UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Natural Reading: Race, Place, and Literary Practice in the United States from Thoreau to Ransom

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Sharon Louise Kunde

Dissertation Committee:
Associate Professor Virginia Jackson, Chair
Associate Professor Rodrigo Lazo
Professor Richard Godden

2017

DEDICATION

To

Braird James and Zane Loren,

readers and backwoodsmen extraordinaire

and

in loving memory of

Lester Fred Kunde,

who did it his way

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I acknowledge with gratitude the support of a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship, which allowed me to spend the 2017-2018 academic year productively immersed in research and writing.

I gratefully acknowledge the members of my dissertation committee, whose enthusiasm and insight helped me to keep going and helped me keep in mind where it was I wanted to go. In particular, I thank Rodrigo Lazo for clear feedback that helped me ground my project in broader disciplinary conversations, as well as for his frankness, honesty, and unpretentiousness – all sure signs of the quality of his thinking. I thank Richard Godden for shepherding me through the early stages of graduate school, for his remarkable intellectual generosity, and for his gentle but unyielding insistence on clear, elegant academic prose.

My deepest thanks go to Virginia Jackson, a truly extraordinary colleague and friend. Dazzling me from the outset with the possibility of turning a critical gaze onto literary criticism itself, she has subsequently supported and celebrated my work at every stage, making me feel like I was doing good work even as she told me to rewrite the chapter again, and again, and again. By framing her rigor as faith in my project and intellect, she made it possible for me to teach myself how to research, think, and write. I am deeply grateful to her for helping me find my way into this thrilling conversation.

I thank Elisa Milkes and Gerri Woods for encouraging me to go to graduate school when it didn't seem like a particularly good idea to others, and Lea Elliott and Jeanne Kolis for reminding me that it's never too late to start on a new path. To the SPR CLB: thank you for the food, recitals, hiking trips, and babysitting, and for wrestling with all the dilemmas of parenthood, career, marriage (and beyond) alongside me.

And finally, thank you to my mother, whom no accomplishment of mine could surprise; to Braird and Zane for being good big brothers to this strange and bookish stepsister; and to Peter, without whose inspiration, support, energy, and unending love I am sure I would never have been able to cross this finish line.

CURRICULUM VITAE

Sharon Louise Kunde

EDUCATION

Ph.D., English, University of California, Irvine, March 2018
M.A., English, University of California, Irvine, 2012
M.A., English Education**,** Teachers College, Columbia University, 2001
A.B., English and Women's Studies, Harvard College, magna cum laude, 1996

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

ACLS/Mellon Dissertation Completion Fellowship, ACLS/Mellon Foundation, 2016 – 2017
Climate Action Training Program Graduate Student Fellow, University of California, Irvine, 2015 – 2016
Nora Folkenflik Endowed Graduate TA Award for Excellence in Teaching, University of California, Irvine, 2015
California Drought Conference Registration Scholarship, University of California, Irvine and the American Geophysical Union, 2015
Semi-Finalist in Lexi Rudnitsky First Book Prize (poetry), Persea Books, 2012
Graduate Dean's Recruitment Fellowship, University of California, Irvine, 2011
Ford Program Grant for Undergraduate Research, Harvard University, 1996
Dean's Summer Research Grant, Harvard University, 1996
John Harvard and Elizabeth Carey Agassiz Awards for Academic Excellence, Harvard University, 1992 – 1996
Phi Beta Kappa**,** Harvard University, 1996

SECONDARY TEACHING AND TEACHER TRAINING EXPERIENCE

English Teacher**,** The Waverly School, Pasadena, 2009 – 2011
English Teacher, The Horace Mann School, New York, 2002 – 2008
Teacher Trainer, New Teachers' Institute, New York, 2001 – 2002
Educational Consultant, Accelerated Schools Project, New York, 2000 – 2001
English Teacher, Chapel Hill-Chauncey Hall School, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2000
English Teacher, U.S. Peace Corps, Mongolia and Albania, 1996 – 1999

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Natural Reading: Race, Place, and Literary Practice in the United States from Thoreau to Ransom

by

Sharon Louise Kunde

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine, 2017

Associate Professor Virginia Jackson, Chair

My research examines racialized notions of nature and naturalness in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literature and literary criticism. Drawing on recent work in ecocriticism, critical race studies, and the history of reading, I argue that American Transcendentalists developed a practice of reading nature modeled on what they understood to be the linguistic practices of indigenous Americans, encompassed in Thoreau's phrase "the eloquent savage." Early twentieth-century American writers then repurposed the idea of a language emanating spontaneously from the environment to help establish the foundations of modern literary criticism. By tracing how they did so, I show that the discipline they founded was one rooted in racial exclusion. Starting in the antebellum era, traversing the rise of literary studies in the early twentieth century, and concluding in the 1930s with the consolidation of the modern university, my project historicizes the uses of nature and the natural in both American literature and the disciplinary formation of literary studies. My project argues that the conflation of nature and race assumed by antebellum writers served the New Agrarians as the basis of a literary canon whose quality emerged from its writers' close and racially privileged relationship

to nature. In this way, my project illuminates previously hidden aspects of the discourses that helped forge the discipline of literary studies. By arguing for the centrality of naturalized race and racialized nature to the literary history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, my project suggests for American Studies and the Environmental Humanities the importance of attending not only to the ideas about nature transmitted by American literature, but the conditions under which naturalized and implicitly racialized notions of the literary emerged in the first place.

Introduction

> Reading is difficult to place conceptually (reading is a metaphor for many things), linguistically (it is both a noun and a verb), and physically (cognitive theories aside, it cannot be isolated as a single action)….In my view, the history of reading has become so dynamic precisely because its challenges make central the interplay between inquiry and interpretation – its archives are the objects of, and not merely the source for, its interpretive claims. The best histories of reading are readings of readings.[1]
>
> Michael Cohen, "Reading the Nineteenth Century"

On February 19, 2015, then-President Barack Obama launched his "Every Kid in a Park" program and designated three new national monuments, two of which in the parlance of the White House fact sheet "help[ed] tell the story" of the histories of nonwhite communities in the United States. In close alignment with such a goal, Obama's parks initiative aimed to increase access to the National Parks for low-income children, and in justifying the moneys budgeted for "Every Kid in a Park," after citing the average 53 hours per week ("more than a full-time job") "young people" engage with "electronic media," the fact sheet constructed the National Parks as "living classrooms that provide opportunities to build critical skills through hands-on learning." It further defined the access-increasing programs that the initiative would fund as ones that would "help enrich family learning experiences at parks and online."[2] As a follow-up, in the waning days of his term in office, Obama issued a memorandum supporting diversity in the staffing and stewardship of National Parks and other public lands and waterways. In this document, he identified federal lands and waters as "among our Nation's greatest treasures" in that they provide material benefits such as "fresh air and clean water, places for recreation and inspiration, and support for our local communities and economies" but also in that they act "[a]s a powerful sign of our democratic ideals." In their capacity as sign these "lands belong to all Americans – rich and poor, urban and rural, young and old, from all backgrounds, genders, cultures, religious viewpoints, and walks of life."[3] What interests me here about Obama's

efforts to increase racial minorities' opportunities to involve themselves in and support public spaces one might naively (if understandably) construe as "wild" or "natural," or at the very least not "urban," is his dual emphasis on these spaces' pedagogical function and their capacity to signify as a "sign" of something else. In this case, they signify shared "democratic ideals" that presumably forge one nation out of a people whose diversity is framed through the demographic markers of the possessive individual of post-enlightenment liberal democracy like economic class, age, and race. The text of Obama's initiatives provides a richly American example of the entanglements of access to what I will in this instance refer to as "nature," the emergence of political identity in a representative democracy notionally based on the equality of citizens, and experience in language, which here involves both the development of particular kinds of literacy (living classrooms, critical skills) and the circulation of meaning through acts of representation (telling stories, powerful signs). In other words, (racial) identity, practices centering on what we call "literacy" and "literary representation," and what is known as nonhuman nature intersect in the cultural imaginary of the United States. Obama's attempts to reciprocally vitalize the democratic American public and the public lands that tell stories of democratic Americanness can be understood as an instance of what I call "natural reading."

Natural reading and the practices and ideas that constellate around it – natural writing, natural or spontaneous literacy, topographical reading, and, significantly, notions of spontaneous and autochthonous literary production that mediates and signifies the identity of a people and the land they occupy – constitute the literary mediations of the cultural complex we know casually as "nature" to which the following pages will attend. Natural reading centers on the assumption – at times fantastical, at others banal – that ostensibly nonhuman nature bears, produces, extrudes, or mediates meanings which can be read like a language. Obama's hope

that contact with the nonhuman nature of National Parks – its air and water – might spontaneously foster new (or old) knowledges as well as membership and investment in a representative democracy relies on the notion that nature contains specific meanings and can be allowed to tell or conscripted into telling stories that foster a national collective identity.

The foundational instance of natural reading in the American tradition might well be Henry Thoreau's entranced fixation upon the shapes in the thawing sand on one side of a railroad cut. The flowing sand, which he observes "bursting out through the snow and overflowing it where no sand was to be seen before," not only possesses its own inscriptive agency, taking "the forms of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy spray a foot or more in depth, and resembling…the laciniated lobed and imbricated thalluses of some lichens," but impresses itself on its human observer by suggesting acts of aesthetic representation: "It is a truly grotesque vegetation, whose forms and colors we see imitated in bronze."[4] Thoreau's imaginative engagement with nonhuman nature at this moment draws connections between it and sculpture, but as the passage develops Thoreau further imagines the earth extruding a language legible to him and suggestive of the origins of human language:

> No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or the animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat, (*λείβω, labor, lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; *λοβος, globus*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words,) *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*.[5]

For Thoreau in this passage, nature has the capacity to produce legible language, and Thoreau's capacity to read it provides him with insight into a natural history of human language. Nature's writing provides the occasion for and invigorates or freshens his own.

Nature serves as a source of what a long critical and pedagogical tradition will construe as a characteristically American literary idiom.

In grimmer circumstances, contemporary scientists and humanists debate the periodization of the Anthropocene, an age marked by the registration of human activity in the geological record, as carbon output and global average temperatures continue to soar, irrevocably changing human and nonhuman patterns of being on the face of the planet. In signals as diverse as patterns of cloud formation, changing ocean temperatures and pH level, and species loss, scientists and humanists alike read something unmistakably epochal that humans have collectively inscribed upon the earth, something that like a text can be read but that occasions a wide range of interpretive tools and responses. As Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall put it, "we might say that our contemporary species-being expresses itself not in denotative speech acts but rather in performative interventions in which humankind functions as both subject and object."[6] In the context of the ongoing climate crisis, we are reading the effects of our collective existence within a global ecosystem which is itself the condition of our existence and our reading practices. The stakes of natural reading, one could say, have shifted dramatically in the past thirty years.

But as Bruno Latour argues, the work scientists do is not merely to allow facts speak for themselves: "The lab coats are no so deranged as to believe that particles, fossils, economies, or black holes speak on their own, without intermediaries, without any investigation, and without instruments, in short, without a fabulously complex and extremely fragile speech prosthesis."[7] "Lab coats," as Latour would have it, discover in natural phenomena and in the technical-intellectual apparatuses with which we put ourselves into semantically significant contact with them an occasion and medium for speaking (and writing) to an audience about a

topic for a reason. In deploying the phrase "natural reading," I intend to draw attention not solely or even primarily to the "facts" brought into discussion but the historically specific (and shifting) complexes of techniques deployed in order to make that speaking (and writing) possible. My contention is that the textual representations we conventionally know as literary texts have something to say about the unfolding ecological crisis insofar as they do not, in Michael Ziser's words (2013), "belong solely to human individuals and societies but in real and specifiable ways to a more-than-human community of humans and nonhuman others."[8] As an archive of thought about the environment, the ways we understand it, and the ways we represent or transmit that understanding in language and other symbolic media, literary texts can themselves be understood as speech prostheses through which the ostensibly nonhuman or more-than-human join in human conversations. And, what seems to me to be much more important, these texts significantly transmit or mediate certain conceptual impasses that condition our current position, impasses that as Dana Luciano (2015) argues emerged together with the massive instrumentalization and exploitation of human and nonhuman populations made possible by colonialism.[9] The impasses in question, which have to do with the representation in language of racialized natures and naturalized races, are expressed, transmitted, and refracted in particularly potent ways in the canon of American literature constructed by New Critics and Americanists in the first half of the 20th century, a tradition that thematized ostensibly nonhuman nature in myriad ways. In a fundamental and as it were literal way, the literature of America has much to teach us about the history of conceptualizations of nature, cultural representations of the environment, and the ramifications of these historically specific representations. After all, U.S. history is bound up with the deployment of an elaborate and enabling notion of variously "wild," "unpeopled," and "empty" "nature" set aside by a higher power as a resource that would support a great and

historically progressive experiment in rights framed as natural and universal but in fact limited to particular subsets of its population paradoxically understood to be at a remove from and dominative of the nature from which they drew both authority and wealth. In the twentieth-century critical tradition that begins with Perry Miller, and includes F. O. Mattheissen, Leslie Fiedler, Leo Marx, Annette Kolodny, and Myra Jehlen, American literature symptomatizes a fungible and politically expedient deployment of the concept of nature whose legacy we must needs attend to at a historically unique moment when humans' rampant consumption of nonhuman nature and the waste this consumption generates have begun to expose the limitations of the notion that nature is separate from and "for" "us" (whatever those two words might encompass). American literature is an archive of what Donna Haraway calls "natureculture," the complex of cultural apparatuses within which ostensibly nonhuman nature congeals into particular circulable and legible entities and patterns. In this respect, my project engages with, although it does not confine itself to, texts canonized as American nature writing.

More than an archive, though, the texts at hand provide accounts of the cultural complex of reading practices and the imbrication of the concept of nature and naturalness in a wide range of cultural discourses having to do with reading and writing, from the definitional demarcations and cultural politics of literacy practices to the close affiliation of particular racial identities with nonhuman nature, an affiliation that can have the effect of producing a privileged and "authentic" literary practice. In short, this project strives to undertake whet Michael Cohen calls "readings of readings," but, not to put to put too fine a point on it, readings of natural readings: readings of the interpretive practices whereby nonhuman nature and the cultural apparatuses of its representation in language are deployed to define and delimit literacy and the literary. By attending to the valences of nature and the natural in the context of the cultural matrices within

which literacy and the literary emerge, we can begin to see the ways in which race, as a naturalized representation of dominative social relations, and nature (writing and natural writing) are at stake in the construction of the literary in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century.

In what respects and to what extent, I am asking, are the nature writing and the environmental literary criticism that has grown out of, around, and beyond it, beholden to the (racialized) hierarchies that Lindon Barrett (1999) for one suggests are internal to "not merely a particular canon of primary texts…but, moreover, a canon of primary responses to texts" institutionalized by the New Critics and still a fundamental – if increasingly contested – basis of professionalized literary studies?[10] Critical reading practices emerge from a constellation of cultural expectations that fuse texts into coherent objects of study and inquiry, making modes of use and response possible, intuitive, and personally advantageous. I am trying to bring into view precisely these normally transparent expectations that make literary reading possible, in order to bring to light the social hierarchies assumed and underwritten by this practice of textuality, but also to bring to light the ways in which the assumptions of this practice of textuality and the social politics internal to it impinge upon acts of reading nature at the present moment of ecological crisis.

By critically investigating the intersection of race, language, and nature in an archive of texts expressive of the introjection of the notion of naturalness into the enabling assumptions of early twentieth-century literary practice, I aim to accomplish within the context of environmental humanities what Dana Luciano (2016) calls for when she argues that

> the critical turn to the nonhuman, if it wants to stop being…another mode of colonization, needs to give sustained attention to ongoing histories of dehumanization that condense around nonhuman/(some) human relations. Rather than simply decentering the human,

> we might ask whether that critical move can be used to interrupt those ongoing histories.[11]

If literary representation has shaped and transmitted the cultural apparatuses we use to interpret ostensibly nonhuman nature, then it seems imperative that literary critics and environmental humanists alike consider the ideological freight mediated by the practices of literary representation and criticism, so that we can frame projects that do not merely replicate the selfsame exclusions and hierarchies in the name of decentering the human and confronting a long conceptual history of hierarchy, differential access to power and representation, and exploitative consumption of the nonhuman and of humans construed as non-, sub-, or pre-human. In other words, the political impasses of our current ecological crisis demand new apparatuses for conceptualizing nonhuman nature, collectivity, and individual agency.

Historical literary studies are often conceived of as offering resources for formulating alternative conceptual apparatuses that might help us redraw the line between the human or nonhuman, or generate alternative affective strategies, or alternative modes of organizing temporality or subjectivity or individual agency, all of which would open up new possibilities for understanding and responding to climate change and the social crises through which it is experienced on individual and collective bases. While these ways of justifying or understanding literary studies open avenues of inquiry, I imagine the literary – and nature writing in particular – as something other than coterminous with the pedagogical, a source or model of what Harriet Beecher Stowe would have called "right thinking."[12] Now can we interrogate the epistemological appeal to the literary and the sets of interpretive practices institutionalized by literary studies as a way to pull race and sociality more insistently into focus within the context of an ecological crisis that has been unleashed through the systematic exploitation of, to play on Dipesh

Chakrabarty, the nonhuman-nonhuman and the subaltern human?[13] (How) Are the disciplinary tools of literary criticism implicated in the conditions of crisis? The notion that the literary archive, particularly of nature writing, can act as a kind of intellectual or aesthetic resource replete with adaptive strategies or cautionary insights relevant to the present moment has the potential to replicate what Luciano above calls "ongoing histories of dehumanization that condense around nonhuman/(some) human relations" when it frames literature itself as an affective repository potentially structured by the same kinds of uneven availabilities that characterize material natural resources.

Besides considering how literature makes available or newly visible an actual, physical nonhuman environment (or a historical instantiation of human epistemologies of the nonhuman) and puts its readers into relation with that environment, my project attends to the ways in which the literary and linguistic themselves rely on notions of nature, naturalness, and (a racialized) individual identity. The readings advanced here can help specify the "anthropological differences" through which Chakrabarty argues the effects of climate change will be (and are being) differentially routed, experienced, and materialized.[14] In this way, these readings speak to the institution of professionalized literary criticism and its implicit assumptions about meaning, value, and subjectivity as well as to a broader interdisciplinary cohort concerned with the conceptual categories that undergird our now mutually deleterious relationship with the nonhuman nature that environs biological life on the planet and that seem so frustratingly to thwart our ability to use extant scientific, technological, and governmental apparatuses to ameliorate our collective vatic inscriptions. My project posits the centrality of environmental justice – the argument that the practices as well as the ravages of global consumer capitalism are not universal and generalized but differentially distributed based on nonexclusive demographic

markers like class, race, and gender – not only to the environmental humanities, but to literary studies more broadly. The natural reading at stake here encompasses the phenomenology and the sociality of our experiences of individuality as they are mediated by material, place, relation, and position.

Nature and the American Literary Imagination

The apparently contradictory notion that reading and writing can be natural – spontaneous, nonhuman, or present in legible ways in ostensibly nonhuman nature – circulates in a wide range of writing by American authors, including that of the twentieth-century critics who inscribed canonical versions of the literary history of the nineteenth century. For Perry Miller, nature along with an American literature thematically engaged with nature constituted the source of American exceptionalism; through the excessive consumption and environmental degradation this apparently freely-available "plenty" allowed, the material nature that so impressed itself upon the literature about nature also constituted the greatest threat to the nation's realization of its exceptional promise.[15] As special access to nature afforded a postulated American political and economic exceptionalism, so special access to nature marked the American literature that serves to validate the promise of what Miller calls nature's nation; Thoreau, for example, in Miller's estimation, reconciled the Romantic division of subject and object, with *Walden* as a prime example of "[Thoreau] and nature publishing each other's truth."[16] Recognizable, then, even in a foundational work of modern literary studies in the United States is something like the notion of the human and the nonhuman fusing in a Latourian speech prosthesis – nonhuman nature "entering into" human conversations through human apprehension and representation of it – via the medium of a literary work. For Leslie Fiedler (1960), American "wilderness" functioned as a

historical and literary locus of civilizational regression: retreat into and confrontation with wilderness in the tradition of the American novel preempted and forestalled engagement with a feminized and feminizing social milieu.[17] The relationship between the individual, nation, and (highly contested) territory in which the nation took shape was thus canonized as a fundamental concern of American literature. In both Miller's and Fiedler's hands, "nature" became a medium through which a uniquely and for the most part belletristic, masculinist, and nationalistic American literary history was worked out.

Besides postulating ostensibly nonhuman nature as a central and foundational preoccupation of literary works canonized by the early Americanists, F. O. Matthiessen for one framed literature as a part of American nature: taking his cue from the nineteenth-century writers he enshrined as the founders of the American literary tradition, he cast the nation's literature as a naturally-occurring territory or organism suitable as an object of formalized study. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941), which helped to form the basis of Miller's and Fiedler's claims, accomplished the double gesture of inaugurating a national American literature and promulgating the assumption – floated earlier and in a slightly different form, as we will see, by the Southern Agrarians – that literature itself is or has a nature. Matthiessen's monograph proclaims interest in "the conceptions held by five of our major writers concerning the function and nature of literature."[18] At a moment of rising political crisis, Matthiessen thus identifies the five texts he has selected as constitutive of the eponymous "renaissance" (thereby framing and laying claim to the European Renaissance as a precursor of the nineteenth-century American one) as a way in which "we can feel the challenge of our still undiminished resources"; literature then not only *has* a nature that makes it an appropriate topic of formalized epistemological inquiry (whose protocols were established in the nineteenth century in what came to be known as

the hard sciences) but *is* a kind of instrumentalizable nature (even a nature whose presence poses some kind of a challenge or invitation to its own instrumentalization), a resource for a nation entering a global military crisis.

In addition to making it possible to imagine literature as a natural resource isomorphic with the "empty" continent which had acted as its first enabling and enticing resource, Matthiessen's study made telling assumptions about the aesthetic quality of the works he chose to study, which for Matthiessen were universal in their relevance, value, and meaning to an American public, but also unique in their excellence; the authors in question were worth study because they were "major," and the insights they offered, as artists writing at what Matthiessen constructs as the tipping point between "the liberal spirit of the eighteenth century" and "the rising forces of exploitation" or the "full emergence of the acquisitive spirit," were uniquely meaningful: media capable of transmitting democratic eighteenth-century ideals into the twentieth century during a corridor when, partly because of U.S. military assaults on fascist governments overseas, higher education was becoming more accessible to a broader public through the G.I. Bill and increasingly understood as a means of transmitting national identity.[19] In this way, Matthiessen gave impetus to a complicated claim in which particular works – by white male New Englanders writing in the first half of the sixth decade of the nineteenth century – were both universal and unique, conflating the universal with the white (northern European) (propertied) male subject in a canonical (and canonizing) move that Barrett diagnoses as the foundational movement of value:

> The condition of authority – which might be called exponential value – arises when, more than violating the Other, it cites itself in the place of the Other. Value as form (dis)figures the Other in the image of itself. Authority, the sighting of the self elsewhere, refigures the potency of blindness as perception.[20]

That literature has a nature, that it exists as a distinct and universalizable or transcendent category and that (literary) nature served as a touchstone for national identity constitutes one of the ideas made possible by the notions of natural reading and natural writing, which begin to show themselves as processes whereby the demarcations between human and nonhuman, between agency and vulnerability, between intellectual mastery and mentation that does not rise to the level of thought or articulation are continually reinscribed.

Other early-twentieth-century Americanists, thematizing the centrality of nature to the narratives of American history and the American literary tradition they were constructing, turned to the pastoral as a hermeneutic. For Henry Nash Smith (1950), the pastoral functioned dually as an ideological formation and as an accomplished reality. He posited the ascendancy of the Jeffersonian agricultural framework, which he cast as a version of the pastoral, over the British mercantile maritime framework; at the same time, he concluded that widespread devotion to the Jeffersonian agricultural ideal specifically as a means of understanding, codifying, and representing American exceptionality worked to obscure and thereby facilitate the land-grab that shunted lands west of the Mississippi into the coffers of large corporations instead of into the hands of individual farmers and their families.[21] Leo Marx (1964) channeled a Matthiessonian understanding of exceptional but representative literature while obscuring the apparatuses of its valuation under the sign of the natural or organic; his interest lay in a topographized or spatialized "region of culture where literature, general ideas, and certain products of the collective imagination…meet," that, despite his lip service to generality remained within the purview of an already-established canon of elite writers – Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Twain.[22] Marx recurred to Nash's preoccupation with the specifically pastoral character of American literature by developing the concept of the complex pastoral: for Marx,

the greatest (and therefore the most representative but also the most valuable) works of American literature did not present nostalgic versions of the pastoral but integrated the "machine" into the great American garden, registering the impact of technological innovation on American history and incorporating it into a natural/national American literature. Through deployment of the pastoral, these authors drew sight lines from works of classical literature to modern American literature as part of what Luciano calls a "progressive project of nation-building."[23]

While many of the working assumptions of these thinkers and their peers have undergone significant critical scrutiny and revision in the past forty years, the point I am making is that nonhuman nature and national identity are fundamentally at stake in the emergence of the professionalized study of literature in the context of a modern university as a site of cultural and economic circulation. To accomplish an environmental or nonhuman turn in literary studies that resists rather than perpetuates the systems of valuation and exchange that we intuitively understand to have established human patterns of unsustainable production and consumption, we need to attend in a granular way to the conditions of our disciplinary engagements, specifically to the ways in which literature and literacy function to array in particular sets of formations nonhuman nature and individual identity, and the implications of these formations for possibilities of agency and political belonging.

Feminist critics in the 1980s began to draw attention to ways in which dominant Western European narrative structures underwrote specific sets of attitudes towards the material existence of the North American continent and all the human and nonhuman life that existed within it, and the way that these attitudes in turn underwrote forms of social relationship, political identity, and governance. For Annette Kolodny (1975), the pastoral central to the critical conversation sustained by Smith and Marx served to feminize the continent itself, framing it on one hand as a

benevolent and capacious mother and on the other as an enticing but threatening harlot inviting (and deserving) violent exploitation. Like Nash, Kolodny attended to the capacity of representational conventions to organize and orient colonial practices; while Nash concentrated on the consolidation of wealth made possible by the rapid territorial expansion and industrialization of the second half of the nineteenth century in the United States, Kolodny's critique reached back to the founding of the colonial nation. For Myra Jehlen (1986), the historical anomaly of a vast territory made more or less suddenly available to Europeans through, in part, racist ideologies whereby the humans who already existed there were framed as less or other than human, allowed American settlers to "build[] their civilization out of nature itself."[24] The continent was rendered "available" to colonization by an interlocking complex of racism, anthropocentrism, and the capitalistic system of exchange made possible by these epistemological technologies of exclusion. The continent's apparent availability authorized and naturalized the American "experiment" in representative democracy. Where in Europe democracy arose dialectically with feudalism, in America it appeared to arise physically out of nature. For Jehlen, American "incarnational ideology," in framing and deploying the emptiness and availability of the nonhuman nature of the North American continent, accomplished a particular form of political sociality based on exclusions and limitations paradoxically constructed under the sign of naturalness. Jehlen's critique centers on the American Transcendentalists and the early twentieth-century literary critics who sought to found an American literary tradition on the Transcendentalists as the first great uniquely American literary and intellectual movement, but it serves as a useful reminder of the ways in which human social relations are internal to the work of representing the nonhuman. While Jehlen focuses on the valences of incarnation to a U.S. political ideology that would frame the history of settler

colonialist democracy in North America as a natural event whose contours inhered in the nonhuman nature of the continent, I am trying to raise the question of how this incarnational ideology was not only commented upon or theorized within the literature of the United States but to consider how it affected and inflected scholarly understandings of the literary and literature as a representational medium. I am trying to ask how Americans' unique (and/or extreme) and highly proprietary relation to nonhuman nature and the humans affiliated with it through the workings of a crypto-racist Enlightenment universality shaped the cultural conditions of literary production in the United States. If post-Enlightenment reading choreographs an agential and inscriptive intellection, wherein textual objects function as a medium for producing or as an occasion for displaying and consolidating individual agency and freedom, then how do the protocols of critical reading shape what's possible in the context of a posthumanist literary criticism or the environmental humanities? How can we push back against the hierarchical and proprietary dynamics of individuality as we seek to understand and express the critical history of literary works that in one way or another turn to "nature" as a touchstone and/or that undertake the work of expressing our myriad, multidirectional, unplaceable, multiprepositional relationships with /to/ in/ of/ through it?

Most significantly for the stakes of my study, critical race theorists have intervened in both the literary canon and the interpretive practices that emerge with it around the issue of the discrete literary object marked by abstract and universal qualities, be that object text or canon of texts. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1987) was among critics who raised the issue of the close imbrication of humanity and writing in the Western intellectual tradition; Gates describes as "curious" and "arbitrary" the fact that, from amongst all possible human activities or even modes of representation and expression, "the written word, as early as 1700, signified the presence of a

common humanity [of the African] with the European."[25] Gates dwells on a formation of (and an explicitly racist instantiation of) natural reading: the Enlightenment tradition, in his critique of it, establishes literacy, particularly the ability to write – a skill innate and inborn to no human being ever – as something essentially natural, an ability inherently and indicatively human, a basis for construing the supposedly nonliterate people being brought for the first time into cycles of global trade as sub- or pre-human.[26] In this way, the Enlightenment tradition construes a learned skill imbued with value in the context of its own epistemological presuppositions as something natural and innate, a basis for categorizing the Other as, in one way or another, beyond the pale of what counts as human.

In his trenchant anatomization of value, Barrett connects value as the basis of capitalistic exchange to the literary value shored up by the canon and by the construction of the text as a discrete object appropriate to certain types of analysis and commentary. For Barrett, textuality, in its very formal exclusions, is "the sign of privilege over which the academic discipline of literary studies presides."[27] In Barrett's analysis, value emerges only through the (violent) institution of an epistemological field wherein items congeal and take on value through their differentiation from and valorization over items or beings that do not take on value: "value is an impeachment of the Other, the willful expenditure of the Other in an imposing production of the self."[28] In this way, the value of the valued item can trace its value to the unvalued item or entity and the violence that institutes and maintains the difference between the two. However, and this is where a discourse on nature and the natural enters the equation, "it is imperative to recognize that value introduces itself by way of a violent agency that it subsequently seeks to deny….Value is…a presentation and a representation."[29] Value makes its appeal to nature, essence, inherence. In this sense, value as a mechanism or deeply-embedded cultural dynamic allows the literary critics who

instituted the canon of American literature "to be universalists without apprehending all of the universe," excluding parts of what Barrett here calls "the universe" in order to imbue with the value of universality that which was not excluded, that which made the cut.[30] By this logic, value constitutes a representational strategy, and representation – in its implicit or explicit reifications, inclusions, yokings, exclusions, disjoinings, blurrings, and limnings – is predicated on the circulation of value. Applied to a privileged canon of literature that makes a consistent appeal to the physical nature of a continent and to the givenness of its aesthetic standards, do Barrett's arguments suggest that to bring material nature into representational focus, or in my parlance to read and write nature, the social relations that reside within that materiality and that make vantages onto it possible must be blurred out? Can we see the literary and nonhuman nature at the same time, within the context of the same critical and interventionist utterances?

Perhaps an answer can emerge from attention to the interplay between the individual and his or her attributes, in particular his or her linguistic and literary attributes. While Saidiya Hartman (1997) reminds us that the cultural politics of possessive individualism, whereby traits and attributes serve to separate and enclose the individual, contribute to "an atomized vision of social relations and the apportioning of individual responsibility, if not blame, for what are clearly the consequences of dominative relations," Patricia Crain (2008) makes it possible to see that in the nineteenth century literacy took on possessive attributes, becoming a personal property that functioned as material property.[31] The act of hierarchization and implicit or naturalized violence undertaken in the institution of private property – whereby an individual or group of individuals constituted by some rubric of exclusion lay claim to some part of a collective material environment– inheres in the differentiation or organization of whatever it is that exists inside individuals. The differential distribution of skills – like written literacy –

re-presents dominative relations as grounded in or authorized by natural abilities. Under the sign of the individual and his or her natural abilities, risks that only should or only can be faced collectively are differentially distributed. The "universal," differentially distributed through the matrix of individuality, might comprehend the material environment whose collectivity is making itself increasingly felt in the present moment through steady application of capitalistic consumption and scientific inquiry. It might comprehend the common and collective experience of bodily vulnerability. It might comprehend the common and collective experience of expression.

Hartman and others displace a notion of personal agency that resides with and in a discrete, coherent, self-consistent individual and registers itself in articulable and representable acts, making it possible to imagine instead agency as being dispersed across and throughout entities and registering itself in omissions, abstentions, submissions, recitations, and microscopic transmissions of resistance. Can we find that nuanced agency in the individual writing and reading naturally so we do not to lose track of the rumpled and crenellated co-presentation of the human and the nonhuman in every act of voicing? Fred Moten (2004) identifies in the particularities of individual texts an "immense ethics of mediation" whereby texts – transmissions or accounts that "move away from the illusory ideal of an immediate presentation of our history" – emerge from and open the possibility of ensemble, which "moves from thought through what Levinas calls an 'ethical saying' to the possibility of ethical action that we must activate."[32] In other words, attention to mediation as a complexly agential and potentially ethical act, one that emerges from constellations of what we generally mean when we say individuals and that opens possibilities for what we generally mean when we say individuals but that activates or realizes those capacities in passing through or connecting or constellating many

individuals can perhaps lead us out of the contradictions and impasses activated by more traditional understandings of language and text (and inclusion in other collectivities) as emanations of an individual, the stuff of private property. Perhaps we can return to the construal of the text as a complex of nonhuman matter or event and human speaker, a speech prosthesis, but augment it with the notion of the text as ensemble, as the re-presentation, activation, and dissemination of "whatever it is that one carries as human: a generative grammar and affect, a knowledge of language and freedom given by and as de Law/d, by and as the improvisational presence of justice."[33] The textual works to which we as literary critics turn by love and by training, themselves available to us through processes and apparatuses we can barely begin to articulate, mediate and transmit our efforts to access and play within that generative grammar, to wonder at how it is that we see what it is that is before, around, and alongside us. As much as Obama's parks initiatives recite problematic acts of enclosure and preferential affiliation, they also nod towards the embeddedness of the human individual within a social and material collective. Perhaps we can begin to account for the exclusions and partitions accomplished in the name of the universal by inscribing and reinscribing the fluid particularities underway within a more truly collective universal.

Natural Language and Natural Literacies

"Natural Reading" assembles an eclectic archive of primary texts that sketch the history of a complex of ideas about the connections between nonhuman nature and human language starting roughly with the American Transcendentalists and ending with the racialized regionalism of the Southern Agrarians. However, I do not intend it to function as a thoroughgoing intellectual genealogy so much as a suggestive engagement with what often prove

to be extreme examples of literary autochthony – the idea (or hope) that language and literature emerge or from a landscape like a rock might, or grow from it like a tree or a field of wheat might. The first section establishes an antebellum preoccupation with the interrelation between nonhuman nature, reading, and political and racial identity. While we can trace the Transcendentalists' fascination with an inscriptive nature to the German and English Romantics, in the hands of American writers faced with the formidable task of accounting for the massive annexations of territory and slave labor underway in their county, the practices involved in reading nature and naturalizing literacy often mapped poorly onto Enlightenment notions of literate, agential subjectivity. For the American writers, natural reading had the effect of dislocating and dispersing the reading subject within the nature he read, and, in the case of accounts of raced language and reading, within the matrices of sociality that made the contemplative, self-dissolving stance possible. The second section moves into the twentieth century, arguing that while the possibility of reading nature remained an ongoing concern to American writers, particularly those who understood nonhuman nature and/or rural life to be their subjects, the emergence of a self-conscious and ultimately professionalized academic literary establishment redeployed (often contradictory or paradoxical) notions of natural reading in order to identify and differentially apportion a validating authenticity and even, fantastically, autochthony to certain groups, writers, and texts. In this way, an authorizing proximity to nonhuman nature – an ability to live harmoniously and fruitfully within its parameters and to read it in unique and self-sustaining ways – became a way to understand and explain not simply American colonial and post-colonial practices, but the American literature that emerged from them.[34] Transcendentalism thus mobilized a conception of nature's legibility that became part of the cultural apparatuses that in turn established American Transcendentalism as the first

important, independent American intellectual movement. In treating texts from disparate time periods, I am operating under the assumption that "no text, properly conceived, is a 'window' to any historical passage but is rather an unruly collection of dispositions toward it."[35] The texts I read contain and project their own versions of human and literary history, and I see part of my task as making more visible the historical assumptions that inform these texts – their unruly dispositions – and the torque those assumptions exert on current-day attempts to read them as part of history. The texts at stake here, I contend, also showcase unruly dispositions towards each other as they seek to anticipate, qualify, contradict, redeploy, and discipline what the others make it possible to imagine as well as what the others make it easy or imperative to forget.

Chapter 1 explores Henry David Thoreau's readings of alphabetic letters and words that appear in and through melting sandbanks, leaves, pond surfaces, and indeed, insofar as such letters and words constitute "the language which all things and events speak without metaphor," everywhere. Thoreau's supposedly metaphor-free reading of the material of his environment demands disorganizations of perceptual apparatuses that disaffiliate the subject from the agential, analytic interpretive practices of the Enlightenment thought even as it positions Native Americans and their languages between the Enlightenment subject and the nature he reads. At the same time, we can construe Thoreau's impassioned account of Native American languages as a refusal of the traditional divide between nature and culture: in his account of the nonhuman nature of backwoods Maine, Thoreau actively accounts for the social relations embodied in his translation work that give him a desirable vantage point onto the nonhuman nature to which he makes himself receptive and to the rigorous recording of which he devotes himself. Chapter 2 considers Frederick Douglass's attempts to represent, critique, and reframe his construction as part of a legible, exploitable nonhuman nature. While Douglass indeed represents his first

autobiography in particular as a spontaneous verbal emanation – a "revelation of facts as could not be made by any other than a genuine fugitive" – and further inhabits the agential subject position of an author, he does so within the context of an interrogation of the agencies conferred by literacy. Douglass's complex mapping of his literacy acquisition challenges the critical and cultural commonplace that equates literacy with social power and ascendancy and theorizes an array of linguistic practices that resist and defy racial hierarchies. Douglass's socially-mediated literacy practices generate a Transcendental subject whose self dissolves in networks of social relations that themselves frame notions of nonhuman nature.

Chapter 3 pursues Mary Hunter Austin's early twentieth-century uptake and redeployment of Thoreauvian notions of legible nonhuman nature mediated by Native Americans and Native American reading practices. Austin, like Thoreau, studies Native Americans in order to practice a subject-dissolving, embodied and emplaced reading invited by the legibility of the desert landscape she inhabits, a landscape which at times seems to include Native Americans as its natural features. Austin further imagines literature as the product of rhythm impressed upon humans by the features of the environment, thereby making any natural reader capable of producing writing that could be understood as indigenous and authentic. The literary object's separation from its author and its mechanistic connection to a physical environment anticipated the New Critical fetishization of the text as an independent, organic object that could be read on its own terms. Austin thus provides a crucial link between a Thoreauvian poetics of the natural and the literary institution that would help establish Thoreau as one of the great literary innovators of the American Renaissance. Chapter 4 describes the ways in which Kentucky novelist Elizabeth Madox Roberts and New Agrarians Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom pressed the idea of natural reading and natural writing into

the service of a high literary aesthetic grounded in and justified by a fantasized Anglo-Saxon primitivity. Roberts's Ellen Chesser, a tenant farmer's daughter with a Thoreauvian proclivity for reading and writing on the surfaces of ponds, embodies the literary and aesthetic theories of Davidson and Ransom, who postulated artistic practices that grew organically from a region through rural agrarian labor. Roberts's novel helps us clarify the ways in which a romanticized and primitivized poverty worked to yoke the deprivation and violence implicit to their pastoralized fantasy of Southern economics to black bodies while retaining the spiritual and expressive freedoms they associated with it for white bodies. For these Southern writers, race – as well as racialized poverty and racialized violence – reveals itself as a crucial category structuring the unequal distribution of literary value.

Together, this archive of texts helps us see that when we turn our attention to "nature," we turn to it with a vast cultural apparatus that makes whatever we mean by nature differentially available to different humans; we engage with a racialized politics of access. The ongoing appeal to narratives of nativity and racial belonging as a means of conferring social identity and prioritizing access to natural and cultural resources increasingly understood as scarce and even vanishing makes it imperative that we think critically about the ways in which language and literature mediate the relationships we think we have with environments.

---

[1] Cohen, Michael, "Reading the Nineteenth Century," *American Literary History* 26.2(2014): 406 – 417, 408, 409.
[2] https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/19/fact-sheet-launching-every-kid-park-initiative-and-designating-new-natio, accessed 7/13/17.
[3] https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/12/presidential-memorandum-promoting-diversity-and-inclusion-our-national, accessed 7/10/17
[4] Thoreau, Henry David (1854) 1992, *Walden* and *Resistance to Civil Government*, Second Edition, William Rossi, ed. (New York: Norton), 216.
[5] Ibid., 204.
[6] Boes, Tobias and Marshall, Kate, "Writing the Anthropocene: An Introduction," *The Minnesota Review* 83(2014),60 – 72.

[7] Latour, Bruno, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 67.
[8] Ziser, Michael, *Environmental Practice and Early American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 67.
[9] Luciano, Dana, "The Inhuman Anthropocene," *Avidly*, March 22, 2015. Luciano argues that the choice of how to periodize the Anthropocene implies interpretations of causality as well as sets of appropriate political responses. On the basis of this insight, Luciano argues in favor of periodizing the Anthropocene from the advent of North American colonialism which, by providing the occasion for the genocide of 50 million indigenous North Americans, caused a (temporary) drop in global carbon emissions large enough to register as a stratigraphic signal. By marking the Anthropocene as coterminous with colonialism rather than agriculture, Luciano imbricates the massive carbon emissions that have come to characterize human modernity with specifically capitalistic and colonialist practices rather than merely with agriculture.
[10] Barrett, Lindon, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 181.
[11] Luciano, Dana, "Speaking Substances: Rock," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4/12/16.
[12] This framework is especially prevalent in foundational environmental literary criticism; Buell (1995) strove to shift the canon of American nature writing from one that helped explain and justify American exceptionalism to one that had the potential to help a reader form his or her own unique and potentially ameliorative connections with nonhuman nature. Scott Slovic (1996) cast nature writing as changing readers' attitudes about and resultant behaviors towards nonhuman nature. See Buell, Lawrence, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995, and Slovic, Scott, "Nature Writing and Environmental Psychology" in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Glotfelty, Cheryll and Fromm, Harold, eds., (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 364.
[13] Chakrabarty identifies the "human-human" and the "nonhuman-human" as a way to distinguish between the ostensibly agential individual and the collective to which individuals contribute but over which they have little to no agential control. "Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change," (*New Literary History* 43.1 (2012): 1- 18), 11.
[14] Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial Studies," 14.
[15] Miller, Perry, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967).
[16] Ibid., 178.
[17] Fiedler, Leslie. *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960).
[18] Matthiessen, F.O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), vii.
[19] Ibid., ix.
[20] Barrett, 44.
[21] Smith, Henry Nash, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950).
[22] Marx, Leo, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 4.
[23] Luciano, Dana, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).
[24] Jehlen, Myra, *American Incarnation: The Individual, the Nation, and the Continent*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 3.

[25] Gates, Henry Louis, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4.

[26] See Derrida, Jacques, "The Writing Lesson" in *On Grammatology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, University Press, 1974 (1967) for Derrida's takedown of early twentieth-century anthropological disciplinary assumptions about the bifurcation and hierarchization of spoken and written language. See also Clifford, James. "On Ethnographic Allegory" in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986.
[27] Barrett, Lindon, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 136.
[28] Ibid., 28.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 176.
[31] Hartman, Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 133. Crain, Patricia. *Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016. See also Crain, Patricia. "New Histories of Literacy," in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
[32] Moten, Fred, "Knowledge of Freedom" (*CR: The New Centennial Review* 4 no. 2 (2004): 269 – 310), 283, 282.
[33] Ibid., 304.
[34] In this way, the men who helped to establish modern literary study framed anthropological culture as internal to the discourse of literary or high culture, even as the dominant literary establishment would come to understand the two "types" of culture as polar opposites by the end of the 1930's. See Hegeman, Susan, *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) and Manganaro, Marc, *Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
[35] Coviello, Peter, *Intimacy in America: Dreams of Affiliation in Antebellum Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005), 14.

Chapter 1

"The Language Which All Things and Events Speak": Thoreau's Extravagant Translations

I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be extra- vagant enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. Extra vagance! it depends on how you are yarded.[1]
Thoreau, *Walden*

Thoreau read avidly. He read the Greek and Latin classics as a young man at Harvard; he read ancient and contemporary Hindu texts. He read extensively in the scientific literature of his day and in the European histories of indigenous North Americans, a project that resulted in an eleven-volume collection of extracts, an ambitious undertaking exceeded only by his forty-seven-manuscript-volume journal, and whose transformation into a more formal and intellectually complete project was foreclosed by his death of tuberculosis at the age of forty-four in 1862.[2] So central to his mental life were reading practices that Thoreau understood them as extending to his interactions with the nonhuman world in the form of a set of hermeneutic practices I am calling natural reading. These practices posit both the "naturalness" or spontaneity of reading and the human capacity to read nonhuman nature like a language. As such, the term is a generative oxymoron, for how can an emphatically social skill like reading be, strictly speaking, natural, a word that would seemingly exclude anything but the most fantastically precultural human? More treacherously, how can nature, traditionally understood as an array of life forms and material flows that exceed the human and that has an existence independent of human thought and signification, be made to bear or produce signs that can be read like a language without foreclosing its material reality and the limitations that material reality poses for

so many human systems? Thus the phrase puts pressure on its constituent terms, asking how intense engagements with nonhuman nature such as Thoreau practiced over the course of his life can be reconciled with equally intense efforts to represent those engagements to other humans in language.

Thoreau's natural reading, related to German Romantic notions of organic connections between place, people, and linguistic tradition as well as to Emerson's uptake of the European ideas in his conception of "natural language," helps explain Thoreau's interest and usefulness to American literary critics in the first half of the twentieth century as they constructed and maintained a canon of literature that complemented a progressive and teleological account of Euramerican settler colonialists' unique and authenticating relationship to the territory, often framed in the context of this literary and historical tradition as empty and/or wild; Thoreau's special connection with the semi-rural spaces of New England, a space that enabled him to "hear a different drummer," exemplified an American exceptionalism authorized by nature.[3] In this way, my project argues that the notion of "natural reading" – that nature can be read like a language, that reading can be natural or presocial – engages the conservative possibility of framing cultural processes as natural, and therefore, foolish to try to change. But Thoreau's natural reading has also made him of great interest to environmentalists and posthumanist thinkers. They see in Thoreau a historical stronghold of practices that have the potential to change extant exploitative patterns of understanding and using nonhuman nature.

In this chapter, I will explore the contradictions engendered and brought to light by Thoreau's storied relationship with nature, a relationship he understands as a kind of reading, and one he understands as intimately connected to a wide array of linguistic practices. Thoreau's extravagant readings open out onto questions of the history of reading practices particularly in

the first half of the nineteenth century, a period when literacy was becoming increasingly common, though by no means universal, and when it also began to take on new import in a society characterized by fluid social and geographical relations. While Thoreau's resistance to notions of an empowered and agential reading subject makes it possible to imagine agency and knowledge as something other than individual and proprietary, his formulations of nature and its legibility also rely heavily on the presence and linguistic practices of Native Americans. Even though Native Americans mediate Thoreau's exalted and regenerative connection to the nonhuman nature of New England, I will also consider the ways in which Thoreau's emphasis on receptivity and the vulnerable materiality of embodiment counter national narratives of growth, expansion, and progress. Thoreau reads and writes in and from a space in which nature and culture cannot be separated from each other and from which neither term can be prioritized. Attention to the cultural apparatuses of literacy sheds new light on the interrelation between the two terms and generates new possibilities for thinking about identity and agency.

I. Natural Reading in Action

Natural reading comes to the fore in one of the knottiest and strangest passages in *Walden, or, a Life in the Woods* (1854), when, early in spring, Thoreau walks through a cut made by the railroad. The sun has warmed one side of the cut, causing damp sand to spill down in fantastical shapes that Thoreau represents as exerting a kind of representational agency. He writes:

> As [the thawing sand] flows it takes the forms of sappy leaves or vines, making heaps of pulpy sprays a foot or more in depth, and resembling, as you look down on them, the laciniated lobes and imbricated thalluses of some lichens; or you are reminded of coral, of leopards' paws or birds' feet, of brains or lungs or bowels, and excrements of all kinds.[4]

At the level of material philosophy, Thoreau seems to be suggesting, through the appearance of the flowing sand as types of plant life, animal life, parts of animal bodies, and even as the flow of excrement whereby what was body becomes (supposedly) inert matter again, that the common fate of all matter is to be swept through a variety of forms. By the end of the passage he has worked himself up into high Transcendental form: "The very globe transcends and translates itself, and becomes winged in its orbit….The whole tree is but one leaf, and rivers are still vaster leaves whose pulp is intervening earth, and towns and cities are the ova of insects in their axils."[5] Indeed, Thoreau's material theory draws from early nineteenth-century ideas that "vegetal life" with a capacity for "continual becoming" was common to all animals, plants, and matter.[6] But at another level, Thoreau advances a theory of natural representation: matter "takes form," "resembles," and it has agency in its capacity to "remind" a person of animal bodies and their constituent parts. Even the "globe" that "transcends" itself does so by "translating" – not by overcoming or passing above matter, but by becoming different or differently-formed matter, a process that Thoreau metaphorizes as a linguistic one. Shapes in the sand elicit a mental process of comparison: they re-semble, they are like something else, or they bring together or collect something into a form.[7] The material world for Thoreau invites and even engages in linguistic processes. The material world, closely observed, represents itself. The unfolding of material processes can be understood as a process of re-presentation, which Thoreau, writing, registers or transmits.

Thoreau perceives an inherent metaphoricity in the nonhuman world – a capacity to suggest continuities in the mind of a human observer, a potential for new connections – that authorizes his reading practice. As his description of the sand bank continues, he extends his theory whereby shapes in the sand have elicited an imaginative metaphorical connection into a

more traditional mimetic one that elicits its own material forms: "It is a truly *grotesque* vegetation, whose forms and color we see imitated in bronze, a sort of architectural foliage more ancient and typical than acanthus, chiccory, ivy, vine, or any vegetable leaves; destined, perhaps, under some circumstances, to become a puzzle to future geologists."[8] The continuity of sand and vegetation constituted first by the process of flux that connects all physical entities and second by metaphorical resemblance in the mind of a human perceiver inspires acts of human mimesis: Thoreau's sentence suggests that physical vegetation in the world and the resemblance of sand to physical vegetation both inspire imitation "in bronze" and as architectural ornament.[9] But even as the sand bank becomes a hypothetical jumping-off-point for a style of sculptural representation featuring mixtures of human, animal, and plant forms – the occasion or inspiration for a mimetic architectural artifact – Thoreau, known for his literalization of metaphor, transforms the foliated "architecture" inspired by gazing on the elaborate forms of melting sand back into the naturally-ornamented railroad bank, imagining "future geologists" puzzling over the cut and its strange patterns.[10] Up to this point, Thoreau's investigation of matter's suggestive resemblance to artistic forms speaks to a New Materialist framework that would include the nonhuman within human creative processes; in the words of Monique Allewaert (2013), "[l]iterature acts on and is acted on by matter. Figuration is then a way of thinking with tropes that proceeds from material causes and has material effects."[11] Thoreau would seem to concur by proposing a theory of sculptural representation inspired by forms observed in the natural world, and by himself acting as a linguistic conduit of impressions made on the flowing contents of his mind by processes of change and transformation in the outside world.[12]

But Thoreau goes much further than reading suggestive formal resemblances between shapes in the sand, the shapes of leaves on trees, and shapes in sculpture and architecture,

resemblances that might shape the artifacts they inspire. After establishing the expressive potential of the railroad bank, Thoreau turns the leafy shapes he has already apprehended and analyzed into morphemes and words which themselves undergird his theory of the continuity of material phenomena:

> No wonder that the earth expresses itself outwardly in leaves, it so labors with the idea inwardly. The atoms have already learned this law, and are pregnant by it. The overhanging leaf sees here its prototype. *Internally*, whether in the globe or the animal body, it is a moist thick *lobe*, a word especially applicable to the liver and lungs and the *leaves* of fat, (*λείβω, labor, lapsus*, to flow or slip downward, a lapsing; *λοβος, globus*, lobe, globe; also lap, flap, and many other words,) *externally* a dry thin *leaf*, even as the *f* and *v* are a pressed and dried *b*. The radicals of lobe are *lb*, the soft mass of the *b* (single lobed, or B, double lobed,) with a liquid *l* behind it pressing it forward. In globe, *glb*, the guttural *g* adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat. The feathers and wings of birds are still drier and thinner leaves. Thus, also, you pass from the lumpish grub in the earth to the airy and fluttering butterfly.[13]

Thoreau's strange account of language shows debts to Romantic German etymological philology, which posited an organic connection between a language and the people who spoke it, and also took language as a material that registered and retained traces of "the beautiful thoughts and images, the imagination and feeling of the past ages those words recorded."[14] But for Thoreau, words can be traced not only through earlier versions and other languages but right down to the material referent they signify: matter (sand) becomes form (here the shape of a leaf) becomes word (lobe) becomes organic matter (liver, lungs, leaves of fat) and phonic matter (f and v as a pressed and dried b).[15] The speaking/writing/reading body, matter, and the language with which the body names and evokes matter prove to be more than continuous, they are gnostically the same.[16] Or perhaps we can explain this unity of speaker, sound, and referent through embodiment itself: language, even in its capacity to signify, mean, link, carry over, mediate, becomes itself an embodied, immediate experience that exceeds semantic meaning. Thoreau wants to attach words – their sounds, roots, and even lettering – to material referents,

and to attach referents to each other in relational chains due to the similarity of the words that represent them in a human linguistic system; hence the connections between labor, lobes and leaves, between lobe and globe, and, analogically, between the grub and the butterfly. Thoreau is advancing a theory whereby sound differences carry particular meanings with them, meanings echoed in or even re-presented by the body, as when the addition of the "g" sound to the word "lobe" "adds to the meaning the capacity of the throat," as if by activating another location in the body in the production of the sound, the word itself is enlarged, sonically and physiologically registering a shift from something smaller to something bigger. The "g" sound does not merely differentiate "globe" from "lobe" but reenacts that difference (one we can perhaps understand as a difference of scale) in the precincts of the human body's resonant spaces. The production of the word creates a physical experience of an aspect of its meaning. Meaning in this way inheres in words, or at least their spoken production. Similarly, Thoreau labors to posit physical connections between words with the same or similar morphemic roots. Thus "leaves" and "lobes," being radically related, share immanent properties of being the building blocks of larger life forms. Even the phonemic shift from "b" to "f" carries inherent meaning, as the voiced labial "b" seems to have the property of being moister and therefore "more" embodied than the dry and unvoiced "f."[17]

Besides invoking the body as a site of meaning-making contiguous to and continuous with the nonhuman world, Thoreau's scenario of natural reading tries to rematerialize language's inherent conceptuality, its inadequate categorizations, its clipping off of the rough edges of dissimilarity as it gathers or conglomerates an ongoing reality into entities.[18] For Thoreau, conceptuality, which we glimpse in his leaps from lobes to livers to leaves, grounds itself as it were in the nature that suggests and gives evidence for the connections he posits. Language's

conceptuality is hidden in plain sight, made plain through its representational mediation by nonhuman nature. In the railroad cut, Thoreau practices what he imagines earlier in the chapter "Sounds," when he advocates shifting the practice of reading from books to the world (apparently) beyond them:

> But while we are confined to books, though the most select and classic, and read only particular written languages, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard.[19]

Things and events speak a language unburdened by metaphor, one that can be forgotten through the practices of traditional reading that works on a bounded text and does not undertake the work of particularizing and materializing. While Branka Arsic (2016) celebrates Thoreau for approaching what for Kant does not register as knowledge "without imposing on it any conditions at all," to my mind Thoreau necessarily must and does impose conditions that arise from his already-learned interpretive practices, but he strives to apply those practices in particularized and uniquely flexible ways.[20]

Because even as nature extrudes language Thoreau experiences as both meaning and sound, as (felt) thought and sensation (of words), his capacity to read it emerges from some kind of training. Definitionally, reading is a learned, cognitive process, one that involves interpretation, a back-and-forth between what one already knows and "what is before you" or "what is to be seen."[21] When reading, humans call upon established bodies of knowledge, practices of decoding, and a conceptual infrastructure that organizes sensory input. Thoreau in fact emphasizes the paradoxical formality and unnaturalness of natural reading by representing its mediation by letters, words, and tropes. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), as he and his brother pass under a "canopy of leaves we saw the sky through its chinks, and, as it were, the meaning and idea of the tree stamped in a thousand hieroglyphics on the

heavens."[22] In this gorgeous image, the nonlinguistic, nonhuman world becomes an inscriptive surface that fleetingly bears recognizable, readable writing (albeit pictographic and obscure to the two New England men) produced by nonhuman entities. Thoreau imagines nature as producing a language that is both figural and not figural. It is figural insofar as the tree "stamps itself" on the heavens: the shapes that appear in the sky complement the shapes of the tree's actual leaves, and so the tree produces a figure of its own leaves. It is, as we can see from this description, also nonfigural or literal because it is real, in the world, itself. The tree represents itself in a pictographic language that can be read with the appropriate set of references, stamping "the meaning and idea of the tree" in shapes that resemble writing. Thoreau's practice of natural reading folds language into the nonhuman world: "The universe is so aptly fitted to our organization," he continues, "that the eye wanders and reposes at the same time."[23] The outside world facilitates or invites natural reading, achieved through a blend of receptivity (the eye reposes) and undirected activity (the eye wanders). To take it a step further, in the act of natural reading, Thoreau posits the inextricability of nature and culture at a historical moment when Nature was broadly construed as a retreat from human culture, a surrounding outside or a lost primordality that might be fleetingly glimpsed. While a resistance to the normal strictures of human sociality certainly drove Thoreau's intense relationship with the nonhuman and his retreat to Concord and Walden Pond, he still experienced that relationship as mediated by acts of reading.

With Emerson, who famously describes language as "fossil poetry" made possible by the poet's proximity ("one step nearer to it than any other") to the thing observed, Thoreau imagines the possibility of a kind of reading made possible by closeness, and he consistently imagines Native Americans as both possessing this closeness and modelling it for him. In volume VI of

his journal, Thoreau states that "[t]he eloquent savage indulges in tropes and metaphors – he uses nature as a symbol…his metaphors are not far fetched – they are not concealed in the origin of language – but he translates entire phenomena into his speech. He looks around him in the woods…to aid his expression."[24] Thoreau's "eloquent savage" draws language – overtly figurative, featuring symbols, tropes, metaphors – from his material environment. His "tropes and metaphors," instead of forging connections between distant or dissimilar things and ideas that are united by a "truth" of categorical resemblance, stitch him more firmly to his material surroundings in which he finds himself relationally, metonymically embedded.

Emerson and Thoreau depart theoretical company, though, when it comes to the teleology of language. For Emerson, natural language is both symptom of and path to man's spiritual essence: "Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact. Every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of the mind, and that state of the mind can only be described by presenting that natural appearance as its picture…The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind."[25] The nonhuman world, as the font of language, serves as a vehicle for the realization of man's spiritual potential: "Nature is the vehicle of thought, and in a simple, double, and threefold degree. 1. Words are the signs of natural facts. 2. Particular natural facts are the symbols of particular spiritual facts. 3. Nature is the symbol of spirit."[26] For Emerson, conceptually untrammeled perception results in the abstraction of materiality in a realm of Spirit. Thoreau's natural reading, by contrast, like the language of the eloquent savage, posits the reader's own material continuity with his surroundings.[27]

In this way, Thoreau offers an alternative to the socially flattening effects of American Transcendentalism, as David Simpson (1986) characterizes it.[28] For Simpson, Emersonian

Transcendentalism collapses nature and human subjectivity via language that emerges organically from reality and that serves to bring the human mind and the nonhuman world into correspondence. This binding of human thought and nature authorizes territorial expansion as well as cultural and racial exploitation as logical outcomes of human spiritual progress. Emerson's natural language results paradoxically in a nature whose inevitable culmination is the human, a state of affairs that justifies any human use of nature (and anything certain humans might construe as part of nature, such as Native Americans) as "natural." Moreover, the concept of the universal soul, the abstraction of physical experience into an abiding spiritual significance, mystifies the actual social and material hierarchies being firmly encoded into antebellum social relations by an emergent global capitalism. As a proposed antidote to mercantilism and utilitarianism, Transcendentalism in fact becomes "an intellectually opportunistic licensing of every expansionist gesture of the new republic and of the culture that legitimates it."[29] While Emerson would heal the Romantic breach by incorporating nonhuman Nature into a transcendent human experience, Thoreau insists on viewing the nonhuman as an objective, external entity.[30] Thoreau reads *nature*, not himself, but he *reads* it: he hears and sees linguistic addresses in and from it.

II. Placing (and Racing) Natural Reading

Reading is not a historically consistent endeavor; what counts as reading and its social ramifications vary across periods and cultures, and the reading practices through which Thoreau brings nonhuman nature into language bear resemblances to dominant post-Enlightenment reading but also pose certain qualifications to existing assumptions about the location of the reading subject and the impacts of his or her reading. Post-enlightenment institutions of

education, for Michael Warner (2004), celebrate a "critical reading" indebted particularly to Kant, for whom reading served as a discipline that produced a certain kind of agential subjectivity.[31] In "What is Enlightenment?" Kant urges the enlightened man to come out of a state of intellectual dependence and think for himself, especially in matters of religion, and especially in a public sphere: "By 'public use of one's reason' I mean that use which a man, as *scholar*, makes of it before the reading public."[32] The act of analysis functions as a mode of self-authorship and public identity. Kantian critical reading produces or assumes "reading subjects [who] assert their own agency and freedom in relation to maximally objectified texts," a protocol we can recognize in the New Critical position of the literary text as a discrete object appropriate to disinterested analytic engagement in acts that amount to a form of public self-definition.[33]

Critical reading, which proceeds from the objectification and distanciation of the textual object from the reading subject, developed in counterdistinction to what we now consider "uncritical" modes of reading: reading as the recitation of history or precedent, for example, or as a way of celebrating a public occasion, inducing religious trance, or accessing a direct address from God. Only in the Enlightenment did reading come to involve a masterful engagement with the text as a coherent whole subject to the reader's analysis in a bounded place (gathered in a bounded volume available to a reading public) and at a bounded time (read over a concentrated period and understood to be at least superficially coherent and self-consistent).

Thoreau shared Kant's impatience with "immature, replicative" reading, although for Thoreau, reading might depart from the bound text and engage a wide variety of inscriptive media, ranging from an environing landscape to civilization itself. In "Reading," for example, Thoreau parallels reading texts and landscape when he dismisses an imagined objection to

reading the classics: "We might as well omit to study Nature because she is old."[34] Later, he ponders the paucity of translations of the classics into modern languages, commenting that "it is remarkable that no transcript of them has ever been made into any modern tongue, unless our civilization itself may be regarded as such a transcript."[35] For Thoreau, the processes involved in reading and decoding written texts are analogous to the processes involved in understanding situations that completely envelop an individual – the environment, his civilization. Thoreau navigates immersive experiences through acts that resemble reading texts.

While Thoreau's narrator posits that almost any medium may be read, like Kant he differentiates attentive reading from automatic reading that neither demands nor produces agency. The narrator deplores this automaticity when he imagines that "Most men" seem content to read only one "good book" – the Bible – and then

> for the rest of their lives vegetate and dissipate their faculties in what is called easy reading….There are those who, like cormorants and ostriches, can digest all sorts of things, even after the fullest dinner of meats and vegetables, for they suffer nothing to be wasted. If others are the machines to provide this provender, they are the machines to read it.[36]

Machines produce and distribute the provender of easy reading, and people consume it mechanically; Thoreau also figures such reading material as food for animals characterized by the capacity to consume by swallowing whole and leaving digestion to the gut. Such reading resembles mindless and excessive consumption. It provides neither autonomy nor essential nutrition. Thoreau shows us critical reading gone awry: the reader swallows the text as such but no subjectivity-producing acts of understanding are practiced upon it. The readers in this passage read compulsively or as an involuntary bodily process.[37] Like Kant, Thoreau associates such reading with immaturity and intellectual dependence: "I think that having learned our letters we

should read the best that is in literature, and not be forever repeating our a b abs, and words of one syllable, in the fourth or fifth classes, sitting on the lowest and foremost form all our lives."[38]

For Lora Romero (1991) the patriarchal valences of Thoreau's model of reading ally it with a predominant trend in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and criticism (Romero's main targets are Foucault and a particular vein of New Historicist criticism) that constructs, for one, a temporally specific emergence of a feminized "discipline" of words as a mode of social control. Romero identifies this framework in Rousseau's *Emile*, where women's lack of physical strength causes them to "defraud [their] constitutional destiny by using words to persuade others to do for [them] what [they] cannot do for [themselves]."[39] Romero sees the Fiedlerian narrative of male retreat into the North American wilderness in search of rejuvenating contact with a Rousseauvian "book of nature" – experience unmediated by civilization – as reliant on the "construction of an utterly mythic time in which authority represented simple physical superiority" and as such representative of "imperialist nostalgia."[40] For Romero, Thoreau's "Reading" repudiates feminized reading practices (consumptive, anti-intellectual, easy, copious, sentimental) and celebrates masculine, solitary, laborious reading which "preserves the autonomy of the subject" by substituting a "paternal apprenticeship system" of action and direct experience for a "maternal representational system" of words whereby women must reason and plead with words since they cannot act directly and forcefully upon the world.[41] But what seems especially curious about Thoreau's athletic, rigorous reading is that, even though it seems to participate in a center-of-the-road Enlightenment celebration of (masculine) individualism and intellectual resistance to civilization's conventions, it does so in ways that first of all posit experience's linguistic qualities, and that second of all that forego the Kantian Enlightenment

model of agency vested in a discrete, autonomous subject. The individual Thoreau celebrates is, in many ways, not a discrete and autonomous entity.

The reading practices the narrator valorizes demand the reader engage faculties other than those involved in decoding or consuming text. These faculties put the reader in contact with the text as an entity that can be encountered but not consumed or enclosed in a reader's "unwearied gizzard": "we must laboriously seek the meaning of each word and line, conjecturing a larger sense than common use permits out of what wisdom and valor and generosity we have."[42] The practice of attentive reading demands the construction of a new self in the encounter, changing the reader rather than sustaining him in his current form. While for Kant, the reader uses the text as an instrument to create an independent public persona, Thoreau's account asks us to imagine the text not as object but itself as agent, or at least partner in an agency mediated through the contact between reader and text. The text is not instrument of self-cultivation or will-to-power but agent of a more radical change.

The narrator reaches for extremes in order to convey the rigor involved in the task: it requires "a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention of almost the whole life to this object"; and demands that readers "stand on tiptoe and devote [to it] our most alert and wakeful hours."[43] While up to a point the reading here involved comes across as heroic, the product of great expenditure of will, it also suggests submission to discipline and bodily accommodations of its rigors. Encounters with texts, construed in this chapter primarily as classical literature but elsewhere more catholically, change the readers even in the anticipation of the textual encounter.

Further, where the Kantian Enlightenment subject coalesces through reading practices that develop, prove, and deploy autonomy through and upon discrete objects of analysis in a

language characterized by a universalizing logic, Thoreau's reading subject develops and deploys autonomy paradoxically through reading practices that, like the materially tropological language of the "eloquent savage," connect him physically to the texts he reads. For Thoreau, the practice of natural reading sustains and intensifies continuity between subjectivities and objects of attention. If autonomy and a distinct persona within the public sphere accrue to a Kantian critical reader, a Thoreauvian natural reader achieves a sensual co-embodiment with the nonhuman world that affords him, in theory at least, a measure of autonomy from logics of abstraction, commodification, and exchange that underwrite the liberal democratic public sphere, an autonomy that paradoxically arises from the process of weakening the links between subjectivity and agency. According to the dominant market logic, the matter of nature transmutes effortlessly into an abstracted and mobile commodity that Thoreau limns sarcastically: "All the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city. Up comes the cotton, down goes the woven cloth; up comes the silk, down goes the woolen; up come the books, but down goes the wit that writes them."[44] The logic of natural reading reverses the trajectory of abstraction by grounding the reader in the earth: "My head is hands and feet. I feel all my best faculties concentrated in it. My instinct tells me that my head is an organ for burrowing, as some creature use their snout and fore-paws, and with it I would burrow my way through these hills."[45] Reading here works as burrowing through particularity, even merging oneself with the matter of the earth rather than transcending or defining oneself in opposition to it.

We can see this strange reading at work in another passage from *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, when Thoreau figures an experience with a text as an immersion in landscape. The Bhagavad Gita transports him not to intellectual insight, but to a state of wordless

emplacement: "You cannot read a sentence without being elevated as upon a table-land of the Ghauts. It has such a rhythm as the winds of the desert, such a tide as the Ganges, and is as superior to criticism as the Himmaleh Mountains."[46] Language here is topographical even as it is tropological. It enables a transcendent imaginative experience (being "elevated as upon a table-land of the Ghauts") even while it paradoxically deflects (or bifurcates) its own power (the language of the Bhagavad Gita "is as superior to criticism as the Himmaleh Mountains"). Insofar as language creates an imaginative embodied experience, it takes Thoreau beyond language's capacity to name, reflect, compare, categorize, and abstract.

Perhaps natural reading tries to sustain a kind of thought that is not centered on decoding even though it is mediated by language:

> Though the sentences open as we read them, unexpensively, and at first almost unmeaningly, as the petals of a flower, they sometimes startle us with that rare kind of wisdom which could only have been learned from the most trivial experience; but it comes to us as refined as the porcelain earth which subsides to the bottom of the ocean.[47]

Here Thoreau uses language and overt figures (similes) to compare contact with language and figures in a text to observing or otherwise experiencing some of the natural world's most recessive actions: a flower opening, silt settling to the bottom of a body of water. Reading involves, even depends on or is made up of, thought, language, and figures. It results in a particular, physical embodied experience that can be expressed through verbal descriptions of passive natural processes. What is the position of the human in these figures? The human seems to be watching them transpire, but the human also seems to have become subsumed in these recessive, natural experiences (the silt "comes to us" as though we are on or are part of the ocean floor). Phenomenologically speaking, natural reading accomplishes an imaginative unity of reader and figure which is also in this case a unity of reader and the natural process it depicts and

the natural process it [reading] is, as when Thoreau imagines the eye wandering and reposing at the same time due to the universe's "aptness" to our organization.[48] Reading can produce a kind of thought whose medium is language and whose aim is embodied receptivity to the text's sound and meaning rather than its translation or analysis. Thoreau engages in communicative acts whose object of representation seems to be the aspects of reading, experience, and reading experience (in two senses – the experience of reading and the reading of experience) whose point or origin are not the communication of concepts.[49]

But despite the democratizing implications of the decentered reading subject I am locating in Thoreau's writing, it is also important to remember that Thoreau uses Native Americans and Native American language practices to help him represent or figure the reading he explores throughout his oeuvre. To take it a step further, the Native American him- or herself lingers in the nonhuman world as a feature of the landscape to be read by Thoreau;[50] we can see the continuity of Native American and landscape in which he dwells when Thoreau and his cousin contract a Native American guide in Maine "that I might study his ways."[51] As an object of study, the guide engages Thoreau as much as the backwoods topography and nonhuman life forms, particularly in "The Allegash and East Branch." Indeed, Robert Sayre calls *The Maine Woods*, of which "Allegash" constitutes the third and final essay, "the book about Indians which [Thoreau] *did* write," suggesting that the backwoods trilogy was the culmination of Thoreau's extensive research on Native North American history and culture, research that has caused many to speculate that Thoreau intended to write a comprehensive history but was thwarted by death.[52]

In a conversation with John Langdon Sibley at Harvard, which Sibley recorded in a letter, Thoreau suggests that the figure of the Native American authorized natural reading in ways that

tended to fold the indigenous human into the nature being read, or at least to place him in a medial position in relation to the white observer:

> Today [Thoreau] enlarged to me somewhat on the mistake of men of science in not giving more attention to the Indians & their languages & habits. In relation to geology, botany, zoology, &c., they *stand between* the men of science and the subjects which they study….Thus men of science might learn best *through Indians* many of the properties &c of the subjects of their studies.[53]

Although this is Sibley's paraphrase of a conversation with Thoreau, I find it significant that the statement celebrating the epistemologies of Native American peoples depicts them as potential mediators of Western scientific knowledge.[54] They "stand between" white men of science and the nonhuman world, indicating that knowledge about the nonhuman world can pass "through" Native Americans to white scientists. Somehow Native Americans stand closer to nature than white Anglo-American settlers; not only nature itself but knowledge of it has to pass through Native Americans (or will be enriched by passing through them). If language mediates the nonhuman and the human, does the figure of the Native American mediate the white reader and the nonhuman? Can Thoreau read nature only insofar as he imagines that Native Americans can? Can he read nature only through the figure of other (kinds of) people?

In placing Native Americans between himself and nonhuman nature as a part of a literary practice, Thoreau, decades before E. B. Tylor used the word culture in 1871 to designate a group's beliefs and customs as an object of what would come to be anthropological study, seems to anticipate what Jacques Derrida (1967) calls "the remorse that produces anthropology" or, insofar as the remorse about the fallen and inauthentic character of one's own civilization produces a discourse that ennobles peoples understood as separate from that civilization, "an ethnocentrism thinking itself as anti-enthnocentrism, an ethnocentrism in the consciousness of a liberating progressivism."[55] Thoreau's deployment of the figure of the *eloquent* savage, not the

noble one, has the effect of rendering his linguistic practices, as a proxy for proximity to nonhuman nature, more usefully appropriable or transferable. By positioning the cultural other close to nonhuman nature as industrial capitalism encloses and degrades nonhuman nature has the effect of placing the other in a past which, as James Clifford argues, helps produce modern, progressivist taxonomic and textual enterprises: "Ethnography's disappearing object is, then…a rhetorical construct legitimating a representational practice….The other is lost, in disintegrating time and space, but saved in the [ethnographic/anthropological] text."[56] Thoreau's spatial distancing coincides with a temporal distancing, although it is not the fully-accomplished scene of "cultural loss and textual rescue" that Clifford attributes to twentieth-century anthropology.[57]

Up to a point, Thoreau's fascinated representational attention to the Native American does indeed place him in a fading and inaccessible past, attributing to Native Americans and their languages a primordality that complements the expansive temporal dislocation afforded him by natural reading, as when, after positing the "language which all things speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard," he falls into a contemplative trance, sitting

> in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at my west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time.[58]

Natural reading allows Thoreau to exit time, or to access universal time or even the future. When he arrives at the Native moose-hunting encampment in "Chesuncook," having chosen to camp there rather than the lumberjacks' "log-camp on the carry," Thoreau "was carried back at once three hundred years," it being "about as savage a sight as we ever witnessed"; the Native American girl singing on the Indian Island in Oldtown when he and his cousin arrive to find a guide in "Ktaadn" is "washing, and humming or moaning…an *aboriginal* strain."[59] The Indian's

connection to his or her surroundings through action and sound is savage, aboriginal, and primitive. Thoreau's attribution of primordality to the Native Americans also calls to mind Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011) conception of the "past perfect," a pastness imposed on marginal cultures which authorizes the dominant culture's sidelining and extermination of them in service of the dominant culture's "future anterior." Temporality, or tense as Povinelli would have it, serves as a crucial switch point for the distribution of essence under the modern regime of liberal democracy and capitalism.[60] While the girl sings in or from the past, Thoreau's mystical attunement to the world that environs him seems to link him to that idealized future. The "music" of the "distant drummer" to which he famously steps aligns him not only with something spatially distant, but with something temporally remote: "It is not important that [a man] should mature as soon as an apple-tree or an oak. Shall he turn his spring into summer? If the condition of things which we were made for is not yet, what were any reality we can substitute?"[61] The (white) natural reader may be out of step with the present, but he is poised to inherit the future. Thoreau naturalizes this futurity in the final image of *Walden*, a description of a phoenix-like insect emblematic of the rising "life in us":

> Every one has heard the story …of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the dry leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years…from an egg deposited in the tree many years earlier still as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn.[62]

Thoreau's white readers may have been able to anticipate with him being a "beautiful and winged life" that hatches "unexpectedly…from amidst society's most trivial and handseled furniture, to enjoy its perfect summer life at last."[63] By contrast, Thoreau can't not primordialize Native Americans in a representational move that partakes of what Kyla Schuller (2016) identifies as the fossilization of Native North American cultures in service of an evolutionary

narrative of cultural progress and white supremacy.[64] In "Chesuncook," he experiences the sound of the Abenaki language as a shift into the past:

> There can be no more startling evidence of their being a distinct and comparatively aboriginal race, than to hear this unaltered Indian language, which the white man cannot speak or understand. We may suspect change and deterioration in almost every other particular, but the language which is so wholly unintelligible to us. It took me by surprise, though I had found so many arrow-heads, and convinced me that the Indian was not the invention of historians and poets. It was a purely wild and primitive American sound, as much as the barking of a chickaree, and I could not understand a syllable of it…These Abenakis gossiped, laughed, and jested, in the language in which Eliot's Indian Bible is written, the language which had been spoken in New England who shall say how long? These were the sounds that issued from the wigwams of this country before Columbus was born; they have not yet died away; and, with remarkably few exceptions, the language of their forefathers is still copious enough for them. I felt that I stood, or rather lay as near to the primitive man of America, that night, as any of its discoverers ever did.[65]

In this passage, Abenaki language emerges as something timeless and artefactual. It is "unaltered," having experienced no "change" or "deterioration"; it convinces Thoreau more than archeological artifacts of the existence of "the Indian." Even more, it takes on qualities of the nonhuman, being "wild and primitive…as the barking of the chickaree," itself here remaining beyond Thoreau's capacity to understand, part of the natural world's legible but arcane address. The simile tends, it would seem, to naturalize genocide by dehistoricizing it as an evolutionary inevitability: "they have not yet died away." *Not yet*, but soon enough, and *died*, not exterminated. Moreover, in the language's reification as a timeless natural feature, Thoreau construes it as American, part of the settled and settler colonialist history invoked by the references to the Eliot Indian Bible and Columbus.

At the same time, we can see Thoreau establishing contiguity between the environing sound of the Abenaki language and the historical artifacts of the colonial nation. The spoken language of the Abenaki men in this passage blends into the written language of "Eliot's Indian

Bible," which itself introduces a specific, colonial history that gives the lie to the narrative of evolutionary inevitability. Still, the spoken language he describes in this passage retains an element of being outside of history, in its copiousness (like the "copious" language of "all things and events" in the doorstep passage) and its impossible permanence. He writes, "These were the sounds that issued from the wigwams of this country before Columbus was born; they have not yet died away" as though sound could have enduring presence. To a certain extent, this semi-permanent realm of spoken language which nonetheless exists within a specific colonial history featuring specific colonial agents (Columbus and Eliot, historians and poets) gives the lie to the twentieth-century anthropological hierarchization of written and spoken language, and the sorting work accomplished by attributing writing to some peoples and not to others. While for Levi-Strauss a civilization's lack of writing figures as a "prison" that contrasts with people who "are able to store up their past achievements and to move with ever-increasing rapidity towards the goal they have set themselves," Thoreau, by contrast, puts linear history (Eliot, Columbus, poets and historians) back in the context of a much larger and encompassing "fluctuating history" incapable of becoming aware of its beginnings or aims.[66] Thoreau situates himself in that larger planetary history when he shifts from "stand[ing] as near to the primitive man of America as any of its discoverers did," a conceptual or epistemological relation (and a hierarchical one at that), to "rather l[ying]" next to him, a physical positionality in which the knowing reader/writer embeds himself in an epochal, planetary history that promises to erase him and his knowledge with its fluctuations. This shift from standing to lying positions Thoreau not as observer or scribe but as embodied human, intimately connected to the objects of his observation.

But what exactly is at stake in Thoreau's willingness to submit to erasure, to fuse himself with the Native American's simultaneous timelessness and proximity to expiration? As Dana Luciano (2016) reminds us, the "pleasure of opening the body to the vibrancy of the material world" is unevenly available across the social spectrum. For one thing, "not all humans turned away from the material world in the first place."[67] For another, humans already subject to systematic erasure may not be able to "make the refusal of this [traditional Enlightenment] model of the self, through a deliberate embrace of death, legible against the disproportionate weight of the morbidity historically allotted to them both figuratively *and* materially."[68] Thoreau's passage destines the Abenaki language to an eventual extinction and himself to a new if yet-unimaginable form of life. While Luciano's critique speaks to Thoreau's practice of natural reading, I want to hold out its materiality, its particularity, and it textuality as possible nuances that allow for this practice of (white) self-dissolution to do more than use the Other as a screen for the fantasies of the dominant culture.

Thoreau was a translator, having translated Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* for *The Dial* as a young man.[69] Thoreau also studied Native American languages diligently and methodically; in his Indian Book he collects word lists as well as history, mythology, and cultural practices of many different tribes. The high point of the essay "Chesuncook," which details the second of three canoe trips Thoreau took in Maine with Native American guides, consists of a scene of oral translation and occurs at an Indian encampment when the men lay awake and exchange language: "they gave us the meaning of many Indian names of lakes and streams in the vicinity."[70] The process is one familiar to any traveler in a foreign country with a willing interlocutor who has a little knowledge of one's own language:

> I asked the Indian name of Moosehead Lake. Joe [Aettion, Thoreau's guide on this expedition] answered, *Sebamook*; Tahmunt pronounced it *Sebemook*. When I asked what

> it meant, they answered, Moosehead Lake. At length, getting my meaning, they alternately repeated the word over to themselves, as a philologist might, – *Sebamook*, – *Sebemook*, – now and then comparing notes in Indian; for there was a slight difference in their dialects; and finally Tahmunt said, "Ugh! I know," – and he rose up partly on the moose-hide, – "like as here is a place, and there is a place," pointing to different parts of the hide, "and you take water from there and fill this, and it stays here; that is Sebamook." I understood him to mean it was a reservoir of water that did not run away.[71]

Here Joe and Tahmunt shift from understanding translation as the simple substitution of one word for another (*Sebamook* or *Sebemook* is the word they use to name the lake the settler colonialists call Moosehead Lake) to putting languages into what Walter Benjamin (1923) might call a "reciprocal relationship."[72] But Benjamin's model of translation harks back to an idealizing and Romantic yen for a universal or "pure language" glimpsed in the process of translation, which "thus mak[es] both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language."[73] And while Thoreau's example above exhibits the kind of mutual impacts languages can have upon each other in the process of their interaction, Thoreau represents a different impulse than the Benjaminian fascination with linguistic purity, a fascination David Bellos pegs as "mystical nonsense" Benjamin mobilizes in order "to defend the clumsiness of his own translation of Baudelaire."[74] Thoreau by contrast sticks with particulars. Joe's translation unfolds something very specific: the process by which a reservoir is created, taking water from here, filling this, and it stays there. The word as applied to the lake Thoreau knew by a name that described, perhaps, its shape, has the potential to change Thoreau's understanding of Moosehead Lake as the result of ongoing processes. Thoreau attends to Penobscot words later in the essay, carefully recording two pages of his continued conversation during which Joe and his friends continue to supply him with English translations of Native American place names, each of which breaks apart his own perceptual habits: "I give more of their definitions, for what they are worth, – partly *because* they differ sometimes from the commonly received ones."[75] The difference

helps Thoreau re-see not only his language but the nonhuman world the words describe. Translation throws new light onto the geographical features he knows, foregrounding aspects which had before remained imperceptible and had not risen to the level of expression in language. As he comments in "The Allegash and East Branch," his account of his final trip to Maine:

> So much geography is there in their names. The Indian navigator naturally distinguishes by a name those parts of a stream where he has encountered quick water and falls, and again, the lakes and smooth water where he can rest his weary arms, since those are the most interesting and memorable parts to him.[76]

Thoreau's contact with Native Americans and their languages teaches him to see nature differently, to remark new features that had not before registered to him as features because of his received conceptual frameworks. In the previously-discussed conversation with John Langdon Sibley at Harvard, Thoreau points out that "The Indian name for the pout…was descriptive of the fish's habit of leading its young as a hen does its chickens – something Thoreau had noticed but seen in no books."[77] The process of translation from "Indian" (sic) to English foregrounds particular animal behaviors and renders certain aspects of that creature's life patterns more visible to its observer.

While Native American languages mediate Thoreau's practice of natural reading, it does so by putting him into new embodied relationship with specific patterns of nonhuman animal life and material flows, and it does so through extended, face-to-face encounters with Native Americans, encounters which he crucially records as part of the practice of natural reading. Particularly in the extended passage above about Moosehead lake, translation proves to be a collaborative, embodied process characterized by negotiation, hesitation, and correction. In the process of giving an account of this embodied exchange, moreover, Thoreau expands the

parameters of natural reading to include human social relations, ones he accounts for meticulously if with myopic ethnocentrism. One might argue thereby that Thoreau does account for the social relations that facilitate and enrich his own ennobling contact with nonhuman nature precisely through his representation of his cross-linguistic encounters.

Thoreau also dwells on language's capacity to exert uncomfortable pressures on the body, a discomfort he attributes both to Joe and himself. Language remaps more than what is "before one," it reshapes the physical contours of the body in ways suggestive of a common vulnerability, what Lloyd Pratt calls an "anti-universalist universalism" channeled by the body's materiality and animality.[78] In "The Allegash and East Branch," Thoreau compares the linguistic mannerisms of his Abenaki guide Joe Polis when speaking English to a Chippewa lecturer who adds sounds to English words "as if it were necessary to bring in so much of his vernacular as a relief to his organs, a compensation for twisting his jaws about, and putting his tongue into every corner of his mouth, as he complained he was obliged to do when he spoke English."[79] Thoreau records Joe's own struggles with the sounds of English: "I observed that he could rarely sound the letter r, but used l, as also r for l sometimes; as *load* for road, *pickelel* for pickerel, *Soogle* Island for Sugar Island, *lock* for rock, etc. Yet he trilled the r pretty well after me."[80] Joe's body registers the discomfort of using an unfamiliar language, which expands or distorts his body in its struggles to accommodate its sounds. We see a similar, if less extreme, example of Thoreau's bodily awkwardness when Joe Polis, in "Chesuncook," teaches Thoreau the Penobscot word for chickadee: "I will not vouch for the spelling of what possibly was never spelt before, but I pronounced after him till he said it would do."[81] Here, Thoreau, as Joe's student, repeats a word several times, modifying his performance each time until it satisfies Joe. He shapes and reshapes his body in accordance with the demands of the language and his teacher.

At the same time, the sound of languages in bodies in "The Allegash and East Branch" testifies to the body's animality, as when Joe exerts his vocal capacities to call a musquash and communicate with a language not made up of words:

> sitting flat on the bank, he began to make a curious squeaking, wiry sound with his lips, exerting himself considerably. I was greatly surprised, – thought that I had at last got into the wilderness, and that he was a wild man indeed, to be talking to a musquash!...He seemed suddenly to have quite forsaken humanity, and gone over to the musquash side. The musquash, however, as near as I could see, did not turn aside, though he may have hesitated a little.[82]

If Thoreau can read a sandbank, Joe can speak musquash, which, if it fails to impress the musquash, seems considerably to impress Thoreau. Of course, Thoreau's ability to speak to animals was well-known. Frederick Willis remembers him using a series of whistles to call a woodchuck and several birds to eat from his hands outside the cabin at Walden.[83] At an even greater extreme, Thoreau suggests continuity between the sounds of nonhuman animals and the sound of human animals: in "The Allegash and East Branch," he considers the similarities between the call of a loon and the sound of his own breathing: "I have heard a sound exactly like it when breathing heavily through my own nostrils, half awake at ten at night, suggesting my affinity to the loon; as if its language were but a dialect of my own, after all."[84] While Thoreau qualifies his comparison between human language and animal sounds with the phrase "as if," the two languages share the quality of being the sound of breath passing through a body, a sound that has inherent if not highly specific meaning.

Further, Thoreau uses that experience of embodied animality mediated by the sound of life passing through a body as a way out of rationalized industrial time and the consumptive practices it orchestrates. As Michelle Neely (2013) has shown, Thoreau's abstemious dietetics work to disarticulate him from the capitalist, expansionist, and slaveholding body politic by positing a new republic in which anyone capable of disciplining the body's unruly appetites

might claim citizenship.[85] Similarly, natural reading's fusion of language and material, of ideation and physicality, also yokes close observation – looking at what is always to be seen – and sustenance. Thoreau thus explores an alternative to the aggressive consumptive regimes of settler capitalism, one that prizes sufficiency and stability over progress and growth.

Natural reading refuses the conceptual separation of culture and nature in its figuration of the textuality of the nonhuman. It takes Native American textual practices (construed broadly as practices of interpretation and communication) both as inspiration/source of authorization and as mediated and mediating object of natural reading. It is a mode of regeneration for a culturally dominant subject, but, as we will see, it also posits a complicated and destabilizing model of subjectivity and resource consumption.

III. Troubling the Subject

In turning reading practices away from textual objects and toward nonhuman nature and the human animal body embedded within it, Thoreau constructs the architecture of a widely dispersed and receptive subjectivity that, while acting as a relay or channel of awareness and expression, does not align with Enlightenment notions of rational and agential self-interest. He explores the receptivity of the decentralized self by figuring it as a vulnerable and material entity. In the "Economy" chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau figures subjectivity as an embodied presence that exists at the meeting point of two temporal entities: "In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my own stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line."[86] His consciousness "toes" a line, he stands bodily "on the meeting of two eternities," and, most intriguingly, he "improve[s] the nick of time" by notching it on his own

stick, that is, in addition to actually marking the walking stick with which he measured plants and other features of Concord's environs, by registering time's passage in the body's ongoing and ever-changing sensations. The experience illustrates what for Arsic are the "small literal contractions manufacturing an instantaneous unity of mind and body" that make up Thoreau's reality, in contradistinction to the categoricality and generalizability that were the threshold of knowledge for Kant.[87] The embodied experience of consciousness also figures in another well-glossed passage: "If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow."[88] Awareness of what Thoreau in the next sentence calls "reality" precipitates being cleft in twain, an experience of the self's dissolution that Thoreau represents with a metaphor of a body's violent bisection. Instead of finding spirit in nature, Thoreau finds nature in the body, and the overlap between the two material entities (body and place, or body and outside-the-body) posits the animacy of the nonhuman and the materiality of the human. In the August 30, 1856 *Journal* entry, Thoreau calls wildness "the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us," contrasting this bodily intimacy with matter difficult to know and not under our control with the dream "of a wildness distant from ourselves."[89] The nonhuman occupies his very gut.

For Thoreau, the thinking human subject can cultivate an awareness of his materiality, although that awareness never fully amounts to mastery: "Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. *Next* to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. *Next* to us is not the workman whom we have hired, with whom we love to talk, but the workman whose work we are."[90] Just as the cimeter divides the attentive individual, here the natural reader appears to be divided into two entities, the more external of which is variously termed a "power,"

a point from which "grand laws are…executed" and a "workman." In the figure of the workman, the passage attributes agency to an entity that exists in a space distinct from that which the individual occupies. Further, Thoreau depicts the entity as a site within which laws are functioning, and in this figure, Thoreau dispenses with the concept of agency altogether. There is no work or will, merely the unspooling of "grand laws." The subject, Thoreau suggests, is spatially dispersed. His agency is partial and uncertain, placed under erasure. When he reads embodiment, Thoreau becomes double-bodied or double-placed:

> We are not wholly involved in Nature….I *may* be affected by a theatrical exhibition; on the other hand, I *may not* be affected by an actual event which appears to concern me. I only know myself as a human entity; the scene, so to speak, of thoughts and affections; and am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another.[91]

For many critics, this passage has been crucial to theorizing Thoreau's literary importance. It is the passage on which Matthiessen's argument for Thoreau's reflexivity and narrative complexity pivots.[92] For Jane Bennett (1994), doubleness forms the nucleus of his posthumanist ethics, a practice of framing the self as emplaced but metaphysically itinerant:

> The sojourning self, then, is doubly double. Through the doubleness of experience/observation sojourners find themselves enmeshed with Nature; through the doubleness of subjecthood/objecthood they reflexively engage themselves. These doublings suggest that for Thoreau, a "native" is no simple or primitive self, but a highly complex identity, of so many parts that an internal coordinating agency is needed.[93]

The subject enmeshed with nature but not wholly involved in it becomes an object with the capacity to be observed and contemplated by itself. Yet Bennett's reading of Thoreau's material metaphysics reasserts a hierarchy and a source of control in the figure of the "internal coordinating agency." But to what could this coordinating agency be internal when subjectivity has become only a "scene of thoughts and affections," or a spatially blurred conglomerate of

workman and worked-upon, or in the even more extreme example, of the process of laws' execution?

Thoreau's practice of reading the body as a feature of the nonhuman world asks us to disband the Enlightenment model of subjectivity as discrete, independent, and agential and to refuse even the loosely conglomerated set of co-ordinations Bennett wants to reassign to Thoreau's subject. Thoreau deplores the impulse to oversee and control the eventualities to which his fellows would subject themselves and their environing world in *Walden*'s opening chapter, "Economy." The drive to control registers as a symptom of capitalistic economic relations (which depend on predictability), and Thoreau both participates in and ironizes the compulsion as he meticulously lists his experiment's incomes and outgoes, concluding that he left Walden with "a balance of $25 21 ¾ on the one side, -- this being very nearly the means with which I started, and the measure of expenses to be incurred."[94] But the attempt to control eventualities manifests at the level of personal identity as well: "How vigilant we are! Determined not to live by faith if we can avoid it; all the day long on the alert, at night we unwillingly say our prayers and commit ourselves to uncertainties. So thoroughly and sincerely are we compelled to live, reverencing our life, and denying the possibility of change."[95] In subordinating possibility to expectation, the individual "reverences" – stands in fear or awe of – a hypostatic, idolized "life." Natural reading, by contrast, demands an act of committing oneself to uncertainties and giving up attachment to a life's established patterns.

For Thoreau, reading nature pivots on reading the embodied heteronomous animal self, but not in the vein of Emersonian correspondence. Thoreau helps us parse reading as an intentional act of cultivating receptivity to the uncertainties of a dynamic material reality. This

achieved receptivity ideally and paradoxically confers a certain level of autonomy from social forms that dictate conventional relations to the material world:

> [M]y life itself was become my amusement and never ceased to be novel. It was a drama of many scenes and without an end. If we were always indeed getting our living, and regulating our lives according to the last and best mode we had learned, we should never be troubled with ennui. Follow your genius closely enough, and it will not fail to show you a fresh prospect every hour.[96]

For Thoreau, reading embodiment involves change, or the ability to perceive, incorporate and respond to what emerges from the contact of awareness and environment: "Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, and end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York."[97] Technological innovations may seem to increase the scope of human agency, but as Thoreau would have it, "men have become the tools of their tools."[98] In the passage above, Thoreau moves his desk and bed out of the house in order to sweep the floor and consequently enjoys the tableau of his furnishings in the clearing, following his "genius" to the insight that his possessions amount to a "gypsy pack," a reminder of his own transience and the provisionality of his situation in the cabin. In the figure we see that the cultivated awareness of one's own otherness paradoxically restores a dynamic and fruitful relation with the agencies that pass through one.[99]

IV. Troubling Positions, or Sight and Sound

The practices whereby Thoreau reads nonhuman nature make it possible to reimagine the agency and knowledge central to the Enlightenment understanding of reading. In order to read nature, Thoreau deploys a passive agency of informed but receptive positionality which renders him the medium of nonhuman processes. Thoreau's is a decentered reading, and the outcome of

his reading opens the possibility for another lexicon describing the kinds of changes his reading works upon his consciousness that do not take the form of meaning, information, insight, sensation, or analysis. His deliberate passivity allows him to register nonhuman phenomena and register himself as part of them. In exploring the possibility of elemental media having the capacity to communicate, J.D. Peters (2015) reasons that nonhuman nature's "repositories of readable data and processes that sustain and enable existence" constitute a "meaning" not of communicable thought but of "a population evolving in intelligent interaction with its environment."[100] But while Peters's model of legible nonhuman inscription provides a useful framework for readings centered on what I am constrained to call information or knowledge, Thoreau's model posits a more embedded and less purposive process.

Thoreau strategically positions his body in order to make it more receptive to the impulses of the nonhuman world. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, the narrator engages in a physical, bodily practice that allows him another version of the doubleness explored above:

> The shallowest water is still unfathomable. Wherever the trees and skies are reflected, there is more than Atlantic depth, and no danger of fancy running aground. We noticed that it required a separate intention of the eye, a more free and abstracted vision, to see the reflected trees and the sky, than to see the river bottom merely; and so are there manifold visions in the direction of every object, and even the most opaque reflect the heavens from their surface.[101]

Here we see not just the interpretive possibilities posed by divided vision, but an attempt to describe the physical movements involved in making that vision possible: a "separate intention of the eye, a more free and abstracted vision." Like the viewer of an optical illusion who lets her vision blur slightly to catch a hidden image, Thoreau's narrator must somehow get the dominant perceptual habits that organize vision, which are also physical, encoded in the positioning of

muscles, to loosen up, to become freer, blurrier, and more receptive to the eye's perceptive potentialities. This adjustment allows the double vision which in the passages explored above proves so metaphysically significant, and it calls on an agency that seems to belong to the eye as distinct from the seer.

Thoreau deploys this same physical trick – an agential passivity – in the famous passage from *Walden*'s "The Ponds," in which he rhapsodizes about Walden's beauty:

> Like the rest of our waters, when much agitated, in clear weather, so that the surface of the waves may reflect the sky at the right angle, or because there is more light mixed with it, it appears at a little distance of a darker blue than the sky itself; and at such a time, being on its surface, and looking with divided vision, so as to see the reflection, I have discerned a matchless and indescribable light blue, such as watered or changeable silks and sword blades suggest, more cerulean than the sky itself, alternating with the original dark green on the opposite sides of the waves, which last appeared but muddy in comparison.[102]

I quote this sentence (yes, it's just one) of Thoreau's in its entirety partly because it is so delightful, but also to demonstrate the complexity of the visual effect the narrator is producing, enjoying, and representing. We can presume that the narrator himself is agitating the surface of the waters to produce the desired effect, as the weather is clear, and therefore the narrator (or his boat) must create the agitation he subsequently observes. Again, there is an intentional physical intervention that helps produce the effect in which he is interested, but here, instead of allowing the eye to exert an agency separate from that of the seeing subject, the body involves itself in the nonhuman elements it observes.

But then, what exactly happens? Thoreau speaks of a particular part of the lake, what in the previous sentence he calls the lake's iris, a zone around the center where the ice melts in springtime in advance of the very center. The narrator suggests that the action of physically agitating the waves mixes the already uncannily blue Walden water with more light, or causes it

to reflect the sky. But after the physical intervention, the narrator performs the same trick of the eyes he employed in *Week*: he looks with "divided vision, so as to see the reflection." He attunes the body to the potentialities of the material world in a way that yields rarified vision, rich both in associations – silks and sword blades – and in its immediacy, as he tracks the blue in its alternations with the dark green.

Thoreau's strategies of visual production resemble what Theo Davis (2010) calls his "ornamental aesthetics," which center on unintentional aesthetic effects produced by processes that might be nonhuman (such as heavy ice bending branches to the ground in winter) or processes that humans might put in motion but the specific outcomes of which they do not control (mechanical or chemical processes, for example). For Davis, Thoreau develops an aesthetics of receptivity, or "indirect or recessive activity," that avoids capitulating to the notion of a universal human subject distant from its perceptual objects, "for here beauty is the unpredictable and mobile result of any number of local impacts and forces."[103] At the same time, Thoreau's aesthetics does not presume to have erased or repressed the impacts of the human perceiver: "Thoreau's observations about ornament go beyond providing a cookie-cutter image of an aesthetics less oriented around the human subject, in part because his diffuse, recessive presence is also startlingly forceful."[104] The cultivated attention does not pretend to leave what it observes unaffected: "The point is that even a highly recessive sensitivity – even the 'flower of the mind' – brings force to bear, and that aesthetic attention can transform rather than solidify and validate its apparent object."[105] Davis concludes that the complicated constellation of human and nonhuman agency formed in the production and appreciation of aesthetic effects gives us "a sense of the range of possibilities within contemplative attention that are still to be discussed and even acknowledged."[106] Thoreau's intentional positioning of the body makes it an open channel

for perceptions and insight; it places the body in the path of processes beyond its control even while initiating them or potentially altering the course they would have taken had he not been there. Besides the subtle practice of divided vision, the narrator also chooses to position himself to render his body more receptive to a disorganizing perceptual experience. Invested again in the potentialities of the lake's surface, he writes,

> When you invert your head, [the surface] looks like a thread of finest gossamer stretched across the valley, and gleaming against the distant pine woods, separating one stratum of the atmosphere from another. You would think that you could walk dry under it to the opposite hills, and that the swallows which skim over might perch on it.[107]

Thoreau's narrator here employs Emerson's well-known strategy for refreshing one's appreciation of the visual appeal of a familiar scene. As with the deliberate blurring of the eyes, Thoreau's narrator inhibits habituated perceptual patterns, giving rise to new imaginative possibilities for body's movements in the scene. First he imagines a person "walking dry under" the "gossamer" line of the lake's surface, and then he reinterprets the birds' motions, reading their motion as informed by the same understanding of the surface as a mere "separation of one stratum of the atmosphere from another": "Indeed, they sometimes dive below the line, as it were by mistake, and are undeceived."[108]

Even more suggestively, this repositioning of the body to produce disorganizing perceptual effects heightens the narrator's ability to read the surface of the lake as a site of nonhuman inscription. Besides having an aesthetic impact, these experiences register to Thoreau as an encounter with language. His reading begins as an impressionistic account of pure visual effects: "it is literally as smooth as glass, except where the skater insects at equal intervals scattered over its whole extent, by their motions in the sun produce the finest imaginable sparkle

on it."[109] Nonhuman motion registers itself first in a meaningless, gorgeous "sparkle" but in the next example proves more conventionally legible:

> From a hill-top you can see a fish leap in almost any part; for not a pickerel or shiner picks an insect from this smooth surface but it manifestly disturbs the equilibrium of the whole lake. It is wonderful with what elaborateness this simple fact is advertised, – this piscine murder will out, – and from my distant perch I distinguish the circling undulations when they are half a dozen rods in diameter.[110]

The narrator reads the lake's surface much as we will see Austin reading the marks left on the landscape by the feet of nonhuman animals. Like her, Thoreau has moved himself to a height the better to read epiphenomenal nonhuman inscriptions. Unlike Austin, Thoreau reads not for ecosystemic information, but for something less definite: "Not a fish can leap or an insect fall on the pond but it is thus reported in circling dimples, in lines of beauty, as it were the constant welling up of its fountain, the gentle pulsing of its life, the heaving of its breast."[111] The sun-limned ripples that out the "piscine murder" are "lines of beauty" indicative of the lake's – and Thoreau's – own "life," like the sound of breath in a body that is the basis of all language.

We see something of the same kind of contemplative contact that involves the body and that resembles the conceptual parameters of reading while Thoreau is night fishing. Besides being emblematically "jerked" back from flights of fancy to embodied engagement with the material world and the hungering body in the form of the fish at the end of his line, Thoreau likens this moment of dis- and re-orientation to reading:

> Anchored in forty feet of water, and twenty or thirty rods from the shore, surrounded sometimes by thousands of small perch and shiners, dimpling the surface with their tails in the moonlight, and communicating by a long flaxen line with mysterious nocturnal fishes which had their dwelling forty feet below, or sometimes dragging sixty feet of line about the pond as I drifted in the gentle night breeze, now and then feeling a slight vibration along it, indicative of some life prowling about its extremity, of dull uncertain blundering purpose there, and slow to make up its mind.[112]

This passage provides us with another kind of "line" Thoreau's narrator reads, here a literalization (or materialization) of the lines he reads on the lake's surface or the lines he reads in texts of classical literature explored in "Reading." His specialized reading of the nonhuman world is both sensuous and aesthetic, accomplished through a "flaxen" string that regardless of its recollection of pastoral diction physically connects him with creatures whose movements and intentions he can only indirectly and dimly read. The two creatures contact each other indirectly, through the "vibration" imparted by the fish's motion to the string and experienced in the narrator's hand and arms. This vibration is the "faint jerk" that "link[s] you to Nature again"; the embodied subject senses his own materiality in a vibration, motion that passes from one body through a mediating substance to another. He experiences his embodiment through his attunement and material contact with other bodies. As material, the body itself forms part of the chain of accidental aesthetic effects.

The continuum of self and non-self becomes especially apparent in the body's mediation of sound. Thoreau repeatedly returns to the image of the self as a lyre or Aeolian harp spread throughout, connected to, and in tune with the world beyond it. He hears the church bells of Lincoln and muses:

> All sound heard at the greatest possible distance produces one and the same effect, a vibration of the universal lyre, just as the intervening atmosphere makes a distant ridge of earth interesting to our eyes by the azure tint it imparts to it. There came to me in this case a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale.[113]

The sound of the bells connects him to all of his surroundings; the objects the vibrations touch and pass through add to them, coloring, augmenting, or extending them. The peals of the bell, he insists, actually activate a kind of voice residing in these other objects that is in some way

"original" to them: "It is not merely a repetition of what was worth repeating in the bell, but partly the voice of the wood."[114] Woodland ecosystem and church bell speak in and through each other. Thoreau insists on the materiality of sounds: they constitute physical contact between thinking mind and vibrating world. Mediation in sound (and by extension words) is a kind of physical contact between entities.

V. Let Me Hear Your Body Talk

Thoreau's attentive practices constitute something similar to but not completely coterminous with Emersonian defamiliarization, turning upside down and looking between one's legs to unsettle one's habituated perceptual apparatuses (although we have seen him do exactly this). Words prove themselves a feature of the nonhuman world, not mere (or only) indices or traces of it. As such, Thoreau theorizes language itself, along with the attentive practices it mediates, as a form of sustenance, which has the potential to feed, to moderate the acquisitive and proprietary appetites of the seemingly-rational liberal subject. The rationality and self-interest postulated by such a model of agency can operate only under the aegis of particular assumptions: of the bounded proprietary individual and limitless instrumentalizable and extractible nonhuman resources. Thoreau's complicated depiction of the body and its appetites, particularly in the chapter "Higher Laws," helps us imagine ways to value sufficiency over plenty, and stability over growth.

Thoreau's attentive engagement to and with the body makes it possible to understand the body as an agentially dispersed inscriptive surface. For Thoreau, this receptive and sensitized self, at its best, vibrates in tune with the music of the spheres, communing with what could be described as a Transcendent unity, a self-correcting and reparative wholeness available to the

"most sensitive": "We cannot touch a string or move a stop but the charming moral transfixes us."[115] At the same time, Thoreau insists on the materiality and even dirtiness of this unity, which we can see in the tableau of John Farmer sitting in his doorway in the evening in order "to recreate his intellectual man."[116] The music of a distant flute awakens "certain faculties which slumbered in him" and suggests a "glorious existence," without immediately providing any indication of how to "migrate thither." Thoreau's response to a tendency to dematerialization within the spiritual impulse is a return to the body: "All that he could think of was to practise some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect."[117] The image of the mind sinking into the body has led some to dub Thoreau a "descendentalist": while "sinking" would seem physically to place the mind over the body, thus reasserting the traditional spatial hierarchy of mind and body, the gesture also suggests the possibility of undoing the dichotomy, of uniting mind and body, of spiritualizing the body by fully and consciously experiencing the body in its entirety.

At the same time, the prescription invokes a discourse of bodily control and abstention, and Thoreau spends much of "Higher Laws," the chapter this passage concludes, articulating distaste for his body's animality and materiality, a distaste that seems at odds with the delight in the material world that characterizes much of his writing. The narrator tries to transmute his distaste into something more catholic by transubstantiating eating – the messy, penetrative, disorganizing and therefore terrifying contact with the outside world represented by food and its tastes – into sound, an adjacent, vibrational (though in some ways no less penetrative) form of contact.

Thoreau makes no bones about the limitations of being animal: "He is blessed who is assured that the animal is dying out in him day by day, and the divine being established….I fear

we are such gods or demigods only as fauns and satyrs, the divine allied to beasts, the creatures of appetite, and that, to some extent, our very life is our disgrace."[118] The statement sounds odd coming from a man who treats animals and plants as his equals, who "frequently tramp[s] eight or ten miles through the deepest snow to keep an appointment with a beech-tree," spends half an hour contemplating a dozing owl, and plays an extended game of hide-and-seek with a loon.[119] He suggests that his ideas about the inadvisability of hunting and fishing stems from his own impulse to slough off an anthropocentric worldview: "I warn you, mothers, that my sympathies do not always make the usual phil*anthropic* distinctions."[120] Thoreau loves nonhuman animals and the nonhuman more broadly as much or arguably more than he loves human animals, a view that forms the basis of Sharon Cameron's reading of *The Journal.*[121]

But perhaps the animality of the human bothers him less than its materiality, its proximities to mud. After suggesting that a progressive human development will eventually lead to all humans becoming vegetarian, "leaving off eating animals, as surely as the savage tribes have left off eating each other when they came in contact with the more civilized," he undermines the importance he has just attributed to dietary choices: "Not that food which entereth into the mouth defileth a man, but the appetite with which it is eaten. It is neither the quality nor the quantity, but the devotion to sensual savors; when that which is eaten is not a viand to sustain our animal or inspire our spiritual life, but food for the worms that possess us."[122] Contact with the world via food – the body's incorporation of matter outside of it – has three possible significances: it can inspire through flavor, it can sustain the animal, or it can, when consumed automatically and without awareness, pass through a subject who, to all intents and purposes, goes absent because he or she remains unavailable, thereby becoming a vessel for the worms that will break down the absent-subject's corpse into dirt. Attentive awareness plays a

crucial role in the passage of time (recall the sensory quality of feeling the "nick of time") and the conglomeration or even emergence of the self from and for a moment in time: without attention to gather the self into a medium that registers the passage of time, it collapses and the body that houses the attentional self becomes matter cycling through phases of relative organization and disorganization. The subject accesses the present through attention to the contact between the outside world and the body. The rapidity or im-mediacy of the body's decomposition into worm food horrifies the narrator: he goes on to wonder "how you and I can live this slimy beastly life, eating and drinking."[123]

The narrator's obsession with his body's materiality approximates what Paul Outka calls the "ecological sublime": a moment, typified by Victor Frankenstein's confrontations with the creature in *Frankenstein*, of an individual's recognition of his materiality and the subsequent erasure of any divide between self and nature: the subject at such moments recognizes "the radical connection between self, body, earth, matter."[124] The moment of ecological sublimity challenges the humanity of the human as well as the naturalness of nature: in Frankenstein's creature, "nature itself looks and talks back, challenges that transcendent subject, insists on its own self-developing and externally designed status."[125] Though Thoreau's narrator seems to resist realization of the ecological sublime when he recoils from life's sliminess, at other points he displays a more tempered attitude towards his materiality: "We are conscious of an animal in us which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms, which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature."[126] The narrator invokes the familiar dichotomy between animal and higher nature, mind and body, but his subsequent observations about its inextricability from our consciousness resist that dichotomization. Syntax

slowed by qualifiers – perhaps, not wholly, possibly – lets him linger over the image of worms that occupy his body.[127] He plainly represents the imbrication of human and nonhuman life-forms, first metaphorically in the image of the reptile, and then literally in the image of the worms which "even in life and health, occupy our bodies." These might be the worms of the grave, who have only to bide their time before being availed of the opportunity to turn our once-living matter back to dirt, or they might be parasites, worms living in and consuming the living body. While before Thoreau turned away in horror from "this slimy, beastly life," here he examines it more objectively, dwelling with the facts of embodiment – its capacity to connect us in terrifying or at least destabilizing ways with other coalescent beings. Here, he tries to make good on the bold statement with which he opened the chapter, that he "love[s] the wild no less than the good," a statement he makes after asserting his desire to devour a woodchuck raw, "not that I was hungry then, except for that wildness which he represented."[128] Loving the wild – consuming the wild, understanding that the wild will one day consume him – involves coming into ideational contact with the indeterminacy and porosity of his own body, marked by hunger, sensation, and decay; and subject to the hungers of other embodied beings.

Awareness of this contact between his body and other bodies gives Thoreau the capacity to do more than renounce his anthropocentrism: he entertains the possibility of his own in- or post-humanity as well.[129] Although he categorically declares that "no human being, past the thoughtless age of boyhood, will wantonly murder any creature, which holds its life my the same tenure that he does" and goes on to suggest that people naturally outgrown the coarseness of "animal food," the account he gives of his own eating habits is decidedly less conclusive.[130] He admits, "I have fished from the same kind of necessity that the first fishers did. Whatever humanity I might conjure up against it was all factitious and concerned my philosophy more than

my feelings….I did not pity the fishes nor the worms."[131] He must "conjure up" his own humanity, which has the potential to be "factitious," a product of "philosophy" – a set of rational beliefs with which he might define himself to himself and others – and not his feelings – more material and immediate because bodily sensations and/or emotions. He also here has the upper hand over the worms who will inherit his body. The humanity he elsewhere insists upon as a natural outgrowth of attention and empathy proves not to be so stable or assured. Despite half the railings of the chapter, Thoreau the fisher – an important figure in the whole of *Walden* – might be possessed only of a factitious humanity, a fact emphasized by the dispassion with which he catches and eats fish. Later in the chapter he goes further, admitting that "[e]very year I am less a fisherman, though without more humanity or even wisdom; at present I am no fisherman at all. But I see that if I were to live in a wilderness I should again be tempted to become a fisher and a hunter in earnest."[132] The decision to eat or not to eat other animals proves to be situational, ad hoc, improvisatory. If he is matter for the worms to turn back to earth, then the worms and fish are matter he subjects to a similar process.[133]

Even while the narrator foregrounds the materiality of his body in his representation of eating and gastronomical appetite (which itself does some work of displacing other appetites even more difficult to represent, indicated by the chapter's anguished and garbled statements – or outcries – about chastity), his representations also work to dematerialize and displace eating as a site of contact between and interpenetration of self and world.[134] Remember his protestation that he hungers not for the woodchuck's flesh but "the wildness which it represented"; in a similar vein, he emphasizes the internal sensation and even mental experience of taste over the physical sensation of food entering the mouth or filling the stomach:

> Who has not sometimes derived an inexpressible satisfaction from his food in which appetite has no share? I have been thrilled to think that I owed a mental perception to the

> commonly gross sense of taste, that I have been inspired through the palate, that some berries which I had eaten on a hillside had fed my genius.[135]

Eating – the democratizing contact of body's matter and inanimate matter (even the raw woodchuck is presumably dead in the narrator's flamboyant thought experiment) – turns ethereal: it produces a mental perception, or it inspires "genius." The narrator has dematerialized the act of eating, leaving only the mental contact between sensation and mind. The chapter's conclusion with the image of John Farmer being uplifted by contact with the notes of a flute performs the same dematerialization: as explored above, sound does involve vibrational contact between adjacent bodies, but it does not involve the kinds of material interchange that eating entails. Indeed, the narrator comes down in provisional favor of the evaporation of the physical appetite: "Every man who has ever been in earnest to preserve his higher or poetic faculties in the best condition has been particularly inclined to abstain from animal food, and from much food of any kind."[136]

But if the narrator's impulse is to dematerialize eating, he inverts or compensates for this trajectory by consistently turning language into a kind of bodily sustenance, a material that emerges not from intention or meaning but from the earth and its forms themselves, and whose effects include the body's own organization. In a passage explored above, Thoreau imagines a piece of farmland he has failed to buy providing him with metaphorical sustenance: "I retained the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow," which proves to be the richest crop the land provides.[137] The narrator figures the contact between his perceptual apparatus and the pastoral scene both as an act of harmless (since the owner does not even feel the imposition) primitive accumulation (impounding landscape with the invisible fence of rhyme) and as an act of animal husbandry that produces rich sustenance, ideal for the

abstemious poet because its tenor (the part that stays) is language and only its vehicle (the part that moves) is food. At the same time, the comparison attributes to language a penetrative, constitutive materiality. Language feeds, or, language and its satisfactions has the potential to ameliorate or contextualize bodily appetite.

At times, this figured materiality seems to confine the poet to a solipsistic self consumption, as in *Week* when he muses that "The poet is he that hath fat enough, like bears and marmots, to suck his claws all winter. He hibernates in this world, and feeds on his own marrow."[138] At other times, though, the poet's capacity to produce language emerges from his abilities to attend to an embodied and embedded materiality:

> The poet sings how the blood flows in his veins. He performs his functions, and is so well that he needs such stimulus to sing only as plants put forth leaves and blossoms. He would strive in vain to modulate the remote and transient music which he sometimes hears, since his song is a vital function like breathing, and an integral result like weight. It is not the overflowing of life but its subsidence rather, and is drawn from under the feet of the poet.[139]

Here the body is matter, and language arises thus from the earth, as part of the flows of matter into forms, which include plants and leaves as much as blood and breath, rhyme and metaphor. Thoreau imagines language as a relationship to the earth that provides physical sustenance. Reading the world, looking forever at what is to be seen, can be a kind of sustenance. I would like to think that in that imaginative space, sufficiency and stability counterpose deep-seated cultural doctrines of progress and growth.

VI. Thoreau, Appetite, Climate

Thoreau saw writing in the deliquescent mud of a railroad bank; in sketches by insects, fish, fishing lines, and "fluviatile" tree branches on the surface of Walden Pond; glimpses of sky framed by the leaves of the forest's canopy into shapes of hieroglyphics. He heard the elements

address him in thrillingly self-disorganizing owl hoots, pealing church bells, and flute, harp, or drum music both real and imagined. At the same time, this elemental, primordial address (so intimate and intense that Thoreau repeatedly figures this communication as a kind of material sustenance, a transubstantiating communion) is mediated for Thoreau by the image of the Native American, one who appears as Thoreau's ghostly double on the banks of Walden in the forms of foils, parables, histories, and arrow-heads, and in the form of Joe Aettion and Joe Polis, with whom Thoreau interacts on his Maine trips and from whom Thoreau elicits much of his knowledge of the Abenaki language.

If there is one thing Thoreau would teach us, it is that to think material relations is always to think social relations. We cannot reconceive the human relation to the nonhuman at this moment of extreme environmental danger without reconceiving the human collective and the collectively human. The modern conception of the rights-bearing individual depends on centuries of systematic resource extraction – both natural and human – and the paradox of a modern moment in which human rights seem to be expressed as access to easy energy. Modern petroculture associates automobility with being alive. An individual's access to cheap energy delimits the quality, comfort, and dignity of his or her life, even while the effects of excessive consumption of cheap energy amplify inequitable social relations, as island nations are submerged, as climate refugees flee the global south for more stable eco-political regimes in the global north, as indigenous cultural traditions highly imbricated in specific ecologies become impracticable. Ecological relations are social relations, and social relations are ecological ones. Thoreau has something to tell us about strange and ecstatic ways to inhabit those lines of connection.

---

[1] Thoreau, Henry David, *Walden* and *Resistance to Civil Government*, Second Edition. William Rossi, ed. (New York: Norton, 1992 (1854)), 216.
[2] See Richardson, Robert, *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986. Richardson cautions that "It is hard to be sure just what Thoreau intended for this project at any given moment," (280); he later muses that "writing straight historical narrative was not his forte. He must have realized this, since, so far as is known, he never attempted even a draft of his project" (300). Nonetheless, for Richardson, "the subject preoccupied him and flowed over, in innumerable ways, into his other projects" (280).
[3] Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*, 217.
[4] Ibid., 203.
[5] Ibid., 204.
[6] Arsic, Branca, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016), 134, 136. On p. 136, Arsic writes further: "Thus, in this type of life, forms change into other forms without collapsing into the pure flow of formlessness that cancels individuated existences….Vegetal life thus circulates through matter, vitalizing and transforming it, and so proving life's literal capacity for becoming."
[7] "Resemble, v.1, v.2". OED Online. June 2016. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163468?rskey=Huucmf&result=1&isAdvanced=false (accessed August 22, 2016).
[8] Thoreau, *Walden*, 203.
[9] See Shamir, Milette, *Inexpressible Privacy: The Interior Life of Antebellum American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). For Shamir, this architectural ornament resonates with a nascent suburbanist discourse in *Walden*. Shamir argues that Thoreau's Walden experiment symptomatized the urge towards suburban existence that both reinforced (architecturally, spatially, and behaviorally) class and racial striations and repressed or tried to naturalize them.
[10] See Johnson, Barbara, "A Hound, a Bay Horse, and a Turtle Dove: Obscurity in *Walden*," in *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1987).
[11] Allewaert, Monique, "Toward a Materialist Figuration: A Slight Manifesto," *English Language Notes* 51.2 (2013): 63.
[12] It comes as no surprise that Thoreau has been claimed as a proponent of their ways of thinking about the nonhuman worlds by New Materialist thinkers. See Rochelle Johnson, "'This Enchantment is no Delusion': Henry David Thoreau, the New Materialisms, and Ineffable Materiality." *ISLE* 21.3(2014): 606 – 634. Johnson argues that Thoreau "anticipated the New Materialism or, more precisely, that the New Materialism provides a convenient vocabulary for discussing his work" (624).
[13] Thoreau, *Walden*, 204.
[14] Dowling, Linda, "Victorian Oxford and the Science of Language," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 97:2(1982): 167.
[15] See Dowling.
[16] Thoreau's speculative etymology resists practices and assumptions beginning to dominate in nineteenth-century philology, of language as a natural and taxonomizable system. The new philology laid the ground for twentieth-century linguistics, and its theorization of language – in particular the phoneme and morpheme in which Thoreau shows such interest in this passage – as a closed system of differentiation with no fixed relation to the material reality it functioned to

signify. For Roman Jakobsen, for example, "The phoneme's sole linguistic content, or more general its sole semiotic content, is its dissimilarity from all other phonemes of a given system." Jakobson, Roman, *On Language*, Linda Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston, eds. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 230.

[17] Perhaps as a testament to the enduring appeal this scenario of "natural reading" holds for literary critics, it replays itself very closely in Walter Benn Michaels' and Steven Knapp's 1982 "Beyond Theory," an essay that pushes back against the New Critical protocol of placing authorial intention beyond the pale as a way of explaining the "meaning" of a literary object. See Knapp, Steven and Michaels, Walter Benn, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8.4 (1982): 723 – 760. Benn Michaels and Knapp imagine a reader finding a stanza of a Wordsworth poem on a sand beach; as long as its reader can logically maintain that some human wrote the words there with the intention of communicating in language, this passage has meaning. As soon as a wave wipes the first stanza away and a second appears in its place, the reader must dismiss any assumption of meaning:

> The arrival of the second stanza made clear that what had seemed to be an example of intentionless language was either not intentionless or not language. The question was whether the marks counted as language; what determined the answer was a decision as to whether or not they were the product of an intentional agent. (728)

For Knapp and Benn Michaels, meaning is intention, and one excellent indication readers have about authorial intention is the meaning of the text. For Benn Michaels the arbitrary "shape of the signifier" does not bear analysis apart from the translatable, transportable, *meant* meaning the signifier evokes in the mind of its reader. It is interesting to note in passing the fact that environmental literary criticism, along with contemporary innovations in media theory like J.D. Peters' *The Marvelous Clouds*, are reopening the possibility of intentionless (and even nonhuman) textual artifacts that nonetheless mean. See Peters, John Durham, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[18] Paul de Man theorizes the figurality of all language and the uselessness of the distinction between figural and literal language. For de Man, literal language's figurality necessitates a distrustful or suspicious relationship between author and her language: no writer can "abandon himself without fear to his language," trusting that it will "faithfully reproduce[] the truth of [his] pathos." To my mind, Thoreau's natural reading avoids the problematic that emerges a hundred years later for de Man invokes by claiming to represent a conceptuality – a capacity to link – already present in nature. See De Man, Paul, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 26.

[19] Thoreau, *Walden*, 75.

[20] Arsic, Branca, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016), 260.

[21] Thoreau, *Walden*, 75. Sharon Cameron (1985) emphasized the significance of the word "see" in this passage. "He importantly distinguishes between observation, which anticipates what it hopes to find, and seeing, for which no expectation can prepare one." While I agree that the "seeing" of natural reading forsakes or tries to discipline itself to forsake expectation and anticipation, I would qualify that its medium is still conceptuality and language, which necessarily import aspects of the reader's culture and experience as a starting point. Cameron, Sharon, *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's* Journal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 14.

[22] Thoreau, Henry David (1849, 1854, various). *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden; or, Life in the Woods* and *The Maine Woods* (Cambridge, England: Library of America, 1985), 128.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Quoted in Fleck, Richard F., *The Indians of Thoreau: Selections from the Indian Notebooks* (Albuquerque: Hummingbird Press, 1974), 63.
[25] Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Nature* in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Fourth Edition, Vol. I*. Ed. Nina Baym et al. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 1004.
[26] Ibid., 1001.
[27] The contrast between Thoreau's embrace of the natural world with Emerson's impulse to instrumentalize it as a rung on the ladder to Transcendent consciousness is a dominant reading in the critical literature. For Lawrence Buell, "Thoreau became increasingly interested in defining nature's structure, both spiritual and material, for its own sake, as against how nature might subserve humanity, which was Emerson's primary consideration" (172). For Philip Gura's Thoreau, "Nature is not to be used, as Emerson in his book by that title suggested, as a ladder on which to move to a higher consciousness. Rather, acceptance of nature, drenching ourselves in the reality around us…is the only course for sane people" (147). Richard Schneider concurs, arguing that "Most of the time Thoreau does not see nature as Emerson seems to, as only a physical means to a spiritual end. For Thoreau spirit is found *in* nature, not *through* it" (100). I am interested in paying specific attention to how the men theorize language as a mediation of the human and the nonhuman. See Buell, Lawrence, "Thoreau and the Natural Environment," Gura, Philip, "'A Wild, Rank Place': Thoreau's *Cape Cod*" and Schneider, Richard, "*Walden*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Henry David Thoreau*, Joel Myerson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
[28] Simpson, David, *The Politics of American English, 1776 – 1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[29] Ibid., 249.
[30] Meredith McGill (2007) observes that Thoreau "wants to claim that a naturalized poetry exists independently of the poet-observer," in contrast to Whitman's "histrionics of projective identification," which "make the poet himself the medium of reconciliation between nature and culture." McGill, Meredith, "Common Places: Poetry, Illocality, and Temporal Dislocation in Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,*" *ALH* 19.2(2007): 357 – 374, 367.
[31] Warner, Michael, "Uncritical Reading" in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, Jane Gallop, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004).
[32] Kant, Immanuel. *An Answer to the Question: 'What is Enlightenment?'* H.B. Nisbet, trans. (New York: Penguin, 1991), 4.
[33] Warner, "Uncritical Reading," 33.
[34] Thoreau, *Walden*, 68.
[35] Thoreau, *Walden*, 70.
[36] Thoreau, *Walden*, 71.
[37] It might be easy to attribute this image of mechanization and reading to advances in the production and distribution of printed materials in the nineteenth century facilitated by the printing press, adjustments in copyright law, urbanization, improvements in lighting, an increase in the availability of primary education, and an increase in leisure time. See Casper, Scott E. and Rubin, Joan Shelley, "The History of the Book in America" in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, Suarez, Michael F. and Woudhuysen, H. R., eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010)

for an overview of broad trends in the nineteenth century. At the same time, we need to keep in mind arguments by thinkers like Michael Warner (1990) and Trish Loughran (2007), both of whom push back against the idea that a geographically even "print culture" facilitated the development of an ideologically unified democratic culture. Loughran in particular argues that the ideology of unity well preceded the technologies that would serve to bring about unity, and that when communicative technologies were actually able to bring physically distant regional cultures into contact with one another, that contact served to intensify sectional differences. Loughran uses Thomas Paine's essays – which strove to disseminate the ideology of democratic unity but were in fact poorly distributed and not widely read in Paine's lifetime – and Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* – featuring a critical and divisive rhetoric and widely distributed, read, and adapted – as her case studies. See Loughran, Trish, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770 – 1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) and Warner, Michael, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[38] Thoreau, *Walden*, 71.

[39] Romero, Lora, "Vanishing Americans: Gender, Empire, and New Historicism," *American Literature* 63.3(1991): 395.

[40] Ibid., 404.

[41] Ibid., 397, 399.

[42] Thoreau, *Walden*, 68.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Thoreau, *Walden*, 78.

[45] Thoreau, *Walden*, 67.

[46] Thoreau's claim of the text's rhythmical evocation of a specific locality prefigures some of Mary Austin's claims about Native American poetry in *American Rhythm*. See Austin, Mary, *The American Rhythm* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1930). Thoreau, *Week*, 120.

[47] Thoreau, *Week*, 120.

[48] Thoreau, *Week*, 128.

[49] Up to a point, Thoreau's deployment of language as experience shares with Anne-Lise Francois's an interest in posing alternatives to "communicative speech as the upper limit toward which subjective, reflective experience supposedly tends." Francois, Anne-Lise, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 14.

[50] Native American women, and women more generally, do not figure prominently in Thoreau's work, and *The Maine Woods* is no exception. The one who has received the most attention is the "Indian girl ten or twelve years old, on a rock in the water, in the sun, washing, and humming or moaning a song meanwhile" (597 – 598) in "Ktaadn."

[51] Thoreau, "Ktaadn," in *Henry David Thoreau (A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods*, and *Cape Cod*, ed. Robert F. Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985), 665.

[52] Sayre, Robert, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 155.

[53] Quoted in Harding, Walter, *Days of Henry Thoreau* (New York, Dover: 1982), 391.

[54] See Walls, Laura Dassow, *Seeing New Worlds: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Natural Science* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). Walls emphasizes Thoreau's resistance to the bifurcation of the humanities and sciences in the nineteenth century. For Walls,

Thoreau's situated empiricism resisted the modern science's claim to objectivity. The formulation here in Sibley's letter of knowledge passing through situated, embodied individuals and being enriched by it resonates with Walls' analysis.

[55] Derrida, Jacques, "The Violence of the Letter" in *On Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), 396.

[56] Clifford, James, "On Ethnographic Allegory" in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George Marcus, eds. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 112.

[57] Ibid., 115.

[58] Thoreau, *Walden*, 75.

[59] Thoreau, *Week, Walden, Maine*, "Chesuncook," 695, "Ktaadn," 598.

[60] Povinelli, Elizabeth, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

[61] Thoreau, *Walden*, 217.

[62] Thoreau, *Walden*, 222.

[63] Thoreau, *Walden*, 223.

[64] Evolutionary scientists, for example, regarded Native bodies not so much as living humans but rather as animated fossils, the prehistoric remnants of the barbaric origins of human evolution. This scientific idea, I would claim, was connected to a political or philosophical idea: the belief that the space that is now the United States naturally belonged to the white settlers who sought to not only conquer it, but also to erase all traces of their conquest as a conquest. See Schuller, Kyla, "Speaking Substances: Bodies," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4/12/16. Accessed 5/5/16.

[65] Thoreau, *Week on the Concord, Walden,* and *Maine*, "Chesuncook," 696 – 697.

[66] Levi-Strauss, Claude, *Tristes Tropiqes* (New York: Atheneum, 1974), 298.

[67] Luciano, Dana, "Speaking Substances: Rock," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4/12/16. Accessed 4/13/16.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Thoreau's biographer Walter Harding dismisses this early work as "a routine piece of hack work." Harding, *Days*, 117.

[70] Thoreau, *Week, Walden, Maine*, "Chesuncook," 699.

[71] Ibid., 700.

[72] Benjamin, Walter, trans. Harry Zohn. "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations* (New York, Schocken Books, 1955), 72.

[73] Ibid., 78.

[74] Bellos calls Benjamin's idea that translation releases pure language into his own "dangerous nonsense," reasoning that "What it means is that the genuine translator just knows what it is that the original fails to express completely because it is swaddled in the purely contingent cloth of some other language. It is of course a sensation that many translators encounter as they struggle with obscure and ill-written or intentionally vatic pronouncements, such as those of Mallarme and, of course, Walter Benjamin. Getting it down in English may feel like a moment of triumph, the final discovery of the 'true thought' of the original. But all translators know this is a self-comforting illusion. All of us – except Walter Benjamin." Bellos, David. "Halting Walter," http://www.academia.edu/5776088/Halting_Walter, 7.

[75] Thoreau, *Week, Walden, Maine*, "Chesuncook," 700.

[76] Thoreau, *Week, Walden, Maine,* "The Allegash and East Branch," 801.

[77] Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian*, 191.
[78] Pratt, Lloyd. "'I Am a Stranger with Thee': Frederick Douglass and Recognition After 1845," *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 85.2 (2013): 247-272.
[79] Thoreau, *Week, Walden, Maine,* "The Allegash and East Branch," 722.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Thoreau, *Week, Walden, Maine*, "Chesuncook," 666. Thoreau does not hesitate to represent his general awkwardness and inexperience on the trip. Just a page before, he mistakes a "red maple changed by the frost" for an Indian encampment and "exclaims, 'Camp!' to [his] comrades" (666). Sayre makes much of Thoreau's apprenticeship to Joe Polis in "The Allegash and East Branch," arguing that the essay depicts Thoreau's somewhat reluctant acquiescence to Joe's superior backwoodsmanship.
[82] Thoreau, *Week, Walden, Maine,* "The Allegash and East Branch," 751 – 752.
[83] Quoted in Harding, *Days*, 193.
[84] Thoreau, *Week, Walden, Maine,* "The Allegash and East Branch," 766.
[85] Neely, Michelle, "Embodied Politics: Antebellum Vegetarianism and the Dietary Economy of *Walden*," *American Literature* 85.1 (2013): 33 – 60.
[86] Thoreau, *Walden*, 11.
[87] Arsic, *Bird Relics*, 309.
[88] Thoreau, *Walden*, 66.
[89] Quoted in Porte, Joel, *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 34.
[90] Thoreau, *Walden*, 90.
[91] Thoreau, *Walden,* 91.
[92] Matthiessen writes, "Nevertheless, since no invention was demanded [to write *Walden*], since all the material was a *donnée* of Thoreau's memory, my assertion that *Walden* does not belong with the simple records of experience may require more establishing. The chief clue to how it was transformed into something else lies in Thoreau's extension of his remark that he did not believe himself to be 'wholly involved in Nature.' He went on to say that in being aware of himself as a human entity, he was 'sensible of a certain doubleness' that made him both participant and spectator in any event. This ability to stand 'as remote from myself as from another' is the indispensable attitude of the dramatist." Mattheissen goes on to praise Thoreau's capacity to establish a "kind of generalized significance" in particular events that arises from his ability to stand remote. For Mattheissen, the double vision Thoreau describes in this passage flags him as a Romanticist recollecting emotion in tranquility. Mattheissen, F.O. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 171.
[93] Bennett, Jane, *Thoreau's Nature: Ethics, Politics, and the Wild* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 31.
[94] Thoreau, *Walden*, 41.
[95] Thoreau, *Walden*, 7.
[96] Thoreau, *Walden*, 76.
[97] Thoreau, *Walden*, 35.
[98] Thoreau, *Walden*, 25.
[99] See Fleissner, Jennifer, *Women, Compulsion, and Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004). Fleissner interrogates the category of

compulsion within the naturalist canon as the site of a struggle for agency in a culture responding to industrialization and global capitalism; for Fleissner, compulsive behavior serves as a point of expression for systemic forces impinging themselves on individual will but also as a mode of microscopic resistance. Compulsive behavior represents the repeated attempt to reinscribe or redirect one's agency. In a similar vein, I see Thoreau's practice of receptive reading of the body as feature of the nonhuman world as empowering the attentive individual by imbuing him with a nuanced sense of the limitations of his will and the ambiguity of the boundaries that divide him from what appears to be outside him.

[100] Peters, John Durham, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.

[101] Thoreau, *Week*, 40.

[102] Thoreau, *Walden*, 119.

[103] Davis, Theo, "'Just Apply a Weight': Thoreau and the Aesthetics of Ornament," *ELH* 77.3 (2010): 564.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid., 583.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Thoreau, *Walden*, 125 – 126.

[108] Thoreau, *Walden*, 126.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

[111] Thoreau, *Walden*, 126 – 127.

[112] Thoreau, *Walden*, 118.

[113] Thoreau, *Walden*, 83. The narrator of *Week* has a similar experience with the telegraph wires, delecting the perception of a barely audible sound: "I heard at some distance a faint music in the air like and Aeolian harp, which I immediately suspected to proceed from the cord of the telegraphy vibrating in the just awakening morning wind, and applying my ear to one of the posts I was convinced that it was so." Of the notes of bugler playing in the night, he writes, "These simple sounds related us to the stars." Sound has the capacity to limn the embodied self's connection to other distant material entities. Thoreau, *Week*, 143, 140.

[114] Thoreau, *Walden*, 83.

[115] Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.

[116] Thoreau, *Walden*, 148.

[117] Thoreau, *Walden*, 149.

[118] Thoreau, *Walden*, 147.

[119] Thoreau, *Walden*, 177.

[120] Thoreau, *Walden*, 142.

[121] As explored above, Cameron (1985) argues that Thoreau felt deeply ambivalent about *Walden*'s project of domesticating nature by drawing humans into contact with it. For her, *The Journal*, which sought to describe nature sans human with a Goethian "delicate empiricism" – and as much as possible to evacuate an anthropocentric human perspective – was a masterwork at least as important as the more canonical text.

[122] Thoreau, *Walden*, 144, 146. For Dana Phillips (2012), "Higher Laws" symptomatizes Thoreau's refusal or inability to name or come to terms with shit and abjectivity, posing in their stead a transcendent human consciousness that can overcome nature. Phillips takes Thoreau to task not only for this piety, but for his socioeconomically insensitive advice to the Bakers, which

Phillips pillories in a weirdly ad hominem way by providing his own ancestral history of dirt farming and poverty. Phillips' position smacks of the piety for which he dismisses Thoreau in what seems to me to be a historically inappropriate rehearsal of an environmental justice argument. Phillips, Dana, "'Slimy Beastly Life': Thoreau on Food and Farming," *ISLE* 19.3(2015):532 – 546.

[123] Thoreau, *Walden*, 146. Other scholars have notable readings of Thoreau's bodily regimes. Michelle Neely (2013, see above) suggests that Thoreau exercised a dietary regimen as a way of resisting the excesses of consumer capitalism and its pursuant affiliations with and dependencies upon a national body. For Neely, bodily abstention from popular patterns of consumption further made available a resistant political affiliation. By basing its efficacy on the individual body – a constitution with the potential to reform a Constitution conscripted by the Fugitive Slave Act into the support of slavery – diet makes possible a body-based citizenship: anyone capable of purifying the body through vegetarianism and the control of other appetites has the potential to help reform the body politic: "Thoreau's project in *Walden* emerges as a regrounding of US republican virtue in somatic management techniques designed to secure the personal and political freedom of every American body at a moment when such freedom was threatened by both Southern and Northern economies." Neely, "Embodied Politics," 35. Benjamin Reiss (2013) offers a more conservative assessment of the liberatory potential of the management of bodily cycles. By contrasting Thoreau's pre-modern sleep habits (characterized by longer periods of sleep and closer proximity to other sleepers, resulting in regular periods of drowsy wakefulness and quiet intimacy) in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* with the more controlled patterns he institutes at Walden, Reiss suggests that Thoreau's concern for wakefulness in *Walden* symptomatizes an emergent industrial ethic of sleep hygiene and optimization. Reiss speculates that Thoreau suffered from what would now be considered a sleep disorder that contributed to his unease with the cultural changes wrought by industrialization: "Returning to Baynton's notion of disability's manifestation as temporal disturbance, we can speculate further that Thoreau's inability to keep regular clock time – his intimate struggles with sleep – led to a feeling of outsiderness that allowed him, thrillingly, to imagine himself stepping out of the nineteenth century altogether." Reiss, Benjamin, "Sleeping at Walden Pond: Thoreau, Abnormal Temporality, and the Modern Body," *American Literature* 85.1(2013): 26.

[124] Outka, Paul, "Posthuman/Postnatural: Ecocriticism and the Sublime in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*" in *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, Ken Hiltner, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 32.

[125] Ibid., 41.

[126] Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.

[127] Never one to stay too long with a single position, this contemplative moment leads towards his anguished or blustering imprecation that "Nature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome" and then to the chapter's conclusion with the image of the mind descending into the body to redeem it. I see the narrator struggling in this back-and-forth to undo the bifurcation of mind and body despite the militant insistence upon the division implicit to the concepts available to him – and us, for that matter.

[128] Thoreau, *Walden*, 140.

[129] At other points, the narrator freely celebrates his body's materiality as a kind of autochthony: "Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly vegetable leaves and mould myself?" This assertion of continuity, however, partakes of a more fully Transcendentalist and Romantic incorporation of Nature into the human: "The indescribable innocence and beneficence

of Nature,…such health, such cheer, they afford forever! and such sympathy have they ever with our race, that all Nature would be affected, and the sun's brightness fade, and the winds would sigh humanly, and the clouds rain tears, and the woods shed their leaves and put on mourning in midsummer, if any man should ever for a just cause grieve." The narrator suggests the impossibility of a just cause, an inherently conservative and Emersonian position; instead of entertaining the possibility of his own inhumanity (or the inadequacy of the concept "human" to his lived experience), he here embraces an anthropocentric view of the nonhuman. Thoreau, *Walden*, 93.

[130] Thoreau, *Walden*, 142, 143.

[131] Thoreau, *Walden*, 141.

[132] Thoreau, *Walden*, 143.

[133] Thoreau's willingness to observe his body and entertain a range of frameworks for conceptualizing the valences of its processes – hunting, eating – aligns him with an "ethics of care" Outka connects with the experience of the ecological sublime. The pragmatic commitment to care for what actually exists turns away from "a pious nostalgia for a pure and stable wilderness referent that never existed" and indicates "a much larger shift in environmental thought, one that eschews categorical questions, isn't organized explicitly or implicitly by a natural/unnatural binary or a human/natural one…but is, rather, busy asking local, political, and practical questions about how best to care for the fallen world that we make and that makes us." While the binaries Outka names clearly structure Thoreau's thought, I contend that Thoreau's positional inconsistencies (especially evident in "Higher Laws") arise from his desire to work against their habitual patterning of his bodily experience. See Outka, "Posthuman/Postnatural" 44, 45.

[134] For an excellent discussion of the relays between eating and sex in the nineteenth century, see Tompkins, Kyla, Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century (New York: New York University Press, 2012). Tompkins argues that discourses surrounding food and eating served to create and police racial and other political inequalities by eroticizing eating practices through their coordination with racial categories. See in particular Chapter 2, "Sylvester Graham's Imperial Dietetics," which argues that Graham's writings aligned the temperate white middle-class body with the triumphal imperial American nation. In particular, a wheat-based diet of grain produced on the "virgin" American continent by Euro-American settlers via Euro-American agricultural methods conferred a kind of ad hoc indigeneity to the colonialists that in fact served to wipe out actual indigenous plants and animals (human and non-human). As a dietetic centerpiece, the consumption of wheat for Graham also helped people control the perverse and onanistic carnal desires fed by an exotic, spicy, or rich diet. While Tompkins' reading of Graham's dietary politics suggests the enormous ideological pressure exerted by contemporary culture on eating practices, Thoreau's personal politics on bread and wheat seem to reinforce Neely's thesis that Thoreau's dietary practices amounted to an act of political resistance to incorporation into the colonial body politic: Thoreau preferred (local, indigenous) rye and Indian meal to flour, and favored sourdough to yeast because of yeast's rather ejaculatory messiness: "I am glad to escape the trivialness of carrying a bottle-ful in my pocket, which would sometimes pop and discharge its contents to my discomfiture" (42 – 43). Thoreau thus reinforces Graham's entwinement of dietary indulgence with sexual excess, even though Thoreau's item of culinary excess is Graham's remedy to it.

[135] Thoreau, *Walden*, 146.

[136] Thoreau, *Walden*, 144.
[137] Thoreau, *Walden*, 56.
[138] Thoreau, *Week*, 80.
[139] Thoreau, *Week*, 75.

Chapter 2

"So Broken Was Their Speech":

Frederick Douglass's Literacies in *My Bondage and My Freedom*

As we have seen, Thoreau locates language close to nonhuman nature. Eager to see without epistemological limits – or to tell the story of such a seeing – he paradoxically finds nonhuman nature expressing itself to him through human language that comes into focus through careful and cooperative positioning of the body, itself a conglomeration of matter imperfectly under his control and not starkly partitioned from that which he reads. He sees hieroglyphs cut into the sky by tree leaves over the Concord River, Greek letters in the thawing sand bank of a railroad cut near Walden Pond. He sees a nature he can read like a language. He sees in nature a language that appears to appear spontaneously, without human agency. Complementarily, the words of a language he considers primitive – the Abenaki tongue – reorganize his perception of nonhuman nature, creating an experience of fresh seeing, seemingly unmediated by established conceptual categories. Nature invites reading; particular instances of language facilitate this reading. Through natural reading, Thoreau figures a language that has the paradoxical capacity to mediate (elicit, express) unmediated (conceptually untrammeled, direct) observation. Thoreau holds out the possibility of language that humans experience as a nonhuman, material phenomenon.

Up to a point, Thoreau's reading of writing that appears in nonhuman nature or has the capacity to unleash what James Clifford (1986) calls "unmediated meaning in the event" proceeds from his engagement with the sonic qualities of language.[1] These qualities, when experienced without recourse to language's semantic freight, elicit tactile, embodied responses

that materially connect speaking entities to sounding entities, going so far in Thoreau's hands as to suggest their consubstantiation. In the experience of unworded sound and of language as primarily sound, Thoreau frames the human body as a conglomeration of matter not necessarily bound together by a coherent agency or point of view. Out on the limb of words as auditory phenomena seemingly freed from language's referential burden, the human becomes continuous with the nonhuman.

But of course the shapes Thoreau sees in the sand and sky can be read only when he has reinterpreted them as letters and words, and while the letters and words that congeal before his eyes or that connect him in new and exciting ways to ecosystemic nuances perform the important office of defamiliarization, they are nonetheless human artifacts. While Thoreau positions these languages and the people who speak – and like him, read – them as closer to nonhuman nature than conventional English and conventional English speakers, such placement or location indicates Thoreau's own transmission of a narrative of civilizational progress in which the freshness and legitimacy of his own seeing derives from its ability to invoke (or trope) the letters and languages of classical and/or "primitive" peoples. To figure "unmediated," unworded observation or experience of nonhuman nature, Thoreau uses human languages he frames as contiguous if not coterminous with the nonhuman. For Thoreau, reading and writing can be natural when mediated by languages he understands as closer to nonhuman nature than his own. He figures proximity to nonhuman nature through classical and indigenous languages.

In his antebellum autobiographies, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1854), Frederick Douglass writes from and about the position of the racialized human constructed as a facet of nonhuman nature. Of course, the capacity to read and write served as an important (if

inconsistent) switch point for the uneven and often contradictory distribution of nature and naturalness, whereby white male bodies held dominion over nature and derived political rights from it, but whereby nonwhite and female bodies were part of an unruly nature and therefore not entitled to the same rights. Douglass's critique of the social mechanisms that enforced and maintained his circulation as a nonhuman animal – his being part of a nature subject to violent reading practices – complicatedly occurs in writing, a medium that signified "the presence of a common humanity with the European."[2] The process of literacy acquisition in fact structures the narrative arcs of Douglass's autobiographies, leading in the case of the first autobiography to Douglass's first oratorical performance on the abolitionist platform and in the case of the second to Douglass's acquisition of a printing press for the purpose of beginning his own paper. Douglass's autobiographies not only give accounts of Douglass's acquisition of literacy and his elaboration of his skills as a literate, lettered social activist, they inscribe literacy. They aggressively displace the framework of Douglass as read, nonhuman nature with the specter of Douglass as reading, writing human nature.

In fact, while Douglass subjects literacy to great representational pressure in his autobiographies, he also frames himself and his autobiographies as a kind of natural writing, especially insofar as he frequently takes recourse in a common (if contradictory) attribution of a liberatory essence to literacy practices. Moreover, the linguistic acts with which he initiates his public identity trade on the seeming naturalness and/or spontaneity of these verbal acts, be they speech or autobiography, which must circulate as honest, unadorned, factual emanations of the realities of his life as a slave, and thereby in a certain way unauthored. At the same time, Douglass remains suspicious of the positioning of literacy as a mechanism for differentially distributing access to social identity. While he eagerly and masterfully demonstrates his literacy,

he also interrogates the types of social being it authorizes and works to articulate alternatives to the agential literacy he seems to wield in the capacity to write the autobiographies. So as Douglass himself represents his literacy acquisition, he deploys a wide range of possible understandings of what literacy is, where it exists, and how it functions. Douglass deploys and complicates the notion of literacy as spontaneously and naturally liberatory by developing a counternarrative wherein literacy functions as property and as such serves as a capitulation to the violences and hierarchizations of liberal possessivism. But Douglass further explores alternative and resistant literacies, making it possible to imagine a range of insistent and resistant linguistic and vocal practices that within the parameters of traditional Enlightenment discourse would not approach the threshold of literacy.

If Thoreau helps us think about antebellum frameworks for understanding the writing and reading of nature, then Frederick Douglass helps us think about the nature of reading and writing. Or, to put it another way: if Thoreau, gripped by Romantic hunger for sensory experience unmediated by human convention, developed the notion of a material language emanating from nonhuman nature that could itself become an unmediated experience of the nonhuman – a natural language – then Douglass plumbs emergent notions of reading and writing as having immediate, transformative, salutary, and – for the bondsman, liberatory – effects upon the people who acquired those skills. Thoreau, in his deployment of reading and writing as metaphors for sensory contact with nonhuman nature, helps us imagine and complicate a notional immediacy of nonhuman nature. Douglass helps us imagine and complicate a notional immediacy of the acquisition, practices, and effects of literacy – of reading and writing.

Douglass himself telegraphs a conception of literacy as having a liberatory and empowering essence when, in his second autobiography, he describes himself realizing that

learning to read and write constitutes "the direct pathway from slavery to freedom."[3] The word *literacy* itself entered the English language several decades after Douglass wrote his first two autobiographies, in, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1883. Patricia Crain (2007) points to its emergence as a marker of an ongoing shift in the social significance of the ability to read and write: "A noun of quality, state, or condition, 'literacy' thus establishes the end to which the verbs 'read' and 'write' supply the means."[4] To possess *literacy* involves something more than to be *literate*, to be able to perform the operations of reading and writing. For Douglass, part of literacy's social end was to invalidate his construction as an illiterate and therefore, according to a dominant Enlightenment logic, subhuman commodity subject to ownership and exchange. His firm grasp upon and deployment of that emergent cultural logic formed the basis of what has come to be known as the liberation through literacy thesis, a prominent line of argumentation running through Douglass scholarship devoted to theorizing the links between Douglass's literacy acquisition and his freedom. But the liberation through literacy thesis tends to obscure the nuances, contradictions, uncertainties, and incompleteness inherent in the process of acquiring what we now call literacy and its social effects, not to mention the exceptionality of Douglass's success in his bid for freedom. As Crain points out, "[I]n the American South, as in most other historical and geographical sites, literacy alone, despite the blinding myth of its empowering force, often had very little social or economic payoff."[5] To accept Douglass's mapping of his literacy onto his truly exceptional bid for legal freedom not only telegraphs a selective and incomplete account of slave resistance in general, which included acts, thoughts, and utterances that did not rise to the level of open confrontation (let alone to the satisfactory resolution of the confrontation), but also misses the opportunity to attend to Douglass's portrayal of his uncomfortable, abjecting, and frustrating experiences with reading

and writing. Moreover, when we uncritically replicate a dominant cultural logic that construes literacy as a source of personal power and autonomy, we miss a further opportunity to dwell in Douglass's representation of a resistant potential characterizing acts of speaking, reading, and writing that fell short of, exceeded, or simply did not coincide with emergent notions of a socially and economically efficacious literacy. Douglass helps us reevaluate illiteracy, broken language, what Douglass calls "language that has no power to convey" and what Fred Moten (2003) calls "the phonic matter and syntactic 'degeneracy'" whose disruptive force "allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence."[6] Douglass, while deeply invested in the rhetorical potential of his literacy as testament of his indisputable personhood in a socioeconomic system committed to perpetrating a wide spectrum of violences that proclaimed and performed his social death, portrays literacy as characterized by complicated, slow, incremental social negotiations in its acquisition and as vexed, uncertain, and often painfully limiting in its outcomes. But he also proposes an alternative literacy, and, like Thoreau, lingers in language that seems to be broken, that demands to be heard rather than understood, summarized, paraphrased, or translated in the reductive logic of an instrumental literacy.

Evident in both Thoreau's and Douglass's writing are multiple, overlapping accounts of reading and writing. While in some respects, reading and writing function as immediate, spontaneous phenomena, in others they manifest as contradictory, uncertain, socially-mediated, and ongoing processes. Thus, with Thoreau, Douglass helps me explore nineteenth-century notions of reading and writing as potentially natural phenomena that emanate from nature and/or that have immediate, fundamental, essential effects upon the individual who practices them. Thoreau and Douglass help us see the ways in which notions of reading, writing, and literacy as

natural and unmediated in their emergence, practice, and effects coexisted alongside notions of their unnaturalness, indeterminacy, and their historical and social construction.

Further, Douglass's interrogation of the (violent) reading and literacy practices that have the capacity to construct him as nonhuman provides an important countervailing and critical counterweight to some of the emergent interpretive protocols of Transcendentalism, especially in regards to nonhuman nature and language. Besides serving to anchor Transcendentalist fascination with spiritual and aesthetic unity in specific material and political concerns, Douglass frames his own kind of natural reading, his own practice of contemplating nonhuman nature that elicits instead of elides the social relations that make the contemplative vantage point possible in the first place. In this way, Douglass actually further expands even Thoreau's materially-expansive meditative subject. Douglass's natural reader proves receptive to the human relationships that have preceded and made possible the nonhuman processes to which Thoreau makes himself such a rich and ecstatic sounding board.

I. Violent Reading

In a strange and sinister transposition of the Thoreauvian tableau of human reading a nonhuman nature that extrudes strange but legible language, Douglass stages a scene of violent reading wherein he stands in the position of a legible feature of a nonhuman landscape. Planning a runaway attempt on Freeland's farm, Douglass's own face becomes a site of inscription. He writes that "I had reason to fear that my sable face might prove altogether too transparent for the safe concealment of my hazardous enterprise."[7] Douglass worries that his own body is beyond his control, transparently indicative of intentions he must needs keep hidden from his captors. He figures his face in turn as something inanimate and as something separable from himself: "Plans

of greater moment have leaked through stone walls, and revealed their projectors. But, here was no stone wall to hide my purpose. I would have given my poor tell tale face for the immovable countenance of an Indian."[8] With a face less formidable than a stone wall, Douglass imagines trading his with that of another object of aggressive colonialist interpretive practices. Douglass communicates the inanimacy attributed to racial others within the context of these reading practices.

The white slaveholder must engage in violent reading practices, Douglass suggests, in order to construct Douglass's status as a nonhuman object, the violent maintenance of which provides ongoing testimony to its falsity. In his extended description of the aggressive, surveilling slaveholder gaze, Douglass suggests the slaves' double valence as human and nature, as material and man:

> It is in the interest and business of slaveholders to study human nature, with a view to practical results, and many of them attain astonishing proficiency in discerning the thoughts and emotions of slaves. They have to deal not with earth, wood, or stone, but with men; and by every regard they have for their safety and prosperity, they must study to know the material on which they work. So much intellect as the slaveholder has around him, requires watching. Their safety depends upon their vigilance. Conscious of the injustice and wrong they are every hour perpetrating, and knowing what they themselves would do if made the victims of such wrongs, they are looking out for the first signs of the dread retribution of justice. They watch, therefore, with skilled and practiced eyes, and have learned to read, with great accuracy, the state of mind and heart of the slave, through his sable face.[9]

In the final sentence, we can recognize a sinister scene of natural reading: an inscriptive surface spontaneously produces a text legible to a "skilled and practiced" reader. In the sentences that help establish surveillance as a kind of reading that works to impose objecthood on the persons thus read, Douglass considers the consistent exertion of discursive discipline whereby the ideology of slaveholding polices the divide between the human and nonhuman: the slaveholders study nature, but it is *human* nature. While they deal "not with earth wood or stone, but with

men," these men register to them as "material on which they work." While the slaveholders' extreme vigilance emerges implicitly from an acknowledgement of common humanity – "knowing what they themselves would do if made the victims of such wrongs" – their vigilance insistently takes the form of reading nonhuman nature: "looking out for the first signs of the dread retribution of justice." Here bondsmen figure and function as nature that can be read.

Douglass goes on to demonstrate more explicitly that the reading practices in question do more than interpret "with great accuracy" the actual intentions of slaves; they serve as an occasion for the iterative violence that maintains the slave's status as object: "[slaveholders] hector and torture a slave into a confession by affecting to know the truth of their accusations….The slave is sometimes whipped into the confession of offenses which he never committed….Suspicion and torture are the approved methods of getting at the truth, here."[10] Douglass considers the ways in which interpretive practices, particularly in their self-presentation as spontaneous or natural, as in the initial figure of the "transparent face" opening uncomplicatedly upon the contents of a person's heart, rely upon, invoke, and perpetuate violence. In the case of slaveholders' "reading" the "nature" of slaves, reading serves as an occasion for the overt physical violence that underwrites the construction of the slave as continuous with nonhuman nature. In this particular constellation of its operations and applications, reading proves to be a complicated conceptual machine for inflicting violence in order to maintain social hierarchy. Douglass's account of his initiation into alphabetic literacy bears the traces of this tableau of violent reading; reading holds the promise of power he decisively annexes to himself but that he subjects to generative and defamiliarizing analyses. As Douglass learns to read and as he inscribes that process in his autobiographies, he exploits, interrogates, and extends the patterns of social identity made possible by literacy.

II. Literacy's Many Faces

"The Direct Pathway from Slavery to Freedom"

The first two of Douglass's autobiographies contain a graphic account of Aaron Anthony's sexually-motivated and sexualized beating of Douglass's aunt Esther (Douglass calls this woman "Hester" in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*).[11] Douglass's account of objectifying violence is, as Moten argues, "more than another violent scene of subjection too terrible to pass on; it is the ongoing performance, the prefigurative scene of a (re)appropriation – the deconstruction and reconstruction, the improvisational recording and revaluation – of value, of the theory of value, of the theories of value."[12] In Esther's vocal response to her objectification and in Douglass's description and transmission of her response, Moten identifies more than an abjecting reaction to the demands of a white master, but an ongoing critique that insists on "the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection."[13] That Esther – along with Douglass – responds to conditions not of her making does not reduce the force and profundity of her utterance, which constitutes a rebuke and a critique of her construction as a commodity and the economic system of exchange that authorizes and executes her commodification.

In foregrounding the complex articulation of subjection and the objections that disrupt it, Moten invokes and repurposes Saidiya Hartman's important insights (1997) into the ongoing and transactional nature of dominative power relations under slavery, which demanded that slaves stage performances of acquiescence and cooperation, shows of consent, pleasure, and contentment that functioned as acts of further domination.[14] But as Hartman helps us see the ways in which violence operates within everyday performances of acquiescence and consent,

Moten shifts the sequence of her hermeneutic and focuses on how resistance lives within that same violent subjection, within Esther's pained cries for mercy, within Douglass's autobiographies which beautifully and masterfully deploy his literacy to portray a scene in which he witnesses violence against a black woman. If Moten takes up the repetition and recording of the act of violence that is also an act of protest, what happens if we use Moten's framework for interpreting black performance as we theorize Douglass's representation of his acquisition of the skills – reading and writing – that gave him the ability to transcribe and transmit accounts of domination that voiced a "painfully and hiddenly disclosed" protest?[15] In what ways do these pedagogical and compositional scenarios – primal scenes of their own stripe, mythically originary and suffused with disavowed desire – account for the murky admixture of compulsion and protest, of acquiescence and refusal that proves so hermeneutically fruitful for Hartman and Moten? What happens if we approach Douglass's account of his literacy acquisition, whose various stages have been understood as nodal points in Douglass's trajectory from bondage to freedom, as scenes of subjection that are also scenes of objection to subjection?

In a reversal of the autobiographies' narrative trajectory out of bondage into freedom, Douglass frames Esther's scream as "the blood-stained gate" through which he must pass as a child as he first grasps the terms of his violent subjection. The framing, evocative of Dante or Milton, can happen because of Douglass's mastery of reading and writing. The "blood-stained gate" becomes such retrospectively, after Douglass has moved from a self-evident state of bondage to a self-evident state of freedom. In a sense, another gate, that of learning to read and write, precedes and enables this one. Up to a point, Douglass works to represent the pedagogical scene in which Hugh Auld interdicts his wife Sophy's instruction of Douglass as a watershed moment of near-Biblical revelation that constitutes a revelatory rupture with his prior state, one

that reverses or compensates for the initiation Douglass experiences as he witnesses Esther's beating. Auld's fierce prohibitions reveal to Douglass the "direct pathway from slavery to freedom," acting as "a new and special revelation, dispelling a painful mystery, against which my youthful understanding had struggled, and struggled in vain, to wit: the *white* man's power to perpetuate the enslavement of the *black* man."[16] Douglass possesses the "knowledge," which he later describes as "instantly derived," that he concludes "unfits a child to be a slave."[17] The pedagogical scene, the skills it has imparted (Douglass can at this time "spell words of three or four letters"), and the response it has elicited from Hugh have, Douglass argues, initiated him to a state of resistance that reverses the state of subjection into which Esther's beating ushered him, rendering him "hushed, terrified, stunned," quailing at the thought that "the fate of Esther might be mine next."[18]

In his insight that "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave," Douglass recognizes and names a deeply-rooted assumption of Enlightenment culture: that, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1987), "Reading, and especially writing, in the life of the slave represented a process larger than even 'mere' physical manumission, since mastery of the arts and letters was Enlightenment Europe's sign of that solid line of division between human being and thing."[19] Gates diagnoses a deep cultural assumption that allies literacy (or, as Gates puts it more precisely, "reading, and especially writing") with social power, with the ability to shape, inflect, and exert a measure of control over one's relationships with other human beings, with the ability to demand recognition as a human being. The strength of the association has caused Douglass scholars to tend, not merely incorrectly, to equate literacy or the ability to read and write with resistance to domination and freedom. Eric Sundquist (1993), for example, describes the *Narrative*, in its capacity as an act of masterful writing and self-authorship, as "capping the quest

for literacy that had been so crucial to his resistance to and escape from slavery."[20] Literacy acquisition, in this discourse, becomes *itself* a kind of freedom in its defiance of slaveholding jurisprudence. Douglass himself closely identifies literacy with resistance and freedom when he experiences freedom in his opposition to slaveholder proscriptions. Learning to read and write amount to a Luciferean rejection of Hugh's power: "That which he most loved I most hated; and the very determination which he expressed to keep me in ignorance only rendered me the more resolute in seeking intelligence."[21] Hugh's prohibitions performatively fuse literacy with freedom. Literacy becomes the transactional medium in which opposition is exercised or expressed. While Douglass of course also experiences Luciferean losses as a result of his defiant autodidacticism, I am interested at this moment in tracing and theorizing the strong association between literacy and freedom that Douglass and his interlocutors recognize as a fundamental assumption of post-Enlightenment Euro-American culture. Literacy acquisition, in its mediation of resistance to slaveholder law, constitutes freedom.

The implicit connection between literacy, resistance, and social empowerment undergirds a wide array of scholarship on Douglass, from Michael Chaney's insight (2001) that Douglass's attribution of a spontaneous literacy to his mother, by locating the source of his own skills in his black maternal line, valorizes his black parentage, to Maurice Lee's augmentation (2012) of the liberation-through-literacy thesis with the argument that slave narratives advanced the numeracy of their authors as much as literacy as evidence of their authors' humanity, to Hugh Egan's contention (2014) that Douglass makes possible a fusion of Emersonian notions of poiesis with political action by framing himself as "a kind of poet-activist, capable of immense practical power, including freeing himself from slavery."[22] In each of these examples, literacy acts as a valuable personal attribute or skill set that leads to or represents social power, whether in the

form of conferring status, giving the person who possesses it the ability to exert persuasive force, or allowing political action. Literacy becomes both an instrument wielded to achieve or demonstrate equality, but also what Crain, above, calls an "end," a social state itself closely identified with freedom and equality. Theresa Goddu (2014) nicely summarizes the dominant argument tied to this constellation of cultural assumptions about literacy: "Douglass's freedom…is achieved not simply through his fight with Covey and his escape North, but through his ascension to literacy – his learning to read and to write, his ability to forge his own pass to freedom, his rising to speak on the abolitionist platform."[23] Literacy, besides imparting instrumental skills, amounts to a social state to which one *ascends* and *rises*, a position metonymized by the platform which Douglass literally has: a way to publicize and propagate his words and ideas.

Of course, I would hardly like to argue that Douglass's literacy has no effect on his social relations, or that any such effect is illusory. V.N. Volosinov (1929) theorizes that "a word is a bridge thrown between myself and another."[24] As such, words shape, delimit, and inflect that which rises to the level of expression in a field of ongoing, unworded consciousness: "Realized expression…exerts a powerful, reverse influence on experience: it begins to tie inner life together, giving it more definite and lasting expression."[25] A word changes Douglass' own attitude towards his state of captivity when he hears the word "abolitionist" spoken by Hugh "with much warmth and excitement."[26] While the dictionary fails to provide enough social context for Douglass to intuit why the word caused such agitation for his master, a newspaper he consults enlightens him, and the understanding further stokes his resistance: he feels first of all satisfaction that an established movement against slavery exists, and secondly, in perceiving the fearfulness with which slaveholders use the word, also feels hope that the movement might

succeed, an attitude that causes him, "when I met with a slave to whom I deemed it safe to talk on the subject, [to] impart to him so much of the mystery as I had been able to penetrate."[27] A word itself changes Douglass's sense of social reality and social possibility; accordingly it changes his actions, leading to what could be understood as his first instances of abolitionist activism (and his first acts of pedagogy). As Douglass's example testifies, what a person says or writes exerts force on social relations, although in anything but a transparent way. However, I am focusing on what the strong association of literacy with social power, the overarching cultural thesis, might obscure or blur, what potentialities or qualities or experiences of reading and writing it hinders from coming into view.

Literacy as Property

We have already seen how, for Douglass, literacy mediates resistance to Hugh since the white man (backed by extensive legal statutes) has prohibited Douglass from learning to read, and how, in the critical literature, literacy not only enables but reifies social mobility and social status. As an even more pointed example of the complicated relays of social power through the complex of abilities, actions, and significations bundled into the notion of literacy, literacy oscillates between being a useful acquired skill – a property of a person – to functioning as in fact personal property. With the spread of revolution and the rise of representative democracy in eighteenth-century Europe and North America, reading and writing begin to function as a set of practices that remedied (or at least deferred, channelled, or displaced) the destabilizations of property incumbent upon these political transformations.[28] Literacy could ameliorate the flux in personal and property relations by creating an appearance of property in the self – seemingly

unalienable, completely portable from one set of economic relations to another.[29] As for the bondsman, who, as property, could not own property, literacy served as a "technology of self-possession, the means through which modern subjects are assured that they belong to themselves"; for bondsmen, by signaling a level of self-ownership "incompatible with the condition of slavery," literacy performed a radical critique of their slave identity.[30] Douglass intuitively understands literacy's capacity to embody or stand in for property and the crucial ability-to-own that would seem to contradict the capacity-to-be-owned. Douglass articulates this capacity in the second autobiography when he is covertly teaching slaves on Freeland's plantation. After outlining the danger his pupils face in the form of violent punishment, Douglass frames the pedagogical situation in which the slaves consolidate property in themselves as retribution for and reappropriation of the slave's stolen time and life force:

> [My pupils'] minds had been cramped and starved by their cruel masters; the light of education had been completely excluded; and their hard earnings had been taken to educate their master's children. I felt a delight in circumventing the tyrants, and in blessing the victims of their curses.[31]

Douglas recognizes that the labor-time slave-owners have appropriated from slaves has congealed as cultural capital belonging to the slave-owners' families; by helping the slaves use their time (which, under the regime of slavery is not their time, but their owners') to amass their "own" cultural capital, Douglass, a pedagogical and Marxist Robin Hood, steals (back) from the rich and gives to the poor. In fact, Douglass anticipates Marx (1867), who, a little more than ten years later would argue that "[i]n capitalist society, free time is produced for one class by the conversion of the whole lifetime of the masses into labour-time."[32] By this token, Douglass re-appropriates time and life energy taken from him and his fellow slaves.

If we return to the second autobiography's pedagogical primal scene, we can see the notion of literacy closely linked to property in self. Hugh Auld spells out "the direct pathway

from slavery to freedom" in a straightforward pedagogical progression that promises to deliver Douglass into a state of self-possession. Hugh tells Sophy, "If you learn him now to read, he'll want to know how to write; and, this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself."[33] Hugh's potent syllogism – reading leads to writing leads to "running away with himself" – names the dual possibility of Douglass owning himself, a contradiction for a slave, and the possibility of his running that self-possessed self away from them. Hugh's words cloak those possibilities in a dead metaphor for excessive zeal (to run away with oneself) that fittingly enough puts one in the position of being ahead of oneself, somehow in advance of one's actual capabilities, as the literate slave advances himself in knowledge, understanding, and capability, but not necessarily in legal rights or social equality. In the *Narrative*, by contrast, Douglass represents Hugh's words as less pointed, if equally suggestive of the potential of literacy to upend Douglass's construction as Hugh and Sophy's property: "If you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him."[34] The sentence Douglass assigns Hugh in the earlier autobiography omits the important step of learning to write – more empowering than reading alone – and the stage of self-possession that stands between ownership by the Aulds and the escape from them implied by the notion of there being "no keeping" a literate Douglass. As a kind of property in the self, literacy confers self-ownership.

But as a property that is property, literacy and its effects appear to circulate, a curious contradiction whereby that which signifies humanity is not essential but alienable. Literacy's "propriety" centers on its paradoxical capacity to signify the "natural" and "essential" even while constantly trading on its capacity to circulate, which here is also to say its social construction. Douglass achieves and shares literacy with other slaves because it retroactively signifies a humanity supposed to be essential. In his meditation on the slave as the commodity who speaks

and thereby disrupts the protocols of exchange that characterize capitalism and liberal individualism, Moten suggests that the supposed object's cry opens the possibility of "the universalization or socialization of the surplus."[35] If classical liberal capitalism assumes rational actors who engage freely in an exchange of goods that achieve a notional equality through the measure of their value in the substance of a general equivalent, then those rational actors possess and control their faculties with the same agency with which they accomplish their economic exchanges. Faculties and attributes become, with Crain above, self-identical, reified entities with instrumental and exchange potential. But such a framework, Moten is saying, fails to account for the ambiguous provenance, placement, duration, composition, and effect of those faculties, chief amongst them being literacy. The speaking, writing slave/commodity/object – along with all that exceeds or eludes agency, instrumentalization, and location "within" the liberal subject – performs a critique of liberal individualism and the economic exchanges it exists alongside and makes possible. On one hand, the notion of *literacy* as a quality a person possesses, in conjunction with a possessive individualist understanding of selves as sole proprietors in possession of their persons and capacities, reifies and internalizes learned skills that are in fact socially transmitted and that take on their value(s) in a vast matrix of social relationships. The very notions of private property and the bounded, self-interested, rights-bearing individual, as Hartman argues,

> assure entitlements and privileges as they enable and efface elemental forms of domination primarily because of the atomistic portrayal of social relations, the inability to address collective interests and needs, and the sanctioning of subordination and the free reign of prejudice in the construction of the social or the private.[36]

The firm twining of a property-like-literacy with liberatory social effects has the effect of placing responsibility for social position on the individual – his ability to get and make use of his skills.

On the other hand, in its construction and function as property, literacy makes it possible to envision the shortcomings of a model of subjectivity which depends on an agential self's ability to possess itself and its attributes. Literacy stands between the individual and the collective, belonging to, originating with and (de)forming both. Language – the ability to speak and to write – challenges the notion of a hard line between the individual and what Moten invokes above as the universal and/or the social. In the earlier example, Douglass's literacy functions as the property of a self which threatens or at least objects to the notion of property in selves. If for Gates, the Enlightenment's frisson of racism and an overarching narrative of social and intellectual progress results in a literary tradition that construes black writing as "the very *commodity* that separated animal from human being, slave from citizen, object from subject,"[37] the line of thinking I'm advancing asks us to shift focus from the response subaltern literature makes to the artefactual demands or strictures placed on it by a dominant literary culture to the ways the utterance framed as "mere" response is in fact itself an utterance that demands its own response, shaping and driving what is, what is said, and what can be said. Literacy is the effect of complex social conglomerations that can give the impression of belonging to and emanating from an individual but that also hold out a promising critique of notions of the self-contained, rationally self-interested individual.

Literacy as Theater of Struggle

Even while it opens up avenues of critique, the notion of literacy as property corresponds with an ascendant discourse of liberal individualism through which the rights and responsibilities of self-government reside with the individual and not with the social collective in which that individual takes shape. Douglass does not hesitate to make use of a liberal individualist

hermeneutic framework, one that helps him make a case for his agency and power in the process, when he represents his literacy acquisition, although in other places, as we will see, he seeks to complicate or even undo that framework. In the pedagogical primal scene, Douglass works rhetorically to construct Hugh, in his stern prohibitions, as an opponent cast in the same agonistic mold as the slave breaker Covey whom Douglass faces later in the narrative in a pitched physical battle which Deborah McDowell (1993) argues "serves to incarnate a political/critical view that equates resistance to power with physical struggle."[38] This parallel puts the tableau of a forceful interruption of domestic instruction and (pseudo)parent-child intimacy on the same footing as Douglass's decision to resist Covey physically, a battle at the conclusion of which Douglass famously proclaims, "I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW."[39] Indeed, Douglass links the pivotal verbal conflict over intellection to the physical contest in a typological fashion. Hugh's prohibitions in the earlier passage activate Douglass's first glimmerings of outright rebellion, and Covey's challenges reanimate that "vital" attitude: Hugh "stirred up not only my feelings into a sort of rebellion, but awakened within me a slumbering train of vital thought"; the fight with Covey "rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers of liberty; it brought up my Baltimore dreams, and revived a sense of my own manhood."[40] While for Jared Hickman (2014) the second autobiography's Promethean imagery suggests Douglass deploys Romantic Titanism as a way to challenge the law-and-order Old Testament God of southern slaveholders as well as the passive, nonviolent New Testament God of the abolitionists; in my reading, the second scene with its burning, its dreams, and its sense of manhood regained sends Douglass back to the primal pedagogical scene in which Hugh cuts short a budding intellectual intimacy between Sophy and the young Frederick. Thus, by redramatizing the scene of Hugh's tongue-lashing in the scenario of hand-to-hand combat with Covey, Douglass replays the earlier scene a with more satisfactory

ending, which involves dumping Covey into the mud of the cow-yard.[41] The later scene's rekindling and reviving typologically fulfills the promise engendered by the confrontation with Hugh. While Douglass calls Hugh's lecture a "new and special revelation," the fight with Covey is "a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery."[42] Thus, prophetic revelation leads to promised resurrection. The physical combat figures as a repetition and fulfillment of the earlier contest over letters, retroactively casting Hugh as an opponent in Covey's mold.

In order further to heighten the symmetrical and oppositional cast of the encounter between Hugh and Douglass, Douglass narratively edits Sophy out of the struggle. Douglass attributes Sophy's initial kindness to her own affiliation with the working class: "She had, in truth, never been a slaveholder, but had – a thing quite unusual in the south – depended almost entirely upon her own industry for a living," and, like Esther, Sophy stands in as a mother-figure for Douglass.[43] But as Esther receives a whipping for squandering on a black person attentions meant to be sequestered for a white one, so Sophy receives a prolonged verbal rebuke that Douglass witnesses and experiences vicariously. In Douglass's inscription and transmission of it, Hugh's interdictory lecture punishes her by effacing her entirely – as McDowell points out, the lecture takes the form of a running list of Hugh's admonitions, with no representation of any response, spoken or otherwise, on Sophy's part.[44] Douglass's elision of Sophy positions Douglass and Hugh, rather than Sophy and Hugh or even Sophy and Douglass as active opponents (although she does become a savage antagonist after her initiation into the *abc*'s of slave owning). Douglass completes the narrative elision when he concludes that "[i]n learning to read, therefore, I am not sure that I do not owe quite as much to the opposition of my master, as to the kindly assistance of my amiable mistress."[45] By downgrading Sophy's instruction to a position not more substantive than Hugh's interruption of that instruction, Douglass frames the

situation as a face-off between two equally-matched male opponents. We can see this confrontation in Douglass's statement: "*He* wanted me to be *a slave*; I had already voted against that on the home plantation of Col. Lloyd."[46] Douglass squares off against Hugh, want for want, and he throws in a metaphorical claim to the franchise ("I had voted against that") for good measure. The oppositionality of the confrontation suggests the possibility of an outcome as decisive as the one that emerges from the battle with Covey, which

> recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a FREEMAN. A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot *honor* a helpless man, although it can *pity* him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise.[47]

Douglass's rekindled virility emerges from a clear sense of self ("self-respect," "self-confidence") and that self's ability to manifest signs of power that exclude an appearance of emasculating helplessness.[48] Freedom, Douglass comes close to suggesting in this passage, comes to individuals who fight for it, and literacy comes across as one theater of this agonistic struggle.

In light of arguments like Hartman's about the political conservativism that inheres in the notion of the rights-bearing individual responsible for him or herself and distinct from any social collective in which s/he takes shape, Douglass scholars have called into question Douglass's narrativization of his life in the mode of the Romantic hero. In her analysis of the autobiographies' foregrounding of physical violence, McDowell concludes that "such struggle cannot function as the beginning and end of our understanding of power relations" precisely because such a framework forecloses the representation and theorization of subtler forms of resistance, ones more likely to be available, for example, to bondswomen.[49] Jeffrey Hole (2013) similarly attributes to Douglass in *The Heroic Slave* a romantic faith in revolutionary, liberal

notions of heroic resistance, finding in the novella's contemporary counterpart *Benito Cereno* a more complicated and satisfactory account of resistance; the other novella, Hole contends, pulls into focus an "agony of a different order, not necessarily of the agon but of stasis and enduring strife, a set of asymmetric relations in which conflict may not necessarily yield emancipation."[50] But I think that this line of criticism has itself not completely taken account of the ambiguity and contradictions involved in Douglass's narrativization of resistance and struggle, especially in the context of his ambivalent depiction of his literacy acquisition. As we have seen above, Douglass invests the process of literacy acquisition with great confrontational significance: the pedagogical primal scene with Sophy both reenacts the pivotal moment of his initiation into the mysteries of slavery upon seeing Aunt Esther whipped by Aaron Anthony and it anticipates his metaphorical or spiritual exit from the state of slavery in his battle with Covey. Such placement weaves literacy together with physical struggle and resistance. However, Douglass's running account of his literacy acquisition – while it is initiated by the confrontation with Hugh – shows the ongoing, socially situated, often abjecting, day-to-day improvisational resistances in which Douglass engages as he slowly learns to read and write. In this way, Douglass's autobiographies provide examples of what Gerard Aching (2012) calls "circumscribed resistance that emerge[s] from within the institutions we inhabit."[51] While on the one hand Douglass identifies literacy – and not necessarily incorrectly – as the "direct pathway from slavery to freedom," he on the other hand represents literacy acquisition as a temporally protracted, arduous, socially-situated endeavor. In this respect, literacy functions not as owned property so much as a heavily-negotiated and constantly-shifting set of capabilities and significances that register differently within different social situations.

Literacy as Incremental Process

Though Douglass opens the pedagogical primal scene by asserting that after a few days of Sophy's instruction he has become "master of the alphabet, and could spell words of three or four letters," he sets out after the confrontation, for what would appear to be the second time, "to learn to read, at any cost," suggesting that whatever it is that he can do by the end of Sophy's few lessons with him, it does not amount, in his own mind, to reading.[52] By the time he "had succeeded in learning to read," he is in fact "about thirteen years old."[53] As he is "not ten years old" when he leaves Lloyd's plantation to join the Aulds in Baltimore and Sophy's instruction happens soon after his arrival and before their relationship sours, several years pass between his alphabetic mastery and his capacity to read.[54] Writing takes even longer; in fact, the desire to learn to read causes him to delay an attempt to run away. When he helps "two Irishmen unloading a large scow of stone," the men, moved by the tragedy of Douglass's being "a slave for life," suggest he attempt escape.[55] Douglass demurs because "I wished to learn to write, before going."[56] While Douglass reasons that "I might have occasion to write my own pass," the bid for literacy in this case seems to obstruct, attenuate, or at the very least postpone the freedom that appeared to emerge fully-formed out of his rudimentary reading skills and the insight into literacy-based white power occasioned by his confrontation with Hugh. Of course, Douglass's postponement is strategic, as he "resolve[s] to add to my educational attainments the art of writing" as a means of better preparing himself for a successful escape.[57] Nonetheless, Douglass' representation of reading and writing oscillates between tropes of triumph and immediacy and tropes of a murkier and ongoing struggle. At the conclusion of his period of autodidacticism,

Douglass describes the process as "a long, tedious effort for years."[58] The "direct pathway from slavery to freedom" has proven to be anything but. Learning to read and write takes Douglass years, and during those years he places his education, true to the Gatesian formulation, ahead of his escape or manumission. It extends or defers rather than resolves his efforts fully to possess himself.

In fact, insofar as literacy functions as, in Crain's words, "a foundation not only of political and private 'virtue' but of subjectivity itself,' then the ad hoc processes whereby Douglass learns to read and write suggest that the subjectivity he achieves is enmeshed with his social and material contexts. Such a literacy suggests a more complicated, porous subjectivity than the model of the rationally self-interested liberal subject or the heroic Romantic individual. Douglass continues the instruction begun with Sophy by trading bread to "hungry little comrades" he meets on the street for lessons in reading, thereby "using my young white playmates…as teachers."[59] These playmates in fact act as sympathetic and willing teachers, many taking time to sigh with him over the injustice of his being "a slave for life"; Douglass refrains from naming several "who took pleasure in teaching me" only for fear of bringing them ignominy.[60] Douglass trades on his friends' good nature and bodily hunger and his own access to bread in order to turn time into skills. Learning to read involves bartering with his friends; those relationships mediate and make possible his ongoing studies, drawing attention to the incrementality and repetition involved the acquisition of literacy. His learning to write takes a similar trajectory through his surroundings and relationships: his first writing instruction occurs in Hugh's shipyard, where he observes how "the carpenters, after hewing and getting a piece of timber ready for use, wrote on it the initials of the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended"; thus he learns "L" (larboard), "S" (starboard), "F" (fore), and "A" (aft).[61] Literacy

accrues to Douglass gradually, one painstaking letter at a time as an effect or emanation of complex and socially coordinated labor. Having learned these four letters, Douglass again takes to the boys in the streets, eliciting instruction through an act of cunning: "I…would make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask them to 'beat that if they could,'" a gambit which gives Douglass the opportunity to watch their hands form the letters again and again.[62] Douglass gleans literacy from the world around him, shoring it up through gently-engineered social interactions. As Douglass puts it, "[w]ith play-mates for my teachers, fences and pavements for my copy books, and chalk for my pen and ink, I learned the art of writing."[63] He accomplishes literacy through acts of happenstance and insight, whereby he recognizes and stages iterative pedagogical scenarios that hardly rise to the level of confrontation.

Far from being a "direct pathway from slavery to freedom," literacy requires time, and Douglass duly steals back the time over which the Aulds choose not or are not able to exert full control. He gets his reading lessons "when sent of errands" or "when play time was allowed," he practices his first four letters "while the carpenters had gone to dinner," and he continues to improve his handwriting by practicing "when my mistress left me in charge of the house."[64] He pilfers superfluous printed material, writing "in the ample spaces between the lines" of Tommy's discarded copy books and "copying from the bible and the Methodist hymn book and other books which had accumulated on my hands, till late at night, and when all the family were in bed and asleep."[65] Douglass thus cobbles together – "after a long, tedious effort for years," as he says in the *Narrative* – his literacy in an incremental and piecemeal fashion. As a process, it resists him as much as it constitutes a field within which he can register his ongoing resistance to white supremacy. It may be a struggle, but, with the exception of Hugh at its outset, it involves no

adversarial confrontation with opponents and no clear-cut endpoint or outcome. When Douglass deems that he has "succeeded in learning to read," the resulting event is his purchase of the *Columbian Orator*.[66] When he learns to read, then, the outcome is that he reads materials intended to cultivate national pride in white children. After he declares that he "learned the art of writing," his next step is to adopt "various methods of improving my hand."[67] When he learns to write, then, the outcome is more writing, the ever-proliferating autobiographies being another example of literacy as an extension and not a resolution of struggle for power and self-definition.[68] Literacy proves to be a mundane, humbling project in which moments of success do not necessarily or only empower but instead lead forward into successive representational challenges.

In fact, one could argue cynically, if somewhat churlishly, that literacy plays no direct role in Douglass's escape, if we consent to confine freedom strictly to a slave's escape from slave territory. While reading brings Douglass together with his fellow would-be runaways at the Freeland farm and resolves them in their purpose, their attempt, predicated on Douglass's having forged written passes, fails. The written documents Douglass has crafted to aid their passage turn out to be liabilities insofar as they constitute the only material evidence of their intentions, evidence the men variously eat or burn to hide from their captors. As Douglass instructs his co-conspirators to destroy their passes, he also tells them to "Own nothing!"; even though Douglass means to instruct the other slaves to remain resolute in their denials since no hard evidence against them besides the passes themselves seems to exist, we can hear in his command the echo of the slaves' being confirmed as property, owning nothing. The failure of his attempt to deploy writing necessitates a repudiation of their bid to own rather than be owned. When Douglass does in fact escape, he depends on the money and planning of his (illiterate) wife

Anna: Douglass biographer William McFeely (1991) writes that "it was always said that Anna sold a featherbed to finance the journey, and having suggested that Frederick impersonate a sailor, altered his clothing to make it look like a seaman's."[69] According to McFeely, Douglass obtains his papers not through forgery but as a gift or purchase.[70] Douglass's literacy does not, in fact, abet his escape attempt, despite his earlier rationalization for delaying any such plans until he has learned to write.

But these facts do not deter Douglass from deploying an emergent cultural logic that tied reading and writing to republican ideals, something we can see in Douglass's representation of the pedagogical scenes in which he is no longer the student but has become the teacher of slaves. In these situations, literacy instruction bears its own revolutionary agency, an effect accomplished by a figuration whose argument attributes an essential liberatory character to the pedagogical situation and the materials which constitute it. When Douglass writes that on Freeland's farm "I early began to address my companions on the subject of education, and the advantages of intelligence over ignorance, and, as far as I dared, I tried to show *the agency of ignorance in keeping men in slavery,*" Douglass gives ignorance an oppressive agency; it becomes a personified opponent to freedom and equality.[71] This is not to say that slaves' ignorance did not serve – and was not fiercely and strategically maintained by – slave-owners; for example, Douglass goes to great lengths in his representation of the Freeland escape attempt to demonstrate how his limited grasp of national geography severely constrained his plan.[72] However, in his account of instructing his fellow-slaves, Douglass reifies ignorance as a bounded quality or and person-like opponent, one that can be definitively expelled or resisted, respectively. Douglass populates the scenario in which such resistance can be cultivated and practiced with the trappings of print culture and primary education: having "quickly secured"

two pupils "thoroughly imbued with the desire to learn," they acquire spelling books with "surprising…ease," as "the cast off books of their young masters and mistresses" appear to be readily available for their use.[73] Douglass connects the circulation of knowledge, through print culture and primary education, with the capacity to dispel the "ignorance" that keeps men in slavery. The proliferation and easy availability of books – pedagogical ones in particular – serve the individual bid for freedom from slavery.

Moreover, Douglass represents a spontaneous political agency inhering in the pedagogical situation and in his instructional materials. Douglass uses the Sabbath school he has established to begin to "disclose my sentiments and plans; sounding [my pupils], the while, on the subject of running away."[74] Instruction in the processes and operations of reading here gives way naturally to acts of resistance. In this situation, Douglass's literacy and the print materials at hand take on their own agency in helping him craft what he calls his first "public speaking":

> Thoroughly awakened, now, and with a definite vow upon me, all *my little reading*, which had any bearing on the subject of human rights, *was rendered available* in my communications with my friends. That…gem of a book, the Columbian Orator…was still fresh in my memory, and *whirled into the ranks of my speech* with the aptitude of well-trained soldiers, going through the drill.[75]

Here, the lessons of the *Columbian Orator*, an instructional primer widespread at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Douglass buys his first copy for fifty cents from a bookseller in Baltimore when he is thirteen), take on their own militant agency, campaigning for Douglass's cause, the escape attempt from Freeland's farm. Douglass's pedagogical scenarios link print culture and literacy instruction with the possibility of a belated fulfillment of the United States' democratic promise. They preserve, circulate, and disseminate revolutionary ideals.[76]

My interest in foregrounding Douglass's deployment of a technologically deterministic account of the materials and operations of print culture as well as to the notion of literacy (in this

passage defined in opposition to the adversary ignorance) arises in part from the way that the hope or faith it invests in an act of self-improvement and/or local resistance might tend to detract from a more thoroughgoing assessment of the location of adversity in the lives of slaves in the American South. To say nothing of the way that *individual* ignorance here occludes a brutal system of oppression as a force keeping them in slavery, Douglass represents himself as the vessel of the revolutionary agency mediated by books, literacy ("all my little reading"), and particular texts (here, the speeches in the *Columbian Orator*). This is not to say that the slaveocracy's militancy against slave education did not play a role in the suppression of black resistance or that Douglass does not give due diligence to the systematic enculturation of brutalizing social norms.[77] While Douglass gives careful account of the systematic nature of social oppression elsewhere, here, in this corridor of his account of overcoming that system, he nevertheless places emphasis on the individual's capacity to overturn far-reaching social imperatives through local, personal acts of resistance. Similarly, the reification and valorization of literacy, despite Douglass's enthusiastic endorsement of its capacity to empower, suggest that individuals can, should, and must navigate a changing cultural and socioeconomic landscape through the acquisition and application of skills – that is, in their capacity as enclosed, already-constituted individuals responsible for their own well-being. Broadly speaking, the notion of a universally and inherently empowering literacy coincides with a teleological narrative of history. As literacy becomes more widespread, people become "more free." But of course, as people become "more free," they also bear more displaced responsibility for social and economic positions that in fact are largely structurally determined. A discourse of freedom and individual responsibility can pass off systemic limitations as the responsibility of the seemingly-agential, self-determining subject whose responsibility it becomes to overcome structural limitations. This

teleological narrative also tends to obscure the ways in which what counts as literacy – and its exact social currency – is always changing, often with the effect of naturalizing extant power relations. Douglass's revolutionary literacy, not to put too fine a point on it, demonstrative as it is of his own oppressive originary conditions, suggests to an extent that emancipation is a matter of personal acumen as much as systematic legal action. It taps into or pulls into focus a liberal Enlightenment construction of the individual as the functional unit of political agency that coincides with an encryption or occultation of collective, systemic, governmental or other conditions for and stays upon individual agency.

Up to a point, then, Douglass represents literacy acquisition as a crucial act of slave resistance that ties him to a revolutionary and democratic tradition. In that respect, he participates in and contributes to a naturalizing discourse that James Clifford identifies with Romanticism's and empiricism's investment in "nonallegorical description," a hope or belief in the possibility of "unmediated meaning in the event":

> The claim that nonallegorical description was possible – a position underlying both positivist literalism and realist synecdoche (the organic, functional, or "typical" relationship of parts to wholes) – was closely allied to the romantic search for unmediated meaning in the event. Positivism, realism, and romanticism…all rejected the 'false' artifice of rhetoric along with allegory's supposed abstractness. Allegory violated the canons both of empirical science and of artistic spontaneity…It was too deductive, too much an open imposition of meaning on sensible evidence.[78]

For Clifford, the two representational schools that bookended the nineteenth century both valorized the immediacy, self-evidence, and material force of external reality as it impinged itself upon human perception and representational practices. Douglass's depiction of the printed material of literacy instruction as possessed of inherent liberatory qualities partakes of the idea that reading and writing themselves are reified things "out" in the world, contact with which, or the incorporation of which constitutes a kind of unmediated experience of "reality." As Thoreau

sees a sand bank extrude phonemes in an expression of some kind of ongoing life force that binds him to the nonhuman world, Douglass suggests or hopes that the ability to read and write fundamentally alters one's relationship with a sensible reality, immediately accomplishing certain foregone orientations and affiliations. However, Douglass's representation of literacy also resists the idea that it is any one thing or that its effects are always socially empowering. Besides its being an arduous and socially-mediated process made up of innumerable small transactions rather than a single heroic encounter, literacy acquisition also appears to inflict great suffering on Douglass.

Literacy as Abjecting

One of the most immediate effects of learning to read for Douglass is a sense of loss he casts as a fall from Eden. As reading deepens his understanding of his condition, Douglass experiences "bitter…results" of his "increase of knowledge": "I was no longer the light-hearted, gleesome boy, full of mirth and play, as when I landed first at Baltimore. Knowledge had come."[79] He gloomily longs for his prelapsarian state, envying "my fellow slaves their stupid contentment."[80] But exactly what knowledge does reading confer upon him? Douglass after all has already been witness to and victim of many of slavery's cruelties, including separation from family, deprivation of food and clothing, and physical violence (though he downplays the confrontational physical violence he suffers before this point in the narrative, instead showcasing violence he has either witnessed or heard of). In part his anguish arises from a realization that there is nothing exceptional about his situation; self-interested violence and cruelty undergird even his relatively warm relationship with Hugh and Sophy; speaking figuratively of the import of his realization, he imagines that "light had penetrated the moral dungeon where I dwelt; and,

behold! there lay the bloody whip, for my back, and here was the iron chain; and my good, *kind master*, he was the author of my situation."[81] In this sense, the knowledge that tumbles Douglass out of Eden bears in upon him what Hartman calls the "savage encroachments of power that take place through notions of reform, consent, and protection."[82] Though explicit, temporally-concentrated violence may not characterize his relationship with the Aulds, a slow, deep violence pervades it nonetheless. The knowledge occasioned by Hugh's prohibition produces a painful understanding of the way in which force underlies his felt attachment to Hugh and especially Sophy. The realization constitutes what Aching calls a "moment[] of compromised freedom made possible by the unsettling work of reflection that constitutes the ground zero of resistance."[83] Douglass has gained a measure of freedom through his realization, but it is not totally clear where that freedom can take him, what he can do with it, or how it changes his relationship with his master and mistress other than making it more contentious.

Beyond its capacity to unveil the violence in which his relationships to his masters are rooted, Douglass's "little reading" brings anguish in its conferral of painfully limited power. On one hand, Douglass represents reading as expanding his capacity to conceptualize: "The reading of [the *Columbian Orator*] added much to my limited stock of language, and enabled me to give tongue to many interesting thoughts, which had frequently flashed through my soul, and died away for want of an utterance."[84] Here, Douglass represents the acquisition of particular words as giving him access to a conceptuality that allows him, it would seem, to think faster or think further, linking the particularities of his social reality to other social realities. The *Orator* contains, for example, "Sheridan's mighty speeches on the subject of Catholic Emancipation" as well as a dialogue in which a slave convinces his master of the injustice of slavery and thereby, through words, wins his manumission.[85] Douglass understands this mental agility as a kind of

power: "I had now penetrated the secret of all slavery and oppression…I was equal to a contest with the religious advocates of slavery."[86] Once again, literacy seems to level the playing field and make Douglass a capable opponent.

But his self-driven constitution as a mental or intellectual opponent to his enslavers fails to account for the socially-determined nature of the contest, in which his freedom is subject to debate, but not that of his oppressors. In the same paragraph Douglass represents the penetrative triumph of understanding as coterminous with the realization of the extent of his impotence. He attributes the "torment" he experiences to the fact that, while knowledge has impressed upon him the injustice of slavery, it has "opened no way for my escape."[87] Literacy represents an important phase shift, but one that maddeningly defers the freedom whose possibility it renders available to conceptualization. In fact, literacy seems endlessly to defer the possibility of freedom:

> Liberty! The inestimable birthright of every man, had, for me, converted every object into an asserter of this great right. It was heard in every sound, and beheld in every object. It was ever present, to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition….I saw nothing without seeing it, and I heard nothing without hearing it.[88]

Language/literacy allows the irresolution of force and resistance, of subjection and the persistent objection to subjection, to cohere in perceived sound and object. The world itself rings with the impasse. Literacy allows a notion of personal liberty as human birthright to cohere in Douglass's consciousness; in the passage above Douglass demonstrates how the coherence of freedom into a concept or the ability imaginatively to project a state of freedom as distinct from the ability to actualize it. Douglass's idealization of the concept of freedom as borne into him by the speeches and dialogues in the *Columbian Orator* alienates it from him and defers it. He discovers freedom in and by language, but the social reality the ideas bind together proves to be unavailable to him – not only within the context of his immediate bondage, but within the context of the constitution

of the supposedly autonomous liberal subject. "Freedom" acts as a blind that deflects, defers, and naturalizes a host of more complicated and uncertain dispersions of individual agency. Knowledge and language mediated by written texts precipitate Douglass's Edenic fall. In this respect, Douglass's narrativization of his literacy acquisition as a traumatic fall from a state of "stupid contentment" contradicts a countervailing tendency in the autobiographies to affiliate literacy with immediate power; once again, Douglass represents the temporal lag and material resistance literacy poses to his quest for personal autonomy.

Literacy in Broken Speech

Yet Douglass did not shy away from the work of binding literacy and freedom; his continued output of written material suggests an indomitable hope that language could help him register resistance and objection. His account helps us see the freedom and power he at times associates with literacy fail to accrue to him despite his Titanic capacities with language. In this respect, Douglass makes it possible to see potentials for subjection and resistance that inhere in linguistic acts but that do not align well with the notions of the autonomous, liberal, socially-empowered self that antebellum literacy seemed to promise. We can see the tension between compulsion and freedom in an act of verbal self-expression at the end of the *Narrative*, when Douglass, "moved to speak" at an abolitionist movement, "reluctantly" takes up the "severe cross" of what Jeanine DeLombard (2001) has styled as testimony, the production of documentary evidence of slavery's atrocities to be wielded by white abolitionists in a controlled production that left the more active role of advocate to Garrison and other white leaders of the movement.[89] As Douglass assumes the burden of self-representation on a platform not of his own making and which frames or contains him as evidence rather than agential activist, he

nonetheless feels "a degree of freedom, and said what [he] desired with considerable ease." [90] This experience of freedom, however, leads before long to the introduction of a new kind of constraint. In the second autobiography, Douglass accounts for the paradoxical manner in which his oratorical eloquence, in the context of a white supremacist culture, undermines the credibility of his identity as a former slave, the very occasion of his oratory. He recounts walking down the aisle at an event to the platform and hearing "the free-spoken Yankees, saying, "*He's never been a slave, I'll warrent* [sic] *ye.*"[91] The "free-spoken" Yankees thus undermine and redefine the measure of freedom Douglass claims to have felt when he first took the stage. Douglass comes to the conclusion that a written document will more decidedly confirm the veracity of its contents than his speeches do: "I resolved to dispel all doubt, at no distant day, by such a revelation of facts as could not be made by any other than a genuine fugitive."[92] In so doing, Douglass does more than craft a riposte to audience prejudice, he assumes the role of activist, and thus repudiates the Garrisonian abolitionists' coaching him to "narrate" wrongs but not to "denounce[e]" them in their impulse to confine Douglass to the role of embodied victim and exclude him from the role of advocate. According to Douglass, he consciously decides to resist that limitation: "still I must speak the word that seemed to *me* to the word to be spoken *by* me"; the act of writing the autobiography seems to extend his determination to seize control over his self-representation in language.[93]

But perhaps even these formulations participate too trustingly in the oppositional framework of agonistic struggle. For Levine (2016), the critical construction of the *Narrative* as a radical and oppositional break from Garrisonian abolitionists takes its cue from Douglass himself and thereby glosses over the intense articulation between the lectures and the first autobiography. Pointing to the platform, affirmation, examples, and feedback – to say nothing of

the very notion of himself as an author – Douglass received as a result of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, Levine concludes that "there is much in the 1845 Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society *Narrative* that points to collaboration and mutual respect between Garrison and Douglass, even if there are tensions as well."[94] While we can presumably see Douglass making an effort to reframe the *Narrative* by republishing two editions in 1845 during his tour of England and including in the new editions prefatory paratexts written by Douglass that served to enclose the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's legitimating forewords, at the same time, the reeditions also allowed Douglass to meet demand for their purchase as he travelled the lecture circuit and to support his travel monetarily. Surely Levine correctly draws attention to the facts that Douglass's composition of the *Narrative* did not necessarily have a fixed starting point that coincided clearly with Douglass's consciously-registered decision to write it, and that the *Narrative*'s coalescence as a document that signified his break with the Garrisonian abolitionists was equally incremental. Nonetheless, the drawn-out and uncertain composition process extends and intensifies rather than settles the ambiguities of self-representation which motivated Douglass's decision to write his autobiography in the first place, both in its constitution as material artifact circulating in the antebellum world and as a textual artifact of self-definition.

What about a text – which can be alienated from an author's person and circulated more widely than s/he can circulate him or herself – could convince Douglass's Northern, mostly white audiences of the veracity of his identity more than face-to-face speech? If the eloquence of his speech throws doubt on his provenance, it would seem that an eloquent narrative would only make matters worse, especially in the light of the Gatesian dictum that written literacy is the gold standard of black humanity; by this logic a cogent written document would telegraph greater distance from a state of enslavement (and would also seem more vulnerable to falsification,

legitimating paratexts notwithstanding). However, the early editions of Douglass's first autobiography, according to Michaël Roy (2015), circulated in close coordination with his physical person: while some abolitionist presses relied on a distributional strategy practiced by evangelical Christians – disseminate widely to maximize exposure without any explicit consideration given to the nettlesome question of whether or not the tracts would be read – Douglass used the lecture circuit as his primary mode of book distribution. We can thus imagine the books' deployment as a material, artefactual supplement to the speech situation of the lecture.[95] Douglass's description of the composition process as a materialization of "facts" supports this interpretation: "I was induced to write out the leading facts connected with my experience in slavery, giving names of persons, places, and dates – thus putting it in the power of any who doubted, to ascertain the truth or falsehood of my story of being a fugitive slave."[96] While Douglass might be able to give the names of people and places from behind the lectern, by committing them to text – materializing them and thus making them circulable – he gives the audience a chance to fact-check, possibly by cross-referencing the book with other written documents, encountering legitimating paratexts, and/or discussing or sharing it with others who might be in a position to verify or simply ratify the plausibility of Douglass's "facts." In this context, his utterances become evidence subject to verification by a rational, literate public. With the written compilation of "facts" so closely affiliated with Douglass the man as to personify him – recall they are such that "could not be made by any other than a genuine fugitive" – Douglass the man-turned-text "enters" and makes an appeal to the print public sphere. In the slippage between the incrementally-created, factitious text and the immediacy and genuineness on which it trades, we can again identify in Douglass-the-man who produces Douglass-the-text a form of writing nature. Douglass mediates and features a language that appears in the world, that clings

to the shape of materially-present facts. In the collapse of text and man, Douglass passes through another of slavery's blood-stained gates, gaining something like liberation in a capacity to circulate through the print public sphere but gaining that capacity through the production of a naturalized account of his abjection under slavery. He represents his own text as a mediation and not a creation; in becoming an author he must deflect attention from his act of authorship. Douglass encounters the abstract public sphere, which "incorporates into the meaning of the printed object an awareness of the potentially limitless others who may be reading" making it "possible to imagine oneself, in the act of reading, becoming part of an arena of the national people that cannot be realized except through such mediating imaginings" through an appeal to his own specificity, to the materialized particularity of his life.[97] As written and writing nature, Douglass can address but not become part of an abstract, unparticularized public, a position that underscores the contradictions and exclusions that structured a literate antebellum public sphere.

But, whatever personal advantages authorship offers Douglass in terms of financial gain, mobility, public visibility, and a sense of autonomy from the Garrisonian camp, is Douglass somehow *more literate* as a writer than as a speaker, in keeping with the critical commonplace that for slaves, in Crain's words, "writing…always seemed to represent the promise – or threat – of empowerment"?[98] Additionally, if Douglass experiences great losses that balance the insights he gains when he learns to read, does writing exact its own losses? Or, to recall Moten, how are we to trace the relationship between the voice – the cry – and the "phonographic, rematerializing inscription" produced in Douglass's writing?[99] Douglass's writing is broken language beset by impossible contradictions: it is an artifact of his humanity, but simultaneously and precisely in this capacity it is a description of the debasements involved in his enslavement.

In his representation of the verbal challenge that elicits the decision to write, that is to say, in the shift from speech to writing, Douglass's narrativization of the composition of the *Narrative* bumps up against what is known as the "great divide" theory of literacy and orality, one that extends back to, among others, Claude Levi-Strauss (1955), who argues for a sharp distinction between cultures that "have" writing and cultures that do not, even if he inflects the resultant hierarchy – based on the writing culture having fallen from an Edenic state of authentic, face-to-face interaction – with disingenuous ambivalence, even ennobling the so-called primitive culture. For Levi-Strauss, writing correlates specifically with social hierarchy: "The only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires, that is the integration of large numbers of individuals into a political system, and their grading into classes"; he concludes bluntly that "the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery." [100] Up to a point, the strong and immediate or natural affiliation of literacy with liberatory social effects correlates with – if only to invert – Levi-Strauss's widely-discredited and technologically deterministic thesis. But in Douglass's efforts to transcribe or transmit in writing instances of language he emphatically experiences as sound, we can see in his writing an alternative to what Clifford calls the "pervasive, contestable, Western allegory" that "writing is a corruption, that something irretrievably pure is lost when a cultural world is textualized."[101] Douglass's fall into letters as well as his ongoing navigation of the practice of publication and the role of authorship involves losses as well as gains, or losses which may not be distinguishable from gains, or developments that reveal the inadequacy of those two terms. Maybe we can say that language and writing provide a necessary medium for resistance that helps us refine what we mean by resistance. Perhaps Douglass can remind us that the ability to write is not naturally, immediately anything and that writing itself is not naturally,

immediately anything, being instead part of an ongoing transmission of generative resistance, the Motenian "propitiative exertion" that represents but does not reproduce violence. Maybe there never has been a question about using the master's tools of a rational, logical language to resist his oppressions, because those tools were never only his and never the same from situation to situation, instead taking shape *in situ*, in the hands and mouths of humans embedded in specific social relations. Jacques Derrida (1967) objects to Levi-Strauss's binarization of written and spoken language by attributing the alienations and abstractions the anthropologist associated with written language to spoken language – which has the capacity to name entities that are not present, or to use pronouns whose referentiality is necessarily unstable – as well, but perhaps Douglass helps us see that both speech and writing have a specificity and materiality that can be accounted for in representation and that resist the simplifications and manipulations made possible by analytical abstraction.[102] Moten identifies such engagement with "music and speech" and the deployment of a "cut and augmented hermeneutic circle" that thematizes the materiality of sound and substitutive kinship, that is, the bonds that spring up between slaves despite and because of slavery's systematic war against the black family and black sociality in general. These engagements with aurality and kinship constitute baseline or cellular-level acts of creative resistance to – rather than reaction to or repetition of – subjection and all of its concentrated and dispersed violences.

Douglass's inscription of the slave songs on Lloyd's plantation, particularly in the second autobiography's inclusion of an extended quotation of the corresponding passage from the *Narrative*, makes visible a species of linguistic encounter that does not correspond with the reading and writing he learns under the instruction of Sophia Auld, the boys on the street, the carpenters at the shipyard, and the profligate pedagogical and religious print materials of white

antebellum Maryland. Douglass begins by establishing the Hartmanian scenario of a performance of affect in song elicited by de facto incarceration: slaves sing because their masters demand they do so, partly in a forced performance of cheerfulness and acquiescence, but also, Douglass points out, as "one means of letting the overseer know where they were, and that they were moving on with their work."[103] Their song serves as a material trace of their physical progress through the field, a metaphorization – a carrying over – of their manual labor into sound the overseer can surveille without seeing their bodies. Here Douglass shows song as a screen for slave suffering, veiling and revealing it. But Douglass goes on to demonstrate that this screening of suffering in song extends even to the slave who has a rare opportunity to slough off surveillance: the slave selected to visit the main plantation to collect rations for his farm, a trip that gives him the chance to "break the dull monotony of the field, and to get beyond the overseer's eye and lash," at which the slave "was comparatively free, and, if thoughtful…had time to think."[104] Douglass describes these slaves as "peculiarly excited and noisy," making "the dense old woods reverberate with their wild notes," but the excitement emerges from intensity, not joy, as, Douglass writes, "they were mostly of a plaintive cast, and told a tale of grief and sorrow. In the most boisterous outbursts of rapturous sentiment, there was ever a tinge of deep melancholy."[105] The slaves sing, Douglass explains, "to *make* themselves happy, rather than express their happiness."[106] The volume of their songs at this moment bespeaks the extent of their bondage: the compulsion to ingratiate themselves to their master even when no one seems to be there to hear the flattery, the contradiction involved in their being given the privilege of bringing back miserable rations and visiting the site of the great house built from their appropriated and congealed labor. [107] The lyrics of the song Douglass records, while literally denoting praise and exuberance, are cut and augmented, redolent with disavowed irony that

negates and expands upon their meaning: "I am going away to the great house farm,/O yea! O yea! O yea!/My old master is a good old master,/O yea! O yea! O yea!"[108] The act of submission and obedience also resists and repudiates slaveholder domination through the voices' plangent wildness as well as through Douglass's pained inscription and exegesis.

The passage in *My Bondage and My Freedom* registers Douglass's cognizance of the ambiguous relationship between voice and text, between the embodied speech situation and his embodied inscriptive account of it. After inscribing the lyrics of the song in the orthographic form of an off-set, centered quotation, Douglass quotes himself, pulling a half-page long passage verbatim from the *Narrative*. Although Douglass often reworks material closely and/or takes sentences or passages wholesale from the *Narrative* to use in *My Bondage*, he usually does not draw attention to the quotation with the orthographic indicators of citation; the slave-song passage is one of only a handful of passages from the first autobiography Douglass includes as word-for-word and offset quotations in the second autobiography. Douglass prefaces the quoted passage by establishing a contrast between hearing voices and reading text, musing that "I have sometimes thought, that the *mere hearing of those songs* would do more to impress truly spiritual-minded men and women with the soul-crushing and death-dealing character of slavery, than the *reading of whole volumes* of its mere physical cruelties."[109] This statement would first of all seem to invert the relation between voice (less convincing) and inscription (more convincing) that prompts the composition of the *Narrative,* and second of all attributes to songs a certain immediacy suggested by their physicality, the physical cry characterized by the potential to disrupt the system of exchange in a way that visual and mental apprehension of words describing a scene of slave subjection cannot. As the situation and expressive materiality of voice necessarily ironize the song's encomium, Douglass suggests, bodily contact with these two

factors would "impress" the "spiritually-minded" white reader-auditors with the nature of social relations under slavery better than contact with the repetition or re-inscription of that situation in written language.

But the distinctions between voice and inscription prove to be not so clear as the passage progresses. To begin with, although Douglass pits songs against written accounts of physical cruelties – songs win in this convincing contest – he registers a potential for overlap in the very word he uses to describe books: *volumes*, a word that connotes size and massiveness, but also sound. Volumes contain a kind of speaking. Conversely the songs feature elements of textuality: they are made of words that may be "jargon to others," but, Douglass insists, are "full of meaning to themselves [the singers]," and thus intended to communicate through the interplay of sound and semantic meaning to which the voice adds its own extra-linguistic meaning.[110] Moreover, within the inset quotation, Douglass curiously situates the imagined auditor of the songs in a way that decreases the face-to-face, situationally-embedded quality of the encounter with voice that would seem to be a significant aspect of its distinction from an impersonal and abstracted encounter with text: "If any one wishes to be impressed with a sense of the soul-killing power of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and on allowance day, place himself in the deep, pine woods, and there let him, in silence, thoughtfully analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul."[111] In this setting songs seem even more emphatically to resemble writing, for the auditor cannot see the singer, or the cruelty of the situation which elicits the song, nor does the singer know that s/he is communicating with a particular auditor, or any auditor for that matter. What seems to remain distinct to song over the writing it resembles in the strange scenario Douglass imagines is the materiality of voice, the potential to register the force of the slave cry independently of the apparent, visually-manifest

situation of the slave walking or riding, with seeming alacrity, to the plantation house for rations. Sound links singer and auditor; it constitutes material contact or caress. It carries with it the force of an acknowledgement.

Conversely, Douglass seems to locate something of that sonic materiality in the inset quotation which, formally speaking, takes on characteristics of the quoted slave song. Douglass justifies the extended direct quotation from the earlier work by referring to its sufficiency, which is at the same time a confession of the insufficiency of any account he might produce, including the lengthy quotation: "I cannot express better now, than ten years ago, when in sketching my life, I thus spoke of this feature of my plantation experience."[112] Douglass thus positions the textual quotation as a close relative of the quoted song in its emergence from his past. His past text, a description of his reaction to the slave songs, borrows something of the appearance of voice and voice's embodied presence by virtue of its being embedded in the present text as a citation. The quoted passage has the added advantage of being temporally closer in origin to Douglass's childhood, another aspect of its positionality that suggests it is less mediated, somehow less textual, than the passage in which it occurs. It is an inscription that is also the cry of his younger self in response to the slave songs. It is his transmission of those cries. Moreover, Douglass represents the act of writing as physically embodied and intensely affecting. Where elsewhere Douglass connects writing and body in the image of the pen with which he is writing that fits easily into the cracks in his heel inflicted through exposure to cold in his childhood, here writing becomes both a space in which he re-audiates the songs and its own experience of embodied expression: "The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirits, and filled my heart with ineffable sadness. The mere recurrence, even now, afflicts my spirit and while I am writing these lines, my tears are falling."[113] Writing transmits and recites, and it becomes its

own embodied expressive act. Inscription mediates and occasions expression. The moment of suffering in composition displaces and replays the initial suffering engendered by hearing a song expressive of another person's suffering. The process of inscription causes the body's witness in tears. Writing becomes song becomes a way to transmit without repeating or merely reacting in kind to the violent encounter.

Additionally, in this passage's deployment of quotation and self-citation Douglass registers a species of reading and writing that does not align with the reading and writing he learns later in life, although one could argue that the instrumental or literal literacy he learns from Sophia and others provides him with a medium for representing and reflecting upon his past that allows him to account for a broken literacy of veiled expression necessitated by the conditions of slavery. When Douglass writes of the initial song, he describes it as "jargon to others, but full of meaning to [its singers]," presumably a reference to the impacted speech situation in which bondsmen express resistance with words that denote acquiescence. At the same time, in the inset self-citation, Douglass identifies himself as "within the circle, so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear," a state which leaves him unable to "understand the deep meaning of those rude, and apparently incoherent songs."[114] Is the "deep meaning" that is beyond the young Douglass different from the meaning the singers seem to be able to apprehend, the meaning contrasted in the earlier sentence with "jargon"? Being within the circle seems to allow and to disallow understanding, and being outside it allows and disallows another set of understandings. Being outside the circle of slavery, while it offers Douglass the opportunity to write and engage with the public sphere, takes Douglass out of embodied relations with the slaves whose recollected voices move him so deeply. Of course, throughout the autobiographies, Douglass frequently cites his close ties to friends – especially those connected

to him through pedagogical situations – as a reason to hesitate at the prospect of escape; as he begins to plan his escape attempt at the Freeland farm, he writes, "An attachment, deep and lasting, sprung up between me and my persecuted pupils, which made my parting from them intensely grievous; and, when I think that most of these dear souls are yet shut up in this abject thralldom, I am overwhelmed with grief."[115] The formation of those ties that to some extent heal the broken kinship imposed by slavery are themselves acts of liberation and resistance, and the fact that an escape attempt means sundering those ties comprises another of slavery's violations paradoxically exacted through an act of resistance, thereby tangling subjection and the objection to subjection. Stepping outside the circle constitutes an act of resistance as does voicing objection within it.

Douglass explicates the broken literacy at stake in the songs that does not align with the more instrumental, public literacy that he achieves and deploys in Baltimore and beyond, in a passage in the second autobiography devoted to describing the pidgin language of the slaves on Lloyd's plantation, a passage that seems like the *Narrative* itself to measure Douglass's humanity in the linguistic distance he travels from an intellectually debased childhood to his public position as author, editor, and orator. Of his childhood linguistic background, he maintains that "[t]here is not, probably, in the whole south, a plantation where the English language is more imperfectly spoken then on Col. Lloyd's. It is a mixture of Guinea and everything else you please."[116] The language of the slaves, many of whom had been brought direct "from the coast of Africa" in contrast to Douglass, who is born in Tuckahoe, Maryland, appears as an imperfect and worrisome amalgam that contrasts sharply with the formal English prose in which Douglass describes their language. Douglass's diagnosis of the slave language spoken on Lloyd's plantation distances him from it: "I could scarcely understand them when I

first went among them, so broken was their speech; and I am persuaded I could not have been dropped anywhere on the globe, where I could reap less, in the way of knowledge, from my immediate associates, than on this plantation."[117] Up to a point, Douglass seems to be disavowing any connection to or benefit from the linguistic environment created by the slaves on Lloyd's plantation, a disavowal underlined by Douglass's insistence at the end of the same paragraph that he tends to associate not with the other slave boys but with Lloyd's white son Daniel. After explaining that the white and black children play together freely and establishing that Daniel "could not give his black playmates his company, without giving them his intelligence, too," he mentions that "I, for some cause or other, spent much of my time with Mas' Daniel, in preference to spending it with most of the other boys."[118] Douglass seems here to identify Daniel as another white progenitor of his literacy, along with Sophy and Hugh, the white street urchins, the shipbuilders, and the authors of the *Columbian Orator*.

But Douglass also indicates influence in the other direction, of the speech of the slave children on Daniel and Douglass as his proxy: "Even 'MAS' DANIEL,' by his association with his father's slaves, had measurably adopted their dialect and their ideas, so far as they had ideas to be adopted."[119] Despite the passing dismissal of the potential of the slave children to have ideas that would register as such with a white audience, the slave language and the ideas it can convey makes its way into the autobiography. Douglass gives us a sample and a translation:

> They never used the, "s" in indication of the possessive case. "Cap'n Ant'ney Tom," "Lloyd Bill," "Aunt Rose Harry," means "Captain Anthony's Tom," "Lloyd's Bill," &c. "*Oo you dem long to?*" means, "Whom do you belong to?" "*Oo dem got any peachy?*" means, "Have you got any peaches?"[120]

The list of grammatically uninflected names and the two dialect sentences, woven together with Douglass's rewording of them, recall what Moten calls the "material degradations – fissures or

invaginations of a foreclosed universality, a heroic but bounded eroticism" that make up "black performances."[121] The utterances Douglass chooses to represent have to do with issues of ownership and property. The pidgin English sheds the possessive form, relying instead on syntax that feels at least to this English speaker somewhat uncertain: Douglass tells us that "Cap'n Ant'ney Tom" is "Captain Anthony's Tom" presumably because it could mean "Captain Anthony Tom" with Tom acting as a surname. Similarly, could Lloyd be a first name and Bill a last? Could there be an Aunt Rose Harry? The uninflected form lets us squint at the interplay between the slave owner's identity and the identity of the slave owned by him, each impinging on the other. The two "*oo dem*" questions, inscribed by Douglass in their sonic specificity, cut and augment Douglass's prose, and he uses them to cut and augment the wonderfully mixed language that seems to appear between Daniel, Douglass, and the other slave children. The pidgin language's degradations testify to the embodied specificity of its speakers, and its inscription and transmission by Douglass suggests an aural performance that shapes the writing and the speech of the person who reads and writes it. This language's deformations ask you to feel the materiality of words and the embodied humanity of its speakers. It is a language through which the slaves, brought from Guinea and "anywhere else you please" sort out lines of kinship and relation, and through which they forge their own embodied human connections with each other. The list of names and the two questions let us swim in a seemingly broken language that seems to have lost its inflected possessive form and in which Edenic peaches that recall the fruit pilfered by "swarms of hungry [slave] boys" from Lloyd's tantalizing garden fenced with tarred boards emblematizing slavery's partitioning of agricultural abundance.[122] The language Douglass examines here, centering on relationship, ownership, and resources, even as it is attributed to a group of speakers and no one individual, suggests "the universalization or the socialization of the

surplus," arguing for humanity in particularity and embodied need expressed and shared in language.[123] If elsewhere, Douglass tackles the reading and writing that comprise the pathway out of slavery, here we catch a glimpse of the language(s) that the later formalization of his language displaces but also lets come into view.

III. Douglassian Natural Reading

As an astute and prolific reader of reading, and as an insightful reader of white natural reading, Douglass offers new ways of thinking about Transcendentalism's reading practices. In fact, Douglass offers us a useful model of an epistemological turn to the nonhuman that refuses to replicate the exclusions and hierarchizations incumbent upon a limited Enlightenment universality. Historical connections particularly between Thoreau and Douglass suggest an overlap in their concerns. Thoreau's biographer Robert Richardson (1986) implies that Douglass's *Narrative of the Life* inspired or at least informed Thoreau's move to Walden Pond and his decision to write about his experiences there: Thoreau heard Wendell Phillips (the Garrisonian abolitionist whose letter to Douglass acts as one preface to the 1845 Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society's *Narrative of the Life*) speak at the Concord Lyceum, and one of his topics was Frederick Douglass, "who was just then making a stir as a speaker and was talking about his intention of writing his own life. Thoreau shared Phillips's indignation that Douglass was being urged to keep silent, lest he compromise people."[124] Richards draws out the coincidence of *Walden* and Douglass's *Narrative*: "Going to Walden was Thoreau's liberation, and his account of himself in *Walden* is an interesting parallel to Douglass's account of his liberation, which was published and reviewed in June 1845, three months after Phillips's speech in Concord and just shortly before Thoreau's move out to the pond."[125] In fact, Thoreau's long revision of *Walden*

(begun during his stay at the Concord pond but published only after he had taken it through six drafts, in 1854) occupies almost exactly the same ten years during which Douglass republished versions of the *Narrative* in Dublin (September 1845, February 1846), published *The Heroic Slave* in Julia Griffith's *Autographs for Freedom* (1853), and subsequently rewrote the *Narrative* as *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855).[126] Regardless of whether or not the two men read each other's work and were overtly influenced by each other, they were writing at the same time and circulated in the lecture circuit of antebellum New England. [127] In fact, besides helping to ground the notions of literacy and liberation in the particularities of slave life, Douglass can further help us ground the attentional practices of Thoreauvian transcendentalism – nominally focused on nonhuman nature but also branching out to encompass human languages and Native Americans – in the particularities of a slaveholding society. Like Thoreau, Douglass regularly turns his attention to nonhuman nature, but where Thoreau sees language and humans that take on characteristics of nonhuman nature, Douglass sees nonhuman nature saturated with social relations that may not be immediately visually evident but that can be made manifest through more broken linguistic practices.

Critics have become increasingly interested in Douglass's potential to connect Transcendentalist thought to the politics of the day, thereby pushing back against the well-established critique of Transcendentalism's focus on the cultivation of the self as quietistic and even, in an argument made in 1986 by David Simpson, as an ideological vehicle that mystified and suppressed the actual hierarchies that structured nineteenth-century social relations.[128] But while critics like Douglas Jones and Hugh Egan are interested in how Douglass uses Transcendentalist abstractions to help him accomplish his own rhetorical aims – for Jones (2016), to debunk the vulgar materialist racist arguments of the American School of Ethnology,

and for Egan (2014) to couch the narrativization of his struggle for freedom in the resonant terms of a liberatory Transcendental self-culture – I am arguing that Douglass establishes the materialist underpinnings of Transcendentalist concepts. In assuming embodiment and social embeddedness as the necessary medium for Transcendent experiences, Douglass, with Thoreau and more recent recuperations of Emerson, makes possible a Transcendentalism that explores the unification of the body with a universality that neither abstracts nor suppresses the specificities of embodiment.[129]

For Douglass, an ennobling thirst for freedom arises not from spirit or any other numinous faculty that might distinguish the human from the nonhuman animal but from the animal body itself. Douglass co-prioritizes political freedom and bodily safety in a line of argumentation running throughout the autobiographies that makes physical well-being a precondition of the freedom drive. After he defeats Covey, Douglass observes that "freedom from bodily torture and unceasing labor had given my mind an increased sensibility, and imparted to it greater activity…temporal wants supplied, the spirit puts in its claim."[130] This narrative logic grounds "spirit" in the body, deploying a descendentalism reminiscent of Thoreau's call for John Farmer to reach a "different sphere" and activate seemingly abstract or imaginative "faculties which slumbered in him" suggested by the music of a distant flute by "let[ting] his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever increasing respect."[131] For Thoreau, Transcendent sublimity can be reached through a practice of letting "the mind descend into the body," and Douglass also formulates transcendence through a cultivated relationship to one's own embodiment when he emphasizes that his hunger for freedom takes hold most keenly when he is well-provided for by a benevolent master. While Douglass repeatedly characterizes freedom as a natural desire and universal right of humans, he

also argues that repeated and sustained violation of the body obstructs the desire and drive for freedom: "Such is human nature. You may hurl a man so low, beneath the level of his kind, that he loses all just ideas of his natural position; but elevate him a little, and the clear conception of rights rises to life and power, and leads him onwards."[132] Humans can achieve their "natural position" only when not "lowered" beneath it through twinned physical and epistemological violence that performs and maintains his displacement.[133]

We also see Douglass embed the abstract or spiritual within the embodied and social when he engages in an iteration of the sorrow songs explicated above. Douglass and other would-be runaways sing "O Canaan" during the lead-up to the runaway attempt at the Freeland farm in what he describes as an almost irrepressible if unstrategic expression of hope. Like the singers of the earlier songs, Douglass fully comprehends the song's "double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to the world of spirits; but, in the lips of *our* company, it simply meant, a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state."[134] In the mere singing of the song, Douglass and his companions materialize spiritual matters and spiritualize material ones, yoking spiritual and political freedom and giving political freedom a fervently-felt spiritual significance. Even the desired "free state" has abstract/universal and particular connotations: the political state bestows personal freedom.

Douglass in fact repeatedly frames practices of self-loss and attentional absorption as ones that emerge from and lead back to specific materialized contexts. In the account of his departure from Baltimore to St. Michaels, for example, Douglass marks the year by a meteor shower: it "was the year, also, of that strange phenomenon, when the heavens seemed about to part with its starry train."[135] Douglass describes the spectacle as "gorgeous" and "sublime"; he

tentatively interprets it as "the harbinger of the coming of the Son of Man," and then connects it to the disruptions occurring in his own life:

> in my then state of mind, I was prepared to hail Him as my friend and deliverer....I was suffering much in my mind. It did seem that every time the young tendrils of my attention became attached, they were rudely broken by some unnatural outside power; and I was beginning to look away to heaven for the rest denied me on earth.[136]

Douglass uses the sublime spectacle to mark the rupture in his social relationships with "those to whom I *imparted* instruction, and to those little white boys from whom I *received* instruction" in Baltimore; it is to these individuals that "the young tendrils of my attention became attached."[137] The "parting" of the heavens metaphorizes the human parting that Douglass expresses as the breaking of "the tendrils of my attention"; the nonhuman world cannot exceed or redress abuses inflicted by his owner, and his plant-like attention is fixed on earthly, embodied relationships.

For Douglass the contemplation of nature leads to a contemplation of relationships between individual humans, while for Thoreau the intertwining of nonhuman nature with human relationality appears more as an afterthought or unintended but irrepressible side effect. Douglass turns to descriptions of nonhuman nature as a way to illustrate the intractability of his own social situation, whereas for Thoreau such descriptions lead to a sense of his connection to all matter and a concomitant augmentation or animation of his own consciousness. When Douglass arrives at Covey's, for example, he writes:

> The Chesapeake bay – upon the jutting banks of which was the little wood-colored house was standing – white with foam, raised by the heavy north-west wind; Poplar Island, covered with a thick, black pine forest, standing out amid this half ocean; and Kent Point, stretching its sandy, desert-like shores out into the foam-crested bay, – were all in sight, and deepened the wild and desolate aspect of my new home.[138]

Nature transfers its wildness and desolateness to the site of Douglass's most dramatic and emblematic struggle against slavery. Contemplation of nature channels contemplation of social

relations figured by the home. For Thoreau, by contrast, solitude in the midst of nonhuman nature produces a sense of unmediated contact he represents as a species of kinship:

> Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.[139]

The Thoreauvian subject, by virtue of a political subjectivity that precedes and enables his retreat to the cabin on Emerson's land, accedes to a stateless mobility and all-encompassing relation.

Douglass by contrast precedes contemplation of landscape with an explicit acknowledgement of his political subjectivity. In the letter to Garrison he sends from England and includes in the second-to-last chapter of *My Bondage*, he states, "as to nation, I belong to none. I have no protection at home, or resting-place abroad."[140] From the position of statelessness, of social and political death, Douglass renders his own version of landscape contemplation that proves so rich and immersive for Thoreau. He thinks longingly of his native country's natural beauty, but this pastoral vision quickly gives way to a historical vision that cannot suppress the sociopolitical context of an apparently unpeopled natural beauty:

> In thinking of America, I sometimes find myself admiring her bright blue sky, her grand old woods, her fertile fields, her beautiful rivers, her mighty lakes, and star-crowned mountains. But my rapture is soon checked, and my joy is soon turned to mourning. When I remember that all is cursed with the infernal spirit of slaveholding, robbery, and wrong; when I remember that with the waters of her noblest rivers, the tears of my brethren are borne to the ocean, disregarded and forgotten, and that her most fertile fields drink daily of the warm blood of my outraged sisters; I am filled with unutterable loathing, and led to reproach myself that anything could fall from my lips in praise of such a land.[141]

Douglass turns the Transcendentally internalized pastoral/national landscape into the site of embodied slave suffering; he figures the land's agricultural resources – water and soil – as being

materially replenished by slave bodies (men's tears and women's blood).[142] In this way, he reverses the conceptual trend that Myra Jehlen (1986) calls the "American incarnation": the notion that the ideals of liberal democracy inhered naturally in the North American continent constructed in the cultural imaginary of the settler colonialist nation as empty and devoid of history. For Jehlen, this structuring assumption justified and even drove territorial expansion, and in reconfiguring movement through history as movement through space, allowed the nation to grow without fundamentally changing or resolving the contradictions inherent to a colonialist democracy that paid lip service to universal human rights. The Transcendentalist gesture of enclosing or registering "nature" within an all-encompassing universal subject coordinates with this collapse of the individual into the American landscape.

Douglass, though, insistently fixes the suffering bodies of individual slaves within the pastoral narrative implied by a sentimentalized discourse of national beauty. Douglass reads the historical presence of the slave as a necessary condition of the narrative of North American natural abundance. The slave functions as part of that abundance, cementing a racial hierarchy that trades on the value of whiteness and laboring to extract agricultural and other kinds of wealth. Where Thoreau sees individual words interacting with or emanating from nonhuman nature in ways that allow for the possibility of direct sensory contact even while making humans and human language a facet of that contact, Douglass represents the embodied social relations that make the specific understandings and uses of nature possible. Douglass shows us what Thoreau glimpses peripherally when he looks with such intensity at nonhuman nature.

Both Douglass and Thoreau turn to sound as a medium of sensuous co-embodiment, and I want to close by turning to two moments in which each man frames sound as a form of

transformative contact. As we explored in the first chapter, Thoreau frames reading as an experience that is felt before it is understood:

> Though the sentences open as we read them, unexpensively, and at first almost unmeaningly, as the petals of a flower, they sometimes startle us with that rare kind of wisdom which could only have been learned from the most trivial experience; but it comes to us as refined as the porcelain earth which subsides to the bottom of the ocean.[143]

Thoreau's experience of the sound of language underlines its materiality and decenters semantic meaning as language's primary significance. For Thoreau, sound connects him to what can be understood as a particularized universal: through its vibrations in his body sound connects him to literally everything. In *Walden*, the sound of the Lincoln church bells ringing through the woods, "[t]here came to me a melody which the air had strained, and which had conversed with every leaf and needle of the wood, that portion of the sound which the elements had taken up and modulated and echoed from vale to vale," suggesting the possibility of Thoreau's own body ringing with sound and thus feeling and testifying to his materiality and consubstantiation with a nonhuman nature.[144] For Thoreau, close attention to the experience of sound facilitates an ability to immerse himself in nonconceptual sensory impressions of the nonhuman.

For Douglass, sound grounds auditors in a matrix of social relations more truly than any visual tableau. If the woods near Concord ring with Lincoln's church bells, the woods of interest to Douglass ring with the voices of slaves, who "would make the dense old woods for miles around reverberate with their wild notes."[145] Douglass struggles to inscribe the meaning of these strange, contradictory, burdened songs, and concludes with the imagined scenario discussed above, inviting anyone interested in witnessing firsthand the "truth" of slavery to "place himself in the deep, pine woods, and there let him, in silence, thoughtfully analyze the sounds that shall pass through his soul, and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because 'there is no flesh in

his obdurate heart.'"[146] Just as sound serves to put Thoreau in bodily contact with all the world and to emphasize his continuity with its materials, in the passage at hand, sound puts its auditor in contact with "a sense of the soul-killing power of slavery."[147] Nonhuman nature acts as a sounding board for human cries, augmenting and transmitting them to other humans who can recognize in shared materiality a shared humanity, and thereupon voice their cry of sorrow and objection.

---

[1] Clifford, James, "On Ethnographic Allegory" in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds. James Clifford and George Marcus (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 100.
[2] Gates, Henry Louis, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 14.
[3] Douglass, Frederick, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 93.
[4] Crain, Patricia, "New Histories of Literacy," in *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 467 – 468.
[5] Crain, "New Histories of Literacy," 475.
[6] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 59; Moten, Fred, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 7.

[7] Ibid., 169.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Because of the temporal proximity of their publication dates to that of *Walden* (1854), this chapter will address Douglass's first two autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Douglass's third autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, was published in 1881.
[12] Moten, *In the Break*, 14.
[13] Moten, *In the Break*, 12.
[14] Hartman, Saidiya, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[15] Moten, *In the Break*, 18.
[16] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 93.
[17] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 93.
[18] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 92, 59.
[19] Gates, Henry Louis, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 25.
[20] Sundquist, Eric, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*

(Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 87.

[21] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 93. For Jared Hickman, Douglass's struggle for freedom includes a struggle for a relationship with God. Hickman sees Douglass rejecting both the authoritarian white god of slaveholding Christians and the loving white god of abolitionists who foreclosed the possibility of violent resistance in favor of an arguably ineffective and self-serving doctrine of submissive moral suasion. In Hickman's argument, Douglass addresses not just a white abolitionist or abolitionist-positive audience with his *Narrative*, but also God himself, whom Douglass hopes to persuade, change, and motivate to act. Hickman, Jared, "Douglass Unbound" *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 68 no. 3 (2014), 323-362.
[22] Chaney, Michael, "Picturing the Mother, Claiming the Mother: *My Bondage and My Freedom* as Auto(bi)ethnography" in *African American Review* 35.3 (2001): 391 – 408. Lee, Maurice. *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Egan, Hugh, "'On Freedom': Emerson, Douglass, and the Self-Reliant Slave," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 60.2 (2014): 198.

[23] Goddu, Theresa, "The Slave Narrative as Material Text" in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, Ernest Jones, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 151.
[24] Volosinov, V.N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Ladislav Metejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973), 86.
[25] Ibid., 91.
[26] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 109.
[27] Ibid., 110.
[28] Crain, Patricia, *Reading Children: Literacy, Property, and the Dilemmas of Childhood in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).
[29] Of course, in practice, literacy enables – or necessitates – the literate repeatedly to engage in specific interpersonal and economic actions (like, for example, teaching) in order for their "owners" to reap economic benefits from their skills. Though literacy is not as alienable as a house, it also does not keep one so dry until its practical application has been converted into another kind of property.
[30] Ibid., 16, 8. Crain's argument centers on the ways in which childhood literacy particularly acutely indexed shifting economic relations: by the end of the nineteenth century, as literacy became more available to African American, immigrant, and poor white children, childhood reading came to emblematize leisure, disposable income, and a capacity to become absorbed in imaginary, phantasmagorical worlds. When childhood literacy became available to former slaves and more widely available to people of lower classes it became not (only) a sign of self-possession but of privileged self-loss (8).
[31] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 164.
[32] Marx, Karl, *Capital, Vol. I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990), 667.
[33] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 92.
[34] Douglass, *Narrative*, 78.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 122.
[37] Gates, *Figures in Black*, 25.

[38] McDowell, Deborah, "In the First Place: Making Frederick Douglass and the African-American Tradition" in *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* ed. William Andrews (Englewood Hill, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), 52.
[39] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 151.
[40] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 93, 151.
[41] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 150.
[42] Hickman, "Douglass Unbound." Douglass, *My Bondage*, 93, 152.
[43] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 90.
[44] McDowell, "In the First Place," 54.

[45] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 93. For a discussion of Douglass's attribution of literacy to his black mother, rather than to his white father or for that matter his white mother, see Michael Chaney.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 151.
[48] Of course, while Douglass's fight with Covey results, he claims, in his never being "fairly whipped" again, despite some "bruises," he still remains, as he himself admits "a slave in *form*" (152) for several years more. Even this triumphant encounter only defers the promise of freedom.
[49] McDowell, "In the First Place," 52.
[50] Hole, Jeffrey, "Enforcement on a Grand Scale: Fugitive Intelligence and the Literary Tactics of Douglass and Melville," *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 85.2(2013), 221.
[51] Aching, Gerard, "The Slave's Work: Reading Slavery through Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 127.4(2012), 912.
[52] Douglass, My Bondage, 92, 98.
[53] Douglass, My Bondage, 99. In the *Narrative*, Douglass says he is twelve years old when he buys the *Columbian Orator*, which he is able to read. In the earlier autobiography, he states that he "succeeded in learning to read and write" by resorting to "various stratagems" during the seven years he lives with Hugh Auld (*Narrative*, 81).
[54] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 85.
[55] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 107.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Douglass, *Narrative*, 87.
[59] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 98.
[60] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 99.
[61] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 107.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 98, 107, 108.
[65] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 108.
[66] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 99.
[67] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 108.
[68] There are three autobiographies: *The Narrative of the Live of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1854), and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). Douglass revised and reissued the *Narrative* twice (1845, 1846), and

also revised and reissued *The Life and Times* in 1892. For a theorization of Douglass's ongoing contention with textual representations of his life, see Levine, Robert S., *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016.

[69] McFeely, William, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991), 70.

[70] Ibid.
[71] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 162, italics mine.
[72] See Douglass, *My Bondage*, 172.
[73] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 162.
[74] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 168.
[75] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 168, italics mine.
[76] For a critique of the twentieth-century construal of the revolutionary character of the eighteenth-century print public sphere, see Warner, Michael, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
[77] See, for example, Chapter 4 of *My Bondage*, "A General Survey of the Slave Plantation," in which Douglass analyzes the power of a common and insular culture to normalize the practices of slavery.
[78] Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," 100.
[79] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 101.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 101.
[82] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 5.
[83] Aching, "The Slave's Work," 916.
[84] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 100.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 101.
[88] Ibid.
[89] DeLombard, Jeannine Marie. "'Eye-Witness to the Cruelty': Literary Abolitionism and the Antebellum Culture of Testimony," *American Literature* 73.2 (2001).
[90] Douglass, *Narrative*, 151.
[91] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 221.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 221.
[94] Levine, *The Lives of Frederick Douglass*, 17.
[95] Roy, Michaël, "Cheap Editions, Little Books, and Handsome Duodecimos: A Book History Approach to Antebellum Slave Narratives," *MELUS: The Journal of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 40.3(2015): 69-93.
[96] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 221.
[97] Warner, *The Republic in Print*, xiii.
[98] Crain, "New Histories of Literacy," 475.
[99] Moten, *Into the Break*, 14.
[100] Levi-Strauss, Claude, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York: Athaneum, 1974), 299.

[101] Clifford, "On Ethnographic Allegory," 119.
[102] Derrida, Jacques, "The Violence of the Letter" in *On Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967). Derrida deflates Levi-Strauss's disingenuous deference of "writing" cultures as "a teleology and an eschatology; the dream of a full and immediate presence closing history, the transparence and indivision of a parousia, the suppression and contradiction of difference," p. 115.

[103] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 64.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 65.
[106] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 66.
[107] Douglass later (*My Bondage*, 75 – 76) relates an anecdote of a slave on a large plantation being tricked by a master he has never before seen and therefore cannot recognize as his master into stating that the man treats him poorly. The master has the man sold the next day. Douglass concludes, "It is partly in consequence of such facts, that slaves, when inquired of as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost invariably say they are contended, and that their masters are kind."
[108] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 66.
[109] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 65, italics mine.
[110] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 65.
[111] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 65 – 66.
[112] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 65.
[113] Ibid. Douglass writes of his frostbitten feet on p. 85: "My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes." Douglass here seems to annex text and the act of writing to his suffering body.
[114] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 55.
[115] Douglas, *My Bondage*, 164.
[116] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 52.
[117] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 52 – 53.
[118] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 53.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 52.
[121] Moten, *In the Break*, 14.
[122] Douglass, *Narrative*, 59.
[123] Moten, *In the Break*, 12.
[124] Richardson, Robert. *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986), 151.
[125] Ibid.
[126] See Levine, *Lives*, for a detailed publication history.
[127] It is worth noting that Douglass's *Narrative* wildly outsold Thoreau's *Walden*. Douglass sold 30,000 copies of the various editions of the *Narrative* by 1860, while *Walden* sold 2000 copies in the first five years of its publication, after which it went out of print until Thoreau's death.
[128] Simpson, David. *The Politics of American English, 1776 – 1850.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
[129] Jones, Douglas, "Douglass' Impersonal," *ESQ: A Journal of the American* Renaissance 61.1 (2015): 1 – 35. Egan, "'On Freedom.'" For an account of Emerson and Thoreau repudiating

Kantian abstraction, see Branca Arsic, *On Leaving: A Reading in Emerson*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010) and *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2016).
[130] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 161.
[131] Thoreau, *Walden*, 149.
[132] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 162.
[133] Hyde, Carrie, "The Climates of Liberty: Natural Rights in the Creole Case and 'The Heroic Slave,'" *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 85. 3 (2013): 475-504.
[134] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 170
[135] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 116.
[136] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 117.
[137] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 115, italics in original.
[138] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 129.
[139] Thoreau, *Walden*, 89.
[140] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 225.
[141] Ibid.
[142] See Ellis, Cristen, "Amoral Abolitionism: Frederick Douglass and the Environmental Case Against Slavery," *American Literature*, 86:2, 2014, for more on Douglass's environmental critique of slavery. Paul Outka further suggests that the exploitation of natural resources is conceptually linked to the exploitation of slaves in the antebellum era. See Outka, Paul. *Race and Nature: From Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
[143] Thoreau, Henry David, *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* in *Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Robert Sayre (New York: Library of America, 1985), 120.
[144] Thoreau, Henry David, *Walden* and *Resistance to Civil Government*, ed. William Rossi (New York: Norton, 1992), 83.
[145] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 65.
[146] Ibid., 66. The editor footnotes the quoted words as "From 'The Time-Piece," book 2, line 8, in William Cowper, *The Task* (1785): "There is no flesh in man's obdurate heart."
[147] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 65 – 66.

Chapter 3:

Place, Rhythm, Language: Mary Austin's Environmental Poetics

In *The Land of Little Rain*, her 1903 collection of vignettes about life in the Mojave Desert, Mary Hunter Austin includes a story of her interactions with an older Paiute woman. Seyavi "made baskets for love and sold them for money," although she withholds some choice specimens from Austin in order to burn them in memory of dead relatives.[1] Of the exchange, Austin writes: "What good will your dead get, Seyavi, of the baskets you burn?' said I, coveting them for my own collection. Thus Seyavi, 'As much good as yours of the flowers you strew.'"[2] Austin invokes and repurposes Thoreau's basket-selling Indian [sic], who storms off after a "well-known lawyer in [Thoreau's] neighborhood" refuses to purchase a basket despite the fact that the basket-maker has based his decision to peddle baskets on the work of the lawyer himself, who "had only to weave arguments, and by some magic wealth and standing followed."[3] Thoreau learns from watching the Native American; having, in the poorly-selling *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, "woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture" but "not made it worth any one's while to buy," Thoreau, "instead of studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets…studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them," a study which takes him to the shores of Walden Pond – and, ultimately, the "weaving" of the more commercially successful *Walden, or a Life in the Woods*.[4] Even though Austin positions herself as an eager basket-purchaser, she also, like Thoreau, draws parallels between her writing and the Native American's basket, parallels that help her frame her literary output as an authentic and even autochthonous artifact of her relationship with the desert in which she lived.

Austin, in *The Land of Little Rain*, posits and performs the legibility of a nonhuman landscape, which in Austin's case is the arid and forbidding terrain of the American southwest.

She places Native Americans at the center of her account of the attentive and interpretive practices whereby a white writer finds the capacity to imagine and undertake such reading. Native Americans serve as repositories of alternative reading practices and function as an aspect of the nonhuman nature thus read. Austin's elision of racialized human and nonhuman nature works to natalize and naturalize her writing, which at a later point in her career includes translations of "Amerindian" songs. In *The American Rhythm* (1923), a collection of translations that includes a long preface, Austin advances a theory of spontaneous literary production facilitated by what she calls "saturation" in landscape and other artifacts closely affiliated with the landscape. She rejects the term "translation," imagining her work as "re-expression(s)" produced by her ability "to saturate myself in the poem, in the life that produced it and the environment that cradles that life, so that when the point of crystallization is reached, I myself give forth a poem which bears, I hope, a genetic resemblance to the Amerind song that was my point of contact."[5] *The Land of Little Rain*, Austin gives an account of her deep knowledge of "the environment that cradles [Native American] life," elaborating the practices whereby she developed regional, ecosystemic, and cultural literacies and suggesting an early twentieth-century and specifically literary repurposing of Thoreau's generative self-dissolutions. Like Douglass, Austin trades on the idea that her literary output emerges spontaneously and naturally, but for Austin naturalness and spontaneity derive not from, as in Douglass's case, an imperative to present the bare facts of social reality, but from a cultivated relationship with the topography and life-forms that constitute an ecosystem. Where Thoreau developed his massive Indian Book replete with tribal histories and lexicons of tribal languages, depicting himself as "st[a]nd[ing] or rather l[ying] as near to the primitive man of America as its discovers ever did,"[6] Austin draws short of offering herself as "an authority on things Indian" while instead imagining

herself to have "succeeded in being an Indian."[7] Austin reads supposedly natural ecosystemic writing in *The Land of Little Rain*, but in *The American Rhythm* she herself seems to have become a medium of an expressive landscape, one feature of which appears to be the Native American songs and chants she translates – or re-expresses. In this way, Austin sheds light on the co-constitution, in the late Victorian and early Modernist period, of (high) literary culture and (low) anthropological culture. Austin helps us see the construction of the idea that literature could be "an organic product of the American people," insofar as those people mediate the almost mystical influence of place, thereby trading on a perceived proximity to or isomorphicity with an "authentic" and "primitive" culture in order to lay the groundwork for high, literary culture.[8]

The two discursive fields denoted by the term culture – the "high" literary culture that belonged to a few and designated elite status and the "low" anthropological culture that described and characterized the patterns of behavior common to a group of people – solidified as two distinct (if still related and interdependent) entities only by the end of the 1930s.[9] From roughly the 1870s, the idea of culture as an integral, holistic set of behavioral patterns and expectations, and the idea of culture as the highest and most refined instances of artistic expression, were thoroughly intermixed; even "the key Victorian texts on culture, Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* and Tylor's *Primitive Culture*, themselves each problematically, confusedly, and generatively mixed artistic, social, elitist, and egalitarian elements and implications in their versions of culture."[10] As evolutionary and universalistic understandings of a common, progressive and unitary human culture gave way to a relativistic, geographical, and multiplicitous framework for understanding the differences between cultures, locality came to bear meanings and perform functions that a hundred years before would have been mediated by

Herderian ideas of language and national identity. Susan Hegeman (1999) explicates the famous conflict between Otto Mason and Franz Boas about the organization of dioramas at the Smithsonian; while tools from multiple locations and times had been grouped to suggest similarity and progression in technical mastery, Boas argued that tools and artifacts could only be understood in context of the other tools and artifacts used by a given culture:

> If this is indeed the founding gesture in the reaction of the 'anthropological' culture concept, then it is important to recognize that its central intervention was one changing the axis of categorization and differentiation from the evolutionary-teleological terms of comparative levels of technical mastery to the geographical-spatial considerations of the location in which the items were produced.[11]

But even as culture underwent a geographical flattening, racial hierarchies reasserted themselves through this selfsame shift. Brad Evans (2005) points out that the diffusionist theoretical model of cultural exchange coexisted with a communication infrastructure that allowed cultural practices to circulate as commodities far in advance of any physical contact between cultures, and that through such commodification "something like 'cultures' became a sign of 'Culture' in the late nineteenth century; the contact with or appreciation of this kind of multiplicity was a mark of being 'cultured.'"[12] Austin, writing about Native Americans and about her own adoption of Native American practices in magazines of early twentieth century, participated in the circulation of Native American cultures and worked to "re-express" Native American culture as an aspect of a settler colonialist American culture.

Specifically, Austin's theory of natural reading and natural writing, whereby a human well-attuned to an environment could become its mouthpiece, claimed Native American oral and material culture as part of an organic, autochthonous tradition of North American literature. At the same time, because the land itself imbued its denizens with creative power, Austin's natural reading and natural writing made it possible for her to imagine herself as "being an Indian."

Austin constructs a continuous North American literary genealogy that originates with Native Americans and extends in an unbroken line to early twentieth-century white writers:

> It is not surprising then, that with this common urge toward communality [which Austin argues is the purpose of poetry achieved by Native Americans through "easy evolution"], with this shared stream of rhythmic stimuli proceeding from the environment, and the common similarity of gesture, that there should be a tendency toward similarity of form between the early and the later American poets.[13]

The unbroken genealogy which natural reading makes possible construes writers Austin at another point describes as "free versifiers" as the natural legatees of an autochthonous American literary tradition that embodies both primitive and high culture.[14] Austin repurposes the Thoreauvian concept of nature made legible through the medial placement of a cultural other within the context of the institutionalization of humanistic studies increasingly along the lines of the taxonomic and descriptive practices of what had emerged as the hard sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century. Austin's natural reading facilitates an alternative style of reading which, like Thoreau's, upsets Enlightenment protocols of agency and authority. In contrast to Thoreau, Austin's natural reading rallies indigeneity and autochthony in service of a theory of a specifically American literary tradition.

I. The Language of the Hills

Mary Hunter Austin began her writing career with *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), a collection of vignettes about life in Western American deserts. At the center of one vignette is the Mojave Desert town Jimville, whose Euro-American inhabitants exemplify the ways ecosystems shape human subjectivity. Like nonhuman animals following climate-induced migration patterns, Jimville's citizens return to the "desolate waste hot lands" of the mountains every spring in the hopes of finding gold whether or not their efforts yield monetary success:

"They develop prospects and grow rich, develop others and grow poor but never embittered."[15] Austin figures their stoical relationship to the nonhuman environment as a verbal interaction: "Say the hills, it is all one, there is gold enough, time enough, and men enough to come after you. And at Jimville they understand the language of the hills."[16] The land speaks to its human inhabitants, and those who endure in it "understand" its language. In fact, *The Land of Little Rain* positions itself as developing and teaching "the language of the hills": a grammar of the nonhuman world that is neither wholly natural nor wholly human. While meaning does not inhere in landscape, neither does it emanate solely from the human who reads it. Instead, through attentive observation of the interpenetration of the self and its environment the human discovers meaning that helps extend its own existence in a given locality.

Austin's phrase, "the language of the hills," alludes to Emerson's theories of language and nature as articulated half a century earlier in *Nature* (1836) and "The Poet" (1844). In fact, in her 1932 autobiography, Austin specifically recalls reading Emerson as a young woman and credits him as being "the only writer out of those days who affected her style."[17] For Emerson, words emerge from nature and refer directly to material phenomena, or "natural facts," and exist because of a deep structural correspondence between the material world and the human mind.[18] Importantly, for Emerson language is evidence of the spiritual teleology of nature. Nature arises from spirit, and the human engagement with nature through an experiential language connects us to one another and our own spiritual essence: "Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine."[19] Moreover, for Emerson words perform the Edenic function of dividing the components of the natural world and thereby bringing them under human dominion: "By virtue of this science the poet is the Namer, or Language-maker, naming things sometimes

after their appearance, sometimes after their essence, and giving to every one its own name and not another's, thereby rejoicing the intellect, which delights in detachment or boundary."[20] Having imbibed Emerson at a young age, Austin developed her own theory of natural language that claimed Emerson's territory for her own, but completely remapped its concerns, challenging its central assumptions about the origin, use, and purpose of language. Austin posits a more self-effacing account of a language of nature that emerges through the careful reading of an attentive human willing to forego clear and stable boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, between what seems to be internal to the self and what seems to be external to it. For Austin, meaning is not immanent to the nonhuman world but can emerge through carefully calibrated acts of attentive reading and writing with, through, and upon it. Austin does not offer us an instruction manual on leaving behind a limiting anthropocentrism; instead, she offers an account of the articulation between the so-called natural world and a human enfolded in it. While for Emerson reading nature reveals its spiritual component, for Austin, reading nature suggests the materiality of the human.

Lawrence Buell, a pioneer of environmental literary criticism, grounds the environmentalist potential of American nature writing in its capacity to point or even urge its readers towards direct contact with whatever natural environments might be available to them. For Buell, nature writing's emphasis on its own textuality underwrites this rhetorical bid insofar as texts drew attention to their own representational limitations in regards to the environment.[21] By contrast, Austin's text makes a more ambivalent argument about textuality and the nonhuman world. For Austin, the real always comes to us through and as a text, as something *read*, and we can apprehend and experience it only by interacting with its textual qualities. Far from removing us from nature, however, this kind of reading and writing anchors us in the nonhuman and can

lead us into unconventional, uncalcified ways of drawing – or erasing – the boundaries that according to Emerson the human intellect loves.

Born in 1868, Mary Hunter was raised in Carlinville, Illinois. Her father, a well-regarded lawyer and Civil War veteran, fostered Mary's literary energies, introducing her to Keats and Shelley as well as important American authors, including Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and Emerson. In 1878, her father died of complications from an illness contracted during the war, leaving the Hunters in difficult financial straits and Mary in particularly dire emotional ones, as her mother showed her little affection or indulgence. Mary earned a degree in science at Blackburn College in Illinois shortly before the family moved to California's San Joaquin Valley in 1888, drawn by the promise of an agricultural Eden.[22] Thriving in the arid landscape proved much harder than the Hunters had anticipated, especially as years of drought took hold shortly after they began homesteading. While the Hunters struggled to establish themselves, Mary worked as a teacher. She eventually met and married Wallace Stafford Austin, whose business prospects took them to the Owens Valley. Austin did not find much happiness in the marriage. She bore a daughter, Ruth, whose mental difficulties eventually necessitated her institutionalization. Austin never saw eye to eye with her husband on issues of household finances and career. The couple worked together to oppose Los Angeles's appropriation of the water of the Owens River, but not long after the aqueduct was completed, Mary left Wallace to write in Carmel, where other luminaries like Jack London and George Sterling had formed an artists' colony.[23] Austin eventually moved to New York, where she fought for financial stability and literary visibility; she lived out her final decades in Santa Fe, near her friend Mabel Dodge Luhan. She died in 1934 in her "Casa Querida" (Beloved House), the adobe home she had had built to her specifications.

Austin wrote *The Land of Little Rain* while she lived in the Owens Valley. Based on stories she had published in the *Overland Monthly,* the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Saint Nicholas* and others, Houghton Mifflin agreed to publish a longer work (some of the vignettes that appear in *The Land of Little Rain* first appear in the 1903 number of the *Atlantic Monthly*). The book opens with three vignettes that explore the plant and animal ecosystem of the Mojave, "The Land of Little Rain," "Water Trails of the Ceriso," and "The Scavengers." Having mapped the territory in question, the narrator develops a series of meditations on individual human inhabitants of the desert: an Anglo-American prospector in "The Pocket Hunter," a Shoshone medicine man captured by a Paiute tribe in "Shoshone Land," and an older Paiute widow in "The Basket Maker." These portraits of individual human consciousness in the desert are interrupted by one account of a desert community: "Jimville: A Bret Harte Town," itself posed as a corrective to romanticized, local-color versions of the American West that predominated in the popular literature of Austin's youth. Jimville sets the stage for the book's closing vignette, "The Little Town of the Grape Vines," a portrait of a Mexican community in California. Between these two portraits of community, six vignettes extend the topographical mapping begun in the first three; these portraits contrast the ultimate reticence and elusiveness of the nonhuman with human acquisitiveness: "My Neighbor's Field," "The Mesa Trail," "Streets of the Mountains," "Water Borders," "Other Water Borders," and "Nurslings of the Sky."

For Austin, the "meaning" of the desert landscape is neither immanent to nature nor projected by human epistemologies. Rather, such meaning can arise in a human consciousness attentive to the limitations the environment imposes upon human interactions with it and the human body's own material continuity with the environment in which it exists. The book outlines specific methodologies for developing fluency reading the desert's topographical and creaturely

inscriptions: embodiment and emplacement. It complicates the valences of these methodologies, however, by including two vignettes that focus on displaced Native Americans, who are fluent practitioners of the language of the hills, and whose stories Austin's narrator seeks to place in relation to her own reading, indebted as it is to the Euramerican literary tradition and the settler colonialism that made her presence in the desert possible in the first place.

The Water Sign and the Death Sign: Embodied Reading

The extreme ecosystem of the desert foregrounds the bodily stakes of reading and of acts of human and nonhuman inscription. The collection's first vignette, "The Land of Little Rain," begins with the desert's most basic statement: the fact of its aridity and the central importance of a creature's capacity to orient itself in order to access water. The narrator warns, "Since this is a hill country one expects to find springs, but not to depend upon them; for when found they are often brackish and unwholesome, or maddening, slow dribbles in a thirsty soil."[24] Come to the region with expectations instead of the intention to observe, and one may be left thirsty, not an insignificant eventuality when human settlements are few and far between, and when landmarks are bewilderingly indistinct to the uninitiated. From the very beginning, expectation, perception, and observation – acts involved in reading the text of the landscape – are based in bodily need. We read (land) because we are thirsty. To move through the land without the proper fluencies is to risk bodily death.

Water is not only the content of the earth's "speaking." In many instances it is the actual agent of inscription, as it physically marks the landscape, sometimes by itself and sometimes through the bodies of other creatures. The first water mark the narrator encounters is botanical: "There are many areas in the desert where drinkable water lies within a few feet of the surface,"

a fact "indicated by the mesquite and the bunch grass."[25] This is the first instance of many when the narrator uses plant life to read the landscape. Here, mesquite and bunch grass signify the availability of water; in other places, willows and other plants mark the farthest reach of waterways that fluctuate seasonally, so that the waterway can be traced even during the dry months.[26] The narrator explains that "[m]ost [plant] species have well-defined areas of growth, the best index the voiceless land can give the traveler of his whereabouts."[27] Instead of giving "voice," the plant life acts as an "index" to features of the land salient to creaturely life, a choice of diction that also suggests the embodiment of signification, since "index" refers to the pointing finger, the body molded into a stance of communicative signification.

Water also motivates concerted actions of creatures who inscribe their bodily motion on the landscape. The desert always and everywhere bears the marks of the creatures that traverse it: "I have yet to find the land not scarred by the thin, far roadways of rabbits and what not of furry folk that run in them."[28] Roadways "scar" the land in tracks that humans and nonhuman creatures can read; this diction figures the land as a body marked by creaturely movement over it towards sources of sustenance. Human perspective, however, makes it difficult to see this meaningful scarification:

> It seems that man-height is the least fortunate of all heights from which to study the trails. It is better to go up the front of some tall hill, say the spur of Black Mountain, looking back and down across the hollow of the Ceriso. Strange how long the soil keeps the impression of any continuous treading, even after grass has overgrown it....[A]ll the paths that wild creatures use going down to the Lone Tree Spring are mapped out whitely from this level, which is also the level of the hawks.[29]

Reading landscape strategically involves shifting out of the dimensions carved by habitual experiences of the everyday. As Austin represents it, this creaturely inscription, visible as a kind of lettering to the perspectived entity that can heuristically discern the proper relation between

foreground and background, possesses a kind of intentionality and consciousness: “Venture to look for some seldom-touched water-hole, and so long as the trails run with your general direction make sure you are right, but if they begin to cross yours at never so slight an angle, to converge toward a point left or right of your objective, no matter what the maps say, or your memory, trust them; they *know*.”[30] Austin embeds a situation in her directive to the interpellated you: this addressed (imagined) individual is in the desert, reading the available signage that indicates its most salient feature, the location of water. This “you” is equipped with the abstract Cartesian system of organizing the landscape with maps, of laying it out in a fantasy of perspectivelessness (since a map let you see “everywhere” at once) and with memory of other excursions in the desert. These epistemologies, however, fail in comparison to the knowledge written into the land by patterns of creaturely life. Read the actual traces, the material imprint of these creatures, the speaker suggests. Their knowledge is embedded, bodily, factic; it has been produced by body after body going to and returning from an actual water source.

For Austin's narrator, the crust of the earth appears to be a text with a coherent language: even if the creatures did not intend to make trails to communicate to other life forms the way to water, their intention to find water created marks on the landscape that can lead the responsive reader to a life-sustaining resource; Austin acts as a Latourian speech prosthesis for nonhuman phenomena which give her occasion to speak. The land-nonhuman animal-human conglomerate form a circuit of meaning-making. The creaturely inscriptions on the land give the human observer information for navigating the landscape and the occasion for her own set of inscriptions. Communication is epiphenomenal to the plants' and nonhuman animals' need for water but it can take place when the human observer is properly attentive to the ecosystem's structure. Signage emerges from the body and its needs; it appears in the world through the

movement of bodies, and it can be accurately read by a perspective entity capable of retaining an understanding of its materiality.

Plants, trails, and topography point the landscape-reader towards water. Signage is embodied, large-as-life, in-the-world, and it guides human and animal movement towards the satisfaction of pressing physical needs. Austin's vignettes further pose these hopeful, nourishing acts of signage and reading alongside aggregations of matter and behavior that point insistently towards death and the sentient creature as a type of dead matter: dispersed, heteronomous, maintained in temporary coherence through carefully-engineered interactions with a landscape over which the creature itself has minimal influence. Both the water sign and the death signs of buzzard and mummy reveal the self to be an aggregate composed of geological and social structures outside of it.

Like Elizabeth Povinelli's designation of "geontology" as a word that encompasses the internality of landscape to patterns of human life in a given place, or the word "extimacy" to describe the influence environment has on the subjectivity of an individual, the death signs that populate the desert landscape testify to the internality of matter to the human and act as a reminder of the limitations death and embodiment place upon human thought and will.[31] As plant life and the trails of animals act as tells of water, buzzards act as tells of its dearth: "The increase of wild creatures is in proportion to the thing they feed upon: the more carrion the more buzzards. The end of the third successive dry year bred them beyond belief."[32] Not only the narrator, but the coyote knows well how to read these bird signs. The coyote steers its course to water by reading topography, and it finds food by reading the sky: "[N]ever a coyote comes out of his lair for killing, in the country of carrion crows, but looks up first to see where they may be gathering."[33] Death for grazing animals means food for the scavengers; the vignettes make plain

the confluence of creaturely life and creaturely death.

Death inscribes itself upon the landscape on timeframes that outlast even the buzzard's putrefying meal. In the desert, corpses resist reintegration into the soil, remaining on the land's surface as mummies and acting as ambivalent signs in their own right. One such mummified corpse is botanical. As much as plant life provides to humans in terms of spatial orientation, indication of the presence of water, nutriment, medicine, and useful material, it also serves a more elusive affective or representational function: "Nothing the desert produces expresses it better than the unhappy growth of the tree yuccas. Tormented, thin forests of it stalk drearily in the high mesas, particularly that triangular slip that fans out eastward from the meeting of the Sierras and coastwise hills where the first swings across the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley."[34] Here Austin's narrator seems to fall into the tendency to read the desert in the "tragic key" she later derides as conventional, arising out of an impulse "to satisfy expectation," an impulse that causes one to "lose much of pleasantness."[35] The anthropomorphized yuccas are tormented, unhappy, and dreary, confined to mesa tops and a mountain-bound wedge of territory.

The yuccas express the desert most perfectly after they have died, and through them, the narrator begins to lead us out of the tragic key towards which genre expectations tempt us: "In death, which is slow, the ghostly hollow network of its woody skeleton, with hardly power to rot, makes the moonlight fearful."[36] The sight of the dead yucca is fearful to the nighttime human observer: they signify death, they could conceal predators. The narrator attributes to this network of skeletons "hardly the power to rot," again sounding a Gothic note of horror, but one that sounds in another key in this ambivalently-genred work that contemplates patterns of creaturely life in an extreme ecosystem. In a work which has sensitized us to networks of sentience that make a muddle of scalar boundaries, rotting is a specific kind of power, conferred by

microorganisms and central to the capacity of the soil to generate life. “Rot” acts as a double agent of the gothic and the scientific, and in this doubleness or duplicity speaks in the geontological register Austin's text prizes open.

The suspension of rot establishes a parallel between the body and the word. What makes the desert a remarkable ecosystem is not only the precarity it imposes on life forms, but its capacity to retain conglomerations of formerly sentient matter in a non-sentient form. Corpses remain behind as failed water signs, uncanny echoes of aboriginal pictograms that attract Austin’s attention later in the text: during a drought, “cattle died in their tracks with their heads towards the stopped watercourses.”[37] Signs of corporeal vulnerability proliferate: “In a year of little rain in the south, flocks and herds were driven to the number of thousands along this road to the perennial pastures of the high ranges....In the worst of times one in three will pine and fall out by the way. In the defiles of Red Rock, the sheep piled up a stinking lane; it was the sun smiting by day.”[38] Biblical language inflects Austin's prose. The “perennial pastures of high ranges,” like the green pastures of the Twenty-third Psalm, counterpose the “smiting” hand of an angry god and lost sheep who “fall out by the way.” The sheep “pile[] up a stinking lane”; dead animals themselves become a kind of path and trace, one stretching towards an unattained promised land. They remain as ecosystemic inscription because “there were not scavengers enough to keep the country clean.”[39] Bodies can become signs when they fail to return to earth: “All that summer the dead mummified in the open or dropped slowly back to earth in the quagmires of bitter springs.”[40] Further, these signs do not express only desertness, but particular human endeavors staged in that unforgiving ecosystem. The narrator uses the passive voice – “were driven” – to nominate the human action involved, but the driving of cows and sheep is a practice introduced and made possible in the American Southwest by settler colonialism.

Uninitiated human life forms result in their own uncanny mummies that exist beside the "fearful" yucca skeletons, the "stinking" sheep, and the pointing cattle. Euramerican explorers die "yearly" in Death Valley: "yet men find there sun-dried mummies, of whom no trace or recollection is preserved," even though "shallow wells would have saved them."[41] The narrator wonders rhetorically, "How were they to know that" the bunch grass signified the presence of water below the surface; of course, if they had attended to the desert more carefully – as has the narrator – through engagement with its human and nonhuman inhabitants, they would have known where to dig their shallow wells.[42] Here we can see the narrator moving in another register than the "tragic key" touched upon in the description of the yucca.

In her account of the initial (avoidable, according to her) settler fatalities in honor of which Death Valley was named, the narrator's use of the passive voice, "it" and "there" as dummy subjects, and the infinitive form as introductory clauses creates an analytic and impersonal mood, one that does not, as in the earlier passage, relish the terror of the mummified corpse:

> *There are* many areas in the desert....*It is* this nearness of unimagined help....*It is related* that the final breakdown....*it is* possible to go safely across that ghastly sink.....no trace or recollection *is preserved*....*To underestimate* one's thirst, *to pass* a given landmark to the right or left, *to find* a dry spring where one looked for running water – *there i*s no help for any of these things.[43]

Human death appears as a feature of a larger ecosystemic phenomenon. The mummy is a feature of the landscape, a sign that gets folded into human systems of meaning, as when the death of a "hapless party...gave Death Valley its forbidding name."[44] The narrator evinces interest in the mummy primarily as a sign, as a feature of the landscape and as a trace of failed human endeavors from which the narrator has learned and from which she offers the reader the chance to do the same.

Mummies represent a temporal glitch made possible by the extreme ecosystem, the body postponing its reincorporation into the flows of matter out of which it emerged, lingering as a sign of fleshly vulnerability, a sign of the body as dead matter. The mummy's dead matter interests the narrator because of its resemblance to the living, the way it retains the trace of sentience in its retention of the shape or appearance of a living being. The mummy's pointings are ambivalent or incoherent; like the dead cow they point towards stopped waterways, toward modes of creaturely existence made possible by habituated knowledge and towards death that results from those selfsame epistemes, when their efficacy expires. In the mummy, we can see that traditional categories of life and death do not work in the extreme ecosystem as the narrator is trying to represent it. Certainly, life and death coexist in different facets of the same ecosystem, but, more interestingly, they coexist *in individual organisms*, substanced with inert matter, holding within them representations of the topography through which they move, and whose reliance on these representations and established patterns of perception lead to their own demise. Drought disallows patterns of movement and resource extraction through the ecosystem it affects. Austin's narrator thinks from falcon-height instead of man-height; the human is one of many living and nonliving patterns taxed by the drought. Action emerges from observation: careful, sustained, patient observation and even submission to ecosystemic limitations becomes a kind of doing.

"Holding Oneself Tenderly Towards the Land": Emplaced and Relational Reading

For Austin's narrator, the capacity to read the landscape depends on interrogating the intellectual boundaries and distinctions prized by Emerson. In her prose, the landscape comes to mean through sometimes purposive and sometimes unintentional acts (or phenomena) that

perform the work of inscription. Besides arguing for the bodily stakes of inscription, the narrator grounds the reading and inscribing human in a particular location whose own unique qualities suggest how to make meaning when imported conceptual and narrative frameworks prove inadequate (as for the early explorers of Death Valley). This is Austin's theory of "emplaced reading": a literacy developed by trying, as much as it might be possible, to see the ecosystem on its own terms, or at least in terms that do not necessarily rely on the human individual and the scope of her lifespan. We can see this emplaced perspective in the narrator's ecosystemic depiction of drought:

> The increase of wild creatures is in proportion to the things they feed upon: the more carrion the more buzzards. The end of the third successive dry year bred them beyond belief. The first year quail mated sparingly; the second the wild oats matured no seed; the third, cattle died in their tracks with their heads towards the stopped watercourses. And that year the scavengers were as black as the plague all across the mesa and up the treeless, tumbled hills.[45]

The primary stakeholders here are nonhuman animals: the narrator attends to the impacts of drought upon birds, cows, and the plants they consume. The nonhuman animals' responses accommodate themselves to their environment, enduring and suffering the changes they can bear, submitting to death when they cannot. The corpses of the water-starved animals point, in failed hope and mute explanation, to the expectancy that became their undoing. The movement from quail to seed to cattle indicates the interconnections between these three types of beings and the heightened vulnerability of the largest and most appetitive of the three life forms. Of course, one organism flourishes as the others fail. Austin's narrator coolly observes that drought benefits and multiplies the buzzards, whose figuration as plague also invokes the bacterial life forms that will consume the dead organisms (and ultimately the buzzards themselves).

This perspective is, to begin with, contemplative. It seeks to extend the duration of receptive contact with the nonhuman world and uses representation in language as a mode of

attention to landscape. In fact, the perspective illustrated in the passage above does not particularly privilege the duration of any one given life form, let alone show much allegiance to the human. Austin seeks to synchronize human observation and representation with the *longue durée* and broad sweep of climatic variation, a timeframe within which settled agricultural societies prove to be inherently unstable, dependent as they are on stockpiled resources and heavily entrenched patterns of resource extraction and consumption vulnerable to the extremes of centuries-long cycles and millennial events.[46] By contrast, Austin explores nomadic human and nonhuman ways of life whose fundamental behaviors are primarily accommodational and whose aim is sustenance rather than accumulation.

The book's preface establishes the landscape as a space internal to the speaking subject, so much so that language about it loses its purely objective and referential qualities. The narrator opens the preface by introducing tribal practices of naming: "I confess to a great liking for the Indian fashion of name-giving: every man known by that phrase which best expresses him to whoso names him....No other fashion, I think, sets so well with the various natures that inhabit us."[47] Relationality determines what gets gathered into an entity and how that entity is evaluated. Different relations call forward different aspects of the "natures that inhabit us." The components of self – personality, experience, cognitive frames, emotions – prove here to shift over time and in relationship with different interlocutors or situations. Moreover, the structure of the sentence asks us to see our "natures" as having external origins: they "inhabit" us. The topography of our interior life has been shaped for us, before the ad hoc self that coalesces momentarily to respond in the unfolding present to a changing situation and changing interlocutor. Different interlocutors and situations make different sight lines through this topography visible, making different trajectories through it possible. Austin provides a geontology of inner life.

By the same token, though, Austin's narrator reasserts the referentiality of language. There is a real, material world outside of language; it is language's most fundamental task to help us understand and navigate that material world, to the point of understanding our own selves as material. Austin makes a distinction, however, between a traditional referential system that maps and fixes and her own when she asserts that "so few names are written [in *The Land of Little Rain*] as they appear in the geography."[48] Her own shifting, relational language possesses in fact a *more deeply* precise referentiality than that provided by "the geography":

> there are certain peaks, cañons, and clear meadow spaces which are above all compassing of words, and have a certain fame as of the nobly great to whom we give no familiar names. Guided by these you may reach my country and find or not find, according as it lieth in you, much that is set down here. And more.[49]

The reader has the capacity to recognize the "nobly great" landscape features through the benefit of the narrator's descriptions and, thus oriented, to locate landmarks. Or do these transcendent geographical entities, properly understood, confer upon the converted not literal knowledge but a *mindset* capable of similar experiences – the "more" at the end of the passage? What is "my country" here: a literal or figurative space, or both, or something else entirely? To what does the "it" in the sentence "according as it lieth in you" refer? Here the narrator projects a fertile and mysterious interpenetration of human perspective informed by abstract thought and the geographical land itself, although, to return to Povinelli, the land is not some immoveable, unchanging, non-biological aeonic entity. The sentence allows us to see the biological and the geographical as the same here: some material "it" – the land and its features, perhaps – lies within us and it in turn gives us the broadened and slowed-down perspective we need in order to read ("much that is set down here").

For Austin's narrator, language emerges through a physically present, material world,

although the meaning and stakes of that routing seem uncertain. Guided by our own relationship with the "nobly great" aspects of embodiment in a landscape, we "may or may not" find what she has written; on the other hand, we may find "more." She explains: "The earth is no wanton to give up all her best to every comer, but keeps a sweet, separate intimacy for each....I am in no mind to direct you to delectable places toward which you will hold yourself less tenderly than I."[50] If we read her text correctly, geologically speaking, we haven't read everything: we've missed the biological aspect of the "sweet, separate intimacy" that embodied existence offers. Playfully, the narrator guards the source of this sweetness, the "delectable places towards which you will hold yourself less tenderly than I." The image is sensual, even erotic: we "hold" ourselves "tenderly" "toward" places. It is an image of some kind of embrace (holding tenderly) but an embrace that is at least partly conceptual (what does it mean to hold oneself "toward" a place? The contact suggested by "hold tenderly" is thrown into doubt). How does subjectivity work in this vexed representational landscape? Where are the boundaries between interior and exterior? Where are the boundaries between selves, between perspectived speakers? Where are the boundaries between physical and conceptual contact, between words that "represent" and physical reality?

The narrator concludes, "So by this fashion of naming I keep faith with the land and annex to my own estate a very great territory to which none has a surer title."[51] The "annexation" in question here is not a legal, literal annexation, as detractors like William Scheik would have us think. Scheik's reading of *The Land of Little Rain,* "Mary Austin's Disfigurement of the Southwest in 'The Land of Little Rain'" (1992), departs from the narrator's claim in "Jimville" to be a "mere recorder," a claim he takes literally and not, as Austin's narrator situates it, in contradistinction to the caricatured narratives of the romantic, swashbuckling, middlebrow

stories of Bret Harte.[52] For Scheik, the word "annex" in the preface implicates the narrator in the acts of colonization of the landscape that she openly criticizes in the text. Any connection to the landscape depicted in the text, Scheik argues, depends on its objectification and appropriation. However, given the work Austin's narrator does in the preface to place herself in an evolving, intimate, and reciprocal relation to the landscape (since the landscape impinges itself on the parameters of her language), Scheik misreads her: Austin does not repeat the Transcendentalist gesture of subordinating nature as spiritual medium and instrument of the human mind. Her ardent relationship to nature emphasizes their continuity, a state of being enfolded into the physically present landscape and thereby augmented by it.

Austin makes a strong case for the emplacement of the reader of landscape, one that stands as a counterpoint to Ursula Heise's ecocosmopolitanism. In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008), Heise takes environmental literary criticism to task for its tendency to accept traditional nature writing's celebration of local affiliation, a celebration that she points out tracks well with natalist ideologies. What is more, Heise points out, a romantic, emotionally charged experience of a natural landscape is one that is first of all politically suspect and secondly unevenly available to different subsets of the global population: the economically disadvantaged have less leave and opportunity to enjoy "nature" as a space of leisure and contemplation. Heise is interested in the kinds of environmental consciousness made possible by global communication; the book's title expresses her aspirations for the literary as a space for developing global identities and affiliations that might correspond and answer to the global scale of the ecological difficulties facing humankind. Heise asks ecocriticism to "go beyond environmentalist clichés regarding universal connectedness and the pastoral understanding of ecology that informed earlier kinds of modern environmentalist

thinking" and to find texts and ways of thinking about texts that imagine globalization not as an alienating deterritorialization but as "the basis of cosmopolitan forms of awareness and community, both ecologically and culturally."[53] Heise's insights point the way to some exciting new paths in environmental literary criticism, but I want to resist her easy move from the territory of local place-based affiliations to a more technologically mediated global citizenship, if only because of the way in which the body resists deterritorialization, especially when it is considered geontologically, as inextricable from "nonhuman" formations that contextualize, host, and spatialize a human life. Our first experience of the material world outside of ourselves is, to borrow Marx's term, metabolic, based on exchanges that weave us into the material and nonhuman life forms that environ us. The material of our bodies constrain us to interact with our immediate surroundings for sustenance. Despite the kinds of socialization that communicative media make available to us, our bodies remain stubbornly territorialized. Our capacity to articulate rises out of a body – tongue, fingers, brain – that exists in a local space and moment in time.

Austin's narrator's capacity to read is grounded in a body itself grounded in a particular environment. Without growing attached to the place as a "homeland," the narrator emphasizes the role locality plays in her capacity to read meaningfully. To begin with, the narrator's reading depends on an augmented temporality that allows for intimate local knowledge: "One must summer and winter with the land and wait its occasions. Pine woods take two and three years seasons to the ripening of cones, roots that lie by in the sand seven years awaiting a growing rain, firs that grow fifty years before flowering, – these do not scrape acquaintance."[54] The best time to visit the mountains depends not on season but on "when you have the longest leave to stay," for only then can you observe small variations, explore (again, physically and locally, by traveling

through the terrain as well as by observing and contemplating it) the connections between different facets of the ecosystem, and wait for what unfolds before you. Sustained and wide-ranging attention yields particular insights into the workings of the ecosystem and particular kinds of literacy:

> For example, when the ripples at the ford of the creek raise a clear half tone, – sign that the snow water has come down from the heated high ridges, – it is time to light the evening fire. When it drops off a note – but you will not know it except the Douglas squirrel tells you with his high, fluty chirrup from the pines' aerial glow – sign that some star watcher has caught the first far glint of the nearing sun.[55]

Engagement with details allows the narrator a spatial scalar shift as well, in which she can connect events according to their ecological logic: noises like the pitch of the river and the voice of a squirrel register changes in localities not visible to the narrator, at rest in camp at the bottom of a canyon.

The narrator's knowledge of the landscape depends on a material contextualization that outlasts the kinds of knowledge provided by scientific discourse and the modes of property ownership they underwrite. One vignette, "Other Water Borders," recounts the violent struggle between two groups of landowners over the river that divides their ranches. The narrator takes the perspective of the contested waterway, explaining that

> [i]t is difficult to come into intimate relations with appropriated waters; like very busy people they have no time to reveal themselves. One needs to have known an irrigation ditch when it was a brook, and to have lived by it, to have marked the morning and evening tone of its crooning, rising and falling to the excess of snow water, to have watched far across the valley, south to the Eclipse and north to the Twisted Dyke, the shining wall of the village water gate; to see still blue herons stalking the little glinting weirs across the field.[56]

The extimate observer traces the irrigation ditch back to its origins in the mountains and marks the link between improvability of land and mountain snows that occur at a geographical remove.

In her account the water itself becomes a stakeholder with a kind of consciousness, a capacity to observe human contention over ownership: “unless you have known [the water-right difficulties] you cannot very well know what the water thinks as it slips past gardens and in the long slow sweeps of the canal.”[57]

The narrator inserts an even more elaborate genealogy of ownership, one in which she herself is more deeply implicated, in her account of “My Neighbor's Field.” She confesses to envying her neighbor his land parcel, but she is at the same time perfectly content to live adjacent to the appealing meadow with only indirect claims on it: “I knew I should have no peace until I had bought ground and built me a house beside it, with a little wicket to go in and out at all hours, as afterwards came about.”[58] She provides an archeology of the field's ownership, starting with Paiutes, followed by “cattle-men,” and shepherds who “attested their rights to the feeding ground with their long staves upon each other's skulls.”[59] The prehistory gives way to named stakeholders who understand the land as a material and financial commodity: the physical “loophole” through which Edswick leveled his shotguns at contestants to his claim gives way to a legal loophole through which the counsel to the man who takes possession of Edswick's land through its being staked as “security against certain sums,” gets hold of the field, who then sells it to the narrator's eponymous neighbor.[60] The commodification of the parcel accelerates the rapidity with which claims to it dissolve; the narrator posits her own relationship of covetousness as more timeless although ultimately no less substantial, as it ends up being addressed through aesthetic representation.

Extimate knowledge of land proves to have a practical side as well. Unlike the scientist of “Nurslings of the Sky” who “taps the record on his instruments and going out on the streets

denies his God, not having gathered the sense of what he has seen," the extimate observer can envision a landscape enduring through the vagaries of time.[61] Such a stakeholder would never make the mistake of the people of Overtown, who "built in the wash of Argus water, and at Kearsarge at the foot of a steep, treeless swale." When their houses are swept away by a periodic flood, the narrator concludes that "you could conceive it was the fault of neither the water nor the snow."[62] Such observation, the extimate annexation the narrator practices, hinges on an awareness of environmental limitations. The narrator exemplifies the inhabitants of Jimville as having "the courage to sheer off what is not worth while."[63] These people are not fooled by "the labor of being comfortable" which "gives you an exaggerated opinion of yourself, an exaggerated pain to be set aside." This is the pain of anthropomorphization that thwarts understanding "the sense of the hills."[64] In fact, the people of Jimville resemble Seyavi's people after their rout by American military forces, "very near to the bare core of things" in their strategy of "reducing life to its lowest ebb and yet staying alive on grasshoppers, lizards, and strange herbs."[65]

The Austinian natural reader accepts the withdrawal of the nonhuman world, its refusal of human understanding and control. Austin figures this quality of the natural world through the image of speech that will not resolve into sense: "The flowers keep up a constant trepidation in time with the hasty water beating at their stems, a quivering, instinct with life, that seems always at the point of breaking into flight; just as the babble of the watercourses always approaches articulation but never quite achieves it."[66] The nonhuman world remains beyond the threshold of incorporation into fully human systems of meaning, a concept the narrator further figures in the image of the *tulares*. The reeds "grow inconceivably thick in places, standing man-high above the water; cattle, no, not any fish or fowl can penetrate them. Old stalks succumb slowly; the bed

soil is quagmire, settling with the weight as it fills and fills."[67] The natural reader does not aim for totalizing knowledge.

II. Natural Literature: Drinking of Hassaympa

More than producing deep and self-altering knowledge of the landscape, Austin's natural reading produces literature, which itself becomes, in her hands, the spontaneous result of a way of living and moving through the landscape closely modelled on the Native Americans who are her subjects. The natural reader emerges for Austin through a withdrawal from or refusal of the tenets of market capitalism, a withdrawal she measures by its correspondence to her account of Native American consumptive practices. Austin attributes her success as a reader of the signs inscribed on the land to a willingness to be idle and to lavish attention on the landscape which prospectors were eager to cross in their search for gold: she explains that while "many wise and busy people" assume that "the hill-folk pass the ten-month interval between the end and renewal of winter rains, with no drink…*your true idler*, with days and nights to spend beside the water trails, will not subscribe to it."[68] The idler invests time and attention in observation that yields no marketable product, though it may allow her to endure in the desert. In her willingness to lavish time in contemplation that enhances her desert literacy, Austin affiliates herself with the "Indians" whose desert reading allows them "not to miss any virtues of the plant world."[69] Their close attention yields access to natural resources already present in the landscape, which they harvest and consume without the ecosystemic interruptions and dislocations imposed by mining (both the less invasive placer mining as well as the ruinous tunnel mining and hydraulicking that followed on its heels) and Euramerican animal husbandry and agriculture. Austin observes that Native Americans use "a resinous gum" exuded by creosote "for cementing arrow points to the shafts"; they harvest the yucca bud by "twist[ing] it out of its fence of daggers and roast[ing] it

for their own delectation"; and, of course, they read the land for water better than anyone but the coyote, who is capable of detecting water-holes "in localities where not even an Indian would look for it."[70] In the authority Austin assumes to explain to the reader the "knowledge" the trails possess and the correct methodologies for divining the location of water, she affiliates herself with (or lays claim to) the kinds of ecological literacy she attributes to Native Americans, which the white settler can access through a deliberate and resistant practice of idleness, or withdrawal from the behavioral norms of the extractive economy.

Austin also closely associates her project of dissolving the subject through natural reading with Native Americans' naming practices, suggesting a specifically linguistic dimension to the material practices she glosses elsewhere. She introduces the Mojave Desert as "the Country of Lost Borders," a name she attributes to members of Native American tribes in a passage that hints at the stakes of her subject-effacing reading:

> Ute, Paiute, Mojave, and Shoshone inhabit its frontiers, and as far into the heart of it as a man dare go. Not the law, but the land sets the limit. Desert is the name it wears upon the maps, but the Indian's is the better word. Desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man; whether the land can be bitted and broken to that purpose is not proven. Void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil.[71]

Austin associates Native American naming practices (which here are a practice of reading landscape well) with a fluid subject whose boundaries and central characteristics shift with its circumstances. The desert itself acts as a kind of subject or entity that proves to be unstable, to slip from under the limiting term imposed by the settler capitalist mapmakers. Those who have applied the name "desert" and drawn the maps see the land's potential to support human habitation through the processes of "bitting" and "breaking" the land, domesticating it by reshaping and reconstituting it in the service of human uses, as opposed to the Native American practices explicated above, of using what the land has spontaneously made available, if through

close and careful observation and a certain level of intervention – collecting gum, outmaneuvering spikes to pick a yucca fruit. Eschewing the "loose term" whose anthropocentrism misrepresents the arid biome's capacity to support nonhuman life, Austin offers "the Country of Lost Borders" as a name that indicates the punishing environment – who can track political borders in a space that "supports no man" – and also describes the melding of the reading subject with material outside of her.

Austin's representation attributes to the practices of the desert-dwelling tribes a desirable capacity to erase of the hard edges of subjectivity, one she locates also in her own writing. Even further, for Austin the cultivated receptive relationship with a landscape inhospitable to the intensive resource demands of industrial capitalist consumptive regimes seems to produce a specifically literary language, or at least to produce her own descriptive writing. After narrating the appeal of the region's physical beauty, Austin's prose represents or performs that beauty through its visual figures and aural qualities, as though mimetically replicating the power the desert has exerted upon her and attempting to extend its bewitching effects:

> If one is inclined to wonder at first how so many dwellers came to be in the loneliest land that ever came out of God's hands, what they do there and why stay, one does not wonder so much after having lived there. None other than this long brown land lays such a hold on the affections. The rainbow hills, the tender bluish mists, the luminous radiance of the spring, have the lotus charm. They trick the sense of time, so that once inhabiting there you always mean to go away without quite realizing that you have not done it.[72]

Austin's list in the third sentence of this passage (rainbow hills, bluish mists, luminous radiance), which exemplifies the "hold on the affections" laid by the "long brown land" requires the reader to linger in the sentence's incantatory assonance. The description performs the spontaneous emergence of the literary from the natural reader's acquiescence to the grasp of the land. Austin later claims that "[t]he palpable sense of mystery in the desert air breeds fables, chiefly of lost

treasure"; the desert produces fables through the medium of the appropriately-calibrated human sensorium.[73] The fable-producing human in question merges with the desert, drinking it in bodily: "[I]t was not the people who went into the desert merely to write it up who invented the fabled Hassaympa, of whose waters, if any drink, they can no more see fact as naked fact, but all radiant with the color of romance."[74] The passage contrasts the pragmatic imperative of "writ[ing]…up" the desert in the form "naked fact" – empirically descriptive writing or perhaps maps – to imaginative writing, which both produces and is produced by "the fabled Hassaympa." The magical and imaginative qualities of the desert mix indeterminately with the magical and imaginative qualities of the writing it mediates. In case we had any doubt that Austin writes under the desert's transformative spell, she goes on to admit that "I, who must have drunk of [Hassaympa] in my twice seven years' wanderings, am assured that it is worth while."[75] Austin's writing thus gives us an account of its own naturalness, of its spontaneous emergence from a compulsive (insofar as it is caused by "lotus charm") love for the land, a love that moreover produces temporal disorientation, "trick[ing] the sense of time" in its imposition of "the color of romance" on the lover's observation of the present.

The temporal frame dilates in the vignette's final paragraph to the point that it universalizes human experience: "The communion of the stars" available "in the pauses of the night" remind her that "the Chaldeans were a desert people," suggesting that the capacious physical theater of the desert overwhelms human history, making visible unbroken sight lines from modern cultures to Biblical ones.[76] Against the broad span of time and space made perceptible in the desert, human struggles appear not only trivial, but beyond human control:

> It is hard to escape the sense of mastery as the stars move in the wide clear heavens to risings and settings unobscured….Wheeling to their stations in the sky, [the stars] make the poor world-fret of no account. Of no account you who lie out there watching, nor the lean coyote that stands off in the scrub from you and howls and howls.[77]

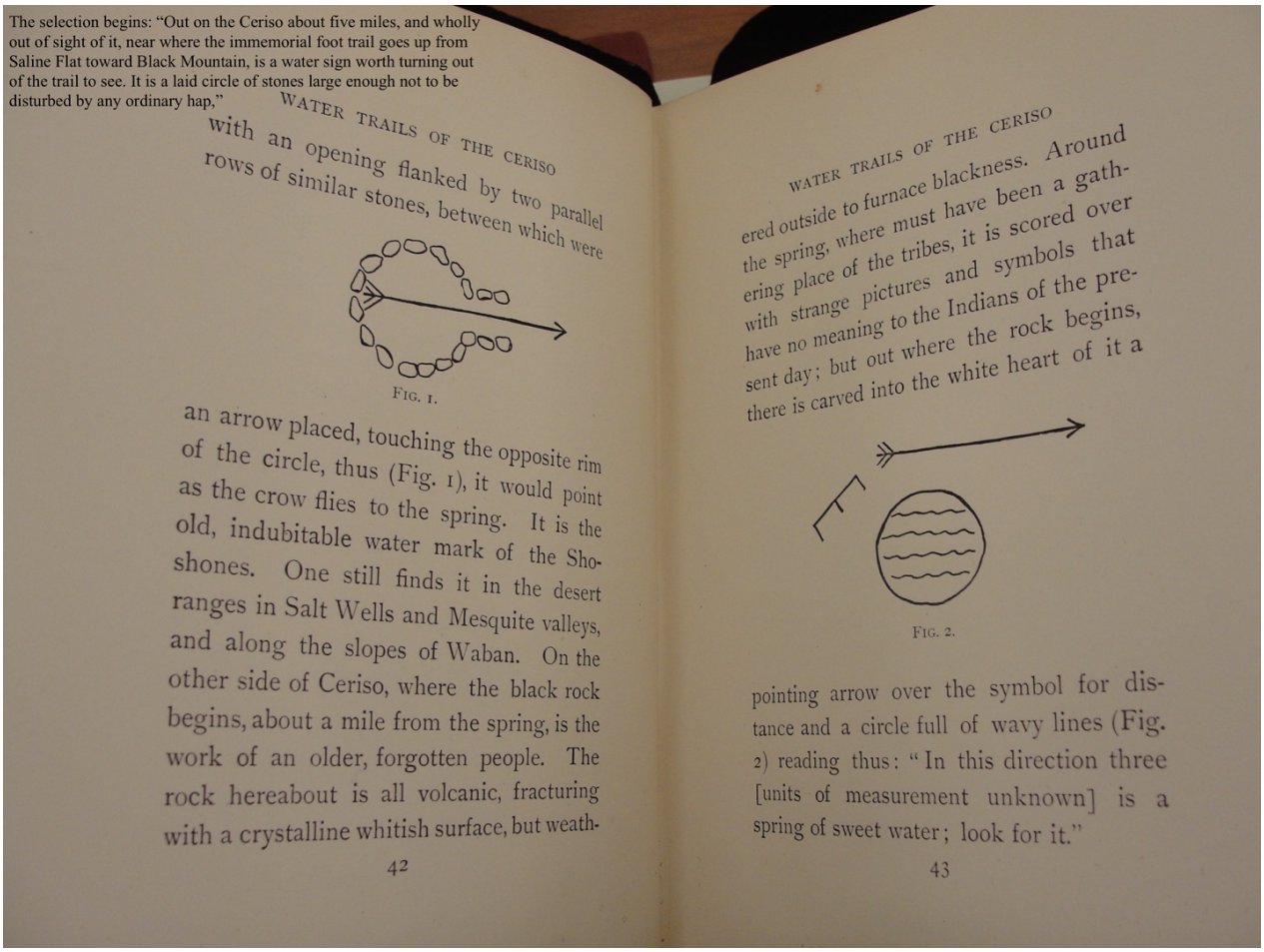
While Austin's first sentence leaves open the dual possibilities that the human observer participates vicariously in the stars' mastery or experiences the stars' presence as mastery over herself, the stars' "wheeling" motion which relegates the human observer to a position of "no account" suggests the fatedness of human events. The desert, then, produces stories and deep history, a sense of the human (and its literature) as insignificant *and as natural* as the lone coyote or his prey.

At first blush, the representational downgrade of the human from its traditional priority over other forms of animacy and material configuration and the contextualization of the human within large-scale geological and astrophysical events seem to anticipate important epistemological interventions ecofeminists and New Materialists alike would make decades after *The Land of Little Rain* was published, interventions that aimed to reframe industrialized civilization's longstanding exploitation and instrumentalization of the environment. But as Austin's text makes manifest, problems arise when we trade a historicist mindset for the thin, intoxicating air of aeonic time, despite the seemingly urgent re-centering of critical focus it allows. Having spent much of the first two vignettes establishing the importance of reading topography for water and parsing water's various Mojavean indices, Austin reaches her culminating example of the land's "knowledge" ("no matter what the maps say, or your memory, trust [the trails]; they *know*") in two Native American water signs.

The fact that the water signs culminate Austin's catalog of natural writing as it appears in the desert affiliates the Native Americans who put them there more closely with nonhuman nature than human culture, but what especially interests me about Austin's presentation of the signs are her technics of reading these pseudo-geological, nonalphabetic marks. Whereas she has

read other water signs – plants, hills, animal trails – for their capacity to lead to water, the first sign, as a trace of Shoshones, and the second sign, left by an "older, forgotten people," provide an occasion for attention and contemplation valuable enough to warrant "turning out of the trail" in what has already been established as a dangerously arid environment in which "to underestimate one's thirst, to pass a given landmark to the right or left, to find a dry spring where one looked for running water – there is no help for any of these things."[78] Thus the vignette extends its implicit claim that reading and writing practices emerge autogenically from a human's elemental relationship to a nonhuman landscape even while invoking the figure of the Native American as an absent presence whose natural writing precedes, participates in, and authorizes its own.

In Austin's reproduction, annotation, and translation (or "re-expression," as she would have it) of the two signs, Austin turns the pictographic/ideographic[79] water sign into alphabetic language, and moreover into a descriptive language that aligns the attenuation (in the case of the Shoshones) and extinction (in the case of the "older forgotten tribe") of Native Americans with natural (nonhuman), evolutionary processes.[80]


The selection begins: "Out on the Ceriso about five miles, and wholly out of sight of it, near where the immemorial foot trail goes up from Saline Flat toward Black Mountain, is a water sign worth turning out of the trail to see. It is a laid circle of stones large enough not to be disturbed by any ordinary hap,"

WATER TRAILS OF THE CERISO

with an opening flanked by two parallel rows of similar stones, between which were

FIG. 1.

an arrow placed, touching the opposite rim of the circle, thus (Fig. 1), it would point as the crow flies to the spring. It is the old, indubitable water mark of the Shoshones. One still finds it in the desert ranges in Salt Wells and Mesquite valleys, and along the slopes of Waban. On the other side of Ceriso, where the black rock begins, about a mile from the spring, is the work of an older, forgotten people. The rock hereabout is all volcanic, fracturing with a crystalline whitish surface, but weath-

42

WATER TRAILS OF THE CERISO

ered outside to furnace blackness. Around the spring, where must have been a gathering place of the tribes, it is scored over with strange pictures and symbols that have no meaning to the Indians of the present day; but out where the rock begins, there is carved into the white heart of it a

FIG. 2.

pointing arrow over the symbol for distance and a circle full of wavy lines (Fig. 2) reading thus: "In this direction three [units of measurement unknown] is a spring of sweet water; look for it."

43

Fig. 3.1: *The Land of Little Rain*, RB 40727, The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

I include the description of the two marks in its entirety:

> [The water sign] is a laid circle of stones large enough not to be disturbed by any ordinary hap, with an opening flanked by two parallel rows of similar stones, between which were an arrow placed, touching the opposite rim of the circle, thus (Fig. 1), it would point as the crow flies to the spring. It is the old, indubitable water mark of the Shoshones. One still finds it in the desert ranges in Salt Wells and Mesquite Valleys, and along the slopes of Waban. On the other side of Ceriso, where the black rock begins, about a mile from the spring, is the work of an older, forgotten people. The rock hereabout is all volcanic, fracturing with a crystalline whitish surface, but weathered outside to furnace blackness. Around the spring, where it must have been a gathering place of the tribes, it is scored over with the strange pictures and symbols that have no meaning to the Indians of the present day; but out where the rock begins, there is carved into the white heart of it a pointing arrow over the symbol for distance and a circle full of wavy lines (Fig. 2) reading thus: "In this direction three [units of measurement unknown] is a spring of sweet water; look for it."[81]

Austin's empirical description – ornamented by marks of academic discourse, such as brackets, figures, and parenthetical textual references to them – shades into anthropological claims about the individuals who made and read them. She easily identifies the first as "the old, indubitable water mark of the Shoshones," implying that she bases her recognition on its resemblance to other signs she has observed "in the desert ranges in Salt Wells and Mesquite Valleys, and along the slopes of Waban." Although the Shoshone are presumably included in "the Indians of the present day" referred to near the end of the passage, the temporality of the mark ("One *still* finds it") implies the attrition of the Shoshone and their signs; one used to be able to find it, and "one *still* finds it," but before long one might not be able to, presumably because the Shoshone will go the way of the "older, forgotten tribe" whose cultural behaviors Austin extrapolates from the presence of wholly unreadable signs: "Around the spring, where it must have been a gathering place of the tribes, it is scored over with strange pictures and symbols that have no meaning to the Indians of the present day." By reading the signs of dead and dying cultures in the rocks of the desert, Austin seems to participate in what Kyla Schuller identifies as nineteenth-century scientific discourses' formulation of genocide as natural extinction in its bid to frame Native Americans as atavistic instantiations of an evolutionary past: "Evolutionary scientists, for example, regarded Native bodies not so much as living humans but rather as animated fossils, the prehistoric remnants of the barbaric origins of human evolution."[82] In her vignette, Austin does not even have to contend with actual Native American bodies; the artifactuality of their signs accomplishes their relegation to the past, thus reflecting what Schuller elaborates as "the belief that the space that is now the United States naturally belonged to the white settlers who sought to not only conquer it, but also to erase all traces of their conquest as a conquest."[83] Austin's reading further gives a geological or natural cast to human-made objects when she moves from a

description of the rock ("all volcanic, fracturing with a crystalline whitish surface, but weathered outside to a furnace blackness") to a description of the illegible signs as features of the rock: "By the spring, it is scored over with…strange pictures." The passive voice stages the signs as without inscriber. The signs are mediated by, apparently, nothing, emerging from nature as artifacts to be read in the same way as rock formations, animal trails, and tufts of bunch grass. On the geologic timescale to which Austin's discourse refers, human agency barely registers.

In this framing, we can detect what Renato Rosaldo famously calls "imperialist nostalgia," which "uses a pose of 'innocent yearning' both to capture people's imagination and to conceal its complicity with often brutal domination."[84] Although Austin positions her own writing decidedly against more popular and sentimental works of Western local color, such as Bret Harte's tales, which she dismisses as "young impression…untroubled by any newer fact," the vignette ends on a note of perplexing intimacy, with *the sign* addressing the reader directly in a kind of reverse apostrophe or personification.[85] The sign, speaking for its grammatically absent Native American inscriber and through Austin's literary re-expression, hospitably invites us, the readers, to find the desert spring's "sweet water": "Look for it." The dramatized translation – Native American speaking through rock speaking through Austin – implies that writing can recover or perform naturally lost presence, or lost natural presence.

What strikes me as particularly urgent about the legerdemain undertaken in this passage is its connection to a larger argument Austin makes later in her career about the origin and history of poetry in North America. As alluded to above, Austin claimed a link between environment and language that shows itself in the rhythms of poetry. To start with, Austin imagines the features of place imprinting themselves upon an individual's perceptual and expressive apparatuses: "But this affection of consciousness, the passing perception of the

rhythmic forms arising fortuitously in our environment – as the roll of thunder or the run of wind in tall grass – through the sensorium into the subconscious, is experiential in its nature. It leaves a track, a mold, by which our every mode of expression is shaped."[86] Landscape marks people who reside within it in similar ways; geology or topography predominate in molding expression. While Austin devotes much of *The American Rhythm*'s preface to theorizing the origin and function of Native American poetic practices, she also imagines environmental marking accomplishing itself within the expressive apparatuses of new migrants to their territory:

> Streams of rhythmic sights and sounds flowed in upon the becoming race of Americans from every natural feature. The great hegira from northern and central Europe had been largely motivated by the desire to escape from the over-humanized aspects of those lands. There was hunger in man for free flung mountain ridges, untrimmed forests, evidence of structure and growth. Life set itself to new processions of seed time and harvest, the skin newly tuned to seasonal vibrations, the very blood humming to new altitudes. The rhythm of walking always a recognizable background for our thoughts, altered from the militaristic stride to the jog of the wide, unrutted earth.[87]

In this way, the environment creates an essential impression on whoever inhabits it, through the force of seasons, altitudes, and topography itself. Austin engenders a notion of authentic, autochthonous or natural expression and by making such expressive style the work of land and not person or culture, makes it the province of indigenous people and colonizers alike.

Austin further loosens the primacy of the claim indigenous tribes have upon the regions they inhabit when she claims to be able to "listen to aboriginal verses on the phonograph in unidentified Amerindian languages, and securely refer them by their dominant rhythms to the plains, the deserts and woodlands that had produced them."[88] The feat erases the "aboriginal" culture that produced the language and the verse, making it open transparently upon the land that "produced" it. Moreover, the gesture attributes naturalness and nativity to modern (free verse and imagistic) Euramerican poetry: by "hearing" the land in Native American poetry Austin "awoke

to the relationships that must necessarily exist between aboriginal and later American forms."[89] The later American forms Austin has in mind – Imagism and *vers libre* – thus can be understood as participating in an unbroken and natural expressive tradition initiated by the North American landscape. As she says in her introduction to George Cronyn's anthology of Native American song and chant:

> [The reader of Indian verse] will be struck at once with the extraordinary likeness between much of this native product and the recent work of Imagists, vers librists, and other literary fashionables. He may, indeed, congratulate himself on the confirmation of his secret suspicion that Imagism is a very primitive form; he may, if he happens to be of the Imagists' party, suffer a check in the discovery that the first free movements of poetic originality in America finds us just about where the last Medicine Man left off.[90]

Here, modern literary traditions blend seamlessly with Native American ones, as both grow out of timeless relations with a generative landscape unmediated by literary or cultural tradition. Far from "suffering a check in the discovery that the first free movements of poetic originality in American finds [sic] us just about where the last Medicine Men left off," he "of the Imagists' party" might understand himself as the rightful legatee to a spontaneous material poetic practice in North America. White writers – Lincoln, Whitman, Sandburg, Lindsay, Anderson are among those Austin favors – inherit a factitious Native American literary authenticity even as the "new" literary tradition displaces the primacy of the Native American's relationship to a given region. Austin's natural reading works to establish and claim a literary authenticity mediated by a style of perceiving nonhuman nature, a style she attributes to and learns from Native Americans.

III. The Weaver and the Warp

Through the figure of Seyavi in the vignette "The Basket Weaver," and Winnenap' in "Shoshone Land," Austin develops her theory of the artistic object as continuous with its maker

and with the environment out of whose material it was wrought. While this gesture tends to elide the Native American artist in favor of a generative and freely-available landscape, Austin, in positing the insufficiency of the aesthetic object, at the same time suggests the primacy of tribal claims upon the territory in question. Austin implicates herself as part of the framing colonial culture but at the same time cannot stabilize her representation of the Native American's temporality, which fluctuates between an ennobling primitivity and a tragic extinction. The vignettes Austin devotes to Seyavi and Winnenap', while providing exemplars of the Native American ecosystemic relationality Austin fetishizes as the font of literary expression, also work to represent and recite the displacement at the root of Austin's representational agenda.

Seyavi's baskets do not obtrude from the environment in which they exist; they are not reified or exportable. They function as domestic and social objects. They are "flaring, flat-bottomed bowls, cooking pots really, when cooking was done by dropping hot stones into water-tight food baskets, and for decoration a design in colored bark of the procession of plumed crests of the valley quail."[91] Even the basket's decoration serves a functional as well as ornamental purpose in its capacity to commemorate and signify: Seyavi uses the quail pattern "in the golden spring of her wedding year" and again "when, after the pillage, it was possible to reinstate the housewifely crafts."[92] The pattern thus marks stages of Seyavi's own life, emerging from what Austin glosses in *The American Rhythm* as "processions of seed time and harvest…seasonal variations."[93]The stages of Seyavi's life moreover are themselves tied to larger environmental cycles of animal life: "Quail ran then in the Black Rock by hundreds – so you will still find them in fortunate years."[94] Sustenance – the availability of game – underwrites the arc of the individual human life, both of which emerge in the basket's aesthetics. The narrator wants us to see that the basket serves several functions at the same time that are inextricable from each

other: it facilitates the preparation of food, it represents food, it telegraphs to its users cycles of want and plenty (although one cycle alluded to here – the pillage – is caused by humans, a fact I will explore below) that mark out stages of their own lives – marriage, motherhood, widowhood, old age.

But even as the baskets signify information about Seyavi's life, they also emerge from nature and Seyavi's capacity to be influenced by it. Up to a point, Austin attributes their "subtlest appeal," their "touch beyond cleverness" to Seyavi's own physical proximity to nature: "The weaver and the warp lived next to the earth and were saturated with the same elements."[95] The environment impresses both the material of art and the human who shapes it; workable matter and artist are equals. Besides being continuous with the material out of which she makes the baskets, Seyavi proves to be an apt reader or even medium of the nonhuman: "whenever Seyavi cut willows for baskets was always a golden time, and the soul of the weather went into the wood. If you had ever owned one of Seyavi's golden russet cooking bowls with the pattern of plumed quail, you would understand all this without saying anything."[96] Seyavi's deft touch allows the "soul of the weather" to persist in the willow branches even when they are taken out of their context, that is, when they are cut and woven into a saleable artifact. In her description of the willows' mediation of the atmosphere/weather, the narrator also praises the Paiute language itself for its sensitivity and responsiveness to seasonal fluctuations, which contrast with more abstract and rigid chronometric systems:

> The Paiute fashion of counting time appeals to me more than any other calendar. They have no stamp of heathen gods nor great ones, nor any succession of moons as have red men of the East and North, but count forward and back by the progress of the season; the time of *taboose*, before the trout begin to leap, the end of the piñon harvest, about the beginning of deep snows. So they get nearer the sense of the season, which runs early or late according as the rains are forward or delayed.[97]

Paiute time words resemble the "Indian fashion of name-giving" discussed above; they grow out of a specific context, one embedded in the ground and not the sky, in the hungering body and not the mind quaking before gods and demons. In this way, the narrator traces aesthetic appeal to the body's ability to mediate nonhuman processes, with as little swerving as possible. Paiute language hews closely to the seasons themselves, recalling Thoreau's eloquent savage whose tropes and metaphors emerge from the woods, allowing him to "translate[] entire phenomenon into his speech."[98] Seyavi's baskets, which Austin "covets for [her] own collection," contain the earthy metaphoricity that adorns the speech of Thoreau's eloquent savage.[99] In the next paragraph Austin explains Seyavi's phenomenology of artistic impulse as "the satisfaction of desire" that ultimately replaces self-adornments driven by "the mating fever"; the two drives both arise from the body's own seasonality. Again, representation emerges from material, place, or body, with little or no cultural mediation.

In the vignette "Shoshone Land," Austin links a Native American linguistic practice to region. Winnenap', a Shoshone brave who has been captured by the Paiutes and made to serve in the dubious office of medicine man – dubious because medicine men must submit to ritual execution upon the death of three patients – tells Austin stories of his natal region with a voice marked by the "rosy mist of reminiscence…the light that never was," a mist and light that recall the magical effects of the desert explored above.[100] Austin figures language inspired by the land's aesthetic force as productive of the land itself: "Sitting on the golden slope at the campoodie, looking across the Bitter Lake to the purple tops of Mutarango, the medicine-man drew up its happy places one by one, like little blessed islands in a sea of talk."[101] And in fact, Winnenap's verbal materializations correspond to a yearly pilgrimage he covertly takes:

> every year about the end of the rains and before the strength of the sun had come upon us from the south, the medicine-man went apart on the mountain to gather herbs, and when

> he came again I knew by the new fortitude of his countenance and the new color of his reminiscences that he had been alone and unspied upon in Shoshone Land.[102]

Austin's subsequent extended description of the route to Shoshone land as well as its ecosytemic character turn Winnenap's journey into her own literary production.

Though a representational object may be so perfectly suited to the seasons that it bears the "soul of the weather," much as poetry can transmit the rhythm of an ecosystem, the vignette places limits on the aesthetic and/or representational object, limits we can already see in her statement that "Seyavi made baskets for love and sold them for money."[103] The baskets can be alienated from their maker and their surroundings, a fact we see when Austin implies that Seyavi wastes them when she burns them in honor of her dead. Even though Seyavi can infuse "the soul of the weather" into her baskets in an act of mimetic pyrotechnics, at the same time the environment resists representation. Speaking of the Paiute for whom the Mojave is home, she explains that "he cannot duplicate [the land, the winds, the hill front, the stream] at any furbisher's shop as you who live within doors, who, if your purse allows, may have the same home at Sitka and Samarcand."[104] While Seyavi may perfectly capture the weather at flood time in the patterns of her baskets, here the possibility of likeness is denied: "neither wind nor weed nor sky-line, nor any aspect of the hills of a strange land [is] sufficiently like his own."[105] The irreplicability of place renders the Native American vulnerable to homesickness, which is "often unto death, since he can get to relief from it."[106] While the aesthetic object retains the imprint of the landscape, remaining in a way a spontaneous and natural part of it, Austin suggests that the Paiute's relationship is characterized by a organismic dependence whose interruption has material consequences.

Austin turns to the indissolubility of the Paiute brave's link to his environment after she depicts the earlier-described exchange with Seyavi that characterizes Austin as part of the colonial culture enclosing the Paiutes.: "'What good will your dead get, Seyavi, of the baskets you burn?' said I, coveting them for my own collection. Thus Seyavi, 'As much good as yours of the flowers you strew.'"[107] The narrator obtrudes herself as a particular kind of market force impinging on Seyavi's practices. Austin depicts herself as part of the outside culture that covets and collects the matter of Paiute aesthetic practice, turning the organic basket into a desideratum of consumeristic exchange. Austin even draws a parallel between her desire for the baskets and her desire for narrative: "it was not often [Seyavi] would say so much, never understanding the keen hunger I had for bits of lore and the 'fool talk' of her people."[108] The narrator's commodification of story and basket mark her as legatee of the Anglo military force indirectly represented when Austin acknowledges Seyavi's widowhood, brought about during "the dying struggle of his race" when "battle-driven they died in [the Bitter Lake's] waters, and the land filled with cattle-men and adventurers for gold."[109] The Paiute die in the lake's waters, not, the grammar suggests, at the hands of an invading Euramerican army, whose violence appears only obliquely in the phrase "battle-driven." Similarly, the land "fills with" settlers as though they were snow or rainfall or lake water. When the narrator describes the way that Seyavi's ecological surroundings mediate settler violence, she represses or distorts imagery of settler violence, casting cultural incursions as a force of nature: "all this warring of rifles and bowstrings, this influx of overlording whites, had made game wilder and hunters fearful of being hunted. You can surmise also, for it was a crude time and the land was raw, that the women became in turn the game of the conquerors."[110] In this final example, we see familiar elements of a naturalizing evolutionary narrative that casts the (quite recent) events as distant in time ("it was a crude time

and the land was raw") and naturalizes Paiute women as "game" of savage, raw white men. By representing herself as part of the settler capitalism enclosing Seyavi, Austin connects herself to the violence that has made her presence there possible, even as the grammar and diction of her sentences works to naturalize or divert attention away from that violence.

Besides acknowledging the effects of colonial presence in the Owens Valley upon individuals, Austin also considers its impact upon the community as a whole. After describing the pining brave for whom no token or trinket can replace or represent his natal land, the narrator broaches the Paiute's resistance to relocation:

> So it was when the government reached out for the Paiutes, they gathered into the Northern Reservation only such poor tribes as could devise no other end of their affairs. Here, all along the river, and south to Shoshone Land, live the clans who owned the earth, fallen into the deplorable conditions of hangers-on.[111]

On one hand, Austin advocates for the rights of the Paiutes by establishing the aesthetic and representational principles that inform their mode of dwelling in the land. Povinelli's "geontology" again proves useful; its presumption of the inextricability of biological life from the geology in which it conducts life echoes Austin's own formulation of the brave who wastes away anywhere outside the "walls" of the mountain ranges between which he was born. Displacement attenuates the tribal way of life; even those who have the wherewithal to resist repatriation devolve to the status of "hangers-on," as the relays of their culture over the landscape are disrupted.

Despite the ways in which Austin might gesture to the stakes of Native American displacement and her own complicity in that displacement, in the end Austin seems unable to move beyond placing her Native American interlocutors in a primitivist or evolutionary past. Of the Paiute who refuse relocation on a reservation she writes:

> you hear them laughing at the hour when they draw in to the campoodie after labor, when there is a smell of meat and the steam of cooking pots goes up against the sun. Then the children lie with their toes in the ashes to hear tales; then they are merry, and have the joys of repletion and the nearness of their kind. They have their hills, and though jostled are sufficiently free to get some fortitude for what will come.[112]

The portrait of the simple joys of nomadic peoples resigned to their fate – "what will come" – precedes the portrait of Seyavi, aged only sixty years and yet relegated to idleness and inconsequence by blindness and frailty. Her stoicism and dignity mitigate the tragedy of her death. She shows her will in her occasional decisions to withdraw from availability in the recesses of her blanket: "suppose you find Seyavi retired into the privacy of her blanket, you will get nothing for that day."[113] The end of the vignette situates Seyavi in the afterlife:

> So in her blanket Seyavi, sometime basket maker, sits by the unlit hearths of her tribe and digests her life, nourishing her spirit against the time of the spirit's need, for she knows in fact quite as much of these matters as you who have a larger hope, though she has none but the certainty that having borne herself courageously to this end she will not be reborn a coyote.[114]

The vignette places Seyavi in a living death, already past, waiting for some kind of reincarnation. Austin's prose mourns and monumentalizes Seyavi, marking her time and way of life as tragically but inevitably over, although Austin positions herself as legatee of Seyavi's aesthetic objects and her aesthetics. Winnenap' also faces death after a plague of pneumonia wipes out much of the village. He stoically faces death by hatchet-blow: "He turned a little from [the three men tasked with his death], dropped his chin upon his knees, and looked out over Shoshone Land, breathing evenly."[115] Like Seyavi, he accepts death as inevitable, and like Seyavi, Austin relegates him to a heaven "worth going to if one has leave to live in it according to his liking...tawny gold underfoot, walled up with jacinth and jasper, ribbed with chalcedony, and yet no hymnbook heaven, but the free air and free spaces of Shoshone Land."[116] While Austin

acknowledges the disruptions imposed by settler colonialism, she does not posit an outcome for her two Native American subjects other than a noble death through which they become the occasion for her own literary production. While Austin may nod to the Native Americans' extimacy, she seems in this respect to place the extimate indigenous American in a "past perfect" that justifies and makes possible the "future anterior" of the dominant culture.[117] Part of that futurity appears in the form of literary discourse.

IV. "Better than Most"

Austin has been championed by feminists, eco-feminists and bioregionalists for representations of the American West that resist patriarchal and capitalistic paradigms of settler colonialism. Readers who take her up acknowledge the ethnocentric limitations of her cultural vision, they tend to dismiss or qualify those limitations. Richard Drinnon (1980), in whose estimation Austin symptomatizes the cultural limitations of her Midwestern Victorianism, concludes that "what she brought in her head to that imaginary point [the frontier] was more important than the geographic fact," but distinguishes her from other frontier theorists like Frederick Turner: "Mary Austin took the trouble to enter Indian lives, found therein the reverse of 'primitive' simplicity, gave way to their rhythmic utterances, and thereby experienced a true rebirth in the spirit of the land."[118] In a similar vein, Elizabeth Ammons (1983), who champions the maternality and spiritual unity proffered by Austin's work as an alternative to the male-dominated canon enshrining a masculinist and individualist vision of American literature, acknowledges Austin's implicit bias but considers her willingness to experience Native American cultures a mitigation: "if it is possible for a member of the dominant group honestly to cross cultural boundaries, then Mary Austin may have succeeded better than most."[119] Arnold

Krupat (1989) praises Austin for being an early advocate of Native American poetry and culture, but critiques her racism; for Krupat, she sought to "evoke cultural world views, a kind of anthropological poetics rather than an anthropological science."[120]

Later critics meliorate her racialisms not through reference to her milieu or the arc of her biography, but by contextualizing it within the environmental ethos of her writing. Lawrence Buell (1995) writes:

> Indeed, throughout her career, Austin was only too ready to represent herself as the authoritative voice of the West and of Native American culture. Yet fundamentally she conceives of the western environment and its pre-Gold Rush inhabitants in a more self-effacing manner. Ultimately, she wished to define her role as that of the partly informed but partly baffled denizen of an environment that it takes several lifetimes to know.[121]

For Heike Schaefer (2004), Austin's abiding "cultural syncretism that aimed at regional adaptation offered the nation the greatest chance for developing an ecologically sound economy as well as a genuinely democratic culture."[122] Schaefer, taking Buell's reasoning to its logical conclusion, thus sublimates an acknowledgement of Austin's cultural appropriations in the promise of a democratic ecotopia.

While I have been arguing that Austin's ecological vision depends on her capacity as an Anglo settler colonialist writer with an audience in the magazine readership of her day to position Native Americans variously between herself and nonhuman nature, as nonhuman nature, in the past, and in a spiritual future that amounts to material death, it argues further that such a capacity to read nature and read naturally is linked to the emergence of professionalized literary studies around the turn of the twentieth century, a discipline which conditions Buell's and Schaefer's assumptions about the interplay between environment, culture, and literature. Buell overwrites Austin's self-representation as the "voice of the West and Native American culture"

with her relationship to an "environment it takes several lifetimes to know"; for Schaefer, Austin's writing amounts to "cultural syncretism" that holds the promise of "an ecologically sound economy" and "a genuinely democratic culture." While I am admittedly holding Buell's and Schaeffer's feet to the fire, I think it is useful to note how both assume continuity between environment and culture, and how literature itself, as a disciplinary field that is itself perhaps always making that connection transparent for us, at least in these generalizing statements with which the two scholars mean broadly to characterize Austin's work, seems to disappear. Can any work of writing, especially given Warner's critique of post-Enlightenment reading practices, be actually self-effacing? What cultural conditions about the nature of the literary text (or the self) must already be in place in order for created, published work to be understood stylistically as self-effacing? Similarly, what assumptions about literature must be in play in order to understand it as a site of "cultural syncretism" with the potential to produce "democratic culture"?

Austin began her writing career during the lag Brad Evans (2005) explores between the twinned emergence of the term culture in the writing of Arnold and Tylor as a term central to what would become the humanities, and its uptake as a term used in the plural to describe "a way of life, or a system of meaning shared among a people."[123] We can see her work as a species of writing that, with Evans, worked alongside an increasingly disciplinary and professionalized anthropology to bring the study of "borderlands and contact zones" into "the city – New York, to be exact, where one could find both the museum and the university."[124] In helping to display a distant region and the people who lived in it for an urban, educated, reading public, Austin's writing constitutes "literature…of the ethnographic imagination," which "has been described as 'vacationistic prose,'" that "reimagine[s] not a geographical locale but a cultural space – the space of the market, where 'culture' is exchanged as a commodity."[125] Like the phonograph

Austin uses to listen to Native American songs and chants, the regional origin of which she claims to be able to identify by reference only to their sound, Austin's writing mediates Native American perspectives on the desert while effacing the Native American him or herself, looking on as she – Seyavi – and he – Winnenap' – face their regrettable but inevitable demise. As humans become the transmitters of an expressive urge internal to place, new migrants to a region can cultivate a relationship with the environment that imbues their literary or artistic output with an authenticating primitivist cast.

Even while an authentic, autochthonous, anthropological culture gains the capacity to circulate as a commodified object, that same culture obtains a capacity to inhere in and distinguish an aesthetic object, an inherence that produced and was produced by an emergent disciplinary literary studies that emphasized, as Marc Manganaro (2002) puts it, "a classical, hard, technical criticism eschewing the Romanticism and impressionism of much prevailing criticism" and that "bears significant affinities to modern anthropology's call for more systematized fieldwork produced by professionals rather than by amateur and interested missionaries or sundry travelers."[126] Austin's claim of a direct relationship between a landscape, the reading practices it invited, and the textual objects it inspired, anticipates the construction of the literary object by the New Critics as separate from the person who created it and possibly even separate from the individual tastes, preferences, and moral inclinations of the person who reads it. One of the most salient features of Austin's natural reading, then, is not the close relationship between human and nonhuman that it represents, as Buell and Schaefer would have us think, *but its representation of that relationship, including the racial politics internal to it, as generative of literary writing*. The next chapter will further explore the stakes of such representation to the new interpretive protocols that came to predominate in the literary studies

of the 1930s and beyond.

---

[1] Austin, Mary, *The Land of Little Rain* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003 (1903)), 66.
[2] Ibid., 68.
[3] Thoreau, *Walden*, 12.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Austin, Mary, *The American Rhythm* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1930), 38.
[6] Thoreau, *Week on the Concord, Walden, and Maine*, "Chesuncook," 697.
[7] Ibid., 41.
[8] Kappeler, Erin, "Editing America: Nationalism and the New Poetry," *Modernism*: 21.4 (2014), 902. As the title suggests, Kappeler's article encompasses the New Poetry as framed by Harriet Monroe, Amy Lowell, Louis Untermeyer, and others, but I contend that we can perceive the same claims to organicity in Austin's prose as well as her "re-expressions" of Native American song and chant.
[9] Hegeman, Susan. *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
[10] Manganaro, Marc, *Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 7.
[11] Hegeman, *Patterns,* 36.
[12] Evans, Brad, *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature 1865 – 1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5.
[13] Austin, *The American Rhythm*, 54.
[14] Ibid., 65.
[15] Austin, *Land*, 47.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Austin, Mary, *Earth Horizon: An Autobiography* (New York: Literary Guild, 1932), 165.

[18] Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Nature. The Norton Anthology of American Literature.* Gen. Ed. Nina Baym. 4th ed. Vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 1994), 1001.
[19] Ibid., 1002.

[20] Emerson, Ralph Waldo, "The Poet" in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature,* Gen. ed. Nina Baym. 4th ed. Vol. 1. (New York: Norton,1073 – 1088).

[21] Buell, Lawrence, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 98.
[22] For a full account of Austin's move west, see Austin's autobiography, *Earth Horizon* (1933), as well as a number of biographies, including Goodman and Dawson's *Mary Austin and the American West* (2008), Stineman's *Song of a Maverick* (1989), Fink's *I-Mary* (1983), and Pearce's *Mary Austin* (1965).
[23] For a thorough discussion of the California Water Wars as they affected the people of the Owens Valley, see Cassuto's *Dripping Dry* (2001), Abraham Hoffman's "Mary Austin, Stafford Austin, and the Owens Valley" (2011), and the biographies of Mary Austin listed above. In short,

the Reclamation Act of 1902 authorized ambitious irrigation projects in the West. The residents of Owens Valley cooperated eagerly with the federal representative, J.B. Lippincott, but Lippincott turned out to be in cahoots with Fred Eaton, former mayor of Los Angeles, who quietly bought up property and water rights. Lippincott and others meanwhile convinced the federal government that the needs of the residents of Los Angeles outstripped those of the Owens Valley residents. The federal government subsequently authorized the construction of a massive waterway to take Owens River water to Los Angeles. The valley residents' outrage resulted in several skirmishes and acts of what would now be termed ecotage, but did not prevent the Owens Valley from reverting to desert.

[24] Austin, *Land*, 4.
[25] Ibid., 5.
[26] Ibid., 88.
[27] Ibid., 6.
[28] Ibid., 12.
[29] Ibid., 11 – 12.
[30] Ibid., 12 – 13, emphasis Austin's.
[31] Povinelli, Elizabeth, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
[32] Austin, *Land*, 19.
[33] Ibid., 22.
[34] Ibid., 6.
[35] Ibid., 9.
[36] Ibid., 6.
[37] Ibid., 19.
[38] Ibid., 23.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 5.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., emphasis mine.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Ibid., 19.
[46] See Stoll, Steven, *Larding the Lean Earth: Soil and Society in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 19. Stoll's survey of pre-industrial agricultural practices argues for a sweet spot in American agriculture during which farmers stewarded small or mid-sized holdings by small-scale technologies, mainly fertilizing the soil with manure produced by their own animals. This corridor occurred prior to the great industrial boom of the late nineteenth century (at which point a scientific farming made possible by heavy industry and professionalized knowledge of soil fertility and seed development came to predominate American agricultural practices), but after the Colonialist period (during which the availability of land encouraged farmers to abandon exhausted soil in favor of richer plots). Stoll emphasizes that the farmers of the early republic possessed knowledge that was trial-and-error, not scientific, and therefore "locally" available – not the purview of urbanized, educated specialists. The existence of this corridor demonstrates to Stoll the possibility of sustainable preindustrial local agriculture.
[47] Austin, *Land*, xxxv.

[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., xxxv-xxxvi.
[50] Ibid., xxxvi.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Scheik, William J., "Mary Austin's Disfigurement of the Southwest in *The Land of Little Rain*," *Western American Literature* 27.1(1992): 37 – 46.
[53] See Heise, Ursula, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 159, 210.
[54] Austin, *Land*, xxxvi.
[55] Austin, *Land*, 75.
[56] Austin, *Land*, 86.
[57] Austin, *Land*, 87.
[58] Austin, *Land*, 49.
[59] Ibid., 50.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 95.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 47.
[64] Ibid., 77.
[65] Ibid., 65.
[66] Ibid., 90.
[67] Ibid., 92.
[68] Ibid., 12, emphasis mine. Matthew Cella (2009) argues that *The Land of Little Rain* lionizes the individual placer miner, a residual mining practice ultimately displaced by the more intensive tunnel-based methods, as well as hydraulicking and milling, more widely practiced after the discovery of the Comstock lode. For Cella, the placer miner Austin represents in a later vignette "represents the best that mining life can offer an individual; but through his success he also stands as a prototype for the extractive nature of the mining enterprise, which is forever transforming his precious desert landscape." Cella could easily extend the same mode of argumentation to Austin herself, and suggest that her literary representations champion indigenous culture even while serving as a conduit of their extreme attenuation, if not utter extermination. See Cella, Matthew J. C., "The Ambivalent Heritage of Mining in Western American Literature: Wheeler's Dime Novels and Austin's the Land of Little Rain," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 16.4 (2009): 775.
[69] Austin, *Land*, 6.
[70] Ibid., 6, 12.
[71] Ibid., 4.
[72] Ibid., 8.
[73] Ibid., 9.
[74] Ibid., 10.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 18, 5. The Shoshones were extant in the Mojave during the time Austin lived there (and beyond). In fact, a Shoshone man who has been captured by a Paiute tribe is the subject of a later vignette in the collection, "Shoshone Land."

[79] David Crystal (1987) distinguishes between pictographs or pictograms, which "provide a recognizable picture of entities as they exist in the world" (197) and ideograms which might no longer resemble what they represent, or might "have an abstract or conventional meaning, no longer displaying a clear pictorial link with external reality…and its original meaning may extend to include notions that lack any clear pictorial form" (198). See Crystal, David. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). The Shoshone mark, then, made out of rocks placed on the ground, is a blaze shaped into an ideogram for direction, whereas the older mark, a petroglyph etched into rock, contains a pictographic element (a circle filled with wavy lines as the symbol for water) as well as the more ideographic elements: the three lines denoting distance and the arrow indicating direction. Alternately, the early twentieth-century Sierra edition of *The Land of Little Rain* translates the arrow as indicative both of direction and a unit of distance: this edition reads the picto-ideogram as indicating that "[i]n this direction three bowshots is a spring of sweet water" (43). This edition bears a 1903 copyright, but since the dustjacket advertises Austin's 1917 novel *The Ford* it must have been printed after that date. I have not been able to ascertain the source of the correction, if indeed it constitutes such. This edition changes one place name spelling, preferring "Carrizo" to the "Ceriso" found in other editions, including contemporary ones.
[80] As J.D. Peters (2015) points out, such an inscriptive system "is not a precision instrument for encoding speech"; it needs or invites translation or ventriloquization. See Peters, John Durham, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 294.
[81] Ibid., 18.
[82] Schuller, Kyla. "Speaking Substances: Bodies." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 4/12/16. Accessed 5/5/16.
[83] Teresa Shewry (2014) makes a similar argument about the nineteenth-century Australian poet Edward Tregear, who, Shewry suggests, uses the evolutionary and geological discourses available to him to frame the extinguishment of the ecosystems in which the Maori lived as geological rather than historical and social processes. See Shewry, Teresa, "Geologic Fictions: Science, Imperialism, and Transnational Literatures of Deep Time," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 21.2 (2014): 253-270.
[84] See Rosaldo, Renato, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations* no. 26 Special Issue (Spring 1989):108.
[85] Austin, *Land*, 41.
[86] Austin, *The American Rhythm*, 3.
[87] Ibid., 14.
[88] Ibid., 19.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Austin, Mary, Introduction to Cronyn, George, *The Path on the Rainbow* (New York: Boni and Liverwright, 1918), xvi.
[91] Austin, *Land*, 66.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Austin, *Rhythm*, 14.
[94] Austin, *Land*, 66.
[95] Austin, *Land*, 67.
[96] Ibid., 67. It is worth noting in passing how frequently this vignette uses the word "golden" to describe an era or epoch. This notation of time codes it as past, and it also symptomatizes the

degraded shift from a "Golden Age" to an age in which humans use violence against other humans and the environment alike to procure gold for their own enrichment in the context of national market operating on a gold standard.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Quoted in Fleck, Richard F., *The Indians of Thoreau: Selections from the Indian Notebooks* (Albuquerque: Hummingbird Press, 1974), 63.
[99] Austin, *Land*, 68.
[100] Ibid., 33.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., 34.
[103] Austin, *Land*, 66.
[104] Ibid., 68.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid., 64.
[110] Ibid., 65.
[111] Ibid., 69.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid., 70.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid., 40.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Povinelli, Elizabeth, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
[118] Drinnon, Richard, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1980), 233, 231.
[119] Ammons, Elizabeth, *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 102.
[120] Krupat, Arnold, *The Voice in the Margin: Native American Literature and the Canon* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 11.
[121] Buell, Lawrence, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 79.
[122] Schaefer, Heike, *Mary Austin's Regionalism: Reflections on Gender, Genre, and Geography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 2.
[123] Evans, *Before Cultures*, 3.
[124] Ibid., 21.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Manganaro, *Culture, 1922*, 11.

Chapter 4:

"Close to the Soil": Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Southern Agrarians, and the Romance of Regionalism

Mary Austin's writing transposed Thoreauvian natural reading practices in the service of a literary-historical narrative in which literature originated in the romanticized relationship of primitive peoples to a surrounding environment. As literary output in this narrative depended on environment as much as it or more than it depended upon people, it positioned the work of early twentieth-century Euramerican writers as the "natural" culmination of disparate literary traditions. In the work of Elizabeth Madox Roberts, a Kentucky poet and novelist who attended the University of Chicago from 1917 to 1921 and published *The Time of Man*, her well-received and critically-acclaimed first novel, in 1926, we can see a further development of the natural reading postulated by Thoreau and critiqued by Douglass, as Roberts herself projects her own vision of literary writing and its relation to nonhuman nature and primitive people who supposedly live in close harmony with it. The concerns of Roberts's fiction map closely onto those expressed in essays by Donald Davidson and John Crowe Ransom, and by reading her work against theirs, I will argue that we can arrive at a better understanding of the racial and class politics implicit to the Southern Agrarians' postulation and celebration of a primitive and autochthonous literary arts – autochthonous insofar as they spring directly from a certain kind of relationship with nonhuman nature, land, and region.[1] I further claim that the Agrarians' vision of what constituted the literary informed the interpretive protocols of the New Criticism, in particular its fascination with a seemingly-independent literary aesthetic object that could be approached as a coherent and implicitly – if not explicitly economically – valuable object by a

thoughtful reader, an interpretive stance Thoreau models in his theories of reading nonhuman nature for nonmaterial, spiritual gains that are somehow simultaneously material and embodied. Roberts helps us unearth the intertwined fantasies of class, race, and literary production that underpin her fiction as well as Davidson's and Ransom's economic-aesthetic-anthropological theories.

Roberts's novel centers on the daughter of a tenant farmer, Ellen Chesser, whose mode of labor – nonindustrialized agricultural tenancy – serves as the basis of a capacity for natural reading so deeply fulfilling as to compensate for and romanticize its extreme economic precarity. As a natural reader in the Thoreauvian cast, the aesthetic compensations of Ellen's alienated labor tend to naturalize and eternize the economic relations of agricultural tenancy, whereby a class of land owners is able to extract value from landless laborers whose only asset – whose only property – is their labor power. Moreover, Ellen's considerable agricultural labor, whose material products are routinely sacrificed to an elite professional or administrative class closely correlates with affective labor that introduces ideologies of domestic and sexual hygiene within her household. These hygienic practices, which include banking her fiancé's money, absolving him of infidelity and redirecting his sexuality within the framework of heterosexual monogamy, and repudiating women who practice nonnormative modes of sexuality and/or property ownership, align Ellen with the social norms of the middle class and help suture her family into a stable unit capable of producing good laborers. At the same time, Ellen's ongoing deployment of domestic and sexual hygiene consistently fails to translate into actual middle-class status for her or, presumably, for her children, who at the novel's end occupy the same itinerant position Ellen occupied at its beginning. Ellen's middle-class aspirations come to her as naturally and spontaneously as her natural reading practices and seem, like the experience of the nonhuman

afforded to her by agricultural labor, to be their own reward. However, the novel's denouement, in which her husband is whipped by a lynch mob on suspicion of barn burning, racializes the Kents, and suggests momentarily the racial politics internal to Roberts's pastoralization of tenancy and unsettles the novel's predominating discourse on the immutability and naturalness of property relations. Race is implicit to Roberts's primitivist epistemology of nonhuman nature as a source of language and literature. Can we better understand how the racial politics of the Southern Agrarians, with whom Roberts is clearly sympathetic and to whom Roberts's work proves useful, inform their vision of a national literature closely tied to agrarian labor and rural social formations?

For Roberts and the Agrarians alike, a measure of economic precarity produces desirably authentic, faux-primitive, autochthonous aesthetic and literary practices. However, their vision of romanticized economic precarity depends on – or outsources the real precarity to – the labor of black bodies while retaining the (literary) authenticity and autochthony generated by precarity (or made possible by its specter) for a fantasized white primitivity. In this way, Roberts's and the Agrarians' vision of a folk literature that forms the basis of high culture repeats gestures of what Meredith Martin (2015) calls "the ballad theory of civilization." Martin argues that the English philological studies of Scottish ballads in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries worked to naturalize and justify the English enclosure of peripheral cultures (Scotland and India) by laying claim to the peripheral culture as a part of the colonizing culture's primitive past: "the peripheral is elevated as the primitive and brought into the whole fabric of the nation as an imagined common past of the colonizing nation."[2] Scholarly and philanthropic interest in Appalachia as a protected bastion of Anglo-Saxon primitivity took hold of the cultural imaginary of the United States in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century – precisely as racial hierarchy was

firmly reestablished and consolidated by the end of Reconstruction and the establishment of Jim Crow laws. Roberts positions Ellen as such an Anglo-Saxon primitive, even, as we will see, giving her English ballads to sing. Ellen thereby functions as a fantasy of an aesthetically-generative and economically precarious Anglo-Saxon primitive who displaces other economically precarious bodies that existed in the same or nearby regions and under the same economic regime, tenancy. Romanticizing and aestheticizing the situation of poor whites allows Roberts and likeminded champions of the South like Ransom and Davidson lay claim to the romance of poverty without addressing closely-imbricated issue of race. The Agrarian romance of regionalism celebrates and naturalizes poverty while selectively locating its supposedly-generative aesthetic effects with whites. Ellen's natural reading, her close relationship with nonhuman nature that allows her to generate language and song, naturalizes a co-constitutive (black) poverty and (white) creativity.

I. Clod Woman

Admirers of Elizabeth Madox Roberts often couch their interest in her work, particularly *The Time of Man*, in terms of its autochthony, or its close affiliation with a given place (the Kentucky highlands), the people who live there, their nonindustrialized mode of agricultural labor, and their speech. All of these seem marked or shaped by that locality's earth – its actual dirt. To start with, Wade Hall's introduction to a recent (2000) University of Kentucky re-issue of *The Time of Man* justifies the republication of Roberts's periodically-revived work in part by praising its focus on farmers, who are for Hall connected to earth by their mode of labor: "Roberts celebrates the people who are naturally in tune with the eternal rhythms of the earth – like the enduring farmers and like the Dominican Brothers at the nearby Abbey of St. Lucy – all

accepting, after hard work, whatever comes, the good and the bad, the lean years and the fat years, the sorrowful as well as the joyful times."[3] Hall attributes to Roberts's subject – central Kentucky tenant farmers – a naturalness and eternality he also attributes to the "rhythms of the earth," an equation which tends to place them outside of historical social relations, as the farmers (like the friars) seem, in Wade's formulation, to bear up passively under the turnings of Fortuna's wheel: "the good and the bad, the lean years and the fat years." Agricultural labor connects the farmer to the earth and thereby ennobles and "naturalizes" him – that is, connects him to the earth's natural and timeless patterns. Hall thus repurposes a long tradition in American letters of identifying isomorphism between land and the man who labors upon it. Whereas Hall's farmer is "naturally in tune with the rhythm of the earth" Thomas Jefferson's farmers (who, not incidentally, are also property owners, in contradistinction to Roberts's tenants) are "the chosen people of God...whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue," and as such the foundation of a "healthy" citizenry.[4] In Jefferson's formulation, the farmer metonymizes that which he works upon; as he plows and plants the earth, so he is plowed and planted with virtue. But whereas Jefferson's late-eighteenth century farmer becomes the soil out of which a healthy democratic citizenry grows, Wade's reading of Roberts's farmer, similarly governed by natural physical processes, seems to exist outside of time, comprehended in the arc of far-ranging planetary cycles that enclose human history. The farmer Wade locates in Roberts's work is mythic and literary, still deriving some sort of value from working the soil, but directed towards different ends.

Critics who wrote about Roberts's work in the 1930s, close to the date of its publication, like Wade understood the farmer as a literary and mythic figure rather than a historical one affiliated with a specific form of governance. These critics crucially imagined a close

relationship between place and language. For Glenway Westcott (1930), who attended the University of Chicago with Roberts, Roberts's evocation of her native Kentucky was so powerful that the place itself took on the representational or expressive qualities of language:

> What a place – a locality which is expressive, apt at metamorphosis, as a language is! I feel that no other author will ever have the right to call his place Kentucky....[T]hanks to Miss Roberts, I persist in confusing Kentucky's genius with hers, in personifying it as a sort of vicarious woman, Greekish with inherited grace and under-nourishment, mediumistic: a sybil, expressing as if it were quite new what has been the truth all the time…willing and able to enact any one of the classic dramas of man, to perform any chapter of the squalid, just a little less than angelic, unfinishable tale.[5]

For Westcott, Kentucky itself merged with – and could be no realer than – the language Roberts used to describe it. The place itself was "expressive" and "mediumistic," capable of producing narrative, "the classic dramas of man," "any chapter of the… unfinishable tale." If for Thoreau and Austin, language grew out of a place, Westcott imagined place transforming into language, interesting and beautiful because of its capacity to mediate what Westcott suggested as a version of human history, one that seems to start with the Greeks. Place disappeared and reappeared as or dissolved into language, which quite literally displaced it, and further did so in a way that Westcott attributed proprietarily to Roberts on the basis of her language, causing him to confuse "Kentucky's genius with hers." Robert Morss Lovett (1930) used the example of Roberts's expressive writing to posit a close link between *literary representations* of the farmer and nonhuman nature as well as a link between American soil and American literature. Lovett compared Roberts's work favorably to the balance of American literature which by contrast lacked connection to the earth: "American literature has so rarely sprung directly from the American soil, has contained so meagerly the elements of folk culture"; by contrast, Roberts's novel satisfies in its agricultural proximity to soil and its capacity robustly to "contain" – not merely represent or evoke or describe – folk culture, the verb echoing Martin's argument about a

dominant culture's positioning of colonial peripheries as a primitive precursor.[6] Lovett further characterized the daily practices of the inhabitants of rural Kentucky, now called "experience," as productive of literary "material" that is "real":

> So abundant and so real is the material in which the experience is rendered, so homely and intimate the background, so vivid the picturing of nature through its succession of seasons…that one feels in this book an almost perfect blending of idea and substance, of soul and body. It is life, not fiction, or rather it is the higher fiction which is the meaning of life.[7]

The critics invoked thus far used similar terminology to identify what they perceived as unusual and valuable in Roberts's work. The value constellated around something like the naturalness, plant-like spontaneity, materiality, and timelessness of its protagonists and their setting, which in turn seemed to confer naturalness, botanical spontaneity, materiality and timelessness on the material of Roberts's prose: for Lovett in particular, literature had the capacity to spring directly from the soil.

Roberts herself viewed her subject in these earthy and botanical terms. In a letter to Glenway Westcott, she referred to the novel's protagonist Ellen Chesser as a "clod woman…animated soil"; in a letter to Monroe Wheeler she framed the argument of the novel as one such clod becoming "aware of itself and the world around and the mesh and beauty and wonder of the sky."[8] Roberts thus imagined her writing as giving voice and language to people conceived of as metonymic of soil, or, by extension, a personified locality. This way of thinking resembles a romantic Herderian conception of a spatially-bounded "people" being animated by a common racial genius or spirit. The romantic notion persisted in early twentieth-century scientific discourse in part through the work of anthropologist Franz Boas, whose resistance to a Victorian evolutionary narrative of the development of human civilization as progressive and stage-based inspired him to understand cultures relativistically and geographically; while

rejecting the idea of the teleological development of the human species through primitive to advanced stages, Boas reinscribed the compelling romantic notion of geography impinging upon culture and its circulation. Marc Manganaro (2002) argues that the idea – "a culturalist belief about the isomorphism of a people and the land" – shaped modernist works like *The Waste Land* and wonders "why it should be assumed, and towards what consequence that a 'culture' is essentially something rooted in a soil" particularly in the context of a literary culture understanding itself in light of a newly relativistic anthropological culture.[9] In Roberts's case, we can begin to see the answer to Manganaro's question in a slippage or shift from soil to culture to literature that happens both in Roberts's theorization of her own work and in its reception by critics. Roberts wrote to Harriet Monroe that "[m]y people here are close to the soil and their talk is out of the clods." [10] Here not just a speaking people but a language itself emerges from nonhuman nature, a shift we can also sense in the Lovett passage above when he praised the reality of "the material in which the experience is rendered," in which "material" seemed to refer to Roberts's own prose. In her notes leading up to the composition of *The Time of Man*, Roberts mused that "for the uses of the tragic muse, images can continually be drawn from some region close to the soil."[11] Representing people conceived as natural and autochthonous conferred upon Roberts's writing its own naturalness and autochthony: if the people she represented are the soil itself gifted temporarily with consciousness and voice, then so was her own writing. As they drew knowledge from their contact with the earth, so she could draw images. Not only was Roberts's subject autochthonous, a natural emanation of the earth, her prose appeared to take on those qualities in this critically persistent representation of it.

But Roberts's literary product depended upon a specific object of an emergent anthropological discourse: the Kentucky highlanders, which in the decades spanning the end of

the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were constructed as an atavistically primitive culture, relatively cut off by mountains from the modernizing forces of industrialism and the railroad. The Kentucky highlanders represented a link to, on the one hand, the American pioneer, and, on the other, to Medieval Anglo-Saxon culture.[12] As James Klotter (1980) puts it,

> Numerous studies emphasized that Appalachian natives spoke a purer English than the rest of America, that they preserved the dialects and phrases of the England of Shakespeare, and that they sang the songs of an older age. As folklorists and linguists studied and restudied the region, a whole new body of material became accepted fact.[13]

We can thus see in Roberts a repetition of the Thoreauvian gesture whereby a people constructed by extant epistemologies as "primitive" actually blend into nonhuman nature, offering him or her who would represent them a special link to nonhuman nature. But to go even further, Klotter positions the burgeoning early-twentieth-century missionary, social-reform, and academic interest in white Appalachia as a displacement of efforts to ameliorate the conditions of the freed American slave: in the face of the New South and the entrenchment of Jim Crow through systematic violence and court cases like Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, "Appalachian Anglo-Saxons began to replace blacks in the national consciousness. The white man's burden applied also to white Americans."[14] While Thoreau and Austin constructed and/or deployed a primitivity adjacent to them – with Thoreau "l[ying]" next to "the primitive man of America" and thereby learning natural linguistic practice directly from him, and with Austin devising a free-floating primitivity impressed upon careful natural readers by the environment itself and thus positioning herself and other white writers as natural legatees of an indigenous American literary tradition – Roberts creates a fantasy of white primitivity that shares a cultural style with indigenous people but that can be construed as genealogically continuous with white authors of the early twentieth century.[15] Thus, Roberts's positioning of her subjects as primitive and deeply, linguistically

integrated with their natural surroundings – and her own literary output as metonymically autochthonous – participates in a race-based nationalist epistemology that served to make certain narratives of national nativity possible, in part through the construction of a professoriate tasked with "discovering" and preserving the nation's unique contribution to Western civilization. In the notion of "clod people," Roberts frames certain people, language, and literature as a natural emanation of a particular place affiliated with both pioneer and Anglo-Saxon antecedents. Upon reading the Southern Agrarians' 1930 manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, she wrote to Allen Tate of her refusal to sing "Marching Through Georgia" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in school, concluding, "Our text books should be rewritten, to foster the true myths and symbols. My own region is rich. We sprang from a race of giants."[16] While William Slavick, in an important essay presenting excerpts from the Roberts papers, duly cautions us against taking Roberts's letters and notes as autobiography, we can see in her statement a commitment to "fostering" and framing a particular national history in literature.[17] Further, her own connection – "sprang" having both botanical and mythical connotations – to the "race of giants" authorized her participation in that project.

Some scholars construe Roberts's choice of subject matter as a manner of social critique. In 1939, Shields McIlwaine credited her with respectfully and realistically representing the poor, white, Southern woman; in step with the anthropological work undertaken in the first few decades of the twentieth-century, McIlwaine identified the poor white as a genealogical and economic legatee of the American frontiersman.[18] In his 1963 introduction to a re-issue of *The Time of Man*, Robert Penn Warren explained the disappearance of her work, which was well-acclaimed, even celebrated, when it first appeared, by citing its incongruence with the overt, New-Deal progressivism of the 30s. Ellen, Warren pointed out, is "not in active protest against

the deprivation and alienation of the life of the sharecropper, but in the process of coming to terms, in a personal sense, with the tragic aspects of life."[19] Warren reasoned, though, that Roberts's close attention to "the inner reality of Ellen and her people in contact with the world" constituted a concern with social justice.[20] By humanizing the poor white, Warren's logic suggests, Roberts accomplished an intervention that can be construed as political. Lisa Hinrichsen (2011) extends McIlwaine's and Warren's argument by reading Roberts's stream-of-consciousness prose as an instance of the feminine sublime that itself constitutes a historically specific response to the dislocations of a burgeoning global economy. In Hinrichsen's reading of *The Time of Man*, the feminine sublime replaces the transcendence and enclosure of the nonhuman that serves as the endpoint of Kantian sublimity with nonappropriative, communitarian, and self-abjecting experiences of the nonhuman Other. For Hinrichsen, Ellen deploys the feminine sublime as an adaptive strategy in response to the incursions of an alienating industrial modernity:

> Roberts's novel reveals the devastating trauma of progress that complicates identity and seems to place self-sufficiency out of reach, while underscoring the way that Ellen's imaginative life, as shaped by the feminine sublime, comes to provide an alternative space for expression, self-definition, and fulfillment that counterbalances the alienation of her nomadic life.[21]

For these scholars, Roberts's choice of protagonist and her detailed portrait of this protagonist's consciousness as emerging from preindustrial contact with nonhuman nature unmediated by automated machines (Ellen places tobacco plants, which must be undertaken by hand; she hoes; her father and husband plow the land but with workhorses instead of tractors) amounts to a critique of the class relations that enforced tenancy as an economic system in the American south from the Reconstruction period onward.

Roberts's choice of protagonist coordinates with a broader early-twentieth-century surge of interest in poor Appalachian whites as a repository of American pioneer spirit, as a medium (if fictionalized and reconstructed) of Anglo-Saxon heritage, and as a way to re-mediate the state's relationship to freed slaves. While Peter Nicolaisen (2006) rightly argues that Roberts's construction of the farmer as "'the eternal man,' a generic figure removed from the flow of history" tends to obscure questions of "the social and economic circumstances that determined the life he really led," we can follow the very construction of the tenant farmer as an eternal man (or woman) deeply connected to and sustained by the nonhuman world back to some of the social and economic circumstances surrounding the construction of literature qua literature in the early twentieth century.[22] In being positioned as compensatory for unjust property relations, Ellen's aesthetic and nourishing relationship with nonhuman nature has the effect of making those unjust relations nonurgent and even natural. Positioning rural agricultural labor as the foundation of sustaining aesthetic experiences bespeaks a broader struggle over the professionalization of literary studies and the construction of a canon of national literature as a body of work with a natural relation to the localities from which it emerged.

Roberts, by selecting a folkloric subject to which her own geographical provenance and commitments gave her privileged access, stages her own writing as folklore at a historical juncture when the distinction between folklore and literature was emergent but not fully established. Thus, Brad Evans's (2005) analysis of the local-color fiction as "no longer taken to simply be about local places and peoples, but…reimagined as being fundamentally representative of them"[23] applies also to Roberts's fiction, which can be understood as a legatee of the local color fiction of the second half of the nineteenth century. For Roberts and her advocates, literature about the folk becomes national folklore, becomes a blood-and-soil

emanation of a people in a place, and becomes a high literature made authentic through its connection to the daily lives of primitive people. We can see the result of what Roberts's own fiction helps to make possible in Robert Penn Warren's introduction. Like Lovett, Westcott, and Roberts herself, Warren connected or even attributed her prose to the place it described, writing that "[h]er stories grew out of the life of the place, and are told in a language firmly rooted in that place."[24] But while Wade, writing in the early 2000s, attributed Roberts's writing to "the earth," and Lovett, writing in 1930, attributed it to "American soil," Warren attributed it to a particular place – "the place," "that place." Penn goes on to exceptionalize Roberts's use of dialogue, her representation of the speech of her characters:

> In a hundred novels for a hundred years we have seen [the representation of local speech patterns] go sour, either by condescension or the strain to exhibit quaint and colorful locutions – which is, in fact, a symptom of condescension. But in *The Time of Man* it is different. For one thing, the writer's ear is true….For another thing, the language is not a façade over nothingness….It is, rather, the language of a person, and a society, which is realized in the novel with a sober actuality.[25]

Once again, as with Lovett above, we see the notion of a "real" – here "realized" – material language in contradistinction to a language or style of representation that is not real, not grounded (even the dead metaphors are redolent of the assumed connection) in folk culture and in the earth. Moreover, Roberts's written, literary language is that of "a person" and "a society": it emerges from a person or group of people, and although Warren does not specify what constitutes the "society" he names, we can perhaps infer that it is a regional one based in a bounded place, an idea, as we will see, that is important to John Crowe Ransom's regionalism.

In and around Roberts's work, we see another instantiation of natural reading and natural writing. Thoreau lets us see a nonhuman nature that expresses itself in forms that resemble language and prove legible to the natural reader, although that language always bears the traces

of the racializing cultural machinery that positions the natural reader and informs his capacities. Douglass's formidable investigation of the types of literacy available to him and their wide-ranging uses and implications helps further my argument that reading and writing are complex and unsettled operations that themselves take on form in a field of social relations. Douglass's autobiographies trace and resist the ongoing, protracted effects of literacies on his own human nature, tracing the connections between literacy practices and institutionalized racism. In addition, they further illustrate the social positioning and cultural machinery involved in the Thoreauvian capacity to read the nonhuman as though it were a language in Douglass's inscription upon landscape and nonhuman nature of the social relations and human history that make possible such notions as property, landscape, and wilderness. Austin uses her own literary productions – prose vignettes, poetic theory, translations of Native American songs and chants – to channel indigenous primitivity into the ethnographic fiction and poetry of contemporary white writers. Like Austin, Roberts participates in the twinned emergence of professionalized anthropological and literary disciplines, using seemingly-primitive cultures as the basis of her own literary artifacts, but this time locating primitivity in Anglo-Saxon antecedents who could be notionally connected not only to the land but to the white literary establishment of the day. For Roberts in particular, the material world seems to imprint itself upon and even produce people, language, and her own representation of them. Roberts postulates an autochthonous culture that gives rise to an autochthonous literature grounded in a specific place and time but at the same time mythically connected to classical culture and planetary cycles. Such a postulation overlaps with Ransomian regionalism's construction of literature as representative of and emergent from a place-based set of nonindustrialized economic practices. Thoreauvian natural reading, a seemingly spontaneous reading practice grounded in and encouraged by the nonhuman

landscape, critiqued by Douglass for its racial politics and repurposed by Austin in her own efforts to render Native Americans part of a landscape-based cultural tradition which she positioned herself as legatee based on her skills as a reader of landscape, reappears in Roberts's work as a version of New Critical assumptions about literature as a product of a place and people that could nonetheless be read as a reified aesthetic object removed from their historical and situational contexts and made newly legible within a professionalized literary discourse. As Thoreau read nonhuman nature by virtue of his ability to use Native Americans and Native American languages to mediate that nonhuman nature, sometimes identifying them with the "ground" of the nonhuman while at other times placing them in an enabling middle distance that gave him access to nonhuman nature while also allowing him to separate himself from it, so Roberts uses her characters' imagined proximity to nature as a way simultaneously to naturalize and rarify her own writing, to make it literary by making it authentic or anthropological. Roberts's reading can happen because of the disciplinary split of folklore/anthropology and "high" literature and because of newly biologized notions of race.

Douglass helps us see the ramifications of an instrumental property in the self that enables self-authorship while occluding the dispersion of agency through social and material relations as well as occluding actions or affect or speech that does not coincide closely with the hermeneutic of liberal agency. These alternative modes of agency register differently for Douglass than they do for Thoreau, for whom ensemblic agency brings insight and pleasure instead of a heightened (if generative) sense of cultural constraint. Natural literacy, then, ramifies in the seeming naturalness of private property and property relations in general in a capitalistic mode of exchange; close attention to Douglass's representation of reading helps denature the property relations that form the foundation of the liberal subject of representative democracy

who is implicitly but necessarily white. Similarly, Roberts gives us a nuanced portrayal of the interconnections between literacy, property, and race. Roberts positions her protagonist's natural literacy as a compensation for her alienation from the means of production; Ellen Kent (nee Chesser) takes a page from Thoreau's playbook, as when he, in contradistinction to the farmer who labors upon it, is able though his aesthetic contemplation to "retain[] the landscape, and I have since annually carried off what it yielded without a wheelbarrow"; Thoreau here expresses his relief that he has been released from an offer he made on a farmer's property, maintaining that he has been freed from the encumbrances of ownership and thus better positioned to "enjoy[] the most valuable part of a farm," which is its beauty.[26] While Ellen does not put her contemplation of the nonhuman into such baldly transactional terms, the novel's narrator consistently positions Ellen's close connection to nonhuman nature as a natural, spontaneous result of her agricultural labor, labor she crucially performs upon land she does not own. Roberts establishes this connection in the book's first chapter, when she juxtaposes the young Ellen's transcendent experience of the Bodines' land with the Bodines' petty greed for the resources it makes available to them.

The Bodines hire Ellen and her family to plant tobacco on their land in the novel's first chapter. The Bodines farm as well as Ellen, but Ellen's labor produces a close connection to the land that contrasts with their anxiety about accumulating and protecting property. Through her labor, soil imprints itself upon Ellen: "Her closed eyes saw again the objects of the day in the field, the near mud over which she bent, her feet pulling in and out of it, the little grains of soil swimming past her tired eyes."[27] Her relation with the soil anticipates her intimacy with other aspects of nonhuman nature on Bodine's farm. She climbs a fence to play with a colt, running "with him down the pasture, screaming and jeering a wild man-animal talk, forgetting her fear of

fences which enclosed land."[28] Ellen merges with the nonhuman animal, even speaking an animalized language. At the end of the week, Ellen enjoys resting in a field of clover, again merging with the nonhuman: "She looked at the clover narrowly, minutely, trying to see it as ants see, as bees. She piled cool clover on her face and felt the smell come and go until sense was drugged and there was no odor left in the blossoms."[29] Through sight and smell, Ellen blends herself with botanical life in ways clearly reminiscent of Thoreau's contemplative unity with "the copious and standard language" which "all things and events speak," from corn to the passing train to the glassy surface of Walden Pond to the loons who play hide-and-seek with him upon it.[30] This exalting, freely-available unity contrasts with the landowners' grasping, as when Hep Bodine locks his house for fear the tenants might steal from it while he is at church (when in fact Ellen herself is the victim of theft, her shoes stolen from the wagon the first day she works Bodines' field), or when Mrs. Bodine countermands her husband's permission to the Chessers to collect blackberries, telling Ellen, "Nobody said you could have them berries. I need every one for myself."[31] The Bodines' property relationship with the land leaves them fearful and niggling, whereas Ellen's, mediated through labor but not ownership, allows her, in Roberts's representation, an aesthetic pleasure that expands the boundaries of her body and consciousness and that she experiences as abundant. For Roberts, then, Ellen's aesthetic enjoyment not only compensates for but proceeds from the precarity of her economic position as the daughter of a tenant farmer.

Ellen does in fact exhibit an awareness of her alienation from the means of production and a desire to improve her class status, but Roberts represents her awareness and desire not in historically specific terms but as continuous with Ellen's receptive experience of nonhuman nature; in other words, class relations register for Ellen as a timeless and immutable feature of

the landscape, not as the result of human history. When Ellen admires the Bodines' farmhouse, representative of middle-class propriety and property, it hovers somewhere between feature of the landscape and human construction:

> The farmhouse stood off among tall trees, a yellow shape with points here and there, two red chimneys budding out of the roof. In her mind the house touched something she almost knew. The treetops above the roof, the mist in the trees, the points of the roof, dull color, all belonging to the farmer, the yellow wall, the distance lying off across a rolling cornfield that was mottled with the wet and traced with lines of low corn – all these touched something settled and comforting in her mind, something like a drink of water after an hour of thirst, like a little bridge over a stream that ran out of a thicket, like cool steps going up into a shadowed doorway.[32]

Besides merging into the nonhuman landscape, the house merges with the realm of imagination and the literary. The unnamable "something" the house signifies leads us to Ellen's experience of books, to which she has been exposed through some faintly-remembered schooling and through another itinerant family with whom the Chessers travelled before contracting with the Bodines. Tessie West's books suggest to Ellen an exoticized, unattainable outside world, as when she rhapsodizes about Tessie's geography book's depiction of London and Mexico City: "You could see yourself a-liven in the brown house, a-walken up big stairs and a-looken out that-there tower window, a-sitten down in a tower to look out all day, a-sitten back cool."[33] The Bodine's house, in its capacity to bump up against the inarticulable and to lead off into nowhere – "cool steps going up into a shadowed doorway" – resembles a universal fantasy realm made possible by imaginative literature, a realm she invokes again in a conversation with her fiancé Jasper: "I used to think when I was a youngone, Jasper, that all the things you read about or hear come to pass in some country, all in one country somewheres."[34] Middle-class ownership remains for Ellen a persistent if pleasing dream, a story that satisfies in being told. When Jasper proposes, for example, she imagines, "[O]ur own house sometime, that belongs to us and all our own stock in

the pastures."[35] She rearticulates the same unrealized hope in the novel's final chapter, after Jasper and Ellen have had five children and cycled through as many tenancies on different farms throughout the area: "After a while Jasper would own a place; they talked of it with a vague certainty."[36] The Bodine's house and the specter of her own ascendance to middle-class status recall that "somewheres" of story and dream, a "somewheres" made available to her through reading books.

Besides contrasting with Ellen's own alienated labor – she reflects that night "[n]ine hours I worked and made two dollars and a quarter, but shoes cost two dollars" – the Bodine's house forms the prototype of a fantasized house Ellen imagines herself possessing throughout the book, one that reasserts itself as a goal only to recede as a possibility with each new economic contract Ellen's father or, in the second half of the book, her husband makes. What Ellen has instead, and what much of the narration focuses on, is a labor-mediated relationship with the nonhuman so intense as to be generative and nutritive, as when she recovers from a broken love affair through agricultural labor intensified because her father's incapacitation:

> She ceased to think of any day before this day or any task before this….her thought was clodded with earth….As she plied the hoe a quick image of a year, a season, from planting to cutting and stripping, stood forth as if it were in the soil, a design, all finished and set apart.[37]

The moment of close connection – an act of natural reading – constitutes an important step in her recovery from Jonas' betrayal: "'Not him,' she said, 'not him.' She went endlessly down the row, plant after plant the same, no thought of how long she would endure or of the end. Her body and mind were of the earth, clodded with the clods; the strength of her arms and her back and her thighs arose out of the soil, the clods."[38] This moment of repudiation mediated and made possible by her hard, trancelike agricultural labor moreover dovetails into her relationship with

her future husband Jasper, who comes to the field as she is working and thereafter assumes the heavy labor of the farm until her father recovers. In this way, Roberts navigates some of the economic contradictions that characterize Ellen's situation. Ellen's nourishing, close connection to nonhuman nature is predicated on a kind of propertylessness and economic alienation; at the same time, Ellen's propriety also functions as property that allows her to subsist. Roberts yokes this propriety, I would like to suggest, to Ellen's race.

II. Ellen Chesser's Earthy Languages

The Southern Agrarian 1930 manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, includes an essay by poet Donald Davidson, "A Mirror for Artists," which elaborates a complicated and often contradictory theory of art and helps clarify Roberts's deployment of the figures of natural reading and natural writing in *The Time of Man*. Davidson, in repudiating the libraries, art galleries, and systems of mass education that mediate (and for Davidson distort) the common man's relationship to art and literature, champions by way of contrast art and literature that have an "intimate connection with life," a connection that Davidson goes on to elaborate as emerging from direct contact with nature, but that he at this juncture in the essay also frames tellingly in terms of ownership: "What is a picture for," he writes, having disparaged the auratic viewing experience afforded by the art gallery, "if not to put on one's own wall?"[39] Davidson does not revert to this implied cultural scene, in which ownership of presumably expensive aesthetic objects facilitates a proper and authentic aesthetic experience, but instead overlays it upon an earthier situation, in which aesthetic experiences intermix with a daily life seemingly available to all without regards to class status and without recourse to democratizing (and, as Davidson himself argues, commodifying) institutions like museums: "the aesthetic experience is not

curtained off but is mixed up with all sorts of instruments and occupations pertaining to the round of daily life. It ranges all the way from pots and pans, chairs and rugs, clothing and houses, up to dramas publicly performed and government buildings."[40] Davidson's theory of art, apparently at least partially indebted to the Victorian arts and crafts movement, valorizes aesthetic experience immanent to everyday life, rejecting the notion of an auratic art promulgated, he argues, by the museum and gallery scene of his day: "[t]he principle of the art gallery requires me to think that a picture has some occult quality in itself and for itself that can only be appreciated on a quiet, anonymous wall, utterly removed from the tumult of my private affairs." [41] For Davidson the art gallery does not serve to make aesthetic objects available to people who are not wealthy and leisured enough to own and collect them, but contradictorily achieves the opposite effect, *cordoning off* true aesthetic experiences as the province of a wealthy elite:

> The art gallery or art museum theory of art to which philanthropists and promoters would persuade us views art as a luxury quite beyond the reach of ordinary people. Its attempt to glorify the arts by setting them aside in specially consecrated shrines can hardly supply more than a superficial gilding to our national culture, if the private direction of that culture is ugly and materialistic.[42]

While museums and galleries make it possible for a general public to view works of art, their aesthetic experience, for Davidson, can only be a "superficial gilding to our national culture" so long as the dominant mode of production that support the "culture" is, in Davidson's vague characterization, "industrialized."[43] Davidson here imagines national culture as an aesthetic object in its own right, capable of bearing gilt while itself comprised of baser material. For Davidson, the stakes of his aesthetic theory are not only wide access to art, but the quality of some substance he calls "national culture." Under the sign of society as an aesthetic object

Davidson is able to avoid any specific formulation of the class relationships that characterize the lost pastoral society he idealizes.

Davidson characterizes an industrialized society as being "too far removed from nature" and therefore likely to cause individuals to "forget that the chief subject of art, in the final sense, is nature."[44] In the industrialized system, Davidson argues, the frantic pace of work "is carried over into our leisure hours," which causes its participants to consume art as a distraction from the discomforts of labor or in an effort to display taste; art circulated via these consumptive relays has lost its integral connection to the mode of production.[45] Aesthetic quality becomes a way to advocate for a rural nonindustrialized mode of production and the social relations that make it possible. Davidson holds out the nonindustrialized sectors of the South as a repository of a way of life particularly conducive to the kind of art he champions:

> [O]nly in an agrarian society does there remain much hope of a balanced life, where the arts are not luxuries to be purchased but belong as a matter of course in the routine of his living. Again, both strategy and conviction will almost inevitably lead him to the sections of America that are provincial, conservative, agrarian, for there only will he find a lingering preference for values not industrial. The very wilderness is his friend, not as a refuge, but as an ally.[46]

We need to keep in mind that two modes of relating to aesthetic objects exist within the boundaries of Davidson's schema: first, the picture hanging on one's "own" wall (although in the passage directly above he objects to the idea of this picture as a "luxur[y] to be purchased"; perhaps we can assume that the object he has in mind has been passed down through generations), and second as integral components of daily life, "belong[ing] as a matter of course in the routine of his living," from "pots and pans" to "dramas publicly performed and government buildings," all forged from some friendly and co-creative relationship with the

"wilderness" as opposed to the oppositional, exploitative relationship with the nonhuman that Davidson attributes to industrial modes of production.

Roberts, in her depiction of Ellen Chesser, illustrates the authentic, integral relationship with nonhuman nature that for Davidson forms the basis of meaningful aesthetic experience; Ellen Chesser practices a Davidsonian aesthetics in which art emerges from and informs daily life. Importantly, the aesthetic practices Roberts depicts are reading and writing, which in Roberts's hands thus take on the rustic, autochthonous, arts-and-crafts authenticity and communitarianism of the aesthetic objects Davidson values – pots, rugs, buildings, public performances of plays. Roberts depicts Ellen as possessed of a spontaneous literacy closely linked to and metonymic of her relationship with nonhuman nature. Ellen, then, embodies the aesthetic dimensions of agrarian life, turning it into language and using language to extend and enhance her relationship with nonhuman nature.

Unlike the spoons, bowls, rugs (and even pictures) Davidson includes in his stable of authentic aesthetic objects, writing is harder to conceptualize as integral to a simple, regionally-bounded, agrarian life. Roberts weaves Ellen's linguistic and inscriptive practices into the vagaries of her life as a tenant farmer at first by dematerializing them and by making them central to Ellen's effort to understand and identify herself. Roberts opens the novel with an act of inscription, a declaration of selfhood: "Ellen wrote her name in the air with her finger, Ellen Chesser, leaning forward and writing on the horizontal plane."[47] Ellen's inscriptive act suits the fluid environment in which she performs it: she writes in air in the midst of the breakdown of her father's wagon as the Chesser family moves from place to place. Her aesthetic performance stages writing as a spontaneous act of momentary self-identification that in this case disappears as soon as it emerges, indistinguishable from the flow of events that contextualize it. Roberts, in

realizing Ellen's inscriptive act, claims for her own writing something of the spontaneity and integration into her immediate surroundings of Ellen's impulse to write. By the end of the second chapter, Ellen in fact does write her name on paper, but even this example retains functionality within the course of Ellen's daily life. Having run away to town on the next court day in hopes of finding Tessie West with whom the Chessers had been travelling until their wagon breakdown, Ellen scrawls her name and address on a scrap of paper to a lace peddler to be passed to Tessie should the woman meet her. Ellen's address takes on the orthographic appearance – offset, centered, italicized – of the ballads that routinely appear throughout the novel:

Ellen Chesser
Rushfield, Ky.
Mr. Hep Bodine's mail box.[48]

Even when Ellen's imagined act of writing materializes as actual writing, it serves a purpose neither decorative or ornamental, a purpose woven in to the circumstances of Ellen's life and arising out of a specific need. Roberts opens the novel, then, with an act of natural writing: writing that is spontaneous and yet purposive, part of nonhuman nature but also part of human culture. It is, in Davidson's words, a literary act that is "mixed up with all sorts of instruments and occupations pertaining to the round of daily life."

Ellen's inscriptive acts, in a now-recognizable gesture, bleed into her interactions with nonhuman nature. Ellen is exploring the Bodine farm, using a stick to vault over pools in a pasture when she discovers she can use the pole to engage in something very much like writing on the surface of algae-filled ponds. Ellen's writing recalls Thoreau's fascination with the ripples created when "a pickerel or shiner picks an insect from this smooth surface," resulting in "circling undulations" which act as testimony of a "piscine murder."[49] Ellen's pond provides a surface only slightly more permanent than the air on which she writes in the previous example:

> The green scum made a curtain over the water holes, but when she tore the curtain away she saw the reflections in the water, the sky, blue and dry, the hills and trees. In a little while the scum gathered back and there was left only black water. To push the film aside with great zigzag strokes and make the world come into the pool quickly, the world big and clear and deep with a sky under it, this was her intent.[50]

Ellen's natural writing – pushing a film or curtain aside with "great zigzag strokes" reminiscent of letters in order intentionally to "make the world" appear – emerges from, briefly expresses, and dissipates back into the unworded, seemingly ahistorical flux of nonhuman nature. Her natural writing, though, extends to include books and a certain kind of literature as the passage develops. Ellen's thoughts turn at this juncture to books and reading, which apparently inform and help her frame her act of spontaneous inscription: she recalls "the book with poetry pieces to say. A brown book, it was. I can see as plain as day and I can see the words inside, pieces to say in school of a Friday."[51] While Ellen here demonstrates familiarity with the situation of formal schooling, the book in question seems not to have been a teacher's but to have been Tessie's, as she goes on to recall "the geography book, Tessie's other book, an old one all torn at the corners and spotted where somebody left it out in the rain some long time ago….a good book, a learned book. I read it a heap here and yon and I looked a lot at the pictures" as well as the one book that Tessie designated as Ellen's: "Tessie gave me one to keep, but it's safer with the balance, I said, along under the quilts."[52] The books themselves appear as outside the ordered progression of human history, inscriptive artifacts more permanent than the pond surface, but like them almost uncreated – material artifacts that transmit old stories, facts about far-off places, and that themselves remain, like the fantasized middle-class house, perpetually out of reach for Ellen. In keeping with Davidson's rural aesthetics, the books are integrated into Ellen's life, mediating memory and relationship.

Moreover, Ellen applies the stories directly to her life. First she projects herself into the stories she remembers. Rapt in her reverie staring at the pond, Ellen begins reciting bits of story and verse from Tessie's poetry book: "'O Mother, O Mother, come riddle my sport, come riddle it all as one. Must I go marry Fair Elender?' Elender, that's me. And people a-dyen for grief and people a-dyen for sorrow."[53] The ballad, emerging spontaneously from somewhere in Ellen's memory, helps Ellen imagine and identify herself; it serves a seemingly natural, spontaneous imaginative function in her life, contextualizing it in the broad sweep of human history suggested by the song. At the same time, Ellen's identification of herself in the action of the ballad positions her, in her present moment, as the subject of folklore, participating in what we have already seen as an early twentieth-century surge in philanthropic and academic interest in Appalachia as a repository of supposed medieval Anglo-Saxon culture. By identifying with the song's Elender, Ellen posits collapses the distance between the ballad's point of origin and her own historical moment. The early-twentieth century preoccupation with the "primitive" rhythms of Old English ballads framed them as a source of artistic inspiration for modern American poetry, one that would revitalize modern poetry – and by extension modern American culture – by infusing it with "Anglo-Saxon traits like 'vigor and freshness and efficiency.'"[54] Writers like Amy Lowell, Harriet Monroe, and Louis Untermeyer, as Erin Kappeler puts it, "constructed a fictional generic coherence for the new poetry based on the idea that it was an organic product of the American people," citing the use of primitivistic rhythms as the medium and sign of this organic authenticity.[55] Roberts's placement of the ballad in Ellen's life resonates with the efforts of these other early-twentieth-century writers to forge connections between modern American literature and a primitive Anglo Saxon culture. In keeping with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ballad discourse, Roberts positions Ellen as an atavistic primitive, existing alongside but

also before the present and a figure who is, to borrow Martin's description of primitive rhythm, "at once universalizing and nationalistic."[56] The ballad helps Ellen and her readers place and understand her as part of Appalachian agrarian communities' and modern America's mythological origins. Her existence, as a singing clod woman, helps erase or elide the bound black labor and the tribal nations who are in fact the history of the farmer and the writer in the American twentieth century. Her balladic claim to primitivity projects an Anglo-Saxon indigeneity at least in the context of Appalachia. Martin argues that ballad discourse, besides idealizing certain historical entities as primitive, also "identified primitive groups of people even in modern societies: the child, the uneducated working class, the rural village-dweller, and the colonial subject, all of whom…could be recruited to represent a powerful fantasy of poetic purity."[57] Similarly, we can understand Roberts as "recruiting" Ellen to represent a fantasy of a past purity of literary inspiration, a natural reading and writing.

Besides helping her understand herself, Ellen uses the ballad further to interpret and predict her environment, here with comical results. Ellen sings the ballad and imagines the action internal to the poem transpiring in her setting, which in fact closely resembles the situation described in the ballad:

> "'O Mary go and call the cattle home,/And call the cattle home,/And call the cattle home,/ Across the sands o' Dee.' Water a-rushen up the almost dry creek all of a sudden, a flood a-comen on Mary!" She jumped from her seat and ran up the bank of the ravine, terrified, clutching at the brush, dry stones rattling back in her path. At the top she turned to look at the wall of water that might be coming up through the valley through Bodine's lower pasture. She sat on the brow among the bushes and snags, laughing at her fear, and after a little her pulses calmed.[58]

Ellen becomes so involved in the imaginative world of the ballad that she takes it for reality, rushing out of the creek bed to avoid an imagined flood. The material of the ballad maps unproblematically onto her actual material circumstances; to return again to Davidson, the ballad

is part of the "routine of [her] living." The ballad is both her history and her present. In Ellen's case, the notion of natural writing and natural reading, which we can see both in her inscriptive acts and in her transparent application of remembered literature to the interpretation of her physical environment, helps flesh out Davidson's notion of aesthetic experiences integrated into an agrarian economic relation with nature, "not as a refuge but as an ally." Roberts deploys the ballad as a kind of natural writing, emerging from and perfectly suited to Ellen's environment.

Ellen's natural reading and natural writing place her in a uniquely privileged position vis à vis nonhuman nature, one that Roberts frames as generative and nutritive, in that it helps constitute Ellen's identity, hailing her and calling her into being. When her jealous and unfaithful husband defensively accuses her of cheating on him with their landlord Joe Philips, he imagines the man "fetch[ing] down fine victuals [for Ellen] when I'm gone to work," and Ellen, seemingly in reference to her generative relationship with nonhuman nature, retorts, "I got victuals you don't know e'er thing about."[59] These "victuals" further align Ellen with a long arc of human history conceived of as both universal and relativistic and imbue her with kinship to nonhuman nature itself. While Ellen and her father clear rocks from a newly-plowed garden patch, he muses that "[n]o plow iron ever cut this-here hill before, not in the whole time of man," a phrase that replays itself in Ellen's throughout the remainder of the novel and evokes her connection to a long perspective on history that seems to relativize cultures, placing all on an equal footing, or making all equally contingent and strange, while aligning her with an ascendant Anglo-Saxon culture.[60] Thinking about "the strange men that lived here before our men, a strange race doing things in strange ways, and other men before them, and before again. Strange feet walking on a hillside for some purpose she could never think," Ellen "laid stones on her altar," her agricultural labor doubling as paganistic worship of a generative earth, which provides both altar stones and

crops in the same seasonal cycle.[61] Ellen is further able to understand her own actions by contrasting them with the possible actions of other groups of people removed from her temporally. On the next page this remove registers geographically: "Well, some people sleep on beds but some sleep on the ground and some sleep in wagons. I've heared it said sailors sleep in hammocks. The people on the other side of the world might, maybe sleep some other way we can't think."[62] Ellen's experience of a spatially-based notion of human culture overwriting a temporally-based one gives way to a conceptual framework in which rocks and other aspects of nonhuman nature operate on the same footing as distant tribes, a conceptualization that partakes in the by-now familiar representational gesture of enfolding peoples understood as primitive or Other into the nonhuman nature they mediate for privileged observers. Ellen asks her father where rocks come from, and when he asserts, on the basis of the fact that rocks keep appearing in the same plowed fields, even after they have been removed in a previous season, that they grow, Ellen incorporates this knowledge through a kind of relativistic reasoning: "Maybe they've got another kind of way to be alive."[63] The possibility of matter's animacy registers for Ellen in her capacity to receive the addresses of nonhuman nature, which take the form in this passage of echoing phrases she's recently heard or spoken. Ellen, as she continues to pile rocks unearthed by the plow, hears in the wind "a faint dying phrase, 'in the time of man,'" which causes her to "[lift] her body and fl[i]ng her head to the great sky that reached over the hills and [shout]: 'Here I am!...I'm Ellen Chesser! I'm here!"[64] Ellen's ability to receive the addresses of nonhuman nature functions as a spontaneous and natural aesthetic capacity and practice that helps Ellen survive crushing losses throughout the novel. Having received the news that Jonas has married another girl, Ellen retreats to the hills where she hears the wind repeating "In the time of man, in the time of man." She

> eased herself among the dry leaves, her folded arm for a pillow, and soon fell asleep although these winds blew over her laden with faint phrases and were all but lost….into her sleep came a sense that she had been flung to some high and remote place from which she could look down upon the time of man, the world, squares and rectangles cut upon a virgin hill, and pity it with a great grief which she would assume all in her season. [65]

This sleep, during which Ellen hears the subsemantic addresses of the nonhuman and seems to merge with the nonhuman, helps Ellen survive the bitter disappointment of betrayal, a disappointment that causes another wronged wife in the novel to commit suicide. Ellen's natural literacy, framed here as a capacity to interact with the nonhuman in the medium of language, emerges from agrarian labor and sustains her; it is an integral, organic, materially-realized aesthetic practice.

III. Regionalism as Natural Writing

More than her practice of an organically-integrated, expressive aesthetics mediated by language, Ellen illustrates assumptions implicit in the New Agrarians' regionalism. The first is the notion of an "establishment," or stable economic base, central to John Crowe Ransom's theorization of artistic practices. In his contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," Ransom elaborates on what he calls the "establishment" of an agrarian mode of production that allows the friendly relationship to nature so important to Davidsonian aesthetics. Ransom imagines a nonindustrialized agrarian mode of production as better coordinated with material, human, and economic limitation than the industrialized mode: "[A]fter a certain point this struggle [to dominate nature] is vain, and we only use ourselves up if we prolong it. Nature wears out man before man can wear out nature."[66] He later describes industrial modes of production as sacrificing "comfort, leisure, and the enjoyment of life to win Pyrrhic victories from nature at points of no strategic importance."[67] For Ransom, then, industrial production is

characterized by a blind need to instrumentalize "nature," without regard to what societies practicing this instrumentalization can or actually want to consume. The fact of production becomes more important than any assessment of what kinds and levels of production would sustain human life. By way of contrast, Ransom imagines a society that creates and accepts an "establishment": a stable, self-perpetuating economic base that "depends on a prevailing magnanimity which scorns personal advancement at the expense of free activity of the mind."[68] For Ransom, the "establishment" provides enough, giving rise to a leisure in which "eighteenth-century social arts" arise spontaneously, and which still exist or recently existed in the rural South: "These were arts of living and not arts of escape; they were also community arts, in which every class of society could participate after its kind. The South took life easy, which is a tolerably comprehensive art."[69] As for Davidson, for Ransom aesthetic forms arise organically from a particular way of getting sustenance from the material of nonhuman nature. Ellen's tenancy, particularly in a region that grows tobacco, the seedlings of which were planted by hand, enforces and maintains her in a pre-industrial mode of production and consumption. Prevented by the economic relations of tenancy, which produce her economic precarity, from accruing capital, Ellen lives in something like Ransom's "provisional" stage of culture, although her spiritual and aesthetic impulses translate her provisionality into something like an establishment.

Further, Ellen's connection to place and race illustrate Ransom's theory of regionalism as the interconnection of place, mode of production, race, and culture. Ransom gives a more detailed account of his theory of the evolution of a mode of production that also gives rise to aesthetic and cultural practices in a later essay, "The Aesthetic of Regionalism" (1934). Here, a geographically coherent and bounded area of nonhuman nature – a region – interacts with a

people (for Ransom implicitly homogenous in terms of race and/or culture) to give rise to economic practices which, when they have progressed past the "provisional" or pioneer state and become established, spontaneously give rise to aesthetic practices. As the "economic pattern becomes realistic, or nicely adapted to the bounty which nature is prepared in this region to bestow," then "nature not only yields up her routine concessions, but luxuriates and displays her charm; and men, secured in their economic tenure, delight in this charm and begin to represent it lovingly in their arts. More accurately, their economic actions become also their arts."[70] Economic patterns "meant for efficiency" come to "survive for enjoyment, and men who were only prosperous become also happy."[71] Here again, aesthetic experiences emerge naturally and spontaneously from what Ransom characterizes as an economic mode of interacting with nonhuman nature, a mode that I am arguing is implicitly racialized and otherwise bound up with contradictions emerging from the racialization of property.

For Ransom, the specific geographic character of the region being thus developed exerts pressure on the people living within it and the economic-aesthetic practices they mediate: "[N]ature itself is intensely localized, or regional; and it is not difficult to imagine that the life people lead in one of the highly differentiated areas of the earth's surface is going to have its differences also."[72] Ransom goes on to prioritize the pressure exerted on the people of a region as more influential of their culture than its racial homogeneity or genetic isolation, even while drawing attention to the particular isolation of "the Southern highlands," his test case, in the process: "Some persons, with a sociological bias, suppose that the local peculiarities of life and custom, for example in the Southern highlands, are due to the fact that the population is old and deeply inbred, and has developed a kind of set because it has been out of communication with the world."[73] Here geographical isolation intensifies racial homogeneity. But even the

mechanically-realized geographical imprint of place upon cultural practices deflects and mediates Ransom's commitment to the apparent racial homogeneity of the cultural groups whose practices he theorizes: "But the primary cause [of regionalism, or earlier of 'the cultural pattern'] is the physical nature of the region. A region which is physically distinct supports an economic unit of society; but its population will have much more of 'domestic' trade than of foreign, and it will develop special ways and be confirmed in them."[74] Geography or region imprints but it also encloses a people, allowing them to "develop" and "be confirmed in" practices Ransom imagines as natural to the region, practices that themselves develop an aesthetic or semiotic dimension.

We can see a deep imbrication of earth and subject in Robert's representation of Ellen, who, at a moment of adolescent self-consciousness considers her labor- and weather-impacted body:

> My hands are big and coarse and my skin is browned and redded in the wind. My eyes are slow and big, always a-looken at everything in the world and always expecten to see something more. My face looks like the ground and my back looks like the ground with my old cloak pulled over it….My feet are like roots of trees. I look like a board and I look like a rough old pond in a pig pasture.[75]

Ellen is and is like the soil she moves about a few counties in central Kentucky to work. Roberts also suggests that Ellen and her predecessors become the region they inhabit, as when Ellen contemplates one of her autochthonous tenant cabins which itself blends into the landscape, its "roof…the color of weather," its "shingles…curved like autumn leaves falling in wavering lines," and which features a yard as rich with artifacts of previous tenants as Henry's field is with animate rocks:

> In the ground around the house were imbedded bits of trash, relics of former tenants, such as wisps of paper, cut hairs, iron nails, pipestems, coffee grounds, threads, and pulps of rags….Once she scratched up a bit of a broken mirror, once a human tooth, once a rotted glove with a bright metal fastener. The soil was black and stiff like felt.[76]

This is a natural, autochthonous aesthetics of agrarianism, one whose connections to the New Criticism John Fekete (1977) traces, arguing that the Agrarianism's failed attempt to project an idealized economic base that would support an aesthetics of retreat into tradition (what Fekete calls a "postulated…Southern way of life") gave way in the New Criticism, particularly the work of Ransom, to a capitulation to the authority of the neocapitalistic social order.[77] Within that order, Fekete argues, the New Critical aesthetic vision substituted an "intensification of our symbolic contacts with an inexhaustible reality" for any real-world effort to "enhance contact with inexhaustible reality" by modifying or intervening in the cycle of alienated production and consumption, or "the expansion of needs and their satisfactions."[78] In this way, the New Criticism represents Agrarian acceptance of the scientistic, technical epistemologies internal to an industrialized capitalistic society in admitting a limited but privileged scope of a professionalized professoriat of traditional intellectuals whose work upholds and operates within what Fekete calls the "neocapitalist totality."[79] A socioeconomic aesthetics subtends Southern Agrarianism; by extension, the aesthetics that subtend the particular reifications of literary texts performed by New Critical protocols retain a socioeconomic dimension. Agrarianism's representation of the neoromantic and only vaguely specified economic base productive of its idealized aesthetic practices is implicit to ongoing practices of the interpretation of literary objects.

The economic base that appears to be at stake for Davidson and Ransom, as I have already suggested, is not particularly well-specified. It is rural, leisured, agrarian, regional, oriented towards handicraft, but none of the essays under consideration here do much to articulate the labor and property relations that would characterize their systems. Fekete likewise recognizes that the Agrarian critique "attacked a specific form of capitalist production while, at

the same time, worshipping capitalist property ownership" and sought to "bypass [the] whole sphere of social determinations" of agrarian labor, indulging in a fantasy that would support and extend their power rather than an analysis that would describe the the social relations that conditioned agrarian labor in the South.[80] But the looseness of the terms Davidson and Ransom use to articulate their economic vision belie their pointed assumptions linking labor, class, and race. I have in mind the racialized representations of labor internal to Davidson's and Ransom's account of aesthetic objects that emerge spontaneously, if gradually, from what Marx calls the metabolism between a group of people and the resources available to them, or what he calls "man's inorganic body."[81] That their representations of an authentic and integrated agrarian society elide or repress the intertwined issues of racialized labor and property ownership suggest that the critical method that itself grew out of their pseudo-politics is marked by similar repressions and elisions. We can further see these repressions operating in strange ways within the text of Roberts's novel, which to a certain extent seems to illustrate and elaborate the Agrarian vision of regional labor and aesthetic production.

Ransom's and Davidson's regionalist autochthonous aesthetics assumes the existence of free or cheap black labor while and by making that labor invisible. Davidson claims traditional Southern culture was "sound and realistic in that it was not at war with its own economic foundations," a statement that can only be made in the face of a radical euphemization of slavery's foundational violence, which certainly amounts to a protracted and brutal war against the enslaved.[82] To return to Fred Moten, such an understanding of the plantation economy relies on the continuous repression, redirection and recoding of the slave/commodity's speech and the critique of private property and liberal individualism implied by it.[83] If we can crudely identify two sources of wealth in the Southern planter system – nonhuman nature and the slave labor that

extracted value from it – Davidson in his statement both sinks slave labor into the abyss of nonhuman nature and ignores a long, well-documented history of soil exhaustion and other ecologically abusive practices of cash-crop agriculture. In Davidson's postulation of the Northern industrialized economy, nonhuman nature is subject to unending abuse and instrumentalization. If for him the South was not at war with this "economic foundation," then black labor disappears into his neoromantic, newly-whole nature; it fails to register as a resource that could and did resist its exploitation. Similarly, Ransom acknowledges that "[s]lavery was a feature [of the southern society he describes in this paragraph as a 'squirearchy'] monstrous enough in theory," but he holds that it was "more often than not, humane in practice."[84] To represent slavery in this way requires a systematic and selective invisibilization of the conditions of slave labor, an invisibilization extended when Ransom goes on to conclude of the Southern squirearchy "all [the different social orders] were committed to a form of leisure, and that their labor itself was leisurely."[85] The notion of a leisurely labor here necessarily unsees both slave labor and the slave labor necessary to rendering the other social orders' experience of the labor left to them as leisurely. In a similar vein, both Ransom and Davidson assume property ownership by a landed gentry even while disavowing class as a limiting structure in their organic, authentic, integrated rural agrarian society; we have already seen Davidson write of proprietary and exclusive ownership as the proper mode of relation to an aesthetic object ("What is a picture for, if not to put on one's own wall?"), and Ransom, while acknowledging the existence of a propertied ruling class deflects the issue of property ownership and social class by imagining that, in contrast with the fixedness of European aristocracy, classes in the United States "were loosely graduated social orders…Their relations were personal and friendly…people were for the most part in their right places."[86] Classes exist, but, like the

impulse to create aesthetic objects, their mediation through the set of economic practices dictated mechanistically by regional features representationally renders them as right and natural. Ransom, in his articulation of his regionalist aesthetic philosophy, imagines African Americans not a group or groups of humans engaged in particular economic/cultural practices but as a unitary entity – "the darkey" – closely affiliated with the culture-producing facets of regional conglomerations of nonhuman nature: "The darkey," he writes in 1934, "is one of the bonds that make a South out of all the Southern regions. Another is the climate."[87] Paralleled with climate, African Americans have the effect of creating regional culture for the social cohesion and identity of white Southerners. Race and a set of exploitative economic relations co-constitutive with the category of race make possible Ransom's regionalism.

Or maybe another way of tracing the racial politics implicit to the notion of regional economics as productive of literary style is to recur to Frederick Douglass and ask whether or not his work anticipates Ransom's regionalism in which place forms a metabolic feedback loop with a group of people living within it, or perhaps Roberts's regionalism, in which place and person blend materially into one another. Douglass, while planning the migration from rural to urban that threatens the agrarian social order both in the form of antebellum runaways and postbellum economic migration, presents his own geographical knowledge and commitments as inflected by what appears as a kind of regionalism, that is, a place-based knowledge and identificatory affiliation. Or we might better understand Douglass's epistemological and representational strategy as a negated regionalism in that the dominative social relations mediated by geography – rather than a socially unmediated geography – enforce Douglass's identification with a particular region. On this count Robert Penn Warren overlaps with Ransom and Davidson in intersecting race, landscape, and labor, as his *I'll Take My Stand* essay, "The Briar Patch," counsels Southern

blacks against migration to northern urban centers on the basis of a logic reminiscent of Ransomian regionalism whereby in the South, the black man "has less the character of a 'problem' and more the status of a human being who is likely to find in agricultural and domestic pursuits the happiness that his good nature and easy ways incline him to as an ordinary function of his being."[88] For Warren, African Americans' "nature" and "ways" suit them to a region and the mode of labor appropriate to it. Like Ellen, Douglass has only the faintest notion of places beyond the confines of his particular region, although a more overtly antagonistic social order produces his ignorance:

> We all had vague and indistinct notions of the geography of our country….We had heard of Canada, the real Canaan of the American bondmen, simply as a country to which the wild goose and the swan repaired at the end of summer, but not as the home of man….I had heard of Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey, and all the southern states, but was ignorant of the free states, generally.[89]

Just as Ellen daydreams about world capitals based on what she has seen in Tessie's book and, when the mules on Wakefield's farm are to be sold south to "the sugar plantations" vaguely remembers a place where "a white field went off a long way over a flat country, and the road went sandy and wet under wheels, all almost forgotten now," Douglass's regionalized knowledge accommodates distant places as story – Canada not as a human-inhabited nation-state but as "a country to which the wild goose and the swan repaired at the end of summer."[90] Similarly, in the first chapter of the book, Ellen imagines herself telling the departed Tessie:

> "The world's little and you just set still in it and that's all there is. There ain't e'er ocean…nor e'er city nor e'er river nor e'er pole. There's just the little edge of a wheat field and a little edge of a blacksmith shop with nails on the ground, and there's a road a-goen off a little piece with puddles of water a-standen, and there's mud."[91]

Both Ellen and Douglass have socially-enforced regional visions that begin and end in their immediate surroundings. In formulating his and his fellow runaways' situation as they

contemplate the social as well as nonhuman impediments to their passage into free territory, Douglass states, "We were hemmed in on every side."[92] What pithier description of Ransomian regionalism does Ransom himself give? Dominative social relations frame Douglass's and Ellen's regionalism, and Douglass's natural reading practice, which reads into nonhuman nature the social relationships it facilitates and mediates, makes it possible to imagine Douglass's "degraded" or demystified regionalism as a Motenian anticipatory and ongoing critique of the mystified and idealized representations of a human being's identity and utterances shaped by contact with the myriad features of a region, representations that come to facilitate notions of a natural regional literature as a privileged body of written works slated for aesthetic contemplation and pedagogical exposition. As Douglass anticipates Marx in offering the example of Esther as the commodity that speaks, does he also anticipate the Southern Agrarians' projection of regions that speak through people, or suggest a way of conceptualizing the homologies between the violent practices of chattel slavery and the social construction of a natural national literature? As Moten says of Douglass, "What is sounded through Douglass is a theory of value – an objective and objectional, productive and reproductive ontology – whose primitive axiom is that commodities speak."[93] How does Douglass's axiom make it possible to interpret Roberts's postulation of Ellen Chesser as speaking earth that works the earth to turn it into someone else's capital? Even though Ellen is an instrument of the earth's commoditization, she also remains close to it, almost a feature of its value – a use value but not an exchange value – a commodity or at least a fetish under whose sign the commoditization of land through agricultural labor can take place. Of the slave, Moten continues: "The commodity whose speech sounds embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign."[94] The speaking (and writing) commodity/slave disrupts the protocols of exchange in her speech, in her capacity to

read and write, and in so doing sets in motion a disruption of notions of ownership in a liberal economy, which is also a disruption of notions of stable linguistic reference, of language's consistency, transparency, and givenness. The Agrarians clearly take recourse in liberal notions of individuality representationally rendered as timeless and natural through discourses like regionalism, nationalized literary studies, and a New Critical version of high culture centered on reified, decontextualized aesthetic objects, using such discourses as a blind for their own investments in private ownership (which mediates their cultural capital) and not, as Moten says, "the universalization or socialization of the surplus." In his initially unsigned foreword to the first issue of *The Fugitive*, Ransom disingenuously claims that he and his fellow pseudonymous (for the first several issues) poet-fugitives flee "from nothing faster than the high-caste Brahmins of the Old South," but qualifies or garbles this disavowal in the next sentence: "Without raising the question of whether the blood in the veins of its editors runs red, they at any rate are not advertising it as blue."[95] To my mind, Ransom raises a question to disavow it and thereby answers it: his blood, he would like us to think, runs a vital, manly red *and* a squirely blue, or even more pointedly red, Anglo-Saxon *white*, and blue, despite his mealy-mouthed claims about how he is advertising his blood's (tainted) tint. What seems to differentiate the Agrarians from the high-caste Brahmins (who play out favorably enough in Ransom's 1930 depiction of a beneficent "squirearchy" referenced above) is a style of representing agrarian labor and their own affiliations with it. Roberts gives us a narrative of a "clod woman" who seems with Thoreau to "g[e]t all the cream" of the farm, "l[eaving] the farmer only the skimmed milk" of material wealth, but extracts her idealized value through alienated agricultural labor and not as in Thoreau's a carefully-staged contemplative practice that involved but did not center on agricultural labor. [96] The question I want to raise now is to what extent does Elizabeth Madox

Roberts's aesthetic of autochthony partake of Agrarian representational strategies and to what extent does it offer an alternative, or a critical inroad into their representational strategies?

IV. Property, Propriety, Natural Reading, Race

To return for a moment to the notion of the "universalization or the socialization of the surplus" by way of opening this question, Ellen's idealized labor promises to do just that. Ellen's economic and aesthetic practices suture her to nonhuman nature and give her access to what appears to be a Transcendent unity, a universalized surplus of nonhuman nature's bounty, as when she revels in the growing corn and beans:

> her pleasure in the growth of the corn was very real. The beans in their rows seemed to be a creature, one, brooding in stillness in all hours of the day and growing rank and full and lush in a few weeks….She liked to sit in the corn after it grew waist-high or more. In the soft clods of the bright days or in the soft loam of the days after showers she would sit, looking about, feeling herself moving with the corn.[97]

Certainly we hear echoes of Thoreau's meditative state produced by agricultural labor and rural living: "it was no longer beans that I hoed nor I that hoed beans,"[98] or even, as he writes of his long contemplative spells at Walden, "I grew in those seasons like corn in the night."[99] And while Ellen's experience of nonhuman nature's generous surplus seems to be authorized by the fact of her inability to realize the earth's exchange value, an inability which consistently limits her capacity to instrumentalize nonhuman nature or at least systematically to benefit from that instrumentalization through property accumulation and upward class mobility, it seems to me that Roberts through Ellen registers an objection to the romanticization of Ellen's labor's economic futility. We can see this critique in the face-off between Ellen and the Bodines with which the novel opens when Hep Bodine hires the Chessers to plant tobacco on his farm. Ellen's first day laboring on the Bodine farm ends for her in an economic wash because someone steals

her shoes. She weighs her labor against the lost possession: "Nine hours I worked and made two dollars and a quarter, but shoes cost two dollars."[100] Bodine keeps the effects of Ellen's labor – she walks about the farm the next day and surveys "her work of yesterday, ragged and new, the plants set where she had dropped them" – but she has come out ahead by only twenty-five cents and is now shoeless to boot, a fact that would seem to limit her productive capacity and her (circular and itinerant, not upward) mobility.[101] When she steps on a thorn, she recalls the theft, weighing its morality in the context of the economic circumstances in which it occurs: "It's wrong to the folks that lose the stuff and that makes it come around wrong to the body that takes it. Only if a man's got so much he never misses what you take, why then it seems like it might maybe not be wrong, only you can't tell whe'r a man is a-goen to miss it or not and so it's wrong, I reckon, no matter."[102] With this moral absolute in mind, Ellen defends her own acts of petty theft – taking wood and eggs – with the incontrovertible fact of her bodily need: "Oh, bitter burning in fingers that were like sticks, shivering body and no underwear….But you have to eat. Your belly makes you do it."[103] Countering Ellen's liberal individualist postulation about the absolute nature of property, the specter of human need calls for at least a partial redistribution of resources away from those who have accumulated more than they can consume. The Bodines understand the vulnerability of their accumulated property implied by the Chessers' presence, and on this same walk Ellen witnesses them lock the house as they leave for church, Mr. Bodine using the Chessers to explain a break from their customary practice of leaving the house open: "It pays not to take chances with people like that on the place."[104] "People" are made "like that" by cold and hunger, Ellen's internal monologue suggests. Moreover, Roberts makes it clear that the Bodines' wealth further depends on a proprietary stance towards nonhuman nature – not only the tobacco and fenced-in colt in whose cultivation they have clearly participated, but the more

spontaneous blackberries – that conditions their capacity to contract Henry's labor. Roberts directly and repeatedly represents the process of owner offering tenant terms, which Bodine does on three separate occasions in the first chapter. First, when the landowner comes across the Chessers waiting for their broken wagon to be repaired, he offers "[t]hree dollars a day…and that-there house over there in the place to stay in….If that-there gal's any good a-worken she can have twenty-five cents a hour, and the woman too."[105] At the end of the day when they consider moving on to find Tessie and her people Bodine raises the wages he offers to four dollars a day for Henry and thirty cents an hour for Ellen. Finally he offers a tenant's contract: "I'll give you twenty dollars a month in cash money and the house rent free to live in and I'll furnish you-all with your lard and side meat and wheat for flour, all at a cost figure. I'll keep your horses till you can sell to suit you….You can have all the wood you-all need to burn."[106] Bodine's property allows him to contract Henry's and Ellen's labor and to lay claim to the tobacco their labor helps to produce; it also allows him to enclose and share or not share other resources like berries, eggs, and wood. Out of this relationship, Henry can hope only to gain a small amount of cash money for his labor; he will even sell the horses he owns so as not to have to pay for their fodder. While they will eat of the garden they cultivate on Bodine's land, the plot itself of course belongs to Bodine and its improved value will remain with him when the Chessers move on – as they inevitably will, in a cycle of small gains consistently offset by larger losses Ellen's story insistently represents.

Ellen expresses class animus on the basis of the disparities between her and the Bodines, further suggesting a potential critique of established property relations. After watching the Bodines drive off to church she "laughed a long laugh" at Bodine and "another long ugly laugh" at Mrs. Bodine; she turns away and sings what in Roberts's second novel features as a work song

sung by blacks in a small Kentucky town as they dig trenches for water pipes in the white neighborhoods of town: "Hounds on my track/Chicken on my back."[107] Her song, which the narrator describes as "a jargon of many phrases that were remembered for the pictures they preserved or the tones the carried," concludes, "Oh, Brother Andrew have you got a G fiddle string?/Oh, Brother Andrew, have you got a G string?" In *My Heart and My Flesh* (1927), Roberts's second novel, the song goes on like this: "Nigga, nigga, what can you do?/I can line a track,/Pull a jack;/I can pick and shovel too."[108] Ellen's song in this context complements the song of "Fair Elender" she sings in the next chapter, and, as Michael Cohen's arguments make it possible to imagine, can be understood as another ballad mediating a fantasized primitivity: "Ballads are figurations for the popular that depend on prior assumptions of their archaism and outdatedness; their cultural value comes in part from an implicit belief that they have endured against rather than over time."[109] In fact, throughout the rest of the novel, Roberts intersperses African American ballads with Anglo-Saxon ones, and their commingling suggests the manner in which the ballad helps to align a variety of peripheral cultures with a colonizing one to which the peripheral cultures form a primitive past. Even better, the commingling suggests that the Anglo-Saxon primitivity Ellen voices is also an African American primitivity; she channels them both for Roberts's representational ends. Her song suggests structural similarities between her position and that of black tenant farmers in the Jim Crow south, claiming or appropriating for Ellen a class animus mediated by race.

Ellen extends her critique of extant property relations by justifying theft. As she walks, Ellen imagines stealing an egg, the thought coming back repeatedly as a fugue strain or burden to her observations as she wanders through the pastures: "If only she had an egg, cool and juicy. You could slip in your hand and take an egg….your hand would slip into the straw and there

would be the egg….Your hand would glide in over the straw and you would hardly know when it happened, she thought, and then the egg would be running down your throat."[110] Theft is clearly on Ellen's mind as an appealing and almost volitionless possibility. Later, this sensual, body-justified fantasy turns into something more aggressive and volitional. When Mrs. Bodine snipes at Ellen about the blackberries, Ellen fumes, "I could steal all she's got and she'd never know, if I was of a mind to. I could get all she's got some night if I'd set my mind that way….I could take all the blackberries she's got and she'd never know when."[111] While a picture may belong on one's "own" wall, blackberries and the other plant and animal life they metonymize seem to suggest a bounty that should or could be freely available to all, a bounty experienced by Ellen phenomenologically as the nonhuman world.

But, as the uneasy slippage between Anglo-Saxon and African American ballad suggests, in its resemblance to what Martin (above) calls the simultaneously "universalizing and nationalistic" effects of positing a common past the authorizing effects of which accrue to a particular group, Ellen's critique of private property and celebration of a Transcendental collective has limitations. Ellen's linguistic connection to the nonhuman, whereby she writes with and upon it and apprehends its addresses in linguistic form, forges a privileged relation to the nonhuman that sustains her through the journey she and her critics understand as a kind of everyman's odyssey. Writing in response to her description of the novel as an "Odyssy [sic] of man as a wanderer" in her notes, Warren, in his 1963 introduction to *The Time of Man*'s reissue, agreed that Ellen's life is "a spiritual journey, the journey of the self toward the deep awareness of identity which means peace," but he objected to the notion that Ellen's story truly belonged to every man:

> Rather, what is common to all men is the basic problem from which this story springs; the solution of the problem, as we find it here, gives the story only of those who have the

> strength to survive the shocks of the world and have the fortitude to take the inner journey by which one may learn to convert the wound into wisdom.[112]

Warren frames Ellen's problem as universal but her "solution" as highly individual; it is in her response to adversity that she forges her individuality, converting "wound into wisdom." For Warren, Roberts is valuable in her capacity to frame Ellen's fortitude and wisdom as the act of a remarkable common individual. In the field of power relations projected by Warren's critique, Ellen possesses an agency she wields in a way that makes her unique. In keeping with Warren's assessment of Roberts's interest in the exceptional and individualistic everyman, Roberts in a letter deplores Dostoevsky for neglecting to represent such people: "where in his life picture are the regular people, the people who work and make society go? In his world, people borrow money incessantly which they never intend to repay."[113] Ellen's natural, organic aesthetic practices afford her exceptional strength to suffer "the shocks of the world," and yet, crucially, never put her in the world's debt. What Ellen takes from nonhuman nature may offer her sustenance but any profit or capital she can derive from it, since real property tantalizingly refuses to congeal for her and her family, is decidedly spiritual; in the light of her and Warren's statements above, her economic precarity seems to free her to relate to the nonhuman in this particularly nutritive, material but fluid way. Even while her identity phenomenologically bleeds into her environment as it does into her children and ancestors, economically and even emotionally she remains independent, indeed never relying on the credit Dostoevsky's characters abuse: although she almost buys a sewing machine partly on credit, that plan is scuttled when she must spend the money on medicines for her final, sickly baby; she pays for Jasper's lawyer's fees by selling a calf; and she and Jasper pay for her father's funeral with their and their oldest son's savings.[114] Similarly, Ellen's experience of connection to other people is not the experience

of a broad-ranging social collective, it is primarily the experience of a racial or biological collective reminiscent of the socially homogenous collective at the center of Ransom's regionalism. While she feels a strange sympathy with her rival for Jonas's affection and with dangerous females like Amanda Swain and Esther Shuck, both of whom threaten the monogamous heteronormative order, these moments of terrifying insight serve apotropaically or disciplinarily, using a moment of identification to create juxtapose Ellen and these women. Ellen disappears into collectives only when they are homogenous, socially cohesive, and hierarchical, as when she joins in with the murmuring women behind the church or the joyous youngsters who dance and flirt, or when they are her own blood relatives. She achieves this biological or genealogical collectivity particularly in the novel's final chapter when she feels herself continuous with her aging mother – "Her mother's life merged into her own and she could scarcely divide the one from the other, both flowing continuously and mounting" – and with her children – "it came to her that these were of her, these people, but that they owned her somehow more than she owned them."[115] Ellen draws strength from a racially- and culturally-bounded collective that mediates her timelessness and the apparent naturalness of her agrarian labor, necessitated by a particular set of economic relations that prevent her and her family from accruing capital.

Despite Ellen's early impulses to appropriate property through acts of theft justified by the expropriations and wrongful enclosures facilitated by capitalistic notions of private property, Ellen's behaviors throughout the remainder of the novel, when she has passed out of childhood and into sexual maturity, advance a more traditional discourse on private property. Despite her antagonism to the Bodines in her childhood, as an adult Ellen functions as a stabilizing member of the extant economic order, both producing enormous amounts of (largely appropriated) labor

and reproducing a (poor, itinerant) laboring class. But what are we to make of the tension between Ellen's output (both labor and children, of which she has five, losing only one as an infant) on one hand and her ongoing poverty on the other? And what are we to make of the close interplay between Ellen's sexual propriety and the property she represents and makes possible for others but never seems able to stabilize for herself? Roberts attributes to Ellen a seemingly natural impulse and capacity to accumulate capital through her unstinting labor and through apparatuses like the trunk in which she banks Jasper's money throughout their courtship, but also through her unflagging bourgeois propriety: Ellen models and makes possible the stable, normative heterosexual monogamy and the nuclear family Giovanna Proccaci (1991) identifies as a means whereby the modern political state disciplinarily produces a modern labor force characterized by a cooperative, docile lower class. The poor exist in opposition to and alongside what Proccaci calls a pauper class which, in its recourse to premodern and economically non-rational-individualist modes of sociality and production (kinship networks, blood feuds, indigence, nonacquisitiveness coupled with an improvidence with available resources), threatens capitalism's imperative to produce a hungry labor force or industrial reserve army free (of any other property so that they are compelled) to sell labor power in the market place. For Proccaci, the modern political economy's institutionalization and administration of poverty provides "a means of stabilizing individuals and breaking down the old systems of kinship" so as to make possible "a grid for reading social relations, a system which serves at once to canalize them and to invent new paths of circulation that are more 'orderly' and more decipherable" than those of a premodern economic order.[116] However, despite the ways in which Ellen acts as a node of property accumulation through her disciplined, hygienic acts that recall to mind Roberts's interest in "the people who work and make society go," rather than those who rely on late

capitalist financial instruments like credit, real property seems to fly away from Ellen as a result of her close and authentic relation to nonhuman nature and to labor. Ellen's close affiliation with nonhuman nature – her natural reading – seems closely linked to her "natural propriety," her seemingly natural middle-class impulses, the domestic and sexual hygiene she regularly practices and enforces. Ellen's propriety is part of the work Roberts does to romanticize Ellen's economic alienation, framing it as a feature of her authenticity or autochthony, but it also acts a blind for the property she holds in her race, property mediated by and through Roberts's writing.

Nonhuman nature may exude specifically literary language in the Ransomian fantasy, but such language is also mediated by economic and domestic propriety in Roberts's narrative. When Ellen is still at the Bodine's, puberty and a desire for middle-class status, understood as the capacity to own private property, arrive at the same time for Ellen. Just as "signs of woman began to appear on her meager body," she begins to hope for "[t]hings to put in drawers and drawers to put things in," an aphoristic description of the bourgeois propriety she fleshes out further down the page:

> Her mother would sit in a gay chair on a gallery sewing a seam, the little stitches falling up and down, her mother saying gentle things. Or even suppose they were poor, then she would be sitting with her hair clean and combed, and she would call out, 'Ellen come see the sparks, they're in the chimney a-flyen like wild geese here and yon' or 'Come look at the cherry tree; it's like a little girl dressed up for summer.[117]

Leisure, gentility, cleanliness, and even the capacity to speak in figures intersect with private property in Ellen's mind exactly when she reaches a kind of sexual maturity or sexual availability. Here we see a Ransomian aesthetics organically internal to a rural and agrarian mode of production, its metaphors doing the modest and regionalist labor of linking sparks to geese, blossoms to little girls in the summer.

Roberts again superimposes notions of interiority, private property, and sexual circulation during Ellen's courtship with the man who marries her, Jasper Kent. The Chessers have left a comfortable position at the Wakefields', the narrative suggests, in part because of Henry's restlessness and in part because of the Chessers' desire to help their only surviving daughter (Ellen's six older brothers and sisters died in infancy and childhood) overcome a double shock: Ellen's coming upon the body of a female neighbor who has committed suicide presumably over her husband's philandering and Ellen's own devastating heartbreak at the hands of Jonas Prather. (That Ellen's first love interest, Joe Trent, at the Bodine's farm, has a first name so similar to Jonas and a last name so similar to Kent further suggests the inevitability of Ellen's fate, comprised of repeating natural cycles of want and a meager plenty: Joe Trent, Jonas Prather, and Jasper Kent). In their new home, the third of the novel, Ellen is gifted with nested interiorities. She has her own room and within that room a trunk:

> Ellen found a delight in the snug dry room into which the rain could not come. She would go through the door with a keen rush of sense and, closing the door behind her, she would look about at the enclosing walls while a quiver of content would sweep over her nerves and gather deep in her mind. Her bed stood along one wall and a small wooden trunk which she had bought from the peddler stood along another. The key of the trunk lay on the shelf before the clock print.[118]

In her enclosure, marked by but removed from time (a previous tenant's clock has left a "print" of the clock's shape on the wall, making time a present absence in the room), Ellen can be alone and cognizant of a personal distinctness identical with an (as yet unrealized) capacity to own things, which is tantamount to keeping them hidden and private and to cordoning them off from other people. In fact, Ellen associates her early memories of her schoolmate Fanny B. with the trunk: "a fleeting identity with Fanny B., whom she had not remembered for many years, would come to her when she took the key from its hiding place and unlocked her trunk in the

white-washed room or when she saw the secret security of the inside of the trunk revealed."[119] Initially, then, the trunk serves as an occasion for and symbol of identity and interiority as a kind of personal property, one linked at least in fantasy with literacy acquisition.

But the first material use Ellen makes of her trunk is not for herself but for Jasper, who works on the nearby Wingate farm for a widow "in a lasting quarrel with her son, Albert, because old Wingate when he died left all the property to his wife during her life, and because Albert tried to force his mother to give him a part."[120] Jonas enjoys a favorable contract with Mrs. Wingate: he farms her land and the two "shar[e] the profits equally," but Albert's interference motivates Jonas to hoard capital, as when he first gives Ellen "[a] little money I wish you would keep by for me." Presented with the money, Ellen "had taken the bills from his hand before she knew what he wished, had let him thrust them into her palm and close her hand over them. The sum, eight dollars, seemed very large as she counted the bills over. She put them in her locked trunk, and laid the key safely on its shelf."[121] In this sexualized exchange, Ellen incorporates Jasper's money in the trunk as her body's proxy; she finds a suitor who fulfills the injunctions of the tenant women Ellen overhears at a dance near Wakefields', insisting that "[a] good provider is what a body wants first and last. A man that's got it in his head to own a place and some property," since "[b]eyond that under their shirts they're all just alike. In the dark you couldn't know one from the next."[122] Ellen rejects this practical, cynical advice when she repudiates a previous suitor whose steadiness and economic ambition causes Ellen to fantasize about their married life as a scene of monetary production: as his wife, she pictures herself "gathering in eggs and trading them for coins and spending the coins for bright new machines that would go clickety-clack across the sparkling meadows."[123] Despite the appeal of a prosperous farm "where fowls snapped up nourishing corn and turned it into profits," Sebe

leaves Ellen feeling "homely and degraded when she was with him for he enkindled nothing within her and thus gave her no beauty."[124] In Jonas's orgasmic deposit of bills and coins into her hand and by them into her trunk, Jonas unites an ability to provide property with an ability to produce bodily desire. Importantly, Jonas seems to offer Ellen the opportunity to align sexual desire and the capacity to accumulate property in excess of the alienated labor that undergirds her metaphysical connection with and emergence from nonhuman nature. Property, agricultural labor, and sexual hygiene merge.

Roberts again suggests the possibility of fusing autochthony, agricultural labor, the money form, and sexuality when, in the ultimate act of courtship, Jonas "hoes" his way across a field to her, offering to take on for free the farm's heavy labor while her father recuperates from a broken leg. As she works, Ellen's "body and mind were of the earth, clodded with the clods; the strength of her arms and her back and her thighs arose out of the soil, the clods turned upon themselves to work back into their own substance endlessly," and soon an echo of her own hoe turns into "another hoe at work, drawing nearer, and then a shadow began to creep toward her down the row and she saw that Jasper Kent had come to the field….When he came up to her he stopped and looked at her and laughed a little, as if he knew that the conveyance of his arrival there had been the hoe."[125] After offering to take on the labor, he "took some bills from his pocket and handed them to her, saying, 'Another piece of money I wish you'd put away for me. Sold a little truck.'"[126] Ellen takes the money and as she gardens feels its physical presence as a version of Jasper's: "Now she dropped the peas into the basket and felt Jasper's money in the pocket of her skirt, lying against her thigh."[127] In this passage, money serves as a natural part of an economy of desire, emerging spontaneously at the intersection of bodily passion and bodily labor, and incorporated easily into the trunk as proxy for Ellen's person and personhood.

Besides successfully yoking physical passion to nonindustrialized agricultural labor, Ellen also acts as a bulwark against sexuality that is not well-tethered to productive heteronormativity. Over the course of the novel, Ellen bears witness to three illicit affairs, each of which results in a rupture or haunting of the social order. In the case of Scott MacMurtrie and Amanda Swain, whose affair causes Cassie MacMurtrie's suicide, Ellen, who comes upon a disheveled Amanda in the MacMurtrie's barn in the course of caring for her turkeys, imagines Amanda bearing a child who subsequently lives in the barn:

> Its image would arise unbidden, a phantom, a naked child of no sex, having a slim long face and a mouth that shut into a thin line and hair in a tumble of curl on its forehead….It would catch the lizards if they ventured into the doorway and eat their lank sides, and in the evening after the lamp was lit, hearing the whippoorwill's call, the lonely quiver and last of the notes was like a thong, and she would think, 'Mandy Cain's brat is a-cryen.[128]

Sexless and lizard-eating, the phantasmagoric child makes itself known to Ellen in a bird's call she experiences as physical pain. Amanda's phantom baby seems to anticipate the actual baby Jonas has with the prostitute Jule Nestor. Although Ellen absolves him of the affair, her awareness of the baby's existence – "a child that looked like Jonas, nursing Jule Nestor's dirty milk and lying in Jule Nestor's foul bed" – ultimately compels Jonas to elope with another girl ignorant of his failing.[129] Both of these unplaced, dirty babies further anticipate Ellen's final baby, Chick, who appears to have been damaged by the bitterness that arises between Jasper and Ellen when Jasper takes up with another dangerously unaffiliated female, Esther Shuck, who is "free to come and go, uncommitted" with impertinent questions and "obscene stories to tell."[130] His liaison with Esther infects his speech, causing Jasper to "cry out strange words in his sleep, lewd words and angered curses spoken out of some torment."[131] Undisciplined sexuality produces obscene language and curses, the opposite of the literary language Ellen puts in her

mother's mouth (sparks like geese, blossoms like little girls) and the primitivizing, ennobling ballads Roberts puts in Ellen's mouth. Jasper's betrayal fills Ellen with murderous rage and strange sexualized fantasies in which Esther instructs her to kill her baby:

> Esther Shuck, her way of crawling about in the thicket, turning herself into a sow; her dark hair; her wide jaws and deep hips: "a little red stringy brat, look at it!" this was Esther. She knew the whole of Esther's way; she could gather her together; she knew her in her own mind, saw her in bestial postures in a swift picture, as sharp as a lightning flash on a dark sky: "a sharp crack on the head with a stick of stovewood and bury it along with the chicken guts and feathers out behind the ash hopper.[132]

It is a testament to the force of Ellen's sexual hygiene that Jasper and Ellen recommit to each other and to their role as parents over the suffering and death of the sickly baby, upon whom the whole family – Jasper in particular – dotes.[133] In this way, Ellen repeatedly repudiates and deflects illicit sexualities that would disrupt or fragment the nuclear family and stable, legible lines of kinship. Just as Ellen spontaneously embodies and expresses the character of her region, she spontaneously expresses a propriety consonant with stable property and social relations. Ellen is a person "who makes the world go."

Ellen's natural performance of middle-class sexual propriety, closely aligned with her autochthony and natural reading, makes it possible for the family to endure as an aesthetic/emotional/economic unit despite the iterative and often institutionally-inflicted financial setbacks that prevent the Kents from rising in class status. Vagaries that seem as inevitable as seasonal variations but that are in fact consistently mediated by institutions of social administration repeatedly consume the capital the Kents accrue. While accumulated sums go to pay for Henry's burial, Chick's doctor, and for the Kents' wedding, the deepest and most detrimental incursions into their capital occur because of Jasper's alleged involvement in two barn burnings. The first, the Wingates', compels Jasper and Ellen to move away from St. Lucy's

and involves a drawn-out and costly court case (Ellen must sell a calf to pay the lawyer) which though it results in Jasper's exoneration on the strength of Henry's testimony nonetheless damages his reputation such that near the novel's end, when the barn of a man who has recently had a public altercation with him, Jasper is immediately blamed. Arson, and particularly barn-burning, is a crime against the accumulated property of a landowner, and, as Alfred Smith (1985) argues in his analysis of crime statistics in northern Georgia during the years of Reconstruction and the New South, "generally constituted a means by which the poor and the propertyless could strike out against those who dominated a racist and economically exploitative society."[134] Jasper appears to be innocent in both cases: in the first, he inadvertently knocks over a lamp during a fight with Albert, and in the second, the children aver that he never left the farm the night of the burning. Still, the novel leaves open the possibility that he is guilty, and whether or not he committed the deeds, it is bruited about that he has. In the second case, Jasper's alleged crime brings a lynch mob to the cabin in the dead of night, resulting in a scene Roberts depicts in mutedly racialized terms, like Ransom when he imagines an Old South not at war with its economic foundations, acknowledging and disavowing the inextricability of race and economic relations (particularly) in the American South. Roberts represents the scene in this way:

> The cold of the night streamed in at the opened door, and many great hooded shapes, men, had dragged Jasper from the bed. The creatures wore *black* cloths over their faces. They had carried Jasper out at the door, and "The Barn-Burner!" was in the chaos of their yells and cries, rose out of their tramping clamor. "Bring out that Barn-Burner! Hang to this-here limb! No, whips this time. Get back offen the road! Let the whips!" Their feet sopped incessantly in the mud and churned the soft dooryard to a wallow. Then the lashes fell like a swift hail, a lash and then another hard upon it….Jasper was down where he had been flung, a *white shape* in the *dark of the mud*, and the *black creatures* with the whips were standing and turning about, a circle of cleared ground left about the *white of the mud* in which the whips could play. The clamor and the scene moved swiftly; "The Barn-Burner! Give fifty more!"[135]

Ellen's response, which in fact dispels the mob, redoubles and reiterates the strangely mobile imagery of black and white:

> She came with hard words and a deep malediction, laying curse on curse, speaking into the *black rag faces* without fear, careless of what came to her for it. "You get offen him," she said. "You *white-trash*! Rags on your faces….I know the last one. I could call out your names.[136]

The "black creatures" with "black rag faces" are "white trash"; the mud in which Jasper, a "white shape," wallows, is both "dark" and "white." Roberts racializes Jasper and his attackers, and while the scenario stages a possible inversion of the race relations that would typically characterize a lynching in early-twentieth-century Kentucky, the "creatures" being black and Jasper being a "white shape," the scenario also hints at the displacement such an inversion stages: the mud (both dark and white) racializes Jasper, and Ellen's denunciation recodes the attackers as "white trash" instead of "black creatures." The violent attack on Jasper again causes the Kents to abandon their current contract, absconding at moonrise with all they can carry, moving "somewheres far out of hearen of this place," leaving them in the novel's final line exactly as Ellen was in the novel's first line: "They asked no questions of the way but took their own turnings."[137]

Or does the Kents' ineluctable poverty and itinerancy register as an instance of a romanticized poverty (implicitly understood as black and in this passage fleetingly named as such) making possible literary creativity (implicitly understood as white)? The day after Lobe Baker's barn burns, immediately after insisting to each other that "Pap wasn't off this place for two days, three," the children's conversation turns to balladry: "'A fire at night against the sky is a sight to see,' Nannie said. 'Last night it was. Like the end of the world. Like the song, Cast on Water. Scotland to burn, all Scotland in the song.'"[138] As we saw earlier, Ellen's life arises from

and produces ballads, a representational strategy whereby Roberts frames her as part of a primitive prehistory of Kentucky that exists alongside, if partitioned within, a modern industrializing nation. Nannie's brother introduces the modern academic gesture of approaching ballads as a form of historical knowledge, making it possible to imagine such an approach as a spontaneous and natural impulse:

> "I aim to know songs and about the things in songs," Dick said, speaking softly. "I aim to know more than I can now think about or tell." "Mammy can sing you a heap of songs herself," Hen said. "You could learn a heap from Mammy." "I already know all Mammy knows. And I want better. And more. I want more than songs. And I want better than Bangum and the Boar and Mary Go and Call and Lady Nancy Belle. Better than any you'd name….I want songs I never yet heard. There must be better songs, a hundred maybe, songs to tell you all you want to know about the world…. And I want books to know and read over and over. I aim to have some of the wisdom of the world, or as much as ever I can get a hold on. There's a heap of wisdom in books, it's said, all the learnen of the world, and that's what I want to have, or as much as ever I can. I couldn't bear not to. I couldn't bear to settle down in life and not."[139]

Dick's longing not only connects ballads to the academic discourse contained in books that "contain the learnen of the world," it also connects the Kents' itinerancy with intellectual and creative curiosity: "I couldn't bear to settle down in life and not." The lynch scene apportions violence to racialized bodies and the creativity that such a violent rupture seems to make possible to white bodies that in Roberts's telling at least would have grown up listening to their "mammy" sing "Bangum and the Boar" and "Lady Nancy Belle." The scenario attributes a romanticized economic alienation that produces a non-instrumentalizable cultural capital to white Southern tenant farmers when most Southern tenant farmers were black and when the system of tenancy served to repackage and extend the racialized economic relations that existed under slavery, all while outsourcing the violence that animated these dominative relations to black bodies.

Perhaps the itinerant Kents, freed by racialized violence to move through the world with physical and intellectual restlessness, are a figure for what Ransom calls "the philosophical

regionalist" in "The Aesthetic of Regionalism." This personage travels by train and by car throughout the United States making what Ransom calls "acquisitions," two of which are provided by the Native Americans who live in the pueblo through which the "eastbound train out of Albuquerque" passes. The first is the primitive-pastoral tableau of tribe members beating grain, which offers Ransom spectacular and iconic imagery for representing a politics which hinge on the apparent timelessness and continuity of their culture: "it goes back to the Stone Age, and they live as they always have lived." The second is an anecdote he has heard in which a Pueblo chief expresses his suspicion of the dependencies involved in the money form: offered government relief during a drought, he refuses because, "knowing that a culture will decline and fall when the people grow out of liking for their own native products" he decides that it "would be bad for the young men."[140] Ransom concludes with satisfaction, "So this was regionalism," a quality to which he attributes Native Americans' "superiority." But Pueblo "regionalism" of course acts as a blind for Ransom's own romanticized Southern regionalism: "Regionalism is really more reasonable, for it is more natural, and whatever is natural is persistent and must be rationalized."[141] Native American regionalism darkly acts as a template and precursor for Southern regionalism, which uses an aesthetics to project and justify the dominative economic and racial relations that characterize it.

As Ransom glimpses Native American labor through the window of a passing train, he also glimpses southern African American labor. This time, he imagines "the philosophical regionalist…[t]raversing by car the east-and-west dimension of Tennessee, and the north-and-south or Delta dimension of Mississippi…mak[ing] his way to Baton Rouge, startled equally by the distinctness and by the unassimilatedness of the regions entered and crossed, finally marveling at the power of the interregional but sympathetic symbol, the South."[142] The

regionalist must pause and consider the blight of the Mississippi Delta, of which Ransom says, "it would appear that during some large part of the period from 1865 to the present day settlers have taken a holiday."[143] And in this place Ransom gives us a glimpse of the black labor he frames as exceptional but that is in fact so fundamental to the rural agrarian way of life he idealizes:

> In the Mississippi Delta he is forced to believe that the progress has been backward, as it has been in those unsouthern regions which have felt the extreme impact of the machine economy: what could be more like the homelessness of men in those regions than the life of this black population on this black land, resembling the life of a camp, forcing from nature an annual tribute of cotton and otherwise scarcely obtaining a single token of her usual favors?"[144]

Ransom here affiliates plantation-style labor with "unsouthern regions which have felt the extreme impact of the machine economy" but in the same sentence performs the signature gesture of his autochthonous regionalism, identifying "this black population" with "this black land." Ransom moves easily past this disturbing scene to his closing example, an analysis of Baton Rouge's architecture, an aesthetic endeavor mediated, as Ransom himself points out, by stones. Dismissing the state capitol because of its cosmopolitan hodge-podge of materials and styles, he confers his favor, appropriately enough, on the buildings of the university, which, when the original campus was expanded, developed "a harmonious plan…in a modified Spanish, and it suits the regional landscape, and is not altogether foreign to the regional history."[145] Ransom thus locates the origins of Southern regionalism in the Spanish colonial era and with the establishment of an institution of higher learning, one whose architecture has been expanded in keeping with the aesthetics of that colonial origin point. Regionalism, as Ransom says, may be "written where the least philosophical of regionalists may read it: in the stones."[146] The stones suitably double as natural features and cultural ones: they emblematize Southern regionalism's

deployment of natural reading, whereby nature is rallied to explain and justify differential distributions of linguistic and literary prestige. When the Kents depart at moonrise, Dick continues his encomium of books: "But the wisdom of the world is the dearest thing in life, learnen is, and it's my wish to get a hold onto some of that-there. It's found in books, is said, and that's what I know…Books is what I want. In books, it's said, you'd find the wisdom of the ages."[147] Dick naturalizes the desire for formal learning, "the wisdom of the ages," and Roberts locates this desire in an Anglo-Saxon tenant farmer. Dick transmutes Ellen's reading of nonhuman nature into a newly academic natural reading; through him Roberts positions her own novel, which narrates an authenticating primitive history of an extant power structure, as part of that ageless wisdom.

---

[1] Though the Southern Agrarians' manifesto, *I'll Take My Stand*, contains the essays of twelve men, in this chapter I will focus only on Ransom's and Davidson's, with passing reference to Robert Penn Warren's. As others have pointed out, the collection itself represented a diversity of views, and many who contributed did not share Davidson's and Ransom's pro-Old South, conservative politics. The Agrarians I have in mind in particular are Ransom, Davidson, Warren (who, as we will see, had an interest in Roberts's work), and Tate (with whom Roberts corresponded). *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006 (1930)).
[2] Martin, Meredith, "'Imperfectly Civilized': Ballads, Nations, and Histories," *ELH* 82.2(2015), 348.
[3] Hall, Wade. Introduction to *The Time of Man*, by Elizabeth Madox Roberts (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), xii.
[4] Jefferson, Thomas, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 157.
[5] Westcott, Glenway, *Elizabeth Madox Roberts: A Personal Note* (New York: Viking, 1930), 9.
[6] Lovett, Robert Morss in Westcott, Glenway et al. *Elizabeth Madox Roberts: A Personal Note* (New York: Viking, 1930), 11.

[7] Ibid., 13 – 14.
[8] Quoted in Slavick, William H., "Taken with a Long-Handled Spoon: The Roberts Papers and Letters," *The Southern Review* 20.4 (1984): 756.
[9] Manganaro, Marc, *Culture, 1922: The Emergence of a Concept* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 35.
[10] Quoted in Slavick, "Taken with a Long-Handled Spoon," 755.
[11] Ibid., 768.

[12] See Whisnant, David, *All That is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). Whisnant's study focuses on three projects that aimed both to modernize and preserve Appalachian culture: the Hindman settlement school, Olive Campbell and Cecil Sharp's ballad collecting project, and a folk festival called White Top. Whisnant's overarching point is that the culture "preserved" is a culture constructed by and for the purposes of those interested in preserving it.

[13] Klotter, James, "The Black South and White Appalachia" in *The Journal of American History* 66.4 (1980), 839.

[14] Ibid., 842.
[15] Thoreau, *Week on the Concord, Walden, and Maine*, "Chesuncook," 697.
[16] Quoted in Slavick, "Taken with a Long-Handled Spoon," 769.
[17] Slavick, William H., "Taken with a Long-Handled Spoon."
[18] McIlwaine, Shields, *The Southern Poor-White: From Lubberland to Tobacco Road* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), 216, xix.
[19] Warren, Introduction to *The Time of Man*, xxvii.
[20] Ibid., xix.
[21] Hinrichsen, Lisa, "Economies of Desire and the Feminine Sublime in Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Time of Man*," *Southern Quarterly* 48.3 (2011): 38 – 39.
[22] Nicolaison, Peter, "Rural Poverty and the Heroics of Farming: Elizabeth Madox Roberts's *The Time of Man* and Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*" in *Reading Southern Poverty Between the Wars, 1918-1939*, Richard Godden and Martin Crawford, eds. (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2006).
[23] Evans, Brad. *Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature 1865 – 1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 83.
[24] Warren, Robert Penn. Introduction to *The Time of Man*, by Elizabeth Madox Roberts (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), xix.
[25] Ibid., xxv – xxvi.
[26] Thoreau, Henry, *Walden* and *Resistance to Civil Government*, second edition (New York: Norton, 1992) 56.
[27] Roberts, Elizabeth Madox, *The Time of Man* (New York: Viking, 1926), 7.
[28] Ibid., 12.
[29] Ibid., 17.
[30] Thoreau, *Walden*, 75.
[31] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 11, 29.
[32] Ibid., 6.
[33] Ibid., 39.
[34] Ibid., 291 – 292.
[35] Ibid., 292.
[36] Ibid., 331.
[37] Ibid., 248.
[38] Ibid., 250.
[39] Davidson, Donald, "A Mirror for Artists" in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006 (1930)), 39.
[40] Ibid., 40.
[41] Ibid., 39.

[42] Ibid.
[43] Davidson writes, "More completely, the making of an industrialized society will extinguish the meaning of the arts, as humanity has known them in the past, by changing the conditions of life that have given art a meaning." "A Mirror for Artists," 29.
[44] Ibid., 29.
[45] Ibid., 35.
[46] Ibid., 52.
[47] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 1.
[48] Ibid., 55.
[49] Thoreau, *Walden*, 126.
[50] Ibid., 37 – 38.
[51] Ibid., 38.
[52] Ibid., 39, 40.
[53] Ibid., 38.
[54] Kappeler, Erin, "Editing America: Nationalism and the New Poetry," *Modernism* 21.4 (2014), 904.

[55] Ibid., 902. Kappeler uses these points to argue against the critical commonplace that the New Poetry and modernism more broadly represented a salutary break from a conservative, imperialist, and racist Victorian poetry.
[56] Martin, "Ballads, Nations, and Histories," 345.
[57] Ibid., 349.
[58] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 38 – 39.
[59] Ibid., 345.
[60] Ibid., 79.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 80.
[63] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 79.
[64] Ibid., 81.
[65] Ibid., 213.
[66] Ransom, John Crowe, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006 (1930)), 9.
[67] Ibid., 15.
[68] Ibid., 10.
[69] Ibid., 12.
[70] Ransom, John Crowe, "The Aesthetic of Regionalism" in *The American Review* 2. 3 (1934), 297.
[71] Ibid., 296.
[72] Ibid., 295.
[73] Ibid., 296.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 82 – 83.
[76] Ibid., 35 – 36.
[77] Fekete, John, *The Critical Twilight: Explorations in the Ideology of Anglo-American Literary Theory from Eliot to McLuhan* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 59.
[78] Ibid., 56 – 57.
[79] Ibid., 46.

[80] Ibid., 70, 68.
[81] Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Writings*, 328.
[82] Davidson, "Mirror," 53.
[83] Moten, *In the Break*.
[84] Ransom, John Crowe, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," 14.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ransom, John Crowe, "The Aesthetics of Regionalism," 308.
[88] Warren, Robert Penn, "The Briar Patch" in *I'll Take My Stand*, 261.
[89] Douglass, Frederick, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 172.
[90] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 97.
[91] Ibid., 3.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Moten, *In the Break*, 11.
[94] Ibid., 12.
[95] Ransom, *The Fugitive* 1.1 (1922), 2. Fekete (*Critical Twilight*, 52) attributes the foreword to Ransom.
[96] Thoreau, *Walden*, 56.
[97] Ibid., 24.
[98] Thoreau, *Walden*, 107.
[99] Ibid., 75.
[100] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 7.
[101] Ibid., 8.
[102] Ibid., 9.
[103] Ibid., 10.
[104] Ibid., 11.
[105] Ibid., 2 – 3.
[106] Ibid., 18 – 19.
[107] Roberts, Elizabeth Madox, *My Heart and My Flesh* (New York: Viking, 1927), 32; Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 12.
[108] Roberts, *My Heart and My Flesh*, 32.
[109] Cohen, Michael, "Getting Generic: An Introduction," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 71.2 (2016), 148.
[110] Ibid., 13.
[111] Ibid., 31.
[112] Warren, Robert Penn, Introduction to *The Time of Man*, xx – xxi.
[113] Quoted in Slavick, "Taken with a Long-Handled Spoon," 770.
[114] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 348, 313, 367.
[115] Ibid., 368, 360 – 361.
[116] Procacci, Giovanna, "Social Economy and the Government of Poverty" in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds. (Toronto: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 165.
[117] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 40.
[118] Ibid., 229.
[119] Ibid., 236.

[120] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 232. Margaret Hagood observes that leaving property to a widow and not a son is not customary amongst the tenant farmers of Appalachia. According to Hagood, amongst the people she interviews, it is customary for the man of the family to shop, since the woman does not normally come into contact with the family's money, a circumstance which Jasper and Ellen's relationship seems to revers. See Hagood, Margaret Jarman, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), 36.
[121] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 240.
[122] Ibid., 148.
[123] Ibid., 142.
[124] Ibid., 143, 127.
[125] Ibid., 250.
[126] Ibid., 250 – 251.
[127] Ibid., 252.
[128] Ibid., 138 – 139.
[129] Ibid., 157.
[130] Ibid., 304.
[131] Ibid., 334.
[132] Ibid., 342.
[133] Roberts describes Ellen's response to Jasper's affair as a sense of rigor mortis: "a curious hardness in her body, as if her life had grown solid and stiff within her flesh" (335). This stoppage of the flow of life in Ellen seems to produce a child who is "a thin wizened creature, the skin pulled gauntly over its bony face" (347). In her ethnographic/sociological study, Hagood notes how Appalachian tenant women used superstition to explain deformity in babies (Hagood, *Mothers of the South*, 123), and in this case Roberts seems to use and confirm Ellen's superstition; upon Chick's death, Ellen says, "I maybe marked him with the way I took on afore he came" (353).
[134] Smith, Alfred, "'Southern Violence' Reconsidered: Arson as Protest in Black-Belt Georgia, 1865 – 1910" in *The Journal of Southern History*, 51.4(1985), 556.
[135] Roberts, *The Time of Man*, 375, italics mine.
[136] Ibid., 376, italics mine.
[137] Ibid., 378, 382.
[138] Ibid., 373.
[139] Ibid., 373 – 374.
[140] Ransom, "Aesthetic of Regionalism," 292 – 293.
[141] Ibid., 294.
[142] Ibid., 307.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid., 308.
[145] Ibid., 309.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Roberts, *Time of Man*, 381.