



# THE CHOSEN PEOPLE: THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN IDENTITY\*

## INTRODUCTION

*Riverscapes and National Identities* explores the relation between national identity and riverscape imagery, with reference to dominant visual representations of five rivers in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America and Europe: the Hudson, Thames, Seine, Volga, and the Shannon (Cusack 2019). The book argues that such riverscapes embodied ideas about the national homeland and about cultural identities and that they carried the dominant ideologies of national elites. In each country, the riverscape offered a different story, or a combination of stories, helping to create national mythologies. As a transnational phenomenon, nationalist ideology is purveyed by many means including visual art. The painted riverscape as a representation of the national homeland thus became a transnational concept emerging across nations, although made distinct for each nation. When *Riverscapes* was first published in 2010 however, the concept of the riverscape was little used in a cultural or humanities context, and river scenes were discussed under the rubric of landscape (Schönach 2017: 11).<sup>1</sup> A landscape refers either to the land and its human

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1. River scenes are classed as “landscapes,” for example, by Hemingway (1992) in his early analysis of river imagery. Paula Schönach notes the development of “riverscape” as a conceptual tool in *Riverscapes* (Schönach 2017: 11).

fashioning, or to second-order representations of the fashioned land, for example in painting. In *Riverscapes* the term 'riverscape' is used independently of, but analogous to, that of 'landscape,' that is, to refer both to the river itself and its human shaping, but particularly to visual representation.

The suffix '-scape' was originally an abbreviation of the word landscape. In an essay of 1990, Arjun Appadurai presented a framework for analyzing what he called global cultural flows in the late twentieth century. Appadurai employed '-scape' here to denote what he termed a "perspectival construct," that is, a reading of something that was inflected by the viewer's historical and political situation (296). He affixed '-scape' to five dimensions which he then (somewhat confusingly) collectively described as landscapes. Although Appadurai's framework was designed to apply to a fast-moving and disjunctive global world, his use of '-scapes' was suggestive. The riverscape as a visual image might be considered a "perspectival construct" in the sense that how the riverscape is shaped, and the meanings attributed to it, will depend upon the conditions and concerns of specific social groups at certain historical junctures. The different geographical, social and political situations of particular countries provided very different contexts for the forms and meanings of their riverscapes.

Riverscapes may be distinguished from landscapes in some key respects. The riverscape is qualitatively different in that what is being "fixed" is something that is essentially defined by movement, while the observer will have some general imagining of the river's pattern, that is, that it arises from some source and flows to some outlet. Rivers have long provided a metaphor for the passage of time and for life and renewal, therefore serving as a useful symbol of national vitality, and the smooth flow of national history. The riverscape incorporates both the distinct symbolic potential of the flowing river and the peculiar qualities of the fixed image. In order to serve as a coherent and memorable iconology, a national riverscape imagery must be based on repeated and recognizable themes, and attach the river to particular topographies.<sup>2</sup> For instance, in the case of the United States, a national

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2. Riverscapes of the Thames in England had two dominant topographical variants, corresponding to the dual identities of "Britishness" and "Eng-

identity associated with the notion of the pioneer was symbolized by images of the river seen in its “natural” habitat, the upstream river in the wilderness, not the Lower Hudson of New York.

A national riverscape may be regarded as a visual text that forms part of a discourse in the Foucauldian sense, that is, it actively constitutes national imaginings.<sup>3</sup> As with any ideological representation, national riverscapes constitute highly selective sets of images that symbolize and help to construct particular notions of identity. Foucault argued that power is most effective when largely concealed (1990: 86). Riverscapes provide an excellent subterfuge for the purveyance of discursive knowledge/power, since art is generally promoted as a medium of expression innocent of ideology. Furthermore, the simplified, semi-mythical quality of many images of the national homeland makes them more tenacious as a national symbol than a more complicated and contradictory representation might be.

National riverscapes do not arise by chance. In the United States, as in Russia, the creation of a national riverscape was the outcome of conscious programs by close-knit networks of artists and influential patrons to develop an imagery of the homeland. Ernest Renan drew attention to the significance of forgetting in the making of national histories (1934: 25). If riverscapes help to construct identities and embody memories, they may also represent a forgetting or elision of alternative identities and memories. The art of the Hudson River School represented the river viewed, or overviewed from afar in a typical sublime setting of mountains and autumnal trees invoking the seminal figure of the pilgrim-pioneer. The wilderness was symbolically appropriated for the new pioneers, while Native Americans were visually excluded or marginalized. In late nineteenth-century France, sunny Impressionist images of leisure on the Seine occluded the recent history of the Commune and portrayed the increasingly powerful bourgeoisie (Cusack 2019: 97–126). As the art of the Hudson River

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lishness”; Shannon riverscapes represented the nation’s mythical past and modern future (Cusack 2019: 57–96, 158–89).

3. For Foucault, discourses were not simply “groups of signs [...] but [...] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (Foucault 1992: 49).

School, and of the Impressionists, has tended to be uncritically celebrated by art historians and others, these ideological moves have been largely overlooked. The process has an echo in Stéphane Castonguay and Hubert Samson's present study of the Saint-Maurice River watershed in this issue, as they observe how hydroelectric construction not only affected the Saint-Maurice River watershed materially, but the resulting surveys and maps symbolically erased the history and habitat of the Atikamekw.

The place of religion in the formation of national identity has been debated in nationalism studies since Gellner (1983), Anderson (1991) and others made it clear that they regarded nationalism as in some sense a heroic substitute for religious authority, while other writers subsequently (Cusack 1997; Hastings 1997; Smith 2003) have argued that religion may be an integral component of nationalism. Riverscapes of the Hudson, as well as those of the Shannon, Thames, and Volga established, in different ways, an intimate relation between Christianity and national identity, while in nineteenth-century France, by contrast, modern riverscapes were linked to secularism. Religion has been employed as a means of excluding some occupants of the national territory from full nationality and this exclusive religious nationalism was symbolically reinforced in riverscapes, whether through the art of the Hudson River School or in Volga riverscapes that symbolically excluded Tatars and others—even converts to Orthodoxy—as “non-Russians.”

New studies of rivers have continued to emerge in various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Rachel Havrelock's *River Jordan: The Mythology of a Dividing Line* (2011) analyzes the Jordan as a border and marker of identity contested by Israelis and Palestinians in both political and symbolic terms, drawing on folkloric and biblical studies, maps and myths. In *A Story of Six Rivers: History, Culture and Ecology*, the environmental historian Peter Coates notes that he was interested in studying some less well-known rivers and “the river rather than the riverscape as a cultural construction” (2013: 12). One of his examples is the Los Angeles River, partly chosen, Coates says, for its complete obscurity. Dorothy Zeisler-Vralsted's *Rivers, Memory, and Nation-Building: A History of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers* (2015) compares these two rivers over many years, beginning

with the rivers, rather than a specific period or culture so that, “from the starting point of the Volga and Mississippi Rivers, a more nuanced history is revealed as the rivers diminish the traditional markers that shape the history of cultures and nations. When the river becomes the organizing theme, a different story evolves” (8). In *Along Ukraine’s River: A Social and Environmental History of the Dnipro* (2018), Roman Adrian Cybriwsky approaches his subject from the perspectives of geography and urban studies, finding parallels with the national rivers discussed in *Riverscapes*. Cybriwsky states that “The continuity of flow can be seen as metaphor for the continuity of Ukrainian identity over the course of history despite the obstacles, and for a yearning that tomorrow will be better” (9). He also notes the Dnipro’s religious significance, another shared theme. Stories of rivers, then, are expanding in many interesting and multidisciplinary directions, with intriguing potential crossovers, and they will be further amplified in the volume of *RIAS* before you here.

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The process of nation-formation in the United States has so far been surprisingly neglected, and as one commentator put it, America “remains on the sidelines in nationalism studies” (Grant 1997: 89)<sup>4</sup>. This disregard may be because America has not easily fitted models of national development based on European examples, for instance in its relative neglect of the past, or because national identity is simply taken for granted. The process of national-identity formation is always complex, and particularly so in nineteenth-century America, so this chapter can offer only a brief critical overview of some aspects. It focuses on the religious-ethnic and gender contexts of national identity formation in this period, and on the figure of the pioneer, and suggests how some of the iconic paintings of the Hudson River School contributed to the construction of an exclusive national identity. It is clear

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4. This article began its course as a paper entitled “The Chosen People: Hudson Valley Landscapes and American Identity,” presented in April 2003 at the Association of Art Historians Annual Conference, “Articulations,” at Birkbeck and University College, London. The descriptors “American” or “America” are used in this chapter as shorthand alternatives to “the United States.”

that over the course of the nineteenth century a powerful ideology of nationalism, allied to a peculiar sense of divine purpose, was consolidated in America, and I argue that this ideology was supported by a visual discourse of American scenery focused on the Hudson Valley riverscape. During the first half of the century, the American “nation” had fluid boundaries as vast territories were purchased, acquired by treaty, annexed, or taken by force (Foley 1991: 178). There was a diverse and growing population, and an increasing schism between North and South, eventually “resolved” by the Civil War of 1861–1865. It was especially during this period of flux and rapid growth that conscious efforts were made by a group of Northeastern artists and their influential patrons to consolidate and to represent an American national identity through shaping an image of the homeland.

This chapter examines the role of the Hudson River School artists, especially their ‘leader’ Thomas Cole, Asher Brown Durand, Jasper Francis Cropsey, and others,<sup>5</sup> in the creation of a national riverscape that embodied particular conceptions of American identity. The Hudson River School of artists is well known to scholars and students of American art and their contribution to the representation of an American wilderness imagery is acknowledged. However, the extensive art-historical accounts of their work, with a few exceptions (such as Boime 1991; Miller 1993), tend to be celebratory rather than critical and fail to properly examine their art in relation to the representation and creation of American identity. My aim is to remedy this omission by examining not only what was depicted in Hudson River School riverscapes but what was omitted or elided from them, as well as how they became hegemonic images in American art and society.

Hudson River School art created an imagery of the American wilderness, based on the Hudson Valley, that focused on distant horizons and embodied a notion of pioneering Christian endeavor. Such art was encouraged and supported by some of New York’s most powerful figures in the interest of forging a national identity.

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5. The school’s ‘membership’ has varied according to whether it has been restricted to those who remained in the Hudson Valley and had personal connections with Cole or his pupil Frederic Edwin Church, the definition preferred here.

In the first section, I introduce Cole and consider the New York-based patronage that brought his work and that of his associates to prominence.

The second section considers the relation between the wilderness and religion enshrined in Hudson River School art. Recent debates among nationalism scholars have drawn attention to the significance of religion for the construction of national identity. Hudson River School art imbued the riverscape with Christian symbolism and confirmed the wilderness as the special domain of white Americans, whether for future development or aesthetic contemplation. In order to provide a context for the religious symbolism of Hudson River School art, I will examine the dominance of Christian ideology in America at that time. The belief of early settlers that they were a special people sent by God to cultivate the wilderness and to prepare for the millennium persisted. In Protestant eyes, Native Americans were viewed as heathen savages, while Native American men were simultaneously denigrated as effeminate in contrast to the masculinity of the pioneer<sup>6</sup>. As we shall see, the notion of a chosen people had affinities not only with ancient Israel, but also with Britain, the main source of American immigration. I suggest that the wilderness as depicted in key riverscapes of the Hudson River School was associated with the notion of chosenness, as well as with the masculine pioneer, and that Hudson riverscapes tended to be the imagined domain of the white male pilgrim-pioneer, the prototypical American.<sup>7</sup>

The third and fourth parts help to demonstrate the peculiar ideological character of Hudson River School riverscapes, first by showing how they were selected from a wide range of alternative Hudson riverscapes, and second by discussing how

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6. Protestant traditions, especially those that took biblical injunctions literally, sanctioned women's subordination to men. An anonymous critic in Jonathan Elliot's *Guide to the Capitol* of 1830 compared Indian males to women: "the body of a male Indian is as smooth [...] as that of the most delicate white female; and this may be easily accounted for from the indolent and inactive lives they usually lead" (qtd. in Scheckel 1998: 138).

7. The popular figure of the pioneer effectively excluded women as agents of nation-formation. The Fourteenth Amendment of 1868, which conferred universal citizenship on those born or naturalized in the United States, for the first time applied the descriptor "male" to voters (Stansell 2000: 7).

they elided the “Hudson River Indians” from the national scene. In the third section, I argue that many depictions of the Hudson River in the first half of the nineteenth century did not conform to the content or style associated with the Hudson River School, but instead were present-oriented, celebrating the country seats of the wealthy or their leisure accoutrements and activities. Both such riverscapes, depicting the estates and leisure pursuits of the wealthy and the more grandiose visions of the Hudson River School symbolically occluded Native Americans from the riverscape. The fourth section considers how the “Hudson River Indians” were officially regarded and represented at this time in order to explore how and why they were occluded especially from the nationalist vision of the Hudson River School.

The fifth and final part examines a symbolic focus on the future embodied in Hudson River School art. Although Americans looked back to Christopher Columbus as the model for the explorer, and revered the Founding Fathers, the historical past was relatively neglected in favor of a focus on a future rather than a past Golden Age. This derogation of the past arguably resulted from the propensity to deny Native American history as well as a desire to be independent of Europe and its cultivation of ‘history.’ The Hudson River School contributed to this process, especially from mid-century, by helping to affirm a future-oriented and even modern nationalism. As Cole recognized, there was always an inherent conflict between preserving “God’s wilderness” and its future settlement, and this opposition was later played out in pastoral riverscapes framed by the wilderness out of which they were forged. The pioneer identity was broadened during the nineteenth century to embrace the entrepreneur-developer. Land, liberty, and property became the cornerstones of a dynamic masculine progress into the wilderness, and what Albert Boime has called the “magisterial gaze” dominated Hudson riverscapes. In Cole’s riverscapes, however, the distant gaze was arguably that of the aspiring pilgrim and I suggest that the gaze implied in much Hudson River School art was that of the pilgrim-pioneer as well as that of the pioneer-developer. The wilderness riverscape of the Hudson River School thus presented an identifiable, national homeland for exclusive occupancy by Euro-Christian settlers.



It came to represent its seamless transformation into a pastoral and sometimes even technological scene that heralded the nation's future Golden Age still tinged with hopes of the Promised Land.

#### NEW YORK AND THE HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL

The significance attributed to the Hudson and its representations, and its role in the construction of national identity, depended heavily on the hegemonic economic and cultural status of New York, and as we shall see Hudson River School art was peculiarly suited to express contemporary nationalist aspirations. The Hudson River runs to New York Bay from the Adirondack Mountains; at 315 miles in length it is smaller than the Seine and tiny compared to the Mississippi (Mulligan 1985: xvi). However, much of it ran through unknown wilderness. Cole, the pivotal figure in the Hudson River School, enthused in his "Essay on American Scenery" that "[t]he Hudson for [...] magnificence is unsurpassed [...] The Rhine has its castled crags [...] and ancient villages; the Hudson has its wooded mountains, its rugged precipices, its green undulating shores—a natural majesty" (1836: 6). However, Cole also noted the capacity of the Hudson for "improvement by art" (Wilton 2002: 23). The Hudson River School artists learned from the Scottish panorama invented at the end of the eighteenth century. They also admired the picturesque style of Claude Lorrain, with its characteristic pictorial elements of dark foreground, trees framing the composition, water in the middle ground, and distant mountains (Duret-Robert 1982: 100). Cole took up the picturesque theories of Uvedale Price, who believed that the main features of landscape were trees and water (Daniels 1993: 155). Thus for Cole, water was "[a] component of scenery, without which every landscape is defective" (4). Cole made detailed outdoor sketches but combined different scenes or viewpoints in his painting so that "the most lovely and perfect parts of Nature may be brought together, and combined in a whole that shall surpass in beauty and effect any picture painted from a single view" (qtd. in Baigell 1998: 13). This composite method meant that the features of his riverscapes need not be read too literally, thereby allowing greater scope for rhetorical or metaphorical imaginings. It also resulted in an idealized vision of America.

Hudson River School paintings celebrating the wilderness enjoyed a high status not simply as art but as images of the nation, and this status was mainly owing to the patronage of powerful New York patrons. Cole was an English émigré born in Lancashire in 1801 who had moved with his family to the United States in 1818 at age seventeen and in 1825 moved to New York, which possessed a vibrant literary and visual culture. The “Hudson River School” was a derogatory title bestowed on artists centered around Cole, possibly by a critic from the *New York Tribune* in the 1870s,<sup>8</sup> when their panoramic realist pictures of the Hudson Valley were being derided as unfashionable, but both before and after this date their work was admired. Thus Cole was being hailed a few years after his death in 1848 as “our revered Prince [...] our great Cole” (Richards 1854: 258–59).

From the 1820s there was a demand from cultural critics and others for Americans “to produce a literature, a drama, an art that would express and affirm the nation’s distinctive identity” (Scheckel 1998: 8). The influential president of the American Academy of Fine Arts, Colonel John Trumbull, who painted romanticized battle scenes of the American Revolution in which he had fought, had “long sought an artistic expression for his young country” (Lassiter 1978: 9), and he found it in Cole’s work, which he happened upon in 1825. Trumbull showed off Cole’s painting to William Dunlap, artist and art critic of the *New York Mirror*, as well as to Durand (Lassiter 9; National Gallery of Art 2008), and he subsequently introduced Cole to patrons among “rich Federalist families, land-owners, merchants, and lawyer-politicians [...], a kind of American squirearchy” (Hughes 1997: 141). In 1826, Cole became a founding member of the National Academy of Design, the first institution to focus on American art (Minks 1989: 13; National Gallery of Art 2008). One of Cole’s influential patrons was Philip Hone, mayor of New York and one of the richest collectors in the city (Boime 1991: 48). Cole’s art was also taken up by William Cullen Bryant, poet and editor first of the *New York Review* and the *Athenaeum* magazine, then campaigning editor of the *New York Evening Post* (Ringe 1954: 233–34; Lewis 2005: 205). Nathaniel Parker Willis

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8. The originator of the term and its first use are not clear; it may have been published first in the *Art Amateur* in 1879 (Avery 1987: 3–5).

observed how frequently “the pen of the poet and the pencil of the artist [had] united to record the grandeur and sublimity of the Hudson” (1840: 2, 18). Thus Bryant’s verse eulogized the “kingly Hudson” and Cole’s painting similarly idealized it. Artists, writers, lawyers, professors, and merchants with a common interest in the Hudson Valley wilderness met regularly in New York from the 1820s, for instance under the wing of James Fenimore Cooper, whose weekly club meetings at the City Hotel were attended by Cole, Durand, and Bryant (Lassiter 1978: 17–18). Cole and Bryant enjoyed the “wilds” of nature and shared a belief that nature inspired moral and religious feeling; their nationalist vision of America was correspondingly based on its natural scenery and the idea of the sublime, and both represented life and time by a flowing river (Sanford 1957: 434, 437–438, 444). Bryant was later instrumental in encouraging the city to buy the space for Central Park, intended to accommodate “trees from all over the US and twisting paths and lonely dells—a Hudson River painting come to life” (J. Jones 2002: 13).

By mid-century New York was the metropolitan and artistic center of America (Howat 1987: 49). The Hudson River Railroad opened its line between New York and Greenbush on the east bank opposite Albany in 1851, and in the second half of the century the east bank became “the favorite retreat of famous writers, generals, inventors, statesmen; a new class of bewilderingly wealthy entrepreneurs [who] created great landed estates and transformed the banks of the Hudson into one of the most highly-groomed landscapes in all America” (Van Zandt 1992: 271). The owners of these manicured estates were the patrons of wilderness riverscapes of the Hudson. Many Northeastern businessmen enriched themselves in the Civil War and spent large sums on American art (Minks 1989: 17). Thomas Prichard Rossiter’s *A Pic-Nic on the Hudson* (1863) depicted a group of prosperous and stylish neighbors and friends of the artist, some in Federalist uniform, on an outing to Constitution Island, posed under a canopy of carefully delineated native foliage in front of the Hudson. Hudson River School art was supported by such a wealthy and well-connected elite, whose political, business, and cultural/religious interests were served by the new art of American riverscape. For many years, the work

of the group of artists around Cole, and later around his pupil Frederic Edwin Church, was feted, and Hudson River School paintings were engraved and popularized as prints. “We can’t conceive of how revered these artists were. They were the celebrities of their day” (qtd. in Berman 58). Several of the artists moved out of New York next to the river, Cole to Catskill Village, and Church and Cropsey to large houses with Hudson views. When Cole decided to visit Europe, Bryant addressed a sonnet to him (“To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe”) warning Cole not to be seduced by European scenery to the neglect of the United States (Lassiter 1978: 25–26), a reminder of how closely the nationalist project was controlled by a coterie of influential and determined New York men.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE WILDERNESS RIVERSCAPE AND THE PROMISED LAND

The formation of national identity in nineteenth-century America depended on a Christian ethos that was enshrined in Hudson River School art and closely associated with the image of the wilderness. As Clifford Longley has observed, before and after the Revolution “the likening of the North American continent to a Promised Land is a strong element in the emerging sense of American nationhood” (2003: 228). There was a widespread belief that America had the key role to play in preparing for the millennium (Tuveson 1980: vii–x): “The notion of the redeemer nation, and of the special role of the United States in the divine plan for the world, was a commonplace of Victorian America” (Parish 15). In this scheme of things, Native Americans were regarded as obstacles, even by Puritans as “Satan’s disciples” (Mihesuah 1996: 40). The Church in America was and remains nonestablished, and it has been suggested that the United States led Europe in breaking the relationship between Church and State (Nye 1966: 46). However, religion remained central to American institutions and national identity in the form of what Robert N. Bellah termed the “American civil religion”; this encompassed a belief in the nation’s divine destiny and was closely identified in the nineteenth century with Protestantism (Bellah 2005: 40–55; Cherry 1998: 8–10, 14; Parish 2003: 18, 62;

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9. In Russia a little later, Ilya Repin was to be reminded by nationalist friends to paint the Russian scene, not Paris (see Chapter 5, “Our Russian Essence,” in Cusack’s *Riverscapes and National Identities*).

see also Hudson 1970: xxiii, 103–4). The civil religion drew on biblical events as “archetypes” and on key events in American history such as the Revolution as revelatory of divine favor, while the Civil War was interpreted as a redemptive event recalling America to its “destiny under God” (Bellah 2005: 47–48; Hudson 1970: 74; Cherry 1998: 10–11, 168). Until well after the turn of the twentieth century in America, “theological language, religious metaphors, and biblical allusions were as characteristic of political discourse and historical writing as they were of sermonic literature” (Hudson 1970: xi) and they are not uncommon today. A Nonconformist tradition had persisted in America since the seventeenth century, and many had seen the wilderness as a place to enact their version of practical Christianity. For Thomas Jefferson, farmers colonizing the wilderness were “the chosen people of God” and America’s liberty was a God-given birthright (Foley 1991: 9).<sup>10</sup>

The idea of chosenness can be located in the broader debate in nationalism studies concerning the significance of religion to national identity-formation (Anderson 1991; Hastings 1997: 1; Cusack 1997: 77). According to Anthony Smith, the idea of a chosen people is intimately bound up with the possession of religious faith and it has been pervasive in different periods and places, as well as a persistent characteristic of nationalist ideology and nation-states (Smith 1999: 332, 335).<sup>11</sup> The English regarded themselves as an elect people, as Adrian Hastings argued, after the Reformation, together with the English defeat of the Spanish Armada, “and [...]the establishment of emphatically Protestant colonies in America [...] combined to convince the English that they were, within the Christian world, a chosen people” (1999: 393). Hastings’s characterization draws together some common threads of nationalist ideology: a masculine militarism and adventurism, supported by religious conviction. At the end of the eighteenth century, 70 percent of Americans were of English or Welsh descent

10. Jefferson owned slaves; so did Washington (Grant 1997: 84).

11. The Old Testament model of divine favor accorded to a particular ethnic group was adopted not only among Jews, but by many others, including the Afrikaners who migrated from the Cape Colony into the wild interior in the 1830s: “The Great Trek was their exodus; their wandering in the wilderness [...] their [...] journey to the Promised Land” (Cauthen 1997: 118).

and a further 15 percent were of Scottish or Irish descent (Maidment and McGrew 1991: 13). It was arguably this English militant and Protestant sense of ethnic chosenness, transplanted to America, that eventually formed part of a newly constituted American identity, underpinning what Smith terms the “national mission,” namely “to create and preserve a distinctive, united and autonomous nation” (Smith 1999: 333). Cole himself, for example, came from an English Nonconformist background. Although the nation was ostensibly secular, the civil religion dominated by Protestantism became the core of national identity; the notion of chosenness was deeply inculcated and intimately associated with the natural scene as a manifestation of the Promised Land.

Cole’s beliefs, and those of other Hudson River School artists such as Durand and Church, were consistent with the discourse defining America as a Promised Land, and their writings make clear that their art was intended to depict nature infused with a sense of the “divine.” Cole was a devout Christian brought up in England as a Nonconformist who then entered the Episcopalian Church (Storr 1994: 26). He wrote that “[i]t was on Mount Horeb that Elijah [...] heard the ‘still small voice’—that voice is YET heard among the mountains! [...] the wilderness is YET a fitting place to speak to God” (1836: 2). Cole saw the wilderness as an “undefiled” paradise associated with the biblical wilderness (4), a religiosity expressed in his art. Church similarly saw himself as a prophet for America’s divine mission (Barringer 2002: 54). Like Ruskin, whose *Modern Painters* (1843–1860) was much admired in the United States, the painters of the Hudson River School observed the landscape as God’s handiwork, and Durand wrote in *The Crayon* in 1855 that “the true province of Landscape Art is the representation of the work of God in the visible creation” (qtd. in Ferber 2007: 248).<sup>12</sup> For these devout Protestant painters of the Hudson River School, the wilderness was perceived as a kind of untouched creation of God (Hughes 1997: 138), and their art fitted the religious aspirations of the young nation.

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12. Durand saw America as a specially chosen land, declaiming in a speech of 1817, “America is the last hope of human greatness [...] it is the last asylum for the rights of man; the hand of the Eternal guards it from destruction!” (qtd. in Durand 2007: 31).

By the nineteenth century the ideology of chosenness was unquestioned, and it was maintained in much art and literature. For example, William S. Jewett's painting entitled *Promised Land* (1850) focused on a pioneer family in the wilderness, the man in buckskins resting confidently on his rifle and a seated woman holding a child on her knee in the style of conventional depictions of the Madonna and child. Herman Melville in his autobiographical novel *White Jacket* (1850) confided in his readers:

We Americans are the peculiar, chosen people—the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world [...] God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race [...] The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are the pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours. (142–43)

Washington Irving, who according to Edgar Mayhew Bacon “may almost be said to have discovered the Hudson” through his writings (1903: 246), in 1820 advised that “[h]e [...] who would study nature in its wildness [...] must plunge into the forest [...] must stem the torrent, and dare the precipice” (Roque 1987: 23); that is, the writer or artist himself must become a pioneer. The wilderness quest could be an actual physical one, or experienced imaginatively through the mediums of visual and verbal descriptions. It has been suggested that whereas European depictions of nature presented the viewer with a “bucolic object of contemplation,” American scenes encouraged participation (Aikin 2000: 84). Just as pilgrims (or pioneers) traveling together forge a common identity as a result of their shared experience (Anderson 1991: 53–54), the actual or imagined trek into the wilderness would help to shape a new American identity. Thus urban dwellers looking at Hudson River School paintings could travel in their mind's eye toward and up the Hudson, imaginatively joining in the pilgrimage of the pioneer. In this way, Hudson River School paintings contributed to a process of imagining a national identity based on a fictive experience of the wilderness, assuming the active role of the masculine pilgrim-pioneer. American identity became associated with this “pioneering spirit” and with a notion of chosenness, which in turn were associated with a white Protestant masculinity: “America was seen as a second Garden

of Eden and the American as a second Adam” (Foley 1991: 9).<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, the appropriation of a “pristine” natural riverscape as well as the incorporation of Christian symbolism formed part of this discourse.

The association between the wilderness and American national identity was created in the nineteenth century. Earlier settlers, despite their hopes and beliefs, had found America to be a “horrible wilderness” (Hastings 1997: 78). American scenery had initially been perceived as historically impoverished and unrefined in comparison to European landscape, “rude without picturesqueness” (Cole 1836: 3), but it was then realized that its wildness and “emptiness” could serve as its point of difference. For Cole, who set out for his first extended sketching expedition along the Hudson in 1825 (National Gallery of Art 2008), the wildness of American scenery was its distinctive and impressive feature and the subject should be of “surpassing interest” to every American: “it is his own land [...] and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!” (1836: 1). With the enthusiasm of the converted, Cole became a passionate advocate of America and its boundless possibilities. Thus in his lecture published as “Essay on American Scenery” he claimed that

American associations are not so much of the past as of the present and the future [...] look down into the bosom of that secluded valley [...] a silver stream winds lingeringly along [...] on its banks are rural dwellings shaded by elms and garlanded by flowers [...] freedom’s offspring—peace, security, and happiness, dwell there [...] And in looking over the yet uncultivated scene, the mind’s eye may see far into futurity. Where the wolf roams, the plough shall glisten; on the gray crag shall rise temple and tower—mighty deeds shall be done in the now pathless wilderness. (8)

Cole’s American future is to be a Golden Age of monumental architecture and glorious deeds. Although Cole criticized the “barbarism” with which the wildernesses were being cleared, he claimed, “We are still in Eden” (9). His American present is an idyllic valley, its riverbanks dotted with bucolic residences and emanating vir-

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13. The women’s movement in nineteenth-century America found it necessary to appeal to the “secular rhetoric” of the Revolution and Enlightenment in order to try to improve their status (Perry 1993: 73).



tues of liberty and happiness. As explained in *The Literary World* (1852), “the strongest feeling of the American is to that which is new and fresh—to the freedom of the [...] forests—to the energy of the wild life. He may look with *interest* to the ruins of Italy, but with *enthusiasm* to the cabin of the pioneer” (Roque 1987: 39).

The God-fearing pioneer was a key figure in the development of an American identity and often represented or implied in Hudson River School scenes. In mid-nineteenth-century America, “statesmen, survey leaders, and artists and writers saw themselves [...] in the image of the early explorers” (Truettner 10), and American presidential candidates were apt to draw on their “log-cabin origins” (Baigell 1998: 78).<sup>14</sup> An engraving for a banknote of ca. 1852–1857 (fig. 1) shows a broad-chested pioneer clearing trees and turning to look back at his cabin: a popular image that by now was emblematic of a discourse of the God-fearing American pioneer establishing himself in the Promised Land.



Fig. 1. Rawdon, Wright, Hatch, and Edson (New York). Proof for banknote vignette, ca. 1852–57. Engraving. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Cole’s *Home in the Woods* (1847), commissioned by the American Art Union, depicts, atypically for Cole, a domesticated pioneer riverscape. An idealized happy family—mother, two children, and grandmother—is seen gathered outside their tidy log cabin, to greet the father who waves as he returns shouldering his catch. The river here is not a distant object, but runs almost

14. Cole may have been referring to the Whig politician William Henry Harrison, whose presidential campaign in 1840 made such a claim (Baigell 1998: 78).

into the foreground and its purpose is utilitarian, to provide food. Beside the cabin, kitchen utensils are drying and washing hangs on the line. However, the glow of an evening sun suffuses the whole scene, and the riverscape is framed by the following elevated verse: “And minds have there been nurtured, whose control / Is felt even in their nation’s destiny; / Men who swayed senates with a statesman’s soul / And looked on armies with a leader’s eye” (qtd. in Baigell 1998: 78).

In Cole’s art, the farseeing gaze could have an allegorical aspect, the journey to the horizon being that of the pilgrim seeking salvation as well as the imagined route of the pioneer. The dissenting culture with which Cole was familiar rejected traditional religious art, but it encouraged the use of religious emblems or symbols (Wallach 1977: 235), and Cole imbued the Hudson riverscape with more or less overt Christian symbolism. For example, Cole’s *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains* (also known as *Sunny Morning on the Hudson River*) (1827; fig. 2) depicts a rough and uncomfortable foreground with broken rocks and blasted trees. An abandoned Indian altar appears to confirm the demise of Native American history and religion and the present vacancy of the land. However, a prominent, dark mound of hillside cuts diagonally across the picture space, obstructing the view and the passage



Fig. 2. Thomas Cole, *View of the Round-Top in the Catskill Mountains*, 1827. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reprinted by permission.

to the river. Although several distant sailing boats are visible, the sign of “civilization,” the river is depicted as far away, pale and serene against a golden horizon. The overall effect is one of a future riverscape of tranquility difficult to attain—requiring a pioneering effort as well as a kind of “pilgrim’s progress” toward it (as in John Bunyan’s Christian allegory).

Cole’s celebrated series *The Voyage of Life*, consisting of four riverscapes based on the Hudson Valley and the Catskills (Richards 1854: 259), can be seen to represent a pioneering American Christian identity in the making. Commissioned by a New York merchant, Samuel Ward, for his private chapel (Minks 1989: 13), this series was painted ca. 1839–1840. Because of problems exhibiting the paintings,<sup>15</sup> Cole repeated the whole series with minor variations in 1841–1842, which indicates how important he regarded a public viewing of this series to be. *The Voyage of Life* again depends on the trope of the masculine explorer, steering himself along an uncharted river, aided only by religious faith. The series represents the archetypal spiritual quest, once more along the lines of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), in which the allegorical hero, Christian, reaches the River of the Water of Life that sustains him, as well as the River of Death that leads him to Heaven.

The four river scenes of *The Voyage of Life* symbolize the passage of an individual life (*Childhood; Youth* [fig. 3, on the following page]; *Manhood; Old Age*) and are rooted in Christian symbolism: the River of Life; the guardian angel; and the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed they may have been based on a sermon by the Reverend Reginald Heber on the theme “Life bears us on like the stream of a mighty river” (Wallach 1977: 239; Baigell 1998: 62).

The riverscapes include the guardian angel of Christian mythology as the life companion of a male figure voyaging along the river in a small boat. In an accompanying text, Cole

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15. Ward died before Cole completed the series, and following a dispute his heirs refused to allow it to be exhibited, so Cole decided to repaint the series, which he did in Rome based on watercolors from the originals (Lassiter 1978: 51; Wallach 1977: 234). The first series is now in the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York, and the second is in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Unless otherwise stated, my comments on individual pictures are based on the first series.



Fig. 3. Thomas Cole, *The Voyage of Life: Youth*, 1842. Oil on canvas; 52 7/8 x 76 3/4 in. (134.3 x 194.9 cm). Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1971.16.2.

explained that the boat was borne out of the cavern “our earthly origin” down the “Stream of Life” (Wallach 1977: 239). *Childhood* depicts a baby protected by this shining winged figure emerging from the cavern in his boat into a landscape of curious vegetation, where according to Cole “the luxuriant flowers and plants, are emblems of the joyousness of early life [...] the Egyptian Lotus, in the foreground [...] is symbolical of human life” (Wallach 1977: 239). The boat is a hybrid of an Indian canoe and a Viking warship with a gilt sculptural angel for a figurehead. *Youth* has a bold young man setting forth upriver, his guardian angel seeing him off from the bank. The vegetation again is an exotic and unnatural mixture of desert palms, succulents, and spreading deciduous trees, with a rocky mountainous landscape in the background, possibly representing future pleasures and trials. The youth gestures toward a pale castle in the sky, surrounded by a giant halo. The castle, more pronounced in the second series where a stray branch also “points” toward it, recalls the mythological sky chariot in Poussin’s *The Kingdom of Flora* (n.d.) and represented the heavenly kingdom. The river winds around the woodland and heads toward the rocks in a symbolic move into the trials of adulthood, confirmed in *Manhood* as the adult is borne on rapids through a rocky chasm, with recourse only to prayer: the angelic figurehead here serves as a surrogate for the guard-

ian angel. Finally, in *Old Age* the boat arrives on calm but dark waters, its white-haired occupant in prayer, while the guardian angel reappears, gesticulating toward the brilliant “Haven of Immortal Life” signified by further angelic figures.

The series thus conflates an imagery of a pioneering struggle against nature (albeit nature of a rarified kind) with that of Christian spiritual trials. *The Voyage of Life* was enormously popular, contributing to the fact that when Cole died, he was the most celebrated artist in America. A memorial exhibition of the series in 1848 drew a half-million visitors, and engravings of *The Voyage of Life* were to be found in domestic parlors all over America (Wallach 1977: 234; Hughes 1997: 150). *The Voyage of Life*, drawing on the Hudson Valley wilderness and incorporating well-known Christian emblems, established a powerful and popular symbolism of pioneering valor and Christian fortitude in which Americans clearly recognized an image of themselves.

#### HUDSON VIEWS AND RIVERSIDE LEISURE

Hudson River School art, as we have seen, presented a natural image of America that was endowed with Christian “spirituality” and encouraged a pioneering expansion toward far horizons. However, not all Hudson riverscapes embodied such grandiose aims. Although the Hudson River School drew most attention from contemporaries, as well as from subsequent historians, many riverscapes were produced that were not by “members” of the Hudson River School, or that diverged from the dominant ethos. Riverscapes of the Hudson were popular from the early nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> As well as paintings, a large industry in engravings and lithographic prints of the Hudson River developed over the nineteenth century and photographic views became common later. The hallmark of Hudson River School art was its depiction of wilderness scenery in a sublime style. However many Hudson views, whether for common use or designed for exhibition, were neither unpopulated nor sublime. There was a variety of riverscapes in different media all designed to show

16. Until this time, portraiture was the dominant art form, while the history painting popular in Europe was less successful in the United States (Lassiter 1978: x).

off the attributes of the Hudson and its function as a pleasurable and wealthy place to live and to visit, and I will briefly discuss some examples below.

Thus *Hudson River Scene* (fig. 4), a circular riverscape of about 1850 painted in oil on wood by an anonymous American artist for the top of a keg (Howat, *Hudson River and Its Painters* 150), is an engaging piece of naïve art representing a section of the Hudson as a blue pool surrounded by detached houses, a castle, and a church, amid trees with prominent bulrushes and oversized geese, a neat and self-contained little idyll without a far horizon to disturb its tranquility.



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Fig. 4. Unknown artists, *Hudson River Scenes*, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Museum Purchase. Reprinted by permission.

*Outing on the Hudson* (ca. 1875; fig. 5), possibly showing the Catskills, was again painted by an anonymous American artist in a naïve style, and it shows a similar bounded scene where well-dressed adults and children walk and converse on a grassy knoll edged with a variety of trees next to the water (Little 1957: 92; Howat 1972: 157).



Fig. 5. Unknown artists, *Hudson River Scenes*, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Museum Purchase. Reprinted by permission.

The hills in the background are not shown in aerial perspective, but in saturated green and blue-green much like the foreground, so that again there is little sense of an expansive horizon. W.J. Bennett in 1831 produced an engraving from his own painting *West Point from Phillipstown* in which a pair of contented goats and varied flora occupy the foreground, and a section of the river, full of boats, is surrounded protectively by wooded hills; although a gap in the hills indicates where the river flows from the highlands, the river is concealed at that point, so that the focus of the picture remains on fore and middle ground.

William Guy Wall, an Irish immigrant who had arrived in America the same year as Cole, painted a series of watercolors of the Hudson, reproduced as aquatints by John Hill under the title *Hudson River Port Folio* (1828). Wall's text deliberately highlighted the properties of the rich landowners who could afford to buy his product

(see Boime 1991: 28–34). Thomas Doughty, whose work Cole first admired in the 1820s, was typically commissioned by wealthy Americans to depict their estates (Minks 1989: 9, 20). Thus Doughty's *Autumn on the Hudson* (1850) focuses on a house nestling by the water, with fine autumnal trees framing the river and a domestic group of woman, child, and pet dog; the scene is present-orientated with the Hudson constituting a pleasant view for the house rather than pointing to any distant utopia.

Colored drawings of the Hudson Valley by the English watercolorist William Henry Bartlett were engraved for a volume entitled *American Scenery: or, Land, Lake, and River Illustrations of Transatlantic Nature* (Willis 1840) published in London and New York. Bartlett's riverscapes were topographical views with towns, villages, riverside mansions, and parks, often populated with visitors, the river filled with sailing boats; for the most part these are not sublime wilderness views. For example, Bartlett's *Albany* depicts the town on the hill across the busy Hudson, with carefully drawn flora focusing attention on the foreground banks. William Hart's slightly later riverscape of the same place, *Albany, New York, from Bath* (oil on canvas, 1846), showed the town across the river through a line of summer trees with the focus on the river and trees that cut across the canvas and beyond that on the buildings rising up the banks. Hyde Park by the Hudson was the site of "several very pretty country seats" admired by visitors such as James Silk Buckingham, founder of the *Athenaeum* (1838; see Van Zandt 1992: 221, 228) and where Harriet Martineau recorded seeing "some pleasant society" (1835; see Van Zandt 1992: 215); Bartlett's *View from Hyde Park (Hudson River)* depicts a parklike area with a smooth grass verge edged with trees where a family grouping with children sit on a bench and chair or on the lawn, overlooking a calm riverscape milling with sailing boats. *View from Ruggle's House, Newburgh (Hudson River)* frames the river, again filled with small boats, with a grand portico, one of its columns encircled with a vine. In Bartlett's *Villa on the Hudson, near Weehawken* the vision of men gazing from a height across the river terminates not in a magnificent horizon but with a large colonnaded villa on the cliff.



His *Undercliff Near Cold Spring*, as Willis's accompanying text points out, depicts the seat of General George P. Morris, on the eastern bank of the Hudson where "the selection of such a commanding and beautiful position at once decides the taste of its intellectual proprietor" (1840: 19). Morris was a poet who celebrated the Hudson in his verse, and editor of the *New York Mirror*, a weekly paper that "circulates more extensively among the élite than any other periodical in the country" (Willis 1840: 20), and his connections with the Hudson as a wealthy resident, writer, and influential editor and as the subject of visual art was not uncommon.

Comparing such images with riverscapes in the elevated style of the Hudson River School serves to demonstrate the ideological character of the sublime riverscapes and far horizons of the more celebrated works, which were sometimes deliberately constructed out of diverse views to produce a harmonious and awe-inspiring whole. For example, we can compare *View of Troy* (ca. 1850; fig. 6), attributed to Asher Brown Durand and later to William Richardson Tyler,<sup>17</sup> with *View near Lansingburgh, Looking Toward Troy, on the River* (ca. 1850; fig. 7), attributed to James McDougal Hart. Whereas Tyler's picture focuses on a distant view of the river, framed by even more distant pale hills on the horizon, Hart's painting shows the river as a scene of pleasure enjoyed by a top-hatted gentleman driving a phaeton followed by a smartly attired gentleman and lady on horseback with their pet dog running alongside, a picture of the affluent classes at leisure.<sup>18</sup> The figures and horses may

17. *View of Troy* is attributed to Durand by John K. Howat (1972: 183, plate 88). Tammis K. Groft has informed me that this painting was purchased by Albany Institute of History and Art in 1950 from the John Levy Galleries, New York City, as *View of Troy by Asher B. Durand* but that in 1990 the museum reattributed the painting to William Richardson Tyler (Tammis K. Groft, Albany Institute of History and Art, personal communication, 27 Aug. 2008). A date of ca. 1850 has recently been suggested for the picture, based on information provided by E. Walter Wheeler (Tammis K. Groft, personal communication, 28 and 29 Aug. 2008).

18. *View near Lansingburgh* is also known as *The Burden Family Enjoying the Hudson River Near Troy* and dated ca. 1860; Mr. Burden was a wealthy manufacturer in Troy (A.H. Jones 1958: 48).



Fig. 6. William Richardson Tyler, *View of Troy, on the River*, ca. 1850. Oil on canvas; 23 5/8 × 39 1/4 in. (60 × 99.7 cm). Albany Institute of History and Art, 1950.3. Reprinted by permission.



Fig. 7. James Hart, *View near Lansingburgh, Looking toward Troy, on the River*, ca. 1850. Oil on canvas; 36 1/4 × 54 in. (92 × 137.2 cm). Albany Institute of History and Art, 1943.8. Reprinted by permission.

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have been painted by Arthur Fitzwilliam Tait, known for his sporting scenes (A.H. Jones 1958: 48). In *View of Troy* the riverscape is framed by a forest in rich autumnal coloring typical of the Hudson Valley, the town of Troy is represented by its church steeples, and the whole is lit by a pink and gold-tinted sky, so that the scene is one of unity and harmony, the river wending into a distant horizon of hills toward the sea. *View of Troy* can also be compared to Durand's pupil John William Casilear's less well-known summer scene *Upper Hudson River Landscape*, which has a similar format of tree-covered hill overlooking the distant river, but lacks the golden coloring and the focus on the horizon. While intimate views of leisure focused on present pleasure, or hilltop views like Casilear's presented a pleasant scene, *View of Troy* presented an allegory of the future, a necessary ingredient of a nationalist art, especially in the United States, and it was such riverscapes that became hegemonic as the image of the nation.

#### "A WHITE MAN'S COUNTRY"

##### NATIVE AMERICANS AND HUDSON RIVER SCHOOL ART

This American nationalist project depended on the processes of exclusion that typically characterize national identity formation. I want to focus here especially on the symbolic exclusion of Native Americans furthered by official art and, I suggest, in riverscapes of the Hudson River School. Ernest Gellner has argued that national identity depends on cultural homogeneity (1983: 138, 141), but cultural homogeneity has often been achieved through a process of exclusions and even genocide. The French historian Gérard Prunier has stated that "the first modern genocide was that of the American Indians" (1995: 238). The new nation debarred women from full citizenship, enslaved black people, and allowed "the genocidal clearance of Indian tribes from their lands" (Foley 1991: 24). Hastings has raised the question of whether "the whole nationalist notion of an 'exclusively chosen' people from Israel on [was] inherently prone to genocide" (1999: 381, 395), and for Native Americans, perceived as savages, the outcome of European settlement was indeed genocide. The reasons for the persecution and misrepresentation of Native Americans

were to be found partly in the belief of waves of new settlers that America was their Promised Land, together with the working out of nationalist ideology. Such ideology was supported by the riverscapes of the Hudson River School that perpetuated the imagining of the brave Christian explorer/settler and the savage native.

Thus Cole described Indians as almost bestially savage (1836: 3), and he painted a version of the popular captivity theme entitled *Indian Sacrifice* (1827) in which a pleading white woman is about to be slaughtered by Indians in a wilderness setting of rocks and dead trees.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, Hudson River School paintings showed the land as abandoned by Native Americans, as in Cole's *View of the Round-Top*, or they were confined to the margins of the riverscape as if lacking the pilgrim's or the pioneer's ability or will to progress, or simply included as picturesque ornaments. Not only Hudson River School painters but subsequent art historical scholars have colluded in the symbolic marginalization of Native Americans in the national riverscape. For example, a quite recent historian of Cole's work has observed uncritically that in his *Falls of Kaaterskill* (1826) "Cole placed an Indian in the center of the composition to suggest the primitive, unspoiled quality of the setting as well as to give scale to the seemingly limitless spaces" (Baigell 1998: 32). This reading no doubt meets Cole's purpose but typically glosses over the subtext of the work, the relegation of Native Americans and the implication for the construction of national identity.

When the English explorer Henry Hudson reached the river in 1609, which he called "River of the Mountains" after its Algonquin name (Sylvester 1877: 37), ten thousand Indians lived along its banks. By the late eighteenth century they had been decimated by wars, disease, and persecution, while others had sold or lost their lands and migrated westward. Some of the main tribes in the Hudson

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19. Asher Brown Durand in a public address at Springfield Presbyterian Church in 1817 spoke rousing of "the groans of your murdered brethren under all the agonies of the ruthless tomahawk and scalping-knife" and of avenging the "fair daughters of America" (qtd. in Durand 2007: 32). The theme of Indian savagery/European female captivity became an established motif of art and literature (Fryd 1987: 25-33).

Valley had originally migrated east from the West, the later white progress westward being a mirror image of this migration. One group had come from the “western part of the American continent” believing they were destined by the “Great Spirit” to settle in the Hudson region (Ruttenber 1971: 45–47; see also Dunn 2000: 161); this was their chosen land. In the early nineteenth century there were still Mahican (or Mohican) families living along the Hudson although the Indian Removal Act of 1830 ensured further migration west (Scheckel 1998: 101–102). Around this time, Robert W. Weir’s popular riverscape *The Landing of Henry Hudson* (ca. 1838) depicted Hudson’s sailing ship, the *Half Moon*, lying at anchor, bathed in white light. Indians overlooking the river stand amid dead and blasted trees, while two of the smaller figures gesture in supplication. The message here seems to be that Hudson’s landing was accepted because the Indians subsisted in a dead land, awaiting revitalization by the white man. Yet the Dutch who arrived in the area in the 1600s had been impressed by the fertility of the soil, the “sweetness of the air,” and the Indians’ prosperity (Dunn 2000: 13, 15).

Until the 1780s, the American colonies were popularly designated by American and European artists by “a somewhat romanticized [American] Indian princess” as in John Dixon’s *The Oracle* (1774) (Colley 1996: 141). At the same time, she is depicted in the shadows as a savage with primitive weaponry. Linda Colley, for whom the figure evoked the “noble savage,” suggests that this portrayal depended on the fact that “[the] white inhabitants had yet to evolve a recognizable and autonomous identity” (141). Even if this were so, the Indian princess is used in a way long typical of allegorical female figures; that is, she represented a power with which she could not possibly be associated in actuality (Warner 1987: xx). Native American culture was officially perceived as both heathen and savage, and from the Revolution to the Civil War, “the United States became more conspicuously and self-consciously a white man’s country” (Parish 2003: 8). The US House Committee on Indian Affairs in 1818 reported that “[i]n the present state of our country one of two things seem [*sic*] to be necessary, either that those sons of the forest should be *moralized or exterminated*” (Gibbons 2000: 210, my emphasis).

A major cultural symbol of the new nation was the US Capitol, reconstructed from 1825, and an important theme of Capitol art was the relations between Euro-Americans and Indians (Scheckel 1998: 129). In this discourse, American Indian males were cast as savages.<sup>20</sup> White women, meanwhile, were either depicted as allegorical figures or appeared as “the helpless victim who requires and reveals the virtue and strength of the heroic Euro-American male” (139), as in Horatio Greenough’s marble statue *The Rescue* (1837–50; fig. 8), installed in 1853 at the top of steps to the portico.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 8. Horatio Greenough, *The Rescue*, Architect of the Capitol. Reprinted by permission.

20. Causici’s *Conflict of Daniel Boone and the Indians* (the US Capitol, 1826–1827, South Door) was described as “contrasting the cool intrepidity of the hero with the ferocity of the savage” in Jonathan Elliot, *Guide-book to the US Capitol*, 1830 (Scheckel 1998: 137).

21. *The Rescue* was installed by Robert Mills in 1853, after Greenough’s death (1852). It was removed from the Capitol for building work in 1958 and never reinstated; in 1976 it was broken while being moved by crane and is now stored in fragments (Fryd 1987: 17, 20).

A review of this work in the *Bulletin of the American Art-Union* (1851) noted “the ferocious and destructive instinct of the savage, and his easy subjugation under the *superior manhood* of the new colonist” (qtd. in Fryd 1987: 34, my emphasis). For European-Americans in the nineteenth century, then, the Indian signified an aggressive or unmanly “savage” failing to match the vigor or the valor of the Euro-American male.

In contrast to Weir’s riverscape demarcating Hudson’s ship from the space occupied by the Indians, an illustration in Edward M. Ruttenber’s *History of the Indian Tribes of Hudson’s River* (1872), entitled *The Half Moon off Yonkers*, shows Hudson’s ship close inshore being approached by a number of peaceable Indian canoes, while groups of dignified Indians watch from the adjacent cliffs and rocks; in the foreground, a border of fresh leaves represents a green and fertile land. Ruttenber was a well-known local historian and publisher based in Newburgh on the Hudson River. His history was an attempt to correct the stereotypes of Hudson Valley Indians as “primitive savages” using “original sources of information” given that, as Ruttenber says, “the history of the Indians who occupied the valley of Hudson’s river [had] never been written” (1971: iii).<sup>22</sup> His account showed them to have a sophisticated and democratic way of life, and his conclusions are well supported by later historical studies of the river Indians, for example, by Shirley W. Dunn (2000). He discusses the three “great divisions or nations” represented in the Hudson Valley, the Iroquois, the Mahicans, and the Lenni Lenapes or Delawares, and describes the Indians’ well-built houses and elaborate clothing (Ruttenber 1971: 8–9, 21–22, 35). Dunn draws attention also to the varied diet of the Hudson Valley Indians, and their uses of the river not only to fish, but to cultivate maize, beans, and squash in its rich alluvial soil (15, 27–28). Much of the cultivation and food storage was organized by women, who were also landholders. However Dunn argues that “once Christianity took hold [women] lost their tribal prominence in land transactions. This was encouraged particularly

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22. There had been many attempts to account for the origins of the Native Americans, including an account by James Adair (1775), who lived among them for thirty years and believed them to be “descendants of the Israelites, the lost tribes” (Ruttenber 1971: 16).

by the English, who were uncomfortable with women as landholders” (2000: 19, 271). Ruttenber notes with approval the Indians’ democratic structures for regulating tribal life, and even holds up the decision-making practices of the Lenapes as an exemplar of that cherished “balancing principle” of the American Constitution: “In the government of the Lenapes the perfect liberty of the people was the fundamental law, and absolute unanimity the only recognized expression of the popular will. A more perfect system of checks and balances the wisdom of civilized nations has not devised” (Ruttenber 1971: 47). Even for Ruttenber, however, the Indians’ religion was not quite on a level with that of his own society: “As the term is generally understood, they had no religion, but in its place a rude system in which they looked ‘through nature up to nature’s God’” (27).

Despite accounts such as Ruttenber’s, America in the nineteenth century was reinvented as “empty territory” and Native Americans were effectively unrepresented, and this vacancy and occlusion were key factors in the definition of an American identity. For example, the discovery of the sources of the Hudson by two American geologists in 1837 has been taken to represent the earliest finding regardless of the history and knowledge of Native Americans living along the river (Van Zandt 1992: 239).<sup>23</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell commented that landscape functioned as the “‘dreamwork’ of imperialism” (1994: 10) and in the United States visual depictions of the land—drawing and painting—typically involved the erasure of Native American culture. Joshua Shaw, an English émigré landscape painter in the 1820s, commented that “America only, of all the countries of civilized man, is unsung and undescribed” (qtd. in Barringer 2002: 43). The riverscapes of the Hudson River School, as well as the many views of the riverside estates owned by elite New Yorkers, clearly contributed to this symbolic erasure.

#### A FUTURE-ORIENTED NATIONALISM: THE SETTLED RIVERSCAPE

Constructing a national history for the United States was problematic insofar as its past was tainted by the suppression

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23. The Hudson’s highest source, Lake Tear of the Clouds, was found in 1872 (Howat 1972: 53).



of the Native Americans as well as interwoven with the struggle for independence, although Susan-Mary Grant believes that “the search for a usable past is one of the defining features of American national construction” (1998: 178).<sup>24</sup> There was some attempt to invoke a European classical heritage, with such popular works as Hiram Powers’s marble statue *The Greek Slave* (ca. 1843), which although a female nude managed to acquire religious symbolism and a chaste reputation as “the triumph of Christian virtue” (Hughes 1997: 218). However classicism declined in popularity from the 1820s (Perry 1993: 55), especially as the value of indigenous, that is, American representations grew. Between 1840 and 1860 waves of paintings of Columbus and scenes of exploration and discovery were exhibited in New York and elsewhere. Columbus was portrayed as the model for the pioneer, taking Christianity and civilization into new lands, providing a parallel for contemporary ambitions. Luigi Persico’s statue *Discovery of America*, installed at the Capitol in 1844 and a companion piece to Greenough’s *Rescue*, looked back to Columbus, who is shown clothed in armor, although with a classical drape, and holding aloft a globe as he strides past a nearly naked Indian woman (see Fryd 1997: 20–21, 24). This national monument once more represented the necessary triumph of European “civilization” over Native American “savagery.”

There were other efforts to construct a national history with appropriate myths and symbols drawing on the Founding Fathers for legitimacy and later, paradoxically, on the Civil War.<sup>25</sup> However, the very brevity of this past deemed usable meant that it depended on the invocation of recent historical figures, and, however mythologized, they could not be so malleable for nationalist purposes as mythical characters or more distant historical figures. For contemporary analysts, and later historians comparing America with Europe, the nation seemed to have arisen quickly, and necessarily “most backward glances extended only a short way,

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24. Peter Parish goes further and calls the idea that nineteenth-century Americans were not interested in their national past a dangerous fallacy (2003: 10).

25. Both North and South in the Civil War looked back to the Revolution as the basis for their claims for union or for secession (Grant 1998: 170).

to the supposedly simpler communities of a generation before or, at most, to Puritan villages” (Perry 1993: 61; see also Hudson 1970: xix; Tuveson 1980: 156). This neglect of history compared to Europe arguably led to a kind of lopsidedness in American nationalism compared to European nationalisms, that is, an over-emphasis on the future at the expense of the past, together with a perceived ability to move into the future unencumbered by custom. There was consequently an emphasis as we have seen on the heroic forward-moving actions of explorers and pioneers, associated with a focus on the natural scene as a metaphor for the country and its future. As Willis commented, “His [the American’s] mind, as he tracks the broad rivers of his own country, is perpetually reaching forward” (qtd. in Boime 1991: 55). According to John L. O’Sullivan in 1845, it was America’s Manifest Destiny “to over-spread and to possess the whole continent which providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government” (Foley 1991: 184). The myth of Manifest Destiny, that the land was inexhaustible and would progressively be transformed into an Edenic pastoral landscape, could only be sustained by continually exploiting new territory, and the Hudson served as a symbol of this movement.

Albert Memmi has described “the colonizer” as “a tall man, bronzed by the sun [...] he rivets his gaze far away on the horizon of his land. When not engaged in battles against nature, we think of him laboring selflessly for mankind [...] spreading culture to the nonliterate. In other words, his pose is one of a noble adventurer, a righteous pioneer” (1990: 69). The colonizer or pioneer possessed what Boime has termed the “magisterial gaze,” which he argues was to be found in American painting from the 1820s to the 1860s: “the perspective of the American on the heights searching for new worlds to conquer [...] The magisterial gaze embodied the exaltation of a cultured American elite before the illimitable horizon that they identified with the destiny of the American nation” (1991: 21, 38). This gaze contrasted with what Boime termed the “reverential gaze,” looking upward, found in North European painting (21). The possessor of the magisterial gaze was positioned on an eminence commanding a vast expanse of country, and in mid-century it was believed that “only daring and insolent men”

climbed mountains, while “savages” would not for fear of spirits inhabiting the mountaintop (Thoreau, qtd. in Boime 1991: 19). The magisterial gaze was fixed on the future; it was related to surveyance, collecting data for mapping, and surveillance, or visual superintendence (150). There was of course another kind of looking, that of Native Americans who viewed the land as a communal benefit, with relatively unfixed boundaries, but the magisterial gaze belonged to the Anglo-European American male: the pilgrim, pioneer, artist, politician, and industrialist. The magisterial gaze is implied in many riverscapes by Hudson River School artists, for instance Durand’s *View of Troy, New York* (1877). It can also be seen in Cole’s work, but there as noted the gaze is more complicated.

American national identity has been intimately bound up with encountering and colonizing the wilderness, which in turn was associated with the concept of freedom.<sup>26</sup> However there remained an inherent conflict between associating American identity with the wilderness as found, or aligning it with civilized settlement. This conflict was resolved by the formula that “[t]he wilderness revealed the work and hand of God [but] the domestication of the landscape represented the American people working out God’s plan on the continent” (Baigell 1998: 10). During the 1830s–40s, land was still rapidly being acquired and exploited for commercial development, and thousands of miles of canals and railways were laid (19); by 1850, the North had developed a powerful network of financial and commercial organizations. The concept of liberty and American identity increasingly became associated with economic advance and individual social progress.

In 1835, Cole had already noted the passing of the wilderness (Barringer 2002: 52). When Cole and others started painting the Hudson, it was being developed for tourism,<sup>27</sup> and he found

26. Frederick Jackson Turner argued that it was the condition of frontier settlements “advancing against a wilderness” that resulted in America’s peculiar attachment to the principle of liberty, although the notion of liberty was also associated with English constitutional precedents and brought to America by British settlers (see, for example, Foley 1991: 19). Turner expounded his “frontier thesis” at the Columbian World Exposition of 1893, during a meeting of the American Historical Association (Boime 1991: 3).

27. A scheduled passenger steamboat service had begun in 1807–1808, the first river steamboat anywhere (Van Zandt 1992: 151; J. Jones 2002: 12).

the Hudson River Valley also becoming despoiled by noisy saw-mills and scorched fields. Cole's conservative political sympathies were with the landowners and rural communities rather than with the democratic "modernizers" (51, 104). His series of five paintings of 1836, *The Course of Empire*, however, was commissioned by a well-known self-made city entrepreneur, Luman Reed. It showed the emergence and eclipse of an imperial city in a fictional setting based on the Hudson estuary, and it demonstrates the contemporary ambivalence of attitudes toward the "wilderness" and "civilization." The overall theme of the series is clearly human *vanitas*, a Christian theme as well as a persistent motif of European art. However, there are admonitory political references for contemporary American society, based on a dislike of urban-commercial development. Cole described the city as depicted in *The Consummation of Empire* as "à la mode New York." In this American morality tale, Native Americans feature only in the prehistory of "civilized man." Thus in the first picture, *The Savage State*, Indian occupation is pushed back to the context of a primitive and mythical dawn. Exhibited in New York, the series was celebrated as "the prototype of a truly American art that blasted away the effeminacies of European painting" (J. Jones 2002: 13).

However, by mid-century a more pastoral version of American landscape was being cultivated and associated with an ideal, civilized republic. The domestication of the landscape accommodated a strong notion of property ownership and fitted well with contemporary economic developments. There was an increase in scenes of modern tourism, boating, and picnics, such as Robert Havell Jr.'s *West Point from Fort Putnam* (ca. 1848) in which three figures dressed for an outing gaze from the ruined fort at the top of a sheer cliff clearly not attained by arduous climbing, while their view of the river is visually terminated by Bannerman's Island. In the more ambitious riverscapes of the Hudson River School, imagery was carefully crafted to present a "moral narrative" of progress in an Arcadian setting, while the style was an academic "transparent" one designed to appeal to both art collectors and a wide public. Cropsey's *View of Catskills Across Hudson* (1877) shows cattle heading to drink in the water, a rus-

tic couple under a spreading tree, the whole suffused in golden sunlight. As the notion of liberty increasingly became associated with economic and social progress, riverscapes from mid-century also incorporated an idealized colonizing trajectory from “wilderness” to pastoral scenery to urban and technological development, as for instance in Durand’s *Progress* (1853). This painting, described as “an idealized Hudson River-like view,” was praised by a contemporary critic as “purely American. It tells an American story [...] portrayed with true American feeling by a devoted and earnest student of nature” (qtd. in Lawall 1978: 96). It contrasted of course with Cole’s vision in *The Course of Empire* of a cyclical return to nature. In *Progress* the signs of technological and industrial advancement on the riverbanks are observed by a group of Native Americans: in this case, the gaze from a height is theirs, but their confinement in a small wilderness setting seems to preclude any subsequent movement toward the future horizon. Cropsey’s large canvas *Autumn—On the Hudson River* (1860; fig. 9), executed on the eve



Fig. 9. Jasper Francis Cropsey, *Autumn—On the Hudson River*, 1860. National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.46474.html> (Open Access license).

of the Civil War, depicted a trajectory similar to that of *Progress*. Very different from Doughty’s *Autumn on the Hudson* (1850) discussed earlier, Cropsey’s picture is structured so that the stream and river provide the metaphorical means of progress toward a brilliant and golden horizon. Although there is a township and a paddle-steamer on the river, the extensive riverscape is barely disturbed by its human occupants. Cropsey had been living

in London since 1856 and he executed *Autumn—On the Hudson River* there. As American scenery for a London audience, Cropsey drew attention to the vastness of the landscape, its atmospheric clarity (presumably in contrast to London smog), and the brilliance of autumnal color, which like the Hudson became peculiarly identified with America at this time. However, this is no longer the wilderness, but a rather Arcadian present, looking toward a golden future.

#### CONCLUSION

Many Hudson riverscapes in nineteenth-century America celebrated the riverside estates and leisure pursuits of the wealthy. However, the riverscapes that became hegemonic as images of America were those of a small group of artists associated with the English painter Thomas Cole and dubbed the Hudson River School. These riverscapes were distinguished by a sublime style and a focus on the Hudson Valley as an expansive wilderness. Just as the Hudson riverscapes that depicted wealthy white Americans and their estates overlooked the history and existing cultures of the Hudson River Indians, so the image of the wilderness riverscape in Hudson River School art symbolically erased Native Americans by presenting the Hudson Valley as empty territory, apart from the occasional ornamental Indian figure. Such riverscapes also invited allegorical and Christian readings invoking, for instance, the biblical wilderness or the spiritual quest of the pilgrim, or they symbolized the “civilized” settlement of the wilderness by the pioneer. The urban spectator was able to identify with the pilgrim-pioneer and his quest by means of imaginatively sharing a journey along the river and toward the distant horizon.

The wilderness, staged as an object of nostalgia, still plays an important role in American culture, symbolized, for example, by the western in film and by the national parks (Short 1991: 178–196; Barringer 2002: 65). Hudson River School art provided images of a putatively authentic American riverscape, initiating a vision of American scenery that would then be pursued westward across the Mississippi. John Gast’s *American Progress* (1872) showed a westward trail of settlers spreading from the Hudson

River, Indians fleeing ahead. A giant airborne female personification of America accompanies the migrants, stringing telegraph wire along the route (fig. 10). In Gast's picture, the pastoral idyll that supplanted the wilderness gives way to a technological symbolism; technology finally sees off the Native Americans and the new America is allegorized, not as an American Indian, but as a white woman.



Fig. 10. John Gast, *American Progress*, 1872. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:American\\_Progress\\_\(John\\_Gast\\_painting\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:American_Progress_(John_Gast_painting).jpg). This file has been identified as being free of known restrictions under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights.

The starting point for Gast's narrative is the confluence of the Hudson and the East rivers. If the projected Golden Age finally lay in the West, the prototype was based on the Hudson, and it was the riverscape of the Hudson River School that provided and still represents a potent image of America as a bountiful, but exclusive wilderness.

The Hudson River had an umbilical link to New York, the contemporary artistic and cultural center of America, and the Hudson River School artists owed their success and their celebrity to powerful patronage in the city that allowed them to promulgate their grandiose vision for the nation. Drawing on the discourse of America as a Promised Land, they created the American wilderness based on the Hudson River Valley and projected onto this setting America's future Golden Age as a settled Eden. The discourse of chosenness drew on English precedents, and Cole himself was

a recent English immigrant and fervent Christian. Such riverscapes helped to constitute an enduring imagery of the national 'home-land' and a potent idea of national identity based on the dynamic figure of the Christian pioneer-pilgrim. As the pioneer merged with the entrepreneur, the riverscape embodied his magisterial, future-oriented gaze, a gaze with which the prosperous urban patrons and clients of Hudson River School art easily identified.

*Rivers  
of the Americas*

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