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Antebellum Posthuman

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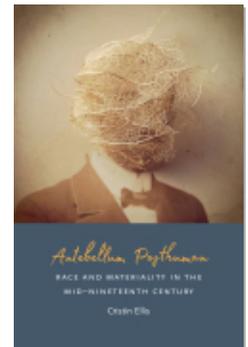
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Thoreau's Seeds: Evolution and the Problem of Human Agency

Henry often reminded me of an animal in human form. He had the eye of a bird, the scent of a dog, the most acute, delicate intelligence—but no soul. No . . . Henry could not have had a human soul.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON¹

I am not responsible for the successful working of the machinery of society. I am not the son of the engineer. I perceive that, when an acorn and a chestnut fall side by side, the one does not remain inert to make way for the other, but both obey their own laws, and spring and grow and flourish as best they can, till one, perchance, overshadows and destroys the other. If a plant cannot live according to its nature, it dies; and so a man.

—HENRY DAVID THOREAU, “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849)

What does it mean for Thoreau to compare society’s workings to the operations of “machinery”? According to what logic could he suggest that debate in a deliberative democracy obeys something like the dynamics of resource competition that govern forest succession? What does it do to our conception of belief to say that moral convictions are inscribed in our “natures” in the way that different habits of growth are inscribed in the natures of oaks and chestnuts? What prompted Emerson to suspect Thoreau had an animal body but no “human soul”?

As we have seen, the idea that moral and biological identity are ineluctably linked—that the human mind is not autonomous of the body—is central to biologist’s challenge to the humanist episteme, and a key premise of antebellum racial discourse. “The intellectual man is inseparable from the physical man,” write the authors of *Types of Mankind*, “and the nature of the one cannot be altered without a corresponding change in the other.”² In the previous chapter we saw how this embodied episteme created a crisis for the ideal of liberal equality at midcentury. The present chapter will examine a different aspect of the crisis that biologist’s embodied account of the human created for liberal doctrine, a problem symptomatized in

Thoreau's comparison of moral to speciological succession, above. As Thoreau suggests, since he is simply obeying the law of his embodied "nature" when he stands up against slavery, he cannot be held responsible for the actions he takes or their effect on "the machinery of society." If moral character is indeed inseparable from physical character, then human agency is merely an expression of biological forces that are beyond our design or control. Already in Douglass's appeal to instinctive violence we can discern the horizon of this reconceptualization of conscientious action: the biologization of belief transforms rational debate into a scene of existential struggle, in which men (like oxen, horses, snakes, and, Thoreau adds, trees and plants) must "live according to [their] nature" or die.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which Thoreau's increasingly empirical understanding of nature in the 1850s reshaped his late antislavery thought. Reexamining the shift in Thoreau's style in the 1850s, a shift often described as lurching from the lyricism of his early *Journal* to the ostensibly "dry" objectivity of his late naturalistic writings, I highlight the continuousness of Thoreau's commitment to an embodied conception of the human across this decade, and examine the difficulties this commitment created for his faith in the freedom of moral conscience, the founding principle of his natural law doctrine. The line I will be charting from the early to late *Journal*, and culminating in his essays for John Brown and unfinished manuscripts on seeds and fruits at the end of the decade, tells the story of Thoreau's sustained investigation of the phenomenon of environmental influence—of the plastic responsivity of the human body and mind to their physical surroundings. As I will argue, if Thoreau's conception of nature's moral influence is at first nearly indistinguishable from Emerson's depiction of nature as a moral text written in physical ciphers, it nonetheless progressively evolved into something markedly different: an idiosyncratic theory of environmental adaptation and speciological development that put Thoreau in conversation with the most controversial debate within antebellum racial science in his final years.

At its broadest, then, my claim is that we have not yet fully reckoned with Thoreau's embodied conception of the human and the effects that his late ecologism had on the liberal antislavery politics we habitually ascribe to him. Critical interest in Thoreau's empiricism has blossomed in the last three decades in the wake of groundbreaking studies by Sharon Cameron, Lawrence Buell, and Laura Dassow Walls, who taught us to recognize the philosophical import of Thoreau's long-disregarded late naturalistic writings.³ Dispelling the notion that Thoreau's "dry" empiricism signaled his declining artistic powers and withdrawal from social activism, these crit-

ics, and those who have followed them, celebrate the late work as evidence of Thoreau's intellectual maturation from Transcendental idealist to ecological materialist.⁴ Lawrence Buell memorably charts this as a progression "from homocentrism to biocentrism," arguing that Thoreau gradually learned to prioritize "nature's interest over the human interest" in his study of natural phenomena.⁵ On this revised view, the increasing facticity of Thoreau's writing in the late 1850s no longer appears as a renunciation of social activism but instead indicates the redirection of his concerns from the "homocentrism" of self-culture and antislavery reform to the "biocentrism" of environmentalist advocacy.⁶

Below I retrace Thoreau's intellectual development in the 1850s in order to highlight an aspect of his thought overlooked in this account of his environmentalist politics: the consanguinity, in antebellum science, of ecological and racial theory. As Richard Schneider observes, in the mid-nineteenth century the study of what we now call ecology was synonymous with the study of human ecology—of human origins, racial difference, and what was then widely assumed to be the teleological progress of civilization.⁷ Indeed, readers of the last chapter will recall that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century natural history, "environmentalism" refers to the idea, central to monogenist racial theory, that human and other species change in response to physical and cultural agents in their environments—a key premise of monogenist racial theory. In this first heyday of racial scientific controversy, even the driest ecological research—a study, for instance, on the varying girth of Galapagos finch beaks or on the mechanisms of seed dispersal—was rife with consequences for the racial politics by proxy unfolding in the pages of midcentury science.

The close affiliation of ecological and racial theory suggests that our accounts of Thoreau's late politics may need to be readjusted. For not only does it indicate that we may be overlooking the racialist implications of Thoreau's ecological vision, but moreover it suggests that our representations of ecologism as a correction to homocentrism may be misleading. The conjunction of ecology and racial science renders the epistemological distinction between nature's interest and human interest untenable: it collapses what Dipesh Chakrabarty has dubbed the "age-old humanist distinction between human history and natural history."⁸ And therefore when we describe Thoreau's late naturalism as an implicit renunciation of his earlier anthropological concerns—expressing "a passion for nature divorced from social meaning" or illustrating his mature interest in "much vaster cycles of time than those generated by the American political system"—we risk reasserting a distinction between natural and political life

that Thoreau's ecological outlook, as I shall be reading it, energetically works to dismantle.⁹

In addition to providing a more complete picture of Thoreau's late antislavery politics, acknowledging the racial implications of his ecologism also amends this picture by underscoring the proto-posthumanism of his late politics. In *The Politics of Nature*, Bruno Latour spells out the distinction between an environmentalist politics that aims to renaturalize human life and preserve nature from human encroachment, and an outlook (what I am calling posthumanism, and Latour calls "political ecology") that begins from the nonhumanist assumption of humanity's naturalness.¹⁰ There is nothing intrinsically redemptive in this latter synthesis: by contrast to what is sometimes presented as environmentalism's romantic aspiration to overcome human alienation and reunite with nature, posthumanism's sense of the always-already imbrication of social and natural processes is not ethical but ontological. Bearing this distinction in mind, I explore how, in addition to his environmentalist appeals to preserve wildness in both our exterior and interior landscapes, Thoreau's late work also elaborates a speculative theory of embodiment that attenuates his political commitments to liberal individualism and conscientious action. If Thoreau's late naturalistic research lent support to monogenist theory and thus bolstered his longstanding antislavery views, it also profoundly reorganized his theory of antislavery activism by remapping political reform onto the vast and diffuse populational, multigenerational, and not-quite-voluntary mechanisms of evolutionary change.

Against Agassiz: Thoreau's Development in Context

The story of Thoreau's evolution from social to environmental activist hinges upon the *Journal*, and the transformation it records as Thoreau's observational methods grew progressively less Transcendentalist and more empiricist over the course of the 1850s. The story I have to tell about Thoreau's development from individualism to posthumanism via environmental racial theory also begins with the renovation of his observational practice in the *Journal*, which I propose to characterize somewhat differently. For while I am fully persuaded that the *Journal* demonstrates Thoreau's gradual renunciation of Emerson's mode of reading nature as a symbolic text, I would like to suggest that it should also be read as registering his increasing resistance to another towering figure of antebellum natural philosophy, Louis Agassiz. Readers of the prior chapter will recall that Agassiz was a featured contributor to *Types of Mankind*; he was also, in

the late 1840s and 1850s, a looming presence in Thoreau's larger social circle: the celebrated head of Harvard's brand-new Lawrence Scientific School, a driving force behind the professionalization of American science and the chief architect of the theory of "special creation," which upholds the immutability of species and rejects the notion that races develop in response to their environments. When read in light of Thoreau's opposition to Agassizian science, the *Journal* begins to appear as a more consistently empirical project. As I shall argue below, even in its "poetic" mode of the early 1850s, the *Journal* demonstrates Thoreau's deliberate investigation, *pace* Agassiz, into nature's power to materially influence and thereby plastically transform life.

Louis Agassiz arrived in Boston in 1846 during the second year of Thoreau's residence at Walden Pond. He had been invited to give the prestigious Lowell Institute lectures in Boston and planned to spend two years touring the New World; as it happens, he never left. The buoyant Swiss naturalist so impressed American audiences with his encyclopedic knowledge and dynamic showmanship that his celebrity was soon being compared to Jenny Lind's, and by the end of 1846 Agassiz was offered a professorship at the head of Harvard's brand-new Lawrence Scientific School, slated to open in 1847.¹¹ The creation of the Lawrence School indexes the rising prominence of natural science in antebellum America. When Thoreau had attended Harvard in the mid-1830s, scientific study, such as it was, was an afterthought to the classical education on offer.¹² But the appointment of Agassiz to helm this new school is also telling in its own right. For as it was initially conceived, the Lawrence School was designed to offer instruction in practical sciences that would directly support "the pursuit of commerce, manufactures, and the mechanic arts."¹³ After Agassiz's spectacular popular success in 1846, however, the Lawrence School's major donor, cotton manufacturer Abbot Lawrence, was so captivated that he decided to pursue Agassiz, a theoretical scientist, for the school's top post. Agassiz's appointment thus gave the Lawrence School a newly theoretical mandate, attesting to the rising cachet of science not just as an applied practice but also as an episteme.

At Harvard, Agassiz consolidated this cultural shift by tirelessly working to institutionalize and professionalize American science. In 1847, he founded the American Association for the Advancement of Science (of which Thoreau soon became a member), and in 1853 he began to lay plans for opening the nation's first museum of natural history. That same year he announced his intention to bring out the first comprehensive survey of North American natural history, soliciting subscriptions among his

influential friends, who by this point included Senator Charles Sumner, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., and James Russell Lowell. But perhaps Agassiz's most profound influence on American science consists of his teaching: Agassiz trained the first generation of professional scientists in America. When he arrived in the United States, there was not a single domestic institution equipped to educate natural historians; by the end of the century, Agassiz's former student William James would observe, "there is hardly one now of the American naturalists of my generation whom Agassiz did not train."¹⁴

From his immensely influential position, Agassiz propagated a version of natural history organized on the theory of special creation.¹⁵ His research on glaciers in the 1830s, before his emigration to the United States, yielded the breakthrough hypothesis that the earth has undergone a number of ice ages, each of which caused a mass extinction event. From this insight, Agassiz developed his theory of special creation, arguing that God serially scrubs the earth clean with glaciers in order to repopulate the earth with more advanced and complex versions of the prior world's species. This theory of speciological change allowed Agassiz to account for a fossil record that kept turning up extinct species that nonetheless bore striking resemblances to extant species without requiring him to conclude that such fossils indicate that species are inherently changeful. Instead, the theory of special creation holds that only God has the power to change nature: in his apparently growing wisdom, God periodically revises species, but species themselves are static, undergoing no physical change between ice ages and remaining fixed in the geographical place to which God assigned them. On this theory, then, the resemblance between fossil species and present-day species is strictly typological: these species are not materially related, Agassiz asserted, but rather represent sequential iterations—an early and a later, superior draft—of a single divine thought. Agassiz thus roundly rejected the "developmental hypothesis" advanced by men like Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, and Robert Chambers. To the contrary, he argued that "there is nothing in [organized beings] which depends in the slightest degree upon the nature or the influence of the physical conditions in which they live."¹⁶ Such physical "agents have never been observed to produce anything new, or to call into existence anything that did not exist before," he maintains, concluding (in a line that might have made the early Emerson proud) that "the whole Creation is the *expression of a thought*, and not the *product of physical agents*."¹⁷ Like stop-motion animation, Agassiz's world only appears to move. God, and not change, is the author of the world that we see, and this syntactical world presents us

with a “vast picture in which each animal, each plant, each group, each class, has its place, and from which nothing could be removed without destroying the proper meaning of the whole.”¹⁸

From their first contact, it was clear that Agassiz’s scientific premises and methods were not Thoreau’s. In 1847, while he was still living at Walden Pond, Thoreau received an invitation to contribute birds to Agassiz’s North American collection. Collecting and classifying specimens was a cornerstone of Agassiz’s scientific method. Since he did not believe that species are influenced by their environments, he saw no value in studying species *in situ*; instead, he sought to comprehend the divine “thought” of creation by collecting as many extant species as possible and organizing these specimens into typological groupings—dividing them into the “four great branches of the animal kingdom” (Radiata, Mollusks, Articulata, Vertebrata), and then ordering them within these branches according to “their superiority or inferiority in regard to others.”¹⁹ In 1847, Thoreau had not yet begun to study natural history in earnest; however, he was already convinced of the importance of studying life in context. In response to Agassiz’s request for bird specimens, he wrote of his “squeamishness on the score of robbing [bird] nests” and suggested that there was, in any case, a wider variety of birds to be found near Harvard, since he had “noticed that in an open country where there are but few trees, there are more attractions for many species of birds than in a wooded one.”²⁰ Thoreau’s distaste for killing life in the name of studying it (he signs off, “Trusting that you will feather your own nest comfortably without stripping those of the birds quite bare”) was thus not only an ethical position. For Thoreau, any worthwhile study of North American birds must not only be able to identify different species but must, more importantly, be able to describe their distinctive ways of being—to understand how birds interact with their habitats and how habitat change (for instance, Cambridge’s deforestation) might induce populational migration (attracting more birds to Agassiz’s suburban campus than to Thoreau’s woods). It is, after all, not the shape but the *life* of the body that intrigues us.

Already in this brief first encounter, it’s clear that Thoreau’s interest in the lived interaction between organisms and their environments sets his approach to the study of nature apart from Agassiz’s. Laura Dassow Walls describes this difference as a fault line that divides the field of romantic science more broadly. As she argues, early nineteenth-century science was dominated by two competing attitudes toward local particularity. On one side were the “rational holists” (including Emerson and Agassiz) who viewed nature’s diversity as the expression of an anterior ordering principle

that is itself immaterial—law, spirit, thought, God, the One. Alternatively, “empirical holists” (including naturalists like Thoreau and Alexander von Humboldt) held that nature’s diversity is “moved and animated by *internal* forces,” that nature unfolds itself through the dynamic interaction of its myriad parts. These differing premises led romantic era science in two different directions: rational holists identified patterns in nature in an effort to elucidate the underlying and eternal ordering principle or moral law manifested therein; empirical holists endeavored to discern nature’s interconnectivity—to observe the “infinity of mechanical forces and chemical attractions” through which climate, topography, and vegetation, as well as human economies, languages, and cultures, variously combine and impinge on one another to create the forms of life distinctive to that place.²¹ The result of this latter epistemology, Walls suggests, “could be called a kind of situated knowledge,” a mapping of local complexity that also traces this local assemblage’s connections to natural phenomena farther flung in space and time.²²

In the late 1840s and early 1850s, Thoreau’s pursuit of “situated knowledge” was chiefly driven by his interest in something that Agassiz’s science strictly prohibited—the possibility of human development. Agassiz believed that humans *demonstrated* development in the sense that, for instance, the “white race” characterized “man in his highest development,” whereas other races embodied various aspects of humankind’s “early stages of development.”²³ Nonetheless for Agassiz, humans did not possess an intrinsic *capacity* for development; only an act of God—an exterminating ice age and total new creation—could change the nature of the races and advance humankind toward moral and physiological perfection. By his own account, Thoreau came to understand his sojourn at Walden Pond as an effort to prove the opposite hypothesis: that humans are indeed impressible, that “physical agents” in our environments can so alter our moral natures that we might come to “live with the license of a higher order of beings.”²⁴ Thus though he may have originally conceived of his move to Walden as an experiment in removal—a demonstration of the freedom afforded by renouncing one’s social environment—by the end of revising *Walden* in 1854, Thoreau had come to frame it as an experiment in self-transmutation, embracing (as William Rossi persuasively documents) a transmutationist theory of evolution that allows him to conclude that “there is an incessant influx of novelty into the world.”²⁵ If we would only go out into nature and open ourselves up to its creative force, we might find that these are “but the spring months in the life of the race,” he warrants.²⁶ In

“Walking,” an essay he first delivered in 1851, while he was still revising *Walden*, Thoreau formulates this thought in the form of an overtly anti-Agassizian credo: “I believe that climate does thus react on man—as there is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?”²⁷

But the site of Thoreau’s most rigorous and sustained experiment in environmental self-cultivation is the journal that he turned into a laboratory of situated empiricism in 1850. In November, Thoreau began to write in his journal every day. From that point forward the *Journal* became the instrument of a *practice*—what Walls describes as “a tool for seeing.”²⁸ Thoreau’s entries in this period demonstrate his ambition not only to record observations of flora and fauna around Concord but, moreover, to refine his capacity for perception—to discover how his own life is environed and, through this effort of attention, to thereby make himself more receptive to the influence of this environment. “Why should just these sights and sounds accompany our life?” he wonders in an entry for April 18, 1852, which serves as a kind of mission statement for this new *Journal* project:

Why should I hear the chattering of blackbirds, why smell the skunk each year? I would fain explore the mysterious relation between myself and these things. I would at least know what these things unavoidably are—make a chart of our life—know how its shores trend—that butterflies reappear & when—know why just this circle of creatures completes the world. Can I not by expectation affect the revolutions of nature, make a day to bring forth something new?

As Cawley loved a garden, so I a forest. Observe all kinds of coincidences—as what kinds of birds come with what flowers.

Fascinated by nature’s “coincidences” (such as “what kinds of birds come with what flowers”), Thoreau frames his *Journal* project as an effort to map the various elements of his environment so that he might “explore the mysterious relation between myself and these things.” What he wants to assemble, then, is not simply an Agassizian survey that will index all of the species that appear in Concord through the cycle of a year. For in addition to being able to list “what these things unavoidably are,” Thoreau hopes to make “a chart of our life”—to identify the material relations *between* these myriad phenomena and his lived experience so as to understand how “just these sights and sounds” produce just this kind of life. Moreover, Thoreau hopes that by studying this interrelation he can transform it—can “make a

day to bring forth something new.” His project is thus not simply documentary but creative: it is not only knowledge but also development he is after.

In her still peerless analysis of the *Journal*, Sharon Cameron highlights how this passage signals Thoreau’s break from the symbolic analytic of nature he had learned from Emerson, and which he employs so frequently in *Walden*. In his Emersonian mode, Thoreau “reads” natural phenomena as parables that are morally edifying, but here, Cameron argues, Thoreau’s natural phenomena “evade morals or interpretations.” For, as she explains, “morals are fixed” and universal whereas the natural phenomena Thoreau mentions here are “fugitive” and particular—historical rather than exemplary, desultory instants and not instantiations of a transcendent moral order. Indeed, Thoreau even suggests that this nature is unfinished, that it is still capable of bringing forth “something new.” Accordingly, Cameron concludes that “the sustained documentation of the *Journal* [is] the strategy for writing about nature that resists being symbolic”: convinced that this world is still in the making, the *Journal* sets out to record natural phenomena without mining them for timeless moral truths.²⁹

While I share Cameron’s sense that this passage indicates Thoreau’s conversion to an analytic of “nature that resists being symbolic,” I want to suggest that this change nonetheless did not put an end to his conviction that nature is morally edifying. When Cameron writes that the *Journal* is satisfied “by the very act of observing contrasts, disassociated from story, progression, from anything at all”—or again, when Buell suggests that the *Journal* tracks Thoreau’s progress “from homocentrism to biocentrism”—we are tempted to conclude that nature, in the *Journal*, is wholly indifferent to human meaning.³⁰ But if nature is not a divine text—a message for humans ciphered in bark and feathers—this need not mean that it therefore bears no relation to human thought. Throwing aside hermeneutics, Thoreau’s *Journal* proceeds on the understanding that the material environment *conditions* Thoreau’s perception of it. In other words, I suggest that the admittedly desultory notes that these entries collect—their apparently haphazard shifts between observations on the weather, flora and fauna, and the thoughts or reflections that these spring in Thoreau—will only seem to be a record of “relentless discontinuousness” if we discount what I take to be the *Journal*’s founding premise: that the various natural and mental phenomena it registers are materially interconnected.³¹

On my reading, Thoreau’s early *Journal* sets out to study the sensuous relations between his mind and nature, determined to identify the as-yet “mysterious” mutuality through which “just this circle of creatures completes” or convokes his thought of the world. The contours of this argu-

ment will be easier to comprehend by way of example. In his journal entry for July 21, 1851, Thoreau reports,

When I am against this bare promontory of a huckleberry hill, then forsooth my thoughts will expand. Is it some influence as a vapor which exhales from the ground, or something in the gales which blow there, or in all things there brought together agreeably to my spirit? The walls must not be too high . . . the trees must not be too numerous nor the hills too near bounding the view.³²

Here Thoreau describes an experience of what we might call inspiration atop a huckleberry hill. However, instead of relaying the content of his dilated thoughts, as we might expect, Thoreau is strictly interested in the physical circumstances surrounding their occurrence. Thus he takes note of the precise arrangement of walls (not too high), trees (not too numerous), and hills (not too near) in an effort to account for the fact that just *this* composition of objects has the power to cause his thoughts to spontaneously “expand.” This subjective experience is the result of “some influence,” he proposes, and if the mechanism at work is more complicated than the miasmatic local vapor he first suspects, it nonetheless retains for him all the predictability and reproducibility of a physiological reflex: “When I am against this bare promontory . . . my thoughts *will* expand.” However ephemeral or ethereal it may seem, this experience of mental illumination is, for Thoreau, a legibly material and embodied phenomenon.

This moment echoes others in the *Journal*, which doggedly tracks the movements of Thoreau’s thoughts of nature. We can see this, for instance, in Thoreau’s fascination with the correlation between the character of his thoughts and the seasons in which they arrive. For Thoreau, winter had a kind of incubating effect, its emptiness bringing his thoughts to fruition: “The winter was made to concentrate and harden and mature the kernel of [man’s] brain, to give tone and firmness and consistency to his thought,” he writes. “Then is the great harvest of the year, the harvest of thought.”³³ And if “winter with its inwardness” of blank days causes thoughts to take final shape, spring is, for Thoreau, the season of new freshets of inspiration.³⁴ “When the frost comes out of the ground, there is a corresponding thawing of the man,” he reports.³⁵ It would be easy to mistake these observations for analogies; however, Thoreau repeatedly indicates that the relation he means to invoke is not comparative but causal. Thus, for instance, when he observes that “the distant view of the open flooded Sudbury meadows, all dark blue, surrounded by a landscape of white snow, gave an impulse to the dormant sap in my veins,” we are at first tempted to imagine that his

feeling of revival manifests as a kind of mystical sympathy with the reawakening earth in this early spring thaw. But the entry goes on to explain that his quickening pulse is more specifically the result of anticipation: offering the first “placid reflecting water” to be seen since the ponds and rivers froze over months earlier, the flooded meadows direct his gaze upward to the sky, where he expects, on the “promise of the morrow,” to see the arrival of new avian life (birds come to fish those newly reopened waters). The flooded spring meadows thus produce a stirring in Thoreau because they indicate the return of activity after a long dull winter. “I must be on the lookout now for the gulls and the ducks,” he eagerly concludes; “this is the sap of which I make my sugar after the frosty nights.”³⁶ Reflections like these help to bring the *Journal* into focus as an instrument for studying the sensuous and affective relations by which natural phenomena incite physiological responses and excite mental phenomena. By faithfully documenting these coincidences, the *Journal* enables Thoreau to observe himself observing nature. In the retrospect that it provides, he can scrutinize his experience for clues to the specific mechanisms by which “climate does thus react on man.”

It is therefore not only the mutability of natural phenomena that marks the *Journal's* departure from Emerson's and Agassiz's static naturalism; Thoreau's heresy also inheres in his embodied conception of mind. Indeed, as Branka Arsić observes, Thoreau's ambition to think “the origin of thought . . . outside of the self” presumes a recursive relationality between mind and world that is at odds with the image of a “self-positing reflexive mind representing the external and material world.” The *Journal* practices an empiricism that begins from the assumption that the mind is not autonomous but rather inextricable from the external and material world it perceives—not mystically fused in some “vague and dubious quasi-ecological” way but ordinarily and unavoidably immersed by virtue of its embodiment and ongoing, sensuous impressibility.³⁷ On this reading, then, what changed as Thoreau's conception of nature became progressively less Transcendentalist and more empiricist in the 1850s is not his sense *that* nature is morally instructive but his sense of *how* this edification takes place. If, for Emerson and Agassiz, nature's order is symbolic (a catechism of law in rocks and stones and trees), in Thoreau's *Journal* nature increasingly appears as a shifting array of physical agents that work us over, impressing us sensuously and materially impinging on our minds through mechanisms Thoreau was determined to discover.³⁸

This intermediation of mind and environment makes for an unusual scientific practice: Thoreau understands his perceptual experience to be a

facet of the material phenomenon he is observing. Thus while Agassiz was training up the first generation of American scientists in the methods of strict objectivity (a mode of seeing Walls describes as a “crystalline purity . . . emptied of self”), Thoreau was developing an experimentally meta-observational practice that would not have passed muster at the Lawrence Scientific School.³⁹ As he would protest, however, his own method was arguably more rigorously empirical than the alternative. Thus, in a memorable journal entry for Christmas Day, 1851, he complains:

I witness a beauty in the form or coloring of the clouds which addresses itself to my imagination, for which you account scientifically to my understanding, but do not so account to my imagination. . . . You tell me it is a mass of vapor which absorbs all other rays and reflects the red, but that is nothing to the purpose, for this red vision excites me, stirs my blood, makes my thoughts flow, and I have new and indescribable fancies, and you have not touched the secret of the influence.⁴⁰

Lamenting the poverty of conventional science, Thoreau calls for an expanded practice that would take into account the whole phenomenon of sunset—both the observable light *and* the sensuous effects of that light on its observer. “This red vision excites me, stirs my blood, makes my thought flow,” he insists, pointing to the fact that this light has not only passed through the vaporous body of a cloud, but also through the medium of his own body, striking his eye and exciting his pulse and mind. Although it would be another thirty years before the invention of an instrument to measure changes in blood pressure, and even longer before the invention of a means to measure blood flow to the brain, Thoreau knows these as-yet-unmeasurable physiological phenomena to be materially real nevertheless, and he insists that they must be counted among the empirical phenomena that compose the multidimensional event we call “sunset.”

On this reading, then, when Thoreau suggests that science is in need of a poetic supplement, he is not voicing the commonplace romantic assertion that poetry has access to a higher moral truth to which empiricism’s prosaically earthbound materialism is blind. For Thoreau, “poetry” refers to experience—the same authority to which empiricism is, ostensibly, committed. Thus when he despairs at the deficiency of an “objective” science that purges subjective experience from its frame of reference, he is not exposing the inherent limitation of empirical knowledge so much as he is accusing conventional science of failing to live up to its empiricist creed. “There is no such thing as a pure *objective* observation,” Thoreau protests,

since “the sum of what the writer of whatever class has to report is simply some human experience.”⁴¹ A truly materialist empiricism must therefore acknowledge the mediating presence of the observer’s subjectivity. Indeed, he suggests that insofar as “objective” science fails to incorporate human perception within the frame of the natural world it scrutinizes, it not only lies about the empirical conditions of its operation but moreover condemns its inquiries to inconsequence. For by expunging the observer from the scene of observation, science precludes itself from examining what must be, tautologically, the most interesting facet of any natural phenomenon: its human interest. Thus Thoreau objects, “I think that the man of science makes this mistake . . . that you should coolly give your chief attention to the phenomenon which excites you as something independent of you, and not as something as it is related to you. The important fact is its effect on me. . . . The point of interest is somewhere *between* me and them (i.e., the objects).”⁴² There is, in other words, no such thing as intrinsic significance: we study that which excites us, and facts are only ever facts *for* someone.

But if it is thus a phenomenological rather than a poetic correction to science that Thoreau envisions, poiesis remains, in a different sense, the central concern of his alternative empiricism. As he insists, the aim of observation is not simply to document a fact but to register its effect on us in the event of perception. In this subjective science, the “poetry” or inventive-ness of Thoreau’s descriptions stems from the creativity of the perceptual encounter itself—watching a sunset generates a new experience in him. Hence he insists, “After all the truest description & that by which another living man can most readily recognize a flower—is the unmeasured [?] & elegant one which the sight of it inspires—No scientific description will supply the want of this though you should count & measure & analyse every atom that seems to compose it.”⁴³ What may seem like the inventiveness of Thoreau’s “poetic” descriptions of nature—their “unmeasured” embellishments, their interest in the effect and inspiration that natural objects can excite, and not simply in their measurable “atoms”—is in fact an insistence on the documentary. Our relations themselves are creative, sensuously, physiologically, and mentally transformative, and it is this—the poiesis of perception—that Thoreau’s prose attempts to get down. “A true description growing out of the perception & appreciation of [a fact]—is itself a new fact . . . indicating [its] highest quality . . . the relation to man.”⁴⁴ The world invents and reinvents Thoreau, and the poetry of the *Journal* is just another kind of geological record the world leaves.

This therefore suggests that if Thoreau’s reflexive science anticipates late twentieth-century critiques of scientific positivism—if, like Bruno Latour

or Karen Barad, Thoreau insists that scientific knowledge is subjectively and culturally mediated—his science also points up a connection between positivism and racist ideology. Thoreau's situated or relational scientific practice stems from his sense that bodies, minds, and even landscapes are *alive*, processual, susceptible to development: perception is an embodied event, and the viewer (at least) is altered by these encounters. His science therefore does not propose to tell us what an object *is* but, rather, how it *moves* us; it is the calculus to positivism's algebra, a science not of identity but of change. As such, Thoreau's critique of positivism is also a critique of racialism's essentialist view of the body. From the perspective of his lively science of a world in flux, the positivism of biological identity is untenable. Like Agassiz's science of still specimens and fixed orders, racialism's nomenclatural grid of human difference must inexorably be belied by the slow flow of embodied change.⁴⁵

In fact, by the mid-1850s, Thoreau's accumulating *Journal* record had led him to expand his intuitions of development into a nascent theory of speciological change. In 1856, on a visit to Horace Greeley's farm in New York, Thoreau described to Greeley his hypothesis that plant species do in fact migrate and colonize new territories through the agency of seeds, which are variously dispersed by wind, water, and animals.⁴⁶ Although the mobility of plants may be a phenomenon that seems wholly unrelated to the question of human development and racial difference, to midcentury naturalists this connection, on the contrary, went without saying. Information regarding the (im)mobility or (im)mutability of plant and animal species was universally understood "to throw light," as Agassiz affirms, "upon the very origin of the differences existing among men."⁴⁷

Thoreau's effort to substantiate his theory of speciological development presented him, however, with a new problem of scale. For whereas he could hope to observe his own experiences of natural transformation, the processes of seed dissemination and populational succession that now occupy him are phenomena that unfold at temporal and geographical scales not directly available to human experience. The mechanisms by which this kind of natural change is accomplished are at once too small—too dispersed and incremental—and too large—too attenuated in space and time—to register in our attention without the aid of careful, longitudinal records. It is therefore not coincidentally around the time of Thoreau's disclosure to Greeley that his *Journal* starts to become less consistently self-reflexive, focusing less and less on his perceptual experience as he becomes progressively more intent on systematically documenting the incremental mechanisms of populational change.

I am therefore suggesting what we have taken to be the newly “empirical” or “scientific” nature of Thoreau’s late *Journal* might also, and maybe even more accurately, be described as its newly racialist imaginary. The early *Journal* was already empirical—indeed, William James might say, “radically” so—and its idiosyncratic empiricism grew out of Thoreau’s desire to investigate the possible natural mechanisms of individual development. What changes in Thoreau’s final years is his determination to investigate the mechanisms of natural development at the level of biological populations—a scalar shift that turns his attention from the drama of personal reform to the epic sweep of speciological change. But if this means that his subjective experience now takes a backseat to more “objective” methods, it should be clear that Thoreau’s late science remained ripe with human interest and even political controversy.

On the Dispersion of Species: Race in Thoreau’s Population Studies

In 1853, Thoreau grieved privately to his *Journal* that he might never find an audience for his natural historical research. He had recently received a survey from Agassiz’s American Association for the Advancement of Science, to which he felt unable to respond frankly: “I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing stock of the scientific community to describe or attempt to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. . . . How absurd that, though I probably stand as near to nature as any of them, and am by constitution as good an observer as most, yet a true account of my relation to nature should excite their ridicule only.”⁴⁸ If Thoreau’s *Journal* remained a largely private enterprise in the early 1850s, this may be because his project presumed what Agassiz’s influential science strictly precluded: that environmental agents impinge on the body, and that individuals, races, and species are susceptible to change. This theory of natural development at the heart of the *Journal* and the unorthodox observational methods Thoreau developed to test it put Thoreau so far outside of the scientific mainstream Agassiz was then consolidating around himself that Thoreau did not dare to share it. A few years later, however, as he began to pursue these mechanisms at scale—tracking not his own personal development but the mechanisms of dispersion, succession, and adaptation in plant populations over time—Thoreau’s research became more legible (if still unpalatable to Agassizians) as a direct contribution to mainstream monogenist science.

In this section I suggest that two events in the latter half of the 1850s were instrumental in spurring Thoreau to brave ridicule by preparing his naturalistic research for publication. The first of these was the publication, in 1857, of the long-anticipated first volume of Agassiz's projected masterwork, *Contributions to the Natural History of the United States of America*, which contains Agassiz's definitive statement of the theory of special creation, "An Essay on Classification." The second event was the publication, in late 1859, of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which sparked a long season of controversy in Boston scientific circles and marked the beginning of the end of Agassiz's preeminence. As I shall argue, reading Thoreau's late naturalistic writings in light of these catalytic events draws out their polemical investment not only in ecological systematicity and the politics of environmental protection, but in human ecology and the politics of human difference on the eve of the Civil War.

Despite dining with Agassiz at Emerson's in 1857, the year *Contributions* came out, Thoreau did not get around to reading Agassiz's book until the following year. But if Thoreau was not overly eager to read the long-anticipated volume, it nonetheless seems to have had a major effect on him. As Robert Richardson reports, upon finishing *Contributions* Thoreau commenced a "major reading campaign in zoology," for which "Agassiz's volume seems to have been the initiating impulse."⁴⁹ At the same time, Thoreau's antagonism toward Agassiz's theory of special creation becomes more palpable in his *Journal*. In March, he objects that "No science does more than arrange what knowledge we have of any class of objects" (a jibe particularly aimed at the typological emphasis of Agassiz's static science).⁵⁰ Later that summer, observing toad spawn in a small pool atop Mount Monadnock, Thoreau dryly quips that "Agassiz might say that they originated on the top."⁵¹ Thoreau's account of a trip that Emerson took with Agassiz to the Adirondacks is likewise laced with condescension for both men: apparently Emerson bought a gun, shot a bird for Agassiz's collection, and then proceeded to shoot at bottles for fun. "It sounds rather Cockneyish," Thoreau sniffs. "Think of Emerson shooting a peewee (with shot) for Agassiz—& cracking an ale bottle (after emptying it) with his rifle at six rods!"⁵² Ultimately, however, Thoreau's dissent is most forcefully expressed in the form of counterevidence: as Richardson notes, in the spring of 1859, the *Journal* is particularly "filled with observations on the interconnectedness and interdependence of things in nature."⁵³ In the fall of that year, Thoreau began the major undertaking of culling his *Journal* notes in order to compose the manuscript that would become *Wild Fruits*.

Wild Fruits can be read as a tacit riposte to Agassiz's *Contributions*. A regionally specific guide to the identification and, above all, *appreciation* of New England plants, *Wild Fruits* is the situated antithesis to Agassiz's grand national typology. Thus whereas Agassiz promises to "[bring] together an extensive museum of purely American specimens," magisterially parading the nation's radically diverse fauna before us, Thoreau begins by suggesting that his purpose is to drive us out into nature, to bring us into closer contact with the vegetation immediately surrounding us.⁵⁴ "Most of us are still related to our native fields as the navigator to undiscovered islands in the sea," Thoreau observes. "We can any afternoon discover a new fruit there which will surprise us by its beauty or sweetness."⁵⁵ Most important, for Thoreau the value of this local knowledge has to do with the transformative moral effect it can have on us. "The value of these wild fruits is not in the mere possession or eating of them, but in the sight and enjoyment of them," he tells us. The child who goes huckleberrying "is introduced into a new world, experiences a new development, though it brings home only a gill of berries in its basket." Thus whereas Agassiz's volume is founded on the understanding that the value of comprehensively studying the immutable order of species is to decipher the vast "thoughts of God" encoded therein, Thoreau's guide is premised on his conviction that it is important to observe these local fruits because "the fruits of New England . . . educate us and fit us to live here." Thoreau promises us not an image of eternal order but an opening onto change: "The value of any experience is measured, of course . . . by the amount of development we get out of it." The chief interest of the species he will proceed to list is not the "finite" place they occupy in an orderly cosmos unmoved by physical forces, but the dynamic "part they play in our education."⁵⁶

But it is not only humans who develop in Thoreau's manuscript. In *Wild Fruits*'s standout essay, "Wild Apples," which Thoreau first delivered as a lecture in February 1860 (a month after perusing Darwin), Thoreau describes the development of a new variety of apple, explaining how an imported varietal near him has, through generations of migration and environmental adaptation, become feral and self-propagating, its flesh transformed into "the choicest of all its kind."⁵⁷ The striking thing about this little fable of re-wilding is just how mechanically specific it is. This is, as David Robinson notes, "a very Darwinian narrative" of speciation, highlighting how this new variety has arisen through the agencies of dissemination (its seed has strayed the orchard into unprotected new fields) and local pressure (aggressive browsing by its "bovine foes" has forced it to adapt new "tactics" for survival).⁵⁸ Thus if Thoreau's prefatory promise of

“development” to the reader who would stray into her “native fields” seems hazily unspecific, the development this apple undergoes by its wandering (or what *Walden* might call its “extravagance”) is unmistakably evolutionary, involving a physiological and characterological transformation. Indeed, it is no accident that Thoreau’s word for this fruit’s peculiar flavor is “racy,” an adjective he uses three times in this essay but apparently nowhere else in his corpus.⁵⁹ While ostensibly highlighting the fruit’s piquant taste, he clearly favors “racy” for its ability to underscore the fruit’s distinction as a new breed. For Thoreau, the bracing flavor of this apple’s flesh is a speciological trait that is also a kind of moral virtue, expressive of what he will ultimately describe as its uniquely American character. This is, he suggests, “our wild apple”: a transplanted and once-colonized fruit that “strayed into the woods from the cultivated stock” to assert its independence, annex new territories, and gradually become a “superior” new type. With “Wild Apples,” Thoreau brings his critique of Agassiz’s science into high relief, underscoring the raciological implications of his theory of environmental adaptation and development.

The other catalytic event that seems to have emboldened Thoreau to publish his naturalistic research was the publication of *Origin of Species*. Thoreau first read *Origin* in January 1860, just five weeks after its publication and one month before he first delivered “Wild Apples” as a lecture. In the ensuing months, Darwin’s book became a flashpoint of controversy in Boston scientific circles, particularly between Agassiz and his Harvard colleague Asa Gray. Gray had shared research with Darwin as Darwin was composing *Origins*, and he had even begun to introduce Darwin’s ideas on evolution to Boston audiences (possibly including Thoreau) as early as 1858.⁶⁰ Between February and April 1860, Agassiz, Gray, and other prominent men of science debated evolution in a series of meetings before the Boston Society of Natural History, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in the pages of the popular and scientific press. Thoreau may have attended one or more of these debates—his *Journal* indicates that he traveled to Boston on the day that at least one of them took place (February 6, 1860). But of course, as we have seen, unlike many in those Boston circles, Thoreau had not been persuaded by Agassiz’s speciological theory to begin with; whereas Darwin’s thesis struck other midcentury readers with the force of a detonation, Thoreau was already sympathetic to the idea that populations adapt and develop under the influence of their local environments.

What was new to Thoreau, in Darwin’s book, was the theory of natural selection. According to this theory, speciation occurs when the natural

variation within a species produces an anomalous trait that affords its carrier a competitive advantage, allowing that trait to proliferate down through ensuing generations. As Gray notes in his review of *Origin*, what made Darwin's theory worrisome was its ambivalence on the score of natural selection's progressivism ("Only let us hope that it always works for good," Gray writes). Moreover, Gray anticipated that this theory might be greeted with popular resistance—not only because it rules "the Negro and the Hottentot our blood-relations," but moreover because it puts the human race in "a closer relation" with the "quadrumanous family" (primates), and even ultimately traces "the evolution of the human no less than the lower animal races out of some simple primordial animal."⁶¹ In short, Darwinian monogenism upheld the common origin not just of all humanity but, moreover, of all life.

However, as Darwin himself acknowledged, his theory still suffered from blind spots, and it is here that reading *Origin* may have been particularly productive for Thoreau by helping him to recognize the vital and timely importance of his own seed studies. In his concluding chapter, Darwin observes that "the chief cause of our natural unwillingness to admit that one species has given birth to other and distinct species, is that we are always slow in admitting any great change of which we do not see the intermediate steps."⁶² In particular, he confessed, he was as yet unable to demonstrate the "intermediate steps" by which species migrate (as his theory required him to hypothesize) from one region to another:

Turning to geographical distribution, the difficulties encountered on the theory of descent with modification are grave enough. All the individuals of the same species, and all the species of the same genus, or even higher group, must have descended from common parents; and therefore, in however distant and isolated parts of the world they are now found, they must in the course of successive generations have passed from some one part to the others. We are often wholly unable even to conjecture how this could have been effected. . . . We are as yet profoundly ignorant of the many occasional means of transport.⁶³

Thus, as Michael Berger has demonstrated, Thoreau's studies of seed dispersal are not just related to Darwin's work but "directly support one of the weakest links in Darwin's argument for evolution."⁶⁴ Whereas Darwin was forced to simply assert that populations have gradually migrated to the

“distant and isolated parts of the world [where] they are now found,” Thoreau had laboriously observed the “infinitely . . . extensive and regular” system by which plants—which are the most emphatically rooted and thus apparently immobile of all the species—are broadly disseminated by wind, water, and animals.⁶⁵ His seed studies were thus poised, as Berger argues, to provide crucial support for Darwin’s embattled thesis.

In the fall of 1860, on the heels of a long summer of evolutionary debates, Thoreau delivered his lecture on “The Succession of Forest Trees.” Modestly addressing the enigmatic yet common occurrence that when a pine forest is cut down, an oak stand may spring up in the clearing, “Succession” sets out to demonstrate that this phenomenon is the result of the movement of seeds. Thanks to a vast and somewhat haphazard network of environmental mechanisms, Thoreau argues, even the heaviest seeds “will be found to be winged or legged,” able to wend their way across vast distances and even seemingly insurmountable topographical barriers without the aid of divine intervention.⁶⁶ In the weeks after delivering “Succession,” Thoreau threw himself into the task of elaborating this account by beginning work on a book-length manuscript, *The Dispersion of Seeds*, which compiled years of his naturalistic research to offer an even more comprehensive inventory of the mechanisms of seed migration and populational succession.

Thoreau’s impressively detailed grasp of interspecies mutualism and environmental dynamism in “Succession” has led contemporary critics to praise this essay’s proto-ecological understanding of nature. The essay is much less often read as an argument for racial unity and yet, coming as it did on the heels of months of evolutionary controversy, it would have been clear to Thoreau’s audience that his argument for speciological mobility bore directly upon the question of environmental adaptation at the center of the debate between Darwin and Agassiz. Indeed, the fact that “Succession” was the most widely reprinted of all of Thoreau’s essays—excerpted in several publications and republished verbatim in three, including Horace Greeley’s *New-York Weekly Tribune*—suggests that editors and readers appreciated its germaneness to the headlining questions of evolution and racial difference.⁶⁷

As if to ensure that we recognize the anthropological dimensions of his botanical thesis, Thoreau prefaces his essay with a humorous sketch of the ecology of racial migrations. “Every man is entitled to come to a Cattle-Show, even a transcendentalist,” he quips to his audience at the Middlesex Agricultural Fair; “and for my part I am more interested in the men than

in the cattle.”⁶⁸ In the paragraph that follows he describes the pleasure he takes in people-watching:

I wish to see once more those old familiar faces, whose names I do not know, which for me represent the Middlesex country, and come as near being indigenous to the soil as a white man can. . . . It is true, there are some queer specimens of humanity attracted to our festival, but all are welcome. I am pretty sure to meet once more that fellow . . . who prefers a crooked stick for a cane; perfectly useless, you would say, only *bizarre*. . . . He brings that much indulged bit of the country with him, from some town’s end or other, and introduces it to Concord groves.

As Walls notes, readers today tend to take these prefatory remarks on the fair as “witticisms” and “throwaway literary asides.”⁶⁹ Against that assumption, Walls observes that they also situate Thoreau as a speaker, exploding “the illusion of an invisible omniscient ‘I.’”⁷⁰ But in addition to resisting the pretense of objectivity, these humorous remarks also cagily point to the connection between nonhuman and human ecologies. Reminding us that humanity is also a subject of the naturalist’s scrutiny, Thoreau anticipates the essay’s analysis of populational mobility and secondary growth among tree species by noting that the typologically “familiar” population of Middlesex County is nonetheless not original to this place but rather has migrated and adapted to this “country,” becoming “as near being indigenous to the soil as a white man can.” He further suggests that the features of this local race are not fixed, taking note of how one or two “queer specimens of humanity,” recently arrived from elsewhere, are even now introducing “bizarre” new variations “to the Concord groves.” Here again, Thoreau’s horticultural pun (“bizarre” being a term for splashy, variegated varieties of flower) and his metaphorical substitution of Concord’s “groves” for its society both insist that the ecology he is about to describe applies interchangeably to oak stands, cattlekind, and the human race.⁷¹

When read in the context of Agassiz’s and Darwin’s landmark midcentury publications, the racial import of Thoreau’s late naturalistic writings is more visible. But if there is still any question about the racialism implicit in Thoreau’s studies of dissemination, Thoreau’s “Indian Notebooks” help us to see that Thoreau explicitly understood the migration of seeds and migration of races to be conceptually of a piece. Thoreau’s second-largest undertaking in this decade, after the *Journal*, the “Indian Notebooks” consist of twelve commonplace books that together comprise what Richard Fleck calls “the largest body of knowledge on American Indian cultures

in the nineteenth century.⁷² In these books, Thoreau transcribed passages from his wide-ranging reading of travelogues, missionary reports, land surveys, and ethnologies relating to the indigenous peoples of North America, and their record indicates that in the late 1850s he also began to compile research on the question of Native American racial origins.⁷³ Although Thoreau's bibliography on this subject was catholic (he read works of both polygenist and monogenist science), evidence suggests that he was most persuaded by the theory that indigenous Americans did not originate in North America (as polygenists argued) but, rather, migrated to this continent from Asia. Indeed, his transcriptions from polygenist works betray an impish instinct to catch them in moments of conceptual impasse.⁷⁴ By contrast, in 1856 Thoreau approvingly transcribed Benjamin Smith Barton's thesis "that the Americans are not, as some writers have supposed, specifically different from the Persians, and other improved nations of Asia," affirming the likelihood of Smith's thesis in his *Journal* the following year, where he observes that "It is most . . . in accordance with the natural phenomena, to suppose that North America was discovered from the northern part of the Eastern Continent, for a study of the range of plants, birds, and quadrupeds points to a connection on that side. . . . Men in their migrations obey in the main the same law."⁷⁵ In keeping with this thesis, in the late "Indian Notebooks" Thoreau pursues cross-racial commonalities by reading travelogues not only of North America but also of the Middle East, Greenland, Australia, the East Indies, the Arctic, and several regions of Africa. As he confessed to the *Journal* in 1859, "It is the spirit of humanity—that which animates both so-called savages & civilized nations, working through a man, and not the man expressing himself, that interests us most."⁷⁶ Here again, Thoreau's interest in animation—in the migratory and mutational dynamism of life—leads him to reject the typological episteme embraced by Agassiz's science and by racialism's ideology of identity and difference.

Thoreau was thus well aware that his own research on speciological migration and development, published in "Succession" and "Wild Apples," was proposing to contribute to an ecological science that was inseparable from racial theory in his antebellum moment. But if we can therefore discern this work's connection to racial theory, defining their racial *politics* remains a different and far more speculative task. As readers of the prior chapter will remember, monogenist racial theory was deployed in both pro- and antislavery arguments, and in support of both racist and egalitarian views. In analyzing Thoreau's writings, a number of scholars highlight the racial chauvinism and settler colonialism implicit in these (and other)

essays' visions of a new "racy" flavor of white transplants who are, like the wild apple or Middlesex farmer, becoming "near indigenous to the soil" of their appropriated home. As these critics note, such a vision effects a double displacement of Native Americans, anticipating their geographical expulsion and cultural appropriation by a "superior" new race of nativized white Americans.⁷⁷ On the other hand, critics who have focused on Thoreau's studies of Native Americans—including his anthropological and ethnographic research in the "Indian Notebooks" and his accounts of traveling with Penobscot guides in *The Maine Woods*—suggest that by the late 1850s Thoreau had developed a far more nuanced admiration for Native American cultures, expressing a desire to learn from them that did not amount to a desire to impersonate or displace them.⁷⁸

While holding this line of inquiry open, I would like to propose that Thoreau's engagement with racial science may also have shaped his politics in a very different way. I have been arguing that Thoreau's interest in ecological change is inseparable from his interest in human development and the question of racial history more broadly. I would now suggest that the theory of speciological development—its biologism, contextual mechanisms, and the vastly expanded scale at which it operates—reinfects Thoreau's theory of social reform, as evidenced in the last antislavery essays of his career, written in defense of John Brown. As I shall discuss in the next section, the naturalization of Thoreau's late antislavery thought registers in the way he accounts for conscientious disagreement (which now appears to be a matter of embodied differences) and in his abandonment of immediatism (Thoreau now suggests that moral reform requires generations to unfold). In particular, I suggest that this alteration in Thoreau's thought registers as a problem of attenuated human agency that his late essays introduce. In this regard, Thoreau's late antislavery essays encapsulate both the power and the limitations of the political ecology that emerge out of his final writings.

Weird John Brown: The Revolutionary as Racial Anomaly

Thoreau's last antislavery essays are coeval with his late natural historical manuscripts; between 1859 and 1860 he moved back and forth between his political and ecological writings. In October 1859 Thoreau had just begun to draft *Wild Fruits* when news of John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry reached Concord.⁷⁹ Eleven days later, on October 30, he delivered "A Plea for Captain John Brown" at the Concord Town Hall, reprising his speech twice more that week (once in Boston as a stand-in for Frederick Doug-

lass, who had sailed to England to avoid being arrested in connection with Brown). On December 2, Thoreau delivered a short eulogy for Brown at a memorial service he had organized at Concord. In early January 1860, Thoreau was reading Darwin, and in early February he drew up final proofs of "A Plea" as he prepared to deliver "Wild Apples" for the first time. In the ensuing spring and summer months, as the Darwin-Agassiz debate played out, he chiefly worked on the manuscript of *Wild Fruits*, but he also wrote a substantial second essay, "The Last Days of John Brown," which he sent to be read at a July Fourth memorial service for Brown in North Elba and which was subsequently republished in the *Liberator*. Two months later he delivered "Succession" at the Middlesex County Fair and began to compose *The Dispersion of Seeds*, his most comprehensive case for speciological migration and adaptation.

As a rule, critics have tended to describe these months of Thoreau's life as a time of intellectual bifurcation, characterizing his essays for Brown as a temporary distraction from his main task of composing his late natural historical manuscripts.⁸⁰ My claim here is that his thoughts on Brown are better understood as extensions and translations of his naturalistic research, for the theory of change he formulates in *Wild Fruits* and *The Dispersion of Seeds* is the same one that animates the account of political reform he sketches out in his essays on Brown, which envision social change as a process of intergenerational succession that is no less operational and inexorable for being difficult to discern in the moment.

Thoreau's essays in praise of Brown entered a public sphere in which even abolitionists denounced Brown's violent methods and popular consensus held that he was insane. Against the tide of this public opinion, Thoreau's essays not only seek to justify Brown's cause but advance the strikingly counterfactual claim that this would-be revolutionary—thwarted, arrested, and slated to die—has succeeded. To the neighbors who tell him Brown "threw his life away," Thoreau responds: "Such do not know that like the seed is the fruit, and that, in the moral world, when good seed is planted, good fruit is inevitable, and does not depend on our watering and cultivating; that when you plant, or bury, a hero in his field, a crop of heroes is sure to spring up. This is a seed of such force and vitality, that it does not ask our leave to germinate."⁸¹ To justify his faith in Brown's ultimate success, Thoreau leans on the logic of natural succession that he was just then working out in his other manuscripts. His metaphor here frames political change—in this case the proliferation of abolitionist sentiment—as a process that operates through mechanisms akin to those by which the wild apple's new race came about. As he tells us in "Wild Apples," the remarkable thing about

that “chance wild fruit” is that its seeds are “hardier” than those of the cultivated stocks from which this apple diverged, able to “plant themselves in distant fields and forests” without the assistance of human tending.⁸² That this fruit can germinate “in woods and swamps and by the sides of roads,” and even survive the grazing herds of “bovine foes,” is evidence of what Darwin would term its natural advantage.⁸³ This apple is, as Thoreau more colloquially puts it, “good seed”—a natural variant whose anomalousness affords it a higher rate of survival and thereby allows it to propagate a new breed. And this is how Thoreau now proposes to explain why Brown’s words and deeds need not fall on sympathetic ground for his beliefs to “germinate”: some beliefs have “such force and vitality” that they can withstand our indifference and proliferate among us without our “leave.”

According to the more standard view, which holds that morality is a set of positions we consciously assent to, there is something unsettling in this notion that a belief might propagate itself without the aid of our consent. And of course, one might also note that this disconcerting idea that moral truth has its own kind of endemic force is an article of Transcendentalist faith that recurs throughout Thoreau’s political writings. “What force has a multitude?” he observes in his 1849 essay, “Resistance to Civil Government. “They only can force me who obey a higher law than I.”⁸⁴ But if moral truth emboldens those who choose to become its champions, what seems to have changed in this late essay is that here moral truth apparently has the power to move through populations of its own accord. Looked at differently, then, we can see that Thoreau’s vision of Brown’s propagative power marks a profound shift from an individualistic to a populational conception of morality. That is, whereas in 1849 Thoreau’s rhetorical question “What force has a multitude?” was meant to contrast the multitude’s physical force with the superior moral power of the conscientious individual, Thoreau’s late writings now conflate moral and physical compulsion. Brown’s moral force is the same as his propagative capacity; moral force can now be measured by demographic success—by the multitudes that it produces with or without “our leave.” Brown has not simply done something heroic; he embodies a superior, heroic race.

And hence, although Thoreau takes comfort in projecting a future race of John Browns, his conflation of moral and raciological identity might well give us pause. The essentialism it implies results in an attenuation of moral agency. This problem becomes clearer in “Wild Apples” when Thoreau reverses his metaphor: if Brown was “good seed,” here he suggests that good seeds are heroic individuals. Turning the emergence of the variant wild

apple into a parable of human progress, Thoreau writes that among men, too, “only the most persistent and strongest genius defends itself and prevails, sends a tender scion upward at last, and drops its perfect fruit on the ungrateful earth. Poets and philosophers and statesmen thus spring up in the country pastures, and outlast the hosts of unoriginal men.”⁸⁵ Beyond illustrating how topologically entwined Thoreau’s late naturalist and political writings are (they use the same metaphors), we can also notice that in both projects Thoreau is working through the same philosophical problem: how to understand agency within a materialist system. One can, for instance, read this passage as a lesson about the singular importance of the exceptional individual. According to both the “great man” theory of history and the evolutionary theory of development, one heroic specimen—one anomalous individual, one unusually bovine-resistant seedling—has the power to change the course of history (human or natural) going forward. On the other hand, this parable also works to naturalize—to render embodied and involuntary—the heroic individual’s contribution. Here greatness is not an accomplishment so much as it is an identity—an embodied “genius” for persistence that allows him to “outlast” his “unoriginal” peers. Indeed, that word “genius,” etymologically related as it is to “genus” and “gene” via their shared root in the Latin word for the male spirit of a familial or tribal line, conjures an exceptional character that is specifically raciological—inborn like the wild apple’s distinctive hardiness.⁸⁶ To praise the virtue of such a man—as, indeed, Thoreau praises the character of the wild apple—is to congratulate the beneficiary of biological luck.

Of course, as the second epigraph to this chapter attests, this is not the first time that Thoreau has suggested that moral character might be determined by one’s embodied “nature.” However, in the context of his late empirical research, and in this case arriving in the midst of a story about the wild apple’s racial speciation, his invocations of natural succession carry a new kind of weight. At this point in Thoreau’s career as a naturalist, we can no longer dismiss the biologism of his metaphors as purely rhetorical. Taking these figures seriously therefore also entails acknowledging that the problems of human agency that they introduce are very real. The possibility that we are not responsible for the beliefs that we hold pervades Thoreau’s defense of Brown in “A Plea.” It lingers, for instance, around Thoreau’s suggestion that Brown is a new breed of American: “the most American of us all,” he does not typify Americans (“He was too fair a specimen to represent the like of us”) but rather instantiates its new type. Thus Thoreau insists that “Brown could not have been tried by a jury of

his peers, because his peers do not exist.” Instead, he rises “above [his accusers] literally *by a whole body*”—a grim visual pun which transforms Brown’s hanging corpse into the measure of not just his moral but also his *corporeal* superiority (a distinction Thoreau underlines in italics and by his insistence that he is speaking “literally”). And by this same embodied logic, in “A Plea” Thoreau argues that Brown’s detractors are “half-brutish,” suffering from “a difference of constitution, of intelligence, and faith.” “They pronounce this man insane, for they know that *they* could never act as he does, as long as they are themselves,” he complains, underscoring the existential nature of this disagreement—they are *constitutionally* incapable of sympathizing with him; they could not think or act as he does and be “themselves.”⁸⁷

This essentialism becomes loudest in Thoreau’s second essay for Brown. Written in the spring or summer of 1860, in the midst of the public debate over Darwin’s challenge to Agassiz, “The Last Days of John Brown” is even more insistent that Brown’s critics are not just morally but physiologically inferior to him. “The man who does not recognize in Brown’s words a wisdom and nobleness,” Thoreau submits, is “not willfully but constitutionally blind.” As he continues,

I was not surprised that certain of my neighbors spoke of John Brown as an ordinary felon, for who are they? They either have much flesh, or much office, or much coarseness of some kind. . . . Several of them are decidedly pachydermatous. I say it in sorrow, not in anger. How can a man behold the light who has no answering inward light? They are true to their *sight*, but when they look this way they *see* nothing, they are blind. For the children of the light to contend with them is as if there should be a contest between eagles and owls. . . . It is not every man who can be a Christian, even in a very moderate sense, whatever education you give him. It is a matter of constitution and temperament, after all. He may have to be born again many times. . . . It is not every man who can be a freeman, even.⁸⁸

In deeming his neighbors “pachydermatous,” Thoreau recasts the racist trope that Black bodies are insensitive—naturally impervious to heat, overwork, and emotional hardship.⁸⁹ Simulating the essentialism, biological chauvinism, and even the dermatological fixation of racist science, Thoreau finds his neighbors condemned to moral blindness by an insensibility that is congenital (“not willfully but constitutionally” acquired) and physiological (“a matter of constitution and temperament, after all”). He even indicates that *Homo pachydermatous* may be another species—benighted

“owls” to the diurnal “eagles” who sympathize with Brown—and in doing so he affects the same condescending regret (“I say it in sorrow, not anger”) that Nott and Agassiz express when they come to similarly heretical conclusions. At once echoing and indicting Agassiz’s patronizing proposition that “the best education to be imparted to the different races” must account for “their primitive difference” by not attempting “to force the peculiarities of our white civilization . . . upon all nations of the world,” Thoreau suggests that resistance to the truth of human equality proves that not every white man “can be a Christian . . . whatever education you give him.”⁹⁰

But as gratifying as this satirical skewering of polygenism is, its biologism also injects Thoreau’s last antislavery essay with a fatalism uncharacteristic of his prior politics. In earlier essays like “Resistance to Civil Government” (1849) and “Slavery in Massachusetts” (1854), Thoreau rails against what he describes as our conscientious enslavement to the slaveholding power, and urges us to “for once and at last serve God . . . by obeying that eternal and only just CONSTITUTION which He, and not any Jefferson or Adams, has written in your being.”⁹¹ In these earlier essays, moral redemption is within everyone’s reach: their own quaking resolve is the only obstacle standing between them and moral perfection. But by the John Brown essays, the moral “constitution” Thoreau invokes has taken on a fleshy materiality and embodied diversity that makes it operate very differently, so that now moral reform may be beyond my power: “It is not every man who can be a freeman, even.” Of course, it is clear that Thoreau does not intend to wholly limit the scope of our moral agency. These essays still press us to overcome our torpidity and live up to the promise of our natures: “If this man’s acts and words do not create a revival, it will be the severest possible satire on the acts and words that do. . . . [Brown] has already quickened the feeble pulse of the North, and infused more and more generous blood into her veins and heart.”⁹² But different, here, is these essays’ new sense that we may be working within organic limits, that the “constitution and temperament” that dictate our conscience, though technically still given us by God, may afford us greater or lesser moral insight depending upon the luck of our birth.

But if Thoreau therefore seems to accede to a kind of moral fatalism, his resignation is leavened by his correspondingly redoubled faith that moral progress is nevertheless on its way. Both “A Plea” and “Last Days” conclude by affirming Brown’s future redemption, expressing a degree of optimism that is unusual in Thoreau’s political writings. In professing this faith, Thoreau invokes a newly capacious sense of political time. When in “Slavery in Massachusetts” his choice was between Jefferson’s Constitution

or God's, his options were to live within the fallen time of human history or to immediately assent to the timeless order of higher law inscribed in his conscience. Now, however, Thoreau seems to imagine moral reform as a gradual rather than millennial process. Brown himself is a product of history here: "such a man as it takes ages to make, and ages to understand."⁹³ Likewise, Thoreau now figures Brown's vindication as an outcome that will arise not through our instantaneous moral conversion but by the intergenerational march of succession: as we have seen, Thoreau expects "a new crop of heroes" to spring from Brown's fecund "good seed" and disseminate his legacy to the future. It is thus by turning to the timeline of sociological change that Thoreau can conclude that even though Brown's raid did not incite the hoped-for slave insurrection, it nevertheless engendered "the possibility, in the course of ages, of a revolution."⁹⁴ "I foresee a time when the painter will paint [the] scene" of Brown's martyrdom, Thoreau confidently closes "A Plea." "The poet will sing it; the historian record it; and . . . it will be the ornament of some future national gallery, when at least the present form of Slavery shall be no more here."⁹⁵

One possible name for this optimistic patience is passive resistance. This, at least, is the term Wai Chee Dimock invokes to describe what she calls the logic of "slow translation" subtending Thoreau's faith in Brown's eventual success. "Is an action still meaningful if the outcome transpires far beyond the life span of the actor?" she hears Thoreau's essays for Brown asking. "Just how far can deed and consequence be strung out?" As Dimock argues, Thoreau's answer—*really far*—works to expose the fact that our tendency to judge political actions by their immediate results puts a premium on violent acts, whose consequences are "instantly adducible and demonstrable." Against that bias, Thoreau's philosophy of passive resistance challenges us to expand our sense of the scale at which politics happen. In contrast to war's "bluntly truncated" temporal timeframe, the enlarged horizon of passive resistance allows us to discern the operation of far more subtle methods and processes of political change.⁹⁶ From this perspective, Dimock suggests, Brown's posthumous agency now becomes visible in the legacy he has "given over to the care of others . . . who will go on to write" about him and catalyze new activism.⁹⁷ Under the sign of passive resistance, we may begin to trace the "luxuriance of outcome" that exfoliates from more indirect and minimal political actions like antislavery essays, withheld consent, the "will to disarm," and other acts of non-violent civil disobedience.⁹⁸

But what led Thoreau to adopt this vastly expanded view of political change? The cascading ramification of minimal events that Dimock

observes here describes the thesis of *The Dispersion of Seeds*, which sets out to demonstrate that natural change occurs not by spontaneous generation or the violence of divine apocalypse but by the ongoing operation of myriad minor agencies. This gradualism describes Thoreau's "faith in a seed":

For many years the daily traveler along these roads—nay, the proprietor himself—does not notice that there are any pines coming up there . . . but at last his heir knows himself to be the possessor of a handsome white-pine lot, long after the wood from which the seed came has disappeared.

We need not be surprised at these results when we consider how persevering Nature is and how much time she has to work in. . . . A great pine wood may drop many millions of seeds in one year, but if only half a dozen of them are conveyed a quarter of a mile and lodge against some fence, and only one of these comes up and grows there, in the course of fifteen or twenty years there will be fifteen or twenty young trees there, and they will begin to make a show and betray their origin.

In this haphazard manner Nature surely creates you a forest at last, though as if it were the last thing she were thinking of. By seemingly feeble and stealthy steps—by a geologic pace—she gets over the greatest distances and accomplishes her greatest results.

Like Dimock, Thoreau suggests that by dilating the scale of our vision we may begin to perceive the "slow translation" of a world that otherwise appears, to our immediate senses, as a fixed order that can only be changed by violent catastrophe. Thus Thoreau explains how the "seemingly feeble" and "haphazard" agency of seeds, breezes, and felicitous fence posts are sufficient to move whole forests, albeit at a "geological pace." Though this process may be too gradual and protracted to witness personally, he insists that it should give us faith that ours is a mutable world: "We find ourselves in a world that is already planted, but is also still being planted as at first."⁹⁹

By calling the philosophy of minor agencies she finds in the Brown essays "passive resistance," Dimock suggests that the theory of change these essays introduce is of a piece with Thoreau's earlier political writings (the term "passive resistance" is, after all, most closely identified with "Resistance to Civil Government"). On my reading, however, his thinking in the John Brown essays derives more immediately from his late naturalistic studies, and in fact marks a significant departure from his earlier antislavery thought. What Thoreau discovered as his early naturalistic interest in

personal moral growth became an interest in speciological succession and development is that, from the perspective of ecological systems, the agency of any given individual is singularly hard to parse. A lone pine seed may be decisive or expendable to the generation of a new pine stand, and although Thoreau describes the results of this process as intentional (the coyly realized plan of a personified “Nature”), up close, he confesses, its indirect and dilatory operation looks anything but purposive. The transference of this ecological model of change into his antislavery writings inspires his expanded conception of political action, and the result seems less an elaboration than a displacement of his earlier politics’ emphasis on the revolutionary power of individual moral agency and the possibility of immediate political conversion. Resituating Brown’s action at Harpers Ferry within the much larger history of this raid’s diffuse future legacy allows Thoreau to assert Brown’s eventual success, but it does so by minimizing the scope of Brown’s intentional agency. The actions Brown conscientiously took—his raid and speeches—are dwarfed by comparison to the posthumous cascade of consequences his life has triggered and which are, Thoreau attests, what will ultimately bring his revolution to fruition.

This subsumption of individual agency into systemic complexity drives Thoreau’s final conclusion, at the end of “Last Days,” that Brown’s death is nothing, his execution inconsequential: “He is more alive than he ever was.” Having compared Brown’s martyrdom to Christ’s, Thoreau now punningly naturalizes that metaphor by comparing Brown to the sun, proclaiming that today Brown “works in public, and in the clearest light that shines on this land.”¹⁰⁰ His unconcern for Brown’s death underscores that it is not Brown’s actions but his influence, the series of aftereffects his life will have touched off, that are poised to transform us. At the same time, the image of Brown’s influence as a kind of sunlight conjures Thoreau’s early *Journal* studies of the mechanisms of light’s influence, the way it impinges on us and subtly transforms our thoughts. “I have new and indescribable fancies, and you have not touched the secret of the influence,” he wrote of that sunset on Christmas Day.¹⁰¹ Thus though Brown’s legacy will no doubt, as Dimock argues, carry forward via the discursive mechanisms of cultural transmission, in this case, Thoreau’s rhetoric refuses to care about the distinction between cultural influence of the sort Dimock cites (whose mechanisms require voluntary human action and consent) and environmental influence (whose mechanisms do not). Brown is now an element of our environment like the light, and that environment has the power to gradually yet radically transform whole populations, whether they wish to be changed or not.

Thoreau's antislavery materialism is thus surprising for two reasons. First, in this racial scientific moment, the predictable antislavery move would have been for Thoreau to deploy his monogenist theory of speciological development to defend human equality and uphold the brotherhood of all races. But though he voices this thesis elsewhere in his work, Thoreau's essays for John Brown spurn the discourse on racial origins and instead draw upon his empirical studies to frame a profoundly expanded theory of political change. In doing so, they move away from the individualism and immediatism of his earlier politics, and hence the second surprise here is that in amending his sense of the timeline and mechanisms of social reform, Thoreau's ecologism leads him to take a deeply qualified view of human agency. Where his earlier writings spoke to our will and resolve, these late writings speak of our condition. Thoreau imagines us as embodied beings who are not fully in control of our moral identities: we are sometimes "willfully" but other times "constitutionally" immoral, and if we are individually and collectively evolving this change seems to occur less by choice than by adaptation, as we affectively and physiologically respond to natural and social environments that work us over.

In this sense, Thoreau's antislavery materialism divorces his late politics from a Western humanist tradition that defines human nature by its moral autonomy and sovereign agency (the freedom of conscience and freedom to enact it that are so crucial to Thoreau's early antislavery work). Thoreau's empirical studies led him to reimagine all of nature as an imbricated and generative process: "The development theory," he observes in *Dispersion*, renders nature "equivalent to a sort of constant new creation."¹⁰² In place of racism's static hierarchy of biological life, Thoreau's ecological politics emphasize life's mutability, a view he came to from his early faith in the human mind's susceptibility to environmental influences.

In theorizing the intermediation of social and biological life, and refusing any final distinction between politics and nature, Thoreau's antislavery materialism anticipates key aspects of contemporary posthumanist theory. Like many posthumanist theorists, Thoreau offers his vision of worldly processualism as a response to the problem of political oppression: the changefulness he uncovers bespeaks a worldly susceptibility to "constant new creation" which promises that the future need not reproduce the wrongs of the present (such as slavery). More specifically, the scope and complexity of this processualism makes his view newly empowering to minor agencies in ways reminiscent of recent posthumanist theories of political affect. Promising that even apparently inconsequential actors (a gust of wind, a peckish cow, a failed revolutionary) can unleash effects that

snowball into significance—that just one splinter can derail vast trains of power—Thoreau evinces an optimistic faith in the transformative power of minor agencies that resonates, for instance, with William Connolly’s account of the vulnerability of neoliberal order to grassroots activism. Connolly insists on the volatility of even the most hegemonic-seeming institutions in the face of the sheer complexity, and hence unpredictability, of the diverse forces that shape our lives. “Creative processes flow through and over us, and reflexivity doubles the creative adventure,” he observes, arguing, “If you join attention to differing degrees of creativity in the domains of human culture, nonhuman force fields, and culture-nature imbrications to a critical account of the expansion, intensification, and acceleration of neoliberal capitalism, you may be brought face-to-face with the fragility of things today.”¹⁰³ With Connolly, as with theorists like Brian Massumi and John Protevi, we can see how assemblage theories of political affect shift our attention from the question of what’s right to the question of how (rather than should) a given set of affects, dispositions, beliefs, and, ultimately, institutions may come to be supplanted by another.¹⁰⁴

Like Thoreau’s essays for Brown, then, posthumanist theories of political affect and assemblages offer something like an ecological model of moral change that challenges us to acknowledge the distinctly nondeliberative, subhuman, nonhuman, and suprahuman forces that shape our political landscapes. Unlike Thoreau, however, these contemporary theories do not tend to flag the ways in which the unmanned “creative processes” they describe threaten to relegate us to political passivity by contracting the scope of individual action and intentionality. As we have seen, in relaxing the distinction between human intentionality and involuntary change, Thoreau’s late ecological vision rescales our sense of political time from the tight rhythms of electoral cycles to the slow roll of geophysical change. One effect of this scalar shift is that it makes the role of conscientious action seem comparatively slight, so that Thoreau’s late political theory seems at once optimistic that slavery will be abolished and pessimistic about the prospect that abolition will be the result of principled and concerted human effort. By contrast, as Mark McGurl observes, posthumanist discourse often chooses not to emphasize the dispossession of human agency that is implicit in its scaled-up view of systemic complexity. In posthumanist work, “even in its gloomier modes, there is a widespread sense, if not of hope, then at least of an opening, a breach” that is born of its certainty that “to see just how much of the total energy in the universe lies beyond the grasp of human beings . . . is also to witness the profound contingency and frailty of contemporary social and economic institu-

tions.” Nonetheless, McGurl asserts, whether or not posthumanists acknowledge it, in making human agency “visible as something nested in forces beyond its control,” posthumanism confronts us with “the terrifying nature of our ethically unconscious selves.”¹⁰⁵ In this regard, the unsettling fatalism that tinges Thoreau’s late ecological politics may yet have something to teach posthumanism about the political stakes of its materialist ontology.

Thus both Douglass’s and Thoreau’s antislavery materialisms bring moralism and materialism together in ways that unsettle the rational, agential, and self-determining moral subject of Western humanism. In doing so, they also redefine the politics of embodiment framed by midcentury racist thought. In place of a biological hierarchy running from “fully” human to nonhuman life, these authors’ materialisms point to the imbrication of human and nonhuman agencies and the co-constitution of political and ecological processes. If Douglass’s antislavery materialism thereby confronts us with our “animal” automaticity, and Thoreau’s discloses the chasteningly attenuated nature of our agency—underscoring the radical passivity of passive resistance, its paradoxically posthumous life—Whitman, as the next chapter shall explore, exposes the unintentionality of our words and, indeed, the illegibility of the identity that utters them.