

## “The Base, Cursed Thing”: Panther Attacks and Ecotones in Antebellum American Fiction

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### Abstract

*The panther attack scenes found in the fiction of Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), and Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835-1921) portray these animals as literary monsters indicative of a developing American environmental anxiety. Drawing on a selection of recent critical studies dealing with both antebellum American fiction and ecocriticism, I suggest that these scenes reveal, especially through their depiction of panther attacks in what ecologists now refer to as anthropogenic ecotones (human-made environmental edges), the beginnings of an American cultural recognition of environmental degradation. Ultimately these panther attack scenes prefigure an American environmental ethic, revealing an instructive early stage in the evolving cultural perception of the human devastation to the natural world.*

### Introduction

“Old Hickory” had little love for trees. Delivering his “Second Annual Message” to Congress in 1830, President Andrew Jackson asked, “What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute” (521). This general-turned-president saw the American wilderness, like he saw the American Indians who called it home, as an enemy impeding European American domination of the land. Specifically, Jackson viewed America’s wilderness as a foe to be conquered in the interest of economic development, and in addressing Jackson’s rhetoric, Roderick Nash observes, “In the vocabulary of material progress, wilderness had meaning only as an obstacle” (41).

While Jackson harbored no qualms about the destruction of the American wilderness in the name of materialism, others had already begun to question the sustainability of both the continent’s resources

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and of its natural beauty. These figures included writers such as George Catlin, who in 1841 was one of the first to call for the preservation of America's "pristine beauty and wildness, in a magnificent park . . . a nation's Park" to be created "by some great protecting policy of government" (263).<sup>1</sup> Such early environmental thought also emerges in some of the age's works of imaginative literature, particularly in those examples of American Gothic fiction that deal with the subject of the frontier. These works often incorporate the concepts of disturbance, decay, the sublime, and the grotesque—all of which ultimately concern the human relationship with the natural world. Works of literature often reveal the social anxieties of the time periods from which they emerge, and it is with this trend in mind that I focus on a telling set piece found in three influential works of antebellum American fiction—the panther attack.

The panthers found in the fiction of Charles Brockden Brown (1771-1810), James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851), and Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835-1921) take the guise of literary monsters that represent a growing American anxiety about the human relationship with, and impact upon, the natural environment. Each of these authors presents the archetypal panther as a supernatural enemy, characterized by "glowing" eyes (Brown 159), "horrid malignity" (Cooper 307), and "hot, foetid breath" (Spofford 86). In these works the archetypal panther emerges as a demon that must be exorcised from the wilderness so that European Americans may themselves possess the land. These texts also reveal, especially through their depiction of panther attacks in what ecologists call anthropogenic ecotones (human-made environmental edges), the stirrings of a fledgling American environmental ethic that highlights the shifting cultural perception of the human role in the natural world.

### **"the perils of the western wilderness"**

Charles Brockden Brown, in his preface to what is arguably the first novel of the American frontier, the 1799 *Edgar Huntly*, writes that "America has opened new views to the naturalist and politician, but has seldom furnished themes to the moral painter" (3). Brown announces his intention to present a new type of novel, one inspired by the American frontier rather than by scenes found either across the Atlantic or in the European Gothic novels popularized by the likes of Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole. He admonishes those American writers who would rather incorporate European "castles and chimeras" into their tales than explore the scenes drawn from their own nation and argues that for American writers "the perils of the western wilderness, are far more suitable; and, for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology" (3). One of these "perils of the western wilderness" that figures largely in *Edgar Huntly* is the American mountain lion, or panther (*Felis concolor*), an animal that embodies the wild and dangerous spirit of the American forest, and over the following decade of the nineteenth century, this archetypal panther would slink its way into a series of important works of American fiction.

Set in the wilds outside of Philadelphia, Brown's *Edgar Huntly* presents a panther attack scene that takes place almost entirely in the dark. The title character, who suffers from a tendency to sleepwalk, awakens to find himself trapped in a dark pit that he later discovers is located within a cavern. Huntly soon realizes he is not alone. Looking up, he puzzles over the nature of two bright points in the darkness, soon realizing that they are the glowing eyes of a panther ready to pounce from above. Relying upon his skill with a tomahawk, Huntly slays the vicious panther, and feasts on its raw flesh to fend off starvation. Brown's panther scene is both dramatic and enigmatic, and it was perhaps the first of the many panther attacks in American fiction.

Despite answering Brown's call to incorporate American scenes into American fiction, twenty-one years after the publication of *Edgar Huntly*, James Fenimore Cooper—in the preface to his novel, *The Spy*

(1821)—directly criticizes Brown’s book as a work that “contains an American, a savage, a wild cat, and a tomahawk, in a conjunction that never did, nor ever will occur” (2). Two years later, with the publication of his enormously popular *The Pioneers* (1823), Cooper would become the foremost master and innovator of the American frontier romance. *The Pioneers* introduces Natty Bumppo, a character who combines Brown’s “naturalist” and “moral painter” into the seminal American frontier hero. And it is also in this ground-breaking work that Cooper set about revising the “conjunction” of elements he took issue with in Brown’s earlier panther scene.

In Cooper’s version of a panther attack, Elizabeth Temple—the daughter of the town founder—her friend Louisa Grant and the family dog, a mastiff named Brave, take a stroll on the outskirts of the Templeton settlement. There they encounter a female panther and her cub. Ostensibly protecting the two women, the dog Brave kills the panther cub, but after a bloody struggle succumbs to the attacks of the mother panther. In the meantime Louisa faints, and Elizabeth falls to her knees, petrified in fear and transfixed upon the eerie eyes of the panther. In the last moments before the predator springs upon the women, Natty Bumppo emerges from the forest and shoots the animal with his rifle. As with Brown’s early example, Cooper’s panther scene gave rise to more such representations, especially in the visual arts.

Discussing the large number of nineteenth-century painters who adapted Cooper’s scenes to canvas, James Franklin Beard writes, “Leatherstocking’s split-second rescue of Elizabeth Temple almost from the jaws of the panther seems to have appealed to artists more strongly than any other scene in Cooper’s fiction. It was painted by John Quidor and George L. Brown, engraved by Henry S. Sadd for the *Columbian Magazine* from a design by Tompkins H. Matteson, and, I am told, baked into sets of china” (484). In fact, Beard’s listing of those artists who illustrated the panther scene is far from exhaustive, and each artist presents a slightly different version, prioritizing certain elements over others. George Loring Brown’s painting “Leather-stocking Kills the Panther” (1834) perhaps comes closest to Cooper’s actual description (fig. 1). His painting includes the carcasses of both the dog and the panther cub, portrays a realistic looking panther, and is true to the positioning of the figures. It becomes a sympathetic, but also dramatically violent and gloomy scene, with the figures encased in a forest of dark enveloping branches that threaten to swallow them from their narrow refuge in the footpath. George Loring Brown’s intense painting preserves the moment right before Natty fires on the mother panther, before the shot rings out in the wilderness.

### **“the eyes of the monster”**

But the American literary panther has nine lives, and in 1860 Maine writer Harriet Prescott Spofford reincarnated the panther scene found in Brown’s and Cooper’s novels in her short story, “Circumstance.” In this tale Spofford exposes readers to a disturbing vision of a frontier woman threatened by a blood-thirsty panther-like creature that she writes is “known by hunters as the Indian Devil” (85). Spofford’s tale follows this Maine frontierswoman as she makes her way home at night after visiting a sick friend. As she walks in the darkness she encounters a spectral vision of a corpse winding sheet accompanied by a disembodied voice that repeats three times the phrase, “The Lord have mercy on the people” (85). Unfazed by the ghostly encounter she presses on into the evening wilderness, toward home. Suddenly a panther-like creature intent upon devouring her pulls the woman into the branches of a tree.



Figure 1. George Loring Brown, *Leatherstocking Kills the Panther* (1834). Oil on panel, 14 x 20 in. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Martha C. Karolik for the M. and M. Karolik Collection of American Paintings, 1815–1865.

The woman, having heard that “music charmed wild beasts” (86), begins to sing to the creature, finding that while her songs do not free her from the animal’s grasp they do mesmerize him (for he is described as a male) into staying his fangs and claws. The woman sings all night until her husband, carrying their child in one arm and his rifle in the other, finds her and shoots the “Indian Devil” just as the woman’s voice gives out. In a twist reminiscent of Indian captivity narratives, the family members make their way back to their cabin only to find their village in smoking ruins, destroyed by a band of marauding Indians while they dealt with the so-called Indian Devil. Leaving her characters homeless and alone in the wilderness, Spofford associates the unnamed frontier couple with Adam and Eve, an analogy she furthers by concluding her tale with an allusion to the end of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*: “For all the rest—the world was all before them, where to choose” (96).

While Spofford is the only one of the three writers to refer to her panther by the Maine regional name of “Indian Devil,” both Brown’s and Cooper’s panthers also take on devilish traits that underscore the notion that these panthers represent demonic figures that must be purged from the wilderness to ensure the success of America’s nationalist advance across the continent. In Brown’s novel the character Edgar Huntly rationalizes his disdain of panthers while also boasting of his prowess in killing the animals:

My temper never delighted in carnage and blood. I found no pleasure in plunging into bogs, wading through rivulets, and penetrating thickets, for the sake of dispatching wood-cocks and squirrels. . . . It was much otherwise, however, with regard to rattlesnakes and panthers. These I thought it no breach of duty to exterminate wherever they could be found. (119)

During the chilling scene in which the sleepwalking Huntly awakens to find himself trapped in a dark pit within a cave, he is instantly confronted with two disturbing points of light. Huntly explains that “They resembled a fixed and obscure flame. They were motionless. Though lustrous themselves they created no illumination around them. This circumstance, added to others, which reminded me of similar objects, noted on former occasions, immediately explained the nature of what I beheld. These were the eyes of a panther” (159).

Unlike the later panther attacks found in Cooper and Spofford, Brown’s involves only a single human character (and a male at that), but as this description of the panther illustrates, it does begin an important unifying trait found in each of these scenes: the panther boasts fiery eyes that emit a disturbing supernatural light. In fact, the panther Huntly confronts in the darkness of the pit appears entirely as a disembodied menace, visible only by the shine of its eyes. Huntly, taking up his tomahawk, uses the eyes to his advantage, and as he relates: “I aimed at the middle space between these glowing orbs. It penetrated the scull and the animal fell, struggling and shrieking, on the ground” (159).

Humans again meet the spectral gaze of the panther in Cooper’s *The Pioneers*, when Louisa and Elizabeth encounter the “glaring eyes of a female panther, fixed on them in horrid malignity” (307). Cooper’s mastery of description serves him well in the creation of this scene, and unlike Brown he provides much detail about the panther’s “active frame” and “claws projecting inches from its broad feet” (309). However, as in Brown’s novel, the panther’s eyes quickly become the most intimidating trait. Cooper writes, “The eyes of the monster and the kneeling maiden met, for an instant . . . with its eyes apparently emitting flashes of fire” (308-309). In writing about what he terms Cooper’s “Imperialist fantasy,” David Cody observes that in this panther scene “there is a remarkable emphasis on vision or the absence thereof; on seeing or not seeing” (303), and this attention to the gaze and the presence or absence of sight emerges in a number of similar panther scenes, certainly Brockden Brown’s and Spofford’s, but also later examples such as William Gilmore Simms’ novel, *The Cub of the Panther; A Mountain Legend* (1869) and Ambrose Bierce’s aptly titled short story, “The Eyes of the Panther” (1892). Building from the archetypal parallels between *The Pioneers* and other Imperialist-minded texts, such as Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* and Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Cody offers a persuasive reading of Cooper’s panther scene as a “pre-Freudian nightmare” stemming from “Elizabeth’s own psyche,” in which the main figures of the scene function as surrogates for other characters in the tale. Cody equates the panther with Edward Effingham and writes, “The panther (the beast whose existence cannot be tolerated) is the other [ostensibly Indian] Edwards (Caliban, Satan, Gothic villain, Bad Indian, Monster from the Id) who is Elizabeth’s own creation” (308).

## “the Indian Devil”

Virtually all of the artists who recreated Cooper’s scene highlighted this demonic aspect of his panther by portraying the animal’s gaze as piercing in its intensity. In 1826, in one of the earliest visual representations of this scene, Alexis François Girard portrays the eyes of the panther as locked with those of Elizabeth (fig. 2). In his 1832 illustration of the same scene, Robert Farrier, despite his comically kittenish rendering of what is supposed to be a ferocious panther, takes pains to accentuate the intensity of the panther’s eyes (fig. 3). In one of the more unique paintings of Cooper’s panther scene, the 1832 work “Leather-stocking’s Rescue,” artist John Quidor preserves the moment just seconds after Natty fires on the panther. Even in death the animal’s eyes glow, but rather than being locked on Elizabeth, they are, in Quidor’s painting, directed at the viewer, in what might be read as a clever

redirection of the panther's accusatory gaze to the world beyond the canvas, to those of us who watch from the gallery floor (fig. 4).

The best example of how the panther becomes transformed into a demonic-Indian presence occurs in Spofford's "Circumstance," a tale that vividly describes the panther as a hellish threat, a true demon of the forest. The heroine of "Circumstance" finds herself literally ensnared and drawn onto a tree branch by a "monster [with] white tusks whetting and gnashing, his eyes glaring through all the darkness like balls of red fire" (86). Indeed, in Spofford's tale the panther is much more than simply an irate specimen of *Felis concolor*. Spofford never once refers to the beast as a panther, preferring to call it an "Indian Devil," or "monster." She even likens its movements to that of a "fabulous flying-dragon" (85). Either way Spofford's connection between panthers and American Indians is so overt that by the end of the tale it appears that both the "Indian Devil" and the American Indian raiding party that destroys the heroine's village work in league with each other to systematically terrorize the area.



Figure 2. Alexis François Girard, *The Panther Scene* (1826?-1832?). Courtesy of Mr. Henry S. F. Cooper, Jr. 17 ½ X 23 ½.

Each of these texts also contain numerous descriptions in which American Indians are equated to animals, highlighting the animalistic association of Indians and wildlife so prevalent in the popular culture of the day. Writing about "Circumstance," Stacy Alaimo argues, "Nineteenth-century representations of nature can hardly be considered apart from images of 'Indians,' since Indians were rarely considered distinct from the natural world" (28). Alaimo suggests that in "Circumstance" Spofford creates a tale in which "Indian and the wild animal merge into one figure" (28). Such a hybridized human

and nonhuman entity speaks to the disturbing, even grotesque, impact on nature that so often seems to accompany the European American influence upon the natural world. Still, the literary connection between Indians and animals is not as simplistic as these writers of fiction would have us believe. As some contemporary sources indicate, the term “Indian Devil” apparently also refers to a creature considered devilish by the Indians themselves.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 3. Robert Farrier. Frontispiece. Engraved by C. Rolls. In James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (London: Colburn and Bentley, 1832). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In his 1854 book of American folkways, *The Americans at Home*, Thomas Chandler Haliburton includes a chapter entitled, “The Indian Devil,” describing the creature as “an animal in the deep recesses of our forests, evidently belonging to the feline race, which, on account of its ferocity, is significantly called, “*Indian devil*”—in the Indian language, ‘the Lunk Soos;’ a terror to the Indians, and the only animal in New England of which they stand in dread” (222). Ten years later, in a surprisingly similar passage in *The Maine Woods* (1864), Henry David Thoreau writes that he learned of the “Indian Devil” from a Native

American who “spoke of the *lunxus* or Indian devil (which I take to be the cougar, and not the *Gulo luscus*), as the only animal in Maine which man need fear; it would follow a man, and did not mind a fire” (699). As these contemporary descriptions make clear, the so-called Indian Devil serves as a source of fear for both American Indians and European Americans alike.

### “wasty ways”

Brown, Cooper, and Spofford’s descriptions of the panther as a monstrous and seemingly supernatural threat to frontier settlers demonstrate how this frightful archetype permeates the American literary tradition. But it is another element of these panther scenes that best illustrates how they reveal an overarching environmental anxiety—the fact that each of these panther scenes takes place within an anthropogenic ecotone.



Figure 4. John Quidor, *Leatherstocking's Rescue II* (1832). Oil on canvas, 27 1/16 in. x 34 1/8 in. Courtesy of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine. Museum Purchase, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund.



An ecotone is an environmental edge, a place in which one biotic community meets another. When created through natural processes ecotones represent areas of rich natural diversity. Organisms from each of the joined habitats frequent the ecotone, and some organisms, so-called edge species, actually find their niche there and thrive. However, when humans create ecotones, say by cutting down a section of forest or clearing an area for construction, the disturbance may in some cases provide results similar to those associated with naturally occurring ecotones, but they more often take the form of wholesale destruction of the habitat and the detrimental interaction of humans with species that occupy the adjoining natural area.

While Charles Brockden Brown probably did not foresee the idea of ecotones, he did write about habitat loss. Brown's awareness of environmental degradation becomes evident in his character Edgar Huntly's description of the changes made to the wilderness bordering the human settlements outside of 1787 Philadelphia, the same wilderness where Huntly encounters the panther in the cave. Huntly relates that "The industry of our hunters has nearly banished animals of prey from these precincts. The fastness of Norwalk, however, could not but afford refuge to some of them. Of late I had met them so rarely that my fears were seldom alive, and I trod, without caution, the ruggedest and most solitary of haunts" (118-119). In this and other descriptions of the wilderness, Huntly applauds the elimination of certain animals (especially rattlesnakes and panthers) from the area around the settlements. He even openly boasts of his role in helping to eradicate panthers from the surrounding woods: "These judicious and sanguinary spoilers were equally the enemies of man and of the harmless race that sported in the trees, and many of their skins are still preserved by me as trophies of my juvenile prowess" (119). The very term "juvenile prowess" deserves some attention. Brown, like many writers of gothic tales, regularly employs unreliable narrators. It would be a mistake to assume that Brown agrees with what his character Huntly says and does in the novel, a situation that leaves a term like "juvenile prowess" intriguing given the possible alternate reading of this phrase to mean not youthful ability but immature actions. True to much of Brown's work this ambiguity remains unresolved; Brown rarely pulls back the veil to reveal the failings of his characters—though those failings often seep through the narrative in a suggestive manner.

Cooper takes a much more direct approach. In *The Pioneers* he writes one of the first works of environmental American literature. Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* would not see print for another thirteen years, and Henry David Thoreau's masterpiece of nature writing, *Walden*, was still thirty-one years away, when Cooper's *The Pioneers* broke sales records by reportedly selling 3,500 copies within only a few hours of publication (Dekker and McWilliams 1). But Cooper's aim was not only to sell books; he meant to teach his readers a lesson. Leslie Fiedler argues that "Cooper was not willing to be a mass entertainer of polite society; his books were to him weapons in a battle against the abuses of society" (180), and perhaps the abuse Cooper took greatest issue with in *The Pioneers* was the destruction of the American natural world in the name of so-called economic progress. To that end, Natty Bumppo repeatedly bemoans the "wasty ways" of the Templeton residents when they clear-cut forests, greedily devastate the fish population of the local lake, and amuse themselves by spraying bullets into epic flocks of migrating passenger pigeons (336, 356).

For this reason, environmental historian Carolyn Merchant positions the book at the head of the American environmental literary tradition, pointing out that "*The Pioneers* highlighted the ecological destruction of massive numbers of passenger pigeons, and sensitively portrayed the option of living by hunting only those animals needed for human survival" (205). Literary critic Lawrence Buell even uses *The Pioneers* as an example of what he calls an "environmental text," arguing that, among other traits, environmental texts provide "some sense of the environment as a process rather than a constant or a

given" (8). Buell argues that in foregrounding the idea of environmental process Cooper's *The Pioneers* becomes a "faithful environmental text . . . because it never loses sight of the history of the community's development from wilderness to town" (8).

### **"the signs of men with the scenes of nature"**

In *The Pioneers* Cooper highlights the brutality of this process of human devastation and voices his environmental concerns through Natty who repeatedly admonishes the villagers of Templeton for their abuses of nature. For instance, when the townspeople delight in their annual slaughter of huge flocks of migrating passenger pigeons Cooper sets the scene by describing the way the residents take advantage of the ecotones they have literally cut into the landscape by carving roads and fields into the forested hills. He notes that "across the inclined plane . . . ran the highway, on either side of which a clearing of many acres had been made" (244), and it is there "Over those clearings, and up the eastern mountain, and along the dangerous path that was cut into its side" that the residents positioned themselves to better shoot the birds, laying wait in ecotones of ambush (244). At first Natty does his best to keep quiet, but when they decide to shoot the birds from the air with an old Revolutionary War cannon, he can no longer hold his tongue:

"This comes of settling a country! . . . here have I known the pigeons to fly for forty long years, and, till you made your clearings, there was nobody to skear or to hurt them. I loved to see them come into the woods, for they were company to a body; hurting nothing; being as it was as harmless as a garter-snake. But now it gives me sore thoughts when I hear the frighty wings whizzing through the air, for I know it's only a motion to bring out all the brats in the village." (246)

Natty condemns the townspeople's wholesale killing of the passenger pigeons and in doing so directly connects the shameful slaughter of the birds with the prior creation of "clearings" in the forest. Natty's linking of the two events as cause and effect supports Buell's observation that environmental texts such as *The Pioneers* recognize and even foreground the process of human alteration of the landscape. This ecological disturbance, this formation of detrimental ecotones through the creation of clearings and edges on the ground, is mirrored in the sky above Templeton as the residents shoot holes in the darkening flock of birds, leaving gaps in the canopy where sunbeams and a rain of dying pigeons trace where the guns hit their marks. In this passage the gun follows the ax in violating the land, a practice in which the wounds of past violence serve as openings for future injury.

Decrying those who revel in the killing of the pigeons as "the brats of the village," Natty calls for the villagers to mature in their understanding and treatment of their environment, a sentiment Glen A. Love makes when he writes that "The challenge that faces us is to outgrow our notion that human beings are so special that the earth exists for our comfort and disposal alone, to move beyond a narrow ego-consciousness toward a more inclusive eco-consciousness" (25). In Cooper's view such eco-consciousness, personified by Natty, does not mean that humans should not utilize the natural world, but that such utilization must be the product of necessity and sustainability. An illustration of this land-use philosophy occurs near the end of the pigeon shooting scene in which Natty, surrounded by thousands of dead and dying pigeons, shoots a pigeon of his own, ostensibly as proof of the sportsman-like method of taking only a single bird in a single shot (247). Cooper's/Natty's warning against the wasteful slaughter of thousands of birds proved prophetic. In a testament to both Cooper's farsightedness and humanity's shortsightedness, ninety-one years after the publication of *The Pioneers*, the passenger pigeon, once the most numerous bird on Earth, became extinct (Krech et al., 982-984).

As with the slaughter of the pigeons, Cooper's panther attack scene also takes place in a human-made ecotone. Immediately before they encounter the panthers, Elizabeth and Louisa walk along the edge of human habitation on the outskirts of town. Cooper's description of this stroll indicates how settlement, even at the moment of their walk, continues to alter the environment outside of Templeton:

They proceeded along the margin of the precipice, catching occasional glimpses of the placid Otsego, or pausing to listen to the rattling of wheels and the sounds of hammers, that rose from the valley, to mingle the signs of men with the scenes of nature, when Elizabeth suddenly . . . saw the fierce front and glaring eyes of a female panther, fixed on them in horrid malignity, and threatening to leap. (306-307)

With this description Cooper juxtaposes the view of the lake and the forested hillside with the sounds of approaching human destruction. It is helpful to remember that Elizabeth and Louisa are strolling along a footpath; they are walking the ecotone between what Cooper terms "the signs of men" and "the scenes of nature." It is a moment that borders on the sublime for the two women, who due to the clearings—including the one they walk along—are given a privileged view of the landscape below.

This colonial gaze, however, is almost immediately reflected back upon the two women by the powerful eyes of the panther. Then the gaze is levied on the panther once again when Natty peeks out from the seclusion of the forest, instructing Elizabeth to lower her head so he may have a better shot at the animal. In a strategy reminiscent of the slaughter of the pigeons, Natty positions himself for the kill by hiding like a sniper in the wooded edge alongside the path, effectively ambushing the panther like the settlers ambushed the pigeons. By taking advantage of the human-created lesion in the environment that is itself a symptom of the encroachment that led to the deadly encounter in the first place, Natty reclaims human supremacy through the ability to alter the landscape.

Cooper is always careful to justify Natty's selective killing of wildlife as necessary for human survival, rather than for sheer amusement or monetary gain as is common with the citizens of Templeton. In fact, Cooper's panther scene presents a unique moment in the book, one in which Natty must dispatch a creature not for food or for his own survival but for the survival of those directly connected with the practices that run afoul of his environmental ethic. Elizabeth is, after all, the daughter of Marmaduke Temple, who as town founder is responsible for much of the environmental degradation prevalent in the area. Also, while Cooper's panther scene boasts much of the terror of those similar scenes found in Brown's and Spofford's work, unlike the other two, Cooper's panther remains the most sympathetic. She is, after all, a mother panther protecting her cub in what was recently her natural environment.

### **"half-cleared demesnes"**

Spofford's story, on the other hand, presents a panther-like creature in an utterly unsympathetic light. The panther attack scene in "Circumstance" stands as the most brutal and disturbing of the three, but the story also strongly addresses the ways that human habitation has made the environment a land of fragmented habitats. As early as the first paragraph, Spofford takes pains to describe the ecotones the main character must traverse on her way to her cabin. As the woman of Spofford's tale walks home in the night she passes through "a copse, a meadow, and a piece of woods,—the woods being a fringe on the skirts of the great forests that stretch far away into the North. That home was one of a dozen log-houses lying a few furlongs apart from each other, with their *half-cleared demesnes* separating them at the rear of a wilderness untrodden save by stealthy native or deadly panther tribes" (84, italics mine). This passage clearly demonstrates the how Spofford hybridizes the panther with the American Indian

presence while also positing a gradient of civilization based upon the shift from one environmental zone to another (i.e., town, copse, meadow, woods, forest, and finally wilderness). Some of these zones may be of natural origins, but soon the woman reaches the place where the ax has scarred the land: “now and then she came to a gap where the trees had been partially felled” (85), and it is in this human made edge, this site of violence against the wilderness, that she finds herself in the vicious embrace of the panther-like “Indian Devil” (85).

Birgit Spengler argues that Spofford’s work “renders her a significant example of the inextricable links between vision and gender” (68). I would argue that Spofford provides similar links between vision and environmental degradation—especially as related to the concept of deforestation. As demonstrated in *The Pioneers*, it is the clearing of forests that offers expanded human vision of, and power over, the natural environment, a power that almost always comes at the expense of biotic diversity and sustainability. Carol Holly argues that at its end Spofford’s tale “expresses an imperialistic vision of the land stretched out ‘all before’ the young family and a confidence in the extension of empire that, in the American nationalist project, was constructed in part upon the Christian ideology of the new nation” (154). Such a reading underscores how Spofford’s tale addresses, however ambiguously, the environmental degradation inherent in the American imperialistic process, a process that moves east to west across the continent, mutilating the wilderness and leaving fragments of habitat in its wake.

Further enhancing the environmental aspects of Spofford’s story, once captured by a creature that threatens to devour her, Spofford’s frontierswoman undergoes a complicated environmental epiphany, a realization of the ecological connectedness of all forms of life. Addressing the possibility of imminent death, the woman reflects on a series of other ways to die—each of which she prefers to becoming a meal for an animal. For example, in considering death by fire, the woman thinks to herself:

Fire is not half ourselves; as it devours, arouses neither hatred nor disgust; is not to be known by the strength of our lower natures let loose; does not drip our blood into our faces from foaming chaps, nor mouth nor slaver above us with vitality. Let us be ended by fire, and we are ashes, for the winds to bear, the leaves to cover; let us be ended by wild beasts, and the base, cursed thing howls with us forever through the forest. (89)

This passage reveals that the frontier woman’s terror stems not so much from a fear of death but from a fear of becoming incorporated into the body of an animal. She is terrified of becoming combined with the flesh of a wild beast, of becoming absorbed by the creature, and hence the land, itself. In writing about what he terms the literary ecosublime, Lee Rozelle argues that “the viewing subject experiences an ecosublime strength, violence, and terror in the realizations that an infinitely complex natural ecology has been fragmented by human intervention, that humankind may not know how to reconfigure the natural machine as it dies” (8). Given this idea, perhaps what Spofford’s frontier woman experiences is the ecogrotesque, a horrid realization of the self as a dying fragment that will eventually become re-assimilated into the nutrient flow of the amoral macroorganism of the natural environment.

## Conclusion

Leo Marx, in his essay, “American Institutions and Ecological Ideals,” writes that “[a] notable fact about imaginative literature in America, when viewed from an ecological perspective, is the number of our most admired works written in obedience to a pastoral impulse” (254). As Marx argues, much of American literature reveals the human urge to control and transform the natural landscape, to carve a paradise out of a howling wilderness. A focus on the panther scenes found in these works reveals a

shared environmental anxiety about the American urge to tame the natural world by eliminating factors threatening to human dominance. These panther scenes present a figurative slaying of the wilderness at the ecotones that mark human disturbance of the land, a phenomenon that furthers our understanding of the American cultural interaction with the natural world.

When Spofford's tale of a woman becoming a potential meal for a panther is taken with the conclusion of Brown's panther scene, in which Huntly must eat a panther to keep from starving, these two texts—balanced by Cooper's conservationist ethic—illustrate a shift in environmental anxieties over the first half of the nineteenth century. Brown's concept of the human role in the environment becomes one in which humans must devour the wilderness to further their advance. Spofford's tale, however, reveals a fear that humanity, in detrimentally fragmenting the natural world, risks becoming that which will feed the hunger created by its own abuse, until eventually we are swallowed up into a starving wilderness.

## Endnotes

1. While Catlin displayed conservationist instincts well ahead of his time, his overall vision of the "nation's Park" was limited to the Great Plains, and it was also decidedly racist in his conception. He proposed that while preserving the natural landscape and animals, the park would also be a place "where the world could see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse, with sinewy bow, and shield and lance, amid the fleeting herds of elk and buffaloes. . . . A nation's Park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty" (263). While praiseworthy from an environmental standpoint, Catlin's dehumanizing idea of implementing the same preservationist strategy for American Indians as for the buffalo is disturbing to say the least.
2. The name "Indian Devil" is a colloquial term for panther; it is also apparently used in the folklore of Maine to refer to a legendary forest monster that, at least in part, resembles a panther; see Citro, *Passing Strange*, 186.

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