

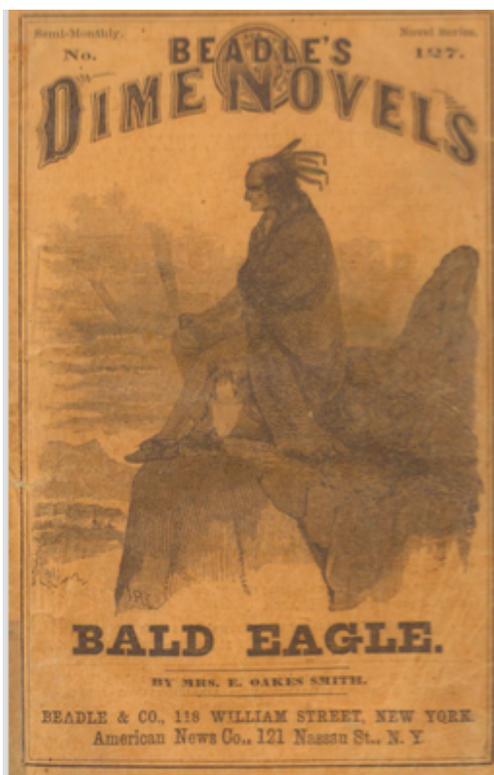
**“Contesting the Uncontested:
Revisions and Race in Oakes Smith’s *The Bald Eagle*”**

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“Ideas do not go backward, but sometimes it is well to recover a neglected thread.”

E.Oakes Smith, *The Queen of Tramps*

It is hard to say how many novels Elizabeth Oakes Smith wrote in her lifetime. Some she left as partially revised manuscripts at the time of her death in 1893, and some might be considered revised forms of one or another, not separate in their own right. This paper considers one of these latter—*The Bald Eagle, or The Last of the Ramapaughs*, published in 1867.¹ As one of two Oakes Smith novels published in Beadle’s Dime Novel series, it is usually paired with the other, *The Sagamore of Saco*, which appeared the following year and which was also a revision of an earlier work. With *The Western Captive*, and a late unpublished novel that might have been entitled *Rachel*



Vaughn, these make up Oakes Smith’s major efforts in the genre of “Indian fiction,” and a lot of Oakes Smith’s thinking on race. Especially in light of the Dime Novels

¹ Published July 7, 1867 as no. 127 of Beadle’s Dime Novels, first series, and republished December 7, 1880 in Beadles New Dime Novels series, no 158.

that routinely traded in debased images of Indians scalping settlers or “biting the dust” themselves, one might hardly expect to find critical race commentary in *The Bald Eagle*. It may be argued that on its own, this work presents Native American tradition, independence, and dignity in ways other Dime Novels do not--and *that*, resistantly enough, even in a period when American military might shifted resources from Civil War to the completion of Indian subjugation in the Far West,² but in this paper, I want to show how a careful consideration of Oakes Smith’s revisions of earlier versions of the works that eventuate in *The Bald Eagle*, more than its plot or character, reveals one of her strongest attempts to de-center dominant national narratives that silenced the voices of racial others.

The history of Oakes Smith’s writing of this novel begins December 16, 1847, when she received a letter from Alice B. Neal, proposing what she admitted was an “odd assignment, “ but one which Oakes Smith, “having so much behind the scenes in a publisher’s life” would perhaps understand.

“The Gazette has offered a series of prizes--\$150 for the best revolutionary tale” etc. etc. and the time for award is fixed(?) Jan 1, 1848,” Neal writes. “We have but three weeks before then, and no tale of sufficient merit has been received.... Will you not be so good--if previous engagements do not interfere---as to write one for which we guarantee you shall receive the prize?

² For details about this shift in military resources, see Boyd Cothran and Ari Kelman’s account featured in the New York Times, May 25, 2015: <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/25/how-the-civil-war-became-the-indian-wars/>.

...If you should so far oblige us--can you accommodate the length to our pages, either seven, or fourteen columns, if fourteen let the commencement of the second part be a continuation of the most thrilling incident of the tale. As some one says "the ingredients of a revolutionary tale are patriotism and love," a judicious interstissure of the two being all that is needed.

Does not all this seem very much like contracting for a house of which you have drawn the plan? but pray forgive the seeming disrespect to original geniuses, it is only seeming I assure you."

Later in life, Oakes Smith periodically returned to files of correspondence, and, as if to intentionally make it as difficult as possible to trace her professional career, burned almost all of it. This letter was evidently remarkable enough to save. On the back is written, "I wrote for this "The Bald Eagle."

Or did she. The story is at least more complicated. Track down rare copies of Neal's *Saturday Gazette and Lady's Literary Museum*, and when you find the issue of



January 29 1848, you will find not *The Bald Eagle* but *The Remapo Pass: A Story of the Revolution by E. Oakes Smith*, a work in nine chapters that was not only the "uncontested" winner of \$150 prize, but more important for the argument that follows, a story tracing ideologically "uncontested" terrain of white, European American

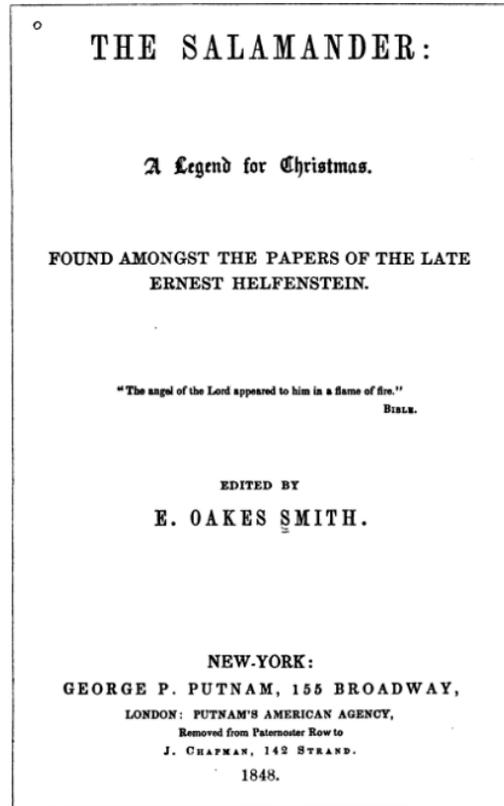
patriotic heroism and traditional gender role-playing.

The novel opens with an honorific summary of the difficulties faced by the patriots of 76 as the Revolution wore on. It is now 1781, and while the tide has turned, it remains for the intrepid Washington to devise a final assault on the British forces to seal our national victory. With Hamilton at his side, the general devises a plot to fool the British, who control the lower end of the Ramapo Pass at the New Jersey New York border by sending a messenger through their ranks with false plans for a siege of the British stronghold at New York City, a feint that will allow the march to Yorktown and the attack on Cornwallis that will end the war. Hamilton suggests a volunteer for what is likely a suicide mission—Wendell Blanch, a faithful patriot whose principle and bravery recommends him as much as his personal life: fatally frustrated in love by Katrina DeWitt, the daughter of a staunch Tory, he is basically suicidal anyway. When Washington delivers his mission, he demurs, pointing out that he is not “bullet proof,” but the stone-faced general peremptorily reminds him of his rank and duty: “your duty, sir, is not to talk, but to obey.” Before he departs, he stops to bid adieu to Katrina, who fails to appreciate the seriousness of the situation, mockingly humming “Yankee Doodle” as he rides off. True to Neal’s request, Oakes Smith breaks her story for the next issue of the *Gazette* at this point, leaving the second part on February 8 for Blanch’s successful mission. In order to satisfy reader expectations for the “taming” of the Tory daughter Katrina and her “conversion from loyalty to succession,” Blanch, of course, lives through the ordeal, its real danger proven and appropriate “tragedy” supplied by the death of a faithful

servant who follows Blanch into the pass and is hit by a stray bullet. And all this, without Bald Eagle, or any Indian, in sight.

It seems Oakes Smith wrote this version of the novel “to order,” or at least this is all she could bring together, evidently, in the rush to supply Neal’s need by the 1st of January 1848. Yet this version of the novel—which I have designated as “uncontested” in multiple senses—stands out as more the exception than the rule in Oakes Smith’s works, which as Caroline Woidat and others have argued, routinely *contest* received histories, especially in their re-centering of native American subjects, women, and the working class. In 1842, her novel *The Western Captive* would decenter the history of a recently elected President for a much more complex “West” that bears the claims of white women and Native Americans; in 1847, her story “The Defeated Life” would disrupt a homely sketch of an historic meeting house in Yarmouth, Maine to reveal the virtual imprisonment and psychological abuse of married women in her own time; in 1852, her lecture “The Dignity of Labor” interrupts what seems to be a celebration of the wonders of accomplishment in US industry and culture in the mid-19th century only to ask “In all this, what has woman done?” Of course, at times, Oakes Smith’s arguments are more moral than realistic; indeed, the counter-narratives of some of her most interesting work (for example, *Shadowland or the Seer*, or *Bertha and Lily*) might be identified as visionary or transcendental, but I would argue the resistance of *The Bald Eagle* inheres precisely in its material referents, or more specifically what Lawrence Buell might call its sense of *place*.

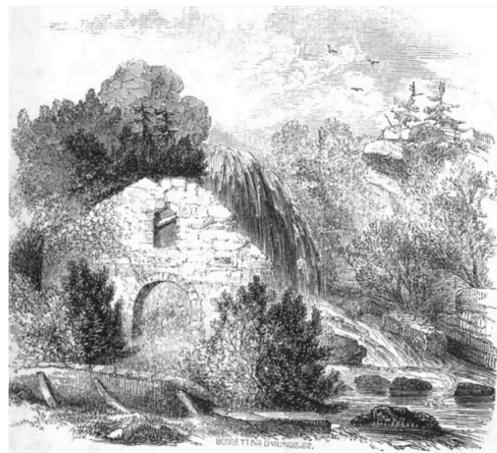
I don't think we've noticed how prominently the "place" called the Ramapo Valley figures in the literary output of Oakes Smith's most active years. It figures here, in 1848, in the version of the revolutionary tale I just summarized, in a re-casting of the same plot for *Emerson's Monthly* in 1856, and later in *The Bald Eagle, or The Last of the Ramapoughs* ten years after that, but it is also the setting of one of Oakes Smith's most popular novels, *The Salamander*, published in the fall of 1848, where it is not the revolutionary past but a quasi-religious Dutch Colonial mythology related to the region's



ironworks that drives what passes for a plot. In a 1999 article for the Rockland County Historical Society journal, William Diebold traced the material remains of Oakes Smith's references to the Ramapo Valley in *The Salamander*, and after finding little related to the her story referenced before 1848, considered the possibility that Oakes Smith originated the myth herself—indeed, may never have visited the place at all. What finally convinces Diebold to credit her book for its contribution to local history is the raft of material references she loads into the "editor's introduction" of that book—as if to provide local, material weight to a figuratively "foreign" invention. She begins, in fact, by contesting any simple view of the place's history, quickly deconstructing any opposition between "foreign" and "national" with praise

for the hospitality of the people in the Valley, who “descend from a mixed race of German, Dutch and French Huguenot ancestors,” some of whom still speak in the accents of the fader-land. If that’s not literal enough, she points out how the “relics of slavery” still exist (this probably the late summer of 1847), with communities of former slaves still serving—here in New York State—in the homes and industries of their former masters. Significantly, Oakes Smith points us not to written words but to the voices of living persons on the ground—a garrulous woman in the Hopper family who shows her the room in which Washington stayed (perhaps Maria La Rue Hopper), and a Mr. P--- (likely Jeremiah H. Pierson) the octogenarian owner of the local ironworks who gives her a tour of historic sites.

When considered in terms of “place” or material environment, the stories these people relate to Oakes Smith, filtered through the alembic of her own experience, become more than hybrid folklore in the way they lead us to objects whose enduring presence exceeds the



storytellers: pewter serving pieces used by Washington, the rocky ledge from which the infamous “Cow-boys,” a lawless band led by Claudius Smith, descended in their predations on both British and Patriot populations, or the ruins of the Augusta Forge, a “romantic” relic for passers by on the new Erie Railroad in Oakes Smith’s time, still standing today below the falls off

Ramapo Valley Road. Of all these details, the most relevant to Oakes Smith's re-writing of "revolutionary" tale of 1848 are vestiges of Indian burial grounds pointed out by her guide, and the stories of Mohawk and Ramapo traditions with which she begins chapter 1 of *The Salamander*. Far more than merely "adding charm to the setting" and the vague "romantic associations" of the novel, as Mary Alice Wyman claimed in her biography of Oakes Smith and her husband,³ it seems clear in Oakes Smith's repeated return to this place over the next two decades, that for her, the stakes were higher. William Diebold would seem to show his patriarchal bias when he verifies Oakes Smith's historical references specifically from their inclusion in Benson Lossing's popular *Field-book of the Revolution* published in 1851, but Oakes Smith's correspondence with Lossing demonstrates that the gender biases of historiographic authority were very real to her in the mid-19th century. In a letter to Lossing from 1849, she recounts her trip to the Valley in some detail, and directs him to sights he should see in his visit there. Later in 1851 she laments what he seems to have *missed seeing*, but nevertheless used *her* work from both *The Ramapo Pass* and *The Salamander* to fill in: "I assure you," she writes, "I am much gratified at being given an authority in your work, for I am very *unwilling* to be regarded as a mere Magazine writer, a compounder of mawkish stories, and sentimental poetry."

In 1856, during the years she and her husband had editorial control of Emerson's United States Magazine and Putnam's Monthly, Oakes Smith republished

³ Mary Alice Wyman, *Two Pioneers* (New York: Columbia, 1927): 182-83. The passage reads, "The pictureseque account, in the first chapter, of the legendary Indians inhabiting this valley—possibly a reason for dedicating the book to Cooper—has little bearing on the tale of the salamander, but adds to the charm of the setting."

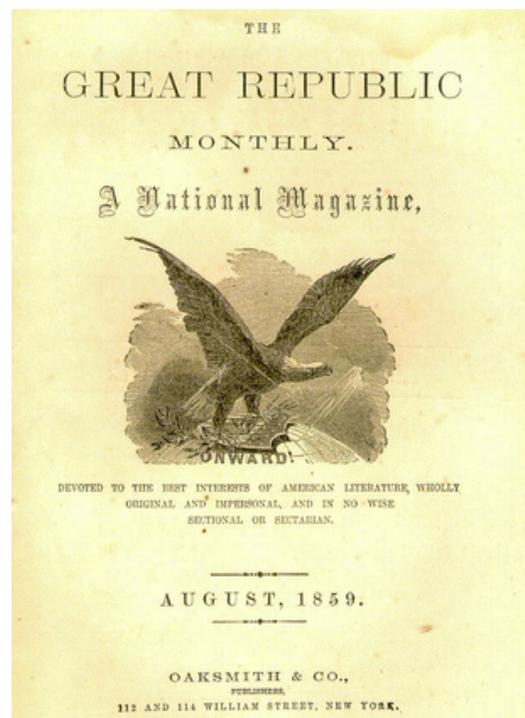
a narrative nearly identical to the one we find in Neal's *Gazette* in 1848, this time entitled *The Intercepted Messenger of Ramapo Pass*, but here, the variety of historical associations she recounts is pared down to a brief reference to the marauding Claudius Smith, and a more elaborate story of the last days of the Chief Bald Eagle. As in the introduction to the *Salamander*, she recounts being guided by the elder Pierson, but this time, her host gives her more details: that the tribe remained in the area even in years after the Revolution, but finally all but this "last of the Ramapoughs" "dwindled away." "He avoided companionship," her guide explains, and supplied his wants by trapping and fishing." Finally, the smoke from his cabin is no longer seen, and he is laid to rest in the Indian burial ground described in *The Salamander*. Drawing her attention to a naked rock high on the mountain above, the guide remembers seeing Bald Eagle seated there, "his eagle tuft waving in the air. . . motionless and as sharply defined as the rock on which he sat." "Heavens," exclaims the narrator, "what a grand statue he must have made there. . . the genius of his people—silent, stern, gazing with an eye of rebuke upon the miserable interlopers who had robbed him of their heritage." Given the tone of this exchange, it's pretty clear at this point—and likely before, if she'd had the time—Oakes Smith was very ready to write the novel she would put off for another ten years—one



of

which not only included but centered upon a race who were, as Mr. Pierson's description of The Bald Eagle intimates, continuous with the very place from which they take their name.

But as what Alice Neal called “a business woman”—not only a writer for hire but now an editor again, with her own family's journal to look after—at this point in this version, Oakes Smith takes her readers back to the “uncontested” ground of the Revolution. Her guide's memory may lead to more complex narratives, but finally his job is to set up a story that even a nation ineluctably divided in 1856 can all rally around (read: “buy”). Dropping all Indian reminiscences, he intones, “But I have a story to tell you, and you must commit it to paper. It is an incident which gave the turning point to the Revolution. It is true—it must be recorded—mind, it is true.” It's not Whitman, but it's insistent. Through the late 50s, Oakes Smith and her husband edited a succession of literary journals, each of which they marketed, in an attempt not to divide their readership any more than the country, as sectionally neutral. Economically or ideologically speaking, it was not time for an Indian novel, and we invited to celebrate the Patriots' victory at the end of the tale of the “Intercepted Messenger” with no memory of the cultural context with which it began.



Turning to Oakes Smith's last version of this repeatedly revised work, *The Bald Eagle* of 1867 brings what Wyman had called the quaint "setting" of *The Salamander* to the center. Contesting not only plot and character but the logic of her earlier narrative, where readers were first greeted by the heroic and wise General Washington in his Newburgh headquarters, this version greets readers with a white man at the opposite end of the moral spectrum, Richard, a son of the notorious Claudius Smith known as Black Dick, who is returning to hide in his slovenly home (please imagine Washington, "hiding") after he and his gang have overwhelmed and murdered the man who had brought his father to justice while his young wife and mother helplessly look on. Significantly, he is hiding not from American military authorities but from the Ramapough chief Bald Eagle, who enters the home, mercifully spares the womenfolk within, and leaves his arrow as a sign he will find Black Dick and bring him to justice. In this, Oakes Smith's contesting narrative, it is not the Indian, but the white man who runs and hides, sensing his doom.

Establishing these "othered" characters and their backgrounds, the plot of *The Bald Eagle* does not then turn, as earlier versions had, to address the dominant or uncontested narrative as such. The story of the "Intercepted Messenger" will be told, but we are invited to view that story, and not the story of the Ramapough, as "background." "We must give a hasty glance at the country," Oakes Smith writes as we leave Black Dick's hovel, "embracing the period in which our story dates, in order to show the bearing of *public* events upon the individuals of *our history*." The revolutionary narrative that immediately follows is copied largely verbatim from those presented in earlier decades—a narrative that was already public,

“uncontested.” In this final version of the work, however, Oakes Smith invites readers to identify with a history that resists that “public” narrative, one that includes not just men like Washington and Hamilton and sassy white maidens, nor one in which Indians are mentioned only to disappear, but one whose “individuals” include predatory whites and dignified Indians. Contrary to the uncontested or public history you have read or been told—this—Oakes Smith insists, is “our history.”

Completely invisible in the earliest version of this work, the Ramapough chief and his tribe here are not incidental to the plot but exert authority in the history of this revolutionary moment. If Tecumseh, in *The Western Captive*, is compared favorably to the patriots of '76, The Bald Eagle stands literally shoulder to shoulder with Washington. Moreover, he and his warriors *guide* the Patriots on their march to Virginia and even *protect them* as look-outs and sharpshooters from attacks of the Cow-boys, who at this moment have allied themselves with the British.⁴ This most developed version does not end with a Patriot victory. In a strange reversal of the military exertion against the Lakota, Comanche, Apache and other tribes in the 1860s, at the end of *The Bald Eagle*, the military turns its attention from fighting for a new nation to the rounding up--not of Indians but of unruly and violent white people. Together, the forces of Washington and the warriors of the Ramapough destroy the Cowboys and capture Black Dick in a violent battle (here, true to the Dime Novel formula), but in an important plot twist, Black Dick's brother kidnaps

⁴ Although the Indian Oakes Smith calls “The Bald Eagle” has not been historically identified, in *Keepers of the Pass* (2016), Lenik does cite legendary accounts of an Indian known as “The Highlander” guiding Washington.

Blanche, a minor female player in the Revolutionary drama. Bald Eagle pursues the kidnapper, and rescues her only by promising to ensure Black Dick's escape from the hangman, "so the Black Panther"—as he calls the villain—"will die like a man." He keeps his word at the hanging scene, severing Black Dick's ties with one slash of his tomahawk, to the gasps of Washington and the assembled crowd, but then brains him with another slash, avenging the cowardly murder that began the novel.

Washington's response is surprisingly resentful, as if "the contest"—of this plot, and of history—was only his to win:

"He was not yours; he was my condemned man, Ramapaugh," says

Washington....and "he flashed an angry eye upon the chief."

"He is dead," Bald Eagle replies. "what does it matter?"

To some—perhaps many—readers of the Dime Novel, perhaps it did not matter, just as long as the villain bit the dust. But to Oakes Smith, who claims her effort here was only "to rescue one point in our history from the fast gathering waters of oblivion"(100), the foregrounding of the Ramapaugh tribe in the history of the Valley that goes by its name would seem to matter a lot—in fact, it would matter enough to revise and republish the story three times to get it right.

As it ends up, this novel, along with the material history that undergirds it, may matter even more to the people who live in the area today. Entitling this session "Repeat, Revise, Resist," I meant to suggest how Oakes Smith's revisions of received history or dominant culture might relate to, let us say, "the contemporary" political situation. Contested history is a good thing—one which declares its own voice as "uncontested"—is not. That's obvious enough. But imagine my surprise, as

I researched the recent history of the Ramapaugh Lenape nation, when I discovered a copy of Oakes Smith's *The Bald Eagle* cited along with a mass of other evidence in a lawsuit over Federal recognition of the tribe in the early 1990s brought by, among others, Donald J. Trump, a principle investor in Atlantic City casino properties attempting to eliminate the potential competition of a tribal casino that might open in Northern New Jersey on Ramapaugh tribal property.⁵ So far, the Ramapaugh have not been successful in gaining Federal recognition, for to do so, by the statute, requires demonstrating a continuous political activity as a tribe from the time of European contact to the present. And yet as Ed Lenik and Nancy Gibbs have argued in a recent book documenting the socio-cultural history of the Ramapaugh for the past 8000 years, the absence of such specific activity testifies more to the success of the racist silencing of "others" in American history in the 19th and 20th centuries than to the actual disappearance of the tribe. If Indian "removal" was a fact in the Ramapo Valley, it meant people taking work in the industries that arrived with the discovery of rich iron ore deposits in the area, and allying themselves to others dispossessed; some left the area, but many retreated to the nearby mountains as New York merchants like the Piersons purchased the land where they had planted,

⁵ For Trump's racist attack, see Noah Remnick, "The Ramapaughs vs. The World," *New York Times*, April 24, 2017 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/14/nyregion/ramapough-tribe-fights-pipeline.html>). When Trump appeared on the Donald Imus radio show to claim he had "more Indian blood than a lot of the so-called Indians that are trying to open up reservations," U.S. senators Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) and John McCain (R-Arizona) ordered that a transcript be printed—not, according to Remnick, to "memorialize his wit" but to demonstrate "the kind of misinformation and misunderstanding...which have characterized discussions about Indian gaming." Known to hold a grudge (even when he wins) Trump continued his attack on the Ramapaugh in 2017 with his support of the Pilgrim Pipeline (the irony of the company name is too much for some).

hunted and fished. It is interesting, in several versions of *The Bald Eagle* story, to hear Mr Pierson tell Oakes Smith's narrator that the Ramapough remained "silent" and "did not like intermeddling." Ironically, the kind of dignified independence we are meant to read in that passage seems in many ways to have led to the tribe's historiographic, if not cultural, disappearance. But if monuments fall, and ruins decay into dust (and certainly the acid paper of Beadle's Dime Novels was not meant to last) the digitized records of the indigenous culture of the Ramapo Valley gathered by Lenik, Gibbs and others, along with Oakes Smith's versions of *The Bald Eagle*, ensure that the voices of the Ramapough will continue to resist the attempts of some to write them out of history.

Acknowledgments

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