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Systems of Self  
Autobiography and Affect in Secular Early America  
by  
Katie Simon

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*for Quinten Patrick McManmon*

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## **Introduction: Autobiography and Affect in Secular Early America**

The central argument of this dissertation is that American autobiographies from the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries typically promote ideological programs, and that with the rise of secularism these programs are haunted by the many negative affects they must necessarily disavow. While secularism may not yet have an adequate language for the negative affects—what used to be called sins or demons—it is true that they are everywhere present, even if we can only glimpse their traces. Autobiographical texts in early America struggle to emit these affects within a new world that no longer recognizes them.<sup>1</sup> Each of the texts I consider here embodies a particularly dense node of affective resonances, both for considering past moments in which self-narration and political/ideological programs so clearly mesh, but also for thinking through the moment we presently find ourselves in, a moment in which religious and secular world views—despite long-standing latent schisms—now seem polarized to such a degree as to form an almost “incommensurable divide” (Mahmood 64). The events of the first years of the twenty-first century—from 9/11 to the war on terror; from wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the Arab spring—make clear the need for a new paradigm, for a different language and conceptual framework that could help negotiate, rather than replicate, this intense polarity. This dissertation contributes to recent intellectual debates about the role of religion and secularism in a post-9/11 global economic world, even as it traces the debate back to earlier affective moments of self-narration in early America, moments when the divide was just beginning to emerge. The writers in my study—Gustavus Vassa, Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, and Mary Baker Eddy—all found themselves straddling this crucial emergent divide between secular and religious models of self-transformation. They actively sought new modes of expression in a secular world, and worked to reconstitute and reconfigure their systems of self and their modes of self-narration and expression to cover terrain that no longer had a clear language or categories. I believe we can learn much from the messiness of this process, and from the constitutive exclusions their systems and narrations necessarily entail.

As Saba Mahmood points out, “[a]ny academic discussion of religion in the present moment must countenance the shrill polemics that have become the hallmark of the subject today” (64). The “shrill polemics” she cites here suggest that it is structures of feeling, as opposed to debatable concepts or ideas, that give the present moment its unique atmosphere.<sup>2</sup> But getting at the “feelings” underlying the polarized discussion can be difficult in that the very terms we have to discuss the topic force us down dead roads that depict religion as unthinking emotion and

secularism as unfeeling thought. Two faulty assumptions have by now been widely discredited by scholars theorizing secularism. The first discredited assumption is that the secularization narrative is true. The secularization narrative or thesis, long promoted by historians, critical theorists, and philosophers, posits not only that the world in general has increasingly become more secular and most certainly will continue to do so, but also that this process would install an apogee of progress and emancipation for all. According to Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, the “developmental aspect of the narrative” first came into question under the scrutiny of postcolonial and post-1960s critics, and in the context of a world-wide recession in the 1970s. “Were postcolonial nations ‘developing’ through the adoption of modern capitalism? . . . for many people in many parts of the world this narrative did not accurately describe their realities” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 9).

The second widely held assumption taken to task by most theorists of secularism (Taylor; Brown; Jakobsen and Pellegrini; Mahmood) is that secularism is not only binaristically opposed to religion, but also that in that binary “secularism represents rationality, universality, modernity, freedom, democracy, and peace” and that “religion (unless thoroughly privatized) can only present a danger to those who cherish those values” (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 9). Here the affective atmosphere of “shrill polemics” can be seen to reside in the high stakes attached to any discussion in which religion is mentioned or secularism is queried. For to question the deeply entrenched conflation of secularism with universal progress, or to query binaristic definitions that admit no nuance, in this atmosphere, is tantamount to attacking values like peace, freedom, and intellectual critique. It seems particularly crucial to understand terms like religion and secularism now, and to think through these narratives and assumptions, in light of the irrationality of the discussion on all sides. To do so, we may need to think about the key terms mobilized in this dissertation: affect, secularism, and autobiography.

In considering the topic of the “shrill polemics” underlying the present discussion of religion and secularism, for example, and in order to understand the various earlier historical moments this dissertation focuses on, we need to move away from thinking of emotion as the privatized domain of individuals and consider the very different valence that the term “affect” evokes. The term “affect” is meant much more broadly than the term “feelings”—it is a capacious term whose theoretical implications are only recently being explored, and much work remains to be done.<sup>3</sup> Affects are energies mobilized by ideas or underlying structures of thought; they are “transmittable” from one body to another; they are physical presences sensed in a room, a crowd, or a text; they cannot be reduced to the container of the bounded individual, nor can they be understood merely within the framework of psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, to engage with the critical discourses of affect theory, as this project does, is to ask “[h]ow might emotion—taking on then

decidedly affectual qualities—be reconsidered without requiring place-positions for subject and object as the first condition?” (Seigworth and Gregg 8).

From the mid-eighteenth century on, American autobiographical texts attempt to organize emotion for the purpose of reasonable, rational self-reform, self-consciously adopting what critics have only recently been theorizing as “secular affect” (Mahmood). Moreover, they do so in a way that explodes the commonsense distinctions between subject and object that a genre like the autobiography would seem to rely upon. Like earlier spiritual autobiographies in which religious affect structures a teleology of conversion, these systems of self, as I call them, are meant to sway converts to the cause, be it capitalist accumulation, secular reason, or the promotion of nationalistic agendas. Systems of self bundle subjectivity, ideology, and affect into attractive lures, creating model subjects to be admired and emulated. To this end, they provide readers with concrete methods offering the promise of self-transformation, giving them practical steps to take so that they, too, can achieve the idealized secular subjectivity advertized by the autobiographical narrator.

Just as these texts mobilize affect towards teleological ends, I argue, they are themselves mobilized by the affect they must necessarily deflect, a move that is all but invisible when one adopts a critical lens assuming that the secular stands binaristically opposed to the religious. The constitutive disavowals of secular and religious modes of being give systems of self an alternative structure, one that can contradict or compete with the sequential presentation of a life story advertising teleological ends. Haunting the ideology of progress in these autobiographical texts are the traces of unrecoverable losses, wells of unacknowledged, incalculable affect. I read these traces as the sorrows that capitalism, industrialism, and the rise of secular civil society leave in their wake, and as the aspirations for a better world than the narrative of secular progress would seem to provide. American literature is replete with the figure of the optimistic, idealistic, and earnest autobiographical narrator—a subject able to ingeniously and benevolently reflect the infinite possibilities of secular progress. My study argues that such optimistic autobiographical presentations are often constituted in tandem with an intense negativity driven underground but glimmering from within the subterranean depths of the text, and emanating from the structures of the systems themselves. Within these positively formulated capitalist success stories and ideological programs, I find the residue of disavowed resentment, anxiety, fear, misanthropy, suffering, and desperation.

The autobiographical narrator of Gustavus Vassa/Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative*, the topic of the first chapter, invents himself as a product of the disavowals required by Enlightenment progress. Equiano would seem, from one view, the quintessential secular man, an ex-slave whose capitalist accumulation has allowed him to buy himself and make himself anew. He fashions himself, however,



using the terms of religious conversion. More particularly, he utilizes the topos of uncontainability offered by the Reverend George Whitefield, the widely popular superstar divine who had cultural capital on both sides of the Atlantic. Equiano's Whitefieldian Methodism valorizes as superior a wretched, debased subjectivity; Equiano then uses that superior/debased structure both to reify his own political aims and to examine the constructedness of representations of piety. As such, the authenticity and earnestness of his piety, a subject of scholarly debate, seems less important than what both secular and religious modes offer him in the particular cultural moment his self-narration appears. From a cultural studies vantage point, one can begin to analyze religious belief less as the privatized contents of an individual mind, and more broadly ask questions such as: What kinds of communities get created of believing subjects? What does religious belief do in the world? Whom does it mobilize? How? In Gustavus Vassa's historical moment, Whitefieldian Methodism enabled the formation of a transnational corporate subjectivity, a coalition of black activists, whose collective voice weighed in on the key issues in its day. It also mobilized an autobiographical narration in which a debased figure "The African" could chastise his white readers as inferior and urge them to abolish the slave trade at once. To say that this voice is merely religious—or to say that these issues, primarily, are secular—is to miss the complex way they imbricate one another in his text, in his world, and in ours.

The complicated religious/secular rhetoric of *The Interesting Narrative* builds an affective bridge with white readers who are called upon to consider the power dynamics inherent in identifying with an African subject. The narrator's attainment of British subjectivity occurs as the result of the violence, sorrows, and losses involved with the transatlantic slave trade. Although he offers to make his narrative "interesting" to readers as an adventure story, the narrator repeatedly slips into acts of witness that remind readers to remember what they would rather forget: the atrocities of the slave trade and their own knowing complicity with it. In a sense, the text haunts its white readers, calling upon them to enter into an affective relationship with one of the jettisoned others whose banishment from subjectivity helps construct their own positive self-image as progressive, secular subjects.

Moreover, the reader is enjoined to enter into an intersubjective relationship with the narrator, one in which the very idea of a self-made subject embodying a particular national identity is interrogated. The affective identifications and transmission in this text marshal the reader toward a series of conversions such that the transpersonal and transnational corporate subjectivity posited by "the Africans" holds sway and contends with the "interest" of the narrative. Indeed, while recent criticism has debated the African versus the Carolinian origins of the author, I suggest that the more interesting focus is on the way the text self-consciously undermines the efficacy of national categories when considering the transatlantic slave trade. Vassa thus marshals affect to question the grounds upon which

categories of autonomous individuality, racialized personhood, and national affiliation are based. From the ruins of Western subjectivity, the narrator formulates a vision of a doubled subject and a collective diasporic subjectivity.

The second chapter furthers the consideration of secularism and affect. It locates a well of disavowed affect nervously counteracting the narrative of Enlightenment progress and the optimistic commitment to reason, industry, and science put forward in Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography*. In narrating his life story, Franklin repeatedly invokes others only to dispose of them, and he models a sense of detachment from debased others as a way of achieving economic, political, and cultural progress. To focus closely upon the logic of disposability undergirding his narrative, as I do here, revises the general critical assessment of his autobiographical persona as a bland presentation of generalized traits, meant to model benevolent citizenship through an evacuation of particularities. My reading uncovers the way that evacuated intensities of emotion haunt the text, frothing to the surface in traces. In scenes meant to advertise the narrator's ability to shed others as impediments to progress, I read a structural dependence upon enemies to assert a sense of self at all. Bound up in the self-representation of the narrator as an Enlightenment man able to keep promises, accumulate capital, and govern himself reasonably, I see a subterranean depth of unmanageable emotion. My chapter focuses, in particular, upon the animating force of resentment in *The Autobiography*. Like Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment*, Franklinian resentment expresses itself covertly; it is a reactive mode that underscores its unthinkability. The text becomes a place to settle scores and to enact an imaginary revenge years later. Readers are invited to have a laugh at the expense of those who may have stood in the way of Franklin's progress toward secular success, a success that he maps onto a national framework and posits as repeatable by following his method of self-improvement. The system of inventory-taking and self-monitoring Franklin presents, however, offers no method for removing the negative affect that haunts the idealized representation of solitary, self-sufficient, sovereign selfhood. A sense of disappointment, loss, sorrow, and incompleteness resonates from the scenes of imaginary revenge. My reading of *The Autobiography* thus expands Max Weber's view of Franklin as embodying the "spirit of industry" and "the spirit of capitalism" embedded within the Protestant ethic, by bringing forward an underlying animus and regret.

The third chapter situates Henry David Thoreau's neglected text *Cape Cod* within Atlantic Studies, arguing that his use of the hauntological sublime marks an ethico-political theory that addresses a global economic system of suffering. Thoreau's affective stance in *Cape Cod* offers a challenge to critical assumptions about Thoreau as environmentalist. Usually read for its optimistic view of moral and political reform and the possibility of transcendence, Thoreau's work in my reading expresses the failure of systems of self to enact transformation in the face of larger

transnational forces like capitalism, industrialism, and colonialism. The optimistic self-making experiment in *Walden*, with its advocacy of non-conformity, contains glimmers of an underlying aggressivity, misanthropy, and fear of the body. I argue that the quiet desperation disavowed in *Walden* coalesces in the sublime landscape of the later *Cape Cod*, where the violence of shipwrecks is understood not as a natural disaster but as part of the wider global economic and political system, whose catastrophes repeatedly wash up on the shore. Driven by a belief in the essential alterity of the human subject, the detached, autobiographical narrator in Thoreau's later text views a coastline strewn with human wreckage. His desperation, projected onto an apocalyptic landscape, is palpable though overtly disavowed. Watching corpses decompose in the sand, thinking about the conditions that led to the relocation and waste of so many domestic workers and indentured servants from Ireland, Thoreau abandons his former faith in systems of self to meditate morbidly on the efficacy of death, the ultimate transformer. Reading *Walden* back through the lens of *Cape Cod*, I uncover the structural importance of disavowed affect and a hauntological argument for a kind of detachment that would not simply mimic the cruelty of an actuarial system. Thoreau here advocates "standing aloof" for the purpose of social justice, and offers a radical critique of the affect of philanthropy against which he reacts. Fragments, debris, and dead bodies in his text are the inassimilable waste capitalism and an actuarial perspective would create. He models a secularized spirituality and an ethical stance that would be able to grasp the wider implications of the disasters he sees flitting by.

In the fourth chapter, I consider the influence of New England Transcendentalism and Franklinian self-invention on the autobiographical and theological work of Mary Baker Eddy, founder of nineteenth-century new religion Christian Science. A self-made woman, Eddy also used her autobiography to promote a system of self that promised readers the kind of material success she had achieved. Eddy authored a best-selling theological text, founded a college, and presided over a lucrative publishing empire. Critical of orthodox religion, she offers a theological system based on the science of demonstration, urging spiritual understanding rather than blind faith. A progenitor of positive thinking, Eddy's system would heal others and empower them by repeating the idea that "there is no reality in matter." The idealism and utopianism of her project, however, are tempered by its constitutive exclusions. Negativity is banished from her program as erroneous, unreal, a delusory product of a mesmerized, unenlightened mind. And yet the negative persists in her work and in the historiography of her life, a disavowed affect in the underbelly of her positive system of self.

This work participates in a growing body of scholarship that seeks to critically assess the project of secularization. One goal is to open up the discussion beyond the limited binaristic discussion of belief versus reason, a discussion that flattens particularities and stunts critical inquiry. Indeed, in all of the life narratives

discussed here I find a dynamic tension between religious and secular modes, and I suggest that they mutually inform one another in theoretically interesting ways. Through a methodology of close-reading and careful historicization, I argue that systems of self designed to promote an ideology of secular success are saturated with the affects they disavow. I offer a theory of the disavowed affects of secularism in the hope that scholars working in a variety of fields including American literature, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Anglophone studies, and hemispheric American studies will find it useful.

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span parallels the life of this project, will be relieved that it's done (though he's never known anything different). The presence of these two graces me daily, and makes this all worthwhile. Let's play ball.





Abstract

Systems of Self: Autobiography and Affect in Secular Early America

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This dissertation argues that American autobiographies from the eighteenth through the nineteenth centuries typically promote ideological programs, and that with the rise of secularism these programs are often haunted by the negative affects they must necessarily disavow. Through the lens of affect theory, I interrogate the false binary between religion and secularism in autobiographical texts that, from the vantage point of the present moment, seem particularly crucial. The writers in my study—Gustavus Vassa (or Olaudah Equiano), Benjamin Franklin, Henry David Thoreau, and Mary Baker Eddy—all found themselves straddling an emergent divide between secular and religious models of self-transformation. They actively sought new modes of expression in a secular world, and worked to reconstitute and reconfigure their systems of self and their modes of self-narration to cover terrain that no longer had a clear language or certain categories. This dissertation contributes to recent intellectual debates about the role of religion and secularism in a post-9/11 global economic world, a debate made all the more shrill in the context of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the War of Terror, and the Arab Spring. And yet it does so by tracing the debate back to an earlier moment when the process may have been messier, though the debate less polarized. This study mobilizes affect theory in an attempt to get at the public feelings engendered by autobiographical self-portraits consciously attempting to create others in their own molds. It seeks to trace a connection between nation, post-nation, and self-narration in an increasingly secular world.

From the mid-eighteenth-century on, American autobiographical texts attempt to organize emotion for the purpose of reasonable, rational self-reform, self-consciously adopting what critics have only recently been theorizing as “secular affect” (Mahmood). Moreover, they do so in a way that explodes the commonsense distinctions between subject and object that a genre like the autobiography would seem to rely upon. Like

earlier spiritual autobiographies in which religious affect structures a teleology of conversion, these systems of self, as I call them, are meant to sway converts to the cause, be it capitalist accumulation, secular reason, or the promotion of nationalistic agendas. Systems of self bundle subjectivity, ideology, and affect into attractive lures, creating model subjects to be admired and emulated. To this end, they provide readers with concrete methods offering the promise of self-transformation, giving them practical steps to take so that they, too, can achieve the idealized secular subjectivity advertized by the autobiographical narrator.

Just as these texts mobilize affect towards teleological ends, however, they are themselves mobilized by the affect they must necessarily deflect, a move that is all but invisible when one adopts a critical lens assuming that the secular stands binaristically-opposed to the religious. The constitutive disavowals of secular and religious modes of being give systems of self an alternative structure, one that can contradict or compete with the sequential presentation of a life story advertizing teleological ends. Haunting the ideology of progress in these autobiographical texts are the traces of unrecoverable losses, wells of unacknowledged, incalculable affect. This study reads these traces as the sorrows that capitalism, industrialism, and the rise of secular civil society leave in their wake, and as the aspirations for a better world than the narrative of secular progress would seem to provide. American literature is replete with the figure of the optimistic, idealistic, and earnest autobiographical narrator—a subject able to ingeniously and benevolently reflect the infinite possibilities of secular progress. This project argues that such optimistic autobiographical presentations are often constituted in tandem with an intense negativity driven underground—but glimmering out from within the subterranean depths of the text, emanating from within the structures of the systems themselves.



## Chapter 1

### The Importance of Being Equiano: Authenticity and Earnestness in Gustavus Vassa's *Interesting Narrative*

In two disparate critical discussions surrounding *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself* (1789), the idea of a “real” Equiano is key. In the first debate I’ll consider here, scholars invested in an African Equiano read his text as an authentic historical piece of non-fiction, the earliest extant account of the Biafran interior written by a self-proclaimed native, and one of the only accounts of the middle passage written by an African who endured it. This African origin story was contested as early as 1792, with two contemporary reviewers claiming that Vassa was actually from the Dutch West Indies.<sup>4</sup> More recently, Vincent Carretta put forth the argument that Vassa was born in South Carolina, and that he “may have invented rather than reclaimed an African identity” (*Biography* xiv). “If so,” writes Carretta, “Equiano’s literary achievements have been vastly underrated” (xiv).<sup>5</sup>

Though most scholars agree that we will probably never resolve the issue of the natal origins of Vassa, the debate continues, and critical investments in the idea of either a “real” African or an “invented” African identity run high, in part because the implications for generic and scholarly classification are so profound. If Vassa were proven to be of South Carolinian birth, so Carretta’s argument goes, we could no longer categorize *The Interesting Narrative* as an autobiographical memoir, nor could we consider the African sections historically accurate, particularly if we presume, with Philip Lejeune, that what constitutes autobiography is an exact convergence between the “vital statistics” of the author and the autobiographical narrator. Were we to prove that Equiano was actually born in South Carolina, a number of historical studies using *The Interesting Narrative* as evidence would presumably no longer retain the same status. Whatever historical status the text might lose, however, our estimation of its worth as literature, Carretta suggests, would increase—literature being a province where “invention” is prized and imaginative renderings hold sway. Gustavus Vassa’s fabrication of the literary figure “Equiano, The African” would make his narrative even more important for the African American literary canon than it already is, consolidating its status as both literary event and ur-text in a significant lineage of North American literary productions, and making its author American and his text the first fictional account by an African American.<sup>6</sup>

In what follows, I would like to problematize critical investment in a certain kind of mimetic textual reality that I see crystallized in this debate. For while I agree with Carretta that Equiano's literary achievements deserve to be considered to their fullest, I don't think an appreciation of his text as literature requires a disproving of its African origins and its veracity as a piece of historical non-fiction.<sup>7</sup> Carretta's formulation relies upon an investment in what Derrida calls "the law of genre"—the policing of the limits of a particular form, stressing its "norms and interdictions" (56). As Jacques Derrida points out, the supposition of generic norms or laws is an act predicated upon the presumption of transgression; a law is unimaginable if one cannot envision a "counter-law" (57). This "axiom of impossibility" of genre normativity, as Derrida calls it, is built into any autobiographical project, but Gustavus Vassa's text confronts and thematizes the issue overtly.

If we contextualize the issue of the mimetic reality of *The Interesting Narrative* within a larger discussion of authenticity in autobiography studies, and within the slave narrative in particular, we will begin to apprehend the difficulty this text presents to the law of genre that Carretta seems to call upon. Generic classifications reliant upon modes of national, ethnic, or genealogical realism, or upon Eurocentric notions of a self as a singular, sovereign individual—unhampered by intersubjective connections with others—are often inhabited partially, imperfectly, or even critically by colonized subjects. Indeed, when colonized or slave subjects use the idioms of the conqueror to describe themselves, the resultant self-representation may bear a vexed relationship to truth claims about a core or essential idea of "self."<sup>8</sup>

As my own reading of *The Interesting Narrative* will stress, however, some of the "interest" of Equiano for literary studies lies in the particular ways that his autobiographical narrative frustrates our attempts to subject it to grids of critical intelligibility such as generic classifications. What seem like tidy abstract categories like the national subject or the individual self become troubled in this text in ways I find significant. For while this narrative moves freely among a web of discourses for constructing subjectivity, calling upon European notions of "Africanness" and ideas of whiteness, blackness, self and other, it also resignifies many of these terms considerably. It gleefully and self-reflexively mixes genres, theatrically posing a deference to the law of genre, and simultaneously flaunting a radical transgression of that law. In fact, as I will argue, *The Interesting Narrative* mobilizes many systems of self for a self-representation that exceeds the bounds of the solitary individual posited in much literary criticism,<sup>9</sup> and forces readers to reconsider the grounds of authenticity or invention upon which literary classifications like autobiography or fiction are based. Indeed, I would suggest further that Equiano's text participates in a more philosophical discussion than has previously been acknowledged. Presenting the self as a kind of fiction,<sup>10</sup> and the autobiographical narrative as a stylized performance of the many fictions of self that a life can generate under the umbrella of an authentic life story, Vassa invites readers to think about the fictions of self they themselves present.

The problem of authenticity is echoed in the second critical debate framing my reading of *The Interesting Narrative*, which takes up the issue of authenticity in relationship to the earnestness of the protagonist/narrator's piety. In this debate about the role of religion in *The Interesting Narrative*, the either/or logic embedded in contemporary North American discussions of secularism and religion is discussed within a framework of authenticity that eighteenth-century Anglophone readers would not be able to recognize. Critics square off on either side of a traditional and insufficient binary, variously arguing for a religious or a secular Equiano. However, in an era in which decorum, reason, and artificial manners were prized, the quality of "earnestness" functioned quite differently than it might for us reading about it today. Whereas earnestness today connotes a simple and straightforward idea of sincerity, to eighteenth-century readers earnestness carried resonances of fanaticism and an unreasonable overzealousness.<sup>11</sup>

In a 2001 forum on teaching Equiano in the journal *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, for example, authenticity and earnestness are crux issues as Adam Potkay, Srinivas Aravamudan, and Roxann Wheeler debate religious and secular approaches to *The Interesting Narrative*. Potkay's goal in the lead article is to test, as he puts it, the "limits of poststructuralist and especially of postcolonial . . . theory" (602) against *The Interesting Narrative*, and he uses his essay to deride neglect of what he calls "the forbidden topic" of religion in Equiano studies (609).<sup>12</sup> He clearly situates an assertion of the value of religion in the text with an argument against critical readings that emphasize the strategies of mimicry, doublevoicedness, and talking back.<sup>13</sup> However, while Potkay and others make the important point that to dismiss or oversimplify Christianity as it appears in *The Interesting Narrative* would be to denude the text of its texture, its historical context, and the meaning it may have had for many of its contemporary readers, many of these critics go further to say that religious conversion is the most compelling aspect of the narrative, or to imply that the autobiographical narrator's spiritual questions, engagement with the bible, and the "final home" he finds in Christianity are the issues critics and students alike should focus upon at the exclusion of his life as a mariner or as an entrepreneur.<sup>14</sup>

Just as a debate rages around Equiano's African origins, the discussion about the role of religion in the text registers an appeal to the mimetic reality of the text's representation of its protagonist. Eileen Razzari Elrod's argument for more attention to religion in Equiano's text, for example, centers on the question of whether Equiano was a "real" Christian, or whether or not he "invented" a professed belief to achieve his political aims. For Elrod, the issue that postcolonial readings miss is what she calls the "earnest piety" of the historical figure Equiano. Inserting the term "earnest" into the discussion, however, has the kind of oversimplifying effect that Elrod herself derides in criticism that takes a more secular approach. Elrod argues that "[i]f we take the facile view that [Equiano] is simply using religion to manipulate readers, or if we see him as simply manipulated by religion, we ignore the earnest and consistent piety that sets the

tone and establishes the purpose of the narrative” (409). This appeal to “earnestness,” like Carretta’s desire to know the exact ancestral origin of the slave author Equiano, reinforces an insufficient view of autobiographical narrative as a mimetic stand-in for the real. Indeed, as De Man, Foucault, and others have argued, autobiographical narratives, like other literary texts, achieve certain effects and create their own sense of affective reality.<sup>15</sup> In short, discourse doesn’t just reflect the world; it helps make the world. Moreover, arguing for the reality of the real in a representation of slavery is a fraught enterprise, especially when we consider that the slave trade developed a system of self based on mendacity. To insist upon an extra-textual mimesis in an ex-slave narrative is to obscure the kind of violence the slave system does to subjects and their self-concepts, to representation itself, and to the very notions of sincerity and intention animating Elrod’s project. As Cathy N. Davidson argues, the “unmaking of a coherent self is . . . what slavery is and does” (44). Thus while I agree with Elrod and Potkay that to ignore the religious themes and the conversion narrative in *The Interesting Narrative* is to dismiss one of its key features, I contest the idea that religious conversion is an apolitical or transhistorical concept, or that the only way to explore the theme of religion is through contemplating the real-life earnestness of the protagonist’s piety. In the end, the textual construction of religious piety, rather than an authentic interior state in the historical figure Vassa, is what readers are confronted with when reading this text.<sup>16</sup>

Focusing on the complicated rhetorical maneuvers in *The Interesting Narrative*, I will argue in this chapter that the text negotiates a reconfiguration of the ideas of authenticity or earnestness that currently dominate the critical debates around Equiano. Specifically, in direct addresses and interpolations of the reader, in self-reflexive moments that highlight the text as a stylized and conscious production, in the alternation between individualist modes of selfhood and a corporate subjectivity in which the “I” is crowded with others,<sup>17</sup> and finally in embracing the logic of conversion offered by Whitefieldian Methodism—its “topos of uncontainability”<sup>18</sup>— I will argue that *The Interesting Narrative* confounds the racial, national, economic, and religious categories that it simultaneously mobilizes to render a complex self-portrait. This self-representation cannot fit smoothly into Western notions of selfhood; it presents not merely an autonomous, individual autobiographical persona but also an intersubjective relationship with countless, nameless African diasporic subjects otherwise lost to history. Nor can it smoothly support a binary opposition between secular and religious modes of thinking, feeling, and being. But it does offer a way to think through the interplay between secular and religious systems of self, and it gives us an opportunity to theorize this interrelatedness more explicitly than has been done in previous studies.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Slave Narrative and The Autobiographical Pact**

The idea of authenticity presumed in the critical debates I have sketched above is not a simple matter. Indeed, this version of authenticity—the presumption of a verifiable self—is often cited as that which distinguishes autobiographical narratives from fiction.

For Philip Lejeune, an early major theorist of the autobiographical genre, the autobiographical text must uphold a pact with the reader that the “vital statistics” of narrator and author be identical, and that the authorial signature and the identity of the narrator converge. Thus autobiography, in Lejeune’s formulation, is a mode of writing that assumes an expectation of specific truth claims in relation to identity, life history, and the plot of one’s life.<sup>20</sup> While imagination and invention certainly have a role in any kind of textual expression, for many critics the invention of specific biographical events or particular ethnic or national identities would remove a text from the genre of autobiography.

The issues of authenticity and historical accuracy, as vexed as they are in autobiography studies generally, have long been the particular focus in scholarly studies of black autobiography. This is especially evident in slave narratives, where the convention of framing documents suggests an autobiographical mode that makes its truth claims along a different axis than a straightforward contract between author and reader.<sup>21</sup> The autobiographical pact is difficult to prove in the narrative of fugitive slaves, who frequently had to change names and facts to resist detection, protect themselves from being re-enslaved, or protect others from retaliation. Indeed, thwarting the convergence between narrator and author, and deflecting the “vital statistics” of the author, was a matter of life and death for many.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the existence of the autobiographical pact, a contract between author and reader about the truth claims of the narrative, presumes an equitable power relationship that simply did not exist for slave narrators. A contract is only viable if two parties are assumed to be equally human; the autobiographical pact functions differently when the writer cannot assume her readers credit her as human, grant her the capacity to tell the truth, or think of her as possessing the capacity to reason.<sup>23</sup> Finally, even if they wanted to, many former slave authors would have been unable to keep the “autobiographical pact,” given that the “vital statistics” of their own lives were made inaccessible to them. If one has been systematically denied access to one’s own life story by the institution and the agents of slavery, how does one tell one’s life story? Isn’t the narrative of an undocumented life always already a kind of fiction?

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, for example, famously begins by complicating the idea of the autobiographical pact for the former slave. Rather than listing in the first pages the details of the narrator’s early origins, Douglass lists instead a series of non-facts, a list of gaps in the vital statistics of what counts as human for most people. Douglass knows from whispers and innuendos, for example, that his father was a white man, most likely his master, “but of the correctness of this opinion,” he writes, “I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me” (48). He also tells his readers that he has “no accurate knowledge” of his own age, “never having seen any authentic record” of it. He knows neither the date nor the year he was born, and can only give the “nearest estimate.” The “vital statistics” of birth date and age he gleaned, he says, through overhearing a conversation not meant for his ears in which his owner referred to him at the time as “about seventeen years old” (47). If he cannot verify for



himself the facts of his age, his birth date, or even his parentage, how is he supposed to forge a pact with his reader that his autobiographical narrator will share the same vital statistics as the author? Rather, both narrator and author share in the paucity of vital statistics, in the gaping aporia of not knowing, and the reader is drawn into that abyss as well. Douglass's powerful rhetoric draws out the negativity of the slave position in terms of the autobiographical pact, pointing out that it cannot be upheld in the same way in a narrative of slavery, since the category of personhood has been systematically denied the slave who has experienced the dehumanizing practices of slavery. The authority of autobiographical authorship is not vested in a person denied his or her own life story.

Gustavus Vassa, writing half a century before Douglass, similarly begins his narrative of slavery and freedom by calling attention to his own vexed position as a subject. He undermines the very idea of an autobiographical pact with the reader by giving himself two names on the title page. The life story in *The Interesting Narrative*, we are told, is that of "Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself," so that while "the African" and "himself" may refer to a singular figure, the name itself represents a doubled, twinned self: "Equiano" *or* "Vassa," which we could also perhaps read as, "Equiano" *and* "Vassa." The name "Vassa," however, was one that the narrator says was given to him in slavery, at the age of eleven, and in a scene of violence: "when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and by which I have been known ever since" (64). Moreover, the violent assumption of this vital statistic was attended by a dehumanization that makes the name "Gustavus Vassa" highly problematic as an authorial signature, for the name functions ironically, to assert dominance and mock the slave's subjugated position. Vassa was a noble Swede who led his people to freedom from Danish rule in 1521–1523; the practice of naming slaves, as Carretta tells us, after such important historical figures (like Caesar and Pompey) was common in the American colonies and in England, a practice that made a joke of the slave's name, and gave him or her the status of a favorite pet.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of how it was acquired, the name "Gustavus Vassa" on the title page *actually* refers to "the author" who wrote *The Interesting Narrative*; Vassa is a verifiable historical figure, a British citizen in the eighteenth century who left behind a trail of letters and legal documents that Carretta, among others, has verified as authentic and legitimating evidence that the text is, for the most part, autobiographical. Thus, it is puzzling that many critics ignore the "Vassa" part of the book's title and claimed authorship, commonly referring to the text as being both authored by and descriptive of a figure named "Equiano," even though the only time this name appears is on the title page.<sup>25</sup> Taking the assertion of an African identity to mean that the African name on the title page is the "real" one, Equiano is by and large the name literary critics use when referring to this text. However, I would like to suggest that the name "Equiano" refers to an idealized state of Africanness that is neither fictionalized or mimetic, but, like the phrase "the African," a direction to the reader to examine the very notions of authorship and identity to which it gestures.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, this refusal on the title page of a singular subject position suggests a complication in the autobiographical pact, a deliberate ambiguity about the authenticity and reality of the person narrating.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, then, the doubled name mimetically represents not the vital statistics of an autobiographical narrator so much as the vital statistics of the dialectic of slavery, a problematic bind that Vassa refuses to smooth over for his audience. Thus, while self-authorship in autobiographical writing always functions as a gesture of self-ownership, such a gesture, in a slave narrative, can never be simply literary and always refers the reader back to the material conditions in which one exists as a legal subject at all.<sup>28</sup> The doubled authorial signature Vassa/Equiano carries the traces of Africa and the middle passage; it bears the weight of slavery and a freedom purchased under duress; moreover, it makes these traces explicit.

*The Interesting Narrative* refuses to satisfy the generic expectation the audience has for a singular, sovereign, European narrator; it posits, instead, the doubled consciousness of a diasporic subject of the African slave trade.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, this act of doubled authorship indicates that the vital statistics asserted had to be paid for, just as the narrator paid for his own freedom. That economy subtends the term “the African” by claiming a kind of solitary individuality that also bears the traces of multiplicity. “The African” is the fetishized individual, the one who represents the many, the one inside the group designated “African,” but also somehow outside that group, singular and exceptional by virtue of its representative function. In this way, the representative is a collective entity who somehow becomes singular once he becomes an example. Being used as a specimen alters Equiano/Vassa’s mimetic reality and authenticity in significant ways. Were he “an” African, we would think of Equiano as a part of the whole. But as “the” African, the singularity asserted is highlighted as absurd un-truth, a bizarre distortion of a mass of peoples into a concept of the individual that reveals the twists and turns of its own deformation. In these ways, the title page undermines the very idea of the solitary individual that typically motivates the genre of “memoir” or autobiography, and calls attention to the constructedness of the figure of the author operative behind the textual assertion of the autobiographical “I.”

*The Interesting Narrative* also points more directly to the fragile dialectic between the author and the reader of an autobiographical narrative, in that it highlights the narrator’s self-reflexiveness about audience and narration. This dialectic always exists when one writes “memoirs,” the narrator tells us, but it is one that becomes infinitely more fraught when the life story of black subjectivity is narrated for a white audience. Indeed, the gesture of self-ownership embedded in the autobiographical act could take place in this case only after the enslaved narrator had literally bought his own freedom.<sup>30</sup> Having paid a price to come into possession of “himself,” Vassa is keenly aware of the need to then commodify himself for his white bourgeois readership. In fact, he lists hundreds of his reader’s names specifically at the front of his text as its subscribers and patrons, a list so long he alphabetizes it and categorizes it, varying the list with each new edition to reflect subsequent subscriptions. Leaving no doubt about the elite status of his

readers, the list begins with “His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. His Royal Highness the Duke of York,” and “His Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland” (15), a list of names that indicates the entrepreneurial spirit that had this text produced, literally, through the financial contributions of people in high places.<sup>31</sup>

The first paragraph of *The Interesting Narrative* brings into focus the two central concerns of meeting generic expectations for an autobiographical text and of negotiating the relationship with the reader in such a way that presumption of a neat distinction between terms like “authentic” and “invented” becomes difficult to maintain. If Vassa is aware that he must meet standards for generic cogency, he also asserts that upholding the autobiographical pact depends not simply on self-representation but upon the audience’s ability to read that representation. Indeed, it is fruitful to closely read his opening salvo, paying attention to the way it delicately negotiates between the various power vectors operating between black author and white readers:

I BELIEVE it is difficult for those who publish their own memoirs to escape the imputation of vanity; nor is this the only disadvantage under which they labour; it is also their misfortune, that whatever is uncommon is rarely, if ever, believed; and what is obvious we are apt to turn from with disgust, and to charge the writer with impertinence. People generally think those memoirs only worthy to be read or remembered which abound in great or striking events; those, in short, which in a high degree excite either admiration or pity: all others they consign to contempt and oblivion. It is, therefore, I confess, not a little hazardous, in a private and obscure individual, and a stranger too, thus to solicit the indulgent attention of the public; especially when I own I offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant. I believe there are a few events in my life which have not happened to many; it is true the incidents of it are numerous; and, did I consider myself a European, I might say my sufferings were great; but, when I compare my lot with that of most of my country men, I regard myself as a *particular favourite of Heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life. If, then, the following narrative does not appear sufficiently interesting to engage general attention, let my motive be some excuse for its publication. I am not so foolishly vain as to expect from it either immortality or literary reputation. (31–32)

As Vassa well knew, the vanity of expecting “immortality or literary reputation” from writing one’s memoirs functioned differently for white and black autobiographical subjects. Whereas in Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*, as we shall later see, aspirations of immortal reputation are fully embraced and even valorized, Vassa carefully works here to exact control in a different way: he wishes to “escape the imputation of vanity” he expects from his readership; he insists that he is a “private and obscure

individual,” and that his life story is “the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant” (31). If the role of the author is one of power, the ability to control one’s reputation through textual self-presentation is, as Franklin makes clear in his *Autobiography*, like playing God. But assuming this position of power as a black British citizen (even fetishized as “the African”) would have been threatening indeed to his white audience, and Vassa strains to deflect the charge that he would selfishly seek out such a position, or that he is “vain” enough to think he deserves it. In other words, he openly embraces the idea of an anonymous subjectivity; he claims he is not exceptional, that he is just one of the many others like him.

In downplaying his own vanity, however, and mitigating the threat his textual authority could pose, Vassa confronts some of the limitations of the autobiographical genre itself. After all, if autobiographies are to consist of “great and striking events” that occur only to privileged European white men, Vassa wouldn’t be qualified to write one. His various occupations as a slave and servant—from able-bodied seaman to hairdresser—are commonplace, the narrator says here, not exceptional; moreover, “the incidents” of the events of his life are so “numerous” that there are millions of African subjects who would share them. While his rise from slave subject to free citizen could certainly be considered a spectacular and exceptional success, the status of “free citizen” is presumed by the autobiographical genre—a memoir is a self-authored narrative of the life of a person, not a thing.<sup>32</sup> The thingness of the autobiographical subject, in this case, has to be overcome in order for the narrator to exist at all.

The passage turns in on itself, however, trying to satisfy the particularities of the occasion of the diasporic black subject narrating his life in slavery and freedom. Vassa twists his rhetoric around again and again, revising definitions of what counts as a “great event” and giving his reader the historical, political, and economic context with which to read the stories of his life in slavery as exceptional, as worthy of the extended literary treatment of a memoir. Thus, what counts as a “great or striking event,” in Vassa’s analysis, turns out to be contingent upon location, situation, and the racial positionality with which one creates a context for those events. Like Roy Pascal, Vassa associates the memoir with a European sense of self. “[D]id I consider myself a European, I might say my sufferings were great” (31), the narrator states flatly, naming the national identity he does not have that would make his experience seem extraordinary to many of his readers. Specifically declining to identify as European here, the narrator draws attention to the fact that the context of his African diasporic subjectivity renders the “great and striking events” of his life less singular, because they are part of the mundane violence of an elaborate, entrenched system of transatlantic slavery. “The incidents” of dehumanizing violence and brutal subjection to others “are numerous,” a common feature of the trade, involving millions of similarly kidnapped, tortured, and abused African subjects. These are not the typical incidents and this is not the typical subject of a “memoir,” Vassa asserts, because the incidents are so “numerous” as to be considered quite ordinary in the social context of slavery.

Rather than ask his reader to accept himself as European, Vassa instead hails the European reader, inviting her to consider her own subjectivity in the context of broader geopolitical and economic networks of power. The passage provides a context for the facts of his life to be read not as the common events of a mere “obscure and private individual,” but as the narrative of a public, political, important and extraordinary person indeed.<sup>33</sup> His singularity as an author and narrator rests, in part, upon the intersubjective experience of a European reader identifying with an enslaved African subject within the context of the transatlantic slave trade.<sup>34</sup> The violence and abuse that occur habitually to the diasporic African subject might be unimaginable to a European, Vassa writes, and were he to consider himself a European, “I might say my sufferings were great (31).” The catalogue of horrors that constitute the “vital statistics” of a life story for those in chattel slavery would give a European autobiography exceptional interest, and were its narrator European she would have achieved the singular status of a “martyr” or a “saint.” Here Vassa invites the reader to place her own presumably secure subject position within the context of danger and violence that he provides. Thus, the events become more “striking” when placed in relation to the subjectivity of the European reader.

While the autobiographical narrator uses his own self-identification as a non-European subject to define the events of his life story as commonplace and ordinary, his African subjectivity also paradoxically renders a construction of self that is truly exceptional. Invoking the widest possible community of diasporic African people as the further context for his autobiography, he writes “when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a *particular favourite of Heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life” (31). What makes his story singular and striking then are not the mundane events of subjection that occurred, but rather the fact that, enabled by the Christian ideology of Providence, the narrator survived when so many of his “countrymen” did not. In assuming the mantle of “Author,” Vassa constructs an exceptional position for himself as an eighteenth-century African diasporic subject who bought his own freedom, became literate, and wrote a life story in English for a British readership. This exceptional outcome to the more common story of enslaved African subject gives him a tenuous claim to authorship. While a European identity is disavowed in this first paragraph, a Christian subjectivity clearly is not. In this manner, the text represents a loophole in European notions of subjectivity; it claims an exceptional transnational identity bolstered by a form of piety superior to the common form of European Christian piety. His stylization as more “earnest” here must be read in relation to a disassociation from the mass of Englishmen he addresses. The memoir must be written, Vassa asserts, because he is one of the chosen, a *favourite of Heaven*, one of the anointed who has had a conversion experience and felt the powerful grace that others vainly strive for a lifetime to obtain. His story, then, is not so uncommon and not so un-European after all, even while it asserts its alterity. For it is in the context of his British identity that the young Vassa was first baptized, and it is in his discourse with British

Protestants that he comes to identify as a superior sort of Christian, one who can uphold all of God's commandments and not just a few.

### **Diasporic Systems of Self**

In the title page's doubled authorial nomenclature and in the first paragraph's complicated deconstruction of the generic presumptions of memoir, we can locate a challenge to the idea of the autonomous individual presumed by Lejeune's Eurocentric formulation of the autobiographical pact. I suggest that within the first two chapters of *The Interesting Narrative* we can locate a further challenge to the autonomous individual (and European) self presumed by Lejeune's theory of the autobiographical pact, a further undoing of the notions of sovereign selfhood that the autobiographical narrator must necessarily frame himself within, but that the slave narrator is specifically excluded from. These first two chapters present the African birth of the narrator that Carretta finds to be dubious, his kidnapping in the Biafran interior, his contact with the Atlantic slave trade, and his narration of surviving the middle passage. As many critics have noted, the narrator frequently disorients the first-person address, adopting a mythic, communal, corporate African persona that belongs not just to the author or the narrator, but expands capaciously to include "a multitude of black people" (to use Equiano's phrase) as well (55). Though there are many details about Vassa's presumed Biafran birth and early childhood, chapter one is generally more concerned with narrating a wider group experience of Igbu culture, an experience that, in chapter two, gets contextualized in terms of contact with the transatlantic slave trade and a movement toward narrating a broader African diasporic corporate subjectivity. Indeed, as Joanna Brooks has argued, the self-conscious awareness of oneself as an African is a gesture that in itself reveals the imprint of the slave trade, insofar as "[t]he very notion of blackness as a group condition covering diverse African peoples developed largely in the service of slave-owning interests" (Brooks 3). Even today, most Africans rarely self-identify as "black," but describe themselves using a wider range of descriptors, such as Equiano does when he refers to the "mahogany" or "red" people who came to take his villagers away in sacks (37).<sup>35</sup>

"Blackness," in fact, is a term that enters Vassa's narrative only when the protagonist encounters the idea of the transatlantic slave trade for the first time in the form of a slave ship waiting at the coast. The protagonist's first awareness of the slave trade is also his first contact with whiteness, which inaugurates the dialectical idea that if there are white people, there are black people as well.

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave-ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe, nor the then [*sic*] feelings of my mind. When I was carried on board I was immediately handled, and

tossed up, to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke, which was very different from any I had ever heard, united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate, and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair? (55)

Prior to contact with the slave ship, Equiano had no conception of the dialectical idea of whiteness/blackness in relation to skin color, though he earlier describes “tawny” or light negroes as representing “deformity” in his Igbo village (38). Here whiteness enters his consciousness in conjunction with the slave ship, as a terrifying and potentially annihilating force.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, he assumes he will soon become prey to white cannibalistic “spirits,” and it is contemplating this probability that prompts his faint—a terrified loss of consciousness.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, at this moment of danger, as the narrator is expecting to die, his concept of blackness is also born.

Blackness is a negative concept here, emerging only in contrast with the complexions of the “white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair” who brutally handle him and toss him around. Prior to this new idea of whiteness in all of its shocking horror, a statement like “I found some black people about me” would have been unthinkable for this narrator, as “black people” were always around, but they had never been identified as such. Thus, blackness is a category constructed in violence and danger. Indeed, some of those very same “black people” the narrator finds about him now had accompanied him on board the ship, “and were receiving their pay”—presumably for kidnapping and transporting slave cargo like Equiano. The horrifying confrontation with the annihilating potential of whiteness renders a tenuous new bond with his captors; they are black like him and “countrymen”<sup>38</sup> in whose possession he would gladly remain as “the meanest slave” rather than board a ship with the white “bad spirits.” The “us” of the first chapter’s descriptions of Igbo culture and village thus quickly moves to an expanded sense of the third-person plural. “Us” and “them” no longer describe Igbo and the rest of

the world; the “we” that might be eaten is a “we” formed from the multitude of black people on the ship.<sup>39</sup>

Vassa’s choice of language here gives that ship the agency that the crystallizing moment demands: the slave ship “salutes” the kidnapped boy. An inanimate object is thus endowed with the subjectivity that the young African prince now feels draining out of his being, as the hegemonic powers of the triangle trade (in the form of the ship) constitute him at once as black and as a slave. The militaristic gesture of the “salute” however, is ironic—a gesture of respect from a subordinate to a superior—perhaps the last such gesture a “thing” will give the narrator who will himself become a thing before he once again achieves the status of human when he purchases his freedom. The inanimate object actually mock-salutes the African subject-about-to-become-slave-object as he boards the ship, flaunting an agency and freedom the shackled boy no longer has.<sup>40</sup> Initially, the narrator views the multitude of blacks he sees on the ship as outsiders, radical others, “a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow” (55). But the third-person plural dissolves into the first-person singular as the sorrow glimpsed on the physiognomy of the others becomes his own bodily experience: “I no longer doubted of my fate, and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted” (55). The horrifying knowledge imparted by the slave ship is that the dejection and suffering of the others will soon become his own. To faint is to die a mini or mock death, to give way so totally to an emotional affect that the body collapses and the mind flees from consciousness. In this moment of lost consciousness the vital statistics of the narrator are radically reconfigured, and one self-concept dies so that another can take its place. Though he finds a few members of his own nation to converse with, the protagonist’s former identity as a tribal subject of some importance in his community is annihilated here as he becomes re-constructed as “black,” and as he assumes the broader pan-African identity embodied by the group of “poor chained men” gathered together in violence for transportation to slave in the British colonies. Blackness, as Orlando Patterson has pointed out, is a construction signifying social death. *The Interesting Narrative* effectively dramatizes the double notion of death resonant in this scene: the middle passage and the literal death it meant for millions is anticipated with a metaphorical death; after receiving a mock salute from the slave ship, the narrator experiences the shock of becoming a socially dead commodity or thing and collapses in a mock death. The awareness of this sudden sense of living death has the narrator craving an actual death, the “great friend” he longs for. He in fact describes many of his new “countrymen” trying to jump overboard to their deaths, trying to enact the annihilation they have already experienced psychologically by the terrifying whiteness encountered on the slave ship (56).

Thus, there are two types of collective identity figured in the first two chapters. First, there is a corporate village subject, narrated as a persistent “we” that alternates with the first-person narration, and that is modeled on conventions of the travel narrative.



Second, there is the broader construction of corporate black subjectivity happening in chapter two, a construction that responds directly to the shocking contact with the slave trade. This “we” is very different than the family or village “we”; it is a “we” of strangers, based on color and the shared experience of the middle passage.

The distinction between these two distinct modes of collective subjectivity breaks down upon closer consideration, however, as even the vital statistics of the narrator’s early origins can be seen as constructed in response to the vital statistics of the slave trade itself. For the first chapter depicting an Edenic life *before* the middle passage is burdened with the narrator’s sense, at the time of the book’s composition, that the autobiographical figure must function as a more generalized “African” or representative “black” person for his white European readership.<sup>41</sup> Because he describes a locale, a people, and a worldview so utterly foreign to his white readership, Vassa’s construction of an African identity thus demands a deployment of ethnography, and the language of a generalized, translated experience that has the effect of erasing particularities. In describing his homeland, for instance, the narrator offers a very general description of a geographic locale and suggests that the slave trade provides the occasion for that description: “That part of Africa, known by the name of Guinea, to which the trade for slaves is carried on, extends along the coast about 3400 miles, from Senegal to Angola, and includes a variety of kingdoms” (32). The “variety of kingdoms” could not have been grasped cognitively by the young boy who narrates these descriptions and who represents the Igbu culture in this passage; “a variety of kingdoms” only gets mapped into the group identity of “Africa” retrospectively, in the context of later contact with the slave trade. Moreover, the particular “part of Africa” mapped for the reader as representing the whole continent is only the portion engaged with slavery in some way. The slave trade motivates the description, and slave trader concepts provide the terms of its existence.

At such moments in *The Interesting Narrative*, the autobiographical narrator becomes, in Mary Louise Pratt’s term, an “autoethnographer,” “translating” his perspective “to the culturally uneducated within their communities and to cultural others outside” (quoted in Kaplan 174; get original citation). If more generalized ethnographic descriptions are used, it is because they are necessary to make the individual intelligible to his readership as a person at all. Vassa uses the language of ethnography to make Biafran culture and a pan-African identity available to a reader totally unfamiliar with its customs, political structure, and social relations. Moreover, the narrator is quite self-conscious about his role as a mediator between cultures, stylizing his personal history so that it may serve a wider function for his readership. “The Manners and government of a people who have little commerce with other countries are generally very simple,” he writes, “and the history of what passes in one family or village may serve as a specimen of the whole nation” (32). In identifying his singular story as a “specimen” of a wider geographic and cultural entity, Equiano’s metonymic function becomes clear. His story is the part that will necessarily have to stand in for the whole. Such a move to metonymic representation is quite different than the notion of mimetically realistic representation

presumed by Carretta's approach to historically accurate autobiography. But it is also quite different than claiming that an autobiographer "invented" a past he never had. If the ideas of Africa or blackness are themselves fictions constituted by the system of slavery, it is problematic to claim some kind of *a priori* "African" essence that slavery presumably took away or that the narrative sought to invent. The essence of the African is always already an invention, Vassa suggests, and his narrator Equiano very cleverly depicts the vast historic, economic, and political systems of self that construct this African subject.

Vassa's repeated use of the term "witness" to refer to his narrator's role further suggests that his pact with the reader of this "memoir" is less concerned with the vital statistics of an individual personality or a solitary individual's "roots" and more concerned with a collective history of the African diasporic subject. The autobiographical "I" self-reflexively positions him, especially in the West Indies scenes, as an assembler of a series of "specimen" stories that accurately portray not a mimetic rendering of the life story of an individual personality but an accurate description of the effects of slavery in the British colonies. His self-positioning as an "eyewitness" who experiences or witnesses horrific abuses undermines the idea that Britain was supporting a benevolent institution. "I was often a *witness* to cruelties of every kind, which were exercised on my unhappy fellow slaves," he writes in chapter five (emphasis mine), before listing a catalogue of horrors including the sexual violation of female slaves (including those "not ten years old") and the punishment of a negro man "staked to the ground, and cut most shockingly, and then his ears cut off bit by bit" (104). "Another negro man was half hanged, and then burnt, for attempting to poison a cruel overseer," he further writes, before listing the "instruments of torture" such as the "iron muzzle, thumb-screws, &c." that "were sometimes applied for the slightest faults" (105, 107).

In his self-stylization as witness, the narrator draws upon the many valences inherent in the term. One sense clearly alludes to the notion of "eyewitness" familiar to Eighteenth-century readers from travel narratives, and refers to one whose firsthand knowledge of an exotic, foreign locale gives him a special authority to describe it. In this mode, the narrator shocks his reader with graphic details of the slave trade just as white European travelers shocked those back home by detailing the barbaric customs of other lands. However, in Vassa's text it is the white slaveholders who are effectively othered as barbaric. The black "African" narrator thus functions as the "objective observer," interpreting the customs of one white group ethnographic group (European colonists in the Carribean) for another (Europeans). The elite British subjects subscribing to *The Interesting Narrative* are implored to contrast their own sense of themselves as civilized with the barbarity that the "eyewitness" narrator describes as belonging to the white West Indian slaveholders. In this mode, the narrator-witness repeatedly stresses the metonymic function of the examples he chooses to narrate:

Nor was such usage as this confined to particular places or individuals;  
for, in all the different islands in which I have been (and I have visited no

less than fifteen) the treatment of the slaves was nearly the same; so nearly indeed, that the history of an island, or even a plantation, with a few such exceptions as I have mentioned, might serve for a history of the whole. (111)

The narrator here gestures to the excess of suffering and abuse he witnessed, self-consciously highlighting his own necessary role as editor of that excess. The part for the whole must prevail in both his own narration of his life story, and in his history of the places he has visited, because there is such an overwhelming amount of material (or such a vast catalogue of abuse). Vassa thus specifically calls attention to the constructedness of his narrative, showing that he has expertly surveyed the terrain (“I have visited no less than fifteen [islands]”) and that he has chosen the examples that “might serve for a history of the whole.” He further invokes the fragile dialectic between the narrator and implied reader, asking the reader to consider not only the narrator’s function as “witness” but the reader’s own role in consuming these “eyewitness” accounts of slave trade suffering as well:

In the preceding chapter I have set before the reader a few of those many instances of oppression, extortion and cruelty, to which I have been a witness in the West Indies; but, were I to enumerate them all, the catalogue would be tedious and disgusting. The punishments of the slaves, on every trifling occasion, are so frequent, and so well known, together with the different instruments with which they are tortured, that it cannot any longer afford novelty to recite them; and they are too shocking to yield delight either to the writer or the reader. I shall therefore hereafter only mention such as incidentally befell myself in the course of my adventures. (113)

It is significant that the narrator so explicitly calls attention to his digression from his own role as autobiographical narrator here, indicating an awareness of the political “conditions and limits” (to use Georges Gusdorf’s term) of the autobiographical genre he is working within and of the need to work both within and outside of its parameters. This contradictory imperative necessitates a certain irony; on the one hand, there must be an attitude of submissiveness in relation to the white reader; at the same time, the narrator takes on a tone of moral superiority as he upbraids the reader and calls upon him or her to act ethically. The narrator must acknowledge that he may have tried the reader’s “patience” in digressing from the vital statistics of the life story he has advertised in this “interesting” narrative. He seems to promise, therefore, that hereafter he will follow the “law of genre” and “only mention” that which pertains to himself and his own “adventures” (113). The promise, however, is disingenuous; the narrator continues throughout his *Interesting Narrative* to describe the slave trade and the “many instances of oppression, extortion and cruelty” he witnesses, not only in the West Indies, but aboard various vessels, in the Arctic, and in the North and Central American colonies.

The laws of genre, therefore, continue to be violated in this narrative and *The Interesting Narrative* becomes what Caren Kaplan has termed an “outlaw genre”—a text that critiques its own genre and the collusion of its conventions with power structures. In such an address, the quality of authenticity operates differently than a presumption of verifiable “vital statistics” between narrator and author. In fact, though he acknowledges the reader’s appetite for the vital statistics of an individual life story, the vital statistics the narrator consistently presents are the more generalized ones of the slave trade.

While the travel narrative trope of the “eyewitness” observer describing unfamiliar lands and radically different people is invoked here, it is also complicated significantly by the narrator’s reminder that the readers should already know all about the mundane violence that occurs in the West Indies among these barbarian slave holders. The “punishments of the slaves,” states the narrator, and the “instruments of torture” used upon them—“are so frequent, and so well known . . . that it cannot any longer afford novelty to recite them” (113). That is, the vital statistics of the slave trade are not novel interesting news to white elite readers of this narrative. The white slave holders in the West Indies that the narrative describes, after all, are not *actually* radical others, and there is nothing *actually* novel in describing them: they are agents of the British empire sent to the colonies to do its business. They are in fact legally, economically, and politically sustained by the list of elite readers who have subscribed in advance to read *The Interesting Narrative*. The delicate doubleness of the address here professes concern for the attention span or the comfort of the reader, yet at the same time the address aggressively instigates discomfort, critiquing Europeans who want to enjoy the commodities the slave trade produces without guilt. Readers are thus called upon to act, themselves, as witnesses. Having digressed from the individual life story and having consumed the narrator’s broader accounts of the vital statistics of slavery’s abuses, the reader now has evidence with which to testify to the “tedious and disgusting” specifics of a catalogue of horrors they already broadly knew existed (113). In other words, Vassa interpolates white readers to act as witnesses of the abuses of the slave trade, and to know that which they have deliberately unknown.

### **The Testimonial Address**

We can put some pressure on Vassa’s self-identification as the witness figure, and upon his narrative as a testimony of abuses he has witnessed, by looking to trauma theory’s engagements with key terms such as “witness” and “testimony.” Testimony, as Shoshana Felman points out, is not simply a statement but a speech act that produces one’s own speech “as material evidence for truth” (5). In the juridical context, “testimony is provided, and is called for, when the facts upon which justice must pronounce its verdict are not clear, when historical accuracy is in doubt and when both the truth and its supporting elements of evidence are called into question” (Felman 6). In this way, testimony comes into being in moments in which there is a “*crisis in truth*”; in these cases the witness’ testimony proposes itself as the truth.

To be the bearer of a truth “when historical accuracy is in doubt,” however, is to move beyond the realm of an individualistic notion of autobiographical authenticity (Felman 6). By its very definition, a witness is someone who experiences an event or happening outside of him or herself; we testify as witnesses to affairs involving others. In representing oneself as being ready to testify, however, the figure of the autobiographer as witness is not merely concerned with relating the facts of an event; rather, the witness demonstrates a “readiness to become himself a *medium of the testimony*—and a *medium of the accident*—in his unshakable conviction that the accident . . . carries historical significance which goes beyond the individual and is thus, in effect, in spite of its idiosyncrasy, *not trivial*” (Felman 24). What to Vassa’s readers might seem digressive, common, not a great event at all, becomes in his narrative a non-trivial accident of history. To become a medium for historical truths, then, is to give facts meaning, to invest representations of events with a significance beyond the meaning any one event could have in itself. To testify is to produce evidence for a wider narrative of truth than a mimetically realistic self-representation could provide. I suggest that in repeatedly designating himself as witness, especially in the West Indies descriptions of torture and abuse that comprise chapter five, Vassa significantly expands the very notions of Western individualistic autobiography that he also harnesses and utilizes.

By inviting the (white) reader to listen to the testimony and bear witness to these atrocities, Vassa participates, I argue, in the creation of what Felman terms a “testimonial *project of address*” (38; italics in original). Radically undermining the idea of white mastery, a convention in which “a master is the one who *cannot be addressed*, the one to whom one cannot say ‘you’” (Felman 38), Vassa structures his narrative as a direct address to white culture. Over and against the production of the slave trade as unspeakable horror perpetrated by nameless agents of mundane violence, Vassa names names, produces faces, and cites locations for the atrocities he witnesses. Moreover, his direct addresses to the reader recreate the reader itself one who can be addressed, what Paul Celan calls “an addressable reality” (qtd. in Felman 38). Naming the unnameable, speaking the unspeakable, making real that which is disavowed or treated as unreal, *The Interesting Narrative* trades in the authenticity of countless life stories and requires the reader only to believe that the narrator credibly witnessed these unspeakable facts, that the “I” is a true eyewitness. Laying the text at the feet of congress, as he hyperbolically promises, he destabilizes the logic of mastery inherent in reproducing master narratives in which one has the authority to speak of oneself as an “I”; he undermines, by highlighting them, the systems of self bolstered by racist, imperialistic logic. This is a text in which to be an “I” is to be many people and to be no one. In Celan’s words, this is a text in which the “I” has “forgotten itself, travel[ing] the same path as art, toward that which is mysterious and alien” (qtd. in Felman 39). In the act of destabilizing his own subject position, however, Vassa also dislodges the reader from his or her subject position. Following Felman, I would like to reconsider the question Paul Celan asks and put it in relation to Vassa’s autobiographical project. Celan wonders about the possibility

of freedom that accrues to the dislodgement and estrangement of the I: "*Is perhaps at this point, along with the I—with the estranged I, set free. . . —is perhaps at this point an Other set free?*" (Celan qtd. in Felman 39; italics in original).

This interpolation of reader as witness, as addressee, as receiver of testimony, therefore, creates a mimetic reality grounded in historical rather than individual truth. In conceiving the reader not as un-addressable master but as addressee, *The Interesting Narrative* moves beyond the bounds of a testimonial project in the secular juridical sense. Indeed, for a Christian subject, such as the protagonist of *The Interesting Narrative*, to identify as a witness is to gesture beyond the realm of historical truth and into religious connotations of the act of witnessing. Having established an intersubjective relationship with the white reader—an "I/thou" testimonial project of address—the narrator marshals all the evidence and facts he has witnessed, not of "particular places or individuals" (111) but of a conglomerate of experience, in order to wreak the idea of divine justice upon the reader. Equiano aggressively uses the second-person address here to prosecute the reader in what one might consider a higher court, certainly a different one than that which authorizes the slave trade. If the courts of law complicit with the slave trade are experiencing a crisis in truth, the testimony of a secular/religious witness becomes more crucial. Like the story of the poor Creole negro he includes in the West Indies chapter, Equiano concludes that when white men steal his fish he "must look up to God Mighty in the top for right" (sic; 110). He exhorts the reader that he will "look up still to the God on the top, since there was no redress below" (110–111). In a stunning reversal of power, he creates a reader, who, unlike a master, can be addressed:

Are slaves more useful by being thus humbled to the condition of brutes, than they would be if suffered to enjoy the privileges of men? The freedom which diffuses health and prosperity throughout Britain answers you—No. When you make men slaves, you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them, in your own conduct, an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war; and yet you complain that they are not honest or faithful! You stupefy them with stripes, and think it necessary to keep them in a state of ignorance; and yet you assert that they are incapable of learning . . . Why do you use those instruments of torture? Are they fit to be applied by one rational being to another? And are ye not struck with shame and mortification, to see the partakers of your nature struck so low? But, above all, are there no dangers attending this mode of treatment? Are you not hourly in dread of an insurrection? (111–112)

Structuring the passage dialogically, as a series of questions and answers between a "you" and an "I," the narrator carefully builds a project of radical testimonial address, one that slips between the poles of juridical and divine justice. Because this passage is not immediately followed by a call to repeal slavery, but advocates, rather, for a change in

the conduct of slaveholders—“happiness would attend you” if you could treat your slaves “as men”—some readers will read this passage as acquiescing to the system of slavery (112). Calling for good treatment of slaves, in fact, could seem like an argument for the continuation of slavery. But notice how relentless the second-person address is here: the word “you” appears in almost every single sentence. I would like to suggest that in this relentless project of address—and in the boldness of questions such as “Why do you use those instruments of torture?”—*The Interesting Narrative* is doing something more radical than advocating for the abolition of slavery (which, of course, the book does later). For although the use of testimony in the Christian sense is to testify to God’s power, it is not a divine retribution that the passage advocates, but a worldly uprising against the masters. Equiano here invokes conquest; he brings up the specter of revenge. “*Are you not hourly in dread of an insurrection?*” Thus, the reader is not simply addressed here as a “you,” he or she is also dethroned from the role of master who cannot be addressed. The reader is addressed, moreover, with a threat of violence. The slave subject who has been disavowed and constituted as socially dead<sup>42</sup> comes to life to haunt white readers who continue to “use those instruments of torture,” willfully unknowing the abuses that their policies, appetites, and practices inaugurate and support. The violence of the master is not only named, but also challenged with a threat of revenge upon the reader. No wonder this complicated act of witnessing ends in a double-voiced deflation, a mitigation of the violent threat, a promise of peace if certain conditions are met. “But by changing your conduct, and treating your slaves as men, every cause of fear would be banished. They would be faithful, honest, intelligent and vigorous; and peace, prosperity, and happiness would attend you” (112). The passage directly following the threatening aggressive address comforts the reader with the idea that there will be no more fear, disavowing its own radical act.

But the question remains: *How is a slave to be treated like a man?* How can a slave be a man, and how can a man be a slave? For the disavowal soothes with a contradictory idea: slaves treated as men would no longer be in the category of the slave. The category of personhood is that which is denied the slave. As Douglass was to show so famously, one cannot be both at the same time: “We have seen how a man was made into a slave; now we shall see a slave made into a man” (107). Vassa’s passage, then, with its oxymoronic call for slaves to be treated as men, can be read as a riddle. But in the knot of this passage’s complexity, the narrator/witness makes his position clear: you treat a slave like a man by freeing him. And if the “you” whom the “I” addresses here cannot free the slave, insurrection awaits. The religious notion of witness is embraced as a moral standpoint, but the threat of wrath is not God’s but a worldly revolt of slaves: wrath on a material plane.

### **Religious and Secular Systems of Self**

The religious voice of divine witness and the secular voice offering juridical testimony, as we have seen, are intertwined in this text in peculiar ways. Just as in the

passage discussed above we glimpse the witness-narrator's call for a divine sense of justice to inaugurate a type of material redress not available in the secular systems of the day, we see similar crossings of religious and secular meanings throughout the narrative. In fact, when unpacked and read closely, many of the most religious moments in the text turn out to have profoundly secular effects. Many of the most secular projects, as well, can be seen as inextricably linked to the narrator's religious conversion and the religious modes and styles he borrows from Whitefield's brand of Calvinist Methodism. I'd like to move now to a more overt discussion of the dynamic between secularism and belief in *The Interesting Narrative*. I will trace in this section the particular style of debased yet exalted subjectivity that Vassa derives from Whitefieldian Methodism. I argue that religious conversion motivates a topos of uncontainability for the believing subject, and that this topos, in turn, enables other sorts of (secular) conversions to be performed and displayed. I will then consider the tension between the two distinct visions offered for the liberation of the African people: the importation of capitalism to the African continent and the promulgation of a diasporic African Christianity that would minister to those in the African homeland. Both of these aims get treated in the failed attempts of the narrator to travel to Sierra Leone. In pressing for these two alternative visions, the autobiographical narrator vacillates between on the one hand a self-stylization as a bounded individual, materially embodied within the confines of his race and class positions (though freed somewhat by his gender positionality), and on the other hand, as a transpersonal and transhistoric subject—the African Christian who is bound by neither geography nor embodiment. As a solution to the problem of his own embodiment as black African, fetishized but still invisible, the narrator posits a black multitude doing political work in ways that exceed the bounded individuality of sovereign selfhood. This collective transpersonal identity, enabled through religious rhetoric, becomes a public voice quite different from the individual believer's narrative of a private conversion experience that also structures the plot of *The Interesting Narrative*.

The tension between the two modes—private/public, religious/secular, individual/collective—is extremely productive, and I agree with Roxann Wheeler that it is this dynamic tension that should engage critics the most. For me, the ways that religion offers a public voice to an otherwise “private and obscure individual” as Equiano calls himself, is key. One might look, for example, to the description of the famous Evangelical minister George Whitefield, a brief scene that confounds reader expectations about religion and secularism in interesting ways. It sets the reader up for a religious discussion that is then saturated with secular meanings. Equiano describes Whitefield preaching in 1765 in Georgia<sup>43</sup> and focuses, as Benjamin Franklin does in his *Autobiography*,<sup>44</sup> not upon Whitefield's religious themes so much as on the performative aspects of the experience and the reception of the crowd:

. . . I came to a church crowded with people; the church-yard was full likewise, and a number of people were even mounted on ladders, looking in at the windows. I thought this a strange sight, as I had never seen



churches, either in England or the West Indies, crowded in this manner before. I therefore made bold to ask some people the meaning of all this, and they told me the Rev. George Whitefield was preaching. I had often heard of this gentleman, and had wished to see and hear him; but I had never before had an opportunity. I now therefore resolved to gratify myself with the sight, and pressed in amidst the multitude. When I got into the church I saw this pious man exhorting the people with the greatest fervour and earnestness, and sweating as much as ever I did while in slavery on Montserrat beach. I was very much struck and impressed with this; I thought it strange I had never seen divines exert themselves in this manner before, and was no longer at a loss to account for the thin congregations they preached to. (132)

While Whitefield's piety is not in question here, it is the performance of piety, the exertion and sweat he puts into this production of "fervour and earnestness," that interests Equiano the most. Indeed, it is striking that Equiano compares the strenuous work of preaching to slavery, insofar as the physical exertions of slaves on Montserrat beaches were compulsory and abusive in horrific ways that the witness/narrator has detailed throughout the narrative. On one level, the passage seems to assert that Whitefield, then, is God's slave, pressed into physical labor against his will, and that is certainly one common stance toward Christian piety. In fact, the standard reading of this comparison is that it asserts the superiority of not only Whitefield's but Equiano's Calvinist Methodism over other forms of Christianity. Those that sweat more are more in debt to God; those who work harder for God will have greater success than those who don't exert themselves and speak to thin congregations.<sup>45</sup>

But the work this comparison does in a slave narrative that ultimately advocates for the end of the slave trade begs a closer look than it has been given. The size of the audience and the physical exertion involved in Whitefield's performance are the key facts for the narrator here, not the content of Whitefield's message nor the quality of his piety.<sup>46</sup> The description suggests that while Whitefield was indeed considered a "pious man" with the greatest "fervour and earnestness," those qualities would only become legible and significant through a stylized repetition that produces them as physical affects.<sup>47</sup> Without questioning the earnestness of Whitefield's own interior quality of piety, Vassa calls our attention to its physical performance, its public presentation, and even further to the social efficacy that the virtuoso performance of piety engenders. As in the many moments I have already cited above in which the narrator self-consciously calls attention to the construction of his own narrative, the narrator here invites his imagined reader to consider subjectivity, authenticity, earnestness, piety, indeed autobiographical narratives themselves, as stylized constructions. Real piety, like real Africanness, can only be read as such through the author's labored performance of it.

Whitefield's sweat, like the sweat of a slave, is what impresses Equiano the most. The earnestness of Whitefield's piety would be nothing, in this estimation, were it not for the bodily energy Whitefield uses to exhort the people. The image of sweat blurs the referents here; an equivalence is drawn between Whitefield (the charismatic, white, British superstar divine) and slaves on Montserrat, slaves like Equiano. This equalizing move through the sharing of sweat operates through the same logic one sees in the sentimental novel's trope of mingled tears.<sup>48</sup> In associating the sweat of these two lone representative figures—Whitefield and “Olaudah Equiano, The African”—the text also suggests a metaphoric equivalency between at least three other collectivities. First, Vassa's audience of readers (who are invited to notice him sweating over his own textual performance); second, Whitefield's enthusiastic and pious followers who form a transnational Christian community, another “multitude” to compete with the multitude on the slave ship; and, third, the collective of diasporic African subjects produced by the slave trade, the nameless faceless sweaters in the sun. Like the multitude of black bodies chained together on the slave ship, here in Whitefield's audience is a mass of bodies the erstwhile Christian subject constructs a persona in common with. The gesture toward collectivity includes in its embrace the imagination of both present and future readers, black and white, slaves and free. Vassa effectively telegraphs in this passage the idea that earnest piety is a quality that one must work and sweat for in order to produce tangible social effects. However, he also suggests that his own project of testimonial address is similarly constructed, produced, and performed, and that it will bear the kind of fruit he sees Whitefield's project bearing in terms of affecting large numbers of people, giving the author a public voice, and enabling the kind of class mobility that Whitefield enjoyed.

If the presentation of an exalted Christian self such as Whitefield's is the result of labor, sweat, and performance, however, how might we read the narrator's many passages describing his own sense of self-debasement, his desire to be “annihilated” or “dissolved” into Christ (193)? Interestingly, while critics debate the earnestness of Equiano's piety, the earnestness of his stylized self-hatred is rarely questioned. It goes largely unremarked. Perhaps this is because self-hatred could be an embarrassing blemish in the self-presentation of the man who otherwise directs hatred outward in loud calls for revenge and insurrection. Might we consider these moments of self-hatred, the many descriptions of suicidal urges and calls for self-obliteration, as performative moments as well? Or at the very least, might we consider what political work the sweat of their representation produces?

Nancy Ruttenberg brilliantly identifies the way that performances of self-debasement bolster a logic of superiority in the life and work of Whitefield, and, following my emphasis on the performance of piety above, I'd like to suggest that what Vassa borrows from Whitefield is not so much a religious message as an attitude, a stylized self-presentation that encompasses both debasement and exaltation. In the figure of Equiano we have a “mortified”<sup>49</sup> outcast who, despite his debased subjectivity, repeatedly proves superior and hence more central than any of the numerous other so-

called Christians (ship captains, slave traders, and governmental officials) he encounters. For as Ruttenberg shows us, at the heart of the Whitefieldian model that Vassa admires is a claim not only “to have reconciled humility and power” but the assertion “that the abasement of the self coincides with its exaltation or ‘enlargement’” (431). Such a stance, Ruttenberg continues, produces “a self-representation innocent of self” (440), a performance of self in which the status of personhood is disavowed in favor of a transcendent, spiritualized entity in which power operates through persons but is not limited to their finitude. In his self-presentations and in his sermons, Whitefield apparently embraced and exploited his status as “outsider” (from the lower classes of British society) to develop this central trope, a trope that appears equally in Vassa’s creation of the protagonist “Equiano”:

Whitefield would transgress the Methodist model of the self to realize what was only implicit in it: the fundamentally dramatic nature of conversion and hence its potential as spectacle. This discovery allowed him to exploit the paradoxical centrality of the outcast in order to stimulate in his hostile spectators a desire for such spiritual currency as he alone possessed and whose disbursement he alone could control.” (Ruttenberg 433)

Paradoxically, the outcast self becomes central in the perfection of a theatricalized conversion. The self acquiesces to the formulaic pattern of conversion, is subsumed within it, but the formula of conversion would be meaningless without the self it objects and casts out. Moreover, the move to cast out the self mobilizes a “topos of uncontainability” that is politically and socially useful not only for the abstract common good, but also for the individual convert (Ruttenberg 437).<sup>50</sup> Whitefield, embracing the uncontainability that an ethos of self-annihilation offered, was able to transgress class boundaries and move freely from low to high society; he appealed to people from all walks of life.<sup>51</sup> Vassa, I would suggest, borrows the topos of uncontainability that the logic of Whitefieldian Methodism offers, in order to transgress not only class but also racial and national boundaries in his presentation of self.

In fact, conversion becomes a central motif in *The Interesting Narrative*, a flexible concept that resonates beyond a description of the protagonist’s conversion to Christianity. Through the deployment of Equiano’s picaresque adventures, conversion models a process of radical political transformation as well as a religious turning toward a particular set of beliefs.<sup>52</sup> The protagonist tries on various political positions to test their respective efficacy before converting or turning toward other models. Especially in the last sections of the book, religious and secular modes are so intimately entwined in the discussion of the slave trade and the fate of the African continent that serial political conversions occur at a dizzying pace. It is thus difficult to agree with Potkay that the staging of religious conversion trumps the secular leanings in the text, insofar as they seem to be truly inseparable entities. However, I also find insufficient Srinivas

Aravamudan's claim, contra Potkay, that the "shell of spiritual autobiography crumbles to reveal a political manifesto within the generic structure" of the narrative (*Tropicopolitans* 244). The spiritual autobiography and the political manifesto embedded within the text are not outside of and within one another (like a shell and a kernel) but constitute one another in such a way as to explode our common distinction between them. Neither is crumbling to reveal an essential antithetical polarity.

Directly following the chapter detailing the protagonist's conversion to Christianity is a chapter describing a series of failed attempts to convert others to his religion. On board a ship to Cadiz, for example, Equiano has "frequent contests about religion" with a Catholic priest who "took great pains to make a proselyte of me to his church; and I no less to convert him to mine" (200). In a later voyage, Equiano joins Dr. Irving as overseer of a slave plantation on the Mosquito shore hoping, he says, "to be an instrument, under God, of bringing some poor sinner to my well-beloved master, Jesus Christ" (202). Just as he fails to convert the priest, he fails to convert four Mosquito Indians en route to the Mosquito coast, including a king's son who had shown a promising spiritual aptness. In Jamaica, Equiano helps the doctor purchase some slaves to cultivate a plantation, saying "I chose them all of my own countrymen, some of whom came from Lybia [sic]" (205). Ultimately, Equiano quits the "heathenish" plantation disappointed and frustrated in his attempts; among other things he felt he was losing his soul for the sin of working on Sundays. Taking an affectionate leave of his "poor countrymen, the slaves," he leaves them not only unconverted but without the protection of his benevolent presence as a compassionate overseer who could comfort them and "render their condition easy" (211). He later learns that the white overseer who replaced him "beat and cut the poor slaves most unmercifully; and the consequence was, that every one got into a large Puriogua canoe, and endeavored to escape; but, not knowing where to go, or how to manage the canoe, they were all drowned" (217–218). So much for a benevolent approach to slavery! When Equiano later encounters Dr. Irving returning to Jamaica to purchase more slaves for his "uncultivated" plantation, and "stock it again" (218), the implications for a theory of slavery as a benevolent institution become clear. The failure of his hope to "do some good" cannot be seen as simply religious nor as simply secular. For although Vassa certainly treats the wasted lives of his enslaved "countrymen" as an economic loss, a secular project gone awry in that the commercial enterprise fails and the plantation remains "uncultivated," he loads this account of capitalism's failure with religious meaning. For the economic loss derives from the "heathenish" practices of the plantation: the failure to observe the Sabbath, for example, and the refusal to treat human beings in a Christian manner. Thus, the failure could be seen as a failure of commercial capitalist interests to embrace a superior Christianity that would, presumably, pay dividends in saved lives and economic prosperity. Even further, the logic of slavery as a benevolent enterprise is undermined by the very inclusion of the episode itself within the narrative. Insofar as slaves can change hands, the story tells us, no individual's good intentions or kind treatment can suffice. That is, no Christian concept of a benevolent

enterprise of saving African souls could ever work, insofar as the captive slave is ever subject to being sold. The institution itself is corrupt and must be abolished. Focusing on a few bad individuals becomes impossible in the face of such a litany of loss and sorrow and depravity.

Indeed, immediately upon leaving the “Moskito” coast, the free black subject Equiano is seized, hung by a rope, and threatened repeatedly with a return to slavery. In recounting this torture, the narrator critiques the flawed logic of slavery as a benevolent institution and presents the idea that legal redress would be the best form of benevolence. He says “Thus I hung, without any crime committed, and without judge or jury, merely because I was a freeman, and could not by the law get any redress from a white person in those parts of the world” (212). He then recounts a catalogue of other scenes in the West Indies in which his life is threatened, he is deprived of wages, he is deceived into working at hard labor he doesn’t agree to, and he is brutally beaten by a furious white captain who takes out his anxieties on the freed black man by striking him across the face with a burning fire stick. All of these scenes stress the idea that emancipation from slavery has little effect so long as one has no standing as a legal subject. In this way, the failures of Equiano’s Christian conversion efforts become the fuel for a thematization of the protagonist’s subsequent political conversions. Equiano the picaresque figure naively embraces a logic of benevolence and accommodation to the slave trade, only to be converted, eventually, to the radical notion that blacks need to become legal subjects (hence non-slaves) capable of receiving redress. The commitment to ideas of paternalism and benevolence are taken to their logical ends, explored in stylized dramatizations, and then discredited; the reader who affectively identifies with the naïve protagonist is enjoined to affectively identify with his political conversions as well. Conversion thus becomes a trope, a mode of turning from one position to another, and is deployed here metaphorically in both secular and religious contexts.

Perhaps the most complex mingling of secular and religious modes in the text occurs at the very end, in the account of Vassa’s involvement with the resettlement project at Sierra Leone, and the final tribute to capitalism that the narrator makes following his dismissal from the project. Having been denied a request for ordainment so that he could preach to his own “countrymen,” Equiano takes part in a project that would settle displaced Africans back in Africa. This is a project funded and administered by the British government, and Vassa in fact had an official post with the organization before his whistle blowing about corruption had him dismissed. The narrator’s frustration with both religious and secular modes of “doing good” seeps through his descriptions of the project, and his narrative explicitly states that he mentions the dismissal only to clear his reputation and his good name. But the Sierra Leone debacle, like the failure on the Moskito coast, signals as well the failure of individual acts of agency in the face of larger systems (previously the slave trade, now the British government). Here at the end of the narrative, in the wake of the failure of his sovereign individuality to do some good, dissolved-in-Christ or not, Equiano calls upon an alternate vision of a corporate

subjectivity, the Christian African collectivity. The text becomes a forum not for the sovereign individual's autobiographical self-expression, but for the expression of a radical third-person plural point-of-view, one that shares some aspects with the village "we" earlier in the text, yet differs from it completely. This later "we" is a collective of Africans from various parts of the continent, all displaced by the slave trade. It is a "we" that operates transnationally, bolstered by Christianity, and directly engages with whites in the public sphere. This "we" creates collective political documents, and engages in acts of diplomacy. In a letter presented to the Quakers in Philadelphia, for example, a corporate subjectivity named "the Africans" (224) is constructed:

We, part of the poor, oppressed, needy, and much degraded negroes, desire to approach you, with this address of thanks, with our inmost love and warmest acknowledgements; and with the deepest sense of your benevolence, unwearied labour, and kind interposition, towards breaking the yoke of slavery . . .

Gentlemen, could you, by perseverance, at last be enabled, under God, to lighten in any degree the heavy burthen of the afflicted, no doubt it would, in some measure, be the possible means under God of saving the souls of many of the oppressors; and if so, sure we are that the God, whose eyes are ever upon all his creatures, and always rewards every true of virtue, and regards the prayers of the oppressed, will give to you and yours those blessings which it is not in our power to express or conceive, but which we, as a part of those captivated, oppressed, and afflicted people, most earnestly wish and pray for. (225)

The narrator's attainment of the kind of British subjectivity expected by his readers—the sovereign, bounded individual—has been troubled. "Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African" is a refracted subject whose doubleness shows the uneasy attainment of his position. Indeed, to become British is to smooth over the fault lines of violence, sorrow, and loss that have forged this figure. As the narrator quips early on, "I soon grew a stranger to terror of every kind, and was, in that respect at least, almost an Englishman" (77). From the ruins of a Western subjectivity he is barred from attaining, the narrator formulates a vision of a collective diasporic subjectivity. Like Whitefield's exaltation of his own outcast position, the signatories of the letter above make their own degraded position as "poor, oppressed, and needy" Africans central to a political drama. They fashion a *collective* voice that draws its moral authority from their debased position, seeking in that category a position from which to speak publicly. The passage is notable for the preponderance of the third-person plural. The group expresses agency: "we are sure," "we desire," and "we wish and pray."

The African collectivity, however, also gets imagined as a tool for others to use, and in this mode Vassa tries to harness its power to appeal to a white power structure. In the passage above, "the Africans" address "the Quakers," and it is assumed that both of

them are in the business “of saving the souls of many of the oppressors” (225). By the end of the text, saving souls takes a backseat to the exalted dream of capitalism, so much so that, I would argue, capitalism replaces Christianity as the operative transcendent force. Rather than freeing slaves by liberating their spirits in a conversion effort, the narrator turns toward the idea of abolishing the slave trade altogether in order to create a new multitude—not of chained black bodies on slave ships, but of African consumers. “How many millions doth Africa contain?” he asks. He conjectures that “collectively and individually” their expenditures “when civilized” will approximate “an immensity beyond the reach of the imagination!” (234–235).

The abolition of slavery, so diabolical, will give a most rapid extension of manufactures . . . The manufacturers of this country must and will, in the nature and reason of things, have a full and constant employ, by supplying African markets. . . . Population, the bowels and surface of Africa, abound in valuable and useful returns; the hidden treasures of centuries will be brought to light and into circulation. Industry, enterprise, and mining, will have their full scope, proportionably [sic] as they civilize. . . . The abolition of slavery would be in reality an universal good [sic]. (234)

The “universal good” is now imagined as resulting not from the transcendent self-obliteration of dissolved-in-Christ believers; it becomes an enterprise in which consuming subjects can be civilized into spending to support the British economic system. The agents of the transatlantic slave trade, having put the vast population of Africa into circulation as commodities, can now circulate instead the kinds of commodities (“raiment and furniture”) that Africans presumably would need to become more fully human. The African population is considered as one of the natural resources of Africa, valuable precisely for how fast it can reproduce itself. The narrator begins advertising Africa as a post-slavery manufacturer’s paradise, one in which the raw goods for commodities grow profligate, and one in which the ready market for the goods is also conveniently supplied:

Cotton and indigo grow spontaneously in most parts of Africa; a consideration this [sic] of no small consequence to the manufacturing towns of Great Britain. It opens a most immense, glorious, and happy prospect—the clothing, &c. of a continent ten thousand miles in circumference, and immensely rich in productions of every denomination in return for manufactures. (235)

From exclaiming the glories of God’s grace, the narrator has turned to waxing eloquent about the glories of capitalism, and the tone here is one of hyperbolic joy. The mortified, debased African bodies chained together on the slave ship become, in the discursive imaginary of Vassa’s text, a glorious, happy, consuming collective, and yet the slaveholder’s logic remains. “If the blacks were permitted to remain in their own country,

they would double themselves every fifteen years. In proportion to such increase will be the demand for manufactures” (235). Calculating a return for every child spawned, the narrator hawks his former continent like a barker at a slave auction, envisioning a day when each child will grow up to consume. Left out of this pretty picture is the labor involved to produce the goods Vassa imagines being consumed. The African population presumably would go from being captive commodities to being active consumers, but the sweat of the production of these goods is a gap in the glorious vision at the end of the text, a palpable absence.

However, this African collectivity structures the text and if we turn back to the first (contested) chapters describing the narrator’s African boyhood we might find the narrator’s advertisement once again. Authentic or not, the collective “we” stylized in the early boyhood descriptions of Africa is constructed to attract investors, though the Africans aren’t hawked quite so brazenly as they are by end of the narrative. The Edenic Africa imagined by the narrator functions as an advertisement similar to the one above, only here the African collectivity is as industrious as the sweating divine Whitefield, or the slaves on the beaches of Montserrat:

Our land is uncommonly rich and fruitful, and produces all kinds of vegetables in great abundance. We have plenty of Indian corn, and vast quantities of cotton and tobacco. Our pine apples grow without culture; they are about the size of the largest sugarloaf, and finely flavoured. We have also spices of different kinds, particularly pepper; and a variety of delicious fruits which I have never seen in Europe; together with gums of various kinds, and honey in abundance. All our industry is exerted to improve those blessings of nature. Agriculture is our chief employment; and every one, even the children and women, are engaged in it. Thus we are all habituated to labour from our earliest years. Every one contributes something to the common stock; and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars. The benefits of such a mode of living are obvious. The West-India planters prefer the slaves of Benin, or Eboe to those of any other part of Guinea, for their hardiness, intelligence, integrity and zeal. (37–38)

It is impossible to imagine such a description without the advent of the slave trade. Vassa’s experience as having been, himself, sold as a commodity and treated as a fetish informs the way he describes himself. He describes his people as the best slaves and as excellent investments for British manufacturers; it is impossible to consider this particular mode of address, this memoir by an otherwise “obscure” individual, without the slave system and the emergent capitalist system. Likewise, he describes a trajectory of Christian conversion because Christianity offered Vassa a mode of superior address, a way to turn his debasement into authority. It is impossible to think of an otherwise “private” individual having such a public voice without the Christian discourse within



which he situates himself. Whitefieldian Methodism offered a rhetoric of radical freedom, transpersonal and transnational, that was useful in envisioning a collective political entity of African Christians. These secular and religious systems together give Vassa the materials from which to construct his own system of self; his text fashions a subject who emerges from the rubble of these self-annihilating systems. At times this subject is “almost an Englishman,” other times he is “the African;” still further he becomes part of the collectivity “the Africans.” He haunts the reader with the knowledge of all the subjects who have been excluded from the grid of intelligibility, even while he panders to the reader’s assumptions and appetites for an “interesting” narrative told by a heroic individual. And yet, the signal achievement of Vassa’s narrator Equiano is that he calls our attention to the game of writing, to the way that he has deliberately constructed this account and this autobiographical persona to do the political work of abolishing slavery and of converting the reader to ever new ideas about how to treat the topic of the African people. Searching for authenticity or earnestness is an extremely vexed enterprise, therefore, and if we are stuck looking for literal proofs of mimetic reality in this textual representation, we miss its central strategies and motivations.

## Chapter 2

### The Slave Morality of Benjamin Franklin's Secular Virtue

“If you would be revenged of your enemy, govern yourself.” —Benjamin Franklin

“It is a revenge the devil sometimes takes upon the virtuous, that he entraps them by the force of the very passion they have suppressed and think themselves superior to.”

—George Santayana

“This is Benjamin's barbed wire fence. He made himself a list of virtues, which he trotted inside like a grey nag in a paddock.” —D.H. Lawrence

Because his place in history is now so secure, it is hard, perhaps, to imagine that Benjamin Franklin would have had the fear, to an almost obsessive degree, that he would not be remembered after he died. But thinking about the precarious life of one's reputation after death had been a habit for Franklin since he was a young man, and he built his life self-consciously as a kind of projected memorial. At the age of twenty-two, for example, he penned an epitaph for himself and he made a practice throughout his life of copying it out and giving it to friends as a gift. The epitaph envisions death as an opportunity to rewrite the events of one's life, to correct and amend that life in a second edition:

The Body

Of

Ben Franklin Printer,

Like the Cover of an old Book

Its Contents worn out  
And stript of it's Lettering & Gilding  
Lies here Food for the Worms,  
Yet the Work shall not be lost,  
For it will/as he believes/appear once more  
In a new & most beautiful Edition  
Corrected and Amended  
By  
The Author  
Born June 6th –1706 <sup>53</sup>

Just as he famously made a plan of his life and apparently stuck to it, Franklin reveals here how concerned he was to insure that the life he created would be remembered not as others imagined it, but in a “most beautiful Edition,” “Corrected and Amended” by himself. “The Work shall not be lost,” he writes, envisioning life as labor, as the strenuous process of self-invention, as the accumulation of great works. One’s reputation during one’s lifetime, so laboriously earned, so carefully designed and controlled, could not be left after death to the vagaries of time, the hazards of chance, or the pens of his enemies.

Franklin was very familiar with the hazards of not safeguarding one’s reputation before one died. In the *Autobiography*, in one of the many negative examples he offers of failed lives and ruined reputations, he details the fate of his friend the Reverend George Whitefield, a widely popular minister who was famous, during his lifetime, for his electric sermons that ignited a major religious revival.<sup>54</sup> Franklin utilizes the example of Whitefield, to contrast himself as superior in a number of ways. While Whitefield is religious, Franklin is secular; while Whitefield rouses emotions, Franklin appeals to reason. But the contrast Franklin draws out most extensively is that whereas Whitefield excelled in oral performances, Franklin was a virtuoso of print medium.<sup>55</sup> As Franklin’s epitaph reveals, he clearly identified himself with texts; he sees himself simultaneously as being book, the author of the book, and the editor of the final edition. That Whitefield failed to distinguish himself in the medium of print, Franklin argues, seriously affected his reputation after death.

Whereas during his lifetime Whitefield could hone “every Accent, every Emphasis, every Modulation of Voice” until he delivered a pleasurable discourse that,

regardless of its content, gave the kind of pleasure one experiences in “an excellent Piece of Musick” (Franklin 180), the textual productions he left behind after his death had serious deficiencies. As a publisher of Whitefield’s travel journals and pamphlets of his sermons, Franklin had a close knowledge of Whitefield’s writing. As he writes in the *Autobiography*:

His [Whitefield’s] Writing and Printing from time to time gave great Advantage to his Enemies. Unguarded Expressions and even erroneous Opinions del[ivere]d in Preaching might have been afterwards explain’d, or qualify’d by supposing others that might have accompany’d them; or they might have been deny’d; But *litera scripta manet*. (180)

After Whitefield’s death, Franklin tells us, the demise of his reputation began:

Critics attack’d his Writings violently, and with so much Appearance of Reason as to diminish the Number of his Votaries, and prevent their Encrease. So that I am of Opinion, if he had never written any thing he would have left behind him a much more numerous and important Sect. And his Reputation might in that case have been still growing, even after his Death; as there being nothing of his Writing on which to found a censure; and give him a lower Character, his Proselytes would be left at liberty to feign for him as great a Variety of Excellencies, as their enthusiastic Admiration might wish him to have possessed. (180)

Asserting his own superiority over Whitefield, Franklin distinguishes his project by way of a negative contrast.<sup>56</sup> Whereas Whitefield was careless with his textual productions, Franklin takes care to preserve his immortal reputation by constructing a virtuoso textual self as practiced and as polished as one of Whitefield’s sermons. As “The Author” of his own life story, the *Autobiography*, Franklin makes sure to leave behind a corrected and amended edition of his life, one that gives no grounds “on which to found a censure; and give him a lower Character,” as Whitefield’s writing had. If a potential danger in writing is that it can hang around after one dies and keep one’s reputation from growing, Franklin decides to control his textual production sufficiently to avoid that possibility. Such control could actually work positively, to convert new followers to one’s cause, to create new friends for oneself, even after one has died.

His *Autobiography*, begun in 1771, written in four installments over a nineteen-year period and published posthumously, works hard to achieve the kind of control over his immortal reputation that Franklin sought. It takes care to avoid all the “Unguarded Expressions and even erroneous Opinions” that might give fodder to Franklin’s enemies, or prevent “Proselytes” from “feign[ing] for him” after his death, “as great a Variety of Excellencies as their enthusiastic Admiration might wish him to have possessed.” If in the epitaph Franklin imagines the self as a book that can be rewritten after death, he also

sees the possibility that an autobiographical text could, itself, function as one's proxy self. Texts as prosthetic selves—entities endowed with subjective agency—could have the power to cajole, convince, sway, or impress others should one be able to do so oneself. One could be beloved after one died, just as one could be admired in life, if one only had the right textual self-representation.

Franklin's tightly controlled autobiographical persona, therefore, is constructed to avoid the mistakes Whitefield made. He omits strong opinions, personal connections, and particular aspects of his life story. He stresses instead "the Work" of the life—both the labor it took to become the great man and the works or achievements he knew he would leave behind as his legacy. The persona he creates, as Mitchell Breitwieser points out, "has a limpid, mildly ironic serenity that is only occasionally aggravated into impatience" in order to be offensive to no one and appealing to all (*Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin* 16). Franklin aspires to create an "equanimous univocity," as Breitwieser puts it, a placid, bland, benevolent textual projection of the reputation he built as altruistic, inventive, and devoted to the public good. While I agree that, in the main, this projection of affable serenity characterizes the surface of Franklin's text, I wish to look closely at the moments of "impatience" that do appear in the *Autobiography*, arguing that these deviations from the controlled persona reveal a pervasive, motivating aggression—an undertow of "*ressentiment*," to use Nietzsche's term—that has its origin in fear. Whereas Breitwieser reads the flipside of Franklin's projection of serenity as "a kind of depersonalized and somewhat chilling blankness that is quite separate from the universal affability he sought to project," I'd like to extend this reading to consider the "chilling" way the text promotes an ideal model citizen in Franklin's "depersonalized" image, and the way, moreover, that he uses his text to repudiate anyone who threatens his ideals (*Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin* 18). The "chilling blankness" that Breitwieser reads as coexistent with the projection of affability, therefore, actually boils to the surface as overt aggression in key moments of "impatience" with others who do not conform to Franklin's model of self. The violence of Franklin's encounter with otherness and his need to eradicate all difference becomes as much a model for selfhood as the prototypical benevolent good citizen Franklin sought to project.

Franklin self-consciously assumed the role of "the Author" of his life as he began composing an account of it in 1771, originally in the loose form of a letter to his son that would offer anecdotes about ancestors and the events of his early years. While addressed to his son, however, he also addresses posterity and the idea of correcting or amending his immortal reputation:

... were it offer'd to my Choice, I should have no Objection to a Repetition of the same Life from its Beginning, only asking the Advantage Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first. So would I if I might, besides corr[ectin]g the Faults, change some sinister Accidents and Events of it for others more favourable, but tho' this were

deny'd, I should still accept the Offer. However, since such a Repetition is not to be expected, the next Thing most like living one's Life over again, seems to be a *Recollection* of that Life; and to make that Recollection as durable as possible, the putting it down in Writing. (43–44)

Franklin abandoned the autobiographical project during the American Revolution and took it up again in 1784. To mark the interruption, he includes a memo stating that what follows is intended to be a more public document:

Thus far was written with the Intention express'd in the Beginning and therefore contains several little family Anecdotes of no Importance to others. What follows was written many Years after in compliance with the Advice contain'd in these Letters, and accordingly intended for the Publick. The Affairs of the Revolution occasion'd the Interruption. (133)

The two letters he inserts—one from Quaker businessman Abel James and another from one of his London publishers, Benjamin Vaughn—urge him to complete and publish the project before he dies. The letters echo the theme of the epitaph Franklin had penned for himself and suggest that he had a unique opportunity to produce a “new & most beautiful Edition” of that life in the form of the *Autobiography*, one that would outlive the body of the man and safeguard his reputation. “Your history is so remarkable,” writes Benjamin Vaughn, appealing to Franklin’s deepest fear of being misremembered after death, “that if you do not give it, somebody else will certainly give it; and perhaps so as nearly to do much harm, as your own management of the thing might do good” (135).<sup>57</sup>

Franklin’s individual subjectivity is explicitly envisioned by these two correspondents as an embodiment of an imagined national subjectivity; as the Quaker businessmen Abel James puts it, “[a]ll that has happened to you is also connected with the detail of the manners and situation of *a rising people*” (135).<sup>58</sup> Such appeals to the national importance of his stature flattered Franklin’s vanity, no doubt, putting him in the company of great historical figures like Caesar and Tacitus; moreover, the two correspondents urge Franklin to consider the usefulness of his *Autobiography*, to think of it as a kind of advertisement to the world about the greatness of the American project. The positive image of Franklin’s persona would be a way to attract the kind of “virtuous and manly minds” that, Vaughn writes, would be ideal immigrants to the new republic. Further, the *Autobiography* was specifically envisioned as providing not only an attraction for future citizens, or a stunning example to others, but as providing, as well, a specific mechanism for the transformation of the nation’s youth, a method for the production of a fit citizenry. As Abel James writes: “I know of no character living, nor many of them put together, who has so much in his power as thyself to promote a greater spirit of industry and early attention to business, frugality, and temperance with the American youth” (134).

James's conflation of Franklin's autobiographical persona with larger issues on the national agenda like emergent political and economic systems gets echoed in Max Weber's use of Franklin in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber analyzes the "peculiar" ethics of this national subject, stylized in accordance with the basic tenets of modern capitalism. Franklin's autobiographical persona serves as an embodiment of the "spirit of capitalism" itself, according to Weber, who deploys James's understanding of the "spirit" exemplified by Franklin, though he differs sharply in his analysis of what that spirit entails. Whereas James sees the promotion of "a greater spirit of industry" in the nation's youth as a positive outcome and stresses the national benefits of adopting Franklin's self-model and method of achieving virtue, Weber uses the figure of Franklin to bolster a critique of capitalism and the use of Enlightenment reason to promote its projects.

Weber finds an "irrational element" in the self-model Franklin provides, a "philosophy of avarice" wherein the accumulation of capital "takes on the character of an ethically coloured maxim for the conduct of life" (71; 51–52). Franklin, in Weber's reading of him, makes his life serve his business, rather than the other way around. "He gets nothing out of his wealth for himself, except the irrational sense of having done his job well" (71). The ideal subject of capitalism is motivated by his own self-interest, seemingly; and yet his peculiar ethos, his need to dutifully accumulate, becomes an end in itself, flattening out the very individuality that structured that self-interested motivation in the first place.<sup>59</sup>

Capitalistic virtues like industry and enterprise could be inculcated via the model of Franklin's autobiographical persona, but also through the "bold and arduous Project at arriving at moral Perfection" that Franklin had planned to include in the *Autobiography*. In the outline Franklin lists the topic as "The Art of Virtue," and Abel James is surely referring to this project when he urges the continuation of the manuscript. Originally conceived as a mode of self-examination and inculcation of virtue for himself, Franklin had for years cherished the idea of publishing a separate volume entitled "The Art of Virtue" that would have made his own method of moral self-improvement available for others to follow (Franklin 148 n5). He had also seen the development of his particular method as part a "*great and extensive Project*," the creation of a

. . . united Party for Virtue, by forming the Virtuous and good Men of all Nations into a regular Body, to be govern'd by suitable good and wise Rules, which good and wise Men may probably be more unanimous in their Obedience to, than common People are to common Laws. (158; 161–162)

In the *Autobiography*, Franklin discusses his idea of forming this "Sect," as he calls it, to be named the "Society of the *Free and Easy*." He had imagined it to be formed, initially, "among young and single Men only," and the condition was that each "should have

exercis'd himself with the Thirteen Weeks Examination and Practice of the Virtues" using Franklin's method (162). The ease and freedom he envisioned as resulting from applying the program correspond, not surprisingly, to the principles of capitalist enterprise:

Free, as being by the general Practice and Habit of the Virtues, free from the Domination of Vice, and particularly by the Practice of Industry and Frugality, free from Debt, which exposes a Man to Confinement and a Species of Slavery to his Creditors. (163)

Franklin's system for producing "free" subjects maps economic freedom with political and moral freedom, seeing a direct link between indebtedness and lack of virtue.

By 1784, however, when Franklin began part 3 of the *Autobiography*, he no doubt realized that both the sect and the separate volume would not be possible in his lifetime (Franklin 148 n5), and yet he had Vaughn's and James's letters urging him to use the occasion of his own life narrative for the larger purposes he had originally envisioned. Thus, the *Autobiography* became a way to consolidate his reputation but also to continue achieving his ambitions after he died. He sought to inculcate his specific brand of secular, capitalistic virtue in others, and to create followers of what he specifically terms his "Creed" (162).

In Benjamin Vaughn's vision, moreover, this more public version of the life narrative would promote the idea that "a reasonable course in life . . . is in many a man's private power" (Franklin 136). It could transmit this sense of "private power" to the citizens of the new Republic, just at a time when colonial structures were diminished and individuals were being required to be self-sufficient. The book, therefore, as both of these correspondents envisioned it, would function both as a prosthetic self for Franklin, for the preservation of his reputation after death, but it could also produce a nation of other Franklins, made in the mold of his specifically secular and capitalistic virtues.

Franklin's fears about how he would be remembered, and his desire to continue growing his reputation even after his death, have in fact manifested in a grandiose national project for the production of citizens whose effects we are still feeling today. In this chapter, I will closely analyze Franklin's self-representation and method for creating the ideal virtuous secular citizen, because I believe the consequences of his project of self-making and its widespread appropriation have been enormous. As Carla Mulford points out, the deification of Franklin began shortly after his death, with his face appearing on stamps, coins, and advertisements that sought to appropriate the reputation he had made as honest, trustworthy, and benevolent (428). Itinerant salesmen traversed the country as it was pushing its boundaries westward, bringing Franklin's *Autobiography* to small mining communities, homesteads, and farms where it was a hot seller. As Mulford writes, "the ordinary white citizen" was "expected to take care of



himself” increasingly, as colonial dependence was shed, and as migration took families away from social and familial structures (419).

Franklin’s persona and image have been used in a plethora of ways through the following years to consolidate specific political agendas and structure cultural and institutional projects. George Canning Hill, for example, wrote a biography of Franklin in 1864 that uses “his construction of Franklin to denigrate Native Americans” (Mulford 424), and contribute to the “shrill, rationalized” discourse “posing Native American savagery against Europeanized civility” as settlers were taking over Native cultures and ancestral lands in the West. His biography uses Franklin’s persona to call for Native American assimilation to an “American” way of living (Mulford 424). After the Civil War, Franklin was invoked to promote national unity, with the message that Southerners needed to put aside their passions for the greater good.<sup>60</sup> Franklin’s *Autobiography* was translated into numerous languages, and has served as a calling card to immigrants to try the American way. In 1808, Mendel Lefin, a Polish Jew, anonymously published in Hebrew a slim volume entitled *Moral Accounting*, a behaviorist guide to moral education and self-improvement. The text included at its core Franklin’s thirteen virtues and an example of his boxed grid; in a strange twist, American rabbis now use this Hebrew text as part of moral instruction in synagogue.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, because it severs moral instruction from specific religious affiliation, variations on Franklin’s method continue to be used to modify behavior and inculcate virtue in a variety of locales including drug rehabilitation programs, in federal prisons among death row prisoners, and in adapted forms in programs like Weight Watchers as well as Alcoholics Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous, and Gamblers Anonymous.<sup>62</sup> An intellectual reappraisal of the implications of the Franklinian self-model and system for moral perfection are long overdue, therefore, given their widespread reverberations, and the largely unquestioned acceptance of the values and ideals they promote.

### Secular Virtue

“There is something in critique which is akin to virtue.” —Michel Foucault

In his 1978 essay “What is Critique?” Michel Foucault defines the Enlightenment period as characterized by the confrontation between “the art of being governed” and that of not being quite so governed” (57). The art of being governed, as Foucault describes it, is a holdover from religious eras:

. . . the Christian church inasmuch as it acted in a precisely and specifically pastoral way, developed this idea—singular and, I believe, quite foreign to ancient culture—that each individual, whatever his age or status, from the beginning to the end of his life and in his every action, had to be governed and had to let himself be governed, that is to say directed

towards his salvation, by someone to whom he was bound by a total, meticulous, detailed relationship of obedience. (43)

The transformation from the “art of being governed” to the art of “not being quite so governed” is tied to secularization in Foucault’s formulation, and the development of a not-so docile subject is an adaptation to historical change.<sup>63</sup> As religious centers were displaced “there was a veritable explosion of the art of governing men” (43), Foucault writes, “a proliferation of this art of governing into a variety of areas” including “how to govern children, how to govern the poor and beggars, how to govern a family, a house, how to govern armies, different groups, cities, States and also how to govern one’s own body and mind” (43). As state systems began to establish themselves, as modern science began developing techniques, as capitalism and the bourgeois world began to be formed, he insists, the importance of the subject unmoored from religious instruction lay in its capacity for “the critical attitude” (44)—“a political and moral attitude, a way of thinking” (45) characterized by the subject’s preoccupation with the question: “how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them” (44).

In associating the critical attitude with secularism, Foucault posits a secular subject whose adaptation lies in his ability to transform himself in relation to increased governmentalization. By negotiating the terms and conditions of his obedience to moral codes, ethical precepts, and social norms, the secular subject Foucault posits necessarily interpolates the role of master in the regulatory regime. Civil society’s great question *How best to govern?* becomes, at the site of the individual subject, *How best to govern myself?* The development of the “art of not being governed so much” by others, or at costs one does not wish to pay, therefore, necessarily involves increased self-government.

Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* presents a secular model of moral virtue, deeply invested in developing the “art of not being governed so much” by others. Like Foucault, Franklin links the ability to adopt a critical attitude to secularism. Both Foucault and Franklin conflate the development of a critical attitude with the art of being one’s own master, with the art of managing one’s own morality. In a 1786 letter, Franklin addresses an unknown correspondent whom he sees as sharing with him the critical capacity to govern himself:

You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous Life, without the Assistance afforded by Religion; you having a clear Perception of the advantages of Virtue, and the Disadvantages of Vice, and possessing a strength of Resolution sufficient to enable you to resist Common Temptations. But think how grat [sic] a Proportion of Mankind consists of weak and ignorant Men and Women and of inexperienc’d, and inconsiderate Youth of both Sexes, who have need of the Motives of

Religion to restrain them from Vice, to support their Virtue, and retain them in the Practice of it till it becomes *habitual*, which is the great Point for its Security. (qtd. in Breitwieser *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin* 175).

Franklin's addressee here is one of the "reasonable creatures" whose superior critical capacity and ability to self-govern make religion unnecessary; he is, presumably, like Franklin, the embodiment of the Enlightenment man and is contrasted positively with the "grat [sic] Proportion of Mankind" who lack this capacity. This pattern of positive definition through contrast with a negative example, as we will see, is a stock feature of Franklin's *Autobiography*. The addressee here, however, is not imagined positively as actually being a virtuous person, but rather as someone who has a "clear Perception of the advantages of Virtue," and the capacity to discern when engaging in "Vice" would create a disadvantage. Virtue is not an inner state or an essential quality for Franklin, thus it cannot be an intrinsic motivator of behavior. Virtue itself, in Franklin's understanding of it, is a behavioral mode, a critical act one engages in to decide what behaviors are beneficial for which situation. In a secular world where virtue is not, presumably, inculcated from the outside, one's own capacity for reason thus supplants virtue. Critique is thus the mechanism or mode through which secular reason gets transmitted into moral virtue; it is the attitude of virtue, "akin to virtue," but not quite "virtuous."

Franklin clearly sees the need for a populace with this critical capacity, this secular form of virtue, and indeed, in a recently emancipated British colony, developing the art of "not being governed so much" would, for many, have been a national priority. The problem for Franklin, however, is that he considers the vast majority of humanity too "weak," "ignorant," or "inconsiderate" to govern themselves through the use of reason. Franklin acknowledges the social function of religion in that it gives those he considers "unreasonable creatures" a ritualized practice, a way to make virtue "habitual." Those who can't govern themselves, can, through religion, be given the way to act as though they were virtuous. Notice again, actual virtue is not the issue here, nor even an imaginative possibility for Franklin. He doesn't see religion as the inculcator of virtue, but rather as providing a "Motive" and a method for those who need it to act as though they had it. Ingenuity, cunning, critical distance and irony—all these qualities Franklin identifies as secular virtues that would allow a populace to develop the art "of not being governed so much" by others. And yet, he looks around and finds these qualities rare indeed.

Moreover, though Franklin clearly acknowledges the social function of religion and the desirability of the masses being controlled through it, he astutely surmises that with increased secularization the viability of religion as a "live"<sup>64</sup> possibility diminishes, and that those who need it are less likely to get it. He foresaw that as the salvation model became less and less compelling, those without the capacity to critically assess

themselves and institute their own method of self-regulation would be left adrift. As Franklin put the problem in a 1760 letter to Lord Kames:

Many people live bad lives that would gladly lead good ones, but know not *how* to make the change. They have frequently *resolved* and *endeavoured* it; but in vain, because their endeavours have not been properly conducted. To expect people to be good, to be just, to be temperate, &c., without *shewing* them how they should *become* so, seems like the ineffectual charity mentioned by the Apostle, which consisted in saying to the hungry, the cold, and the naked, “Be ye fed, be ye warmed, be ye clothed,” without showing them how they should get food, fire, or clothing. (qtd. in Breitwieser *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin* 192).

Franklin’s method of self-examination is thus a practical guide, meeting the practical social need for religion in an increasingly secular society, and *showing* people how to govern themselves, “to be good, to be just, to be temperate, &c.,” though they may not themselves possess the secular virtue of reason, detachment, and the moral attitude of critique. His system does not, significantly, seek to engender critical capacity in the vast majority of humanity, nor does it provide methods for developing one’s ability to reason; rather it offers a way that those deemed incapable of critique can achieve, instead, an approximate version of this secular virtue. Franklin’s method would divorce the idea of virtue from religion and give those who want it a way to stylize themselves as virtuous (which is, in effect, what the capacity for critique would give one).

Franklin’s moral program requires engaging in secular rituals such as noting one’s behavior, acknowledging when one errs, taking a daily inventory of one’s desires and temptations and the success one has in combating them. Instead of confession to an outside religious authority or prayerful communication with a divine, however, Franklin’s mode of moral regulation takes on the form of an accounting book, with columns of red ink and “little black spots” jotted down for every fault of the day. Spiritual progress, in Franklin’s system, is a matter of mathematical calculation, of reviewing the accounting books and hopefully finding them clean. As Breitwieser points out, for Franklin the “acquisition of virtue, like other forms of acquisition, is work” (*Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin* 192). Self-transformation in a secular world can no longer be a matter of spiritual conversion, and need not function through one’s connection to an outside divinity, or one’s experience of grace. Rather, self-transformation and the habits of virtue become the daily job of the citizen who wants to achieve success in a secular capitalist economy. The rewards occur not in an afterlife, but in the worldly acquisition of capital and prestige, as well as in the satisfaction of knowing one has mastered oneself and not served an outside master.

Franklin offers his reader his carefully constructed autobiographical persona as an appealing advertisement for his method of virtue. He portrays himself as an exceptional

person, but also as the kind of citizen his secular system for moral self-government could presumably produce *en masse*. His description of the method of his “bold and arduous Project of arriving at Moral Perfection,” as he calls it, is embedded in part 2 of the *Autobiography*, interpolated into the chronological narrative of Franklin’s own life story. His method of self-examination is portrayed as something he actually *did* to make him who he *was*. To this system of self-regulation he attributes his economic and worldly success, his ability to maneuver through society and participate in politics, his scientific achievements, his career in printing, and his benevolent inventions like the lending library, the fire station, and the Franklin stove.

And yet, a contradiction arises in thinking of Franklin as a product of his own moral system. For were it not for the superior Franklinian capacity for critique—his presumed distance from the need for actual virtue and his ability to discern when and where the “act” of it could be advantageous—he could not have “invented” such a system in the first place. We can take seriously perhaps, the idea that Franklin indeed subjected himself to his own account book program for moral regulation, but it also seems obvious that he invented the terms of his own subjection, and revised them frequently as necessary. This double attitude toward the work of moral-regulation, the Franklinian ability to simultaneously stylize himself as the capitalist entrepreneur who invents modes of spiritual transformation for others, and the industrious wage slave who dutifully keeps the spiritual account books clean, explains in part why, as Carla Mulford points out, the figure of Franklin has appealed to such diverse segments of the North American population. What has been expunged or devalued so that the model of secular virtue and detached, self-governing critique could be put forward as positive values? What haunts this national system of selfhood, this project whereby autobiography animates a method of self-design that promotes the values of capitalism, secularism, autonomous individuality, and scientific progress? What kinds of “subjugated knowledges,” to use another term from Foucault, are excluded from this system?

### **Franklin’s Slave Morality**

In Franklin’s outline for the autobiographical project (after the first part addressed to his son) he epigrammatically gestures to the topic of his own resentment, indicating that he thought that mental state worth writing about. He says, for example, that he planned to write not only about his first printing job in Philadelphia with an esoteric man named Keimer, but that he wanted to write as well about his resentful reaction to the unjust treatment of his employer. His outline for that section of the *Autobiography* lists a series of moves Franklin wishes to make in describing that period of his life: “Go to work again with Keimer. Terms. His ill Usage of me. My Resentment” (269).<sup>65</sup> The resentment at his employer Keimer echoes the sense of injustice that he had felt as an indentured servant to his elder brother, and in that earlier description, too, he describes the “Impressions of Resentment” that cause him to commit one of the first “errata” of his life, taking unfair advantage of a dubious scheme to keep his brother’s paper publishing (70).

In both cases the textual traces of resentment at unjust or unreasonable authority are palpable.

Here, my discussion of resentment will be aided by turning to Friedrich Nietzsche's discussion of slave morality in *The Genealogy of Morals*. Slave morality, Nietzsche argues, is the morality of the underdog and the dispossessed. He uses the term *ressentiment* to describe not mere resentment, but rather the "entrenched hatred and revenge of the powerless man," a contempt for others that has to simmer below the surface, because there is no power to express it or act on it, and that results in a primary "distortion" of reality (22). As a strategy for self-preservation and survival, slave morality reconstructs morality itself so that the haves are inherently immoral and evil and the have-nots become the exalted on earth. This is essentially the position of Judeo-Christianity, according to Nietzsche:

The beginning of the slaves' revolt in morality occurs when *ressentiment* itself turns creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, being denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality grows out of a triumphant saying 'yes' to itself, slave morality says 'no' on principle to everything that is 'outside', 'other', 'non-self': and *this* 'no' is its creative deed. This reversal of the evaluating glance—this *inevitable* orientation to the outside instead of back onto itself—is a feature of *ressentiment*: in order to come about, slave morality first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all, —its action is basically a reaction. (21–22; bold in original).

While Franklin's *Autobiography* stylizes itself as a yes-saying secular text, as an active model of virtue and invented morality for others to emulate, it is deeply entrenched in the slave morality Nietzsche saw as the heir of religious formations of virtue. The narrator invokes a series of incidents in which he says "no," contrasting the reasonableness and self-regulating secular virtue of his autobiographical persona with an endless procession of minor characters he debases for failing to adhere to the values prized within his own system. Ostensibly, the contrasts he makes put the figure of Franklin as successful, reasonable, industrious, and virtuous into relief. And yet his slave morality, in Nietzsche's terms, "first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, psychologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all." His persona, then, is essentially a negative figure, created in reaction to others, incapable of defining himself without the construction of an evil enemy.

The ritualized textual act of needing to trump others years later—to point out again how their world views, characters, and beliefs are so wrong—reveals the prodigious memory of the man of *ressentiment*. Consider, for example, the following anecdote early on in the narrative, presumably included to detail the kind of resistance

Franklin's enlightened rational persona encountered as it was propelling its way toward secular success:

There are Croakers in every Country always boding its Ruin. Such a one then lived in Philadelphia, a Person of Note, and elderly Man, with a wise Look, and very grave Manner of speaking. His Name was Samuel Mickle. This Gentleman, a Stranger to me, stopt one Day at my Door, and asked me if I was the young Man who had lately opened a new Printing House: Being answer'd in the Affirmative; he said he was sorry for me, because it was an expensive Undertaking and the Expense would be lost; for Philadelphia was a sinking Place, the People already half Bankrupts or near being so; all Appearances of the contrary, such as new Buildings and the Rise of Rents being to his certain Knowledge fallacious, for they were in fact among the Things that would soon ruin us. And he gave me such a Detail of Misfortunes, now existing or that were soon to exist, that he left me half-melancholy. Had I known him before I engag'd in this Business, probably I never should have done it. This Man continu'd to live in this decaying Place; and to declaim in the same Strain, refusing for many Years to buy a House there, because all was going to Destruction, and at least I had the Pleasure of seeing him give five times as much for one as he might have bought it for when he first began his Croaking. (116)

Surely anyone ever excited about a plan has encountered the intense pessimism of a doomsayer such as Mickle, and it is easy to identify with the narrator's irritation with the man. The autobiographical narrator's superiority in business is grounded, he asserts here, in the quality of intense optimism he possesses, in his ability to shake off such pessimistic outlooks, and in his good fortune in avoiding such people before undertaking certain plans. Here he contrasts his own optimistic, secular, enlightened thinking with the Puritanism of his elders. Franklin's persona gloats in his own reasonableness and in the freedom and success he says he experienced in the absence of Calvinist beliefs and dogmas.

And yet, this "Samuel Mickle," as he is specifically named, is a minor figure in the landscape of the story of Franklin's life. A stranger who made a pronouncement he didn't like, Franklin's mention of him reveals the *ressentiment* that lingers as he writes the narrative years later, saying first that he took "pleasure" *at the time* in seeing him pay "five times as much for a house," but expressing a kind of sadistic pleasure later, *as he writes*, in spitefully naming and defaming Mickle in his text. These two levels of the address are crucial, as the text becomes not merely a chronological account of past events, but a place where the now-time of injury and redress is fresh. The reader is enjoined to feel in the text's present narration a sense of outrage at Mickle, or at least a contemptuous superiority to one so misguided in the past and who has in the present tense of the text's narration been proven so wrong. Thus, there is a double gesture. We

feel the sense both of a narrator describing the historical pleasure he says he felt as a powerless young man in the past, and a second type of pleasure as the text uses the authoritative position of the now famous (and no longer dispossessed) Franklin to deride Mickle, to enact his imaginary revenge on the outmoded pessimism of Calvinism by putting forth his own triumphant success story of secular rational progress. The “Croaker” is a deeply pessimistic and fearful subject, a textual construction designed to reveal the superiority of Franklin’s persona and his moral system. In this way, through the stylized recalling of life experience, the reader is urged to avoid the depressiveness and anxiety of his forebears. In the face of such inherited and environmental fears, the reader is offered the Franklinian model instead. Franklin stands for optimism here, for a vision that sees endless future possibilities; he describes himself in this dialectic as the one who can take risks and invest in capitalistic ventures without fear of losing, the one who can grasp the benefits of rationality and science, the man of virtue who does not need the prop of a religious structure to (mis)guide him.

In the text’s dependence on the figure of the anxious elder man to define its heroic persona as optimistic, however, it reveals a sense of vulnerability and fragility. First, the narrator can’t seem to define himself without using examples of what he is not, giving him the kind of “blank” persona that Breitwieser notes—an empty figure who only comes to life when contrasted with clear examples of failed systems, personas, outlooks, and behaviors. Moreover, if we see this autobiographical figure of Franklin as the advertisement for his secular moral system, as we are clearly meant to, might we not then consider the negativity of this figure as also part of the system? In other words, while it is easy to see Franklin’s persona as advertising a program in which the followers would develop such qualities as secular virtue (the capacity for critique), an optimism about the future, and self-government, might we not also see the Franklin brand as advertising a need to create enemies and enact revenge against them? Might we not also consider the harboring of *ressentiment* as one of the byproducts of the Franklinian system of inventory-taking and a kind of accounting-book morality that keeps one in a state of deluded non-freedom, believing that governing oneself is not to be governed? After all, as I am asserting here, the project of positive self-making and wealth accumulation advertised in *The Autobiography* is an essentially negative one, a reaction to others that requires a renunciation of everything opposed to the others values. The seemingly positive system Franklin offers is imbued with slave morality—it is not free or optimistic; it exists only in opposition and is dependent upon that opposition to define itself as moral at all. This feature of the system, however, is disavowed and unacknowledged by the narrator himself.

There is a well of pessimism and anxiety that Franklin’s persona projects outward onto the figure of the doom-saying Mickel; however these “ugly feelings” cannot be contained there, for, as he tells us, the elder man “gave me such a Detail of Misfortunes, now existing or that were soon to exist, that he left me half-melancholy” (116).<sup>66</sup> The contagious potential of outmoded habits of belief hovers over the scene, as the figure of



Franklin for a time takes on the properties of Calvinism that he claims to resist. Thus, *The Autobiography* presents the incident as a kind of close call, a test of the narrator's ability to say no to a Calvinist moral system and emerge triumphant for the cause of secular, self-governing, optimistic freedom. But, as in slave morality, the seeming triumph is actually reactive, weak, a manifestation of "the revolt of the slaves and their victory *as* slaves," an expression more of the narrator's *ressentiment* than his success (Deleuze 117).

What I'd like to stress here, most of all, is that Franklin's inclusion of the incident—minor and fleeting as it seems to have actually been during his lifetime—implies that the renunciation was not complete. In this second edition of the life, this amended and corrected version, Franklin's persona is compelled to repudiate textually the others whose views he presumably rejected in actuality during his lifetime, to assert anew his ability to say no to them. The text says no to them publicly, triumphantly, but the implication of this autobiographical act is that one has to continue to say no to others as they ever threaten to encroach upon one's attempt to be optimistic and free. The feeling of *ressentiment* as something felt (*senti*) rather than acted, as a reactive force motivating the textual patterns of repudiation, encroaches on the self-portrait of "affable serenity" that Franklin sought to project, revealing such an affect as a mere mask covering a stunning aggressive streak, a capacity for cruelty, and a deep motivating mood of being entangled with the idea of revenge against one's enemies. The stylized optimism Franklin's persona overtly presents depends upon the "prodigious memory" of the man of *ressentiment* to present itself as such; yet the *ressentiment* structuring the contrast contaminates the self-stylization as aloof, benign, unattached. Surely Franklin would like to paint himself as one who is able to move on and forget about old croakers such as Mickle. Yet he lingers here on the path not taken, wanting to be justified and take his revenge.

Let us turn to another example that will help illuminate the slave morality and the structural presence of *ressentiment* in the text. The narrator's description in the *Autobiography* of his encounter with his boyhood friend, Collins, begins with a joyful moment of recognition in New York. Initially, we are given pleasurable details as he remembers the kind of books they shared and the childhood intimacy they enjoyed. The narrative ultimately, however, conjures up memories of Collins only to project onto the friend a host of qualities debased in Franklin's moral system for secular virtue. Franklin's persona starkly opposes his own industriousness and sobriety with the indebtedness and drunkenness of Collins; he indulges in an extended harangue, filled with *ressentiment*, about the other man's drinking that is meant to highlight his own superiority. As the story continues, however, the narrator recounts a violent episode on a boat in which he throws Collins overboard and taunts him:

His Drinking continu'd about which we sometimes quarrel'd, for when a little intoxicated he was very fractious. Once in a Boat on the Delaware with some other young Men, he refused to row in his Turn: I will be row'd

home, says he. We will not row you, says I. You must or stay all Night on the Water, says he, just as you please. The others said, Let us row; what signifies it? But my Mind being soured with his other Conduct, I continu'd to refuse. So he swore he would make me row, or throw me overboard; and coming along stepping on the Thwarts toward me, when he came up and struck at me I clapt my Hand under his Crutch, and rising pitch'd him head-foremost into the River. I knew he was a good Swimmer, and so was under little Concern about him; but before he could get round to lay hold of the Boat, we had with a few strokes pull'd her out of his Reach. And ever when he drew near the Boat, we ask'd if he would row, striking a few Strokes to slide her away from him. He was ready to die with Vexation, and obstinately would not promise to row; however seeing him at last beginning to tire, we lifted him in; and brought him home dripping wet in the Evening. We hardly exchange'd a civil Word afterwards; and a West India Captain who had a Commission to procure a Tutor for the Sons of a Gentleman at Barbadoes [sic], happening to meet with him, agreed to carry him thither. He left me then, promising to remit me the first Money he should receive in order to discharge the Debt. But I never heard of him after. (85–86)

A boyhood friend who possessed the great problematic tendencies toward drunkenness and indebtedness that Franklin despises, Collins is presented here as obstinate and opposed not only to Franklin's personal will, but to the will of secularism, capitalism, and the progress of the emergent nation as well. If the narrator mythologizes himself as the industrious accumulator of capital, one who takes advantage of every opportunity and maximizes the use-value of every relationship, he demonizes the drunken debtor here as an unfortunate impediment and burden, as a wasteful byproduct of his childhood nostalgia that needs to be cast off for the narrative and the life to progress.

In contrast, the narrator valorizes his own obstinacy as indicative of the enlightened power and rational capacities he possesses, and it is significant that, in the scene described, the others in the boat have no problem with a little extra rowing. If Collins is the enemy to the secular good life and Franklin's persona is the hero, these anonymous rowers are the great mass of men who do nothing and go nowhere, like the beer guzzlers Franklin later encounters in London. Casting off impediments to capitalism and progress requires a kind of violence in this formulation, a willingness to counter obstacles and apathy with force, and Franklin seems to have been willing to sacrifice Collins for his cause here, literally pitching him off the boat and being willing to leave him to drown. The negativity of Franklin's self-portrait lies in its reactivity, in the way the narrator relies on Collins's actions to set in motion a description of himself as a positive, active force for capitalist enterprise. Indeed, while Collins seemingly is the passive one here, he is actually the actor, setting the scene in motion with his refusal to row and his demand to be rowed by the others. The dialogue is structured as a dialectic, a

conflict of wills and ideas: *I will, we will not, you must, I continued to refuse.* And in this dialectic Collins makes the affirmative statements. At the end of the scene the persona of the young Franklin acquiesces, helping to lift the obstinate Collins into the boat and bring him home.

Years later, however, in this corrected and amended edition of the life, Franklin stages a textual reenactment of the scene. Much as it took pains to specifically name the old Croaker who dared to discourage the young Franklin from his business pursuits, the narrative once again displays the prodigious memory of *ressentiment*. For though he apparently acquiesced to his friend's will at the time, here the narrator stylizes himself as the victor, the one who triumphed with the success of his own life story, while Collins gets ejected out of the boat of his text. These moments of *ressentiment* function to flag the narrator's sacrifice of everything that opposes the great secularized plan for moral living Franklin has conceived. If Puritan fear and doomsday pessimism must be cast off, so too must childhood nostalgia, mates who don't pull their weight, drunkards who can't accumulate capital and instead accumulate debt. But the feeling of powerlessness that engendered the *ressentiment* remains. The "creative act" of Franklin's definition of himself as virtuous is a kind of slave morality in that it relies on the construction of an enemy to oppose, and only arises in that opposition in the first place.

I highlight here not the idea that Franklin may have actually been a resentful person who enjoyed taunting and rejecting his friend in life (since I do not care about that). Rather, I'm interested in the way the textual descriptions of the narrator's own idealized characteristics are structured negatively, in a mode of reaction to the traits of others and relying upon those others for their own definition. In calling attention to these scenes of *ressentiment*, I want to stress the way that the text makes sure to denounce the others it invokes. This pattern of denunciation is like the "imaginary revenge" of slave morality in Nietzsche's formulation. Though *The Autobiography* is written many years later, the text portrays the narrator, the former underdog, the once poor boy from the underclass, as triumphing over the kid in Franklin's hometown whose economic privilege had allowed him to appear smarter. For in their childhood, Collins had been "naturally more eloquent" [and] 'had a ready Plenty of Words'; when Franklin's narrative describes the narrator's father reading a series of letters between the two boy, he pronounces Franklin as falling "far short in elegance of Expression, in Method and in Perspicuity" (61).

On the one hand, the episode with Collins reveals the straightforward rags-to-riches story of how "a poor Boy like me" (as Franklin calls his childhood persona) was honored with a conversation with the Governor, a "pleasing" positive conversation about "Books and Authors" that the hapless Collins was too drunk to attend. In this sense it is meant to be an affirmation of the superior virtues in Franklin's persona, that he had the ability to attract and accept such gifts, and be propelled forward to success. However, the stylized textual memory of the encounter also becomes an occasion to engage in violent

class warfare, to settle old scores and air old resentments. In the text, Franklin's narrator ejects the privileged Collins off the boat of his success story, aggressively asserting years later the superiority and smugness of a self-made man who squandered no opportunity and was given no advantage. He is particularly resentful that as a child Collins "had the Advantage of more time for reading, and Studying and a wonderful Genius for Mathematical Learning in which he far outstript me" (84). But the *Autobiography*, serving as a proxy self, does the work of "imaginary revenge," showing Franklin's subsequent learning and genius as well as his spectacular rise from the underclass. It also reveals the anxiety that attends such a trajectory, for the text must assert the earlier comparison in which Franklin was inferior and supplant it with this later comparison arguing for his character's eventual superiority. The slave morality of Franklin's text must continue saying no "on principle to everything that is 'outside', 'other', 'non-self': and *this* 'no' is its creative deed" (Nietzsche 21). Saying no becomes a virtuoso performance, a negative gesture painted as a positive instinct for self-preservation and success. Franklin urges his value system upon his readers, arguing in essence that it is necessary to dispose of those who cannot reason. *Ressentiment* becomes an affirmative value in Franklin's moral system, a dark passion that postures as a mode of detachment and calculated reasonableness. But he has constructed a system that will say nothing about this constitutive exclusion. Does resentment actually motivate the qualities such as "industry," "frugality," and "moderation" he advertises so overtly? Does the creation of enemies enable his sense of himself as superior? As Nietzsche writes, the formerly powerless like Franklin, those who lack the power to aggressively act, "make the most *evil enemies*," because "their hate swells into something huge and uncanny to a most intellectual and poisonous level" (18).

*Ressentiment* is a feeling, a reaction to a subterranean depth of feeling one was too powerless to express, and the text lingers on the feelings it says it is conjuring up only to dispel and eject. For a sense of loss lingers even as Franklin asserts a triumphal superiority; the episode with Collins ends, surprisingly, on a melancholy note. Not only does the indebted Collins never pay Franklin back, leaving him with a financial loss, but he disappears from Franklin's life completely. After the incident on the boat, both parties apparently remained resentful ("We hardly exchange'd a civil Word afterwards") and Collins eventually procured a job in Barbados. "He left me then, promising to remit me the first Money he should receive to discharge the Debt. But I never heard of him after" (86). This sense of unfinished business, of people who *owe* Franklin and leave him wanting, is a recurrent pattern in the *Autobiography*; I would argue, as well, that this sense of loss is the inassimilable waste produced by his seemingly positive system in that it offers no method for dealing with such psychic aspects of the self. Virtue is conceived in exteriorized modes that fail to address the affective level of personhood. In *The Autobiography* characters seem to appear and disappear from the narrator's life and Franklin's text, leaving behind a trail of loss and unexamined sadness. The relentless positive spin to every situation is in response to an incredibly anxious, melancholy,

disappointed, and sorrowful self, a self the success story of Franklin cannot entirely counteract. The feeling of *ressentiment* compels the narrator to re-experience the struggles with those he says he has mastered. Despite the elaborate system *The Autobiography* mounts to model an ideal American self and teach others how to inhabit the positive values of secularism, democracy, rationality, reason, thrift, industry, and so on, a deep undercurrent of *ressentiment* surfaces, a well of disavowed affect. The narrator posits the feelings as surmounted, but the moments of “impatience” with others remain. Far from impatience, I maintain, they represent an underlying structure of violence toward others and an aggressive need to construct others as enemies.

Franklin’s episodic inclusion of a description of Ralph, the poet friend he traveled to London with, similarly constructs a former friend as evil enemy and also ends on a note of unassimilated loss. After having described a friendship in which the two men were at one time “inseparable Companions,” Franklin dismisses the character with the harsh phrase “And in the Loss of his Friendship I found my self reliev’d from a Burthen” (99). As in the case with Collins, the text uses the figure of Ralph to deride impediments to the accumulation of capital and the project of becoming a “reasonable creature;” Ralph the poet comes to embody “the Folly of pursuing the Muses with any Hope of Advancement by them” (99) rather than working and saving. Ralph’s pursuit of poetry is similar to Collins’s stubborn refusal to row the boat: it is directly opposed to Franklin’s will, the advice he expounds, and his model for living. To the system of reasonableness Franklin expounds, anything not calculated for direct and immediate improvement of one’s situation is sheer folly. Poetry and drunkenness are equally irrational.

As in the previous passages, however, Franklin’s extended example meant to contrast the inferiority of some alternative version of self with his own superior, self-made successful version actually ricochets back on itself, stirring up the dark side of encounters with others that his optimistic system of self-reliant virtue purports to supplant. For Ralph is actually a good friend, a friend whom Franklin betrays when he makes sexual advances towards his mistress. The system of secular progress and capitalism requires, in this formulation, a cunning and wily hero who can use whatever opportunity he has to settle his accounts:

In the mean time Mrs. T. having on his Account lost her Friends and Business, was often in Distresses, and us’d to send for me, and borrow what I could spare to help her out of them. I grew fond of her Company, and being at this time under no Religious Restraints, and presuming on my Importance to her, I attempted Familiarities, (another Erratum) which she repuls’d with a proper Resentment, and acquainted him with my Behaviour. This made a Breach between us, and when he return’d again to London, he let me know he thought I had cancel’d all the Obligations he had been under to me. So I found I was never to expect his Repaying me what I lent to him or advanc’d for him. This however was not then of

much Consequence, as he was totally unable. And in the Loss of his Friendship I found my self reliev'd from a Burthen. I now began to think of getting a little Money beforehand; and expecting better Work . . . (99).

Franklin invokes the hapless poet here as an extreme example of an unreasonable creature, a man who refuses to pay his debts and irrationally takes advantage of the narrator's "Erratum" to free himself from financial obligation. Poetry and poets are financial problems, Franklin suggests, and after dispensing with the burden of his entanglement with Ralph, the narrative optimistically moves forward, immediately mentioning that Franklin was getting "better Work" and amassing capital in more ingenuous ways. Yet, the supposedly irrational or unreasonable logic that Franklin associates with Ralph, the inability to calculate that an overture toward a mistress does not cancel a debt, is the same kind of calculation Franklin himself employs in approaching Mrs. T. in the first place. He presumes that his financial importance to her would obligate her to suffer his advances, and he calculates that he is owed something in the way of services for the burdensome debt he has incurred. The logic of his secularized capitalism allows prices to be paid for human interactions; what Franklin objects to is the fact that the debtor employed a similar logic and took control of fixing the price. That Mrs. T. "repuls'd" him with "a proper Resentment," is a nod to propriety here, but the lingering emotional affect from the episode is that Franklin has been disappointed in a so-called friend, and that he was unable to exact a payment of any kind. Moreover, Franklin as author *and* narrator is full of *ressentiment* toward the poet and his mistress. "So I found I was never to expect his Repaying me what I lent to him or advanc'd for him," he states, circling the debt, highlighting it years later as though it were a fresh injury. Though the scene is meant to construct Ralph as unreasonable—as not understanding the logic of exchange—what seems to bother Franklin most is not actually Ralph's irrationality *per se*, but rather his cunning. For Ralph leaves Franklin cheated, his contract unfulfilled, and finds an ingenious way to substitute his friends "errata" for the debt, just as Franklin had cunningly sought to take advantage of the poet's debt to gain sexual favors.

The narrative seethes with *ressentiment* in moments like these—an understated, calculated resentment that years later is pointing to the accounting books and saying how wronged he was. Franklin's own "erratum" can be forgiven, but the peccadilloes of minor figures like Collins and Ralph and the old Calvinist Croaker cannot be forgotten. The *Autobiography* stages a place to memorialize the unbalanced account book, to extract payment from those who Franklin feels owe him. Part of how these figures pay their presumed debt is by becoming jokes in the text. They become the material consumed as fuel for the forward narrative of capitalism and secular progress to proceed. The "imaginary revenge" of Franklin's slave morality uses the text to cuckold Ralph, presenting him as a weak and diminished creature. As in the previous episode with Collins who is ejected from both the boat and the text, this scene registers and reenacts the kinds of sacrifices secular progress entails. The initial loss of Ralph as a friend is

staged as a reenactment in the text, narrated as the cost of doing business in a belief system where personal affiliation and attachment to others can only hinder success. Expunging this character in the text allows the plot to move forward unhampered in its progress-narrative, allowing the heroic narrator to proceed relieved of a friend he considered an impediment to financial success. Thus, the “spirit of industry” embodied in Franklin’s self-portrait is actually dependent on the “spirit of revenge” for its delineation.

There are no major characters besides the narrator in this text. What we have instead of a narrative in which connections to others are described is a parade of scenes in which minor figures are invoked in order to be ejected from the text. Thus, the plot is not so much centered on the “actual” events of Franklin’s life per se, but on the specific events that help him to make an argument for his own moral system as a model way of life. Analyzing these scenes, moreover, as scenes of *ressentiment* suggests that Franklin’s secular virtue, much like the Calvinist theology he repudiates, is a kind of slave morality, a positive value dependent upon constructing an evil outside that the virtuous can respond to. “The ‘well-born’ *felt* they were ‘the happy’; they did not need first of all to construct their happiness artificially by looking at their enemies” (Nietzsche 22–23). Like the meek who would inherit the earth, Franklin “knows all about keeping quiet, not forgetting, waiting, temporarily humbling and abasing himself” (Nietzsche 23). And in the second edition of his life he would have his revenge.

### Reasonable Creatures

“So convenient a thing it is to be a *reasonable Creature*, since it enables one to find or make a Reason for every thing one has a mind to do.” —Benjamin Franklin

While for most of *The Autobiography* the narrative of secular Enlightenment progress articulates a narrator who describes himself as possessing a kind of critical detachment from the Calvinist religion of his forefathers, a secular virtue based on his ability to reason and govern himself, there is a disturbing and significant moment in the text when he ventriloquizes a figure full of Puritan beliefs in the form of a punishing and vengeful deity. In describing the Carlisle Treaty with the Native Americans he helped to broker, Franklin gives the following account:

As those People are extreamly apt to get drunk, and when so are very quarrelsome and disorderly, we strictly forbad the selling any Liquor to them; and when they complain’d of this Restriction, we told them that if they would continue sober during the Treaty, we would give them Plenty of Rum when Business was over. They promis’d this; and they kept their Promise—because they could get no Liquor—and the Treaty was conducted very orderly, and concluded to mutual Satisfaction. They then claim’d and receiv’d the Rum. This was in the Afternoon. They were near 100 Men, Women and Children, and were lodg’d in temporary cabins built

in the Form of a Square just without the Town. In the Evening, hearing a great Noise among them, the Commissioners walk'd out to see what was the Matter. We found they had made a great Bonfire in the Middle of the Square. They were all drunk Men and Women, quarrelling and fighting. Their dark-colour'd Bodies, half naked, seen only by the gloomy Light of the Bonfire, running after and beating one another with Firebrands, accompanied by their horrid Yellings, form'd a Scene the most resembling our Ideas of Hell that could well be imagin'd. There was no appeasing the Tumult, and we retired to our Lodging. At Midnight a Number of them came thundering at our Door, demanding more Rum; of which we took no Notice. The next Day, sensible they had misbehav'd in giving us that Disturbance, they sent three of their old Counsellors to make their Apology. The Orator acknowledg'd the Fault, but laid it upon the Rum; and then endeavour'd to excuse the Rum, by saying, "*The great Spirit who made all things made every thing for some Use, and whatever Use he design'd any thing for, that Use it should always be put to; Now, when he made Rum, he said, LET THIS BE FOR INDIANS TO GET DRUNK WITH. And it must be so.*" And indeed if it be the Design of Providence to extirpate these Savages in order to make room for Cultivators of the Earth, it seems not improbable that Rum may be the appointed Means. It has already annihilated all the Tribes who formerly inhabited the Sea-coast (198–199).

Here the seemingly benevolent secular narrator invokes the Calvinistic God he has taken pains to supplant throughout his narrative, and in excoriating the drunken behavior of the Native Americans, and the irrationality of an Orator who sees rum as a gift from the great spirit, he presents the equally irrational idea that perhaps God made the rum for the white people to kill the Indians with. The brunt of his critique of the Native Americans here—as with his critique of Whitefield above—rests in the failure of the Native Americans to take responsibility for their own behavior, and their use of an occult or unseen force to excuse themselves. As he had said about Whitefield, "knowing it to be the Custom of the Saints, when they received any favour, to shift the Burthen of the Obligation from off their own Shoulders, and place it in Heaven, I had contriv'd to fix it on Earth" (179). He wants to hold the Indians to an earthly, scientific, rational explanation for their actions, and seems to delight in the idea that they have none.

And yet his own logic relies on the same formula of avoidance of blame that he decries in the Native Americans. Rum, not Anglo-Americans, he asserts, is to blame for the annihilation of the tribes who formerly inhabited the seacoast, as if rum were a transcendent, powerful occult force divorced from the material conditions of its production and distribution. Far from a scientific explanation for the genocide of Native Americans, Franklin relies on a bigoted and inherited representation that is stunning in its retrograde quality; it calls forth and endorses the kind of old ideas and oscillated beliefs



he has decried throughout this forward moving narrative he has stylized as secular progress and rational thinking.

What interests me here is the eruption of textual violence in the midst of the benevolent façade of universal, greater good, and the way in which the dark undertow of *ressentiment*, simmering below the surface and glimpsed throughout the text in its shadows, comes out so fully in the open here. Relying on hackneyed formulations of drunken, “half-naked” Indians resembling a hell he has already disowned, Franklin aligns himself with the Puritan explanation for the genocide of racial others, and effectively aligns himself with the economic prosperity and domination ideologically associated with being one of God’s chosen people. This moment of intense ideological identification with his forefathers is striking in that he has taken such pains to rebel against the limitations of a Calvinistic view providing providential explanations for history and pessimistic beliefs in a punishing God.

It is possible that in conjuring up the Puritanical view of God as a killer of Native Americans, Franklin is merely performing a position, opposing the irrationality of the Native American belief in a Great Spirit who makes rum for Indians with the equally irrational Calvinistic view of Puritan enemies. In this case he could be seen as mimetically reproducing the war of religious beliefs, showing the folly of both sides (Calvinism and Native spirituality) and disengaging himself as a rational and scientific observer. And indeed, the sincerity of any position Franklin takes in the *Autobiography* is a huge question, given the intensity of the rhetorical performance and the highly stylized construction of his autobiographical personae throughout his *oeuvre*. But, as in the previous chapter, authenticity and sincerity are not the issue here. Leaving aside for the moment the question of the historical Franklin’s racial attitudes and opinions, I am interested rather in interrogating the rhetorical affect he creates in this moment of dramatic tension by using such a dialectic. His persona may be performing a common attitude and pandering to the expectations of an audience that would expect him to endorse the genocide of Native Americans with paeans to God and Providence; what calls for explanation is why Franklin strategically does so in this particular moment, given the numerous examples I have cited above of his skepticism about, and his ritual sacrifice of, such a position.

Here the text chooses between two outmoded belief systems—both seen as obstacles to secular progress—and sacrifices the Native American belief in a Great Spirit rather than the Puritan concept of Providence. The “Indian” way of life, like Collins’s drunkenness and Ralph’s poetry, must be discarded in a narrative in which the forward movement of the secular, democratic, capitalistic American future will prevail. Just as Franklin has ejected personal and affective ties from his personal narrative, here he empties the landscape of North America, ejecting non-white subjects whose beliefs would threaten the design for national success he has proposed. In the context of the Carlisle treaties, the contest is no longer between religion and secularism, or between

poetry and the accumulation of capital, but rather between a European and a Native American way of life. To associate the Native Americans with the drunkenness he has already derided as an enemy of Enlightenment progress (in his discussion of Collin's and the beer "guzzlers" he works with) and with the oratory (such as Whitefield's) he has similarly repudiated makes the task of vilifying others a consistent part of his project. Yet in aligning his narrator so explicitly with a position he has equally derided—even if it is in jest or dramatically conceived—is to present a major contradiction in the entire project of his self-presentation and his method of secular virtue. This particular moment represents a crack in the coherence and consistency of Franklin's project, a place where his own seeming rationality is overtly exposed as irrational. The intensely stylized persona of a figure embodying and modeling Enlightenment principles crumbles, and the conceit that Breitwieser has so ably shown, Franklin's project of distinguishing himself and his program of virtue from Calvinism, fails.

As in the scene on the boat with Collins, the aggressive energy of this text erupts here in this encounter with racial difference. This undertow of *ressentiment* is socially sanctioned in those textual moments when the narrator identifies a suitably abject locus for his violence, for his need to assert himself not merely as an agent of history and progress but as a triumphant victor in a war against the human impediments to his secular moral system. Giving his own enemies no chance to criticize him is one stylistic strategy he employs; his revenge is "imaginary" in Nietzsche's terms, because it takes place years later, after Franklin's death. But choosing enemies from the margins of history is another strategy; the disempowered rarely have the means to mount a counter attack to such a crafty, cunning, virtuoso textual performance. The drunkards are too drunk, the poets too broke, and the Native Americans, he seems to presume, will all soon be dead. Franklin's colossal project of self-making and subject-forming involves creating a sufficiently benign, empty, exteriorized version of self that provides no distraction from the worldly achievements he narrates, and his procession of ritually sacrificed victims powers the narrative of benevolent Enlightenment progress he slates for history. But history resides in the undertow as well, in the moments that flash up and show us the vulnerability of those whose power is dependent on revenge against others.

## Chapter 3

### Thoreau's Secular Dirge: Cruelty, Optimism, and Affect in *Cape Cod*

Most readers of Thoreau's *Cape Cod* have taken note of the peculiarity of the narrator's affect, of the way he describes the violence of the sea and the mangled humans it spits out in such dispassionate terms. While it has been read divergently as a "genial" travel narrative (Harding) and as a "macabre" prose poem bordering on the surreal (Morgan), the sense of a pronounced *lack* of affect in the narrator is what most readers can't help but notice. A contemporary *Atlantic Monthly* reviewer, for example, mentions the severe "bareness" of Thoreau's prose, a bareness astounding for its desiccating quality—"like the air of California, where things the most loathsome may lie around us without making the air impure" (Higgenson 41–42). This sense of atmospheric dryness and tonal neutrality when commenting on the most "loathsome" of topics is a striking feature of the text that several contemporary viewers noted, while predicting, as well, the importance this "peculiar" text would likely have to future scholars of a newly forming peculiar American literature (Anonymous, *Yale Review*). In the peculiar genre of American literature, however, this detached text about emotionally charged, disgusting topics may have proven a bit *too* peculiar for most critics, as it has hardly been considered a mainstay of the canon.

There isn't a lot of twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical commentary on *Cape Cod*, especially when one considers the high canonical status *Walden* has obtained, and the critical industry devoted to Thoreau studies.<sup>67</sup> Critics tend to focus on *Cape Cod* merely as a "peculiar" minor work in Thoreau's *oeuvre*, the masterwork being, of course, *Walden*.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, considering that Thoreau didn't really publish the work as a volume in his lifetime—he published three chapters of *Cape Cod* as a series in *Putnam's Monthly* and left a manuscript after his death that Ellery Channing edited—it's hard to know if the text we have is one Thoreau would have given his imprimatur to, or even published at all, which is part of why it has for many critics a minor status.<sup>69</sup> One way of understanding the dearth of critical attention to this marginalized narrative, however, is by considering the obvious challenge *Cape Cod* poses to readers' ideas of Thoreau as heroic environmentalist. Critical investment in a Thoreauvian redemptive vision of nature gets tested in a narrative in which nature is constantly wielding death and in which the affect

of the narrator viewing this scene is stoic in the extreme.<sup>70</sup> As Thoreau opines in *Walden*, life is an experiment; few, it would seem, can embrace the experiment's resulting bleakness as it unfolds in *Cape Cod*.

If readers become “nervous and wretched” reading *Walden*, as Ralph Waldo Emerson stated he did, and if many readers become frustrated with the endless contradictions and opaque diction in that earlier text, the issue of wretched nervousness is certainly heightened in *Cape Cod* (qtd in Michaels 132). For in *Cape Cod*, the idea of protecting pristine nature would seem a joke, and the idea of divesting oneself from such a pervasive system of suffering through civil disobedience, as I will argue, would seem futile and naive. Walter Benn Michaels has argued that much *Walden* criticism can be best understood as providing strategies for trying to manage the discomfort the text produces. But in *Cape Cod* the pervasiveness of a “wretched” affect is perhaps more extreme than it is in *Walden*, producing a kind of nervous discomfort scholars have not been so eager to rationalize or explain away. The optimism of the project put forth in *Walden*—the notion that withdrawing to the bosom of nature could remove us from our “cruel attachments”<sup>71</sup> to the forces of industrialization, capitalism, and petty societal pressures—becomes, in *Cape Cod*, a much more pessimistic meditation on nature's ultimate indifference to us and a much more forceful critique of the systematic nature of those pressures. A wider global economy is glimpsed in *Cape Cod*—an economy whose sorrows, losses, and costs are made available to the reader obliquely, displaced onto a surreal landscape strewn with mutilated fragments and supercharged traces of former life.

As I will argue here, *Cape Cod* is a book that wants the reader to feel nervous. It aims to destabilize the reader's nervous system, harnessing all the terror associated with the sublime in order to point to the everyday violence of a transatlantic economic system, and the unspeakability associated with its systematicity.<sup>72</sup> It trivializes serious things and makes seemingly trivial things more wretched and ghastly than anyone could possibly have imagined. As such, what at first promises to be a light-hearted stroll on the beach viewing the flotsam and jetsam the sea has churned up, emerges, rather, as a critique of empire, the global capitalist system, and the flow of labor and bodies across the Atlantic in the 1850s.<sup>73</sup> Including in its “now-time” embrace a palimpsest of other historical moments, in its associative framework *Cape Cod* gestures to other unnamed and perhaps unnamable atrocities. These include the deaths at sea and the horrors above board involved in the eighteenth-century slave trade and the middle passage, as I will argue. Perhaps we have needed the benefit of relatively recent theoretical projects, such as Transatlantic American Studies and theories of the Black Atlantic, to grasp the melancholy knowledge that I believe is encrypted in Thoreau's long meditation on the landscape.<sup>74</sup> In Thoreau's imaginary, the Atlantic is a vast “morgue,” symbolically representing the underbelly of systems of modernism and progress, a place where fragments of the unnamed dead—the ghosts of history—wash up on shore. This idea of the Atlantic Ocean offering a countercultural hauntological memory is one that is now familiar to us; locating it in relation to Thoreau studies may seem to many, however, to

be a strange intervention. After all, Thoreau does not explicitly reference the slave trade or African Americans anywhere within the text of *Cape Cod*. What I am arguing, however, is that Thoreau offers a Benjaminian view of history “shot through with chips of Messianic time” and that his long meditation on the Atlantic Ocean and shipwrecks associatively links the nineteenth century with a constellation of other historical times in which “the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin 255). The Atlantic affectively links the Puritan colonists with slaves on the middle passage with Irish immigrants. While I will focus on affect in this chapter, my concern is more with the affective nature of the text itself, and the ethico-political argument I believe it is making about history, rather than upon the affective life of the authorial personality behind the text. Ultimately, I wish to suggest that the sense of indifference so insistently emitted by *Cape Cod* structures an argument not for detachment and divestment. On the contrary, I see it as urging a rather grand and striking care for others, as modeling a way of being in modernity that accounts for its disavowed counternarrative.

### **Walden’s Positive System of Self-Making**

Because *Walden* is more familiar to most readers, and because, as I have stated, *Cape Cod* poses a challenge to the general cottage industry around Thoreau and the forces leading to his canonization, I will first consider the basically optimistic view of nature offered in *Walden* and the way that this text posits a positive system of self-making through promoting detachment from others and divestiture from bad systems. I am beginning here in order to show how fraught the issue of critical attention to *Cape Cod* is, insofar as *Cape Cod* provides a counternarrative to a very compelling dominant narrative offered in *Walden*, a narrative that many critics of Thoreau may be strongly attached to.

While I discuss many different semantic fields for the term “system” throughout this dissertation, here in this section I mean by “system” Thoreau’s proposition of a method or procedure that would presumably bring about a new kind of self. In the previous chapter, I argued for an understanding of Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography* as a model form of self-making reliant upon a logic of disposability, and in many ways, *Walden* operates with a similar logic, a logic that believes one needs to radically detach from flawed systems and denigrated others (Irish John, The Woodchopper, etc.) in order to make oneself anew. This single-man-standing-alone formula for self-making exudes, as I argue in the previous chapter, a surface-level optimism. The optimism about the project of detaching and moving on is undercut in Franklin’s text by an affective undertow that is attached to the very others whose importance it disavows.

Nature, in *Walden*’s idealistic imaginary, is the perfect place to rejuvenate and mount self-making experiments like Benjamin Franklin’s program of self-management. Nature is imagined as outside of time, away from the hands of humans; as such, it can

bolster one as one divests oneself from deleterious human systems. Another meaning for the term “system” therefore can refer to the forces that shape the self, the ideological, social, cultural pressures to become a certain type of self.<sup>75</sup> Nature in *Walden* is generally imagined (though not always, as I will explore later) as utopian elsewhere, a place outside the zone of human corruptness. It is most often represented as pristine, untouched, and separate. It is a place to escape from the knot of human systems, a place to shed the beliefs and expectations that lead one to live a life of “quiet desperation.” As Thoreau describes Walden Pond: “[t]here are few traces of man’s hand to be seen. The water laves the shore as it did a thousand years ago” (“The Ponds,” 233). Nature’s resilience has it resisting the forces of history. Walden pond, Thoreau writes, “is itself unchanged . . . it has not acquired one permanent wrinkle after all its ripples. It is perennially young” (240).

Both the Thoreauvian and the Franklinian systems offer more than models in self-making experiments; they also valorize their narrators—the autobiographical subjects of their own systems—as having a superior virtue. In both texts, an autobiographical “I” becomes both *the inventor* of a new alternative system and also *the exemplary subject* of the system itself. Transcendence occurs under the aegis of the self; the self-proposed system manages the self; one will become an image of his or her own making. The autobiographical “I” in Thoreau’s response to Franklin<sup>76</sup> is thus also a poster-child for his own proposed system, a self presented as superior and as capable of living a better life than others. *Walden* thus frames itself with an overt and oft-repeated optimism about the ability of subjects to reform themselves that echoes the surface Franklinian optimism discussed in the previous chapter. “It is never too late to give up our prejudices,” Thoreau enjoins his readers. “Old deeds for old people, and new deeds for new” (50; 51). The new, the now—it is all possible in *Walden*. The “prejudices” and “old deeds” Thoreau would have us shed, as in Franklin’s work, emanate from a Calvinistic worldview inherited from Puritanism. The secular models proposed by Franklin and Thoreau, respectively, would thus compete with the Puritan system of self-making offered through conversion.<sup>77</sup> For though appeal to religious belief is largely absent, the task in *Walden*, like that of Franklin’s *Autobiography*, is still to convert the reader. Rather than converting to a religious ideology, both texts promote conversion to a progressive secular project of *disadhering* from entrenched systems of social convention and religious belief. Both Franklin and Thoreau want to convince readers that giving up erroneous, unexamined beliefs based on a pessimistic, Calvinistic worldview will result in a kind of progress.

Unlike Franklin, Thoreau does not see material reward as evidence of the success of this newer type of person. On the contrary, for Thoreau the focus on the material is what makes one “old.” Thus *Walden* largely eschews materiality and the market in favor of transcendent principles. If Thoreau, relative to Franklin, lingers over his diagnosis of the flawed system of “old” Calvinistic ways of life, perhaps it is because the Thoreau who wrote *Walden* had less of an autobiographical success story to offer to prove the

efficacy of his system. After all, he was hardly in the position Franklin was near the end of his life as an internationally known, highly accomplished public figure. Nevertheless, by the end of *Walden* we can feel the same kind of triumphal tone, the mood of success, as we feel anxiously and overtly insisted upon in Franklin's text: the sense of needing to assert that one has produced an enviable life worth living. While for Franklin the life itself is the evidence of the success of his elaborate program for others to follow, for Thoreau "[h]is most telling piece of evidence is *Walden*—the book itself. Recognizing the clarity, coherence, and power of the writing, we can only conclude . . . that the experiment has been a success" (Leo Marx 243).<sup>78</sup> In Thoreau's case, a retreat to nature gives him the ability to realize superior virtues in the form of an aesthetic production that specifically eschews the values of the market and exists, in fact, because the protagonist has divorced himself from conventional, habitual, and limiting societal pressures and beliefs. In this way, as Leo Marx points out, he is not that far removed from the conventions of traditional Pastoral, in which a liminal figure like the shepherd (neither pure metropole nor pure wilderness dweller) becomes the font of contemplation for the poet, producing artistic works bolstered by the seeming superiority of an imagined rustic simplicity. For Thoreau, unlike Franklin, aesthetic productions are prized as the ultimate success story.

### Incipient Darkness

However, this view of the optimism undergirding the project in *Walden*, or more precisely, this optimistic belief in the restorative properties of nature, is incomplete. Optimism, no doubt, is the dominant affective mode of *Walden*, but, as in Franklin's *Autobiography*, the presence of a dark undertow of intense melancholic pessimism is also there throughout. As Laurence Buell has rightly argued, aligning Thoreau's text with standard pastoral logic requires ignoring key passages in *Walden* that don't support such a benign view of nature's ability to bolster our human projects (26). Richard Bridgman, in his carefully argued *Dark Thoreau*, usefully focuses on those neglected contrapuntal moments in *Walden*, the moments that strain against any understanding of nature as affirmative. Bridgman's study brings out the violence and aggression latent in all of Thoreau's *oeuvre*, arguing that "his apparent exultation in the absolute indifference of the natural system, in its operating by means of flesh torturing flesh, must give us pause" (xii).<sup>79</sup>

In spite of *Walden*'s opening declaration that it does "not propose to write an ode to dejection," we might notice, for example, the sense of despair that appears in the text in glimmers, a pessimistic sense of defeat that arises when contemplating the difficult project of convincing others to give up their dearly held beliefs:

The head monkey at Paris puts on a traveler's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same. I sometimes despair of getting any thing quite simple and honest done in this world by the help of men. They would have

to be passed through a powerful press first, to squeeze their old notions out of them, so that they would not soon get upon their legs again, and then there would be some one in the company with a maggot in his head, hatched from an egg deposited there nobody knows when, for not even fire kills these things, and you would have lost your labor. Nevertheless, we will not forget that some Egyptian wheat was handed down to us by a mummy. (68)

Here we have a narrator emitting a constellation of negative affect: aggression, contempt, defeat. The glimmer of despair in a text that otherwise presents such a positive view of the possibility of radical transformation in oneself and others is based on the narrator's belief that only violence could ever "squeeze old notions" out of most people. The lingering attention to the image of a torturing "press" or device leads to the insight that, however effective it might prove in changing people's minds, such a violence would be potentially disabling, making it impossible, perhaps, for people to exist or ever "stand upon their legs again"—thus not so attractive as a notion of progress. Even if the violent procedure of getting rid of old ideas were accomplished for some, the social nature of humans, and our ability to be coerced and affected by others, makes the project even more precarious. Thoreau's project of converting others to give up their beliefs is a labor of love, for sure, but a labor easily lost when opposed to the powerful maggots in the heads of his fellow townspeople. What is his preaching when compared to the powerful old ideas that even fire can't kill? Despairing, pessimistic moments like these punctuate the entire overtly optimistic text of *Walden*—they are quick blips that often get embedded in metaphors, dense symbols, or in brief interludes easily skipped over. These are moments that recognize the futility of the project being put forth, that take measure of the opposition one will face, and that register the way that disadhering from social conventions can be profoundly disabling and thus nearly impossible for some. What is a benevolent view of nature compared with such obdurate representations of human will? Thoreau despairs here because most people carry within their being such profoundly erroneous ideas and so easily and unconsciously conform to the ideas of others without thinking them through.

### **Cruel Optimism**

Despite such despairing moments that appear in glimmers throughout *Walden*, overall, as I've already said, the text is structured on a promising atmospheric mood. While it may be truly depressing to consider that one must detach from all the systems of self that propel you in deleterious ways—like a market economy, the pressure of neighbors and human society, all your unquestioned conventions and beliefs—a retreat to the alternative system of nature offers, still in this text, some promise and hope, not only of a way to make that radical detachment from human systems possible, but also in the idea of nature as a good, happy object to attach oneself to.<sup>80</sup> In considering attachments to nature in Thoreau's *oeuvre*, one might think here about Lauren Berlant's argument that



“all attachments are optimistic” in that “[w]hen we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us” (33). While in *Walden* we may sense moments of pessimism or fear that such a “cluster of promises” will not be met, that nature won’t deliver the goods and provide the sustenance, escape, and relief one looks to it for, in *Cape Cod* nature becomes a more overtly problematic object, and any optimism about its possibilities would surely be misguided, in that its potential for cruelty is insisted upon throughout the text. Berlant’s formulation “cruel optimism,” however, describes “the condition of *maintaining* an attachment to a problematic object” (33) and will prove useful for considering the way that nature as an object of affection oscillates for Thoreau when we consider *Walden* in relation to *Cape Cod*. As Berlant explains it, if the cluster of promises animating one’s ability to proceed with life is associated with an object that essentially threatens one’s ability to live, the optimism about attaching to that object is cruel indeed. And yet, often “the fear is that the loss of the object/scene of promising itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything” (Berlant 33). Thus, it is difficult to give up one’s attachments, even if the result is a living or literal death, because one has fear about what that might entail, or further, one has fear about one’s ability to survive the divestiture. The optimism of attaching to objects of desire is undercut by the cruelty of the fact that our attachments might kill us; and yet few can detach from the thing that gives their life meaning, even if it may possibly, and in a literal sense, take that life away.

By the time we get to the later work *Cape Cod*, nature’s potential for cruelty takes center stage. One is hard pressed to see, in any way, how the violently sublime image of nature depicted there could function either as a happy object of one’s affections or as a restorative tonic bolstering one’s utopian plan of detaching and divesting from human systems. Thoreau pursues in *Cape Cod*, as Mitchell Breitwieser notes, “a more radical investigation of the stringent need to divest oneself of encumbrances than he did in *Walden*” (“Henry David Thoreau” 145). Indeed, there is little solace for the loss of one’s attachments to be found in contemplating the natural environment. On one level we might read this, with Breitwieser, as Thoreau’s appreciation for the demands of the sublime. In this reading, the ability to aesthetically align oneself with the sublime involves a special kind of radical detachment, one that Thoreau valorizes for the artistic and philosophic qualities he associates with the sublime. He thus posits as a reader the superior type of person who would be able to appreciate such beautiful violence as nature offers. Alternatively, we might read biographically and consider, with Bridgman, that the outright cruelty attributed to nature in *Cape Cod* is simply a projection of the disturbed fantasies of “an uncertain, lonely young man” who “enlarged his own isolation into a trope of independence” (80). But while both of these views are convincing and enable my own reading, they fail to account for the social and political resonances I see in this neglected text. These are the resonances I would like to tease out in this chapter.

I submit that more is going on in *Cape Cod* than simply a personal, philosophical, or aesthetic expression of the need for divestment from encumbrances, though those

modes no doubt are operative. I would like to extend the idea of radical detachment and consider more fully the things *Cape Cod* would have us detach from and the vision of an ethical subject that it offers as the product of that sort of detached stance. Moreover, such a radical and “stringent” detachment, modeled and described by the narrator, produces an affective textual atmosphere that is not simply “peculiar” but also completely disturbing to readers. As I stated earlier, this is a text that seeks to make us nervous; it is a text that would disturb one’s complacency and would risk being a bad neighbor and friend in order to awaken a higher sense of ethical commitment in us. But this is not simply a commitment to the sublime or to one’s own dark vision of the world; it is a commitment to an idea of social justice that Thoreau expresses more directly in his essays but that I believe pervades this work as well.

If we read *Cape Cod* simply as offering a meditation on the awesome beauty and sublime effects of the natural world, implying that the violence of nature is redeemed for Thoreau by the higher order aesthetic appreciation he has cultivated, what do we make of the undertow of unredeemable fragments and gashed body parts littering the shore? While certain piles of bones may, as Thoreau writes, claim a kind of majestic possession of the beach, dwarfing mere humans with their “sniveling sympathies,” there are many more moments of unbeautiful murk, death whispered in mournful birdcall and in the inarticulate howl of conch shells; there is, overall, a haunting sense of unrecoverable and unaesthetic loss. These fragments and moments of everyday terror, I submit, are left without recourse to the surfeit of emotion that many sublime treatments of shipwreck, especially within the tradition of nineteenth-century landscape painting, would enjoin the reader to feel. Indeed, one of the most striking features of *Cape Cod* is the horrifying indifference modeled by the narrator in respect to human suffering and death, and mirrored everywhere in the people on the Cape, causing, as I’ve mentioned, most readers to feel “nervous and wretched”—certainly not satisfied that they have been given a vehicle to properly sympathize with the suffering of others, safe in one’s own zone outside the suffering. Thoreau’s sublime aesthetics may cause him to linger and meditate at times on corpses and death in a poetic, beautiful way, like a painting in the tradition of Turner or the Hudson River School, but there is also an aggressive sense of haunting the reader with nature’s violence and ugly incomprehensibility that, along with Bridgman, I agree must be accounted for.

### **Secular Affect**

I will return to a discussion of Thoreau’s relationship to Turner and to landscape painting at the end of the chapter. For now I want to continue my consideration of the radical detachment modeled by the narrator in *Cape Cod* and begin accounting for this startling affect. One way of accounting for the atmosphere of cold detachment that haunts *Cape Cod* is through the sense of a godless universe that his detached narrator envisions, at least for some readers. One early reviewer saw Thoreau’s detachment from religion as causing the pronounced, striking affective state we might call, with Saba Mahmood,

“secular affect.”<sup>81</sup> The anonymous reviewer called Thoreau a “stony eyed observer who looks through nature and finds no God,” stating further that “[h]is comments upon everything that pertains to the faith of Christian men, or the worship of the Supreme, are sarcastic and bitter. The humor and wit scarcely redeem the inhumanity and irreverence combined, which characterize these sallies.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, the secular “irreverence” this critic notices is a self-conscious pose for Thoreau, who, as Robert Pinsky points out, perfected his ability to elicit affect from an audience on “the secular pulpit” of the Lyceum Lecture Circuit, where a version of “The Shipwreck” first appeared. Irreverence and exaggerated detachment, I suggest, are used strategically to temper the bleakness of the Cape environment and the pervasiveness of the death he finds there, and to make an argument about modernity’s counternarrative of disavowed sorrows. He burlesques the Cape people for laughs, noting in particular religious people.<sup>83</sup> In making fun of the long, tedious Cape histories in which the personalities of Calvinist ministers like the “Son of Thunder” (Mr. Treat) figure large, Thoreau jokes:

Let no one think that I do not love the old ministers. They were, probably, the best men of their generation, and they deserve that their biographies should fill the pages of the town histories. If I could but hear the “glad tidings” of which they tell, and which, perchance, they heard, I might write in a worthier strain than this. (38)

Thoreau offers in *Cape Cod* a stylized opposition to the optimism offered by religious “glad tidings,” a meditation on the costs of modernity that affectively mimes its structure to reveal its losses. Yet, despite his jokes and put-downs about organized religion, neither his secularism nor the severity of his critique can be taken for granted. While one anonymous reviewer apparently viewed him as epitomizing secularism, “in his own day,” according to Alan D. Hodder, “Thoreau was generally conceived in spiritual terms, even in some cases as a sort of charismatic, if decidedly unorthodox, religious figure” (20). If some critics see him as intensely secular, while others see him as a kind of numinous, exemplary religious figure, we might, from the vantage point of twenty-first-century attempts to theorize the secular, think about how his work usefully complicates our present binaristic modes of thinking about religion and secularism. I’m interested in what theoretical work untangling this seeming contradiction might lead to.

As I argue above, the system of self offered in *Walden* critiques both secularism and institutionalized religion. It also proposes its own model for how to live a virtuous life outside of an organized religious structure. And yet one could also say that Thoreau’s vision is of an intensely ethical, spiritual life that would culminate in a greater freedom for all. Indeed, in *Walden* Thoreau offers a secular model for living the good life, and yet he also begins to offer us a catalogue of what one might consider the erroneous belief systems of secular institutions, the beliefs animating self-governing subjects under a democracy and a capitalist system. These are broad secular belief systems that create constricted selves, capitalist drones, and automatons that Thoreau rails against

vociferously and caustically. *Cape Cod* also offers a critique of secularism and its costs, and it traces through the fragmented debris of modernity the deleterious beliefs that sustain modern subjects. Moreover, in theatrically miming a caricature of a secular stance, in *Cape Cod* the autobiographical narrator models a way of bearing in one's being an affective sense of what the move to modernity entails.<sup>84</sup> This is a detached, clinical view of others, a calculation of their value based on an abstract set of principles, rather than on an empathetic relationship or a humanist fellow feeling. I wish to argue, however, that this rather horrifying coldness toward others, modeled by the narrator, does a double kind of work. On the one hand, it produces a "wretched nervousness" in readers, a sense of disgust at the systems creating selves whose capacity to live life are so severely constrained. On the other hand, it argues against a sentimental or sympathetic response, and advocates for a sane kind of detachment that would allow one to critique conditions producing not one's own wretched nervousness but the larger systems that produce suffering and death on such a wide scale.

In a famous passage from *Walden*, Thoreau discusses the affective state of detachment I have been tracing in ways that complicate the binarily opposed terms "secular" and "religious," making it difficult to define each respective term as the other's opposite. In this passage, Thoreau sees detachment as a form of political orientation associated with "thinking"—or what is conventionally understood to be secular reason—and yet his elaboration of the felt quality of that state is intensely spiritual:

With thinking we may be beside ourselves in a sane sense. By a conscious effort of the mind we can stand aloof from actions and their consequences; and all things, good and bad, go by us like a torrent. We are not wholly involved in Nature. I may be either the driftwood in the stream, or Indra in the sky looking down on it. 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 much more. 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. However intense my experience, I am conscious of the presence and criticism of a part of me, which, as it were, is not a part of me, but spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it; and that is no more I than it is you. When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned. This doubleness may easily make us poor neighbors and friends sometimes. ("Solitude" 180)

There is much to say about this dense passage, but I will focus mostly on the privileging of detachment that it offers and the way that detachment cannot be aligned smoothly with either a secular nor a religious position. Here detachment is a spiritual quality, and yet it is found not through conventional Christian religions, nor through piety nor prayer, but

through the secularly coded realms of “thinking” and the “mind”; indeed, it is this spiritual capacity for standing remote from oneself that allows one to be “sane” enough to get to the hard bottom of things and participate in a lucid critique. If much of what one believes and takes part in is but “a kind of a fiction, a work of the imagination only,” then reality, Thoreau asserts here, is to be found in cultivating the position of the “spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it.” Indeed, the scientific objective-observer position of the “spectator” is appropriated here, not as one who cultivates empirical evidence, per se, but as an affective stance, a position or way of being in the world that allows one to be virtuous. As such, detachment is a style, a set of aesthetics for the self. And yet, as we shall see, it can have political implications.

This passage from *Walden* posits an enhanced ability to critique as deriving from a position of spiritual detachment. It also offers glimmers of the lengths Thoreau is willing to go in cultivating an aesthetics of detachment in order to divest himself from deleterious systems. The self must undergo a radical separation not only from friends and neighbors, but also from one’s own sense of oneself, from the life one is bound up in. This results in a disorientation of the first-person, a risky move to the limits of what constitutes the human.

To return to the theatricalization of the narrator in *Cape Cod*, we might note that though the narrator is a rhetorical figure who bears the markings of an autobiographical persona, he cannot be understood as limited by the personality of Thoreau. Rather, the narrator is a construction of a persona who deviates from the conception of an individual person—the “scene” of “thoughts and affections”—in order to inhabit an idealized ethical position. Ironically, while in one view he stresses a kind of radical individualism, Thoreau’s stylized aesthetics of the self would undo the very idea of personhood that privileges the individual as part of a social network. The radical detachment advocated by his position is actually a detachment from social norms so as to achieve a higher spiritual connection and an enhanced ability to critique persistently erroneous systems. Judith Butler describes the disorientation that can result when one is cultivating critical distance from social strictures, because we are at once “constituted by norms and dependent upon them” (*Undoing Gender* 3), even as we seek to transform them:

This is not easy, because the “I” becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this “I” fully recognizable. There is a certain departure from the human that takes place in order to start the process of remaking the human. I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable. This is the juncture from which critique emerges, where critique is understood as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living. (*Undoing Gender* 3–4)

Of course, Butler's work here focuses on "undoing" the norms that constitute gendered subjects in particular, but I think her point is useful for thinking through Thoreau's ethical project of developing an aesthetics of the self more generally.<sup>85</sup> Butler's point that the "I" is threatened with becoming "undone" in the process of developing a critical stance—and interrogating the constraints under which one lives—resonates with Thoreau's assertion that one must risk being perceived as a bad neighbor and friend at times. For Thoreau, engaging in the process of critique entails "undoing" the "categories by which social life" is "ordered" (Butler "What Is Critique?" 5). "Standing aloof" is a consciously cultivated state for Thoreau, an affective mode engendering the possibility of self-transformation, a way to remake the human by detaching oneself from categories that organize life in such a way as to produce "a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability" (Butler "What Is Critique? 5).

While Thoreau's position that sociality itself is coercive and limiting has led to dismissals of his political theory as merely anarchic, such dismissals do not focus on the deeper deconstructive work that Thoreau's ethical position enacts, nor do most critics recognize Thoreau's very modern articulation of the way that constraints to critique can be embedded within the self, within one's notion of one's personality.<sup>86</sup> In this scenario, the optimistic attachment to the promise of being recognized by others as human is, in Berlant's terms, "cruel" in that it inhibits one's ability to recognize, critique, and perhaps even change the systems that render life inhumane for many. This same sense of risk to "subject-formation itself" that the ethical subject flirts with in Butler's formulation resonates with Thoreau's insistence on being "beside oneself" in a "sane" way. For to be "doubled" and so removed from oneself that one can "stand aloof" is to risk one's mooring in the social conventions that structure sanity and give one a place in the category of the human; it is to risk fragmentation, loss of identity, and loss of a grid of intelligibility. For Thoreau, as moments like this in *Walden* reveal, this state of doubled consciousness, of standing beside oneself in order to survey one's own position and be a spectator of life, is a stylized habit of being in the world, a matter of "conscious effort" that he believes will yield the affective state of detachment necessary to divest from politico-economic systems of oppressiveness and cruelty.<sup>87</sup>

### Everyday Violence

Just as in the "standing aloof" passage from *Walden*, the narrator of *Cape Cod* insists on detachment as a mode of "thinking" through the systems that bind one to lives of "quiet desperation." One difference between the two texts, however, is that the entire landscape of *Cape Cod* is charged with the affective resonances of the systems that cause suffering, in such a way that nature can no longer be considered a thing apart from the mind, a place of respite to which the thinking subject withdraws. Nature, subjectivity, and perception itself are all implicated in the wider net of global politics and capitalist systems that the narrator of *Cape Cod* confronts through his meditation on the landscape.

The quiet desperation in *Cape Cod* takes the form of the way that the violence of shipwrecks has become such an everyday matter. The first shipwreck Thoreau describes, the *St. John*, was a brig bound from Galway that smashed into the rocks a mile from what Thoreau calls the rockiest coast in Massachusetts. To notice simply the sublimity of a violent nature that would wreck such a ship would be to miss the social context and wider implications that the detached observer modeled by Thoreau brings forth, such as the “terror as usual” offered within a global capitalist system. The affect field of evacuated emotion produced by such a system is not only inhabited by the narrator, but apparently shared by every person on the Cape he comes into contact with. In this way, the costs of modernity are registered in affective terms, in the palpable and hauntingly present absence of emotion that mimics the actuarial perspective of the global finance system.

The *St. John* was full, primarily, of Irish emigrants fleeing the famine and hoping to secure work in America. As Thoreau and his companion arrive on the scene they encounter a freshly dug mass grave, and they see some twenty-eight bodies that have floated ashore and are awaiting coffins. The travelers pick through fragments of the ship, bits of clothing, and random body parts that mingle with kelp and seaweed in the sand. Thoreau notices the way that though the beach is covered with people like himself who are “looking out for bodies, and examining the fragments of the wreck,” he sees in them “no signs of grief” (3). Instead he is affected by the “sober dispatch of business” that he observes, and especially by the way that men with carts busily collect seaweed the storm has cast up. The lack of affect is notable, as if everyone were numb or unaware of the tragedy that envelops the scene.

In the very midst of the crowd about this wreck, there were men with carts busily collecting the sea-weed which the storm had cast up, and conveying it beyond the reach of the tide, though they were often obliged to separate fragments of clothing from it, and they might at any moment have found a human body under it. Drown who might, they did not forget that this weed was a valuable manure. This shipwreck had not produced a visible vibration in the fabric of society. (4–5)

The lack of public feeling in response to this catastrophe strikes the narrator as forcefully as the event itself. Indeed, the “value” of the scene of shipwreck for the wreckers lies not in the sentiments the dead bodies create in others (shock, revulsion, sadness, grief) but rather in the seaweed the storm tosses up, in the financial opportunities such a bounty provides. The observation of affectless wreckers self-reliantly working during such a catastrophe may produce an atmosphere of horror for the reader, but seemingly not for the narrator, who busies himself emulating the wreckers by “standing aloof” from the scene. He records and observes dispassionately the grim details of the wreck, making aesthetic value of the scene much the way the wreckers derive economic value from it.<sup>88</sup> In one oft-quoted passage, the narrator’s scientific, clinical observation reaches an

extreme level of precision and chilling dissociation as he zooms in on a particular body to record:

I saw many marble feet and matted heads as the cloths were raised, and one livid, swollen, and mangled body of a drowned girl,—who probably had intended to go out to service in some American family,—to which some rags still adhered, with a string, half concealed by the flesh, about its swollen neck; the coiled-up wreck of a human hulk, gashed by the rocks or fishes, so that the bone and muscle were exposed, but quite bloodless,—merely red and white,—with wide-open and staring eyes, yet lusterless, dead-lights; or like the cabin windows of a stranded vessel, filled with sand. (3–4)

The narrator's point of view here is as detached as the scavengers he encounters. Thoreau focuses not on the loss of the young girl's life. Rather, he fixes his gaze upon the physical details of her corpse with an "exactitude" that "already exhibits the coldness of anatomy and vivisection" (Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic* 61). He notes the way the body is "swollen," and the way that—although it has "red and "white" "bone and muscle exposed"—there is no blood. Whoever she was in life, the drowned girl becomes, in Thoreau's description, a site of secular inquiry and scientific investigation, a mere "hulk." Although she is drained of value to others—she is likened to a wrecked ship, an empty vessel filling with sand, no longer of use—she becomes a valuable commodity to Thoreau. The passage essentially dehumanizes the girl, making her simply another object the sea violently churns in its jaws, before vomiting it up, like a piece of the ship or a stick of wood. And yet Thoreau derives aesthetic value from her; she is like a beautiful shell one might find and collect. There are no expressions of sympathy or sadness, nor any of the other "humane" feelings that might accompany a person viewing such a scene. Thoreau explicitly eschews the impulse toward sentiment when viewing these dead. "Why care for these dead bodies?" he asks. "They really have no friends but the worms or fishes" (7). The indifference of nature is something to emulate. "If this was the law of Nature," he asks, "then why waste any time in awe or pity?" (7).

The detached observational tone works hard, however, to produce a well of affect in the reader, not by insisting on a gush of frothy sentiment, but quite oppositely, through the coldness of the detached scientific approach and the prurience of the narrator's voyeuristic inspection. The reader, I suggest, is enjoined to feel that there is something inappropriate about this callously fixed gaze, to feel perhaps wretched and nervous about joining the narrator in subjecting the dead girl to this "unseemly stare" (Morgan 56). I agree with Jack Morgan that there is an underlying "transgressive undercurrent to the passage:"

The observer draws very near to prurience, a prurience that the darkly advantageous, anomalous situation of the author and reader enables and



even encourages. That the body is essentially naked is made clear in the remark that only a few rags still cling to it. The diction resembles the language of titillation, as if the stare were indeed edging toward the pornographic: “the cloth was raised”; “exposed”; “concealed by the flesh”; even the word “gashed” might bear examination here as a Freudian employment, as “gash” has long been an obscene term for female genitalia. (Morgan 56–57)

In this way, as Morgan’s reading implies, the seemingly detached scientific-observer position of the narrator is belied by the suffusion of the scene with highly charged, sexualized details. As Morgan further points out, drawing on Margaret Kelleher’s work on the feminization of famine, of all the twenty-eight bodies on the beach, the narrator focuses only on women’s bodies for closer inspection and detailed description. Morgan also draws our attention to the girl’s class and ethnic position, suggesting that the power dynamics make her available for visual inspection in a way that other women may not have been. Thus, the absolute detachment and horrifying composure modeled by the narrator is belied, and we sense the undertow of a dense and purposeful titillation, a strategic attempt to arouse an affect in the reader through an uncomfortable display of the power of the gaze.

### **Affect-Defects**

There *is* a violence in the “unseemliness” of the gaze, as Morgan puts it, but the reader, I suggest, is made uncomfortable not simply through the violence of the narrator’s visual inspection but also because in coupling such violence with such a casually stated idea that this is business as usual one reaches a further level of horror. As Thoreau tells us, in an exaggeratedly off-hand tone, the scene is “not so impressive” as he might have expected. One expects, that is, to be horrified when rushing off to view a catastrophe wherein “Death” is the order of the day; what impresses the narrator here is how unimpressive it is, how normal such a catastrophe seems. He cites the multiplication of corpses on the beach as the reason for his own lack of affect, saying, “[i]f I had found one body cast upon the beach in some lonely place, it would have affected me more. I sympathized rather with the winds and waves, as if to toss and mangle these poor human bodies was the order of the day” (7). In this seemingly callous move, Thoreau mimes his idea of cruel nature, to be sure, but he also mimes the actuarial perspective of a global finance system that calculates risk to human life by financing leaky vessels, as if to mangle an immigrant body like the young girl’s “was the order of the day.” With such an act of mimesis, he directs the reader’s attention away from the individual death to consider a wider kind of sympathy with the victims of global systems of suffering. Affect is here marshaled toward the causes, not toward the overwhelming symptoms, of the problem. Moreover, his extended descriptions of the wreckers and his suggestion that they are defective in the affect department points to the idea that a wider system with horrifically widespread effects is instituting suffering on a colossal scale.

Indeed, the plethora of bodies produces a numbing effect, “as on the field of battle,” for “it is the individual and private that demands our sympathy” (*Cape Cod* 7). But sympathy, as we shall see later, is problematic for Thoreau, in that sympathy for “the individual and private” can distract us from a more systematic analysis. Sympathy for “the individual” can inhibit the ability to engage in critique, to notice the cause of individual suffering. Like the wreck of the *St. John* detailed in “The Shipwreck,” the wreck of the *Franklin*, alluded to throughout *Cape Cod*, figures as an index of the wider horrors of modernity. A description of the wreck, chilling for its descriptive clarity and its sense of evacuated emotion, comes to the reader through the point of view of an old, almost blind man who is absolutely *not* wretched and nervous, but rather, stoic in the extreme. Thoreau and his traveling companion Channing stay with the man and his family overnight, and he tells them the story of calmly watching the wreck of the *Franklin* the previous spring. The case of the *Franklin* was infamous, and readers of *Cape Cod* would have been familiar with the sensational details surrounding this wreck, for there was a trial in which the captain was accused of purposely allowing the ship to sink for the insurance money.<sup>89</sup> Thoreau alludes to a pervasive public feeling: “The reader may remember this wreck from the circumstance that a letter was found in the captain's valise, which washed ashore, directing him to wreck the vessel, before he got to America, and from the trial which took place in consequence” (50). While contemporary journalistic accounts of the wreck of the *Franklin* marshaled affect in predictably sentimental ways, Thoreau chooses to include a hyperbolically flat description in his own account. Yet his prose is freighted with an uncanny quality, a well of disavowed affect, and there is a sense of inexpressible sorrow underlying his deadpan descriptions. Indeed, as he writes, “There are more consequences to a shipwreck than the underwriters notice” (114), and one of those consequences seems to be the creation of affect-defects, persons incapable of responding to the catastrophe.<sup>90</sup>

Here's how Thoreau describes the wreck of *The Franklin*: a boy came to an old man's house to tell him a boat was in distress, a quarter mile from him. The man “being an old man, first ate his breakfast, and then walked over to the top of the hill by the shore, and sat down there, having found a comfortable seat to see the ship wrecked” (64). This sense of everyday horror, of grabbing a comfortable seat to watch a shipwreck occur, involves both a detached spectator and an implicit critique of modernity's creation of detached spectators who calmly watch death as entertainment. The man is completely inured to the scene of death. He describes the passengers as they jump onto a lifeboat:

“and then they jumped into it one after another, down as straight as an arrow. I counted them. There were nine. One was a woman, and she jumped straight as any of them. Then they shoved off. The sea took them back, one wave went over them, and when they came up there were six still clinging to the boat; I counted them. The next wave turned the boat bottom upward, and emptied them all out. None of them ever came to shore alive. There were the rest of them all crowded together on the

forecastle, the other parts of the ship being under water. They had seen all that happened to the boat. At length a heavy sea separated the fore-castle from the rest of the wreck, and set it inside of the worst breaker, and the boat was able to reach them, and it saved all that were left, but one woman.” (65)

Notable in the man’s story is his mathematical calculation of the dead bodies; he has the presence of mind first to count those jumping into the boat, and then to count the group again after a huge wave rolls over them. First there were nine, then there were six. The man repeats the phrase “I counted them,” emphasizing not only his ability to coolly survey the scene, but also his ability to use secular reason rather than emotion or religious affect to later describe the deaths. While on the one hand the man seems to be merely a passive voyeur, watching the scene from a distance in his comfortable chair, his language gives him a more active role in the event. He subjects the scene, much as Thoreau does the earlier description of the Irish girl, to his own clinical gaze and analysis, and to the frame of his succinct narrative. As the passage proceeds with its mathematical precision, the man subtracts three from the original group of nine to make six; then the boat capsizes; then he subtracts those six to make zero. These are not dead and dying people, but integers, a group of dots on the horizon. Indeed, why waste time in pity or sympathy, if death is the order of the day, if death is such a relentless fact of life?

If the inhabitants of the Cape are affect-defects, or inappropriately numb to scenes of catastrophic suffering and death, they are inured to it through their constant exposure to the Atlantic Ocean and the transatlantic system it represents; death is an everyday experience. Inhabiting the Cape involves embracing a harsh reality. “The stranger and the inhabitant view the shore with very different eyes,” Thoreau writes. “The former may have come to see and admire the ocean in a storm; but the latter looks on it as the scene where his nearest relatives were wrecked” (112). One Cape inhabitant, when Thoreau says he supposed he loved to live there and constantly hear the sound of the surf, answered: “No, I do not like to hear the sound of the surf.” As Thoreau notes, “He had lost at least one son in ‘the memorable gale,’ and could tell many a tale of the shipwrecks which he had witnessed there.” (112)

However, we might also consider the scene above with the man calmly watching the wreck of *The Franklin* in another light. Might it function metaphorically rather than descriptively? In stylistically partaking in the cold precision of the old man, the narrator’s tone suggests wider readings of everyday violence than simply Cape shipwrecks, metonymic reverberations that we might fruitfully trace. Given Thoreau’s oft-repeated critiques of industrialism and its potential to create automatons (in *Walden* and “Resistance to Civil Government” especially), might we also read this particularly affectless man as a symbol, more generally, for modernity? Most chilling, perhaps, in the old man’s perspective, is the inclusion of the detail “there were six still clinging to the boat; I counted them.” The detachment of the Cape man and the inclusion of these details

bring to mind Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of Homer's Odysseus in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In this influential reading, Odysseus is the first secular man: rational, detached, skilled at reducing "thought to a mathematical apparatus" (20). Like Odysseus's description of the hanged maids, in which he coldly states the detail that "for a little while their feet kicked out, but not for very long," the old man here views the scene of death on the Cape in grim, calculating terms. We might consider Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of Homer as a way to push forward the critique of modernity (secularism; capitalism; global finance systems) in Thoreau's discussion of shipwreck on Cape Cod:

The exactitude of the description, which already exhibits the coldness of anatomy and vivisection, keeps a record, as in a novel, of the twitching of the subjugated women, who, under aegis of justice and law, are thrust down into the realm from which Odysseus the judge has escaped. As a citizen reflecting on the execution, Homer comforts himself and his listeners, who are really readers, with the certified observation that the kicking did not last long—a moment, and all was over. But after the words "not for long" the inner flow of the narrative comes to rest. "Not for Long?" the narrator asks by this device, giving the lie to his own composure. In being brought to a standstill, the report is prevented from forgetting the victims of the execution and lays bare the unspeakably endless torment of the single second in which the maids fought against death. (61–62)

Here we have an echo between Odysseus's phrase "not for long" and the old man's statement "I counted them." Indeed, following Horkheimer and Adorno, I'd like to suggest that the statement "I counted them" begs the reader to ask: "*You counted them?*" The "inner flow" of the narrative comes to rest on that phrase, repeated twice. It is an utterly banal statement, yet it is freighted with the affect it disavows. Here in a gloomy, dismal landscape full of corpses and "mournful" plovers singing their dirges, we come upon one of the most uncanny moments of all, a moment, I suggest, that is meant to make the reader extremely uncomfortable. Part of our discomfort resides in our uncertainty about how to judge this man, and how the narrator means us to judge him. *Is this figure a human being, or is he an automaton? Why is he counting the bodies as they go under and come back up?* And part of our discomfort lies in the fact that though the gesture is absolutely strange, we may also have the sense that it is perhaps uncannily familiar after all.<sup>91</sup>

The man's affect and his cold calculation resonate with the cold calculation of the global finance system, beginning in the eighteenth century with the underwriting of marine insurance during the slave trade. More particularly, in the case of the wreck of the *Franklin* described above, the old man's affect mimics the financiers who had already counted the very same bodies he now counts, when they calculated that wrecking the ship

might prove more profitable than seeing it safely to shore. As Horkheimer and Adorno write:

Not only is domination paid for with the estrangement of human beings from the dominated objects, but the relationships of human beings, including the relationship of individuals to themselves, have themselves been bewitched by the objectification of mind. Individuals shrink to the nodal points of conventional reactions and the modes of operation objectively expected of them. Animism had endowed things with souls; industrialism makes souls into things. (21)

And here we have come back to the critique of conventionalism, familiar from *Walden*, that makes readers so “nervous and wretched.” For the dissection of domination offered in Thoreau’s work generally is most concerned with the individual’s relation to others and to themselves. “The nodal points of conventional reactions” posit industry and calculation as the habit to cultivate, much as Benjamin Franklin did, while Thoreau posits cultivating a detachment from such scenes. One must be a “bad neighbor and friend” sometimes in order to resist modes of operation expected of one, modes that promote composure and the objective recording of death in order to better create a system of profit.

Directly against this type of faux detachment, Thoreau posits an extended example of a truly detached individual, one who is on the scene and able to observe, but one who is also not mesmerized by the scene’s particularities at the expense of grasping the larger operant systems. In *Cape Cod*, I’d like to argue then, Thoreau encourages a method of reading for what cannot be said, for what has not been recorded, a hauntological method that takes into account the deliberate unknowingness of a system of domination. Indeed, he laments, to repeat a passage I have already partly quoted: “There are more consequences to a shipwreck than the underwriters notice. The Gulf Stream may return some to their native shores, or drop them in some out-of-the-way cave of Ocean, where time and the elements will write new riddles with their bones” (114). The real “consequences” perhaps of the global finance system, a system that traverses the Atlantic, may remain a “riddle,” to all who would deliberately unknow the “hard bottom” of its realities. While the “more consequences” may remain buried at sea, their absent presence palpably haunts *Cape Cod*. Thoreau conjures up countless moments of danger that, in Benjamin’s terms, were not “seized;” ever aware that “the true image of the past flits by” (255). The history of the Cape is a history of oppression that can’t be spoken; moreover, in the now-time that Thoreau writes within, it is a continuous presence in which ghosts haunt every “single strand” of beach:

The annals of this voracious beach! who could write them, unless it were a shipwrecked sailor? How many who have seen it have seen it only in the midst of danger and distress, the last strip of earth which their mortal eyes

beheld. Think of the amount of suffering which a single strand has witnessed. (114)

### Charity and Shipwrecks

I've been arguing thus far that the narrator of *Cape Cod* stylizes himself as affectless and detached, as almost cruelly objective. I've also been suggesting that this stance is deliberate and pointed toward political ends, toward a critique of the cruel objectivity of the global capitalist system whose wreckage Thoreau sees everywhere washing up on the shore. I'd like to turn now to an extended example of this critique in *Cape Cod*, as it manifests in Thoreau's discussion of charity and shipwrecks. When Thoreau's traveling companion comments "in rather absolute terms" that the narrator has "not a particle of sentiment" he declares "[b]ut I did not intend this for a sentimental journey" (54). His intention, rather, is to counter the atmosphere of faux sympathy and narcissistic liberal sentiment he sees underlying charitable organizations and philanthropic institutions that seemingly "do good" on the Cape while actually causing harm and suffering. Like the pessimism about nature and the moments of radical detachment discussed earlier, this critique of philanthropy is familiar from *Walden*, though as in the previous examples it takes on a more sinister and more thoroughly melancholy tone in *Cape Cod*. Although rarely discussed, the sections on philanthropy in *Cape Cod* are an important part of the larger Thoreauvian critique of philanthropy, a critique that, I will argue, bolsters a sustained political theory that runs throughout his *oeuvre*.<sup>92</sup> This critical stance is often misread not as political theory, but as simply an expression of the author's cranky misanthropy—his "wolfish" lonerism, as Philip Hallie argues (115). I maintain, however, that the affect of narratorial detachment, like the tonal affect of cranky misanthropy in the text, apart from the issue of Thoreau's biography and an analysis of his presumed "real" disposition, works on an emotional level to further a political argument in which philanthropy figures as a misguided or cruelly complicit entity within global systems of power and exchange. My claim is that to misread these tonal registers as personal expressions, rather than as stylistic choices used to advance arguments, is to miss the wider political theory that Thoreau's work advances.

It is tempting to focus on affect as personal expression, however, when we consider caustic rants such as the following passage in *Walden*:

There is no odor so bad as that which arises from goodness tainted. It is human, it is divine, carrion. If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life, as from that dry and parching wind of the African deserts called the simoom, which fills the mouth and nose and ears and eyes with dust till you are suffocated, for fear that I should get some of his good

done to me,—some of its virus mingled with my blood. No,—in this case I would rather suffer evil the natural way. A man is not a good *man* to me because he will feed me if I should be starving, or warm me if I should be freezing, or pull me out of a ditch if I should ever fall into one. I can find you a Newfoundland dog that will do as much. Philanthropy is not love for one's fellow-man in the broadest sense. (*Walden* 117–118)

Here the idea of philanthropy as love is critiqued, as it is not love for one's fellow man in the "broadest sense." The narrator's hyperbolic tone here, and the severity of his images (philanthropy is like a parching African desert wind) would seem to support a misapprehension that there is nothing more than a humorous misanthropy being expressed. Indeed, Thoreau gets a lot of comic mileage out of juxtaposing the positive image of charitable do-gooders with negative terms like "virus" and "evil," and on the face of it such descriptions certainly do seem absurd. And yet, clearly Thoreau theatrically inhabits this seemingly absurd position (how can good be bad?). He claims to inhabit an affective state of fear so intense that he would need to run for his life to avoid getting "some of his good done to me,—some of its virus mingled with my blood." How could someone's benevolent intentions provoke such an extreme state of panic in the narrator? What is wrong with a person who would run from such benevolent, well-meaning folk? Isn't such a position absurd?

The extreme hyperbole of the narrator's affective stance in this anti-charity passage in *Walden* serves as a direct counterpart to the desiccating dryness and lack of sentiment assumed by the narrator of *Cape Cod*. Sympathy and sentiment, in Thoreau's view, are used to mask the cruelty of a capitalist system philanthropic organizations are not only complicit with, but which they in many cases underwrite and control. The critique is not of philanthropists, per se, but of the liberal notion that overrates the impulse toward sympathetic identification rather than eradicating the systems of suffering "in the broadest sense." A broader form of "love," according to Thoreau's political theory, would work to undo the entire economic system that puts the lives of our "fellows" in such clear and present danger.

While it may seem hyperbolic to describe philanthropy as a suffocating presence, something that fills the nose and ears and eyes, and as an evil smell that threatens to overwhelm one's nervous system, Thoreau uses this metaphor to identify the way ideology travels through affective currents. Ideology passes from body to body; it is sensed physically; it's an atmosphere or mood that one can literally feel.<sup>93</sup> Through this affective mode in the text, the ideology of capitalism is materialized; it has a smell and a sound and a touch. Thoreau suggests that those who possess the delusion that they are doing good often actually cause harm, in that they benefit and support a system that demands economic equivalence for human life. The discussion of the affective sense of philanthropy's harm in *Cape Cod* is further materialized when one considers the context of the shipping industry and the maritime insurance that underwrote it. Eerily present

here, as an unspoken subtext alluded to in glimmers, is the practice of calculating human life as financial risk and as potentially more profitable as loss in shipwreck than as a life preserved. For now, what interests me is Thoreau's further insight, in the passage cited above, that the harm is caused through a potentially contagious affective atmosphere of effusive sentiment and narcissistic emotionalism; that a mood of seeming goodness can be cruel and destructive indeed. This sickening and suffocating affective atmosphere, this sense of easy sympathy without critique, is precisely what Thoreau would undercut with his severely non-sentimental portrayal of the shipwrecks on Cape Cod.

Another passage from the "Economy" section of *Walden* further clarifies the social justice demand behind what on the face of it can seem like merely a cranky misanthropic dislike of those who seem to do good:

I would not subtract any thing from the praise that is due to philanthropy, but merely demand justice for all who by their lives and works are a blessing to mankind. I do not value chiefly a man's uprightness and benevolence, which are, as it were, his stem and leaves. . . . His goodness must not be a partial and transitory act, but a constant superfluity, which costs him nothing and of which he is unconscious. This is a charity that hides a multitude of sins. The philanthropist too often surrounds mankind with the remembrance of his own cast-off griefs as an atmosphere, and calls it sympathy. We should impart our courage, and not our despair, our health and ease, and not our disease, and take care that this does not spread by contagion. (120)

Here again, the notion of "contagion" is introduced in relation to philanthropy. The particular form of economic injustice that liberal institutions inaugurate and support is spread through a mood or atmosphere that calls itself sympathy; in reality, it masks or even partakes in a cruel system of suffering. Philanthropy might call itself sympathetic, full of love for one's fellows, but Thoreau questions the empathetic abilities of those who are simply projecting their own diseased atmosphere of "cast-off griefs" onto others. Indeed, Thoreau believes "that what so saddens the reformer is not his sympathy with his fellows in distress, but, though he be the holiest son of God, is his private ail" (*Walden* 121).

This philanthropic disease of displaced sadness, of jettisoning one's grief by surrounding others with an atmosphere of their continued remembrance, is a complex mixture of mourning and melancholia. On the one hand, it is a type of socially acceptable mourning that successfully substitutes others for one's lost object; it is a way of moving on by putting aside the lost and the dead and helping others who may need it. And yet, as Thoreau suggests, it is also a form of social control and a way of achieving resolution (completing the cycle of mourning) by imposing suffering on others, surrounding them with the atmosphere of the "remembrance" of grief. Philanthropy also requires a ready



supply of needy others, or even worse, it requires in particular needy others who will subject themselves to a hegemonic grid of norms and systems in order to receive aid. Thus, as Thoreau also makes clear, there is something pathological or melancholically “diseased” about this seemingly normal mourning process, in that the philanthropist seems to have formed, him or herself, an identity centered around loss, encrypting the loss within their own being, threatening to spread the contagion of their own despair onto others.

In the 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholia as two distinct psychic states. He sees mourning as a “normal affect” that he then contrasts with the more pathological state of melancholia. Mourning involves a healthy state of grieving a loss about which one is conscious, while melancholia involves a kind of endless sense of loss, in that the loss is unconscious, unacknowledged, and perhaps unnamable. In the 1923 essay “The Ego and the Id” Freud would return to this earlier essay, reworking the presumed distinction between the two psychic states and normalizing the workings of melancholia as one stage of all healthy mourning. In the 1970s, the French psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok retheorized the concept of melancholia in what would prove for many scholars to be a generative and suggestive study. In *The Shell and the Kernel*, they explore the antithetical dynamics of substitution and incorporation latent in Freud’s earlier discussion of the two states; for them, the distinction is that mourning introjects the lost object, substituting an other for the lost object, while melancholia, quite oppositely, incorporates the lost object, “encrypting” it in the body in some way. Melancholia is thus, as Judith Butler put it, “the state of disavowed or suspended grief in which the [lost] object is magically sustained within the subject” (*Gender Trouble* 86). What Abraham and Torok highlight, and what scholars like Butler have fruitfully explored, is the sense of disavowal inherent in melancholia, such that the loss remains in its ghostly traces, a kind of unconscious phantom. In melancholia, loss is an absent presence, palpable in an affective register if not available to the conscious mind. Thoreau, I suggest, is sensing some of the melancholic disavowal of loss in the figure of the philanthropist he critiques, and he is using that sense of philanthropic melancholy to make a larger claim about social justice and how it will best be achieved.<sup>94</sup>

With the above psychoanalytic discussion in mind, a common-sense view of philanthropy, if one were to view it as a form of mourning at all, would be to view it as a form of “healthy” mourning, in that if one had suffered profound loss one could presumably “get over it” by projecting outward, substituting others for the lost object of love. And yet, quite oppositely from a more commonplace view, Thoreau posits philanthropy as a kind of “diseased” state of despair and unresolved grief. It should be clear that throughout his *oeuvre* Thoreau maligns not the philanthropic impulse, per se, but the particularly “viral” type of person who in many cases is associated with philanthropic endeavors. This person is “unthinking,” “like a Newfoundland dog,” helping others only through vague impulses to “do good” and not through any higher

order thinking or wider analysis of the troubling situations that create sufferers to help in the first place. In Thoreau's view, many philanthropists are narcissistically unaware of the needs of the actual others they would help, because the drive toward charitable acts comes not from the actual needs of others but from a compulsion to formulate their own positive identity as a benevolent person. Thus, the philanthropist is the one with a real need, a need to "cast off" one's grief, to jettison the lost others' memory by substituting it with a ready supply of new objects of affection.

In highlighting this neediness, therefore, Thoreau also points to the sense of melancholia in the philanthropic enterprise. The work of melancholic philanthropy is never complete, insofar as one's identity is formulated around the position of "casting off" grief and building an atmosphere premised upon the loss. The philanthropist projects the sense of melancholic disease outwards, creating a permanent sense of loss, an ungrivable loss, for others.<sup>95</sup> Things are ungrivable, according to Freud, where they are unconscious. If, as is generally assumed, philanthropy is entirely a good thing, how does one grieve the losses that being the recipient of such do-gooding often entails? To Thoreau, the affect of philanthropy gets in the way of real good: the suffocating, self-centered atmosphere created by the seeming beneficence of do-gooders has nothing to do with working toward the worthy philanthropic goal of creating a world system providing "justice for all." Indeed, the radical demand for social justice in Thoreau's writing on philanthropy would necessitate a puncturing of the affective atmosphere of a "charity that hides a multitude of sins," a charity that cruelly attempts to resolve its own losses by instituting systems that participate in "extracting life" from others. Thoreau thus envisions a greater conception of charity that would eradicate the need for such charitable acts.

The radical critique of philanthropy's complicity with capitalist systems, emergent in *Walden*, is even more forcefully and subtly articulated in *Cape Cod*. The critique also takes on a broader global dimension as Thoreau casts his gaze out toward the Atlantic. He moves beyond the project of advocating a new system of self-making, a withdrawal from deleterious beliefs and systems like capitalism, as he contemplates a much wider pool of subjects than his Concord neighbors. For it is true that the subjects he discusses on the Cape—the Irish cast upon the shore and the affectless wreckers going about their business of collecting and profiting from catastrophe—are not positioned in such a way that undertaking utopian projects of disadhering from capitalism seem possible. Indeed, for the Irish in the first wreck Thoreau encounters, it is the very promise that one could make oneself anew by withdrawing from one system that has proven bankrupt. For the transatlantic system links various local sites of empire-building and oppression, spreading the catastrophic effects of famine, say, through a traffic in laboring bodies who then wash up on distant shores. Even further, the global financial system has clearly found a way to capitalize upon and profit from this catastrophic state of affairs in that the marine insurance system, and the banks underwriting the voyages, have always already calculated such losses into their profit structures. But what about the incalculable

costs of such losses, the sorrows that can't be expressed or perhaps are never known? Thoreau alludes to those immeasurable losses beneath the global financial and political system as the wreckage that washes up on the shore. What might on the surface level be a travel narrative local critique of the Cape's sights and scenes, with a narrator seemingly indifferent or cranky about what he finds there, upon further examination reflects a sophisticated political theory that thus puts Cape Cod in a contact zone with a global economic system of death. This system has ties to the eighteenth-century slave system and extends, through its traffic in laboring bodies and its credit-based financial structure, to a nineteenth-century system of empire-building whose costs the Atlantic Ocean itself both registers and covers over.

While Thoreau satirizes a variety of religious and charitable entities historically present on the Cape from the seventeenth-century onwards (revivalist preachers; hysterical women given to fits; the practice of administering lashes to those who don't attend church on a Sunday), he reserves the most vitriol for the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, an organization founded in 1785 to ameliorate deaths by shipwreck off the Massachusetts coast. Modeled after the British Royal Humane Society, the Massachusetts organization created an award system for heroes who risked their lives to save others from drowning; it also established a system of safe houses or (as Thoreau calls them "huts") along the Massachusetts coast. These so-called Charity houses were conceived as places where survivors of shipwreck could find shelter so as not to freeze to death on shore before help could arrive (as often happened).<sup>96</sup> Thoreau encounters one such coastal "charity house" on his Cape walk, and he uses his description of its neglected state to bolster a much wider critique of the philanthropic impulse in liberal politics and the liberal subject in general. Thoreau presents the impulse to help the shipwrecked as both hypocritical and actually cruel. The huts and the manuals distributed give the shipwrecked, according to Thoreau, the illusion that they can survive, prolonging their suffering.

Using a Whitmanian kind of catalogue (or a Melvillian detailed list of extracts), Thoreau reproduces long passages from an 1802 Humane Society publication dispersed to sailors. The manual points out the spots where the Charity houses were built, and also describes for the shipwrecked the other places (churches, government buildings) where one might look for shelter. Thoreau mocks this publication for its minute and misguided attempt to map the Cape and provide helpful detail. At issue, primarily, is the cruel optimism of the manual's writer, not only the narcissistic do-goody tone that is content to live in illusions of benevolence and love toward ones fellows, but the cruelty of promoting an attachment to a seemingly salvific organization whose own structure is part of what has one shipwrecked. But the tone of this manual is an affective indication of a much wider misapprehension that Thoreau particularly abhors, a cruel cluelessness that can actually kill. A discussion in the philanthropic manual, for instance, begins with a sixteen-mile stretch commencing at Nauset Lights and describes the "steep and lofty banks, which it is very difficult to climb, especially in a storm. In violent tempests,

during very high tides, the sea breaks against the foot of them, rendering it then unsafe to walk on the strand which lies between them and the ocean” (44). A guidebook telling the survivor of a shipwreck that they won’t be able to make it up the bank during a storm is as useless as they come and, as Thoreau implies, it is perhaps crueler to describe in such detail the potentially impossible conditions than it would be to just let the shipwrecked try to save themselves, or failing that, recognize the futility of that effort and acquiesce to fate. “Should the seaman succeed in his attempt to ascend” the banks, the manual continues, “he must forebear to penetrate into the country, as houses are generally so remote that they would escape his research during the night” (44). The deep pessimism emitted in this purported optimistic enterprise of saving lives is clear. Thoreau imagines a shipwrecked sailor diligently reading the book for clues to survival, only to be cruelly told, in a positive, upbeat tone, that the bank isn’t safe to climb, and that even if one were to ascend it in a storm, there wouldn’t be any houses nearby.

“I have read this Shipwrecked Seaman’s Manual,” Thoreau tells us, “with a melancholy kind of interest,—for the sound of the surf, or, you might say, the moaning of the sea, is heard all through it, as if its author were the sole survivor of a shipwreck himself” (43–44). Here Thoreau describes the melancholy affect emitted from the publication, an affect he locates at the heart of the philanthropic enterprise. Once again, Thoreau envisions affect as contagious, as the writer of the manual transmits his own cast-off grief to his readers who, like Thoreau, might take a “melancholy kind of interest,” though the intended beneficiary of the charitable act is poorly served by such a publication. Imagined by Thoreau as a “sole survivor of a shipwreck himself,” the manual’s writer uses the guise of helping others as a way of actually telling his own melancholy sea-story in an encrypted form. The sea “moans” throughout this manual as it does throughout Thoreau’s own text, creating an atmosphere in which feelings of despair, futility, and pain are conjured up in relation to the specter of shipwreck, even while the upbeat, cheery narrator of the manual marshals the shipwrecked toward seeming safety. Most of all, Thoreau senses in this text an undertow of massive loss that the text fails to name overtly. Thoreau thus locates an affective counternarrative in the Humane Society publication, an atmosphere of negativity pulling against the text’s overt self-stylization as an optimistic act of helpfulness and provision. On the one hand, as Thoreau points out, the publication cheerily extends its hand to all future shipwrecked sailors and presents the possibility of loss as recoverable; on the other hand, it spreads an affective sense of loss and pessimism about the charitable act it engages with, wringing its figurative hands about the difficulty and the near impossibility of survival. Thus one could say that the publication gestures to the idea that there are incalculable losses, tales of suffering and death that will never be told nor factored into the progressive narrative of global financial systems and the charitable acts that ameliorate the suffering they cause. Clearly, what bothers Thoreau most is the dissonance between form and content, between the publication’s tone of positive thinking as it recites the grisly facts that one’s chances of survival are grim. “It is pathetic to read the minute and faithful directions which he gives

to seamen who may be wrecked on this coast, to guide them to the nearest Charity-house, or other shelter,” he writes, introducing a quote from the manual writer, who says of Eastham that though there are a few houses within a mile of the shore, yet “in a snow-storm, which rages here with excessive fury, it would be almost impossible to discover them either by night or by day” (52). The writer of this guide is “pathetic” to Thoreau for maintaining an affective stance totally out of keeping with the situation of shipwreck and the prospect of a group of shipwrecked seaman, for presenting how “almost impossible” survival will be in a tone of anything-is-possible upbeat positivity:

You hear their imaginary guide thus marshalling, cheering, directing the dripping, shivery, freezing troop along; “at the entrance of this valley the sand has gathered, so that at present a little climbing is necessary. Passing over several fences and taking heed not to enter the wood on the right hand, at the distance of three quarters of a mile a house is to be found. This house stands on the south side of the road, and not far from it on the south is Pamet River, which runs from east to west through a body of salt marsh.” To him cast ashore in Eastham, he says “The meeting-house is without a steeple, but it may be distinguished from the dwelling-houses near it by its situation, which is between two small groves of locusts, one on the south and one on the north,—that on the south being three times as long as the other. About a mile and a quarter from the hut, west by north, appear the top and arms of a windmill.” And so on for many pages. (52)

Thoreau maligns the “marshaling,” “cheering” impulse of this philanthropist, in part because it offers, as I’ve been arguing, a double-voiced discourse: on the one hand, the publication clearly promotes the idea that one will be able to survive shipwreck on the Cape, and it offers minute details about how that will occur; on the other hand the very minuteness of the details is giving false hope. The text admits that it describes near impossible conditions of survival, and it includes an affective counternarrative that moans and wails and worries. And yet, the illusion purveyed is the cruelly optimistic idea that if one can memorize the particular directions of each particular craggy cliff, one might be prepared to survive. Or if one is shipwrecked, and could have the amazing good luck to have this particular manual in one’s soggy pocket, one might be able to consult it for details that might save one’s life.

But further, what Thoreau objects to is the banality of the description, the way the narrator tells a “drippy, shivering, freezing troop” about architectural sights and important Cape landmarks, as it were conducting tourists through the picturesque Cape towns. This sense of profound disconnectedness in the affective level of the address to the reader, this confusion about its purpose—is it a survival guide or a travel guide?—fits into a larger critique Thoreau launches not just against philanthropic organizations but against the complicity of the travel narrative genre with the enterprises of conquest, dominion, and empire he sees traces of throughout the natural landscape. Windmills,

steeple, the size of one grove compared to another: these are the details one would point out to a tourist or visitor, Thoreau suggests, not to shipwrecked seamen or alienated laborers just dashed upon the rocks and struggling to make it to shore. Here Thoreau raises the question of audience, implying that the manuals were not written solely for the aid and benefit of the shipwrecked, as stated, but perhaps also for the curious, the bored, the fellow members of Boston's elite society who form the ranks of the Humane Society membership. As James Patrick Brown has shown, many of these Society members were investors, brokers, and salesmen in the maritime insurance industry, the very industry whose scandalous and reckless underwriting of substandard vessels led to so many shipwrecks and so much drowning in the first place, such as the deliberate wrecking of *The Franklin* discussed above.<sup>97</sup> The manual for shipwrecked seaman survives, perhaps, as an entertaining read for travelers on the Cape, or as a way for the Humane Society to aggrandize itself, but it does nothing to acknowledge or change the wider political and economic system that forms the backdrop to many of these shipwrecks. This ineffective, narcissistic orientation at the heart of the philanthropic impulse is what Thoreau critiques as he works to formulate a theory of social justice beyond the charitable acts envisioned by traditional liberalism.

Thoreau's description of the Charity house he and his companion encounter also furthers the notion of cruel optimism behind the philanthropic impulse. Not only is the idea of "Houses of entertainment for shipwrecked men!" a ridiculous notion to Thoreau, in that "[t]hey appeared but a stage to the grave," but after all the guidebook's long descriptions about the helpfulness of the shelters, the particular hut Thoreau hikes into is not only locked shut with a rusty nail that can't be opened, but it is also totally empty of all the comforts promised, such as firewood, matches, and so on (51). "Perhaps this hut has never been required to shelter a shipwrecked man, and the benevolent person who promised to inspect it annually, to see that the straw and matches are here, and that the boards will keep off the wind, has grown remiss and thinks that storms and shipwrecks are over" the narrator states sarcastically. "[T]his very night a perishing crew may pry open its door with their numbed fingers and leave half their number dead here by morning, he continues" (51). Indeed, the house that Thoreau and Channing locate "had neither window nor sliding shutter, nor clapboards, nor paint" (53). Looking through a knothole, the two men discover that "there were some stones and some loose wads of wool on the floor, and an empty fireplace at the further end; but it *was not* supplied with matches, or straw, or hay, that we could see, nor 'accommodated with a bench'" (54). The cheerless emptiness that Thoreau finds at the center of the so-called "Humane-house" is further evidence of the cruel optimism that he locates at the center of the philanthropic impulse in general. For to promise safety, warmth, and shelter and then not provide it, he asserts, is worse than just letting people fend for themselves and get what they can; it is to promote an attachment to an idea that might, literally, kill one. The prolonged suffering entailed in keeping hope alive, the frustration of being so close to a salvation that can be promised but rarely delivered, these are the affective costs of an

“antique virtue” that fails to oppose the wider systems that lead to such suffering and death in the first place.

Rather than spreading the contagious disease of one’s own personal pain outward, casting it onto others and calling it sympathy, Thoreau posits an alternative kind of benevolent subject, one capable of “looking inward” in order to then be able to do the difficult work of looking outward to see the hard truth of things, to “stand right fronting and face to face to a fact,” to “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, and so you will happily conclude your mortal career,” as he states in *Walden* (142). This new virtuous subject envisioned by Thoreau would “crave reality” more than the cruelty of optimistic illusions. In a long passage dense with allusions and symbolic import, he constructs a persona, unlike the narrator of the philanthropic text he critiques, who can obtain insight and *actually see*:

However, as we wished to get an idea of a Humane house, and we hoped that we should never have a better opportunity, we put our eyes, by turns, to a knot-hole in the door, and, after long looking, without seeing, into the dark,—not knowing how many shipwrecked men’s bones we might see at last, looking with the eye of faith, knowing that, though to him that knocketh it may not always be opened, yet to him that looketh long enough through a knot-hole the inside shall be visible,—for we had had some practice at looking inward,—by steadily keeping our other ball covered from the light meanwhile, putting the outward world behind us, ocean and land, and the beach,—till the pupil became enlarged and collected the rays of light that were wandering in that dark (for the pupil shall be enlarged by looking; there never was so dark a night but a faithful and patient eye, however small, might at last prevail over it),—after all this, I say, things began to take shape to our vision,—if we may use this expression where there was nothing but emptiness,—and we obtained the long-wished-for-insight. (*Cape Cod* 53)

Here we see how arduous the process of attaining a vision is; insight doesn’t come easy, but is instead the result of the “practice” of looking inward, looking patiently and “long.” Thoreau directly opposes the insights gleaned from this valorized self-reflective process to the philanthropist’s outward orientation and impulse to cast one’s own grief onto others, and he uses this discussion of the actual vision of the cheerless, inaccessible Charity houses to undercut the disassociated pleasant optimism of the Humane Society publication and its false promises. For the failure of the philanthropist to obtain the affective register appropriate to the situation of shipwrecks (seeking to cheer the castaways on, to “entertain” them, etc.) is more than just a personal callousness, or a matter of style; it represents to Thoreau a failure in vision, a failure to apprehend what to him is “the hard bottom of truth” to be found on the Cape. The visionary capacity of one

self-centeredly preoccupied with one's own sense of benevolent selfhood, with presenting oneself as a liberal subject capable of sympathizing with others, is severely limited. Such a person sees only one's self-centered projections, asserts Thoreau, and then calls them sympathy. This self-centeredness, paradoxically, is the direct opposite of an inward looking self-reflexive process of ethical engagement with the world. Thoreau offers himself as an alternative model, claiming to have mastered the art of "looking inward" through practice, not simply to assert himself as a superior person, but to model a mode of political engagement with the world that would more effectively be able to see, and thus change, the world. The practice of engaged, attentive looking inward has yielded him the sublime ability to grasp the reality of outward circumstances, to avoid illusions, and encounter instead "the thing itself":

There I had got the Cape under me, as much as if I were riding it bare-backed. It was not as on the map, or seen from a stage-coach; but there I found it all out of doors, huge and real, Cape Cod! as it cannot be represented on a map, color it as you will; the thing itself, than which there is nothing more like it, no truer picture or account; which you cannot go farther and see. I cannot remember what I thought before that it was. (44)

The Cape proves, as does nature throughout Thoreau's *oeuvre*, to be symbolic for broader abstract political and ethical points Thoreau wishes to make. Nature is symbolic for the ineffable, that which cannot be grasped; the mapping impulse is seen as an illusory attempt to obtain control of something so terribly sublime. Throughout the narrative, Thoreau writes about the impossibility of mapping a constantly shifting landscape, one in which the contours of its features completely change from day to day. Mapping the Cape for the shipwrecked seamen is not only cruelly optimistic, then; it proves to be an erroneous process insofar as "it cannot be represented on a map." Mapping reality, Thoreau suggests, is equally fraught in that our measures and guides are limited; and yet, the narrator claims to have had an experience of the Cape/Reality "huge and real," "as if I were riding it bare-backed." If the book *Cape Cod* is not a map of the Cape, nor a guide to surviving shipwreck there, nor any of the other forms of narrative Thoreau satirizes (tedious histories, banal travelogues noticing picturesque beauty, sensationalist accounts of shipwreck and death) the question remains, how does it give a "truer picture or account?" And what, exactly, is it accounting for? And how does it gesture towards that which cannot be accounted for? Towards that which cannot be represented, "no matter how you color it?"

### **The Hauntological Sublime**

I'd like to conclude this chapter by returning to the issue of Thoreau's aesthetics in order to outline, briefly, a cluster of resonant associations I believe undergird and inform Thoreau's ethico-political theory. We might refer to the aesthetic he develops in *Cape Cod* as the hauntological sublime, an aesthetic that gestures to, even haunts the



reader with, a disavowed counternarrative of modernity. Like Paul Gilroy's formulation of the slave sublime, the hauntological sublime inquires into "terrors that exhaust the resources of language amidst the debris of a catastrophe" (218) as well as those sublime terrors that language would place in beautifully macabre theatrical scenes. Just as Thoreau had seen the sea "moaning" throughout the Humane Society publication, positing a hauntological double to the happy upbeat you-too-can-survive manual, so too does Thoreau's narrative contain its own counternarrative, its own presence of loud wordless sound (such as plovers plaintively singing their dirges) and unassimilated horror. Moreover, many of the sublime moments, put into language, nevertheless refer back to debris in *Cape Cod*, the inassimilable waste that the modern subject eschews or disavows in his most pronounced states of elevated, civilized feeling. In this sense the hauntological sublime produces not the surfeit of easy emotion that the liberal spectator presumably seeks in contemplating sublime objects, but the wretched nervousness that I've been arguing *Cape Cod* elicits in the reader.

The importance of images of ships and maritime scenes to the discourse of modernity has been established by theorists such as Paul Gilroy, who argue that such images allow one to consider the Atlantic as an alternative space vying with the nation-state as a site of inquiry. Images of the sea also hold a special place in the sublime tradition, a tradition epitomized by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century landscape painting in which "terrifyingly impressive natural phenomena such as mountains, volcanoes, storms and the sea" are characterized by "obscurity, vastness, and power" (Baldick 215). One of the key images in this tradition, mobilized in various discussions of the Black Atlantic, is J.M.W. Turner's painting entitled *The Slave Ship*. Exhibited at the Royal Academy to coincide with the world anti-slavery convention in London in 1840, the painting details a storm at sea in which light, clouds, and color dominate the canvas. In the lower part of the canvas, the hands of Africans thrown overboard appear in the water, still shackled.

Turner is the key example in art critic John Ruskin's influential *Modern Painters*, an important text that sets standards of taste for the enlightened subject of modernity through celebrating Turner's aesthetics. Ruskin views these aesthetics as the height of artistic achievement, noticing mostly Turner's attention to formal details such as color and light. And yet, in his celebration of Turner, as Gilroy points out, Ruskin's discussion of *The Slave Ship* omits all mention of the slave ship around which the images of water, clouds, and light in his painting coalesce. Ruskin fails, more particularly, to mention that the subject of the painting is a case, like that of *The Zong*, in which 133 live Africans were thrown overboard to collect insurance money. The case came to the public's attention because the insurance underwriters disputed the claim. Ruskin was unable "to discuss the picture except in terms of what it revealed about the aesthetics of painting water. He relegated the information that the vessel was a slave ship to a footnote of the first volume of *Modern Painters*" (Gilroy 14).

Constitutive exclusions such as Ruskin's haunt the aesthetic tradition that Thoreau draws upon in taking up the topic of shipwrecks on the Atlantic.<sup>98</sup> This tradition mobilizes images of suffering and death in order to promote sublime feelings in the viewer, safely detached from real horror and able to enjoy the sensation of awesome, terrible power in the scene. For in the Turner painting, the thrilling, terrifying notion of nature's awesome power is complicated by the fact that it is not nature but rather human systems of racial and economic exploitation that have created the violence that permeates the scene. Human actors, not ineffable nature, jettisoned the live bodies that led to the sublime scene of suffering amidst beautiful waves and sky and air. Ruskin, who lived with the painting for twenty-eight years, finally sold it to an American buyer. "It is said he had begun to find it too painful to live with" (Gilroy 14). The melancholy knowledge of violence beneath the celebration of color and light finally, perhaps, seeped in.

Although Thoreau participates in this logic of constitutive exclusions to some degree and certainly mobilizes an aesthetic of disavowed violence within the tradition of the sublime, he also, as I've argued above, forces the reader to confront the violence of the Atlantic system with a palpably confrontational stare. Ian Baucom's discussion of Turner's canvas, subtitled *Slavers throwing overboard the dead and the dying* will be useful here. Baucom locates the inspiration for the painting in Thomas Clarkson's 1785 *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, Particularly the African*, which he reads as perfectly blending "history, polemic, and romance melancholy" in order to create in its readers "an idea of the suffering of the Africans" and of "the observer's own suffering before such suffering" (212). The Turner painting, like the Clarkson essay, posits an imagined spectator who, in the liberal tradition of Adam Smith, is capable of morality because he is able to imagine and thus feel the suffering of others. This empathetic or sympathetic viewer is just the kind of narcissistic sentimental feeler whom Thoreau so thoroughly distrusted, as I discussed in the section above. The problem with imagined sympathy, as Smith points out, is that in existing within the mind of the sympathizer, it risks partaking of the unreal or illusory, and thus risks bearing no connection to the real needs of the sufferer. And yet, paradoxically, the imagination has to be used in order to conjure up the political realities that remain unspoken, unmentionable, ghostly phantoms. Thoreau too, in emphasizing a new way of seeing into the knothole of charity, encounters "the problem of the unseen, the problem of nonappearance, the problem of blocked vision" that Baucom locates as *the* problem for abolition "and all subsequent cosmopolitan discourse" (217–218).

Melancholy may constitute an inability to forget what cannot be remembered, but it also comprises the obligation to see what has not been seen. This is not just a psychic or an epistemological dilemma; it is also the consequence of a geopolitical impasse. For what is lost is not only lost in damaged or unrecorded time, it is also, frequently, lost in space, unseen not merely because time, measured chronologically, continues its implacable, imperturbable march but because the extent of geographic

space and the constraints of politically organized sightlines on history intervene between the witness and the unforgettable spectacle of what has not been witnessed. This is Clarkson's problem—as it is the problem for any afterimage of the *Zong* massacre or any other such obscure (or obscured) historical catastrophe—as the distance of passing time or the obstacles of geographic space separates the witness from the scene of witnessing. (217–218)

Thoreau, too, inherits the problem of the melancholic witness in that his vision of modernity would have him unable “to forget what cannot be remembered.” He displaces this melancholia onto a landscape supercharged with dead bodies, mournful birdcall, stoic witnesses, moaning waves, and bones lost at sea. His ethical contribution is to insist that one must try to see what cannot be seen, to grasp within one's political vision what has always already been unseen. Unlike the liberal spectator posited by Smith and imagined by Turner, however, Thoreau wishes to avoid the “bleary optics” of sentimentality. He also senses that whatever cruelty nature may purvey, harsher cruelties derive from sympathetic identifications with sufferers—sufferers created, often, by one's own attachment to the systems that wreak violence upon them. Optimism, indeed, can be cruel when it encourages us to attach to things that would kill us.

The discussion I've provided in the chapter above calls attention to the maritime images in *Cape Cod* as part of Thoreau's sustained ethico-political theory, and I'd like to consider now the power of holding these images next to Turner's image of a slave ship at sea. Thoreau's focus on the wrecks of the *St. John* and *The Franklin*, as well as his dissection of the Humane Society's attempts to rescue the shipwrecked, function as his attempt “to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger” (Benjamin 255). I see these images as part of a larger constellation of images, including that of *The Zong* and modern images from our current political reality: images like undocumented children of illegal immigrants arrested in school, and victims of Hurricane Katrina drowning in their own attics. Moments of danger on the Cape, ubiquitous in Thoreau's text, could never be isolated wrecks. Each image resonates with past and future wrecks, catastrophes that are covered over as soon as they “flit by,” “lost in space,” unnoticed because unseen within the larger system that creates them.

Here the familiar Transcendental interest in the mystic, in the idea of “grasping the ineffable,” takes on a more tangible tone and acquires a political and historical urgency. For in focusing on shipwrecks on the Cape, and in meditating so heavily on the history of the Cape, I believe that Thoreau senses, in the particular moments of nature's ineffable violence he describes, not merely “a chain of events” but rather “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Benjamin 257). Indeed, I would contend that this insight dictates the fragmented form of the text, and that the form itself is making its own argument for the hauntological sublime as a way of grasping reality, a way of getting at something approaching the hard bottom

of a modernity that always already excludes reference to its own inassimilable waste. Thoreau's concern with giving a "truer picture" of the Cape and its affective atmosphere of catastrophe leads him to develop an associative style that would account not simply for the mysterious awesome power of nature, but also for the haunting way that these moments of danger are shot through with past and future moments. Thoreau's vision of Cape Cod exists within a Benjaminian "time of the now," as part of a "constellation" in which future events and past events collide in single images of shipwreck, fraud, forced migration, and bankrupt notions of progress. Nature is the medium through which Thoreau grasps this historical reality, and the sublime is the mode he engages with in order to unfold it. These associative links haunt the reader with the melancholy knowledge of what has been lost and banished in order for modernity to proceed, calling forth a reader capable of feeling the wretched nervousness consonant with a real state of emergency.

## Chapter 4

### **Mezmerized Subjects of Gender: Mary Baker Eddy's Mental Mind Cure**

“There are . . . acts which are done in the name of women, and then there are acts in and of themselves, apart from any instrumental consequence, that challenge the category of women itself.” —Judith Butler

Partway through her autobiography *Retrospection and Introspection* (1891), Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, casts herself out of her text. What begins as a straightforward chronological life narration—with details about her ancestry and early childhood—turns in this moment into a spiritual autobiography in the Puritan vein. She suddenly deems her own bodily experience and her individual personality irrelevant. The move to excise her body and her life story from her autobiographical text occurs, however, not at all randomly, but precisely at the point in the narration when Eddy, as a young adult woman in the 1850s, begins to experience some profound personal problems, problems that have everything to do with the configuration of white middle-class female bodies and subjectivities in North America in the Victorian era. The historical Eddy finds herself, in her early twenties, pregnant and newly widowed, penniless, a burden in her family home, ill, and unable to work given the limited options for women generally and her own limitations specifically.<sup>99</sup> In her own narration of events, she dispatches the details of these early years quickly and obliquely, but it is clear that she was moving around, living with various relatives and friends, a complete dependent. When an attempt at remarriage fails to provide the stability she had sought, Eddy (then Baker Glover Patterson) loses contact with the by now twelve-year-old son she had been struggling to raise. She details this event in two painful paragraphs:

My dominant thought in marrying again was to get back my child, but after our marriage his stepfather was not willing he should have a home with me. A plot was consummated for keeping us apart. The family to whose care he was committed very soon removed to what was then regarded as the Far West.

After his removal a letter was read to my little son, informing him that his mother was dead and buried. Without my knowledge a guardian was appointed him, and I was then informed that my son was lost. Every

means within my power was employed to find him, but without success. We never met again until he had reached the age of thirty-four, had a wife and two children, and by a strange providence had learned that his mother still lived, and came to see me in Massachusetts. (21)

Eddy relates the sad details of the story of the “removal” of her son coolly, objectively, without much detail. “A plot was consummated for keeping us apart,” she states, using the passive voice to obscure the agents of the deed. In fact, while there seem to have been people responsible for the actual decision to send her son to live with a foster family in the first place (her father and stepmother), and to eventually remove him to another state (her new husband and the foster parents), the factors leading to the rupture with her son are perhaps so complex that Eddy cannot name them. It may take the benefit of historical distance to notice the intersecting and competing norms of class, gender, and race that form the backdrop to Eddy’s life story and make her rise from poverty and obscurity to wealth and fame so remarkable. Rather than analyze the political and social issues contributing to her loss of her child, however, Eddy connects her text to the tradition of Puritan spiritual autobiography<sup>100</sup> and eschews any autobiographical project that would concern itself merely with the corporeal or the personal.

Immediately after mentioning the “plot that was consummated” for keeping Eddy and her son apart, the tone of the text shifts abruptly. Eddy follows the two paragraphs about the loss of her son with a grandiose, messianic statement denying the importance of this painful “removal” of her son, and she “expunges” any further mention of him. Moreover, she says, she will remove herself as well from her own life story. She will not dwell on “personal events,” she insists, but instead will “illustrate the ethics of Truth”:

Mere historic incidents and personal events are frivolous and of no moment, unless they illustrate the ethics of Truth. To this end, and only to this end, such narrations may be admissible and advisable; but if spiritual conclusions are separated from their premises, the *nexus* is lost, and the argument, with its rightful conclusions, becomes correspondingly obscure. The human history needs to be revised, and the material record expunged. (21–22)

The details of the narration of her life, she concludes, are not so important as the fact that they lead her to the discovery of Christian Science and the revelation that God had been completely misunderstood throughout the history of Protestant Christian thought.<sup>101</sup> The “argument” Eddy makes here in her autobiography and in her best-selling theological text *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (1875) is that “sin, disease, and death” are but an illusion, a mirage of erroneous beliefs and outmoded religions. The sad details of her personal story, she states, are but a part of the “human history” or the “material record” that her theories and her religion would “revise” or “expunge”; they are part of a bodily existence she connects with “error” rather than “Truth.” But Eddy goes further

than denying the relevance of her own “corporeal personality” and her “so-called life” in her autobiographical project; she argues that material existence in general is illusory, that it has no relevance to a higher truth (*Retrospection* 23). She spent her life (after the loss of her son) convinced of her own understanding of this higher spiritual truth, and trying to articulate it for others.

Mary Baker Eddy bases First Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science), on her conception of an infinite and benevolent deity that combines a superior intelligence with maternal qualities. She stresses the idea of God as a loving presence rather than a punishing personality, and she holds that since God is an impersonal and ungendered principle—combining both masculine and feminine qualities—women have as much access to God’s power as men. While she insists on the irrelevance of the personal and the corporeal in her autobiography and her theology, she in fact revises her own material record (and thus her own human history) drastically after the loss of her son and the failure of her second marriage. Despair, ill health, and poverty have her turn to the Bible, which, she claims, “was her only teacher”<sup>102</sup> and through which she perceives the revelation that leads to her metaphysical system for healing. She begins teaching others, setting up shop as a healer, and in 1875 publishes her first edition of the philosophical theological description of her program. Thus, while the autobiographical narrator of *Retrospection and Introspection* casts her own limited female body and personality out of her life story, this sacrifice serves a much wider narrative of spiritual human progress, one in which the infinite love of a feminized divine becomes a structural support for an authoritative, public female subjectivity.

Though Eddy de-emphasizes herself as a body or personality in this autobiographical text, her status as a leader or model for other women impels her to write her life story in the first place. Her incredible career as a self-made woman is part of what creates a market for her story; she is deeply aware of this in her writing. Unlike Benjamin Franklin’s chronicle of his rise from rags to riches, however, Eddy’s narrative and her self-design must walk a fine line between self-promotion and a disavowal of personal agency. In Franklin’s story the rhetoric and ideology of Enlightenment reason enable a masculine autobiographical persona who masters the secular world to make a God of himself; for many middle-class white women in North America, however, the self was still too precarious a thing to promote. In her texts, Eddy appropriates the language of scientific and philosophical reason just as Franklin does, and she details her own brilliant business solutions involving mastery of copyright laws and the ability to craft legal defenses to protect her best-selling texts from plagiarism. But she couples such authoritative discourse and self-assertion with a disavowal of her own individual personality and corporality. Thus she works against the idea of a “self-made” woman, and presents instead a God-made woman, locating all authority, power, and intelligence in a feminized divine whose combination of masculine and feminine qualities mirror her own. Her transgressive assumption of an authoritative writing and speaking voice, and

her significant worldly success, are thus simultaneously consolidated and obscured in her work.<sup>103</sup>

The impulse to cast out or deny the body coexists in Eddy's autobiography and theology with a desire to intervene in the symbolic order that creates our ideas about bodies and subjectivity in the first place. Her theological system seeks to rearticulate and resignify foundational texts in the Western tradition so as to reflect her understanding of the presence of a feminine divine. Her discussion of materiality and deity in both *Retrospection and Introspection* and *Science and Health* is deeply entrenched in a rigorous theological and philosophical reconsideration of the ideology, norms, beliefs, and customs associated with gender; she seeks a dismantling of the conventional gender binary, and posits an understanding of gender as being culturally constructed and available for resignification. Eddy uses her conception of deity to dismantle justifications for the subordination of women and to advocate for a view of gender as "mental, not material" (*Science and Health* 508). Though she is focused on a more general critique of materiality and a denial of bodily existence, Eddy mobilizes her theological texts and her conception of a benevolent maternal deity to put forth theoretical formulations of a transcendent female gender and subjectivity, and she uses these formulations to provide pragmatic solutions for the problems many women encountered in the nineteenth century.

### **God's Gender and the Female Divine**

Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, and sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine. There comes a time for destruction. But, before destruction is possible, God or the gods must exist.—Luce Irigaray

Mary Baker Eddy's theology and her nineteenth-century reformulations of gender and subjectivity can fruitfully be read alongside the work of the contemporary French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray,<sup>104</sup> because Irigaray's work illuminates the feminist and philosophical dimensions of her project. Irigaray insists that the task of feminist philosophy is twofold, and, according to one recent critic, Irigaray argues that a feminist philosophy

must subvert the privilege accorded to the phallus and masculinity, through a feminine miming and mirroring of phallogocentric discourse that subtly displaces its claims to mastery, totality, and wholeness . . . Yet Irigaray insists that feminist philosophy must also articulate a new symbolic and a new imaginary grounded in the morphology of the body marked as female within male-dominated discourse. (180–181)<sup>105</sup>

Irigaray's ambitious feminist project of deconstructing masculine privilege and articulating a new female imaginary and symbolic, however, cannot be undertaken without a new conception of the divine, she argues, because "as long as a woman lacks a



divine made in her image she cannot establish her subjectivity or achieve a goal of her own” (“Divine Women” 43). In “Divine Women,” Irigaray draws on the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, in particular his suggestion in *The Essence of Christianity* that God is “an expression of man’s idealized projections,” and notes the way that the construction of an infinite God who mirrors a masculine subject serves as a structural support of masculinity:

To avoid that finiteness, man has sought out a unique *male* God. God has been created out of man’s gender. He scarcely sets limits within Himself and between Himself: He is father, son, spirit. Man has not allowed himself to be defined by another gender: the female. His unique God is assumed to correspond to the human race (*genre humain*), which we know is not neuter or neutral from the point of view of the difference of the sexes. (42)

Without a projection of oneself as an idealized form representing infinite possibilities, Irigaray argues, one is paralyzed; without a kind of imaginative horizon against which to see oneself mirrored and to formulate one’s goals, one is constricted, claustrophobically confined to the role of the Other. The Christian theological tradition presents a problem for women in that “[t]here is no *woman* God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit. This paralyzes the infinite of becoming a woman since she is fixed in the role of mother through whom the *son* of God is made flesh” (“Divine Women” 42). In Irigaray’s formulation of the feminist project, women need the structural support of a female divine in order to avoid the finitude of the limited roles offered to them in patriarchal culture—indeed the finitude of the limitations of individual subjectivity itself—and in order to engage in the kind of deconstructive and reconstructive projects she envisions.

In her “Keys to the Scriptures” section of *Science and Health*, Eddy includes a chapter called “Genesis,” and she mobilizes a reading of this scriptural text to justify her conception of a feminized divine. She makes a distinction between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, arguing that the latter verse offers “the history of the untrue image of God,” and that “the proper reflection of God” is to be found in the first verse. She focuses in particular on Genesis 1.27: “So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him; male and female created He them (516).” She then follows this quote with her own meditation on the gender of God:

To emphasize this momentous thought, it is repeated that God made man in His own image, to reflect the divine Spirit. It follows that *man* is a generic term. Masculine, feminine, and neuter genders are human concepts. In one of the ancient languages the word for *man* is used also as the synonym of *mind*. This definition has been weakened by anthropomorphism, or a humanization of Deity. The word *anthropomorphic*, in such a phrase as “an anthropomorphic God,” is

derived from two Greek words, signifying *man* and *form*, and may be defined as a mortally mental attempt to reduce Deity to corporeality. The life-giving quality of Mind is Spirit, not matter. The ideal man corresponds to creation, to intelligence, and to Truth. The ideal woman corresponds to Life and to Love. In divine Science, we have not as much authority for considering God masculine, as we have for considering Him feminine, for Love imparts the clearest idea of Deity. (516–517)

Eddy takes a traditional justification for the idea of a masculine God (“So God created man in his own image”) and shows how the clause “male and female created He them” has been ignored in most interpretations of this verse. Eddy then offers her own complex vision of God as being not strictly aligned with one or the other gender—because not anthropomorphic—and yet still offering qualities of both masculinity and femininity with which to mirror human subjectivities. While the qualities of “the ideal man” and the “ideal woman” Eddy invokes here could be read as a reification of traditional Victorian gender norms—in that man is associated with “creation,” “intelligence,” and “truth,” and woman with “Life and Love”—Eddy draws upon such separate spheres ideology in order to make the surprising claim that God is probably more feminine than masculine “for Love imparts the clearest idea of Deity.” This statement posits the idea of a feminine God, a God who partakes in the Victorian era’s idealization of femininity as an ethereal, maternal, loving, and benevolent presence,<sup>106</sup> but who is not limited by these gender roles. Eddy does not anthropomorphize, but even if one did, Eddy asks rhetorically, why would God’s gender assignment be male, given that the God of her understanding is synonymous with love? In this way Eddy draws upon limiting conceptions of femininity to create structural support for a radically unlimited female subjectivity.

Further, if God is love, and females have equal access to it, Eddy suggests, it follows from her argument that women are also aligned with the “masculine” qualities she associates with God such as “intelligence” and “truth.” Women thus have equal, if not superior, access to this feminine/masculine deity, and all the various qualities—like superior intelligence—that her era had insisted on dividing so sharply along gender lines. This concept of the divine then authorizes Eddy as a credible recipient of divine revelation and suggests that her whole system of theology and mental mind healing is authorized by God. Over and against the male authorities in the fields of religion, medicine, and literature doubting her credibility—by disparaging her abilities as an intellect, a theologian, a preacher, and a writer—Eddy structures a rebuttal by calling upon the benevolent deity she finds in Genesis 1. Her concept of a feminized divine ultimately bolsters her own transgressive female subjectivity, enabling her to write, as Gillian Gill puts it, “not the expected textbook on mental healing techniques, not the comfortable compendium of healing anecdotes, but a book that takes on the great questions of God and man, good and evil, and that rejects orthodox verities” (217). In a circular way, her conception of God authorizes her audacious readings of scripture; and her audacious readings authorize her conception of a feminized divine. She denies the

body as a material reality, and yet such a denial bolsters an actual experience of female power and authority. The concept of a personal, embodied self is sacrificed here in favor of a wider narrative of spiritual progress in which all agency resides in a transcendent divine; but the loss of this idea of self paradoxically engenders a standpoint from which Eddy positions herself as a credible intellectual, religious, and scientific authority.

### **Mesmerized Subjects of Gender**

“Gender is mental, not material.” —Mary Baker Eddy

Mary Baker Eddy’s project is both theoretical and practical. Supported by her concept of a feminized divine, she offers a radical critique of materiality and puts forth a theory of gender in which the relationship between the morphology of the female body and female subjectivity is radically revised. She also uses her texts to puncture the prestige and authority accorded the institutions of religion, medicine, and science by “miming and mirroring” their rhetoric and discourse, using their own terms to displace their claims to “mastery, totality, wholeness.” More practically, in founding institutions such as her church, her school, and her publishing empire, Eddy creates structures and institutions in which the revised female subjectivity she envisioned and embodied received material support. To appreciate how she saw her own spiritual and practical program as so wholly positive—as such an antidote to the plethora of deleterious systems of healing then available—it is necessary to situate Christian Science in the context of the health reform movements and alternative medical practices that proliferated during the nineteenth century.<sup>107</sup>

Many of the health reform movements, like Christian Science, variously conflated ideas about morality and physical health, used scientific or pseudo-scientific discourse, and had large numbers of women as constituents.<sup>108</sup> Almost a third of the members of the American Physiological Society, for example, were women. This organization’s mission was to foster health by teaching physiology, and it adopted resolutions specifically giving women power through a symbolic role as someone capable of moral influence or uplift:

*Resolved.* That woman in her character as wife and mother is only second to the Deity in the influence she exerts on the physical, the intellectual, and the moral interests of the human race, and that her education should be adapted to qualify her in the highest degree to cherish those interests in the wisest and best manner. (Morantz 158)

Eddy exploits this widespread reformist emphasis on the role of women as second only to the Deity, while at the same time critiquing the materialistic approaches of such movements and setting herself apart from them. Many advocates of the health reform movement embraced treatments and techniques such as the water cure, the Graham diet, the rest cure, and so on, and Eddy threads references to these alternative medical

practices throughout *Science and Health*, writing sarcastically of the water cure, for instance:

We hear it said: "I exercise daily in the open air. I take cold baths, in order to overcome a predisposition to take cold; and yet I have continual colds, catarrh, and cough." Such admissions ought to open people's eyes to the inefficacy of material hygiene, and induce sufferers to look in other directions for cause and cure. (220)

Eddy cites her competition throughout her texts, only to contrast her own program to the variety of alternatives and position herself as smarter, more effective, and more authoritative. Thus, while many of the reform movements gave women a figurehead role as being closer to God and able therefore to influence men through roles of wife and mother, Eddy uses this same ideology of superior feminine spirituality to assert her own religious, intellectual, scientific, and practical superiority. She positions herself as a competent religious authority (rather than a wife or a mother), for example, when she compares herself to a male clergyman who "adopted a diet of bread and water to increase his spirituality." His health failed and he gave his material method up, she writes, advising others "never to try dietics *for* growth in grace" (220). In this way her text constantly cites and dismisses others, trumping them as Franklin's *Autobiography* trumps the minor figures it calls forth and removes, relying on exteriorized negative examples to make its own positive claims. While Eddy cites and derides numerous alternative and orthodox spiritual and medical programs, however, she takes special pains to deride the alternative medical practice called mesmerism or animal magnetism, perhaps because it was most often confused with her system.

Mesmerism had been popular during the antebellum period, but it had garnered a great deal of negative attention by the time of the first edition of *Science and Health*, which includes a whole chapter devoted to the system. Eddy had been accused of being a mesmerist, but she also used the charge herself as an epithet to describe former partners and students who strayed from her system.<sup>109</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, the figure of the mesmerized subject had become ubiquitous. If the dynamic between an entranced, hypnotized mesmeric subject seemingly at the effect of the nefarious will of a despotic, trespassing, and predatory mesmerizer was a terrifying image for many Americans—including Eddy—it also provided her with a major metaphor to describe the dangers of not adhering to her theological and healing system.<sup>110</sup> Despite her condemnation of mesmerism and her disavowal of any link between it and her own theological system, Eddy's articulation of Christian Science is bound up with the idea of mesmerism—so much so that she can hardly define herself without recourse to it, cannot measure where she is without situating herself in relation to it. Mesmerism serves as the trope through which Eddy can establish her own program, and one could almost say that she stylizes Christian Science as everything that mesmerism is not.

Franz Anton Mesmer, a German doctor, first introduced animal magnetism, which later was called “mesmerism” in his name. His system involved the manipulation of magnetic fluids in patients’ bodies; he experimented with and documented cures involving the use of magnets, physical touch, and hydrotherapy. In 1784, the French government conducted an investigation of his theories and techniques after he had relocated to Paris and had begun instructing other doctors in his fledgling system. Benjamin Franklin was on the commission that found in 1784 that there was “no proof of the existence of the animal magnetic fluid” and that whatever effects one could observe from the therapy were the result of “the power of the imagination” (*Science and Health* 100–101).<sup>111</sup> Despite this critique and other attempts to publicly discredit the method, it morphed and flourished in the hands of various disciples and teachers and became popular in the United States, especially in the Northeast. Though Mesmer had not introduced techniques such as hypnotism and displays of clairvoyant powers, these became key features in the showy demonstrations of the itinerant mesmerizers traveling up and down the Eastern seaboard during the antebellum period of Eddy’s youth and young adulthood. After the Civil War, various alternative medicines and religions such as Spiritualism, Harmonialism, and Mental Mind Cure<sup>112</sup> would appropriate some of the features of mesmerism, and Eddy’s system arose in the context of these competing systems.<sup>113</sup> She uses the dynamic of a hypnotized or entranced mesmeric subject under the nefarious power of a Svengali-like figure to describe the deceptive power of the unreality of material existence. Eddy deliberately invokes the negative associations the public by now had of mesmerism in order to highlight what she sees as the totally positive and benevolent aspects of her system and her own conception of the divine. She ritually conjures up, then dismisses, the alternative program, authorizing Christian Science by way of contrast.

In “Animal Magnetism Unmasked,” a chapter of *Science and Health*, Eddy derides mesmerism as being unscientific, and she engages in a polyvocal discourse to simultaneously appropriate the jargon and authority of the medical and scientific community’s condemnation of this once popular therapeutic system, and to assert the superiority of her own theological standpoint.<sup>114</sup> She includes in her critique the French commission’s language dismissing animal magnetism as “one more fact to be recorded in the history of the errors of the human mind, and an important experiment upon the power of the imagination” (101). But she also appropriates this language to build her own metaphysical ontology in which “the power of the imagination” and the false beliefs of outmoded religions and misguided, bumbling physicians could actually make people sick.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, the language of the commission’s condemnation of mesmerism and her own articulation of her methods seem uncannily similar, as if Eddy’s theory arose in the wake of not only her own criticisms of the theological, medical, and scientific institutions of her day, but in response, as well, to their own criticisms of one another. The commission’s phrase “the history of the errors of the human mind” recalls the proto-psychological aspect of Christian Science, the part of her theology that is suspicious

about “belief” (more on this later) and sees the human mind as a source of both “error” and healing. Eddy builds on this idea and emphasizes as well the delusory nature or “unscientific” understandings of the relationship between spirit, body, and mind:

If animal magnetism seems to alleviate or to cure disease, this appearance is deceptive, since error cannot remove the effects of error. Discomfort under error is preferable to comfort. In no instance is the effect of animal magnetism, recently called hypnotism, other than the effect of illusion. Any seeming benefit derived from it is proportional to one’s faith in esoteric magic.

Animal magnetism has no scientific foundation, for God governs all that is real, harmonious, and eternal, and His power is neither animal nor human. Its basis being a belief and this belief animal, in Science animal magnetism, mesmerism, or hypnotism is a mere negation, possessing neither intelligence, power, nor reality, and in sense it is an unreal concept of the so-called mortal mind.

There is but one real attraction, that of Spirit. The pointing of the needle to the pole symbolizes this all-embracing power or the attraction of God, divine Mind. (101–102)

Eddy here appropriates the language of orthodox medicine—which was actively consolidating its power in part through debunking as quackery, superstition, or “magic” anything not aligned with its methods and teachings—and she echoes its critique of alternative methods such as mesmerism by calling them “unscientific.”<sup>116</sup> And yet she asserts that true science would acknowledge that “God governs all that is real, harmonious, and eternal,” claiming for her own program the use of the term “science.” Her focus on the “seeming” benefits and illusory effects sometimes produced by mesmerism enables a critique not simply leveled at the fringe medical practice, therefore, but one pointed more generally at an entire system of *materia medica* as well (including more orthodox medicine). Just as beliefs or a powerful imagination could be observed sometimes to fake a mesmeric cure, she argues, so too could these mental states create an “erroneous” idea of illness or disease in the mind of the patient in the first place. Her system thus stresses the relationship between mental states and bodily experience of illness or wellness; even as she asserts the unreality of matter and material existence, she acknowledges the way that their “acts” or imaginary effects can be convincing. In asserting that “error cannot remove the effects of error,” she simultaneously names as “error” both the belief in the illness and the imaginary effects of the mesmeric or even the orthodox medical cure. Her method, she asserts, is more efficacious because it advocates the reality of God’s power and punctures belief in human powers or “mesmerizers” of every kind, removing not only the “effects” of erroneous beliefs, but their cause as well.

In her “Genesis” chapter of *Science and Health*, Eddy specifically highlights the negative associations of mesmerism with mind control and loss of individual agency, and she uses the trope of the mesmerized subject to launch her critique of materiality. She turns the familiar association of mesmerizer with male seducer and dominator on its head, however, and uses the language of her time to radically deconstruct the creation story responsible for providing a biblical justification for gender hierarchy. She critiques Genesis 2, looking specifically at the controversial moment in which Eve was said to have been made from Adam’s rib:

*Genesis* ii. 21,22. And the Lord God [Jehovah, Yawah] caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; and the rib, which the Lord God [Jehovah] had taken from man, made He a woman, and brought her unto the man. (528)

She follows her citation of the Bible passage with her own reading of the story:

Here falsity, error, credits Truth, God with inducing a sleep or hypnotic state in Adam in order to perform a surgical operation on him and thereby create woman. This is the first record of magnetism. Beginning creation with darkness instead of light,—materially rather than spiritually,—error now simulates the work of Truth, mocking Love and declaring what great things error has done. Beholding the creations of his own dream and calling them real and God-given, Adam—*alias* error—gives them names. Afterwards he is supposed to become the basis of the creation of woman and of his own kind, calling them *mankind*,—that is, a kind of man. (528)

Eddy here invokes her previous discussion in “Animal Magnetism Unmasked” and uses mesmerism as the major metaphor for the reproduction of “error” and as a description of the way that erroneous material ideas can simulate spiritual truths. Eddy presents Adam, the original man, as the mesmerized subject of an erroneous understanding of God in that he beholds “the creations of his own dream” and calls them “real and God-given.” The supposed birth of Eve from Adam’s rib is the “first record of mesmerism,” she states, having already established that mesmerism is synonymous with delusion. In her theological system, God cannot be a kind of “mesmerizer” who manufactures showy spectacles of unreality masquerading for the real. She sees the idea of Eve coming from Adam rather than God as a foundational error in that it gives rise not only to a belief in the power of man (or materiality) over deity, but to a belief in the divinity of the fictitiously gendered male as well.

Eddy emphasizes that God, not Adam, created “man” or “mankind,” and asserts her own understanding of gender drawn from Genesis 1. If Adam erroneously appropriates the power of God’s creativity and claims to name God’s creations and give

birth to a woman, Eddy here asserts the power of her own analysis over that idea, renaming Adam as “Error.” If Adam, “*alias* Error,” she asserts, is merely one of God’s creations like all others—an idea and a reflection or image of a non-anthropomorphic deity—then the hierarchy of man over woman is rendered fictitious, and the reproduction of such a fiction, the reiteration and repetition of a mythology of two genders, is punctured as part of illusory materiality. In a glossary at the back of her text, Eddy parses the name “Adam” as:

a product of nothing as the mimicry of something; an unreality as opposed to the great reality of spiritual existence and creation; a so-called man . . . the opposer of Truth, termed error; Life’s counterfeit, which ultimates in death; the opposite of Love, called hate. (580)

Eddy conjures up the negativity of the idea of a mesmerized subject under the control of another human being and uses it to distinguish her idea of a benevolent, feminized God from the more masculine, punishing God of the Calvinist tradition. She suggests that those unable to grasp the reality of her image of divinity and her method of healing are in a position like that of Adam, in that they are entranced by a system of illusory beliefs that lead to death. Adam, she writes, succumbs to an idea of deity that is “nothing,” and that notion of deity bolsters masculine authorities who merely engage in a “mimicry of something.”

Eddy uses the image of procreation offered in Genesis 1.12 to establish a vision of gender and sexuality as social constructs, as products of ideology vulnerable to counterfeit claims like that of Adam’s to have given birth through his rib. She offers a surprising reading of the lines: “And the earth brought forth grass, and herb yielding seed after his kind, and the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in itself, after his kind: and God saw that it was good (508).” Her gloss of the quote argues for gender as a social construct, rather than a biological essence, and she uses that idea to describe a kind of non-heteronormative sexuality:

God determines the gender of His own ideas. Gender is mental, not material. The seed within itself is the pure thought emanating from divine Mind. The feminine gender is not yet expressed in the text. *Gender* means simply *kind* or *sort*, and does not necessarily refer either to masculinity or femininity. The word is not confined to sexuality, and grammars always recognize a neuter gender, neither male nor female. The Mind or intelligence of production names the female gender last in the ascending order of creation. The intelligent individual idea, be it male or female, rising from the lesser to the greater, unfolds the infinitude of Love. (508)

Eddy revises the conventional hierarchy of gender subordination, asserting that if God names “the female gender last in the ascending order of creation,” it is only because ideas



must rise “from the lesser to the greater.” As it has elsewhere in her text, Eddy’s conception of a divinity here partakes of both masculine and feminine qualities—combining the stereotypically masculine “Mind or intelligence” with the stereotypically feminine quality of possessing an “infinite of Love.” But both men and women are equally capable, she asserts, of being “intelligent, individual” ideas of God. Since God is the all-intelligent Mind, and all life forms are “ideas” of God, she argues, their particular genders—or kinds or sorts—are mental, not material constructs.

On one hand, since for Eddy spirit is real and matter is unreal or erroneous, it follows in her formulation that gender is a kind of man-made construction—attributable to the deluded Adam and his heirs. This idea of the unreality of gender has certain echoes in the social constructionism of recent gender theorists and feminist philosophers, much of which is grounded in linguistics and psychoanalysis, in which the body is read as a discursive or textual site.<sup>117</sup> Read this way, Eddy’s phrase “gender is mental, not material” means that both the body and gender are products of erroneous human ideology, an ideology that her system seeks to resignify for the benefit of both spiritual and physical health. However, she also figures gender as being a “mental” construction not of man but of God the idea producer, and as such she could be seen as attributing to gender a kind of essential, God-given quality.

One could therefore read the phrase “God determines the gender of his own ideas” as meaning, contrary to my gloss above, that gender is in fact a God-given, spiritual essence rather than a delusory, man-made construction. Some confusion centers on Eddy’s use of the term “mental” here, as she clearly associates it with a non-human, non-corporeal quality of the “divine Mind.” If “gender is mental, not material,” she suggests, then gender consists of particular qualities that are God-given, and these qualities will be determined by none other than her feminized divine. The idea of Adam creating a female version of himself is thus laughable. In other words, gender is “mental” but the “mind” she valorizes here is non-human. Whether gender is a human construct or an idea of God for Eddy, however, it is significant that she again asserts the notion of a third term here—a neuter gender—and she associates a transgressive kind of subjective and bodily freedom with the possibility of a “kind or a sort” not strictly aligned with either the masculine or the feminine pole in a binary gender system. Whether neuter, masculine, or feminine, she asserts,—wherever we are on the gender continuum—we are all emanations of “divine Mind.” For Eddy the “pure thought” of God—this most intelligent of thinkers—makes our illusory ideas about men, women, and bodies seem insignificant.

The utopian propensities of Eddy’s project are clear in the passage above, in that she envisions a world in which gender distinctions not only don’t matter but also aren’t registered as real. She goes further, however, when she asserts that God creates human life spiritually, via individuals rather than via heterosexual contact. Her vision of a genderless principle of love multiplying individuals as an extension of divine thought

eliminates the need for heterosexual contact in human procreation. Like “the tree yielding fruit, whose seed was in it,” the sufficiently enlightened human being attains a radical kind of self-sufficiency based upon dependence on God. If each individual contains “the seed within itself” already, the whole system of heterosexuality proves illusory, unnecessary, a convenient “allegory” to support a patriarchal dream of erroneous power that operates through its mesmerizing effects. “Did God at first create one man unaided,—that is, Adam,—but afterwards require the union of the two sexes in order to create the rest of the human family? No! God makes and governs all,” she writes (531–532).

### **The Status of Belief**

In calling attention to the false beliefs associated with gender and sexuality, Eddy’s nineteenth-century philosophy and theology bear remarkable similarities to the social constructionist strain in the work of more recent gender theorists and feminist philosophers. Judith Butler, for example, argues that there is an illusory quality to the “abiding gendered self,” and she sees gender as a series of acts that merely present an “*appearance of substance*.” Like Eddy, Butler stresses the idea of gender as a compelling fiction in which “entranced” actors perform and promote error through their own erroneous beliefs:

Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the ideas of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis. The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness. The historical possibilities materialized through various corporeal styles are nothing other than those punitively regulated cultural fictions that are alternately embodied and disguised under duress. (“Performative Acts” 405)

Eddy’s ontology shares with Butler’s theory a suspicion about the category of belief, and both writers stress the way that fictitious beliefs about gender can produce material effects, illusory dreams of reality that are systemic and constitute embodied subjects.

In appropriating the figure of Adam as a trope for the ultimate mesmerized subject, deluded by materiality and erroneously imputing to himself the powers of God, Eddy surely draws upon and reifies the gender norms of her day, but she does so in order to radically undo them. She specifically codes the “error” of materiality as masculine, and

she associates femininity with an etherealized spirituality. However, she uses this etherealized feminine spiritual standpoint to enable a critique that usurps the masculine role and performs a female subjectivity with access to masculine power in the form of reason and intelligence, intervening in the patriarchal institutions of her day and critiquing their authority, and positing her own ideas about God and gender to counter the debilitating and limiting conceptions she encounters. Thus, she works within her own narrow “grid of intelligibility” to resignify key terms and create a new understanding of gender and female subjectivity. This reformulation of a familiar narrative, and her use of it to enact a theological system with practical implications for female embodiment, is bolstered by her conception of a feminized divine, a particular conception of God that serves not only as a mirror for her own transgressive subjectivity but as a structural support for a reconfiguration of the relationship between bodily existence and states of consciousness.

Eddy’s deconstruction of the erroneous beliefs structuring the sex-gender matrix, however, is part of her wider project of dismantling illusory material existence, though she does code matter as masculine. Eddy wants more than to simply dismantle false beliefs about gender and sexuality; she wants to dismantle all erroneous beliefs that lead to death. In seeking to dismantle a belief in the primacy of material existence, and inaugurate an “abiding” relationship to the realm of spirit, Eddy’s system puts forth absolute affirmativeness, absolute infinitude, and envisions radical possibilities for embodiment and subjectivity. Her concern is with the limiting conceptions that in her lifetime made life less livable in general and made death such a preoccupation. She connects Adam’s “dream,” his erroneous belief in a binary system of genders, to an entire “history of error” in which the self is assumed to be material. “The order of this allegory [in Genesis 2]—the belief that everything springs from dust instead of from Deity—has been maintained in all the subsequent forms of belief. This is the error,—that mortal man starts materially, that non-intelligence becomes intelligence, that mind and soul are both right and wrong” (*Science and Health* 530–531). In her typically sweeping fashion, Eddy eschews “all the subsequent forms of belief” that human beings might hold as being erroneous in that they are predicated on the “dream narrative” of a binary gender system that a mesmerized subject concocts to aggrandize himself. Such an absolute statement acknowledges the way that erroneous or outmoded beliefs can constitute reality—or one’s experience of reality—through “maintaining” other beliefs.

Eddy derides the category of belief in general, for its reliance on materiality:

Belief is less than understanding. Belief involves theories of material hearing, sight, touch, taste, and smell, termed the five senses. The appetites and passions, sin, sickness, and death, follow in the train of this error of a belief in intelligent matter. (*Science and Health* 526)

The greatest error for Eddy is “this error of a belief in intelligent matter.” Belief is a too-easy “mental state,” she insists, and “[t] here is danger in this mental state called belief” (*Retrospection* 54). She proposes, instead, the unfolding of a spiritual understanding of the divine intelligence of her feminized divine, a more “scientific” process she contrasts with the lulling effects of prayer, or the unenlightened position of blind faith. “Millions are believing in God, or good, without bearing the fruits of goodness, not giving reached its Science” (*Retrospection* 54).

If, as Butler suggests, the fiction of gender resides in “one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness,” then surely the project of “undoing gender” (or undoing the norms, regulations, and restrictive conceptions of gender) necessitates a rethinking of the concept of belief itself. If the entrancing, mesmerizing, hypnotic effects of beliefs can create fictions that constitute gendered subjects and gendered bodies, how can a material transformation take place without intervening at the level of belief? How can one undo gender insubordination without undoing beliefs that lead to gender insubordination in the first place? In positing a system in which a belief in a feminized divine structures an “undoing” of a whole host of inherited, restrictive beliefs, Eddy presents a complex relationship to the concept of belief that merits further attention. Her production of an enabling belief structurally supports the dismantling of debilitating beliefs; belief becomes a strategic device to intervene at the level of the symbolic. In jettisoning the limited female body from the category of reality, Eddy expunges as well all the entrancing fictions that would keep her from living a more livable life. And a livable life is surely a reality worth having.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect*. “As far as I can tell, the negative affects (understood as mobile rather than endogenous forces) are identical with demons and or deadly sins—the earliest incarnations of the idea of negative affects in the West. The seven deadly sins are not acts. They are affects: pride, sloth, envy, lust, anger, gluttony, avarice. Early Christian writings, like rabbinical writings, speak of the demon of despair and the demon of shame” (21).

<sup>2</sup> The term “structures of feeling” comes from Raymond Williams. See *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Brennan (4-6) and Gregg and Seigworth, “An Inventory of Shimmers” (2-3).

<sup>4</sup> The accusations appeared within days of one another, in *The Oracle* on April 25, 1792, and in *The Star* on April 27. In the editions following (5–9), Vassa begins the narrative with a “Letter to the Reader” that directly takes up the charges of the “invidious falsehood,” and he includes a number of letters from prominent people testifying to his own good character, his Africanness, and to the veracity of his autobiographical narrative (237–238). In this way, Vassa’s text vastly complicates the progress narrative Robert Stepto charts for the life stories of ex-slaves, a trajectory in which authenticating documents initially dominate the narrator’s voice, giving it an “*eclectic narrative form*” that is more dialectical than that of the later ex-slave narratives, which resist this authenticating apparatus and achieve a more unified narrative form (4). Stepto does not mention Vassa’s text, and his schema of slave narratives begins in the nineteenth century. But the history of Vassa’s authenticating documents suggests that the disruption in the unified narrative voice for the eclectic inclusion of other voices functioned as a response to reader expectations and accusations, not necessarily as a result of a lack of skill or a lack of authorial control. Indeed, in Stepto’s schema of “first phase” narratives, “[t]he publisher or editor, far more than the former slave, assembles and manipulates the authenticating machinery and seems to act on the premise that there is a direct correlation between the quantity of documents or texts assembled and the readership’s acceptance of the text as a whole” (7). The key difference in *The Interesting Narrative* is that not only does the author assemble and manipulate the authenticating documents, but he also tells the reader he is doing so—a self-reflexive move that is key to my argument. I would add that in presenting documents authenticating himself and establishing his credibility as a person, the ex-slave narrator is in a sense reproducing and authenticating the vital statistics of slavery’s operations, structurally reproducing the kinds of policing moves that he was subjected to during slavery. Vassa reproduces a number of these documents within the body of the text of his narrative, which not only authenticate him, but also show his own skillful mastery of the codes and conditions of the dominant culture. About to bid Montserrat “adieu” en route to London, for example, the protagonist Equiano requests “a certificate of my behaviour while in [the] service” of Robert King, his former master. Vassa includes the letter in his text. The letter, framed by the character’s request for it and the author’s inclusion of it, stands as evidence of the way in which the freed slave was still dependent upon the good graces of former masters to make his way. King says that Gustavas Vassa “was my slave for upwards of three years, during which he has always behaved himself well” (163).

<sup>5</sup> Carretta’s evidence for the claim of a Carolinian birth rests on the presence of two documents, a 1759 parish baptismal certificate and a 1773 ship muster. Carretta first described and discussed the documents in the footnotes of the Penguin edition of *The Interesting Narrative* in 1995, but no real notice was made of them. In 1999, he spelled out what he saw as the implications of the documents in *Slavery and Abolition*. In 2005, Carretta’s full-length biography *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* reiterated the claims that the African identity was invented, dramatically challenging anyone who still views Equiano as African to accept as theirs the “burden of proof” in light of the conflicting evidence (xv). This challenge, mitigated somewhat by Carretta’s own statement that “We will probably never know the truth about the author’s birth and upbringing” further publicized the controversy and engendered more critical discussion (xv). For the best problematization of Carretta’s project and an excellent contextualizing analysis of the two

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documents in question, see Cathy N. Davidson's 2006 article "Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself." For a historical examination of the African parts of the narrative in light of Carretta's claims, see Alexander X. Byrd, "Eboe, Country, Nation, and Gustavus Vassa's *Interesting Narrative*." Of the many responses and rejoinders to Carretta, see also Paul E. Lovejoy's "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African" in *Slavery and Abolition*. Carretta published a full response to Lovejoy the following year in *Slavery and Abolition*.

<sup>6</sup> Early African American critics like Gates and Constanza placed Vassa's text at the beginning of an African American tradition of slave narratives. Critics of African culture later focused on the text as an early example of Ibo print literature. See for example, Samuels "Disguised Voice." See Byrd for a more recent reconsideration of the African origins of this text, one that complicates the earlier origin-narrative considerably. More recently, British literary critics have begun to emphasize the text's traffic in British rhetorical forms and discourse (Potkay "History, Oratory, and God"; Caldwell "Talking Too Much English"). Doyle provides a useful summary of this criticism in *Freedom's Empire*, 184–186.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Cathy N. Davidson notes the resemblance between *The Interesting Narrative* and eighteenth-century fiction (both British and American), but states that it also fits "the generic conventions of many autobiographies of the time . . . in its novelistic emphasis on self-creation" (19). Davidson, however, also calls the text a trauma narrative (21). Many critics have written about the way Vassa is indebted to Defoe, drawing upon *Robinson Crusoe*, in particular. See Aramavudan 275–281; Doyle *Freedom's Empire* and "Toward a Philosophy"; and Murphy, "Olaudah Equiano, Accidental Tourist."

<sup>8</sup> Here I am relying on the work of Mary Louise Pratt. Pratt's term "autoethnography" describes the complex mix of genres and voices involved when the presumed Other of Western ethnographical writing constructs a text "in response to or in dialogue with" the metropolitan discourses and racist representations that have been used to oppress and colonize them in the first place. Autoethnographies seriously undermine notions of authenticity and truth, even while they strive to represent the truth about a general experience. As Pratt puts it: "Autoethnographic texts are not, then, what are usually thought of as 'authentic' or autochthonous forms of self-representation," for they are concerned with "talking back" to the forms of discourse that have subjugated their narrators, even as the narrators rely upon those discourses to enter the grid of intelligibility in the first place (7).

<sup>9</sup> I use the term "system of self" here to describe an autobiographical text that seeks to sway its reader toward acceptance of a wider ideological project. It does this by offering readers concrete methods of self-transformation, in order to both emulate the idealized representative figured in the narrative and to embody the abstract ideals presented. For a fuller discussion of my concept of systems of self, see the Introduction.

<sup>10</sup> For a classic discussion of the idea of "fictions of self" see Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*.

<sup>11</sup> The rise in the eighteenth century, particularly in Scotland, of the "moderate" school in preaching stressed a rational approach to religion and "denounced as enthusiasm and fanaticism" the expression of a sense of "earnestness in religion" that went beyond duty (Blaikie 240).

<sup>12</sup> Potkay locates the "secularization" of Equiano studies as beginning in 1984 with the publication of Houston Baker's influential *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, which offers a reading of the protagonist's economic savvy. In Baker's argument, "having been reduced to property by a commercial deportation [Equiano] decides during his West Indian captivity that neither sentiment nor spiritual sympathies can earn his liberation. He realizes, in effect, that only the acquisition of property will enable him to alter his designated status as *property*" (quoted in Potkay "History, Oratory, and God" 609). According to Potkay, such readings ignore the "Christian claims" of the text, distorting it in a "wholly secular direction" (608). Similarly, Potkay derides Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 1988 discussion of Equiano in *The Signifying Monkey* for selectively editing out religious contexts and exhibiting a "disdain for Christian ideology" (610, 611). Despite the clear trajectory of a conversion narrative in the structure of the text, Baker and Gates were able to take Equiano studies in a wholly "secular direction," in my opinion, simply because there *are* secular themes running throughout the text. To ignore the secular contexts in *The*

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*Interesting Narrative* would be to miss the richness of the protagonist's engagement with an emerging capitalist market, his myriad negotiations with the slave trade itself, his involvement with political organizations for abolition, and government-sponsored projects such as the colony at Sierra Leone. As I will argue throughout this chapter, the religious and secular themes in the text must be pursued in tandem; to stress one at the expense of the other is to oversimplify the richness of the text, but it also reinforces a false binary of religious/secular that distorts the ways these terms mutually inform one another in productive ways. Thinking outside that binary will be one goal of the chapter.

<sup>13</sup> Mimicry as a strategy of postcolonial resistance comes into focus in the work of Homi K. Bhabha, in *Nation and Narration* and *The Location of Culture*, and though Potkay does not mention him by name, he clearly singles out the poststructuralist jargon and the engagement with deconstruction and psychoanalysis for which Bhabha is widely known. On the idea of colonial subjects "talking back" to the dominant discourse through which they have been constructed, see Pratt.

<sup>14</sup> Potkay and Burr, for example, state in their Preface to *Black Atlantic Writers* that when abridging Equiano's narrative they omitted the portions detailing his life as a mariner and entrepreneur, because they see his "spiritual and intellectual development" as the "central unifying theme" of his autobiography (ix). See also Potkay's "History, Oratory, and God" in which he states that the narrator's "final home" is in Christianity (692). In this article, he compares *The Interesting Narrative* to Puritan autobiographies and argues that it follows the bible in its construction. Such a focus is enabled by ignoring the entrepreneurial and mariner passages, however, which I think is misleading. For other resonant examples of this line of thinking see Elrod (especially 409) and Orban.

<sup>15</sup> Two classic essays on the topic are Paul de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement" and Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?"

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, earnestness functions as a commodity in the eighteenth century, and in the slave subject in particular, in ways that bear consideration. Equiano's cosmopolitan identity has him trafficking in earnestness as a commodity; his sincerity is a quality that must be performed in order to affect his audience. Earnestness, like the category of "the African," is not a monolithic catch-all that we can throw Equiano into and settle the matter at once, especially for such a cosmopolite as Equiano, who was widely involved with seafaring subcultures and whose wide travels exposed him to different cultural conventions and norms, all of which guides his self-presentation as pious and sincere. To acknowledge such cosmopolitan investments and exposures, it seems to me, is not necessarily to debunk Equiano's sincerity, his actual piety, nor the authenticity of his African origins. It just allows one to examine his text as a sophisticated literary representation of selfhood, and to examine the way his autobiographical self-portrait partakes in the systems of self that constitute subjects and render them visible to others.

<sup>17</sup> Here I borrow from Hertha D. Sweet Wong, who asks "When a Native woman writes or speaks in the first-person singular, who else is crowded into that 'I'? Who are her relations? And is that speaking/writing subject a product of her Native culture(s) (as well as of the larger U.S. culture) or an invented figure of the female indigene commodified by the dominant culture?" (168) Wong's essay treats the relational identity of Native women, a very different matter than the identity of tribal Africans in the eighteenth century, and yet I find her questions useful for thinking about Vassa's text.

<sup>18</sup> This phrase is Nancy Ruttenberg's, who uses it to describe the Reverend George Whitefield. In Ruttenberg's excellent analysis of Whitefield's persona and his *oeuvre*, the topos of uncontainability, which is also the topos of itinerancy, "movitated not only his self-fashioning but also his theology and his evangelism" (437).

<sup>19</sup> For some recent considerations of secularism see Taylor *A Secular Age* and "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism," Warner et al. *Varieties of Secularism*, Jakobsen and Pellegrini, and Asad.

<sup>20</sup> Philippe Lejeune first articulated this concept in his "Le Pacte autobiographique" (1973). See Paul John Eakin's edited selection of Lejeune's work for an English translation of the essay, "The Autobiographical Pact."

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<sup>21</sup> Much of the seminal work on black autobiography focuses on African American autobiography. See for example Butterfield. On black autobiography and its connection to the slave narrative see Stepto (1–52) and Andrews.

<sup>22</sup> Harriet Jacobs, for example, changed names to protect herself and the family she left behind once she escaped to the north. For many years, her pseudonym “Linda Brent” was thought to refer to a white woman. Frederick Douglass refused to divulge the facts of his method of escape from slavery in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and he publicly criticized Henry Box Brown for unveiling his own innovative method in his 1849 autobiographical text, implying “that Brown had chosen to profit from his own ingenuity rather than share it with other slaves who could have possibly utilized a similar passage to freedom” (Gates ix). See Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s Forward to *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002), vii–x.

<sup>23</sup> Reason is a category that whites have appropriated for themselves. As Franz Fanon writes: “Reason was confident of victory on every level . . . when I was there, it was not; when it was there, I was no longer” (quoted in Gordon 17).

<sup>24</sup> For more on this custom, see Carretta’s notes to the Penguin edition, pp. 252–253.

<sup>25</sup> Those who refer to the author of *The Interesting Narrative* as Gustavus Vassa tend to be historians. See, for example, Byrd and Samuels. Given Carretta’s claim that a major part of *The Interesting Narrative* was “invented,” and cannot be considered “historically accurate non-fiction” it is odd to me that his full-length biography consistently refers to its subject as Equiano. Carretta undermines his own argument that Equiano is the invented African name of a Carolinian ex-slave by using the term “Equiano” to refer to the historical figure known as Vassa. Many critics have discussed the complicated issue of naming in this text and of the implications of the title page in particular. See especially Casmier-Paz, Davidson (44–46), Sidbury 93–94, and Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans* (244–245).

<sup>26</sup> Throughout this chapter I will use the name “Oldaudah Equiano” to refer to the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative, but I will use the name “Gustavus Vassa” to designate the historical figure and the author of *The Interesting Narrative*.

<sup>27</sup> For an extended discussion of naming in the slave narrative see Casmier-Paz, who also discusses the autobiographical pact and the resistance of fugitive slave narratives to autobiographical theory. Casmier-Paz usefully focuses on the Derridean idea of trace in ways that have informed this chapter; however, I do not agree with the argument that seeking “the representational function” of a slave narrative is “an impossibility which comes with following writing’s traces to a mythology of presence” (219). While my own approach obviously differs from historical researchers like Carretta and Jean Fagin Yellin (whom Casmier-Paz cites), I acknowledge and appreciate the important work that authentication can do in terms of literary reception, canonization, and the historicization of autobiographical texts. Indeed, the allegation that ex-slaves could not possibly have produced such a literary text as Jacobs’s were effectively silenced once Yellin proved, using a cache of letters hidden in the archive, that Jacob had authored the narrative. See Yellin’s “Introduction” for more details about the reception history of Jacobs’s slave narrative.

<sup>29</sup> The theory of the double consciousness is best articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, but it has been productively explored as well by Franz Fanon.

<sup>30</sup> Equiano (the literary figure) tells us in detail about the process of coming to self-ownership by trading in commodities, even while he was a commodity himself. For example, he includes his manumission papers in his text (137). The bequeathal of freedom to Gustavus Vassa by Robert King for the sum of seventy pounds in 1766 in Montserrat itself is an act which complicates the idea of self-ownership, for though Vasa as an agent paid the sum, King is the “lord and master over the aforesaid Gustavus Vasa” whose act of “giving, granting and releasing unto him . . . all right, title, dominion, sovereignty, and property” is what gives the ex-slave his freedom (137).

<sup>31</sup> Another example of Vassa’s self-commodification is his success eliciting subscriptions on the book tour. See John Bugg’s article “Oldaudah and the Public Book Tour,” *PMLA* (October 2006).



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<sup>32</sup> There is in fact a popular eighteenth-century subgenre of the novel, called the “it-narrative,” in which inanimate objects or animals serve as the central characters. For an overview of the it narrative see the essays collected in Mark Blackwell’s critical anthology *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> The term “individual” has many valences, and during Vassa’s lifetime it was undergoing a transition from its former meaning “indivisible” (i.e., connected to others) to its more current meaning as distinct from others. In the eighteenth century, according to Raymond Williams, “a crucial shift in attitudes can be clearly seen in uses of the word. . . . Increasingly the phrase ‘an individual’—a single example of a group—was joined and overtaken by ‘the individual’” a fundamental order of being” (*Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: Oxford UP, 1983, 163).

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, British audiences identified with this narrator sufficiently that the *Interesting Narrative* went through nine editions in five years. In North America, the reception was different. See Ito for an interesting discussion of the lackluster reception of the first and only American edition in 1791. Comparing subscriber’s lists, Ito concludes that the narrative appealed primarily to American artisans for the ethos of industry and class mobility it embodies. In the face of impenetrable barriers between classes, and “the growing dominance of capitalist thinking” toward the end of the century, the artisan class lost interest in the text (92). It would take thirty years for an abolitionist movement strong enough to support such publications to thrive in North America.

<sup>35</sup> I am grateful to Rachel Faye Giraud who clarified this point for me.

<sup>36</sup> For an interesting discussion of whiteness as terrorizing Other, see bell hooks’ “Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination.” The essay appears in Ruth Frankenberg’s useful edited collection entitled *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 1997) pp. 165–179.

<sup>37</sup> This a neat reversal of the conventional white fear of cannibalism, depicted in eighteenth-century travel narratives. On travel narratives see Pratt.

<sup>38</sup> See Byrd for a nuanced discussion of the use of the term “countrymen” in *The Interesting Narrative*.

<sup>39</sup> Byrd convincingly argues for the slippery quality of the designation “Igbu.”

<sup>40</sup> Douglass clearly alludes to this passage in his famous mock-heroic ode to the ships that taunt the slave with a freedom he himself does not have.

<sup>41</sup> I want to be clear here that in putting terms like “African” or “black” in scare quotes I am not asserting that there is no such thing as racial or ethnic difference. Rather, I am highlighting here the way that such difference is socially constructed in this text in ways that are influenced by the historical, political, and social contexts of its production.

<sup>42</sup> See Orlando Patterson for the seminal discussion of social death among slave subjects.

<sup>43</sup> Vassa states that the sermon he attended was in Philadelphia, but Carretta’s research shows it most probably to have occurred in Savannah, Georgia, in February 1765. See Carretta’s notes to the 2003 Penguin edition, *TIN*, 277 (footnote 363).

<sup>44</sup> Vassa and Franklin’s respective descriptions of Whitefield preaching are uncannily similar, in fact. I discuss Franklin’s use of Whitefield’s performance of humility in chapter 2, “Benjamin Franklin’s Resentment.” Many critics have noted parallels between Equiano/Vassa’s narrative and Franklin’s *Autobiography*. See for example, Sidbury (90) and Carretta *Equiano the African*.

<sup>45</sup> Here, no doubt, Vassa takes a swipe at the so-called “moderate” school of rational religion that denounced “fervour and earnestness” in preaching. See Blaikie.

<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Vassa may have had grave differences with Whitefield on matters of ideas, given Whitefield’s support for slavery and the way he defended it as a kind of necessary evil. In a 1751 letter, for example, Whitefield defends the use of slave labor at his orphanage in Georgia, claiming that “hot countries cannot be cultivated without Negroes” (Coffey 99). Like the abolitionist Benezet, whose work he avidly read and cited in *The Interesting Narrative*, perhaps Vassa considered Whitefield’s message to be “mealy-mouthed”

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(Coffey 99). Coffey's history of the British evangelicals in relation to abolition, with some discussion of Black evangelical abolitionists, is useful on this score.

<sup>47</sup> Here I am drawing upon the work of Judith Butler, who in turn draws upon Maurice Merleau-Ponty's claim that the body is an historical idea. Butler's theory focuses on gender as "an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*," one "in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" ("Performative Acts" 402).

<sup>48</sup> For an excellent reading of *The Interesting Narrative* in terms of the tropes and themes of sentimental fiction, see Doyle *Freedom's Empire*, pp. 190–202

<sup>49</sup> As Cathy N. Davidson points out, "mortified" is one of the narrator's favorite words (20).

<sup>50</sup> For a nuanced discussion of the political efficacy of conversion see Gauri Viswanathan's *Outside the Fold*.

<sup>51</sup> Another narrative that describes Whitefield is the 1785 conversion narrative of John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black* (1785). (NY and London, Garland Publishing, 1978). In Marrant's text, however, Whitefield's performance is not emphasized over his message. Indeed, the young Marrant, who initially came to play music and disrupt the Reverend's sermon, is so struck with the power of Whitefield's words that he collapses. His collapse results in his conversion.

<sup>52</sup> Davidson also makes this point.

<sup>53</sup> In manuscript at the Library Company of Philadelphia. On line exhibition curated by James N. Green and Peter Stallybrass, 2006. <<http://www.librarycompany.org/BFWriter/images/large/1.10.jpg>>

<sup>54</sup> For Whitefield's biography and cultural context see Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*.

<sup>55</sup> For an extended analysis of Franklin's relationship to emerging print culture see Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America*, 73–97.

<sup>56</sup> Here I am indebted to Mitchell Breitwieser's important analysis of the negativity of Franklin's self-portrait in *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin: The Price of Representational Personality*. Breitwieser's foundational work enables my own reading of Franklin, which analyzes the implications of this negative self-model in further detail. Breitwieser also discusses Franklin's obsession with reputation in the epitaph (269) and analyzes the description of Whitefield's writing above (273).

<sup>57</sup> It is interesting to compare this gesture with the convention in slave narratives of framing the main autobiographical text with supporting letters by white people. Here, Franklin is urged by his equals to preserve his great reputation; in Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs the letters have more authority than the narratives themselves. They attest to the truth of the narrative, the character, honesty, and morals of the black autobiographical narrator whose humanity is not presumed, but must be argued for. I consider the implications of this difference further in the first chapter.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, G. Thomas Couser's work on the national importance of Franklin's persona, and the way that *The Autobiography* makes "a virtually explicit link between political and literary autonomy" and so thoroughly conflates individual/nation (*Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography*, 13). See also Couser's earlier work on Franklin, emphasizing its connection to the tradition of Puritan spiritual autobiography, even as it invents itself as a new form of self-narrative, the secular autobiography (*American Autobiography: The Prophetic Mode* 28-51)

<sup>59</sup> For a detailed discussion of the issue of self-interest in Franklin's *Autobiography*, see Glazenor.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Cantwell, for example, gave a Lyceum lecture with this basic message in Oxford, North Carolina. The Franklin Society published this lecture in 1867 (Mulford 424).

<sup>61</sup> For more on Levin and an analysis of this act of cultural appropriation see Sinkoff.

<sup>62</sup> I here thank Cynthia Scheinberg for providing anecdotal information about the use of Franklin's program via the Hebrew text *Moral Accounting* in synagogues and prisons in the U.S. today. On the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous see the anonymously authored *Pass it On: The Story of Bill Wilson and How the AA Message Reached the World*. On the use of autobiography within the literature and practice of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement see O'Reilly.

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<sup>63</sup> Here Foucault theorizes from within the space of the secularization thesis, a paradigm problematized recently by historians, anthropologists, and religious scholars. See, for example, Asad; Mahmood; Taylor. For a recent critical assessment of this thesis see Viswanathan “Secularism in the Frame of Heterodoxy.”

<sup>64</sup> Here the use of the word “live” derives from William James’s theorization about the viability of beliefs dependent upon cultural context. “Let us give the name *hypothesis* to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either *live* or *dead*. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to whom it is proposed” (“Will to Believe,” *Writings* 718).

<sup>65</sup> I have tried to make the distinction between the textual Franklin and the historical Franklin clear throughout, though the fact that the historical Franklin is so clearly delineated by the textual (particularly the autobiographical) portrait of him makes this problematic difficult to maneuver. As in all autobiography criticism, the distinction between narrator and character (though they may share a name) is crucial. While I may contextualize the autobiographical persona of Franklin at times with biographical detail, my reading is mostly concerned with the “coherent rhetorical project” of Franklin’s work, rather than an assertion of the truth about a person.

<sup>66</sup> I allude, of course, to Sianne Ngai’s theory of the negative emotions *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005).

<sup>67</sup> In the main, a brief description of *Cape Cod* has been appended to larger studies of Thoreau’s life or his work. More thorough treatments of *Cape Cod* include: Breitwieser “Henry David Thoreau”; Bridgman; Pinsky; Ryan Schneider; Brown.

<sup>68</sup> Critics who describe Cape Cod as “peculiar” include Lowell, Theroux and Pinsky.

<sup>69</sup> *Putnam’s Monthly* published three installments of the Cape Cod sketches in 1855 but, according to Robert D. Richardson Jr., they broke off publication “probably from uneasiness over the indelicate parts of ‘The Wellfleet Oysterman,’ . . . and the “anticipated problems with the author’s unwillingness to tone down any of these indelicate parts” (336). Paul Theroux, however, maintains that Thoreau himself broke off publication in response to excessive editorial changes demanded by *Putnam’s* editor George William Curtis, who felt that Thoreau was “belittling” Cape Codders and that his views on religion were “heretical” (xiii). Walter Harding states that the “real issue” was that Putnam’s complained they hadn’t realized Thoreau intended to publish the essays in book form, since they liked to publish their own anthologies of essays from their magazines (361).

<sup>70</sup> On the making of Thoreau’s reputation see Lawrence Buell, “Henry Thoreau Enters the American Canon.”

<sup>71</sup> Here I am referencing Lauren Berlant’s essay “Cruel Optimism.” I treat the formulation “cruel attachments” in much more detail later in the chapter.

<sup>72</sup> I am drawing here upon the language and ideas Michael Taussig offers in his essay “Terror as Usual: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of History,” from *The Nervous System*, 11–35.

<sup>73</sup> Amazingly, to my mind, some readers take the “light-hearted” tone to be the sum total of the net affect of *Cape Cod*. Walter Harding, for example, takes the narrator’s journalistic style at face value, calling it “simply a report” on the Cape and largely ignoring what it reports. Harding’s gloss is quoted on the back cover of the Princeton University Press edition: “*Cape Cod* is Thoreau’s sunniest, happiest book. It bubbles over with jokes, puns, tall tales, and genial good humor . . .” (361).

<sup>74</sup> For an early theorization of the black Atlantic see Gilroy. I am also indebted in this chapter to Baucom.

<sup>75</sup> See Chapter 2 for a complete discussion of Franklin’s experiment and its implications.

<sup>76</sup> Bridgman points out that while many critics view Thoreau’s ledgers as a parody of the Franklinian businessman, “who in his preoccupation with the material minutiae, allows the philosophic hour to slip away,” “. . . there is also an unmistakable earnestness” in his attention to account-keeping, for, like Franklin, “he wished to prove it literally possible to live comfortably at little cost” (77).

<sup>77</sup> An interesting contradiction however, is that in their anti-Puritanism both writers have seriously Puritanical worldviews. Bridgman argues that “Thoreau’s position was high Puritan. If the problem was

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that the nation was ‘ruined by luxury and heedless expense,’ then ‘the only cure’ Thoreau could conceive was ‘a rigid economy,’ ‘a stern and more than Spartan simplicity of life,’ together with an ‘elevation of purpose’” (83). On Puritanical elements running through Franklin see Breitwieser, *Cotton Mather and Benjamin Franklin*.

<sup>78</sup> Here my assertion is undercut a bit by the fact that Franklin clearly envisioned his life as a kind of a book, and his book as second life, amended and corrected by its author. Yet, I would argue that Franklin was much more concerned with aesthetics as a way to convey one’s reputation after one’s death and assure one’s legacy than he was interested in producing books that embodied aesthetic principles themselves. Thus, he is interested in aesthetic principles mostly insofar as they allow him to convey an essentially referential biographical mode. As Couser has pointed out, it is difficult to call Thoreau’s work biographical at all. Indeed Thoreau’s work, as I’m arguing here, thinks about aesthetics in ways that have political and ethical implications, but ultimately he is concerned less with creating models for others to follow than offering a stance that becomes motivational.

<sup>79</sup> I agree with Bridgman’s reading of the darkness in Thoreau, and I am indebted to his project on a number of levels. Where I differ, however, is in the tendency to notice in the work a reflection of the presumed psychological make-up of this historical person, and thus a sort of cause-and-effect relation between biography and the text. To Bridgman, Thoreau “was a deeply pessimistic man who could rarely bring himself to admit it . . . he had a hostile, punishing streak in him, manifested most vividly in his imagery . . .” (x). Bridgman also writes “until his death Thoreau harbored demons of anxiety and resentment that he tirelessly tried to rationalize but that would not be stilled” (23). While these statements may in fact be apt and correct as regards Thoreauvian biographical detail, my approach, as this chapter should make clear, is not to look to the text for traces of the historical person Thoreau, but rather to analyze the way that the text’s rendering of affective states, atmospheres, and moods bolsters a political critique and ethical position that reformulates the idea of the liberal subject. As such, the construction of an autobiographical “I” in Thoreau’s texts does social work and has tangible effects far beyond an expression of biographical representation.

<sup>80</sup> Here I am drawing on Sara Ahmed’s theorization of “Happy Objects” in *The Affect Theory Reader*.

<sup>81</sup> Mahmood uses the term “secular affect” in relation to the term “religious reason” in ways that are suggestive. I first heard a version of this paper in the conference “Is Critique Secular?” sponsored by The Townsend Center for the Humanities at University of California, Berkeley, February 2009. Several papers from the conference, including Mahmood’s appear in the publication *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

<sup>82</sup> The Anonymous review was published in July 1865 in both *The New Englander* and *The Yale Review*.

<sup>83</sup> For a consideration of the theatricality of the narrator’s stance in *Cape Cod* see Pinsky. Pinsky points out that the Lyceum Lecture circuit, where several of the first chapters were presented, was a kind of “secular pulpit;” “a repeated mode of Thoreau’s is the mock-sermon, almost a parody-sermon” (83).

<sup>84</sup> My concept of mimicry here draws upon Luce Irigaray’s discussion of mimicry as a feminist strategy in which “one must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it.” Mimicry thus makes “‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible” (76). See *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

<sup>85</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this chapter, one could also consider more overtly the implications of Thoreau’s *oeuvre* in relation to gender and sexuality along the lines of subject transformation I am tracing here. For queer readings of Thoreau and his work, see Warner “Thoreau’s Bottom;” Morris Kaplan.

<sup>86</sup> For such a dismissal, see Rosenblum.

<sup>87</sup> For many, of course, a “doubled consciousness” is not necessarily a choice but rather a condition imposed upon one by a dominant society that deems one outside of or marginal to the norms and qualities of the human. The classic theorization of this phenomenon is W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*.

<sup>88</sup> For a reading of the figure of the wrecker as analogous to the situation of the writer, see Breitwieser, “Henry David Thoreau and the Wrecks on Cape Cod.”

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<sup>89</sup> The letter, found in the valise of the Captain, reads: “Dr. Sir this will be the *Eternal Making* of us all, if not it will damn us forever” (qtd. in Breitwieser “Henry David Thoreau” 158).

<sup>90</sup> While Brown does not discuss this passage in particular, he makes a similar point in contrasting sentimentalized journalistic accounts of Margaret Fuller’s death with Thoreau’s unsentimental approach.

<sup>91</sup> For Freud, the uncanny works through a sense of familiarity and strangeness combined, as in the figure of the familiar stranger. He also suggests that there is no greater device for creating uncanny effects in literature than through creation of doubt about whether a figure is a human being or an automaton. See “The ‘Uncanny’” [1919], trans. James Strachey, 227.

<sup>92</sup> Critics who discuss the philanthropy sections of *Cape Cod* include Hallie, Brown, and Richardson.

<sup>93</sup> See Ahmed for a discussion affect as an atmosphere. On the contagiousness of affect see Massumi and Gibbs.

<sup>94</sup> For Butler’s discussion of the melancholia of gender see *Gender Trouble* (57–72). Butler also works with the concept of melancholia extensively in *The Psychic Life of Power* (132–150). My discussion of melancholia in this chapter is indebted to Baucom’s use of the concept in relation to the liberal subject in *Specters of the Atlantic*.

<sup>95</sup> On ungreivability, see Judith Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim*.

<sup>96</sup> On the history of this organization, which exists to this day, see the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts website: <<http://www.masslifesavingawards.com/history/>>. See also the discussion in Hallie (114–134). While Hallie bases his work on archival research conducted in the Humane Society archives, his documentation of those sources is casual, insofar as his book was written for a popular audience. The archives, deposited in the Massachusetts Historical Society, are unavailable to the public until 2020, so I was unable to follow his leads or check his sources.

<sup>97</sup> Brown cites the case of one Provincetown man who moved from a career as legislative representative, to state senator, to serving as an agent for the Boston board of underwriters, and finally to serving as the director of the Provincetown National Bank. He also served as an agent in the Massachusetts Humane Society “for about twenty-five years.” As Brown points out, members of the organization typically were invested in maintaining the status quo in which “the underwriting scandals, famines, and greed that drove trade and made the Humane Society’s houses necessary” flourished to the profit of its members (13).

<sup>98</sup> Thoreau was familiar with Turner’s work, and he read Ruskin’s *Modern Painters*. He writes in his journal on October 6, 1857: “I am disappointed in not finding it a more out-of-door book, for I had heard that such was its character, but its title might have warned me. He does not describe Nature as Nature, but as Turner painted her, and though the work betrays that he has given a close attention to Nature, it appears to have been with an artist’s and critic’s design. How much is written about Nature as somebody has portrayed her, how little about Nature as she is, and chiefly concerns is, i.e. how much prose, how little poetry!” (*Journal* 183).

<sup>99</sup> For my characterization of the “historical Eddy” here I draw on biographical as well as autobiographical sources, and distinguish this figure from the autobiographical persona of *Retrospection and Introspection*. My characterization of Eddy is most indebted to Gillian Gill’s splendid biography *Mary Baker Eddy*. Gill also includes in her appendix a helpful overview of the biographical tradition on Eddy, which for many years was polarized between sensational, muck-raking negative portrayals, or on the other hand, hagiographies by Christian Science apologists.

<sup>100</sup> A useful study of the self-effacement in Puritan spiritual narratives and Quaker journals is Daniel B. Shea Jr.’s *Spiritual Autobiography in Early America*. For a comparison of British and American Puritan conversion narratives see Patricia Caldwell’s *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*.

<sup>101</sup> An interesting article by Stephen J. Stein draws thematic and structural parallels between Eddy’s self-conception in this autobiographical text and the life of Jesus as narrated in the gospel narratives of the New Testament.

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<sup>102</sup> Eddy puts this phrase forth in her autobiography, and it has become an oft-quoted phrase in Christian Science literature. The claim suggests that Eddy did not read once she made her discovery of Christian Science, which doesn't seem likely. I read this claim, rather, as part of a pattern I see in Eddy's writing and in her self-presentation as a whole. She tends to revise what would otherwise be deficiencies or losses, and rhetorically turns them into authorizing claims, as she does in this self-fashioning gesture in which she eliminates the need for academic credentials by stylizing herself as the recipient of divine revelation. This move preempts a charge frequently leveled at her—that she hired ghostwriters to mask her poor education and near illiteracy, and that her best-selling text was a hoax or a fraud. In fact, she had an uneven education and, like most women in her time, did not go to college. But an analysis of her early work and her letters reveals that despite a tendency toward purple prose and sentimentality, she was not at all illiterate. See chapter 12 of Gill's *Mary Baker Eddy* for a discussion of the first edition of *Science and Health*, especially in regard to the charge that Eddy plagiarized the work of her former mentor Phineous Quimby. Gill argues persuasively that she did not.

<sup>103</sup> At a time when public speaking was relatively taboo for white, middle-class women, the concept of a spirit directing the words and ideas of an entranced female speaker made the transgression more palatable to many. See Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* for an analysis of the Spiritualist movement and the many women who worked as Spiritualist trance mediums—often lecturing in trance on issues such as women's rights—and who later became key figures in the Suffragist movement.

<sup>104</sup> I am grateful to Gillian Gill for suggesting the connection between the work of Eddy and Irigaray. As both a biographer of Eddy and the major English-language translator of Irigaray's work, Gill traces connections between *Science and Health* and Irigaray's writings on religion in a footnote to her *Mary Baker Eddy* (637n32).

<sup>105</sup> Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. In chapters 6 and 7 Hollywood offers incisive readings of the status of belief and the use of mysticism in Irigaray's work, which she situates in a larger project moving from Georges Bataille, to Simone de Beauvoir, to Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida.

<sup>106</sup> See Nina Baym's discussion of Eddy's use of "separate spheres" ideology in her chapter on religious women in *American Women of Letters and the Nineteenth-Century Sciences: Styles of Affiliation*.

<sup>107</sup> Catherine L. Albanese situates Christian Science, for example, among medical sectarian movements (hydropathy, Thomsonian herbalism, homeopathy, osteopathy, and chiropractic), mesmerism, and the Transcendentalists. See "Physic and Metaphysic in Nineteenth-Century America: Medical Sectarrians and Religious Healing."

<sup>108</sup> As Beryl Satter points out, Christian Science drew middle-class white women in disproportionate numbers. In 1890, 75% of professional Christian Science healers were women, and by 1910 the figure had risen to 89% (66 and 271n29).

<sup>109</sup> After a falling out with Richard Kennedy, her first business partner, Eddy believed that Kennedy practiced "malicious mesmerism" on her, and proved a threat to herself and her business. Kennedy's use of mesmeric techniques such as manipulation of the head and abdomen, and the induction of a trance state in his patients, became an issue in 1871 when Eddy, who had originally sanctioned such techniques, came to believe they were harmful. The partnership was dissolved when she pressured Kennedy to give them up and he refused. See Gill, *Mary Baker Eddy*, 202.

<sup>110</sup> The erotic implications of the relationship between the mesmerist therapist and patient were part of what contributed to the negative public impression of the technique. On this see Crabtree, Gill, and Winter.

<sup>111</sup> These quotes of the commission material are from Eddy's description of mesmerism in *Retrospection and Introspection* (100–101). Adam Crabtree discusses the various governmental commissions and their dismissal of Mesmer in *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*. For a general overview of mesmerism in the United States, including the various commissions, see Robert F. Fuller's *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls*. Alison Winter focuses on the use of mesmerism in nineteenth-century Britain in her excellent study *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian England* and

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uses medical archives to show how prevalent it once was as a credible system of treatment in some of the top medical schools and established medical journals in England.

<sup>112</sup> On Spiritualism see Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, and Bret E. Carroll, *Spiritualism in Antebellum America*. The term "Mental Mind Cure" was widely used by a number of practitioners both inside and outside of Christian Science circles. Beryl Satter's history of the New Thought Movement stresses the debt that practitioners of Mental Mind Cure and New Thought owe to Eddy.

<sup>113</sup> One of Eddy's early teachers and healers, Phineus Quimby, was a mesmerizer in his early career, and studied with Charles Poyon—a Frenchman who worked with Mesmer's main disciple, the Marquis de Puységur. In 1836, Poyon had "brought the first full dose of animal magnetism" to America on a lecture tour of New England (Fuller 17). The controversy about the status of Quimby's teachings and writings in Eddy's theological and methods has raged since his death and her ascent as a religious leader. Gillian Gill argues persuasively in her biography *Mary Baker Eddy* that Eddy's debt to Quimby has been overblown by followers of his and a sensationalizing press.

<sup>114</sup> Both Gillian Gill and Alison Piepmeier use the term "polyvocal" to describe Eddy's writing. Piepmeier has an especially nuanced reading of this aspect of Eddy's text, focusing on the ideology of "sentimental invalidism" that Eddy both invokes and undercuts. Gill speculates that postmodernism and the advent of such theorists and philosophers as Nietzsche, Derrida, and Lacan perhaps make reading Eddy more possible.

<sup>115</sup> Piepmeier uses the term "bumbling" to describe Eddy's assessment of the physicians of her day (77), and I think that term captures her attitude quite well.

<sup>116</sup> See the introduction to Winter's *Mesmerized* for an overview of the medical profession in the United States and Britain during the nineteenth century, and its attempts to consolidate its power.

<sup>117</sup> See for example Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* and Judith Butler's many works including: *Gender Trouble*; *Bodies that Matter*; and *Undoing Gender*.

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