modern critics would call a social constructionist view of racial difference. After positioning herself as a surrogate Indian poet, she further states that "difference of character among the various races of the earth, arises mainly from difference of condition" (4). The reunion scene is constructed to test this proposition. The argument there in favor of "conditions" as a marker of racial difference turns on the strangeness of the phrase used to describe Hope's reaction: "an unthought of revolting of nature." The ambiguity of language and syntax in this phrase, as is so often the case in the novel, conveys disparate meanings. On the one hand, the phrase simply means that Hope's "unthought" is of a kind that might be termed *revolting* (i.e., an unthought revolting of nature), in which case "revolting" is simply an adjective that describes the "nature" or type of unthought that Hope feels: Hope finds the sight of her sister repulsive. On the other hand, the grounds for that revulsion are indicated by the term *nature*, which refers not only to Hope's unthought, but to Faith's decidedly *unnatural* (according to Hope) appropriation of Indian clothing, manners, and speech (i.e., an unthought of revolting *against* nature). In this case, "revolting" also functions as a verb: Hope is revulsed because Faith seems to be revolting against nature.

Which is only to say that what so sickens Hope is that her sister is disguised as an Indian; she is, in Hope's view, *passing*, hiding what Hope believes is her true nature—whiteness—beneath Indian clothing. This aspect of Hope's disgust is revealed when Hope tries to communicate with her sister: "Hope knew not how to address one so near to her by nature, so far removed by habit and education. She thought that if Mary's dress, which was singularly and gaudily decorated, had a less savage aspect, she might look more natural to her, and she signed to her to remove the mantle she wore, made of birds' feathers, woven together with threads of the wild nettle" (239). Here, Hope's "unthought" has begun to take shape as a *thought*: that Faith's nature is being concealed beneath Indian garb. Removing it, Hope seems to think, might restore her Faith. But as a thought, Hope's attitude with regard to Faith's passing is reversed, for what Hope actually thinks here is not that Faith's true nature as a non-Indian

will be revealed by removing her Indian clothing, but only that she will “look more natural” to Hope. So what Hope originally (un)thought was Faith’s immutable nature has now become a matter of appearances. This explains, I think, the narrator’s use of the odd term *unthought*; it refers to Hope’s prelinguistic reaction to the sight of her Indianized sister. When that reaction becomes concretized, described, put into language, Hope’s position—her belief in an unchangeable nature or identity—is undermined. Consequently, her strategy of restoration backfires: “The removal of the mantle, instead of the effect designed, only served to make more striking the aboriginal peculiarities; and Hope, shuddering and heart-sick, made one more effort to disguise them by taking off her silk cloak and wrapping it close around her sister” (239). What Hope wants here, but fails to achieve, is for Faith to *re-pass* or to pass back to her original whiteness. But that identity is no longer available (if it ever was); instead, there are only layers of “disguise”: beneath Hope’s silk cloak is “Whitebird” and beneath Whitebird is “Faith” and beneath Faith is “Mary.” Whom does Hope want to uncover? Yet in her failure to uncover—by re-covering—Faith’s nature, Hope also activates another meaning of the pivotal term *revolting*. For in a text that makes such conspicuous use of the rhetoric of the American Revolution and in which, as we have already seen, to be “aboriginal” is to be Revolutionary, the logic of this scene holds that Faith actually becomes “natural” by becoming native. This is why Hope, in what may be the strangest gesture of all in this complex scene, attempts to “disguise” with her own silk cloak what originally she took to be Faith’s disguise, her Indian dress, the removal of which does not reveal Faith’s true white nature, but only her “aboriginal peculiarities.”

Carolyn Karcher has suggested that Sedgwick, too, disapproves of Faith’s passing, since the view of her as disguised links her to Rosa, the “fallen woman” in the novel, whose shameful condition is hidden beneath her disguise as Sir Philip’s manservant (xxiii). But, again, it is only Hope who views Faith as wearing a disguise and, as we’ve just seen, even that position is undercut by the narrator. Moreover, Rosa-Roslyn’s is not the only other disguise in the novel: the Catholic Sir Philip is disguised as a faithful Puritan, Magawisca dresses up as Master Craddock to escape prison, and even Hope, in the chapter immediately following her reunion with Faith, “identif[ies] herself with a catholic saint” (253) in order to escape from drunken Italian sailors. Clearly in *Hope Leslie* not all disguises are transgressions. In fact, the text does not pronounce on dissembling as such; disguises are neither good nor bad. Rather, they only serve good or bad ends.

The same is true of historical authority in the text. As with dissembling, the novel does not pronounce on authority (narrative or

otherwise) as such. There are only good or bad authorities, like Hope's heart (124, 189) and Governor Winthrop's head (245, 310), respectively; there are only good or bad narratives. In fact, the novel actively resists the very notion of "full narrative authority" that Gould ultimately views as inconsistent with the text's historical relativism ("Recital" 653).<sup>26</sup> The text's relativism goes all the way down. The point of its argument for historical relativism—bringing the past into relation with ever-new presents—structurally mirrors the point of the reunion scene. That is, the narrative experience of history *Hope Leslie* offers to its readers (of whatever era), what I have called the *present-within-history*, is duplicated in the text's representation of the racial *other*, in imagining what might be called a relation of *sameness-within-difference*. So just as the novel is less concerned with an objective or faithful recovery of a remote period in time than with bringing disparate periods in time into productive relation—or to use Emerson's language, allowing the past and the present to "meet in perception"—so is it less concerned with recovering Faith's "true" cultural identity than with the negotiation that results from the meeting between disparately situated individual subjects. What the reunion scene is about, in other words, is Hope—and, by extension (because she is our heroine), the reader—struggling to cope with *otherness*. In racial and cultural terms, Hope sees her sister as at once different from and the same as herself. And the reader not only witnesses this struggle (and sees Hope duly reprimanded for her particular method of coping), but experiences something like it as well: for not only does the reader sympathize (and thus imaginatively identify) with Hope, the novel's heroine, but the scene simultaneously asks the reader to identify with the Indian Magawisca, the scene's voice of moral authority.

Of course, Sedgwick finally is left with the problem of resolution—both novelistic and cultural—which is anathema to the open-endedness of the (historical) process the bulk of her text embodies. And to be sure, despite Everell's feeble and naive assertion that "the present difference of the English with the Indians, is but a vapour that has, even now, nearly passed away" (349), the Indians in the novel are banished to "the deep, voiceless obscurity" of the "western forests" (359) at the end of the novel. Or rather, they choose obscurity over assimilation; as Magawisca puts it, "the Indian and the white man can no more mingle, and become one, than day and night" (349). But as unsatisfactory as this denouement may appear to the modern reader, its reliance on the myth of the vanishing American may have less to do with the "constraints" of Sedgwick's culture than with the formal constraints of the novel itself; unlike the movement of history or the formation of personal, national, and cultural identity, it has to end.

## Notes

1. Such *nativizing* may be one of the text's key themes. In an interesting reading, Maria Karafilis has suggested that Magawisca functions as a "host" (339) for the novel's Puritan heroine, Hope; thus "Hope's absorption of autochthonous traces links her to the New World" (340).

2. Gustavus Stadler remarks that "When Magawisca anachronistically alludes to Patrick Henry . . . she becomes not simply heroic, but more specifically an embodied voice in the young United States' discourse of nation-founding" (51). Sandra Zagarell views "the echo of Patrick Henry's words" (238) as part of the novel's extended critique of "Puritan gynophobia" (236) and its articulation of a "different concept of liberty" (239). And Suzanne Gossett and Barbara Ann Bardes argue that Magawisca's defiance "allow[s] Sedgwick to question the legitimacy of a political authority which excludes certain groups in the population" (23). My reading differs from each of these readings, however, in that what interests me is the complex *historicity* of this moment, rather than its implications for the politics of Sedgwick's day. I mean to explore not the meaning of the anachronistic *reference* (its Revolutionary origins, its early national resonances), but the meanings of the *anachronism itself*.

3. I am following the definition of historicism provided by F. R. Ankersmit: "the view that we should conceive of history as consisting of a *series* of epochs each *possessing* its own individuality" (par. 25; emphasis added). In referring to historicism among Americanist literary scholars, I mean, in a broad sense, works of literary criticism and literary history that, implicitly or explicitly, participate in what has come to be known as the *return to history*, works that seek to explain the relations between literary texts and the "individuality" of a particular epoch or historical moment. This includes, but is not limited to, the New Historicism. Americanist literary scholarship, in particular, has taken up the historicist cause with especial fervency. And while I recognize the extraordinary diversity of critical practices (and the variety of historicisms practiced) among Americanists—what Sacvan Bercovitch has famously called "dissensus"—I also agree with Bercovitch that what unites a great deal of the most important work in American literary studies in recent decades is a historicist orientation. As he puts it in his introduction to *The Cambridge History of American Literature*: "[T]he emphasis on history as the vehicle of critical revision . . . is the emphasis, too, of our critical moment. At no time in literary studies has awareness of history—or more accurately, theorizing about history—been more acute and pervasive. It is hardly too much to say that what joins all the special interests in the field, all factions in our current critical dissensus, is an overriding interest in history: as the ground and texture of ideas, metaphors, and myths; as the substance of the texts we read and the spirit in which we interpret them" (4). What I am questioning and what *Hope Leslie* along with a host of other antebellum texts—not all of them "historical fictions"—challenges is a fundamental assumption of this emphasis on history: the conception of time as "a series of epochs each possessing its own individuality." For a useful general discussion of the "historical turn" in literary criticism, see Simpson. On the New Historicism, see Veesser and Thomas. The historicist hold on Americanist scholarship is perhaps best reflected by Duke UP's "New Americanist" series, published under the general editorship of Donald Pease. For an important dissent from the orthodoxy that claims today's critics have a greater interest in history than earlier generations (especially the New Critical generation), see Levin.

4. Following Mary Kelley's lead (xxx) in her fine introduction to the Rutgers UP reprint of *Hope Leslie*, Cheri Louise Ross (325, 332), Carol J. Singley (115), and

Dana Nelson (202) all use the phrase “alternative history.” T. Gregory Garvey asserts that the novel “revises the history of Puritan New England” (290). Lucy Maddox calls it a “self-consciously feminist revision of male-transmitted history” (103). And Zagarell argues that “the novel challenges the official history of original settlements” (235). Among these commentators, Nelson offers the most detailed reading of the text’s handling of history, which she views as dialogic (195–97). Only Nina Baym dissents from this view, arguing that Sedgwick’s revisionism “is only lukewarm” (158).

5. This point is made more explicitly in Gould’s valuable study of historical romances of New England, *Covenant and Republic* (which includes an expanded version of his article on *Hope Leslie*). There he suggests that “recent admirers of Sedgwick . . . often inscribe *their own* language and values onto” the novel (93).

6. I mean to call attention here only to the frequency with which appeals to context are preceded by the definite article, as in Pease’s well-known “new historicist return of *the* repressed context” (“New Americanists” 35; emphasis added), or possessive pronouns (its, their), as in Wai-chee Dimock’s concise formulation: “the text and its context are in every case inseparable, the latter . . . encompassing [the former] and permeating it as the condition of its textuality” (5). My concerns about this historicist procedure are also intended to echo those of Judith Fetterley, who has questioned its “strategic usefulness for changing the evaluation of nineteenth-century American women writers.” Citing Jane Tompkins’s important and influential historicist work, *Sensational Designs* (1985), Fetterley asks,

Might Tompkins’s emphasis on the distance between the culture that produced, for example, *The Wide, Wide World* and the culture we inhabit, on the gulf between the aesthetics that produced a text of “trifles” and the aesthetics that modernists have taught us to value, in fact have the effect of making this literature seem at once uninteresting and inaccessible to contemporary readers? of suggesting that the power of these texts cannot be realized by anyone less than thoroughly conversant with certain aspects of nineteenth-century American culture, indeed by anyone not of the nineteenth century, and thus of drawing a line around these texts—that was then, this is now—that effectively seals them off from the contemporary? (“Commentary” 606)

While I share Fetterley’s reservations about readings that seek to recover past contexts, I would add that this potential problem is not confined only to nineteenth-century American women writers. My argument supplements Fetterley’s in that my analysis of *Hope Leslie* is intended to bring out its “thematic significance for readers of our own day” (“Commentary” 606): the novel speaks directly to the widespread interest in history among Americanist literary scholars. Further, I suggest that the problems presented by historicism involve not only its means of evaluating texts, but, more fundamentally, the conception of history that underwrites it: namely, the privileging of a text’s moment of production over and above its moments of reception. For a more extended critique of Tompkins’s historicism, see Thomas 27–31.

7. See Thompson and Link in *Neutral Ground*, who accuse the New Americanists of engaging in “presentist politics” (4–5). They insist that “[n]either presentism nor the sometimes presentist-oriented ‘New Historicism’ can legitimately dismiss or diminish the task of careful historical research, whatever the implicit hermeneutical limitations. Even though historicists should be always mindful that no past can be recovered as it ‘truly’ was, no amount of deductive presentist reformulation of the past can ever become a satisfactory substitute for attentive historical archaeology” (11). Conversely, Tompkins provides a good example of a historicist acknowledgment

of the presentism dilemma: “Any reconstruction of ‘context’ is as much determined by the attitudes and values of the interpreter as is the explication of literary works; my reading of the historical materials as well as the textual analyses I offer grow directly from the circumstances, interests, and aims that have constituted me as a literary critic. If I have from time to time accused other critics of a ‘presentist’ bias, the same charge can be levelled against my own assumptions, which are of course no more free than theirs from the constraints of a particular historical situation” (xiii).

8. See Berkhofer: “[H]istorians assume the otherness of past times: the longer ago they are, the more the then and there differ from the here and now” (106).

9. Kammen provides a brief but excellent discussion of the importance of “character” in the nineteenth-century historical imagination; see esp. 248–51. For a discussion of “national character” as a racial discourse in nineteenth-century history writing, see Callcott 166–71. Gould concentrates his reading on the related term “virtue” to show how Sedgwick revises that term’s gendered meanings, 62–68.

10. See, e.g., Gould (*Covenant* 9–12, 81–89) and Buell (208–11).

11. On this point, I am in agreement with both Gould and Nelson. However, for Gould this raises the issue of “Sedgwick’s intentions.” He argues that “the gendered meanings of republicanism during this era . . . make it difficult for one to believe that Sedgwick stood so theoretically detached from Magawisca’s account” (*Covenant* 84). Of course, I also agree that Sedgwick’s intentions are “open to debate” (84), though my reading of both the theoretical self-consciousness of the preface and the narrator’s running metacommentary throughout the novel reveals a much greater detachment (on the part of the narrator, at any rate) from the narrative proper than Gould allows.

12. See Brown’s essays “The Difference between History and Romance” (1800) and “Historical Characters Are False Representations of Nature” (1806). These and other essays on history and fiction Brown published are discussed in detail by Kamrath.

13. Gould discusses the historiographic controversy surrounding the Pequot War at length. See esp. *Covenant* 64–77.

14. Not surprisingly, Magawisca’s retelling of the Puritan attack on the Pequots figures prominently in many readings of the novel. See, e.g., Gould, “Recital”; Zagarell 234–35; Kelley, Introduction xxxii; Ross 325–27; and Nelson 195–97. See also Baym (158), who compares Sedgwick’s attempt to narrate history from the Native American point of view unfavorably to Irving’s essay “Philip of Pokanoket.”

15. For a discussion of the formalism of New Historicists, see Thomas 42–44. By contrast, Mary Poovey has recently questioned whether “close reading [still] constitutes an appropriate interpretive tool” (368) for the kinds of historicist and cultural studies readings that characterize much of the work in literary studies. Fetterley, on the other hand, has persuasively argued for the continued value of older methodologies like close reading (“Commentary” and “My Sister!” 492). It should be evident from my reading that I am in agreement with Fetterley.

16. If my turn from author to narrator appears to recall the New Critics, the historicist emphasis on the author (as the embodiment of the text’s embedment in history)



itself risks committing a version of what the New Critics called the *intentional fallacy*. That is, while New Historicists do not claim that the author's intention is the best determinant of meaning, they do often claim implicitly that authorship determines context. See also White, who similarly claims that New Historicists commit the "genetic fallacy" ("New Historicism" 294).

17. Margaret Higonnet mentions that Sedgwick's "many metanarrative interventions disrupt" the story (20) but does not pursue this metanarrative in any detail. Kelley also takes note of several instances of direct address to the reader but attributes these to Sedgwick, rather than to the novel's narrator (Introduction). Only Nelson treats the narrator's discourse in an extended way, arguing persuasively that the novel's many "textual apologies" and "narrative asides" form a "subversive political commentary on the patriarchal assumptions of both the Puritans and her contemporary male audience" (193–94).

18. The poor quality of women's education and the submissiveness of women in marriage are the two issues in Sedgwick's published and unpublished writings for which she reserved her most caustic remarks. In her unpublished autobiography she writes, matter of factly, "'Education' in the common sense I had next to none" (qtd. in Kelley, *Power* 72), and later, more bitterly, "What would the children now, who are steeped to the lips in 'ologies,' think of a girl of eight spending a whole summer working a wretched sampler which was not even a tolerable specimen of the species" (74). In her conduct manual *Means and Ends*, written for young girls, Sedgwick wrote even more frankly, and with barely contained venom, about women's education, linking it explicitly to the inequalities of marriage: "Women by their defective educations have been left helpless and dependent on men for support and protection. This has been the most effective cause of those marriages (the curse of woman, and man too,) without affection on the one side and respect on the other. Be sure to be so educated that you can have an independent pursuit . . . then marriage will not be essential to your usefulness, respectability, or happiness" (19). The point here, however, is not to attribute the narrative intrusions to the "author," the historical Catharine Sedgwick; rather, the point is only that, knowing the author, it should come as no surprise that she would imbue her narrator with something approximating her own acerbic wit.

19. Several readers have commented on the novel's pattern of imprisonment. Fetterley, for instance, argues that "Sedgwick manages to keep Hope out of jail, both literally and figuratively" ("My Sister!" 501). Obviously, I disagree.

20. Just before the section on Mrs. Winthrop, the narrator echoes this language in another metacommentary, this time taking on male literary authority. As she begins to describe the governor's mansion she adopts her typically self-deprecatory tone: "The mighty master of fiction," she notes, referring to Sir Walter Scott, "has but to wave the wand of his office, to present the past to his readers, with all the vividness of the present" (149). Juxtaposed with her description of the Winthrops' marriage, this passage, too, should be read as ironic. That is, the narrator's "obedience" to a "master" is meant to echo the description of Mrs. Winthrop's relation to her husband, just as "following" Scott "at an immeasurable distance" resonates with the governor "leading" his wife like a horse. Scott, the "mighty master," is constructed as Governor Winthrop's surrogate, while the narrator, "in obedience," is reduced to the status of the governor's wife. Intriguingly, this play perhaps suggests that although, like most nineteenth-century Americans, Sedgwick admired Scott and read his work with interest, she was also keenly aware, even at this early stage in the development

of American literature, of the gender politics of literary production. Nelson ventures that these asides, ostensibly deferent, “might” be “less sincere than calculatingly rhetorical” (194). I would state this more strongly: more than just a mollifying rhetorical stance toward male authority, they are subversive of it.

21. For a more extended discussion of how the novel “defines liberty from a woman’s perspective,” see Zagarell 238–39.

22. A wholly intended implication of my argument here is that the “linkages” that historicists make between text and context are, like Benedict Anderson’s communities, “imagined.” This, I think, tarnishes some of the empirical gloss with which historicists often tacitly coat their claims. But I would also add that viewing historicist claims as imagined rather than *real* or *empirical* does not at all invalidate them. The brilliance of Anderson’s book lies, in part, in showing the power of such imaginings, in showing that nations are not real *in spite of* being imagined but *because* they are imagined.

23. Zagarell, e.g., asserts that the novel “refuses to see history as a matter of progression or regression,” a statement with which I wholeheartedly agree. I don’t agree, however, when she further asserts that “it pays little attention to the movement of history at all” (236). To the contrary, the narrator’s commentary, I am arguing, is deeply concerned with historical movement, historical time: it proffers anachronism as an alternative to the progress-regress binary.

24. My description of the narrator’s news here is meant to echo Anderson’s argument in *Imagined Communities* about the function of the newspaper. Anderson writes that the emergence of print culture, and the newspaper in particular, served as a “source of imagined linkage” (33) for the nation, a ritual of “simultaneous consumption (‘imagining’)” (35). The paradox of the newspaper is that it takes place privately, “in the lair of the skull” (35), yet knowing that millions of others participate in the same ritual at the same time makes of it a communal activity. What for Anderson makes the newspaper such a powerful figure for imagining a community is that it is an “extreme form” of the novel (34). Both constitute a “complex gloss upon the word ‘meanwhile’” (25). That is, when reading a novel the reader is privy to the actions of characters who may never meet, but whose acts are nevertheless “performed at the same clocked, calendrical time” (26). For instance, while we watch the movements of our protagonist Hope, we also know, though we don’t see it, that somewhere at the same time, her sister Faith goes about her own business. The newspaper replicates this process on a much larger scale. In any paper on any given day will be grouped together, arbitrarily, events and incidents from all over the world that bear no other relation to one another save “calendrical coincidence” (33). So if an event that occurs in, say, Mali (to use Anderson’s own example) is reported one day followed by a long period of time in which Mali does not appear in the news, “readers do not for a moment imagine that Mali has disappeared or that famine has wiped out all its citizens. The novelistic format of the newspaper assures them that somewhere out there the ‘character’ Mali moves along quietly, awaiting its next reappearance in the plot” (33). For a useful discussion of Anderson and novelistic time, see Culler.

25. Gould notes that both Everell and the reader are “seduced” (“Recital” 653) by Magawisca’s narrative. Thus, “the power of historical narrative, the text suggests, lies inevitably along an axis of imaginative feeling between author and reader” (654). But again, as I have shown, such moments of emotional seduction are precisely

the ones the narrator often interrupts; the narrator draws readers' attention, in other words, to their own experience of having been seduced.

26. Karcher helpfully notes that "from the first to the last chapters," the narrator "shares narrative authority with her characters" (xxxii-iii), through both direct (narrative) discourse and its incorporation of the epistolary form.

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