



PROJECT MUSE®

---

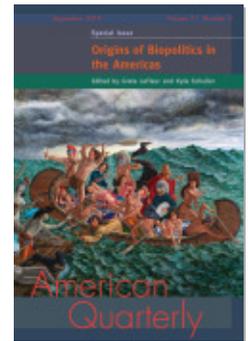
## Robert Montgomery Bird's Neurodiversity Hypothesis

Ittai Orr

American Quarterly, Volume 71, Number 3, September 2019, pp. 719-740  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2019.0051>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/734908>

# Robert Montgomery Bird's Neurodiversity Hypothesis

*Ittai Orr*

Neurodiversity, it turns out, is a very old idea. While the term itself was first coined in the late 1990s by Judy Singer to name the notion that autism and other cognitive conditions are not diseases but “naturally occurring variations,”<sup>1</sup> its roots stretch back to debates in the early nineteenth century around the degree to which individuals were immutably, innately different from one another, and whether there is a material explanation for thought and consciousness. The decades between 1780 and 1860 saw a proliferation of scientific fields that investigated the material origins of mental difference and in turn underwrote the term *diversity*, a direct precursor to the *neurodiversity* of today. According to the author of *Synonyms Discriminated* (1871), “diversity” meant “internal, essential, or natural difference.” In his 1828 dictionary, Noah Webster provided this illustration of the term: “There is a great *diversity* in human constitutions,” a nineteenth-century way of saying that people are essentially different from one another.<sup>2</sup> The idea of human diversity displaced earlier theories of the universality of the human mind much as psychology has given way to neuroscience in the twenty-first century, and just as the neurodiversity movement of today demands greater acceptance for “neuroatypicals,” or individuals with autism or other mental diagnoses, nineteenth-century diversity theorists argued for better treatment of the mentally ill and “feeble-minded,” and frequently adopted a pluralist rather than unitary notion of success, excellence, and happiness.<sup>3</sup> Although nineteenth-century diversity and contemporary neurodiversity differ in important ways, their similarities are worth closer examination: by privileging nature over nurture, both rely on the logic of apposition—apt placement—that has underwritten both critiques and defenses of highly unequal conditions.

This essay interprets Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (1836) as an early case for neurodiversity that dramatizes its egalitarian potential as well as its tendency to reify racial stereotypes and preserve the highly unequal status quo. Written in the style of a satirical picaresque, *Sheppard Lee* follows an impoverished and ineffectual farmer (Lee) as he dies while

searching for buried gold, then floats as a spirit into the bodies of other people. First animating the deceased body of his rich neighbor, Lee goes on to animate several other Americans, including a penniless fop, a loveless miser, a Quaker philanthropist hanged by an anti-abolitionist lynch mob, and even a black slave participating in an uprising, before returning to his original body. Scholars have extensively covered the medical, ethical, and legal implications of *Sheppard Lee*, but the novel still has much to tell us about how the nineteenth-century physiological science in which it is rooted yielded diagnoses and prescriptions not only for individuals but for society itself.<sup>4</sup> It returns us to something of an origin point, the moment when various human sciences first challenged the prevailing doctrine of improvement and civilization to produce a biopolitics of nature over nurture.

That Bird was variously a physician, author, and political candidate places him at the intersection of scientific and political discourse and recommends *Sheppard Lee* as a salient case study in the genealogy of biopolitics. This essay situates Bird's diverse novel between what Michel Foucault calls "the anatamopolitics of the body," with its twin impulses of reform and discipline, and the "bio-politics of population," which entails the management of populations associated with statistical norms. Early theories of diversity, like those underwriting *Sheppard Lee*, instead partake in an intermediate, though overlapping, episteme: what I call *the physiopolitics of diversity*, concerned not with reform or population management but with matching different individuals with their apposite roles.<sup>5</sup> "Physio" here alludes to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century field of physiology—"the science of the properties and functions" of animals, plants, and systems—and a close examination of physiological texts reveals that it was predicated on the natural rightness of human diversity, that is, on the basic axiom that "the differences observed among the individuals of the great human family are as numerous as the individuals themselves."<sup>6</sup> Physiology's embrace of an individual model of human health as opposed to one rooted in statistical norms, and its acceptance of a great deal of variation within the human species has prompted disability scholar Janet Lyon to call the field "capacious."<sup>7</sup> That physiology was, despite this capaciousness, considered the arbiter of the "function" of organs and organisms nevertheless argues for its role as an apparatus of biopower, since the determination of function is always political. Where anatomical knowledge grafts and molds, and statistical knowledge compiles and compares, physiological discourse individuates and places, drawing its authority from "nature." Physiopolitics operates wherever there is talk of a "fit" between internal essence and external conditions, appearing in

early modern arguments for a correspondence between temperate regions and languid constitutions, or in references to professional “calling” and personality types. Like most forms of power, physiopolitics could be directed toward more than one end: in one instance, it could be mobilized for greater acceptance, for example, in arguments for kinder treatment of people considered intellectual or moral “idiots”; in another, it could be deployed in favor of inequality, segregation, and extermination most notably in arguments for a natural fit between slavery and blackness, and between Jews and usury. *Sheppard Lee* illustrates the deployment of this physiopolitics in both directions.

The first part of this essay establishes that on the level of both form and content, *Sheppard Lee* can be read as a thought experiment designed to play out the premise that there is a natural diversity of human constitutions without an inherent hierarchy of worth, what amounts to an early “neurodiversity hypothesis.” The second section demonstrates that as a consequence of this hypothesis, the narrator struggles to explain (much less solve) the related problems of misfitting and ambition, which in a world as divinely authored as naturalists often characterized it, were difficult if not impossible to account for. Although the term *misfit* only referred to ill-fitting clothing until the early twentieth century, the idea that a certain providential “fit” existed between each individual and his or her environment was so widespread that without being named, the figure of the misfit, or the individual who cannot find satisfaction in his or her role, haunted early nineteenth-century debates over the best way to organize society.<sup>8</sup> Rather than consider his characters’ desire for a better life as natural, Bird identifies it as a foreign infection of the body politic, preserving the idea that natural differences in ability and therefore “station” need not imply disparities in happiness. Bird’s novel demonstrates how physiology’s particularizing view of white men and narrow, monolithic take on nonwhites and women translated into a defense of racist and sexist institutions and policies. The final section considers whether hierarchy necessarily follows from theories of natural diversity, identifying Charles Fourier and Ralph Waldo Emerson as salient counterexamples to Bird: both take fundamental difference as the basis of a socialist reimagining of the division of labor, and both oppose slavery. I conclude, however, that like Bird, they cannot circumvent the inherent problems produced by physiopolitics: the untenable division between nature and pathology, the questionable assumption of a “fit” between even the most repugnant forms of labor and innate passions, and the enigma of the misfit with no acceptable social role.

## ***Sheppard Lee* as Neurodiverse Novel**

The tone of *Sheppard Lee* may be satirical, but Bird nevertheless seems to earnestly subscribe to the novel's underlying conceit that people's minds really do work differently and that this natural diversity should not (and cannot) be reformed out of existence. Ralph Savarese's reading of Herman Melville as "neurocosmopolitan" and Jason Tougaw's analysis of the "neuronovel" establish that there is such a thing as a neurodiverse novel, one that embraces various forms of cognition and even attempts to bridge them. Bird's innovative combination of physiological explanations, his reluctance to immediately pathologize difference, the radical sympathy entailed in becoming other people, the use of a transmigration framework to attempt to overcome "the explanatory gap"—that is, the problem of understanding what it is like to be someone else—and his adoption of an episodic narrative structure all make *Sheppard Lee* an important early example of neurodiverse literature.<sup>9</sup> Characterizing the novel this way not only helps to explain its polemic but also raises important questions about the political and historical effects of proto-neurodiversity arguments.

The claim that *Sheppard Lee* is a neurodiverse novel may land as controversial for several reasons. The first is that it is clearly anachronistic, given that "neuro" of neurodiversity signals the disability rights movement's alignment with advances in scientific research, and the era under discussion saw only the first timid steps toward modern neuroscience.<sup>10</sup> A consideration of nineteenth-century diversity theory, however, reveals that neurodiversity is actually a nineteenth-century idea clothed in modern terminology. As some scholars note, the use of *neuro* in neurodiversity is misleading, since twenty-first century neuroscience does not really prove the notion of naturally occurring variations. Developments in neuroscience have more often produced evidence of plasticity than fixity when it comes to cognition, suggesting that the kind of knowledge that underwrites neurodiversity is much older than the brain scans associated with the term.<sup>11</sup> Although "diversity" conspicuously lacks the *neuro* prefix and its attendant mantle of cutting-edge scientific authority, both take as their fundamental premise the eighteenth-century theory, put forward most famously by Julien Offray de La Mettrie, that the mind is material and that "the soul follows the progress of the body," such that differences in the mind are products of physical differences in either the brain or the systems in which the brain partakes.<sup>12</sup> Attached to these differences is the normative stamp of the "natural"—a well-known fixture of early nineteenth-century moral thought.

Just as neurodiversity aims to destigmatize and depathologize neuroatypicals, nineteenth-century theories of diversity argued that society should care for

rather than mock and condemn people with mental illnesses and disabilities. When phenomena like “idiocy” and “derangement” became widely understood as natural variations of the human species, caregivers adopted the “moral treatment” model in the early decades of the nineteenth century, slowly giving up the violent methods of subjugation that made almshouses and hospitals for the insane sites of horror and suffering. Criminals, for example, might be excused for being “moral idiots,” or for possessing, as Benjamin Rush put it, a “derangement in the moral faculties.” By the 1840s, even the disciplinarian Samuel Gridley Howe agreed that “all classifications or definitions which lead people to treat idiocy as a disease . . . are of injurious tendency.” Despite his background as a physician, Bird goes much farther than Howe in the direction of nonpathologization, eschewing talk of “defectiveness,” deficiency, and mental levels, which superintendents like Howe embraced, for a language of natural variety and peculiarity.<sup>13</sup>

Consider the surprising lack of judgment in the following passage from early in the novel, when readers are first introduced to Sheppard Lee proper:

My natural disposition was placid and easy,—I believe I may say sluggish. I was not wanting in parts, but had as little energy or activity of mind as ever fell to the share of a Jerseyman. . . . Besides being deficient, as I humbly confess, in all those qualities that are necessary to the formation of a great man, I had not the slightest desire to be one. Ambition was a passion that never afflicted my mind; and I was . . . indifferent to the game of greatness which was playing around me.<sup>14</sup>

There is no disciplining logic, no sense that Lee is guilty of the sin of slothfulness to be avoided by a youthful readership; nor is there a sense that he has a disability that prevents him from pursuing his calling. Lee's apparent lack of activity is matched by his lack of ambition, making any aspersion on his character rather unjustified. How can he help being who he is, we are invited to think, when Lee's curmudgeonly neighbor, Mr. Higginson, who abuses Lee for crossing onto his property, cruelly calls him “Dicky Dout,” a “Poor fellow!” “wrong” in his “upper story!”<sup>15</sup> What appears from one angle to be an argument in favor of an unequal status quo operates simultaneously as an appeal for sympathy and understanding in the face of apparent failure. Bird gives us the natural-historical theory that what appears to be sin or a lamentable and hopefully remediable lack may simply be a natural variation in the species. As if waving off the phrenologists, who believed various organs and lumps in the brain were responsible for different capacities and could be expanded or diminished, Lee declares that he is “not wanting in parts.” He is fine the way he is.

Because the entire novel is written from the rather unreliable perspective of Lee himself, it is still possible to read it as a sendup of his laziness, mental illness, prejudice, and conveniently self-exonerating theories. Indeed, Justine S. Murison does exactly this in her interpretation of *Sheppard Lee* as a staging of the nineteenth-century mental illness of hypochondria, the excessive identification with objects, animals, and people.<sup>16</sup> While it is true that Lee is ultimately diagnosed with hypochondria and told that he merely hallucinated all his transmigrations, the evidence is overwhelming that Bird was not invested in diagnosing Lee or satirizing his theories. The narrative ends on a pathologizing note simply because in order to follow its own materialist premise, it must discount the possibility of transmigration altogether. The conclusions and observations Bird draws are meant to linger despite the thought experiment's impossibility.

Given Bird's own eccentricity and possible struggle with mental illness (one biographer writes that he failed to avert several "breakdowns" and even suffered episodes of blindness), it may be that he identified more with patients than with doctors.<sup>17</sup> Most of the doctors in *Sheppard Lee* are quacks, and in his medical lectures, Bird regarded claims to supernatural abilities or "faculties" with cautious respect, considering the possibility that "apparitions" may be the product of an inner sense, a "power to see without sight, to hear without hearing" even if they do not adhere to the skeptical standards of medicine.<sup>18</sup> Although he was not against the idea of pathology in general, Bird understood how pathologization could be mobilized for nefarious ends.

In his subsequent fictional travel narrative, *Peter Pilgrim* (1839), Bird includes a vignette, originally intended for *Sheppard Lee*, called "My Friends in the Madhouse," which aimed its satire at the hypocrisy of a society that makes illness out of virtue and temperament.<sup>19</sup> Like *Sheppard Lee*, "My Friends in the Madhouse" is organized as a survey of various archetypal male characters, inviting speculation as to what exactly unites them. Each of the inmates, including an inventor, a newspaper editor, a member of Congress, and an all-too-honest salesman, has been clapped in the madhouse for doing the morally right thing: the inventor creates an automaton that can put an end to slavery; the editor stops muckraking an opposing party; the congressman, Mr. Smash, calls for public works and public pensions; and fired from all of his jobs, the honest salesman becomes an honest preacher whose revelation of too much irreligious truth renders him "a fool." Each is pathologized by his friends and colleagues in turn, with one congressman telling Smash, "Take my advice, Mr. Smash: your health is infirm, you have a nervous temperament, a great deal of enthusiasm." The congressman invokes something between religious

enthusiasm—that histrionic, unruly devotion decried by eighteenth-century ministers—and the new language of mental illness. He goes on: “The brain is a very tender and delicate organ—a very, very tender organ, Mr. Smash.”<sup>20</sup> Mr. Smash could have been delegitimated in other ways—as a traitor, a demagogue, or a sinner—but Bird chooses to foreground the relatively newfangled utility of mental science, whereby the quickest route to doing away with an enemy is to question his mental health.

In the same vignette, Bird describes a Mr. Lawless, whose peaceful nature prompts him to refuse a duel, and when he summons his courage to kill his challenger, he is deemed insane. Bird's narrator suggests that Mr. Lawless is a type, has a natural or inborn predisposition to which society attaches value almost arbitrarily: “We are brave or timid as God makes us. If courage be a virtue, why not fear? . . . How absurd to punish that to which both religion and law address themselves, to win the human race from crime!”<sup>21</sup> Bird puts his faith in the innate cowardice that prevents crime and distrusts those who would attempt to alter it, including medical professionals. Casting a satirical shot at “reformers and agitators,” he places them in their own special circle of hell in a Dante-esque nightmare-vision experienced by the imprisoned editor: they sit forever flaming in “refining-pots,” “undergoing a process to reform their own qualities—a matter which, in their eagerness to amend their neighbors, they entirely forgot to attend to in the world above.”<sup>22</sup> As I argue more fully below, Bird's egalitarian embrace of human difference sits uneasily with a fatalistic pessimism: there can be no helping people whose nature dictates that they behave in certain ways.

In the argument for Bird's capacious embrace of mental difference, nothing speaks louder than his refusal to engage in the language of abilities, talents, and faculties throughout *Sheppard Lee*. Rather than cite each character's “capacity” or “ability,” he chooses less normative terms, like “energy,” “activity,” and “passion,” which explain rather than categorize, harking back to classical and early modern notions of humors and passions.<sup>23</sup> As the dandy I. D. Dawkins, Lee ignores finances for romance: “What gave me the most pleasure . . . was a marvelous great quantity of love-letters, locks of hair, finger-rings, odd gloves, &c., that I found scattered about.”<sup>24</sup> When he becomes Abram Skinner the miser, the “desire to enjoy myself had vanished; the thoughts of fine clothes, horses and carriages, and so on, entered my mind no more. The only idea that possessed me was ‘What am I worth? How much more can I make myself worth?’”<sup>25</sup> As Zachariah Longstraw, all his “feelings and desires were swallowed up in one great passion of philanthropy; universal benevolence was the maxim I engraved upon my heart.”<sup>26</sup> Each is differentiated on the basis of

his passions, attentions, and desires, imposing those proclivities onto Lee. As Lee puts it, “Stepping into each [body], I found myself invested with new feelings, passions, and propensities—as it were, with a new mind—and retaining so little of my original character, that I was perhaps only a little better able to judge and reason on the actions performed in my new body, without being able to avoid them, even when sensible of their absurdity.”<sup>27</sup> The implication here is that if a Lee is unsuccessful, a Skinner miserly, a Dawkins amorous, or a Longstraw charitable, none of them can help it. Culpability falls in every case on the particular bodies, histories, and peculiarities of the individual in question rather than on individual choice.

Lee articulates lay-theories of materialist determinism throughout the novel, revealing the influence of Bird’s own background in physiology. In a note Bird scribbled while preparing to write the novel, he sketched Lee’s materialist discovery under the heading “Metaphysics”:

Many of our propensities, and other peculiarities of spirit, are caused by certain peculiarities, (congenital or accidental, and durable or temporary) of our physical structure. . . . The souls of all men are therefore more or less influenced by their peculiar *physiques*; and were an exchange of souls possible between a Socrates and a Diogenes, the souls of both must experience some changes; caused by the influence of the new bodies.<sup>28</sup>

Lee himself concludes something very similar: “The associations of the mind, as well as many of its other qualities, are more dependent upon causes in the body than metaphysicians are disposed to allow. . . . I do verily believe that much of the evil and good in man’s nature arises from causes and influences purely physical.”<sup>29</sup> Consider the similarity of this insight to statements from a physiological textbook written by Bird’s contemporary and fellow Philadelphian Robley Dunglison just a few years before *Sheppard Lee* was published. To explain peculiarities, idiosyncrasies, and differences in constitution, as well as aversions, now called allergies, to various foods, he writes: “In all cases, perhaps, these peculiarities are dependent upon inappreciable structure, either of the organ concerned, or of the nervous branches distributed to it.”<sup>30</sup> Bird had written his own medical thesis on the constitution most susceptible to consumption in 1826, so it is not unlikely that Bird intended his readers to take the novel’s physiological materialism at face value.<sup>31</sup>

*Sheppard Lee* not only reflects the materialist causality supposed by physiology; it also takes seriously its radically individual model of health. Dunglison, for example, insists that idiosyncrasies and temperaments “modify sensibly the whole organism, but without interfering with the health,” suggesting that the physician’s duty is to become aware of them specifically in order to set them

aside as natural and acceptable. "It is the duty . . . of the patient to put the physician in the possession of the fact of such peculiarities, so that he may be enabled to guard against them, and not take that for morbid which is the effect of simple idiosyncrasy."<sup>32</sup> In other words, what may appear "morbid," that is unhealthy, or diseased, is just a feature of someone's unique physiological profile.<sup>33</sup> The question becomes: what is healthy *for this individual*?

Bird's point is not that Lee's understanding of his experience is quackish, but that were one to take over another's life and all of that individual's wealth and abilities, this change would not necessarily entail a greater degree of happiness, a lesson Lee quickly learns when his first transmigration, into the body of the wealthy neighbor who had taunted him, leaves him with excruciating gout. Blinded by pain, he cries, "Why was I not content to be Sheppard Lee? . . . What a fool I was to change my condition.—Would that I was now a dog!"<sup>34</sup> This is also echoed in the book's final line: "Be my body what it may, hardy or frail, stiff or supple, I am satisfied with it, and shall never again seek to exchange it for another."<sup>35</sup> Given the correspondence between physique and mental life throughout the novel, this is Bird's way of saying (via Lee) that no mind, and therefore no life, is better than another. Despite its darkly fatalistic implications, *Sheppard Lee* can be understood as an attempt to prove a radical equivalency of worth, if not of ability or wealth.

Key to the reading of *Sheppard Lee* as a neurodiverse novel is its remarkable lack of judgment with regard to the cognitive types Bird surveys. He may be lightly poking fun at various personality traits—Dawkins's conceitedness, Skinner's miserliness, and Longstraw's gullibility—but his willingness to imagine what it must be like to inhabit their bodies, and his exploration of each individual's unique set of pleasures and pains, moves *Sheppard Lee* away from caricature and toward a study in sympathy. Indeed, this simultaneously affective and physiological term has rightly played a central role in previous interpretations of the novel, although the debate remains open as to whether Lee has too much or too little of it.<sup>36</sup> At the time Bird was writing, sympathy meant both "common feeling with another" or "fellow feeling," "as of bodily pleasure or pain," and also, in the medical sense, "a correspondence of various parts of the body in similar sensations or affections" or a "consent of parts."<sup>37</sup> What separates *Sheppard Lee* from sentimental novels and melodramas of the same period is that these genres disproportionately extended sympathy to victims, whereas Lee indiscriminately inhabits aggressors, victims, the rich and the poor, implying the existence, at least theoretically, of a natural "consent of parts" in the social sphere: if every individual is stuck in his or her own unique physiological track, then how can the social world, with all its injustices, be

anything but inevitable? The move from the naturalness of individual variation to the naturalness of social structures constitutes a pervasive physiopolitical move to be explored more fully below.

### The Physiopolitics of the (Un)Happy Slave

Despite his overarching faith in a happy “fit” between one’s proclivities and one’s occupation, Bird had to wrestle with the existence of discontentment and ambition. How can it be that no one is a good fit for poverty or slavery when society appears to rely so heavily on these roles? According to Bird’s logic, either some people are created to be unhappy or their happiness is somehow unnaturally occluded. It does not occur to him that society may not truly require such roles—that they are fit for no one—an oversight that can be traced to the physiopolitical assumptions at the root of Bird’s novel. The America Bird depicts is recognizable as the country in which deregulated banking and overleveraged cotton production would, just one year later, precipitate a devastating economic crisis. Each character Lee inhabits dies a miserable death brought about by financial destitution, disease, or violent crime, but Bird’s explanation for all that misery is not a misalignment between the social world and the internal natures of his characters. They are not made unhappy by the systems in which they are subjugated, like slavery, for example, but burdened by their own misperceptions and imported vices. In this way, the novel departs considerably from its picaresque prototype, Voltaire’s *Candide ou l’Optimisme* (1759), which refuted Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz’s sunny belief in the rightness of the world. *Sheppard Lee* agrees with Leibniz’s faith in the underlying justness, or at the very least, inevitability of fate, providing a rather conservative diagnosis for the ailing body politic. Flying in the face of popular utopian reform movements, but much in line, I argue, with the reifying tendencies of nineteenth-century natural science, Bird’s capacious embrace of various human types lends itself to, and perhaps derives from, a rather bleak fatalism.

The difficulties in *Sheppard Lee* arise when Bird’s acceptance of benign variation does not extend to his character’s desire for a different life or desire for more money. When Lee writes that he is “deficient . . . in all those qualities that are necessary to the formation of a great man,” but that he also does not have “the slightest desire to be one,” this fortunate sympathy between who he is and who he wants to be—between his abilities and his passions—can be read not only as an egalitarian reframing of disability, but also, more problematically, as a feature of the early nineteenth-century biopolitical fantasy of “fit.” The assumption that each individual is equipped with his own means of personal

fulfillment makes it unlikely that there will be a natural mismatch between desires and abilities, or between socially available roles and internal proclivities, casting instances of misfitting—wherein people do not find contentment in their class position, or are not equipped with the means of success within it—as a problem merely of perception or attitude. In *Sheppard Lee*, the means to happiness are more or less provided to each character, but, as Bird put it in another note he scribbled preparing for the novel, each is “ruined by divers American propensities (chiefly the urge to grow rich).” As it turns out, these “propensities” in fact turn out to be foreign and unnatural infections of the American body politic.

Edgar Allan Poe, in an otherwise positive review of the novel, took great issue with this implication, writing, “The sole object here in the various metempsychoses seems to be . . . the enforcement of the very doubtful moral that every person should remain contented with his own.”<sup>38</sup> Poe’s reading is supported by the many instances in which Lee regrets his desire for more money or suffers at the hands of those who desire it. During Lee’s sojourn as the grossly abused philanthropist Zachariah Longstraw, Bird even lapses into a protracted sermon on the roots of “the ingratitude of the poor,” which “springs, like a thousand other evils . . . not in the natural enmity supposed to exist between the rich and the poor, but in the unnatural hatred provoked in the bosoms of one by the offensive pride and arrogance of the other.” He blames, in short, the richer classes’ “pomp and ostentation, the uncontrolled contempt of labour, . . . the puerile vanity and stolid pride of the genteel and refined” for “the exasperation of the lower classes.”<sup>39</sup> It is unlikely that Bird wrote this speech facetiously, since it aligns so well with the novel’s repeated refrain that life is hardly better as a rich man than as a poor man, and it interrupts the otherwise first-person narrative with a rather unusual third-person commentary, giving the sense that it is not written as Lee or as Longstraw but as Bird himself. It is even possible that he chose to publish the novel anonymously for the reason that its lesson—hammered home in sections like this—was so unpopular that politicians could no longer support it publicly. Bird’s jeremiad serves as an explanation for Longstraw’s many abuses at the hands of his beneficiaries: his ill-treatment does not result from their lack of education, or from the unequal distribution of wealth, but from their wrongheaded jealousy of the more fortunate, after having received and internalized the upper class’s contempt.<sup>40</sup> The envy of the rich had, after all, set Lee’s aspirations in motion in the first place; it is right after Higginson calls him “Wrong in [his] upper story!” that Lee first has a dream of finding buried treasure, and wishes himself “any body or any thing” but what he is.<sup>41</sup> Had he not been so instigated, he might have let sleeping dogs, or cursed treasure, lie.

To diagnose the unrest tormenting his characters, the physiologically minded Bird frequently alludes to foreign infections. In the political digression above, for example, he asks, rhetorically, “Why should the folly of a feudal aristocracy prevail under the shadow of a purely democratic government?” This echoes an anonymous 1834 op-ed that Bird almost certainly read (and may have even written) that casts “radicalism,” or popular unrest of the kind that fueled Andrew Jackson’s ascendance, as an “imported exotic.”<sup>42</sup> The American Revolution, with its preservation of economic inequality, was relatively tame compared with the violent upheavals emanating from Europe at the time Bird was writing. Unhappiness among the poor, and the increasing number of poor immigrants seeking better fortune in America, was apparently not a native or natural feature of the United States but the product of some infiltration or mistaken impression; America had established a *natural* aristocracy while European monarchies suffered from an artificial one. Cementing the impression that discontentment originates from abroad, Bird’s sympathy for Abram Skinner does not prevent him from casting the money-lender’s avarice in anti-Semitic terms. When, as Skinner, Lee feigns generosity and modesty to squeeze one of his clients of an absurdly high interest fee, he defends himself on the basis of an appeal to the ways of Skinner’s “tribe.”<sup>43</sup> Bird equivocates with regard to the source of Skinner’s greed, seeming to attribute it to unnatural and therefore remediable sources, but ultimately placing it outside of intervention. In the end, his parents may be the guilty party, since “a grain of lying or thieving, or any such spicy propensity, infused into the youthful breast by a tender parent, will give a scent to the spirit for life.”<sup>45</sup>

That there is really no way for Skinner (or Lee-as-Skinner) to reform his ways—inscribed as they were in the essential makeup of his tribe—leads to the conclusion that it would be useless to punish him, as well as to the portentous implication that the disease is Skinner himself, and that nothing short of expulsion or extermination can rid the nation of his proclivity for usury. Skinner’s extreme age, and the wretchedness of his sons’ inherited avarice, invites the reader to join Lee in wishing a swift death. It is thus only a small step from the capacious embrace of difference that attends the science of human physiology to the genocidal logic of the twentieth century. Indeed, Andrew Jackson justified the proto-eugenic Indian Removal Act, passed just a few years before *Sheppard Lee* was written, in terms that recall Bird’s own essentialism: the move, Jackson argued, would enable American Indians “to pursue happiness in their own way and under their own rude institutions.” Just as Bird does not blame, and even seems to sympathize, with Skinner, Jackson claimed to have sympathy for the expelled tribes: “Toward the aborigines of the country

no one can indulge a more friendly feeling than myself." Hatred was not a necessary affective register for the logic of segregation and expulsion; despite being blameless, Skinner is apparently not benign.<sup>45</sup> The theme of implanted or imported social ills recurs again in the next section of the novel, when Lee escapes from Longstraw's body at the exact moment of his being hanged by a Southern anti-abolitionist mob and occupies the body of a slave named Tom. His first impressions as Tom reflect the same match between occupation and internal constitution the novel earlier granted to Lee, and he describes life as a slave to a kind master in idyllic terms: "I found myself, for the first time in my life, content, or very nearly so, with my condition, free from cares, far removed from disquiet, and if not actually in love with my lot, so far from being dissatisfied, that I had not the least desire to exchange it for another."<sup>46</sup> Catering to typical conjectures about the mental habits (if not abilities) of African Americans, Bird posits a fit between the lazy constitution of his new host and the "easy and idle" life as a house slave. The unprecedented satisfaction Lee experiences as Tom is, however, interrupted by the intrusion of an abolitionist pamphlet "dropped by the fiend of darkness himself," which announces that "All men are born free and equal," and spreads the news of Haiti's emancipation. Lee as Tom immediately identifies these as the first words of the American Declaration of Independence, but Bird pointedly draws them from the French and therefore Haitian Declaration of the Rights of Man. Foreign ideas—including the tantalizing possibility of a black emperor—are to blame for the subsequent violence that engulfs the plantation.<sup>47</sup> Pointing to outside influences like pamphlets and, in the case of the earlier lynch mob, a demagogic congressional candidate, Bird draws a parallel between radicalisms on both sides of the slavery debate. Both, according to the logic of the novel, are equally unnatural social infirmities because they imply a lack of sympathy between the various parts of the body politic.

What authorized Bird's decision to draw the line between natural/healthy and unnatural/morbid where it lands in *Sheppard Lee*? From one angle, Bird's decision to exclude antislavery from the privileged category of natural inclinations can be read as a product of his racial prejudice. Although this certainly played a role, Bird's prejudice was reinforced by the physiological assumptions on which his novel depended. Physiology's tendency to embrace "fatalism," or what today we would call determinism, and its failure to see diversity within nonwhite and nonmale populations make Bird's treatment of race less surprising. His racism is a product of the same development in the history of biopolitics—this transitional logic of physiopolitics—that produced contemporary theories of neurodiversity. If the peculiar features of various individuals

are naturally inscribed, the peculiar institutions in which they are embedded may be as well.

Charges of “fatalism” dogged physiological accounts of the mind, in contrast to the Lockean faith in educability and universality. Robert Mudie’s *Mental Philosophy: A Popular View of the Human Mind* (1838), for example, identifies fatalists, as those who “acquiesce in the doom which they fancy to be prepared for them.”<sup>48</sup> Johann Spurzheim, an influential proponent of the field of phrenology, which at the time Bird was writing began to be incorporated into physiological accounts of mind, was meanwhile called on to address the charge that the new science was fatalistic: “Certain writers understand by fatalism, that everything in the world, and the world itself, exists by necessity.” Despite his attempts to reassure readers they are not destined to carry the cranial bumps they have to the grave, he admits that “it is certain that the faculties of the mind are not equally distributed” and that “the determination of these faculties may doubtless be termed fatalism.”<sup>49</sup> As the historian John Carson has shown, in contrast with the “blank slate” theory of human potential espoused by eighteenth-century enlightenment thinkers including John Locke, the new, tightly bounded constraints of natural diversity left little room for improvement and change. Bird leaned toward this kind of fatalism—at least insofar as he depicted rather intractable differences between Lee’s hosts.<sup>50</sup>

Added to this relatively new conviction in physically derived discrepancies between people’s minds was a faith that nature had wisely planned a natural role for everyone. The mode of biopolitical reason I am calling physiopolitics is a feature of this transitional phase from idealist to materialist accounts of the human mind.<sup>51</sup> If people were made differently, as naturalists argued, then God, veiled behind such terms as *nature* and *the universe*, cannot be justified unless a proper or apposite role has been designed for them. The examples of this sort of thinking are endless: adopting the axiom that “the human race presents a scene of the greatest possible diversity,” Francis Wayland, a preacher and Brown University professor, argued that “every human being is a distinct and separately accountable individual. To each one, God has given just such means of happiness, and placed him under just such circumstances for improving those means of happiness, as has pleased him.”<sup>52</sup> Most adopters of the diversity hypothesis also held that there was a providential destiny that would naturally unite individuals with their intended outcomes, given a few social precautions, since all in the end is natural. Even the reform-minded scientist Franz Joseph Gall, founding father of phrenology, wrote in the 1820s: “How can we believe that a supreme wisdom has not placed each animal in harmony

with his external world, and consequently the internal faculties in accordance with the external organs?"<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, the naturalist James Cowles Prichard, quoting Dr. Richard Owen, opened his 1843 *Natural History of Man* with the declaration that "every species at every period was created most perfect in relation to the circumstances and sphere of life in which it was destined to exist."<sup>54</sup> The picturesque impression conjured by these scientific texts obscures the brutal dynamic of advantage and disadvantage so prevalent in Herbert Spencer's proto-Darwinian psychology and economics of later decades.

If this meant inequality, so be it; God could do no wrong. Taking their cues from Leibniz and Alexander Pope, many in the nineteenth-century embraced the inequality implied by theories of human diversity. The same anonymous opinion piece that spoke of radicalism as an "imported exotic" also quoted Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (1734) to repudiate Jacksonian class angst: "Order is Heaven's first law, and, this confess, / Some are, and must be, greater than the rest."<sup>55</sup> Patterned after the Aristotelian notion of the "natural slave" and Plato's hierarchy in *The Republic*, proponents of physiopolitics held that the role one occupies must coincide very nearly with the role he or she was meant for. The founding principles of the United States made this conclusion all the more necessary because to accept both material inequality and the founding vision of a free and equal populace required a version of happiness independent of clout or income: respect people's differences and you are most of the way to a just society. It was therefore the task of physiologists not to seek for the causes of misery in larger systems but to embrace natural diversity and recommend an ethic of self-knowledge that would permit each individual to discover the work he or she was born to do—to discover his or her function. To some doctors, like the mental asylum superintendents Isaac Ray and Edward Jarvis, the Jacksonian scramble to rise above one's station was the chief cause of an apparent wave of madness sweeping the continent. The problem was not differences in status but the idea that those differences were a problem.<sup>56</sup> Bird was simply keeping step with contemporary views when he insisted on the rightness of inequality, and this extended to his approach to race and slavery.

Bird's narrow representation of blackness at least partly derives from physiology's historic focus on white populations and rather monolithic understanding of nonwhite populations. Bird maintained some skepticism about his colleague Samuel Morton's racist skull comparisons, but he nevertheless subscribed to Morton's assumption of fundamental racial differences. As Dunglison's textbook demonstrates, physiologists saw various constitutions and temperaments within the white population—adopting early modern humors like "phlegmatic,"

“sanguineous,” and “nervous,” which variously required a “ruddy complexion,” “light hair, fair skin” and “blue eyes,” for example—but did not extend this particularity to nonwhite populations. Bird’s decision to survey six white men and only one black man falls in line with this oversight. Relatedly, the fact that not one of Lee’s hosts is a woman replicates the exclusion of women from accounts of the various human temperaments and constitutions. “African” and “woman” were types in the same way that “melancholic” and “bilious” were.

The only other black characters in *Sheppard Lee* are slaves, including Lee’s sagacious slave James Jumble, who actively avoids being manumitted, suggesting that Bird failed to consider the possibility that a variety of apposite roles may exist for the free African American community. This aversion to a potential “fit” between black people and occupations outside slavery likely contributed to Bird’s later decision, in the midst of efforts to obtain the right to suffrage by free black men (whom Bird called “blackguards”), to move to the slave state of Maryland, buy two slaves of his own, and take up farming rather than see African Americans get the vote.<sup>57</sup> Key to Bird’s racist attitude toward African Americans in *Sheppard Lee* is an apparently paternalistic, even positive regard for them in the abstract on the basis of their humanity, but a simultaneous denial of their similarity in ability and temperament to white people. His novel thus aligns with the statement made by representative John Z. Ross of Genesee in Pennsylvania’s constitutional convention of 1838 that “the proposition that all men are free and equal, according to the usual declarations, applies to [African Americans] only in a state of nature, and not after the institution of civil government.” So, while African Americans are granted the status of being humans, a distinction is made between their natural equality, ostensibly in terms of general dignity and worth, and their fitness for the role of citizen. Ross characterizes them as “a *peculiar* people,” incapable of participation in civil government with “any sort of discretion, prudence, or independence.”<sup>58</sup> The biopolitics of nineteenth-century diversity is, in the context of this debate, made brazenly clear: its premise of difference, and even of common humanity, while aiding efforts to better the conditions of slaves and “idiots,” also reified racial and class-based stereotypes to the point that fundamental structural changes—including the abolition of slavery—were difficult if not impossible to imagine. The contemporary neurodiversity movement’s overwhelmingly white and male image may be a product of its physiological roots; the argument that people are born as they are may have fueled movements for better care and tolerance within white populations, but it also prevented African Americans from being granted equal rights and excluded them from literally being treated by physicians. The nineteenth-century refusal to see a diversity of human

constitutions within nonwhite and female populations has likely contributed to disparities in the quality of medical care for those groups, with instances of African American mental illness and disability consistently underdiagnosed and undertreated in the present.<sup>59</sup>

### **Physiopolitics without Inequality?**

While many proponents of human diversity supported the essentialist distinctions in *Sheppard Lee*, not all of them did. Despite their infamous faith in essential racial difference, the German anthropologists Johann Blumenbach and Friedrich Teidemann, for example, concluded independently from one another that there was actually no difference between the skull sizes of Africans and Europeans.<sup>60</sup> Some nineteenth-century philosophers operating under the assumption of natural diversity, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, came to realize that society and its exploitative institutions needed to be altered to accommodate the full range of human proclivities and passions. His 1848 lecture “Natural History of Intellect” echoes Bird’s insistence on individual measures of health and success, arguing that “every man is furnished, if he will heed it, with wisdom necessary to steer his own boat,—if he will not look away from his own to see how his neighbor steers his. . . . All excellence is only an inflamed personality.”<sup>61</sup> Just as Bird eschews talk of inborn faculties and organs, Emerson writes of personal “polarity or bias,” and individualized “genius.” Unlike Bird, however, he refuses to accept economic inequality as natural and applauds the idea of a universal basic income: “The dream which lately floated before the eyes of the French nation—that every man shall do that which of all things he prefers, and shall have three francs a day for doing that—is the real law of the world; and all good labor, by which society is really served, will be found to be of that kind,<sup>62</sup> that is, voluntary.

Emerson’s allusion to the late dream “of the French nation” almost certainly referred to the 1848 revolution in France, with its demand for a guaranteed income. More specifically, his schema evokes the work of one of the revolution’s chief inspirations, the infinitely bizarre naturalist-socialist Charles Fourier, who stands as the clearest foil to Bird’s reification of the economic, sexual, and racial order. Emphasizing the scientific ambit of his intervention, Fourier’s first major premise was that there are at least twelve guiding passions distributed in varying degrees among the entire population of the Earth, yielding in various combinations over eight hundred distinct personality types.<sup>63</sup> And while he saw attractions, passions and talents as natural and God-given, he did not extend this naturalness to any extant human society: “None of these philosophical

whims, known as duties, bear any relation to nature. Duty is man-made, attraction comes from God.”<sup>64</sup> He explicitly targeted the patriarchy, and turned natural history on its head by suggesting that the most advanced civilizations were those that embraced the equality of the sexes.<sup>65</sup> If it is true that humans have diverse passions and proclivities, he wondered, why not organize society around our inborn passions, rather than dream up some imaginary alignment between what is and what should be? Fourier’s enemies were the disciplinarians and moralists who had, he argues, strangled human nature in the straightjacket of civilization and repression for over a millennium. In 1808 he proposed forming “passionate series” or sects based on shared proclivities (e.g., bread making), and spent the next three decades, the remainder of his life, laying out exactly what that entailed. He argued that humans should not repress their urges, as those dour “moralists” and “philosophers” demanded, but that society be rebuilt to support “all tastes which are not harmful or annoying to others.”<sup>66</sup>

Perhaps the greatest difference between Bird and Fourier is the latter’s embrace of the ambition Bird pathologizes in *Sheppard Lee*: “The number of times [the moralists] have vociferated against ambition! To hear them you would think it was wrong to want anything but dull, poorly paid employment, and that, to be morally correct, if a job paid an income of 100,000 livres you should only accept 10,000.”<sup>67</sup> Making room for the avarice of a Skinner, Fourier writes: “I do not mean that this new order will change the passions in any way: neither God nor man can do that; yet it is possible to change their course without altering their nature.”<sup>68</sup> Harmony, Fourier’s name for his utopia, was not homogeneous but the product of different musical notes played together. If there were disparities in ability, so be it. That “God is an enemy of uniformity”—his articulation of the axiom that people are different—did not imply that some would be allowed to live in poverty while others idled.<sup>69</sup> Here was physiopolitics—the acceptance of natural diversity, the centrality of “fit”—without the reification of inequality and slavery. In the hands of Fourier, physiopolitics laid the groundwork for later nineteenth-century egalitarian theories by foregrounding the dissonance—or the misfitting—between internal natures and the material realities of capitalism and slavery.

Like Bird, however, Fourier relied on an untenable division between “natural” and “unnatural.” Despite its radical potential, the notion of human diversity tended to reify features of human life that are actually historically contingent. As Bird’s contradictory explanation for ambition reveals, the logic of physiopolitics could not consistently answer the question of where troublesome or radical desires and proclivities come from, ejecting some desires and even people from the realm of the body politic. As a testament to this causal conundrum, Fourier also had to admit that passions sometimes change, and

while Karl Marx seemed initially convinced by the argument that capitalism alienates us from our inner natures, he also argued that underlying structures can dictate what we perceive to be natural, particularly in his discussion of the commodity fetish. The logic of physiopolitics precludes the possibility that the roles we occupy, the conditions of our upbringing, and the rules we must play by, produce our internal “natures.” It obscures the possibility that we are not always “born this way” and that the economic and social structures in which individuals are embedded produce as well as debilitate them.<sup>70</sup>

Although the assumption of human plasticity has also underwritten invasive biopolitical interventions, historians scrutinizing the antebellum period have rightly identified the negative consequences of essential human diversity.<sup>71</sup> The fixing of people into types emerged partly as the result of tumultuous structural changes resulting from industrialization that required strategies of stabilization, as Ellen Samuels has recently argued, as well as to justify unprecedented economic instability and inequality, including slavery.<sup>72</sup> The historian Scott Sandage identifies a key function of physiopolitics by demonstrating that, by midcentury, people could *be* failures rather than just fail.<sup>73</sup> As this essay has revealed, physiopolitics also insists on labor and calling as defining characteristics of every individual, such that as Herman Melville keenly perceived, the possibility of someone who “prefers not to” do anything at all, and cannot be defined by his or her inner calling, remains socially illegible. That some people may be unsuitable for any role, and some roles could be so onerous that no one would agree to form a “passionate series” around them without being coerced, falls outside the realm of physiopolitical possibility.

Disability's unique position between pathology and identity has made it a crucial site for the interrogation of diversity as a model for social justice. Lenard Davis, taking up an argument put forward by Walter Benn Michaels, argues that “disability is not just missing from a diversity consciousness; disability could very well be antithetical to the current conception of diversity.” The reason for this, he writes, is that people with disabilities often “fall into the category of what some might call the ‘abject’ and must be forcibly repressed in order for the rainbow of diversity to glimmer and shine.”<sup>74</sup> Abjection in this context is roughly analogous to the notion of total misfitting: it refers to those with no extant apposite role. As Davis notes, the contemporary iteration of diversity erases the disparities that survive even the most successful destigmatizing efforts, and obscures the structural, economic, and material causes of suffering. Neurodiversity's celebration of natural variation can therefore only depart from its antecedents, including *Sheppard Lee*, by questioning physiological concepts like function, calling, and the “consent of parts” in order to identify structures of oppression that operate under cover of nature.

## Notes

- Special thanks to Benjamin Reiss, Sari Altschuler, and Colleen Boggs for their generous feedback on this essay over the past two years. I am grateful as well for the careful editorial attention of Greta LaFleur and Kyla Schuller, and the two anonymous readers.
1. Steve Silberman, *NeuroTribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity* (New York: Avery, 2015), 16.
  2. C. J. Smith, *Synonyms Discriminated* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1871), 244; and Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, vol. 1 (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. "Diversity."
  3. For the turn from psychology to neuroscience, see especially Fernando Vidal and Francisco Ortega, *Being Brains: Making the Cerebral Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017); and Joelle M. Abi-Rached and Nikolas Rose, *Neuro: The New Brain Sciences and the Management of the Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).
  4. Sari Altschuler, "From Empathy to Epistemology: Robert Montgomery Bird and the Future of the Medical Humanities," *American Literary History* 28.1 (2016): 1–26; Justine S. Murison, "Hypochondria and Racial Interiority in Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 64.1 (2008): 1–25; and Peter Jaros, "The Faculties of Law: Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee* as Legal Fiction," *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 3.2 (2015): 307–35.
  5. Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 139–42. Although Foucault did identify the nineteenth-century tendency to reify personal characteristics, he subsumed all the natural historians, human zoologists, physiologists, superintendents, and phrenologists into the category of psychiatrist, implying a uniformly reform- or discipline-minded approach to the criminal or "dangerous individual." In this essay, I particularize this uniform mass of scientists and zoom in on the scientific school that so radically reified individual constitutions that it was in many instances opposed to the interventionist approach associated with psychiatry. See Foucault, "The Dangerous Individual," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988), 125–51.
  6. Webster, *American Dictionary*, vol. 2, s.v. "Physiology"; Robley Dunglison, *Human Physiology*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1832), 451.
  7. Janet Lyon, *Idiot Child on a Fire Escape: Modernism's Disability* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), chap. 2.
  8. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson similarly connects disability to "misfitting." See Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," *Hypatia* 26 (2011): 591–609.
  9. Ralph Savarese, "Neurocosmopolitan Melville," *Leviathan* 15.2 (2013): 7–19; and Jason Tougaw, *The Elusive Brain: Literary Experiments in the Age of Neuroscience* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2018).
  10. See Edwin Clarke and L. S. Jacyna, *Nineteenth-Century Origins of Neuroscientific Concepts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).
  11. Elizabeth Fein, "Innocent Machines," in *Sociological Reflections on the Neurosciences*, ed. Martyn Pickersgill and Ira Van Keulen (Bingley, UK: Emerald Group, 2011), 27–50; Fernando Vidal, "Brainhood, Anthropological Figure of Modernity," *History of the Human Sciences* 22.1 (2009): 5–36.
  12. Julian Offrey de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine* (Chicago: Open Court, 1912), 95.
  13. See James Trent, *Inventing the Feeble-Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 1; Benjamin Rush, *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon Diseases of the Mind* (Philadelphia: Grigg, 1812), table of contents; and Samuel Gridley Howe, *Report to the Mass. Legislature on Idiocy* (1848), 14.
  14. Robert Montgomery Bird, *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself*, ed. Christopher Looby (New York: NYRB, 2008), 11.
  15. *Ibid.*, 32. A common schoolyard taunt at time alluded to the lewd shamelessness of idiots: "Dicky, Dicky Doot / Your shirt hangs out, / Four yards in and five yards out." See Iona Opie and Peter Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), 47.
  16. Justine S. Murison, *The Politics of Anxiety in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chap. 1. See also see Foust, *The Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York: Knickerbocker, 1919), 93.
  17. Foust, *Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird*, 113–14. Christopher Looby, introduction to *Sheppard Lee: Written by Himself* (New York: NYRB, 2008), xxii, xxiv.

18. Cited in Jaros, "Faculties of Law," 312–13.
19. The point that "My Friends in the Madhouse" was intended for *Sheppard Lee* is also made by Sari Altschuler in *The Medical Imagination: Literature and Health in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 152.
20. Robert Montgomery Bird, *Peter Pilgrim* (Philadelphia: Burtley, 1839), 106.
21. Bird, 148.
22. Bird, 130.
23. I use "normative" not to refer to statistical norms, a slightly later phenomenon, but to contrast Bird with comparative diagnostic language evident for example in phrenology, with its ideal of well-rounded crania.
24. Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 116.
25. Bird, 200.
26. Bird, 272.
27. Bird, 140.
28. Robert Montgomery Bird memo on "Metaphysics," undated, MS Coll. 108, folder 259, *Sheppard Lee* fragments, Robert Montgomery Bird papers, University of Pennsylvania Library, Philadelphia.
29. Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 140.
30. Dunglison, *Human Physiology*, 663.
31. Altschuler, *Medical Imagination*, 134.
32. Dunglison, *Human Physiology*, 451.
33. Webster, *American Dictionary*, vol. 2, s.v. "Morbid."
34. Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 96.
35. Bird, 425.
36. Murison reads *Sheppard Lee* as a case study of an excess of sympathy, or "disordered sympathies," (*Politics of Anxiety*, 18), while Sari Altschuler characterizes it as a "searing indictment of facile understandings of sympathy," which could never "stem or subsume the crisis emerging from the problem of knowing human difference" (*Medical Imagination*, 148, 133).
37. Webster, *American Dictionary*, vol. 1, s.v. "Sympathetic," "Sympathize," and "Sympathy."
38. Edgar Allan Poe, "Robert M. Bird" (1836), in *Edgar Allan Poe: Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 389.
39. Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 305–6.
40. See Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), chap. 16.
41. Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 35.
42. Anonymous, "Radicalism," *New England Magazine*, January 1834, 143. We know Bird probably read this because it appears directly below his own anonymously published poem "To Governor M'Duffie."
43. Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 207.
44. Bird, 209–10.
45. Andrew Jackson, second annual message to Congress, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 2, in *Native American Voices: A History and Anthology*, ed. Steven Mintz (St. James, NY: Brandywine, 1995), 115–16.
46. Bird, *Sheppard Lee*, 341.
47. Murison, *Politics of Anxiety*, 42–43, has also observed the conspicuous nod to the French and Haitian revolutions.
48. Robert Mudie, *Mental Philosophy: A Popular View of the Human Mind* (London: Wm. S. Orr, 1838), iii.
49. Johann Gaspar Spurzheim, *The Phrenological System of Drs. Gall and Spurzheim* (London: Baldwin, Craddock, and Joy, 1815), 495, 289.
50. John Carson, *The Measure of Merit: Talents, Intelligence, and Inequality in the French and American Republics, 1750–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), chaps. 1–3.
51. In the early nineteenth century, "idealism" was the belief in the incorporeal nature of the soul while "materialism" held that the mind can never be independent from its physical seat in the brain and body.
52. Francis Wayland, *Elements of Moral Science*, (Boston: Gould, Kendall and Lincoln, 1835), 192.
53. Franz Joseph Gall, *On the Functions of the Brain and Each of its Parts*, vol. 1, translated from the French by Winslow Lewis Jr. (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1835), 153.

54. James Cowles Prichard, *The Natural History of Man: Comprising Inquiries into the Modifying Influence of Physical and Moral Agencies on the Different Tribes of the Human Family* (London: H. Baillière, 1843), 1.
55. Anonymous, "Radicalism," *New England Magazine*, January 1834.
56. David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little Brown, 1971), 113–22.
57. This is one explanation for the question raised by Samuel Otter in *Philadelphia Stories: America's Literature of Race and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) over Bird's refusal to represent the rising black middle class in Philadelphia (103). For the racism underlying Bird's move to Maryland, see Bird's letter to Sam Groome of 1838, printed in Jaros, "Faculties of Law," 325, and mentioned by Curtis Dahl, *Robert Montgomery Bird* (New York: Twain, 1963), 109. For evidence of Bird's ownership of two slaves, see Foust, *Life and Dramatic Works of Robert Montgomery Bird*, 114.
58. William Yates, *Rights of Colored Men to Suffrage, Citizenship and Trial by Jury* (Philadelphia: Merrihew and Gunn, 1838), 10.
59. For neurodiversity's whiteness, see Savarese, *See It Feelingly* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 123. For racial disparity statistics, see American Psychiatric Association, "Mental Health Disparities: African Americans," December 19, 2017, [www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Cultural-Competency/Mental-Health-Disparities/Mental-Health-Facts-for-African-Americans.pdf](http://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Cultural-Competency/Mental-Health-Disparities/Mental-Health-Facts-for-African-Americans.pdf).
60. Friedrich Tiedemann, *On the Brain of the Negro, compared with that of the European and the Orang-Outang* (London: 1836).
61. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Natural History of the Intellect," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 12 (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1904), 31, 82.
62. Emerson, 83.
63. Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*, ed. Gareth Stedman Jones and Ian Patterson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86.
64. Fourier, 74–75.
65. Fourier, 130.
66. Charles Fourier, *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier: Selected Texts on Work, Love, and Passionate Attraction*, trans. Beecher and Bienvenu; first published in 1822 as *Théorie de l'unité universelle*.
67. Fourier, 74.
68. Fourier, 13.
69. Fourier, *Theory of the Four Movements*, 194.
70. Here I draw on Jasbir Puar's argument in *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), that the disability rights movement frequently leaps to the affective register of disability pride in lieu of reckoning with the biopolitical causes of impairment and debility.
71. For a salient critique of antebellum plasticity, see Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 23–27.
72. Ellen Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), introduction.
73. Scott Sandage, *Born Losers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 12.
74. Lennard Davis, "Diversity," in *Keywords in Disability Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 63.