CHAPTER ONE

Buried Bodies: Landing a Nation in
José de Alencar and Nathaniel Hawthorne

From the fifteenth century onward, European ideologies of exploration and colonialism linked the physical bodies of New World inhabitants with the physical landscape in which they resided, working to institutionalize a hierarchical difference between the Old World “civilized” powers and New World “natural” colonies. But by nineteenth century, many American independence movements and new nation-states embraced their purported state of nature as a sign of autochthonous legitimacy. Through a complex shift, the same associations that had once served to exoticize alien spaces and peoples and to justify their exploitation, helping to naturalize the ways in which colonial territories and colonial subjects were made subordinate to the demands of the metropolis, now regularly served to assert claims of national belonging. Nevertheless, this connection with the natural world was not universally empowering for New World citizens and residents. Although nineteenth-century national narratives celebrate the people and landscapes they deem natural as central to the nation, they also frequently relegate those persons most closely associated with nature to merely rhetorical roles within the community. Insofar as their material presence comes into conflict with the demands of the modern nation-state, the citizens and residents most closely linked to the land are also those most likely to disappear from the nation, figuratively and literally.

Indeed, many nineteenth-century literary and political narratives establish a discursive role for the natural citizen that calls to mind the figure of the homo sacer. As Agamben has suggested, the legitimacy of
the modern state is predicated upon the *homo sacer*, a figure whom the state can nevertheless kill without providing recourse to challenge or oppose this sentence. The *homo naturalis*—or, quite frequently, *mulier naturalis*—of nineteenth-century American discourse is not identical to the *homo sacer*, but the parallels are nevertheless disconcerting. In the two nineteenth-century romances this chapter will examine in more detail, *Iracema* by José de Alencar and *The Blithedale Romance* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the principle female characters are originally portrayed as central, foundational figures within their communities who are intimately connected to the earth and the natural environment. Although they are not killed by the state, they are eventually seen as a significant drain on their communities, at which point they are marginalized so completely that they end up dying. Indigenous characters are described with romanticized nostalgia, providing a sense of national origin only to fade completely from the literary narrative as well as the national community. In both communities, these deaths and disappearances are tolerated and even acknowledged as necessary in order for the nation to achieve its social and political goals.

Any New World proposition that suggests the association between lands and bodies will have beneficial and liberating consequences must address, suppress, or recontextualize the narratives of European colonialism in the Americas. When the European “discovery” of the Americas called into question much of European religious, scientific, and political thought, displacing the planet’s physical and religious center from Jerusalem and revealing both lands and peoples whose existence had not been accounted for within secular or sacred traditions, American space and American inhabitants came to be the subject of extensive scientific investigation, religious debate, and artistic representation. The terrain and bodies of the Americas also became the object of tremendous political and economic exploitation that found justification in a series of contradictory narratives proposing various relationships between American peoples and American lands. Presumed to be so closely tied to the natural world that they were unsuitable for integration into “civilized” society—and thus undeserving of the rights and privileges of that society—indigenous inhabitants of the Americas were enslaved from the very beginning of the conquest of the Americas to work the land in agricultural production or mineral extraction. However, the primarily hunter-gatherer societies first encountered by Europeans were also said to have an undeveloped or incomplete relationship to the land because they did not cultivate it and had no system of property rights as understood by the