Diasporic Reasoning: The Idea of Africa and the Production of Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century America

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the significance of Africa (both as a literal geographic space and as an imagined or symbolic space) in 19th century American intellectual and literary culture. I argue that when nineteenth-century intellectuals grappled with the institution of slavery, the significance of slave revolt, and the extent of black intellectual capacities, they dealt not only with a set of domestic social and political concerns, but also with a wider epistemological crisis surrounding the very idea of Africa and Africanness. The paradoxical legacy of the transatlantic slave trade, which produced unthinkable dislocation and suffering even as it created new diasporic networks of black affiliation built around a common African origin, forced a reexamination of conventional thinking about history, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, education, and civilization.

Diasporic Reasoning traces the impact of the idea of Africa on specific American intellectual outlets, including popular historiography, the novel, and the university. I contend that in each of these cases, the engagement with the idea of Africa enriches the possibilities of thought and leads to a fruitful reframing or refinement of established ideas, genres, and institutions. I begin with an exploration of the different historiographic uses of “representative men” in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Representative Men and William Wells Brown’s The Black Man (Chapter One). I argue that Brown’s contribution to the genre of collective biography complicates the apparent “universalism” of Emerson’s earlier text, and forces us to rethink the categories of the
universal and the particular. In Chapter Two, I continue to examine the impact of the African diaspora upon historical consciousness by arguing that the encounter with the specter of slave insurrection produces cognitive (and in turn, formal) ruptures in two historical novels, Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* and George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes*. Chapter Three focuses not on a literary genre, but on the circulation of knowledge through the institution of the modern university. Building from a comparative reading of the educational philosophies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edward Wilmot Blyden, I argue that Blyden’s provocative conception of an “African university” draws out and extends upon the implications of Emerson’s thinking on education. Finally, in the Epilogue, I look at the syncretic uses of “Ethiopianism” in Pauline Hopkins’ *Of One Blood*, J. A. Casely Hayford’s *Ethiopia Unbound*, and W. E. B. Du Bois’ *Darkwater* in order to explore the new paths that Pan-African and diasporic thought would take in the twentieth century. I argue that these works reflect the degree to which an evolving anthropological understanding of the idea of “culture” and the specific political contexts of anti-colonial struggles across the African continent would complicate the kinds of intertextual possibility available in the nineteenth century. This dissertation thus traces the often-surprising intellectual interrelations of America and the African diaspora, and in so doing, opens up a more nuanced approach to the study of nineteenth-century literary and intellectual culture.
This dissertation is dedicated to

Alison, who kept me going

and to

Truman Bekalu Bigsby, who lights up my life

and to the memory of

John Gustave Bleir
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Dialectics of Diaspora

The history of the United States has long been intertwined with that of the African continent, primarily through the historical entanglements of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which quite literally brought Africans and African cultures to the Americas, and created through the American slave systems conglomerates of ethnically- and culturally-diverse African-descended peoples. The traces of African “roots” in slave culture and the broader significance of an imagined African “homeland” for black Americans had a deep impact on cultural and intellectual developments within the United States throughout the nineteenth century. From the efforts of the American Colonization Society to establish a colony of freed slaves on the coast of West Africa in Liberia, to lingering fears about the implications of the Haitian Revolution, to the many bold writings of African-Americans who linked their struggles to an imagined African homeland, we can see the significance of Africa in the evolution of American thought and culture—and, conversely, the significance of America in the evolution of a diasporic or black international intellectual tradition. Groundbreaking scholarship has shown how specific African cultural elements made their way across the Atlantic and were transformed accordingly.¹ This dissertation, in contrast, focuses on the symbolic and

even epistemological registers of “Africa” as a concept or idea. I argue that “Africa” operated as a manifold symbol for white and black writers alike in the United States, and that efforts to think through the significance of Africa and the significance of blackness (or Africanness)—efforts that this dissertation names “diasporic reasoning”—brought about fundamental shifts in Western conceptions of history, liberty, education, civilization, and literary form.

*Diasporic Reasoning* develops the argument that there is a dialectical relationship between mainstream (largely white) American intellectual currents and the early writings of the African diasporic tradition. While black writers are often seen as theorizing their conceptions of black nationalism or Pan-Africanism in direct response to the systematic and epistemic oppression produced by a long history of enslavement and intellectual denigration of African-descended peoples, it is less often recognized that these black responses in fact open up new dimensions of their Western interlocutors. In other words, these responses also make important *contributions* to the intellectual debates into which they enter. Thus, when Paul Gilroy explores the concept of a nascent black Atlantic as a “counterculture of modernity,” he only draws out the contrariety of black Atlantic thought.² By reading conceptions of transnational African affiliation not only as responses to Western modernity, but as complex *engagements* with its principles, we can read black nationalism, Pan-Africanism, and Ethiopianism (to name a few

manifestations of these phenomena) not merely as “separate” or “fringe” intellectual lineages, but as a part of the fundamental intellectual landscape of nineteenth century America.³

In exploring the dialectical engagement of various nineteenth-century approaches to the idea of Africa with emerging American cultural forms, I am drawn in particular to examples of (white) American cultural production that are already invested in a cosmopolitan or universalizing epistemological framework. By examining instances of “diasporic reasoning” alongside, for instance, the efforts of Ralph Waldo Emerson to chart out broad, cosmopolitan frameworks for the consideration of intellectual history and education, we are able to see how the idea of diaspora undercuts the apparent universalism of Emerson’s work even as it helps broaden its applicability, revealing new ways in which Emerson’s thought might be used to illuminate diasporic history and identity.⁴ The idea of Africa thus enriches American literary and cultural history even as

³ On the manifold manifestations of diasporic affiliation during the nineteenth century, see Kersuze Simeon-Jones, Literary and Sociopolitical Writings of the Black Diaspora in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2010). On a more fundamental level, “diaspora” is a problematic term of analysis, as its use in the context of the “African diaspora” derives from twentieth century criticism, and is thus applied anachronistically to the period under consideration in this dissertation. Nonetheless, I take it as a useful heuristic term that allows me to bring together numerous strands of black internationalism under a single category. The nuances of each writer’s conception of internationalism (and the terms in which they establish it) will be drawn out at length in subsequent chapters. For further consideration of the concept of diaspora, see James Clifford, “Diasporas,” in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 244-78; and Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Uses of Diaspora,” Social Text 66, Vol. 19, no. 1 (2001): 45-73.
⁴ In her provocatively-titled Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas, Doris Sommer writes of the challenges posed by numerous Latin American literary texts to readers who would wish to know (in an imperialist sense) their cultural dynamics and contexts. Sommer’s provocative insistence on the “particularism” of certain texts—that is, their refusal to be enveloped under the aegis of a “universalist” critical paradigm—reminds us that ways of knowing are not always meant to be available to
it complicates or contests it. It is in this sense that I argue that *diasporic* reasoning is *dialectical* reasoning. While the full implications of these dialectical linkages for the study of American literature and for the study of the African diaspora will become clear in the course of this dissertation, in a general sense this project participates in the effort to broaden the boundaries of the study of American literature.⁵

To flesh out the dialectical model that is at the center of this project, I would like to provide a brief account of the intertextual engagement of Thomas Jefferson and David Walker. Using this fascinating pairing as a kind of case study, I will elucidate the basic terms of the dialecticism I trace and will thereafter unpack key questions about how Americans (including African Americans) were able to acquire knowledge of Africa during the period, and *what kinds* of engagement with existing paradigms, institutions, and genres this knowledge led to. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782; first U.S. edition, 1788), Thomas Jefferson famously argues that while the institution of slavery is morally degrading and should be brought to an end, its abolition must be accompanied by the

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removal of freed slaves to a designated colony in Africa or elsewhere. Otherwise, insists Jefferson, the result will be eventual race war:

It will probably be asked, Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expense of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.⁶

Jefferson proceeds to present a discourse on the inherent inferiority of the African races.

This extended disquisition on slavery and the condition of African-descended peoples forms a rupture in the middle of what is purportedly a reply to a “Query” on “The administration of justice and description of the laws” in Virginia.

The vociferousness with which Jefferson denigrates the character of the slave is significant enough, but the fact of its embeddedness within a discussion of justice and law serves to symbolically link questions of American law to issues of racial classification and the fundamental meanings of “African” identity. Furthermore, Jefferson’s remarks remind us that Africa (both as a figure of the racial unity of slaves and as a literal point of origin and potential future destination for slaves and their descendents) registered strongly in the minds of America’s early intellectuals. Jefferson’s pre-Malthusian remarks on the population dynamics that would inevitably lead to

perpetual racial conflict would grow into a specific line of reasoning through the
nineteenth century, emphasizing not only colonization but, more broadly, careful
attention to black population growth as essential for the future stability of (white)
America.7

Nearly half a century later, David Walker would use his arguments against
Jefferson’s claims in order to ground a conception of a transnational black identity. In his
Appeal, Walker aims to prove that “we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the
most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world
began.”8 In his characterization of the degrading influence of slavery upon black
intellectual and moral capacities, Walker castigates Jefferson’s comparison of white and
black potential:

It is indeed surprising, that a man of such great learning, combined with
such excellent natural parts, should speak so of a set of men in chains. I
do not know what to compare it to, unless, like putting one wild deer in
an iron cage, where it will be secured, and hold another by the side of the
same, then let it go, and expect the one in the cage to run as fast as the one
at liberty.”9

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7 For a broad assessment of the place of racial extinction in nineteenth-century thought, see Patrick
Brantlinger, Dark Vanishings: Discourse on the Extinction of Primitive Races, 1800-1930 (Ithaca, New York:
Cornell University Press, 2003). Black writers provided fascinating alternatives to such discourse. Martin R.
Delany’s novel Blake: or, The Huts of America (1859-62), for instance, captures the appeal of transnational
black cooperation. At the end of the nineteenth century, Sutton Griggs presented a different vision of the
relationship between black population dynamics and politics. In his novel Imperium in Imperio (1899), Griggs
explores a secret “nation” of black resistance that overlaps geographically with the U.S., thus constituting a
militant sort of “internal colonization” that is grounded on U.S. soil.
8 David Walker, Walker’s Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World,
But in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of
9 Ibid., 13-14.
Walker’s scathing rebukes continue throughout the text, and Walker frequently quotes *Notes on the State of Virginia* within his *Appeal*. Even more strikingly, towards the end of the final Appeal, Walker quotes the opening paragraphs of the American Declaration of Independence in full (and without breaks) before providing his own annotations as follows, replete with his characteristic typographical embellishments (capitalization, excessive punctuation, italicization):

See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language? Hear your language, proclaimed to the world, July 4th, 1776--
"We hold these truths to be self evident--that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!! that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness!!"

Compare your own language above, extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation!!!!!!

Hear your language further! "But when a long train of abuses and usurpation, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security."

In encouraging (white) Americans to “see” and “hear” the Declaration of Independence more carefully, Walker implies that he has a more complete and sophisticated understanding of the subject then they. In his insistence that he needs to re-teach the meaning of the Declaration to white America, Walker shows his complex engagement with existing ideas about liberty, race, and national history. Black liberation is conceived

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10 Ibid., 85.
here through a revision (and an emphatic re-presentation) of founding American principles.

The intertextual play throughout the *Appeal* reinforces Walker’s agonistic engagement with an existing set of ideas about black Americans. Walker’s project is fundamentally intellectual, even scholarly, in nature. Walker himself makes the intellectualism of his aims clear when he addresses his intended audience in Article II (“Our Wretchedness in Consequence of Ignorance”): “Men of colour, who are also of sense, for you particularly is my APPEAL designed. Our more ignorant brethren are not able to penetrate its value.” In light of this disparity between ignorance and intellect, it is furthermore the duty of all able readers of the text to work “to enlighten” their “ignorant brethren.” Indeed, as Sterling Stuckey notes, Walker specifically “urged blacks to purchase, study, and refute Jefferson’s *Notes on Virginia.*” Walker’s project of black enlightenment, then, was meant to be a project of engagement with racist rhetoric. Furthermore, Walker indicates that the enlightenment of blacks is not meant to be limited to the boundaries of the United States—as Walker puts it at the outset of the third and final edition,

> It is expected that all coloured men, women and children, of every nation, language and tongue under heaven, will try to procure a copy of this Appeal and read it, or get some one to read it to them, for it is designed more particularly for them.\(^{13}\)

\(^{11}\) Ibid.,33.
\(^{12}\) See Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 129.
\(^{13}\) Walker, *Walker’s Appeal*, page verso.
In a significant footnote to the quotation above, Walker qualifies his statement by reminding the reader that he addresses only those “coloured men, women, and children . . . Who are not too deceitful, abject, and servile to resist the cruelties and murders inflicted upon us by the white slave holders, our enemies by nature.” Thus, Walker’s *Appeal*, a remarkable early entry into the nascent tradition of black nationalism, builds its conception of unity among all African-descended peoples out of its complex antagonism towards an existing tradition that denigrates black intellect.\(^\text{14}\) In this way, it illustrates the fundamentally dialectical emergence of black (inter)nationalism.

Walker’s *Address* is also a fundamental contribution to the discourse on America’s political and social future. If, as we saw, Jefferson’s remarks on race open up a rupture in the midst of a discussion of justice and law, we might say that Walker’s text opens that rupture further, but does so in order to provide a critical examination of its meaning. Walker manages to show that Jefferson was right to link questions of justice and law to questions of race, but required Walker’s interpretive acuity to draw out the full significance of these linkages. The complex relationship between Walker and Jefferson illuminates the dialectical function of “diasporic reasoning”: in thinking through the significance of diasporic affiliation, Walker complicates Jefferson’s text while also reevaluating its significance.

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\(^{14}\) Sterling Stuckey traces the complex influence of African cultural forms—particularly music and dance—on Walker’s early life in Wilmington, North Carolina. Stuckey argues that Walker’s nationalism, and his resistance to the project of black colonization, are grounded in a conception of a common Africanness that was shaped, though perhaps only unconsciously, by these early experiences. See Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 98-100, 126-8.
1.2 Scholarly Precedents

Pioneering efforts by scholars have begun the work of opening up the network of connections between Africa and the United States. Thus, Sterling Stuckey’s *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* explores the confluence of various African cultural heritages within the homogenizing United States slave system, and explores how a multivocal grouping of enslaved Africans gradually became a (relatively) unified “African American” culture through, ironically, the appeal to a shared “African” past. In literary studies, work by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Keith Cartwright has emphasized the lingering traces of cultural elements derived from specific regions of Africa in American literary productions. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates proposes a broad theory of African-American literary development that derives from the transferal through the vernacular of the antics of West African trickster figures into black American tales and, eventually, into the “high” literary art of figures like Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed, and Alice Walker. More recently, Keith Cartwright has explored the impact of a different network of African cultural influences (from the Senegambian region, rather than the primarily Yoruba-based influences traced by Gates)

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in *Reading Africa into American Literature: Epics, Fables, and Gothic Tales*. Cartwright’s account opens up suggestive insights into the engagements of both black and white American writers with these African influences.

In contrast to the specific routes of cultural transferal traced in the works noted above, Paul Gilroy provides a broad theoretical model that opens up numerous ways of thinking about the connections of Europe, Africa, and the Americas in his seminal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. In Gilroy’s work, we find not only a new analytical model for the treatment of transatlantic historical and cultural dynamics (the “black Atlantic”), but also an explicit engagement with the broader intellectual configurations of “modernity.” Gilroy positions the black Atlantic concept as a means of resisting “nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches” to cultural and political history; instead, “cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective.” Gilroy describes the black Atlantic as a “transcultural, international formation” that has a “rhizomorphic, fractal structure.” In the breadth of the black Atlantic lies both its strength and its limitations as an analytical model. Gilroy’s model for the consideration of “black political countercultures that grew inside modernity in a distinctive relationship of antagonistic

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20 Ibid., 4.
indebtedness” has helped to inaugurate a new approach to the study of the African diaspora, but it often does so by dismissing or eschewing more localized approaches.\textsuperscript{21}

Indeed, the precise nature of the “antagonistic indebtedness” of black Atlantic culture to the West needs a great deal of refinement. The specific examples of cultural interchange between an American literary tradition and a broader transatlantic vision of Africa traced in this project will help elucidate some of the specific dynamics in play in one portion of the complex picture of the “countermodernity” Gilroy describes. In my attention to the significance of the African diaspora in relation to nineteenth-century American thought, I aim to follow scholars such as Sibylle Fischer and Ifeoma Nwankwo, who have looked closely at specific moments in black Atlantic history. In her study of the “silences” that followed in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, \textit{Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution}, Fischer builds upon and subtly revises Gilroy’s theory.\textsuperscript{22} Her treatment of the cultural filiations of the Haitian Revolution in the nineteenth century Caribbean suggest that they are not simply antithetical to or separate from Western modernity (as is often the case with Gilroy’s “countermodernity”), but are instead bound up in the very making of that modernity. Ifeoma Nwankwo uses the nuanced concept of “black cosmopolitanism” to ground her study of numerous literary figures in \textit{Black Cosmopolitanism: Racial Consciousness and

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 191.
Transnational Identity in the Nineteenth-Century Americas. By studying the specific formations of black internationalism as practiced and theorized by blacks in the Americas, Nwankwo adds to our specific understanding of the dynamics that contributed to the making of the black Atlantic.

While these studies have gone a long way towards elucidating the interconnectedness of African, European, and American cultural and material histories, I contend that a full treatment of the impact of the idea of Africa on nineteenth-century thought requires that we explore not only how these discourses function in relation to Euro-American predecessors, but also how they reground and reorient those predecessors. When a former slave speaks of the idea of liberty, the very contours of “liberty” as a philosophical construct are brought into more vivid focus. No longer simply a philosophical abstraction, the idea of liberty is made more concrete and also more profound in this case. Similarly, I will argue throughout Diasporic Reasoning that whenever an established nineteenth-century genre, institution, or philosophical frame of reference is put into dialogue with the ideas raised by Africa and Africanness, its very foundations necessarily undergo a significant shift.

24 For a more complete treatment of the concept of embodiment and its relation to anti-slavery discourse (as well as nascent feminist discourse), see Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s study Touching Liberty: Abolition, Feminism, and the Politics of the Body (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).
1.3 Ideas of Africa: Making Use of Ethiopia, Haiti, and Liberia

In order to explore the influence of the idea(s) of Africa on American literary and cultural production, we need to consider more carefully what kinds of access to the concept or geography of Africa would have been available to writers during the period under consideration. In particular, I argue that we need to recover the significance layered into various shorthand terms and concepts, each of which carried with it a useful cluster of associations. While a select few nineteenth-century black writers, such as Martin R. Delany, had direct contact with both the Americas and the African continent, most black (as well as most white) writers and thinkers would have had to rely on much more fragmentary sources of knowledge about Africa. While the remnants of African tradition in slave culture would go on to influence black cultural practices in important ways, for prominent black intellectuals of the period, these were not primary influences as such. Instead, black intellectuals developed new kinds of relationships with “Africa” through their figurations of African descent, their explorations of Africa’s place in the ancient world, and their conceptual gestures towards a type of black internationalism or diasporic awareness. Ultimately, it is less the precedent of a “real” linkage to Africa and more the figurative or symbolic layers of a

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perceived (or imagined) understanding Africa that grounds the “diasporic reasoning” of the thinkers I examine.

The expansive, liberating dynamics of the black Atlantic as formulated by Paul Gilroy can obscure the forms of partial representation, misrepresentation, and cultural myth that would in fact have been the primary point of reference for nineteenth-century thinkers. One of the particularly problematic gestures made throughout Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* is the dismissal of historical instances of black nationalist thinking as naïve. For instance, in his consideration of the life and writings of Martin Delany, Gilroy remarks that “his life reveals a confrontation between his nationalism and the experiences of travel that have been largely ignored by historians except where they can be read as Ethiopianist or emigrationist gestures against American racism.” According to Gilroy, “this is no longer sufficient.” 27 When Gilroy slights these ways of reading the history of black nationalism, he forecloses a full understanding of the ways in which they contributed to the kind of transnational perspective he embraces. For nineteenth-century black intellectuals, concepts like Ethiopianism and emigrationism were an important part of the dialogue over the meanings of African descent and the relationship of the Americas to Africa. The consideration of Delany’s relationship to “Ethiopianist” and “emigrationist” thought, for instance, is in fact an important means of illuminating the history of diasporic thought, and can lead us to a more nuanced view of how black thinkers themselves conceived of their efforts. It is thus important to return to some of

the specific shorthand registers through which nineteenth-century black (and white) thinkers referenced Africa.

In particular, my study draws on the symbolic and literal significance of Ethiopia, Haiti, and Liberia in nineteenth-century American thinking about Africa and Africanness. Toni Morrison’s useful articulation of the “Africanist presence[s]” that often operate in texts by white writers—that is, the black characters who serve numerous functions within white-authored texts—is helpful here.\textsuperscript{28} Expanding on her concept, I would like to consider how the idea of Africa enters (and sometimes haunts) texts by nineteenth-century American writers, white and black alike. The articulation of a black identity in the nineteenth century was not itself a transparent, self-evident gesture, and we must look at the ways in which members of the African diaspora claimed a common identity. In what follows, then, I would like to pursue the numerous associations embedded in the three important figures of Ethiopia, Haiti, and Liberia. These three, which function both as places and as symbolic concepts, obviously do not exhaust the possible associations of Africa in the nineteenth-century imagination. I choose them because they are all highly conspicuous in nineteenth-century thought, and because they highlight different key aspects of the idea of Africa (e.g. millenarian expectations, insurrection and violence as a necessary response to oppression, prospects for black nationhood, and spatial and temporal dimensions of Africa and diaspora).

Haiti, Liberia, and Ethiopia can be described as symbolic standards for conceptions of diasporic unity in the nineteenth century. A close look at this cluster of places and symbols reveals associations with both mystical and practical forms of proto-black nationalism and Pan-Africanism. Ethiopianism is the source of one of the oldest strains of black internationalism. The appeal to the Biblical phrase “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” has been the source of much prophetic belief about a coming redemption in the wake of centuries of enslavement and degradation. As Wilson Jeremiah Moses notes, this vague Biblical phrase is fundamentally tied to much nineteenth-century black nationalism, and it imbibes even the rationalist language of some writers with a tone of mysticism. The obsession with finding roots of black civilization in ancient Egyptian and Ethiopian sources is similarly related to the impulse of Ethiopianism, in the works of writers who aim to define a past black civilization and to prophesize or inaugurate its return. As Eric Sundquist suggests, the various strands of prophetic Ethiopianism "portrayed

29 Psalms 68:31, (King James 1769 version).
31 Here, we might invoke Wai Chee Dimock’s useful concept of “deep time,” which gives us new ways of thinking through the temporal implications of these ideas. Dimock regards “deep time” as a way of expanding the temporal horizons of American literary. Ethiopianism is one instance of how “deep time” comes to enlarge the categories of American literature. As Dimock suggests, American literature is full of such linkages: “[American literature] is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. Active on both ends, they thread American texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States. This double threading thickens time, lengthens it, shadowing in its midst the abiding traces of the planet’s multitudinous life.” Wai Chee Dimock, Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 3.
colonized Africa or enslaved Africans in the diaspora as prepared for providential
delivery from bondage." Alternatively,

[A] more radical interpretation [of] the scripture could be seen to
prophesy a black millennium, a violent seizure of freedom through acts of
revolt sanctioned by God and led, literally or figuratively, by a black
redeemer from within Africa or, in some interpretations, from America.³²

This latter, more revolutionary reading of the Biblical text connects a broad array of
mystical or prophetic approaches to black emancipation or redemption, a line that
would include Nat Turner’s affirmations of a perceived divine sanction for insurrection
(as recorded in the “Confessions of Nat Turner”) as well as the nation-building projects
advocated in the Black Nationalism of Martin Delany and Sutton Griggs.

The significance of Haiti and the Haitian Revolution for black conceptions of
affiliation lies in its profound reconfiguration of the political horizons for the enslaved.³³

As the location of a successful, large-scale slave revolt in the Americas, Haiti paved the
way for numerous further efforts at insurrection in the U.S. and the Caribbean. In this
vein, its impact on slaveholders and slaves alike is remarkable. As Nwankwo contends,

“Whites’ fear of the revolution and its presumably contagious nature forced people of
African descent throughout the Americas, particularly those in the public and published
eye, to name a relationship to the Haitian Revolution, in particular, and to a

³² Eric J. Sundquist, To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (Cambridge, MA: Harvard
University Press, 1993), 553.
³³ See David Brion Davis, The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell
University Press, 1975); Laurent Dubois, Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); Sibylle Fischer, Modernity Disavowed
transnational idea of Black community, in general.” In its immediate aftermath, the Haitian Revolution was a clear sign to Thomas Jefferson that his earlier perspective on the inevitability of race war was correct, and only solidified his views on the incompatibility of the races. For David Walker and, later, William Wells Brown, Haiti is a remarkable example of black strength and achievement. Even as knowledge of the specific conditions of post-Revolutionary Haitian political and social life faded from the purview of most Americans, the idea of Haiti (as promise or threat) and the veneration of its heroes and villains (Toussaint L’Ouverture was widely deemed “the black Napoleon,” whereas Dessalines was more often invoked as a barbaric despot) remained touchstones of American intellectual life. Thus, the Haitian Revolution could be used as an emblem both of vicious black violence and of redemptive anti-imperial and anti-slavery political promise. Haiti also ties together the manifold efforts to link Africa and its descendants with barbarism and primitivism, even as it paved the way for a new potential black civilization in the Caribbean.

In contrast to Ethiopianism, the example

34 Nwankwo, Black Cosmopolitanism, 7.
of Haiti suggests that redemption can come from a real and direct confrontation with the
systems of slavery.

The relation of Liberia to the United States and to broader trends in African
nationalism or Pan-Africanism is complex, as Liberia itself was a liminal nation in the
nineteenth century, situated on the African continent yet rooted in the legacy of New
World slavery. Liberia was initially established as a colony by the American
Colonization Society in 1822 as a specific locale for freed American slaves to relocate.\textsuperscript{37} Much historical and literary scholarship has followed the perspective of Frederick
Douglass that effect Liberia was a flawed, white-originated alternative to the struggle for
emancipation and political freedom on U.S. soil.\textsuperscript{38} But the significance of Liberia goes
much further. The manner in which E. W. Blyden in particular built a complex Pan-
Africanism out of his experiences in Liberia illuminates a number of significant
historical-cultural trends: the complex relationship of ex-American slaves (Americo-
Liberians) to the indigenous populations, the meaning of a new black civilization in
Africa, and the meaning of Liberia’s “post-colonial” status even during the period of
Europe’s grand imperial designs on the African continent. As is the case with Haiti,
Liberia marks a pragmatic alternative to the mystical redemption of Ethiopianism, yet it

\textsuperscript{37} Gomez, Reversing Sail, 144.
\textsuperscript{38} But, as Nwankwo and Robert S. Levine have shown, Frederick Douglass’ increasing interest and
involvement in Haitian political affairs towards the end of his life complicates the common view of him as
acting fundamentally for black amelioration on U.S. soil alone. See Nwankwo, Black Cosmopolitanism and
Robert S. Levine, Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism
too carries an association of providentialism in its national mythology. In essence, the 
chapters that constitute Diasporic Reasoning consider the specific, nuanced ways in which 
writers and thinkers explored the meanings of these concepts (Ethiopia, Haiti, Liberia) 
and the network of issues they stand for. Close attention to the impact of the idea of 
Africa on existing ideas, genres, and institutions reveals that these symbolic locations are 
of much greater critical utility than previous scholarship has suggested.

1.4 Diasporic Reasoning: Overview of Project and Summaries of Chapters

Diasporic Reasoning is fundamentally concerned with the manner in which the 
egagement with Africa (as a physical space or as an idea) impacted ways of knowing in 
several subfields of nineteenth-century American thought—primarily, historiography, 
the novel, educational philosophy, and nationalism. My focus on dialectical shifts in 
epistemological orientation is reflected in the shape of the chapters of my dissertation, 
which are built around dynamic pairings of works. This emphasis on pairings of texts 
allows me to investigate, in each case, 1) an extant trend in American thought or genre 
(and, in particular, instances of those trends which themselves aspire to a kind of 
universality or inclusiveness), 2) the ways in which a reconceptualization built through 
“diasporic reasoning” (engagement with the idea of Africa) opens up new generic or 
intellectual possibilities, and 3) the manner in which that reconceptualization reframes 
the initial trend, both emptying it of its claims to universality and forcibly expanding its
spatial, temporal, or epistemological bounds. This focus on a dialectical engagement is not meant, however, to suggest a firm distinction among “separate” trajectories of knowledge (Western vs. African). Part of my intention is precisely to show the inextricable linkages among these systems of thought. By examining literary, historical, or philosophical works in tandem, I reveal the entanglements of nineteenth-century American literary culture with the specific forms of cosmopolitan or transnational affiliation represented by the African diaspora. *Diasporic Reasoning* deepens our understanding both of American national literary history and of the early history of black internationalism across the Atlantic.

Each of my chapters draws attention to one of the central loci in which the engagement with the African diaspora impacted ways of knowing in nineteenth-century thought. Thus, chapter one, “The Distillation of Diasporic Culture: Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Wells Brown’s Anthologies of Representative Men and Women,” takes as its focus the writing of history—in particular, the historiographic-literary form of the “representative men” anthology (or “collective biography”). In many ways, the very form of the representative men anthology—a popular type of historical text in

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39 In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Brent Edwards makes the important point that intercultural misunderstandings have long been present within black efforts to enact diasporic identity (in his study, particularly between Anglophone and Francophone African-descended peoples). Edwards’ emphasis on “décalage”—which he describes as “the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water”—as a tool for the analysis of diaspora reaffirms the fact that we need to carefully study the heuristic uses to which the appeal to “Africa” might be put, noting both the potentially-liberating and the potentially-confounding outcomes of such an appeal. See Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14.
which analyses of selected key intellectual and political figures stand in for much broader historical dynamics—entails a kind of epistemological challenge to its readers, asking them to conceive anew the relations among individuals, institutions, ideas, and nations. Thus, in *Representative Men* (1850), Ralph Waldo Emerson establishes non-American figures ranging from Plato to Napoleon as representatives of intellectual types that have remained static through time, and in so doing points towards a holistic view of human achievement that diminishes the priority of the modern nation-state. In *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863), by contrast, Wells Brown offers a much more dynamic and historically-situated narrative of human potential. Brown’s text captures the lives of figures from throughout the African diaspora, and in so doing creates a map of black thought that links the achievements of black Americans to those of others from throughout the African diaspora. I argue that Brown’s contribution to the genre complicates the apparent “universalism” of Emerson’s earlier text, and forces us to rethink the categories of the universal and the particular. In this way, we see how the dialectics of diaspora not only establish a new counter-discourse, but also fundamentally reframe an existing intellectual perspective.

In my second chapter, “Narrating the Irreducible: The Practice of Historical Fiction in Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* & George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes*” I explore the ways in which an engagement with the specter of slave insurrection alters the contours of narrative form in two works of historical fiction:
Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855) and George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes* (1881). Melville’s *Benito Cereno* brings the historical weight of the Haitian Revolution to bear on his narrative of a slave uprising aboard a Spanish slave ship off the coast of South America. The novella’s compressed representation of numerous issues—racial tensions, the nature of slave violence, the appeal of a distant Africa, and the struggles of American Captain Amasa Delano to make sense of what he sees aboard the *San Dominick*—reveal a sophisticated attempt to grapple with the epistemological challenges posed by the history of the slave trade. Cable’s *The Grandissimes* is an ambitious historical portrait of New Orleans in the wake of the Louisiana Purchase that shows the traces of its multiple cultural influences as African, European, Caribbean, and American cultures come together to form an uncomfortable new set of social and cultural norms. In the midst of this already-entangled cultural milieu, Cable inserts the rich narrative of Bras-Coupé, a maroon slave whose complex history and broad significance suggest the way in which slavery itself ruptures the fabric of Western history. In this chapter, my aim is to show how a reckoning with slavery and slave insurrection bring about experimental shifts in the historical novel—a genre that has traditionally been esteemed for its capacity to show us, through its presentation of distinct social types, the social contexts of past societies. In Melville and Cable, we see instead how our understanding of the past is ruptured in the attempt to take a full account of the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade.
Chapter three, “The University, the Self, and (Black) Civilization: Ralph Waldo Emerson and E. W. Blyden on the Location(s) of Knowledge,” centers on the circulation of knowledge in the institutional spaces of the modern university, and on nineteenth-century debates over the significance of a “liberal” education in such institutions. I argue that E. W. Blyden, the leading spokesperson for West African education, enters directly into this intellectual debate, and reveals new dimensions of educational possibility in his conception of an “African university.” For Blyden, such an African university (often more an ideal than a realized fact) will be an essential cornerstone of an international African consciousness, fostering black self-pride and countering centuries of Western diminishment of Africa’s historical richness and intellectual potential. By reading Blyden’s efforts to foster education in Liberia (and his efforts to cull support and students from the African-American population) as a central rather than ancillary part of America’s intellectual history, I show how his radical thinking about the meaning of a liberal education for Africans both echoes and reimagines Emerson’s provocative “American Scholar” address from earlier in the century. Through a close reading of Blyden’s address “The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education for Africans” alongside Emerson’s address “The American Scholar,” I explore the intertwined academic histories of the United States and the African diaspora.

In the Epilogue, I look at the syncretic uses of “Ethiopianism” in Pauline Hopkins’ Of One Blood, J. A. Casely Hayford’s Ethiopia Unbound, and W. E. B. Du Bois’
Darkwater in order to explore the new directions that Pan-African thought would take in the twentieth century. In these works, national and international politics, scientific discovery, pseudoscience, and myth all come together around a fundamental fixation on “Ethiopia” and what it represents. I argue that these works reflect the ways in which an evolving anthropological understanding of the idea of “culture” and the specific political matrices of anti-colonial struggles across the African continent would complicate earlier models of black internationalism, and that these tendencies find full expression in Du Bois’ conception of an “African World State” in Darkwater. Diasporic Reasoning thus traces the intellectual impact of the idea of Africa and the idea of a shared diasporic African identity through the course of the nineteenth century, and in so doing, opens up new dimensions of American literary and cultural history.
Early in his 1837 “American Scholar” address before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard University, Ralph Waldo Emerson advanced a neo-Platonic framework for the unity of human knowledge that informs the method of biographical history employed in his later work *Representative Men* (1850) and in William Wells Brown’s *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (1863). Emerson asserts that "there is One Man,—present to all particular men only partially, or through one faculty; and that you must take the whole society to find the whole man." Since no one human being can partake of the entire spectrum of possible ideas and actions, professions and "functions are parceled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work." Thus, for Emerson, each profession or activity only reveals its full significance in relation to this overarching conception of the totality of knowledge. In light of this foundational belief, Emerson expresses disappointment with the tendencies of modern society, which threaten to dampen or even eliminate this sense of the whole:

[U]nfortunately, this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.²

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² Ibid., 1135-36.
The image of "amputation" captures his sense that labor (whether physical or intellectual) conducted without a guiding sense of unity will never produce intellectual growth. The role of the individual is only valuable insofar as it is linked with the social totality of the "One Man."

So too, it would seem, with history. The form of historiography utilized by Emerson in *Representative Men* and by William Wells Brown in *The Black Man* is built upon the idea that fragmentary portraits of key individuals provide a powerful means of accessing a broader view of human achievement and knowledge. In this respect, Brown’s *The Black Man* and Emerson’s *Representative Men* participate in the popular genre of collective biography (itself often associated with a “universal” or “global” mode of history), which was widely used by writers throughout the nineteenth century. The conception of “universal history” as an ideal stretches back to ancient contexts, but its modern manifestations can be traced to European Enlightenment thinking. The ambition of “universal history” is to capture human intellectual and moral achievements across broad geographical and temporal expanses. Among the types of historiography that fall under this category are grand histories of the rise and fall of civilizations, narratives of continuity between the ancient and modern worlds, and comparative studies of multiple civilizations.

“Collective biography” is a prominent nineteenth-century historiographic sub-genre that often pushes in the direction of universality. Thomas Carlyle’s *On Heroes,
*Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1840) is one of the most noted literary models, but there were countless other published volumes with perhaps less literary interest, using biographies of famous individuals to impart moral principles or to provide models of intellectual excellence. Indeed, the popularity and prominence of the genre of collective biography stemmed from a strong interest in biography that amounted to a “biographical mania” among the American reading public, according to Scott Casper. Yet the roots of the genre are much deeper. Marnie Hughes-Warrington provides an overview of the concept of collective biography that stretches back to “ancient catalogue verses” of the type found in the Greek epics, and suggests that the modern incarnations of the form “deserve recognition as universal histories because their authors were evidently interested in drawing together historical events to lay bare universal moral truths.”

The relatively masculinist, Eurocentric tendencies of such works were contested during the period by minority writers who aimed to establish additional figures as worthy of biographical sketches in this fashion. Thus, for instance, Marnie Hughes-Warrington provides examples of a number of nineteenth-century books comprising biographies of prominent women throughout time and across the world, each of which

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³ M. Luke Bresky notes, for instance, the fairly dry tone with which one of Emerson’s reviewers notes that “it has become the fashion of late, to discuss abstract principles in morals and mind, by the use of some historic personage as a type; and while nominally treating of individual character, to indulge in the widest range of generalization.” See Bresky, “‘Latitudes and Longitudes of Our Condition,’” 211.

aimed at illuminating the roles played by women throughout history. Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) illustrated the possibility that the idea of masculine heroism was in need of revision and expansion. As M. Luke Bresky aptly summarizes, this revision affords a corrective function even as it serves an activist ambition: Fuller’s treatise reflects “the point at which it becomes impossible to entertain the idea of ‘Man’ representing women, be it in biography, politics, or (as a mere word) in ordinary speech.”

Similarly, works of collective biography penned by African-American writers served as interventions into the white-dominated historical record and served numerous political causes. Stephen Hall explores a number of precedents to Brown’s *The Black Man*, each of which defends the intellectual potential of black persons through the use of the literary device of collective biography, “which situated the lives of notable individuals as symbolizing the potential of all human beings.” Hall argues that the use of biographical sketches of representative men and women was ubiquitous in African-American historiography of the antebellum period. In *Liberation Historiography*, John

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5 Bresky, “‘Latitudes and Longitudes of Our Condition,’” 223.

In his famous essay “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” Arthur A. Schomburg denigrates this tradition of black collective biography, tracing its roots in “liberal-minded” texts by white authors and its gradual evolution into a vague historical method: “Vindicating evidences of individual achievement have as a
Ernest contends that African-American historiography was necessarily “metahistorical” in nature, as it forced a rethinking of the idea of history and of the terms and practices of historical writing.\(^8\)

In this chapter, I use Emerson’s *Representative Men* and Brown’s *The Black Man* as significant examples (representatives, in a sense) of the collective biography form in order to parse out the implications of the “universalism” (or, somewhat more narrowly, “cosmopolitanism”) of the genre. I look closely at the engagement between Brown’s “counter-history” and Emerson’s text, which is itself a provocative effort to delineate a cosmopolitan form of history. In both works, the concept of time is reframed so that the representative individuals function both as historically-situated individuals and as members of a broader human tradition. I argue that the very form of the representative men anthology pushes historiography towards a conception of human knowledge that is both cosmopolitan and ahistorical. I take Emerson’s 1850 volume *Representative Men* (the published version of a series of seven lectures originating from the 1840s) to represent the most epistemologically rich instance of these tendencies. I then explore what happens when the form of the collective biography (or representative men anthology) is used by William Wells Brown as a means of consolidating the history of the African

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diaspora. I argue that Brown’s approach to diasporic achievements opens up additional layers of significance in the form, allowing us to achieve a more sophisticated view even of earlier works in the genre. Brown’s contribution to the genre complicates the apparent “universalism” of Emerson’s earlier text, and forces us to rethink the categories of the universal and the particular.

At first glance, Emerson’s *Representative Men* seems to be a fairly traditional instance of the collective biography form. The six figures it addresses are prominent Western intellectuals: in order, Plato, Montaigne, Swedenborg, Shakespeare, Napoleon, and Goethe. Swedenborg is the most unusual choice, but his inclusion is less surprising in light of Emerson’s long-standing interest in the Swedish mystic and the broader intellectual climate of the mid-nineteenth century, in which various forms of mysticism had a strong hold. Yet Emerson’s volume is much more than a paradigmatic instance of the representative men anthology because it makes the epistemological complexities of the genre very much a part of its fabric. Emerson was thoroughly conversant with the tradition of biographical and representative history, and the particular achievement of his text is its metacritical stance towards its form. Indeed, as we will see, the opening essay on “Uses of Great Men” provides a suggestive lens through which to read the entire volume. What is above all distinctive about *Representative Men* is Emerson’s application of his philosophical bent to the genre. Emerson’s lifelong fascination with the parameters of individual intellect shapes the construction of the text, allowing it to
serve as a study about representation itself as much as it is about six noted historical
personages. Thus, *Representative Men* affords us keen insights into the properties of the
genre as a whole, allowing us to consider for instance its ability to serve as a unifying
scaffolding through which to connect individuals from disparate places and times. In
exploring the cosmopolitan form of intellect encouraged by Emerson’s volume, I
illustrate a set of principles that William Wells Brown’s *The Black Man* will work to
complicate and reframe.

Published over a decade later, on the cusp of the emancipation of the American
slaves, William Wells Brown’s *The Black Man* (1863) is a striking intervention into the
historical record. Explicitly positioned as a means of "vindicating the Negro’s character,
and show[ing] that he is endowed with those intellectual and amiable qualities which
adorn and dignify human nature," Brown’s text presents a catalogue of biographical
sketches of prominent black figures, among them writers, actors, and political
revolutionaries. It aims to consolidate a variety of actions and thoughts into a coherent
historical lineage of black achievements that can be invoked to promote pride in black
identity and act in itself as an argument against institutionalized slavery. Written in the
midst of the Civil War, *The Black Man* is framed as a direct response to questions about
the prospects for freed slaves to live among white Americans. Brown cites President
Lincoln’s view "that the whites and the blacks could not live together in peace, on

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account of one race being superior intellectually to the other,” and offers, as a corrective, a careful historical perspective on black achievements. The idea that a collection of biographical sketches can constitute an argument is itself striking, but it is the structural elements of the text that deserve particular attention. The Black Man, built on evidence from library archives as well as from personal anecdotes, marks Brown’s effort to put into print, often for the first time, the names and accomplishments of its many subjects.

Along with his scholarly effort to strengthen the historical record of black deeds and achievements, Brown shows an anthologist’s interest in collecting texts as artifacts, as traces of an overall trend of cultural production. Many of the figures he addresses are writers and poets, several of them little known and scarcely-published, and it is one of the striking features of Brown’s texts that many of his biographical sketches quote the language of the subjects themselves. Thus, the text as a whole speaks the voices of myriad black thinkers as they denounce slavery and the maladies of racism, and looks both to the past and towards a potential future generation of black activists and intellectuals. Most striking of all, Brown’s alternative genealogy of black achievement is not only a retort to claims of racial inferiority, but also a profound attempt to bring black history into dialogue with national and global histories. In the effort to craft a coherent vision of black history, Brown complicates the very fabric of the historiographic record.

10 Ibid., 31.
11 Both Emerson and Brown can be read as offering a distinctive alternative to the increasingly-consolidated vision of white American manhood described in Dana Nelson, National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998). Emerson’s reach beyond
Scholarship on these two texts, while somewhat scarce, has raised a number of important questions about their function and their place within nineteenth-century historiography. In the midst of Emerson’s corpus of works, *Representative Men* gets relatively little critical attention, compared to *Nature*, the *Essays*, the many addresses, or even *The Conduct of Life*.12 The volume on representative men is either seen as an outlier in the trajectories of Emerson’s philosophy of individualism, or, curiously, as a text that fits so naturally within Emerson’s canon on the whole that it deserves little specific commentary.13 In fact, I illustrate, the form of *Representative Men* ultimately points towards the resolution of many of the central conflicts within Emerson’s works. And its implications for the conduct of historiography leave open powerful possibilities for further additions to “universal history” from hitherto neglected racial and ethnic groups. In this claim, I am pushing beyond the historically-grounded assessment of Emerson’s foray into abolitionism in Amy E. Earhart’s “Representative Men, Slave Revolt, and Emerson’s ‘Conversion’ to Abolitionism.” Where Earhart provides a

the borders of the nation evokes, if nothing else, a vision of international (Western) white manhood, but in doing so it opens up new terms of engagement with the national. Brown’s project focuses on excluded black voices while also appealing to the terms of humanism, thus suggesting a kind of international (black) humanism. For further consideration of the evolution of black masculinity, see Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men’s Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).


13 This is a tendency that was true at the time of the book’s publication as well as in more recent critical accounts. See M. Luke Bresky, “‘Latitudes and Longitudes of Our Condition’: The Nationality of Emerson’s Representatives” *ESQ* 48, no. 4 (2002): 211-212.
compelling set of connections between Emerson’s speech on the abolition of slavery in
the West Indies and his early efforts to shape the concept of the representative man in
“New England Reformers,” I treat Emerson’s varied responses to slavery and
abolitionism in ethical and epistemological terms. Thus, I move beyond biography and
authorial intention to look at the ways that Emerson’s views of representativeness might
have been shaped by his investment in the ethical principles underlying reform.

Brown’s *The Black Man* has received little critical attention, especially from a
specifically literary point of view. Much of the current scholarship on Brown’s historical
work tends to overlook its complex formal and literary qualities, instead situating it as
fundamentally a response to works of history that implicitly or explicitly exclude
African-descended peoples. Stephen G. Hall reads *The Black Man* within a specifically
American tradition of African American historical writing, while Wilson Jeremiah Moses
focuses more broadly on its place within a genealogy of Pan-African ideals. Marnie
Hughes-Warrington reads *The Black Man* within the broadest perspective, exploring the
idea of “universal history” in different national and historical contexts before ultimately
arguing that a more localized set of variables gave rise to Brown’s specific project (itself
a contribution to “universal history”). Ifeoma Nwankwo uses Brown’s text as a way of
reading the figure of the Cuban poet Placido, and gives only scant attention to the

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literary qualities of Brown’s text itself. Following John Ernest’s brief, though provocatively, reading of The Black Man in Liberation Historiography, I contend that the full implications of Brown’s historical work within the larger traditions of African-American historical writing and the composition of world history become clear only when we treat his text as a dynamic literary construction. In the same way that Brown’s most famous work, Clotel, is a novel that develops a historical narrative through anecdote and invention as well as genuine research, Brown’s biographical history is a composite of many different approaches to writing history, some of them scholarly and others more informal, and the final result is a text of far greater depth and purpose than it may initially appear.

In this chapter, I use a comparative reading of Emerson and Brown to show how the representative man anthology provides a particularly striking means of linking individuals and their achievements to broad historical trends. Reading any texts of historiography in their original context gives us unique access to earlier perceptions of

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time and change.\textsuperscript{18} By parsing out the narratives that historians have constructed at different points in time, we can draw significant conclusions about the shifting practices and purposes of thinking historically, as the writing of history always has implications for the present and future as well as for the past. Emerson and Brown both aim to understand the actions of human beings in the past by framing them within a broad vision of human history, but the specific approaches they each take lead to wildly-different results. Emerson tends to flatten out the depths of historical time in his work, bringing all great minds into an everlasting intellectual present. Alternately, Brown emphasizes the depth of black history not only in order to counterbalance the assertion that Africa and Africans had always existed in a timeless vacuum before the arrival of Europeans, but also to place every instance of black achievement within a unified narrative of progress. I draw out the implicit dialectical relationship between the two works, revealing how each complicates and informs the other. Thus, Brown’s effort to craft a narrative of black achievement through time (we might call this black universal humanism) brings into question Emerson’s aspirations towards totality. At the same time, however, Emerson’s reach towards the universal provides us with a complex philosophical lens through which to view Brown’s narrative of black intellectual development.

2.1 The Temporality of Knowledge in Emerson’s Representative Men

Both Representative Men and The Black Man open with framing essays that provide a context for the biographical sketches that follow. Fundamentally, Emerson frames his sketches in such a way as to empty them of historical specificity, whereas Brown (as we will see) restores a sense of historical contingency to the form. The opening essay of Emerson’s Representative Men, “Uses of Great Men,” begins with a characteristically-aphoristic statement: “it is natural to believe in great men.”19 Here and throughout the essay, Emerson goes to great lengths to illustrate that the exceptional rarity of great men only makes their strong presence within our everyday lives all the more significant. We “believe” in them as though they were deities, and perform daily worship of them. The common and the exceptional, the mundane and the transcendent, are brought together through the mediating force of the great man. “Nature seems to exist for the excellent,” says Emerson, yet even those who are not themselves “excellent” are brought into a higher orbit through the achievements of the great: “actually or ideally, we manage to live with superiors. We call our children and our lands by their names. Their names are wrought into the verbs of language, their works and effigies are in our houses, and every circumstance of the day recalls an anecdote of them.” The language here—bridging the “actual” and the “ideal”—represents a subtle evolution in Emerson’s epistemology when compared to his most profoundly idealistic works, such

as “The American Scholar.” Where in the early works, we are often given the sense that greatness in any capacity will radiate through the core of the universe through some unknown means (which tends to approximate the transcendent or divine), here in *Representative Men* Emerson insists that greatness must be carried to the masses through intermediary great figures whose names and accomplishments are widely renowned. Indeed, the six figures Emerson writes about in *Representative Men* are highly conspicuous historical and intellectual figures: Plato, Swedenborg, Montaigne, Shakspeare [*sic*], Napoleon, and Goethe.

Yet Emerson makes it clear that there is a danger in looking only to iconic or famous figures for inspiration and wisdom. The wisdom that leads us to look to these figures for guidance can “degenerate[ ] into idolatry of the herald.”20 In light of this concern about the worship of the representative man, it is not surprising that Emerson’s presentation of the figures tends to turn them into idealized abstractions, representatives of key intellectual “types.” In this, we see a deliberate shift from the formula of one of *Representative Men*’s primary textual predecessors, Thomas Carlyle’s *Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic*, wherein specificity and, indeed, *worship*, are fundamental. In each of Emerson’s biographic essays, there is a striking tension between the historicity of the individual discussed and their primary function as *representatives* of certain human capacities (in the sense of the “One Man” principle). Thus, each essay positions its subject both as historical individual and as ahistorical type: “Plato; or, The Philosopher,”

20 Ibid., 11.
“Shakspeare; or, The Poet,” or, in a more interesting variant, “Napoleon; or, The Man of the World.” Emerson is principally invested in the intellectual significance of these representative figures. He tends to dilute them of their specificity as individuals, focusing instead on the categories to which they belong and the types that they represent.

In “Uses of Great Men,” Emerson explores the utility of great men (in their abstracted form) for his audience. Emerson envisions a “magnet that would point to the countries and houses where are the persons who are intrinsically rich and powerful,” allowing us to bypass the temptations of material wealth and comfort.21 The image of the magnet is striking because it places intellectual activity on the level of natural forces that can be registered and monitored. For Emerson, ideas quickly move from the internal realm of consciousness and become part of the fabric of lived physical and social space. The figure of the magnet resembles one of the most potent images in “The American Scholar,” by means of which Emerson likens the great thinker’s power to the gravitational force of the moon: “The unstable estimates of men crowd to him whose mind is filled with a truth, as the heaped waves of the Atlantic follow the moon.”22 These elemental forces work in two ways. Not only are great minds capable of guiding the contours of nature, but also “a man is a centre for nature, running out threads of relation

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21 Ibid., 3.
through every thing, fluid and solid, material and elemental.” Thus, the goal of individual enlightenment depends on a perpetual growth outward into the world, as “man is that noble endogenous plant which grows, like the palm, from within outward.”

Great minds can lead us outward towards further reaches of insight, allowing us to draw the “threads of relation” further afield. Ultimately, then, in Representative Men as in much of his work, Emerson emphasizes above all the value of these portraits for our own development. If, as he suggests, “other men are lenses through which we read our own minds,” then these great “representative men” provide us with the clearest and most vivid view.

Emerson makes it clear that “representative” never describes a transparent relation between two things. He remarks first that “each material thing has its celestial side; has its translation, through humanity, into the spiritual and necessary sphere where it plays a part as indestructible as any other.” This sort of correspondence between the material and the celestial has a deep history in Emerson’s thought, going back to Nature. Even where the means of the “translation” remains unclear, we must always consider the move towards the “spiritual and necessary sphere” to be the fundamental drive of all ideas, and we can interpretively push all things into their

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23 Emerson, Representative Men, 6
24 Ibid., 4.
25 Indeed, Mark Patterson suggests that the idea of the representative provides a fundamental link through the corpus of Emerson’s works: “Emerson’s concept of the representative provides a useful link between the idealism of Nature and the more pragmatic essays of his middle period. In addition, Representative Men reveals the strategies by which Emerson tried to express the political and social aspects implied in his earlier work by transforming his theory of representation, found in Nature, into his representative men.” Patterson, “Emerson, Napoleon, and the Concept of the Representative,” 231.
deeper dimensions. But if men can be representative “first, of things, and secondly, of ideas,” there is also the question of political representation: “the constituency determines the vote of the representative. He is not only representative, but participant.” In other words, the representative is a citizen himself who stands in for all the other citizens. While Emerson means this metaphorically, as a means of expressing the dual status of the representative figures he examines, the question of political representation will be far more significant in Brown’s *The Black Man*, in light of the pressing need to prove the capabilities of the race and to establish the grounds for further political representation of black Americans.

The idea of the individual as representative gives grounding to Emerson’s idea that every member of a given category of knowledge or activity extends the representative figure’s achievements:

In one of those celestial days when heaven and earth meet and adorn each other, it seems a poverty that we can only spend it once: we wish for a thousand heads, a thousand bodies, that we might celebrate its immense beauty in many ways and places. Is this fancy? Well, in good faith, we are multiplied by our proxies. How easily we adopt their labors! Every ship that comes to America got its chart from Columbus. Every novel is a debtor to Homer. Every carpenter who shaves with a fore-plane borrows the genius of a forgotten inventor. Life is girt all round with a zodiac of sciences, the contributions of men who have perished to add their point of light to our sky. Engineer, broker, jurist, physician, moralist, theologian, and every man, inasmuch as he has any science,—is a definer and map-maker of the latitudes and longitudes of our condition. These roadmakers on every hand enrich us. We must extend the area of life and

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26 Emerson, *Representative Men* 7.
multiply our relations. We are as much gainers by finding a new property in the old earth as by acquiring a new planet.\textsuperscript{27}

Representative figures thus serve us by standing at the head of their categories of achievement, providing us with a clear vision of the heights of possibility within that category, and we also serve them (in a sense) by extending their work, even when our capacities cannot match theirs. Thus, the representative individual represents his (or her, to push beyond Emerson’s gendered language) area of knowledge, and later contributors to that field in turn represent their predecessor and, by extension, the area of knowledge as a whole.

Taking each of these facets of Emerson’s approach in \textit{Representative Men} into consideration, we can say that Emerson is concerned above all with the capacity of the representative man to transcend his own specific moment and enter into the currents of intellectual perpetuity, taken in the broadest possible sense. Comparing the mature work of 1850 to Emerson’s earlier explorations of the utility of biographical sketches in his 1835 lectures on Biography reveals a marked shift in the center of attention. If the earlier lectures were composed in the mode of “Plutarchian exemplary biography,”\textsuperscript{28} emphasizing the lessons that can be learned from close engagement with the great minds of the past, \textit{Representative Men} is a study in the totality of human intellect, with all

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{28} Wallace E Williams, “Historical Introduction” to \textit{Collected Works ed of Repr. Men}, xxiii.
of the power and pitfalls that the idea of “totality” entails.29 These figures do not stand so much as markers of past greatness that can serve us in the present as they become a living part of the present. Thus Plato did not merely establish the groundwork for modern philosophical inquiry; he is quite literally still at the center of all latter-day philosophy, in Emerson’s view. Emerson’s conception of influence holds that all of history is of use only insofar as it pushes one’s thinking forward in the present.30 Accordingly, the idea of historical progression or evolution is replaced by a kind of endless present. Even as Emerson places his representative figures in their different historical contexts, he treats them ultimately as equal members of a flattened epistemological space that is wedded firmly to the present.

2.2 Brown’s Revolutionary Historiography: The Collision of Past and Present in “The Black Man and his Antecedents”

If Emerson’s introductory essay argues for a detemporalized vision of the influence of “great” representative figures—that is, they serve us in our moment regardless of the historical distance between they and we—Brown’s introductory essay

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29 Doris Sommer uses the aspiration towards universalism in the poetry of Walt Whitman in order to establish the terms of a counter-discourse of “particularism.” The key terms of universalism (“symmetry, mutuality, boundlessness”) are useful in describing the work of Whitman’s mentor Emerson as well. Emerson, like Whitman, invites us directly into his expansive project, thereby putting disagreement or critique at bay. Doris Sommer, *Proceed With Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999): 36.

30 Thus, Gutaaf Van Cromphout’s contention that Emerson’s ultimate ethical principle of “self-realization” carries with it “an inescapably relational dimension” can be applied to the relations formed with past intellectual figures as well as the social relations that are Van Cromphout’s focus. See Gustaaf Van Cromphout, *Emerson’s Ethics* (Columbia Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 90.
to *The Black Man* suggests that the inclusion of hitherto-overlooked individuals within a work of collective biography is itself an intervention into the fabric of historical possibility. That is, these significant figures need above all to be brought into the realm of historical consideration—they need to be recuperated from a liminal or neglected status within mainstream (white) historical writing. Brown’s text works to recover a neglected history of black achievement. But his efforts need not, indeed should not, be regarded merely as part of a “separate” historiographic trajectory, one focused on black history as opposed to white or Western history. For in the act of correcting a historiographic imbalance that elides the contributions of black persons to world cultural and political history, Brown and other writers in this vein also reframe the entire concept of “representativeness” in Emerson’s sense. Brown’s construction of a transnational black tradition through his assemblage of figures provides a nuanced, particularized alternative to Emerson’s embrace of the universal and the transhistorical.

The structure of Brown’s *The Black Man* suggests that the introductory essay stands apart from the volume’s catalogue of biographies. The bulk of the text is composed of a series of fifty-three biographical sketches of notable black individuals from the United States and elsewhere within the African diaspora. The sketches, collected under the heading “The Black Man, His Genius and His Achievements,” address figures as wide-ranging as revolutionaries Toussaint L’Ouverture and Nat Turner, writers Phillis Wheatley and James M. Whitfield, and orators, abolitionists, and
black rights advocates Frederick Douglass and James M’Cune Smith, as well as mythic or even fictionalized personages (e.g. “Joseph Jenkins” and “A Man Without a Name”). Later on, we will see how the conjunction of these various types itself constitutes a remarkable formal achievement. Before the sketches properly begin, however, the introductory chapter “The Black Man and his Antecedents” explores the context for Brown’s collective biography. From its title, the opening essay would appear to be concerned primarily if not solely with the first of his subtitle’s three concerns (“antecedents”), as distinguished from the other two (the “genius and achievements” that will be catalogued in the sketches which follow). Yet Brown’s use of the concept of “antecedents” is crucial to understanding his catalogue of representative figures, as it positions his historical perspective within the frameworks both of humanist universalism and of Ethiopianism.

From the outset, Brown situates his arguments in the essay “The Black Man and his Antecedents” within a broad tradition of holistic human history. “Of the great family of man,” he writes, “the negro has, during the last half century, been more prominently before the world than any other race.”\(^{31}\) The history of the black man is, then, a subset of the history of humankind. This in itself is an important rhetorical move, as it rebukes those anthropologists and historians who would carve out a separate (and unequal) niche for black history or excise it from the record altogether. The newfound “notoriety” of the black race before the world, however, has not led to a deep critical examination of

the depth of black history or its many filiations throughout the African diaspora. And it is precisely this sort of historical intervention, a means of overcoming the shortsighted scale of analysis in common use, that *The Black Man* aims to accomplish. Thus, Brown’s historical excavations aim towards specificity (a richer understanding of the impact of African-descended peoples in history) as well as universality (a more complete understanding of human history as a whole).

Indeed, Brown’s entire project is predicated on the idea that the very shift in global attention that has made the black man so visible as an object of consideration for the rest of the world may also allow black history to gain a new grounding within world history. The forced geographic movements of black people under the slave system have resulted in a kind of obligatory cosmopolitanism on the part of the modern black writer. As Brown puts it, the “negro” would have gladly remained “isolated away in his own land […] had it not been for the avarice of other races.”32 Having undergone the permutations of slavery, however, it is no longer possible to remain thus isolated. The “race” is now firmly entrenched in Western (and global) history. Ifeoma Nwankwo describes a nascent nineteenth-century “black cosmopolitanism” that “is born of the interstices and intersections between two mutually constitutive cosmopolitanisms—a hegemonic cosmopolitanism, exemplified by the material and psychological violence of imperialism and slavery (including dehumanization), and a cosmopolitanism that is

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32 Ibid., 31.
rooted in a common knowledge and memory of that violence.” Brown appropriates the complex dualism of black cosmopolitanism by making the diasporic spread of African peoples, from ancient African civilizations through to the modern Americas, a crucial part of his effort to bring black history to bear on world history.

Turning first to ancient human history, Brown builds upon the work of other historians in order to demonstrate that Ethiopia and Egypt were home to advanced black civilizations. "The negro is engraved upon the monuments of Egypt," writes Brown, "not as a bondsman, but as the master of art.” Here, Brown playfully redirects the concept of mastery from the physical, bodily context of American slavery to the realm of culture. A “master of art” requires no act of submission from another human being—cultural “mastery” is a relation of educational development rather than subservience. Brown proceeds to cite a number of authorities to demonstrate that the Ethiopians and Egyptians were racially black. Volney, for instance, is said to “assume[ ] it as a settled point that the Egyptians were black” and Greek traveler and historical Herodotus “set them down as black, with curled hair, and having the negro features.” Beyond these historical referents, Brown looks to mythological and anecdotal evidence to claim that Atlas and “even the great Jupiter Ammon himself, were located by the mythologists in Africa,” and that “Euclid, Homer, and Plato were Ethiopians.”

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35 Ibid., 32.
With this bombastic demonstration that revered ancient civilizations were racially black, Brown appears to be staking a claim for the black origins of Western culture in a fashion that prefigures the Afrocentric historicism of the twentieth century. It is unclear whether Brown himself believes all of his claims, and indeed their primary rhetorical function becomes clear only by way of contrast. The exaggerated proof that the ancient Egyptians were black paves the way for a satirical, highly unflattering contrast in the narrative of Anglo-Saxon heritage that posits the Romans as conquerors of an unsophisticated, ignorant Anglo-Saxon population. Brown’s rhetorical playfulness leads to a defamiliarization of both black and white history—while the black Ethiopians (and Egyptians) were surpassingly advanced in culture and art (and little acknowledged for it by white society), the early Britons or Anglo-Saxons were “lilte superior to the Sandwich Islanders’” when they first became known to the Mediterranean world. That quotation is not Brown’s own invention, but comes from the British historian Thomas Macaulay, and it opens up another layer of irony, as it continues the trend of using the denigration of one cultural group as a means of boosting the image of another. Thus, the Sandwich Islanders stand as a stock example of primitivism, just as (in much

36 Ibid., 33.
conventional thinking) the Africans and African-descended peoples do, and, for Brown, just as the early Anglo-Saxons do in relation to the ancient black cultures. This rhetorical play is ultimately less a genuine historical discourse and more a means of unsettling the American obsession with pure lineage (a thematic concern he had already explored with great effect in Clotel: or, The President’s Daughter): "Ancestry is something which the white American should not speak of, unless with his lips to the dust."38

Ultimately, then, Brown’s focus on an Egyptianist or Ethiopianist reading of black history is part of a larger, more significant argument about cultural evolution.39 In “The Black Man and his Antecedents,” Brown aims not only or even primarily to defend black history and ancestry categorically, but focuses instead on the variability over time of different civilizations. Egypt again comes to the forefront as an example of an ancient black civilization in a crucial passage in which Brown explains his theory of cultural development at greater length:

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38 Brown, The Black Man, 34.
39 Brown’s investment in the study of the Ethiopian-Egyptian roots of the race would be further developed in his later and more conventional work of historiography, The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race (1874). Much of the material in the biographical sketches in The Black Man would also become central to Brown’s diasporic history, particularly in his chapters addressing the Haitian Revolution and its aftermath. The overlap between the subtitles of the two texts suggests that the meaning of “antecedents” had shifted in Brown’s view in the decade between the publication of the two works. Not only had the further passage of time put events in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean in a more historical perspective, but also the author’s conception of the respective utility of history and biography to capture the essence of the “antecedents,” “genius,” and “achievements” of the black race had undergone a subtle, though significant, shift. Within the theory of the development of civilizations posited in The Black Man, the bounds and significance of history (past) and potential (future) loosened, and often overlapped as equally-vital elements in a continuum of development. Strikingly, the expansion of “The Black Man and His Antecedents” in The Rising Son is matched by a condensation of “The Black Man, His Genius and Achievements” into that book’s final chapter, “Representative Men and Women.” William Wells Brown, The Rising Son; or, The Antecedents and Advancement of the Colored Race (Boston: A. G. Brown and Co., 1874).
There is nothing in race or blood, in color or features, that imparts susceptibility of improvement to one race over another. The mind left to itself from infancy, without culture, remains a blank. Knowledge is not innate. Development makes the man. As the Greeks, and Romans, and Jews drew knowledge from the Egyptian three thousand years ago, and the Europeans received it from the Romans, so must the blacks of this land rise in the same way. As one man learns from another, so nation learns from nation. Civilization is handed from one people to another, its great fountain and source being God our Father. No one, in the days of Cicero and Tacitus, could have predicted that the barbarism and savage wildness of the Germans would give place to the learning, refinement, and culture which that people now exhibit. Already the blacks on this continent, though kept down under the heel of the white man, are fast rising in the scale of intellectual development, and proving their equality with the brotherhood of man.

Significantly, then, Brown’s play with differences in development across time is not a celebration of cultural relativity in our modern sense, but an insistence on the potential of civilization’s progress to overcome any widespread cultural shortcomings. In the image of the mind left “blank” without development, Brown echoes the Lockean view of human knowledge, but he applies this to the evolution of civilizations as well as individuals. And it is that overlap between the development of the individual and the

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[40] Brown, *The Black Man*, 35-6. This significance of Brown’s subtle use of ancient black civilizations to ground the biographical sketches that follow is overlooked by Hughes-Warrington when she comments that Egypt-oriented interpretations of nineteenth-century black thought are foiled “by Brown’s not mentioning Egypt in *The Black Man.*” While it is certainly true that none of the biographical sketches deal with ancient Egyptians—indeed, the earliest individual Brown cites is the American Revolutionary War hero Crispus Attucks, b. 1723—Hughes-Warrington fails to consider the important framing function that “The Black Man and His Antecedents” serves within *The Black Man* as a whole. The idea of Egypt (and of Ethiopia) is central to Brown’s vision of historical development and possibility. Hughes-Warrington, “Coloring Universal History,” 121.
development of the race as a whole that grounds the biographical sketches of *The Black Man*. Each of Brown’s representative figures illustrates the promising future of the race.  

Brown applies his theory of the evolution of civilizations to the recent history of emancipation in the West Indies. Here, the West Indies serve both as a potential parallel for the U.S. case, and as a part of a shared diasporic history. This is the interesting duality that continues to crop up throughout the text, both in its content and in its publication history: Brown’s heightened attention to emancipation in the U.S. (the text was published in the very year the Emancipation Proclamation would begin to take effect) stands in contrast to the broader significance of *The Black Man* within black historiography and, ultimately, world history. Brown’s interest in the case of the West Indies centers on the question of how the events are narrated in the Western press:

> It is asserted that general ruin followed the black man’s liberation. As to the British colonies, the fact is well established that slavery had impoverished the soil, demoralized the people, bond and free, brought the planters to a state of bankruptcy, and all the islands to ruin, long before Parliament had passed the act of emancipation.

The misleading narrative that places the onus on the black populations of the islands is based on a fundamental error in the consideration of effects through time. Just as the black population of the U.S. cannot be fairly compared to the white population while

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still “kept down under the heel of the white man,” so too is the potential development of the freed West Indian populations already constrained by prior actions during colonial rule.

Brown looks at West Indian emancipation as a political and cultural “experiment” whose results, so to speak, have been grossly misinterpreted. In reality, writes Brown, “the moral and intellectual condition of both blacks and whites is in a better state now than ever before.”43 The idea of emancipation as “experiment” takes on additional weight in light of Brown’s investment in the need to construct liberty in the wake of formal emancipation: “Why, every man must make equality for himself. No society, no government, can make this equality. I do not expect the slave of the south to jump into equality; all I claim for him is, that he may be allowed to jump into liberty, and let him make equality for himself.”44 Freedom, like all forms of political and cultural identity, is necessarily a process. Once again, it is “development” that is at the center of Brown’s argument.

Thus, the consideration of ancient “antecedents” in Brown’s opening essay gives way to discussion of the making of liberty in the present. For Brown, as for Emerson, the utility of historiographic modes of accessing the past lies in their capacity to reconfigure the potentialities of the present. The difference between the two visions of “representativeness” lies ultimately in the relation between past and present. Where

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43 Ibid., 39.
44 Ibid., 47.
Emerson celebrates the creative energies that can arise spontaneously out of an engagement with key markers from the past, Brown insists that the movement towards a better future depends on a gradual, evolutionary process. Thus, while Emerson’s representative figures are treated as paragons of their respective types, Brown’s figures each contain kernels of potentiality. As a collective, they represent not simply the best minds of the past, but the possibilities of a (future) black man (or woman). Thus, the “black man” of Brown’s title ultimately refers to black civilization as a whole, in the process of its modern awakening.

2.3 Emerson’s Portraits: The Reach towards the Infinite and the Limits of Representativeness

Having explored how Emerson and Brown express their conception of the “representative” in their opening essays, we can now look more closely at the representative portraits or sketches each author offers in his text. I argue that, in both cases, the collection of biographical sketches both extends and complicates the author’s apparent purpose, and that the nuances of the two volumes point towards both the power and the limitations of the form as it engages with the African diaspora. In the case of Emerson’s Representative Men, there is pronounced tension between the historical specificity of the individuals and the abstractions of their representative roles. Emerson actively shapes the sketches in such a way as to distill the typical, representative qualities of the individual. The first sketch, that of “Plato; or the Philosopher,” opens a
statement of Plato’s dominant role in the history of thought: “Out of Plato come all things that are still written and debated among men of thought. Great havoc makes he among our originalities.” Every philosopher after Plato, aiming to say “fine things” to his “reluctant generation” is ultimately no more than “some reader of Plato, translating into the vernacular wittily his good things.” Plato’s breadth is such that even the greatest thinkers “suffer some deduction from the misfortune (shall I say?) of coming after this exhausting generalizer.” In light of his purported circumscription of the bounds of knowledge, Plato is “at once the glory and the shame of mankind,” a kind of initial limit beyond which no one has managed to push.\footnote{Emerson, Representative Men, 23.} For Emerson, then, Plato is the consummate philosopher, and his work ultimately constitutes philosophy itself.

The breadth of Plato’s thought is such that he not only inaugurates Western philosophy, but also assimilates the abstract teachings of Eastern religion and philosophy into his thought and solidifies them in the written forms of the West. In Emerson’s reading, Plato figures as the originator of global thought, the first figure to combine early philosophy the world over into a cohesive, defined form. Emerson envisions Plato as the mechanism through which philosophy entered a mature state of being:

There is a moment in the history of every nation, when, proceeding out of this brute youth, the perceptive powers reach their ripeness, and have not yet become microscopic, so that man, at that instant, extends across the
entire scale, and, with his feet still planted on the immense forces of Night, converses by his eyes and brain with solar and stellar creation.\textsuperscript{46}

It is precisely its proximity to both a primordial original state and the totality of cosmic knowledge that makes this liminal moment so profound. This is a moment before the differentiating tendencies of science have forced us to take a “microscopic” view of each facet of the universe. It maintains the mythological and spiritual pull of the pre-rational cosmology. It derives from the “dreams of barbarians,” and yet it emerges into the realm of fully formed written thought: Plato, the agent of this change, “needs no barbaric paint, or tattoo, or whooping, for he can define.”

Yet Plato has not abandoned the lessons of the “barbaric” mind in his final achievement, nor does Emerson wish to cast aside this source of inspiration. Indeed, as Gustaaf Van Cromphout suggests, in \textit{Emerson’s Ethics}, there is a distinct “element of primitivism” in Emerson’s treatment of language throughout his writing.\textsuperscript{47} Emerson was convinced that language, in its earliest states, was purely figurative and poetic, and that modern forms of reason, however useful, tend to occlude that initial symbolic function. It is thus fitting that the key ingredient in Plato’s work, for Emerson, is the sense of the ultimate unity of the universe, a conception derived from supposedly less civilized, non-Western forms of thought. Emerson highlights Plato’s pilgrimages to Egypt and perhaps further East as the source for his conception of “the idea of one Deity, in which all things are absorbed.” Plato managed, ultimately, to combine “the unity of Asia and the detail

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{47} Van Cromphout, \textit{Emerson’s Ethics}, 149.
of Europe, the infinitude of the Asiatic soul, and the defining, result-loving, machine-making, surface-seeking, operagoing Europe.”

The curious (and likely, deliberate) anachronism of these ancient and modern points of reference takes on greater significance when we consider that Emerson was presenting these sketches as lectures to his Western contemporaries. The purpose of the essay on Plato is to push the audience outside geographical, cultural, and historical specificities and into the realm of the ahistorical. That is, Emerson is deliberately goading his audience into a consideration of the possibilities that lie outside modern European civilization. Non-Western and “uncivilized” cosmologies are at the center of the Platonic project, and thus lie hidden in the core of Western modernity itself, according to this line of thought. While Emerson does not go as far as Brown’s claim that Plato is “Ethiopian,” his reading of Plato nonetheless invites a complex consideration of the intercultural matrices at the root of Western thought. In the sketch of Plato, more than in the other sketches, Emerson uses the idea of the representative man as a means of escaping the narrowness of any given branch of thought. As he puts it in the supplemental section “Plato: New Readings,” Plato represents “the power [. . .] of carrying up every fact to successive platforms and so disclosing in every fact a germ of expansion. [. . .] Whatever he looks upon discloses a second sense, and ulterior senses.”

Ironically, by emphasizing one particular figure, Emerson manages to escape the notion

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49 Ibid., 46.
of individuality altogether, moving instead towards the transcendent plane of ideas on which his representative categories reside.

If the portrait of Plato best reveals Emerson’s investment in collapsing the scale of human time so that intellectual achievements exist in a vast simultaneity, then the lecture on Napoleon is the one most firmly entrenched in the political and intellectual climate of the nineteenth century. As such it illustrates more cogently how the problem of individuality (or self-ishness) operates within the representative men form.\textsuperscript{50} The type or category that Napoleon represents for Emerson is the most idiosyncratic among them: he represents “The Man of the World.” In the simplest sense, he is at the helm of this category due to his status as “the best known and the most powerful” person of the nineteenth century. But his remarkable fame is not the quality that interests Emerson. Rather, Napoleon’s key characteristic is “the fidelity with which he expresses the tone of thought and belief, the aims of the masses of active and cultivated men.”\textsuperscript{51} By “expresses,” Emerson more closely means “embodies.” For Napoleon is “the incarnate Democrat,” carrying the will of the people within himself, with all the contradictions and shifts that this entails. Strikingly, Emerson reads him as “no hero, in the high sense”; rather, he is “the idol of common men because he had in transcendent degree the

\textsuperscript{50} Bresky reads the progression of the volume from Plato to Napoleon and Goethe as “outlin[ing] a history of fragmentation—the ‘One Man’ and his world giving way to partial men and their nations” (“’Latitudes and Longitudes of Our Condition’” 223). I would emphasize instead the function of the volume itself as a framework for “oneness.” That is, the national emphasis of the later portraits is trumped by the larger aims of the project.

\textsuperscript{51} Emerson, \textit{Representative Men}, 129.
qualities and powers of common men.” 52 Napoleon is thus the consummate representative man—he is a living representation of the wide-spread revolutionary will of his day. 53 He is a “Man of the World” also in the sense that he worked so skillfully within the parameters of the world he lived in: “With him is no miracle and no magic. He is a worker in brass, in iron, in wood, in earth, in roads, in buildings, in money and in troops, and a very consistent and wise master-workman.” 54 He does not bring a new quality or category into existence or to its highest expression; rather, he masters the extant social parameters through a combination of chance and force.

For Emerson, the incredible capaciousness of Napoleon’s grasp was ultimately “an experiment, under the most favorable of conditions, of the powers of intellect without conscience.” It is, in the end, a failed experiment, as “the attempt was in principle suicidal.” But here too, Emerson emphasizes the conditions and world in which Napoleon existed as the reason for his downfall:

It was not Bonaparte’s fault. He did all that in him lay to live and thrive without moral principle. It was the nature of things, the eternal law of man and of the world which baulked and ruined him; and the result, in a million experiments, will be the same. Every experiment, by multitudes or by individuals, that has a sensual and selfish aim, will fail. The pacific Fourier will be as inefficient as the pernicious Napoleon. As long as our

52 Ibid., 131.
53 As Mark Patterson observes, the very form of the Napoleon essay, characterized by numerous anecdotes and quotations from Napoleon, emphasizes his dominant pragmatism: “To a far greater extent than in any other essay in Representative Men, Napoleon is seen as actor and heard through his own stories. Whereas in the other biographies Emerson maintains his voice and intellectual presence, here Napoleon’s practical success challenges Emerson’s powers.” Mark Patterson, “Emerson, Napoleon, and the Concept of the Representative,” ESQ 31, 4th quarter (1985): 237.
54 Emerson, Representative Men, 132.
civilization is essentially one of property, of fences, of exclusiveness, it will be mocked by delusions.\textsuperscript{55}

There is, in this passage, a fundamental tension between Napoleon’s role as the “incarnate Democrat” and as a selfish individual. In part, Emerson is arguing that the multiplicities of ideas and aspirations characterizing the masses cannot be held together for long in the person of one man. Conversely, an individual can only capture the essence of the age for so long before the problem of self interrupts. And whether or not Napoleon’s particular actions are worthy of celebration, it is Emerson’s contention that his representativeness of the potential in man is in itself the most remarkable contribution of Napoleon to the world:

We can not, in the universal imbecility, indecision and indolence of men, sufficiently congratulate ourselves on this strong and ready actor, who took occasion by the beard, and showed us how much may be accomplished by the mere force of such virtues as all men possess in less degrees; namely, by punctuality, by personal attention, by courage and thoroughness.\textsuperscript{56}

Plato and Napoleon alike function as everyman, one on the level of abstraction and the other on the level of the material. The purpose of Representative Men as a whole is to meld these similar but opposing figures within a still wider conception of “Man.”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 147-48.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{57} Interestingly, the Napoleon lecture provided the germ for the entire project. Emerson had been working on a lecture on Napoleon before he conceived of the entire series, and I would argue that the thematic tensions within the finished lecture’s portrait of this definitive “representative” man established the specific conception of representation that Emerson would develop through the other six lectures. That is, the representation of the political will as seen in Napoleon could be translated into the timeless intellectual “representativeness” of a figure like Plato.
Yet even this capacious conception of human intellect is not to be regarded as conclusive or final. The mutability and contingency that we see once we look more carefully at the neatly-ordered, chronologically-arranged final set of sketches indicate, importantly, that like much of Emerson’s work, *Representative Men* is intended more as a suggestive set of possibilities than as a conclusive compilation. While the final set of six sketches certainly covers a great deal of intellectual ground, it also leaves open the possibility of further additions both to the figures and to the categories addressed. Within Emerson’s notes, we see clues that at one point he intended to include lectures on the Persian poet Saadi (perhaps under a combined heading with “Shakspeare”) and the nineteenth-century reformer Fourier, and the absence of these lectures within the final count only augments the sense that more (potentially much more) could be done with this model of historical-intellectual inquiry. If Emerson’s work leaves open the possibility that other unmentioned figures or groups might enter the realm of the representative, Brown’s text makes good on that possibility by bringing the African diaspora into representative history. But Brown’s consideration of diasporic history also provides further insights into the question of historical time, and the depth of past, present, and future, and in this way works to expand the epistemological parameters of the genre.

By doing so, Brown takes part in a process of perpetual intellectual enlargement that is at the core of Emerson’s thinking itself. In "Circles" from *Essays, First Series*,

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58 Williams xviii
Emerson uses the image of the circle to push further towards a conception of generative possibilities. Just as any circle can be subsumed within a larger one, so too "every action admits of being outdone" and "every ultimate fact is only the first of a new series." For Emerson, then, any apparent endpoint is in fact a starting-point for new modes of filiation. Emerson’s circles suggest an anti-hierarchical, anti-linear approach to human thought and history. Indeed, as one of the most powerful moments in "Circles" indicates, it is precisely the recurrent challenge of overcoming a static set of principles that defines the course of human life:

For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance—as for instance an empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite—to heap itself on that ridge and to solidify and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong it bursts over that boundary on all sides and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and to bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned, in its first and narrowest pulses it already tends outward with a vast force and to immense and innumerable expansions.

The function of too great a worship of the past, or of institutions, is to bind thought, to keep it within certain accepted borders, whereas the probing intellect must continually push outwards with so many "pulses." And no matter how far we travel along the path to enlightenment, there will always be "a residuum unknown, unanalyzable" that suggests new heights, as yet unreached. Emerson regards himself as an endless "experimenter" in words and ideas, working less to "settle any thing as true or false"

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60 Ibid., 253-54.
than to "unsettle all things." By further unsettling the terms of representative history, as we will see, Brown manages to draw a new “circle” around the conception of totality expressed in Representative Men.

2.4 Assembling the Racial Past, Present, and Future: Brown’s Representative Men and Women and the Nature of the Type

Following the opening essay on “The Black Man and His Antecedents,” the remainder of Brown’s text (under the heading “The Black Man, His Genius and His Achievements”) is devoted to sketches of representative black men and women from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, each of whom illuminates the capabilities of the race in the face of powerful forces of oppression. In total, there are fifty-three sketches in “The Black Man, His Genius and His Achievements,” a number that appears staggeringly large in comparison to Emerson’s six carefully hewn biographical essays. Many of the same figures Brown addresses had been cited before as representatives of the race in earlier entries in the genre. Yet The Black Man remains distinctive amongst these for a number of reasons. Among these, as Stephen Hall suggests, is the text’s

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61 Ibid., 260.

publication in 1863, on the cusp of emancipation, which afforded Brown a “Januslike quality” in his assessment of the racial past and future. Brown and other black historians in the post-bellum period could “look backward and forward in ways that their antebellum predecessors could never do.” More importantly, though, Hall suggests that the complexity of the organizing principles of the text need to be explored more fully. Scholars need to study *The Black Man* as something much more careful than a “miscellany of random facts,” as Brown’s early biographer, Williams Farrison, regarded it amidst Brown’s corpus of works. Yet Hall himself scarcely begins to take up that call for a more sophisticated literary study of Brown’s text, focusing instead on the broader place of Brown within nineteenth-century African-American historiography. In what follows, I illuminate the specific rhetorical power of *The Black Man* by taking a much closer look at its construction and its literary qualities. William Wells Brown was a deeply ironic, careful thinker, and it is a mistake to overlook the literary playfulness that makes *The Black Man* very much a part of the oeuvre of the author of *Clotel*.

*The Black Man* contains sketches of writers, abolitionists, scientists, political revolutionaries, and professionals from throughout the African diaspora, and it is

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64 Furthermore, Hall provides four useful observations that serve as starting-points in the exploration of the complexity of *The Black Man*, yet each of these places greater value on context than on the specificities of the text’s rhetorical and literary sophistication: 1) “the volume suggests the importance of the earlier writers themselves and the subjects of their publications,” 2) “Brown structured the narrative in such a way as to denote the relative importance of the person and his or her contribution,” 3) “the volume was a clear attempt to define freedom through a project of racial vindication, showing achievement at the height of slavery as well as after freedom,” and 4) “despite the postbellum publication, the work is also an extension of the abolitionist crusade.” Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race*, 126.
precisely through its juxtapositions of “types” that the volume complicates Emerson’s model of representative men. While there is a broad chronological movement from earlier figures towards figures more contemporary with Brown, there are many unexpected sequences along the way. The first sketch, for instance, is of Benjamin Banneker, a multi-faceted eighteenth-century scientific thinker who worked both in the abstract realms of astronomy and mathematics as well as in applied settings as a surveyor and almanac author. The next ten sketches explore, in order, Nat Turner, Madison Washington, Henry Bibb, Placido, Jeremiah B. Sanderson, Toussaint L’Ouverture, Crispus Attucks, Dessalines, Ira Aldridge, and Joseph Cinque. This section of text contains the three longest sketches in the entire collection, and also illuminates the array of types taken by Brown to be representative. The opening sketch of the consummate man of science is thus followed by sketches of two leaders of slave revolts, Nat Turner of the 1831 slave uprising in Virginia (longest sketch in the volume) and Madison Washington of the revolt aboard the slave ship Creole (third-longest sketch).

These are followed by brief sketches of three very different figures of black knowledge and artistry. Henry Bibb is best known today as the author of a significant slave narrative, but Brown paints him as above all an orator for the cause of abolition, a man who rose from ignorance to achieve great heights of intellect and learning: “No one who heard Mr. Bibb, in the years 1847, ’8, and ’9, can forget the deep impression that he left behind him. His natural eloquence and his songs enchained an audience as long as
the speaker wanted them.” The inversion here implied by the word “enchained” is striking, as is the implication of the text’s organization that Bibb’s efforts merit a comparison to the more overtly radical actions of Turner and Washington. The Cuban poet Placido is given a brief sketch, in which Brown emphasizes his natural genius and his radical anti-slavery agitation prior to his conviction and death sentence. Jeremiah B. Sanderson, a Massachusetts-born minister whose sermons engaged with the great intellectual minds of the day, such as “Emerson, Carlyle, and Theodore Parker,” is a figure for the spread of knowledge, as his activities in California are of particular merit.

The intermingling of intellectual achievements and revolutionary activism continues as the sketch of Toussaint L’Ouverture (second-longest) is followed by those of Crispus Attucks (killed in the Boston Massacre), Dessalines, Ira Aldridge (English actor), and Joseph Cinqué (leader in the Amistad uprising). While Brown does not attach his subjects to specific “types” or “categories” in the way that Emerson does (except insofar as they all exemplify the “type” of the black man or woman), we can nonetheless see the biographical catalogue of The Black Man as elucidating a number of interrelated “sub-types.” Thus, in the opening sequence of figures, we can already discern such key categories or types as the (black) scientist-philosopher, the (black) revolutionary, the (black) artist, and the (black) orator. Yet the lack of clear groupings results in a mélange of types that overlap, with striking implications. By way of juxtaposition, Brown

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65 Brown, The Black Man, 87.
66 Ibid., 91.
manages to draw a line of continuity between forms of intellectual engagement and forms of political activity. Revolution itself becomes coded as a source of knowledge, or even as a type of knowledge. Reading racial revolt through the lens of representative men turns insurrection into one of the modes of human achievement. The familiar valorization of the American Revolution is both undercut and enriched when Brown celebrates the heroism of the Haitian Revolution and the revolts in which Nat Turner, Madison Washington, and Placido participated.

As we move through the collection of sketches, the primacy of revolutionary action increasingly fades into the background. While there are a few more choice sketches of political figures from the African diaspora—President Roberts of Liberia, as well as Haitian revolutionaries Henri Christophe, Alexandre Petion, and Andre Rigaud and Haitian Presidents Jean-Pierre Boyer and Geffrard—the remainder of the collection focuses less on political or violent action and more on writing or oratory, either in the service of the American abolitionist cause, or in their own right as cultural endeavors. Thus, the narrative painted by The Black Man is one in which political rebellion and revolution give way to cultural forms of insurrection. The writings and speeches of the figures sketched in the second half of the book represent not only the capacities of the race, but also a new set of approaches, through intellectual and aesthetic means, for responding to oppression.
Whereas Emerson is interested in finding the individuals who best represent a certain type or category of knowledge or achievement, Brown emphasizes the overlapping roles of political, intellectual, and aesthetic aims in many of his representatives. The contingencies of the diasporic experience lead to a conception of knowledge that evolves in a patchwork fashion. As a totality, the sketches provide an image of “the black man” as an actor within a complex diasporic network of affiliations. The function of collective biographies of black individuals, in Brown’s text as in other entries into the genre, is to impart a conception of membership in a shared “imagined community.”

It is a cultural form that operates much like the novel or the newspaper to foster a sense of shared identity. The conglomeration of “types” offered in Brown’s text thus provides a view of the diverse figures and achievements that can be unified under the banner of black civilization.

Brown’s investment in dynamic connections between divergent forms of knowledge is evident not only in the sequencing of the sketches, but also within each individual sketch. In the first sketch, for instance, Benjamin Banneker emerges as a thinker of deep learning with numerous intellectual interests. At a young age, he “mastered the Latin, Greek, and German” languages, obtained a vast “general literary knowledge” that lead his white benefactor “to regard him as the most learned man in the town,” and pursued the study of astronomy in order to produce a highly-acclaimed

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almanac. His reach into various fields—“He knew every branch of history, both natural and civil; he had read all the original historians of England, France, and Germany, and was a great antiquarian. Criticism, metaphysics, morals, politics, voyages and travels, were all studied and well digested by him”—is of particular value because he exhibits, for Brown, the kind of broad genius that can synthesize such disparate strands, “that energy which collects, combines, amplifies, and animates.”

While Banneker’s vast learning is certainly of interest in its own right, but also because of its service as a vehicle for more decisive political influence. Much of Brown’s account focuses on a set of exchanges between Banneker and Thomas Jefferson. The letters exchanged between the two, and Jefferson’s invitation that Banneker visit him at Monticello in 1803, stand in for Banneker’s much broader, symbolic political role. If he is shown to have had a strong impact on Jefferson’s thinking about race and the capacities of black persons, it is perhaps even more striking that his name (and his moniker “the Negro Philosopher”) circulated in Britain and France in the midst of debates about the abolitionist cause and the predicament of St. Domingo. Brown goes so far as to say that Banneker served a fundamental symbolic role in the French “Society of the Friends of the Blacks” as a model of the capacities of his race: “Indeed, the genius of the ‘Negro Philosopher’ did much towards giving liberty to the people of St. Domingo.”

Interestingly, then, Banneker, who is ostensibly one of the least politically-significant of

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68 Brown, The Black Man, 52.
69 Ibid., 58, 57.
70 Ibid., 56.
the first several figures addressed by Brown, was intimately embroiled in the most pressing political concerns of his day surrounding the African diaspora. All black achievements are from the start subsumed within a larger narrative about the capacities of the race. Emerson’s potent image of the “One Man” that is a composite of all types takes on a new poignancy when linked to the particularities of the Black Man (and of *The Black Man* as a volume).

If the classically trained Banneker takes on unexpected political relevance, then Nat Turner, the subject of Brown’s second sketch, illuminates a much different constellation of knowledge and political will. He is painted as a man of *intuitive*, rather than reasoned, knowledge, raised in the midst of “the superstition of the slave quarters” and “taught by his mother that he was born for a prophet, a preacher, and a deliverer of his race.”71 The impact of this configuration of influences is to shape Nat into a seer whose motivations derive from the visions he has seen and the communications he has had with God. Brown cleverly draws an analogy with Napoleon, who also “regarded himself as a being of destiny,” thereby positioning Turner as both inside and outside of Western political thought. If Turner has been regarded by whites as a consummate outsider, a man who in spite of his natural intelligence has been led astray by a peculiar religious fanaticism, then Brown wishes to put him back within the orbit of Western politics, suggesting that Brown’s self-image was much like that of Napoleon. Just as Napoleon was for Emerson the individual best able to consolidate the strands of thought

71 Ibid., 59.
and action in his age, Turner—in spite or perhaps because of his visionary sensibility—showed an acute understanding of the core inequality of the slave system in which he lived. Justice, for Turner, operated on a transcendent level, and to enact it (at whatever cost to human life) was divine work. Intuitive knowledge can be consummately practical as well as ethereal or spiritual in nature. Indeed, read in this light, Turner appears to be a kind of precursor to Emersonian thought in his linkage of the transcendent and the pragmatic.

Brown’s sketch of Turner is also notable because it makes use of Turner’s voice, his spoken words (and not through his writings, as is the case with Banneker and with many of the other sketches in the volume). Brown moves through various key passages of Turner’s “Confessions” (as recorded by Thomas Grey) in order to tell Turner’s story, providing supplementary context and pointed commentary along the way. This is, in itself, striking. Brown provides a sophisticated alternate reading of the “Confessions,” a document that aims to contain and pacify Turner’s violence and power. Brown unpacks the complexities of Turner’s character, uncovering a hidden layer of Grey’s text in a kind of analytical excavation. It is fitting that Brown opens his account of Turner with some words on the genre of the biographical sketch:

Biography is individual history, as distinguished from that of communities, of nations, and of worlds. Eulogy is that deserved applause.

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72 Thus Brown works as a literary critic of sorts, pushing on the questions raised by Turner’s voice in much the same way as scholars like Eric Sundquist would do nearly a century and a half later in To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993).
which springs from the virtues and attaches itself to the characters of men. This is not intended either as a biography or a eulogy, but simply a sketch of one whose history has hitherto been neglected, and to the memory of whom the American people are not prepared to do justice.\textsuperscript{73}

The initial insistence that this sketch of history is isolated from larger historical narratives ("of communities, of nations, and of worlds") proves to be a facetious tactic. Brown suggests that Turner indeed merits a place within those grand narratives, but that the world around him may not be prepared to see it that way. That is, Brown suggests that America is not yet fully ready (even in 1863) to regard Nat Turner as a representative man. While other figures in the study may well be assimilated into the registers of great men (Frederick Douglass, for instance, along with Banneker), Turner remains an enigma, a (deliberately) misunderstood and overlooked ghost of American history. In the same way that Turner seemed to embody the spirit of the Haitian Revolution, in Brown’s era, in the midst of the Civil War, “every eye is now turned towards the south, looking for another Nat Turner.”\textsuperscript{74} Turner’s power as a force of revolutionary will operating outside the structures of political power makes him a much more dangerous figure of “the black man” than many of the others in the volume, but Brown suggests that it is precisely his ability to make profound change within highly-circumscribed conditions that makes Turner such a potent, lingering symbol.

\textsuperscript{73} Brown, \textit{The Black Man}, 59.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 75. For contemporary views of Turner as a descendant of the Haitian Revolution, see Alfred N. Hunt, \textit{Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean} (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 120-1.
The opening sketches of Banneker and Turner show Brown’s interest in the many ways knowledge can be obtained within the constraints of a world organized around race, and they also show that “knowledge” exists in numerous, disparate forms. As we proceed through the volume, the complex connections between knowledge and politics continue to be a prominent theme, as the leaders of the Haitian Revolution are juxtaposed with modest poets and poetesses of Brown’s day. As we saw in the case of the sketch of Benjamin Banneker, Brown often makes use of textual materials written by his subjects to provide context for his narrative. In many of the later sketches, this shifts from being a biographical tool to being a means of showcasing the thought and talent of the subjects. In the case of George T. Downing, for instance, Brown provides only a brief physical description and a few general remarks on his subject’s prominence—“The tall, fine figure, manly walk, striking profile, and piercing eye of George T. Downing would attract attention in any community, even where he is unknown”; “he has long been looked upon as a representative man”; “Mr. Downing is always admired as a speaker”—before allowing an excerpt from one of Downing’s addresses take over for the bulk of the sketch (roughly 3 pages of a sketch that spans 3 ½ pages in length). A brief concluding sentence wraps up the sketch. Rather than provide any sort of commentary or intellectual context, Brown allows the material to speak for itself.

The sketch of Charlotte N. Forten is similarly striking for its subtle implication of future potential. Forten is a poet who is “still young, yet on the sunny side of twenty-

five, and has a splendid future before her,” who is given high praise by Brown in what is one of the longest sketches in the entire volume.\textsuperscript{76} Brown provides a rather detailed narrative of her early education, her success in poetry contests (in which her racial identity remained unknown until after she proved victorious), and her growth into a potent, natural poet. This is one of the sketches in which Brown’s orientation towards the future of black America is most clearly illustrated. Forten emerges from this sketch as a symbol of the potential for black writers to enter the literary tradition on equal footing with white writers. Brown’s lingering sketch suggests that he found in her a potent symbol who might, like Nat Turner, continue to inspire insurrection (here, of a literary sort) in generations to come. In the sketches of Forten and Downing, as well as in numerous others, Brown crafts a kind of anthology of emerging black thought, letting the texts of black writers and orators stand together as a collective retort to historical practices that would exclude their narratives.

The very idea of Brown’s work as constituting in part an anthology, as a collection of texts that together represent a certain segment of literary or cultural history, carries striking implications about the formation of knowledge. By organizing these disparate thinkers under a common heading and including their texts as part of his own, Brown stakes out a distinctive pocket of American (and global) cultural history for black writers and thinkers. In this light, Brown’s various approaches in his sketches amount to a set of different ways for thinking through the nature of blackness and black identity in

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 199.
the nineteenth century. Each of his representative figures, then, offers him one perspective on the concept of “the black man,” and the variety of styles incorporated into the sketches (anthologizing, analytical commentary, recreation through textual sources, and in some cases, narrative invention) serve as different means of entry into the forms of thought that characterize the abstract totality of “the black man.”

The contingencies of Brown’s construction of the text only heighten its improvisational character, and further bring its patchwork conception of knowledge to light. In the Preface to the volume, Brown notes that “the characters represented in most of these biographies are for the first time put in print.” This is a work that heralds new, unsung voices. Furthermore, the nature of Brown’s source material is splendidly haphazard: “The author’s long sojourn in Europe, his opportunity of research amid the archives of England and France, and his visit to the West Indies, have given him the advantage of information respecting the blacks seldom acquired.” Add to this the fact that much of his information is hardly archival at all, but anecdotal, and that several of his sketches are copied either verbatim or with slight modifications from early texts such as *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places and People Abroad* (itself an American reprint of Brown’s London-published *Three Years in Europe*), and we have a fascinating constellation of overlapping and contradictory textual materials, historical narratives, and unverified sources.

77 In this vein, we might also consider *The Black Man* as a predecessor to Du Bois’ more complex socio-historical method in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*.
Many commentators have noted that this mixture of truth and half-truth was part and parcel of Brown’s method throughout his career as a writer. In his assessment of *The Black Man* as a distinctly performative text, John Ernest remarks that Brown’s reuse of textual materials in new variants is a common thread in all his work, from fiction to history to autobiography:

Stories from his autobiographies turn up in his fiction; stories in the autobiographies themselves change; novels are reshaped; episodes from his autobiographies become episodes in his plays, where Brown plays a minstrel version of himself, with the name changed; stories from his fiction turn up again in his histories; and material from earlier historical works reappears in later historical works, in different contexts, serving different historical purposes.  

Similarly, the same tendency to play with historical data and documents is a key element of Brown’s fictional writings. Lee Schweninger has noted the fascinating play of authenticity and invention in Brown’s use of authenticating documents in *Clotel*, including within his fictionalized narrative “newspaper articles and advertisements, letters, legal tracts, religious publications, and the prefatory narrative of the author’s own life and escape from slavery.” Beyond the authorial exigencies that might have been the cause for some of this recycling, there are a number of profound insights to be drawn from Brown’s meandering methods. As Ernest notes, following Robert S. Levine, “Brown was a trickster narrator from the very beginning of his writing career, and a

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80 Schweninger, “*Clotel* and the Historicity of the Anecdote,” 21.
master at making ridiculous stories impart a kind of disconcerting truth.” Levine had noted the curious paradox that Brown was both “a deadly serious moralist” and “also something of a confidence man and trickster.” The interplay of truth and invention throughout Brown’s oeuvre becomes particularly salient in the consideration of his historical works. As we have already seen, part of Brown’s project is precisely to invent new realms of truth, to expose a historical narrative that has long gone unnoticed or ignored. Brown’s circuitous search for knowledge is both the idiosyncratic quirk of a particular author and a broader symbol for the cumulative challenges posed to the structures of knowledge by the African diaspora.

One of the later sketches in The Black Man, that of Joseph Jenkins, ties together the strands of knowledge, performance, and contingency that are suggested by the overall shape and form of the text, and in so doing reveals most clearly Brown’s reconceptualization of the Emersonian “type.” Jenkins represents a remarkably flexible model for gathering and making use of knowledge. Here is the opening of the sketch (taken verbatim from his earlier Europe travelogues), in which Brown paints Jenkins as a jack-of-all-trades:

No one accustomed to pass through Cheapside could fail to have noticed a good-looking man, neither black nor white, engaged in distributing bills to the thousands who throng that part of the city of London. While strolling through Cheapside, one morning, I saw, for the fiftieth time, Joseph Jenkins, the subject of this article, handing out his bills to all who

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81 Ernest, Liberation Historiography, 334.
would take them as he thrust them into their hands. I confess that I was not a little amused, and stood for some moments watching and admiring his energy in distributing his papers. A few days after, I saw the same individual in Chelsea, sweeping a crossing; here, too, he was equally as energetic as when I met him in the city. Some days later, while going through Kensington, I heard rather a sweet, musical voice singing a familiar psalm, and on looking round was not a little surprised to find that it was the Cheapside bill-distributor and Chelsea crossing-sweeper. He was now singing hymns, and selling religious tracts. I am fond of patronizing genius, and therefore took one of his tracts and paid him for a dozen.\(^8^3\)

In this passage, Jenkins emerges as an eminently public figure, a confidence man in his own right, appearing in various guises at different times. Jenkins’ fiercely “energetic” nature carries him from one task to another, and Brown’s acknowledgment of his “genius” seems to refer to the breadth and variety of his activities as much as to the specific aesthetics of his singing.

Jenkins’ later metamorphosis into an actor playing the role of Othello literalizes his general histrionic tendencies. Brown attends the performance following the suggestion of a flier advertising a performance by “Selim, an African Prince.” As the mysterious “African Prince” arrives on stage, he becomes a kind of mixture of various black leaders: “I immediately recognized in the countenance of the Moor a face that I had seen before, but could not at the moment tell where. Who could this “prince” be? thought I. He was too black for Douglass, not black enough for Ward, not tall enough for Garnet, too calm for Delany, figure, though fine, not genteel enough for Remond.”\(^8^4\) In

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\(^8^3\) Brown, *The Black Man*, 259-60.
\(^8^4\) Ibid., 261.
this striking passage, Brown curiously places the as-yet unidentified Jenkins in the company of various political agitators, leaders of the abolition movement and leading thinkers on the potential development of the African diaspora. Ernest reads the character of Jenkins as “a type of Brown’s own performative approach to his public life,” and he finds in Brown’s catalogue of black leaders “a veiled way of distinguishing himself” from each of them.\(^{85}\)

I would argue that it is more striking still that Brown uses their names at all in this context. The manner in which he seeks to identify a familiar face through a series of comparisons to prominent black intellectuals indicates that Jenkins, through his ubiquity and his unceasing extension of himself into new realms, is himself a kind of unacknowledged black leader. Jenkins, however authentic or fictitious his story may be, illuminates better than any of the other sketches in *The Black Man* Brown’s investment in a type of knowledge that pushes endlessly at the boundaries between intellect and politics. Brown finally leaves Jenkins (after encountering him again as a preacher and listening to his slave narrative, originating in an obscure African community) with the impression “that he was the greatest genius that I had met in Europe.”\(^{86}\) In his Napoleonic embodiment of his age, Jenkins becomes one of the most significant figures Brown can depict, significant in part because of his obscurity. As he becomes increasingly mythic in stature, Jenkins also becomes increasingly representative. Jenkins

\(^{85}\) Ibid., 336.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 266.
represents the limit of the “type.” Whereas for Emerson, the type is one way of bringing representative individuals into the realm of the universal, here in Brown the very idea of a clearly defined “type” is called into question.

2.5 The Unstable Boundaries of the Form: Emerson’s “John Brown” and Brown’s “Man Without a Name”

Both Emerson and Brown suggest that no instance of the “representative men” form can be comprehensive. No examination of representative men and women (no matter how precise and restrictive the parameters) can exhaust all possible subjects. Thus, Brown implicitly hopes that the coming generations of black leaders, writers, and thinkers will be worthy of addition to a future iteration of the catalogue of black accomplishments. The project is necessarily ongoing. And while Emerson’s Representative Men clearly aims at a kind of comprehensiveness, in its tendency to find individuals who represent the absolute highest evolution of their type, there is clearly room for expansion in the variety of types considered if nothing else. Emerson’s hasty decision to excise possible sketches of Saadi and Fourier, as mentioned earlier, gives a hint of the alternative possibilities. But Emerson also recorded some of his thoughts on other omissions in his journals. Perhaps most profoundly, he expressed a disappointment that he had not represented “the unexpressed greatness of the common
farmer and labourer.” This is quite striking, as the idea of the common man as a subject alongside the towering figures of Plato, Shakespeare, and Napoleon would have put Emerson’s project in a new light, emphasizing more directly the influx of genius from all sources.

In some ways, we can read Brown’s *The Black Man* as a kind of supplement to Emerson’s text which helps fill this absence, as it is full of portraits of men and women who are, if not always common, then at least by and large underappreciated and overlooked. At the same time, Emerson’s inability to complete his catalogue is in itself part of the point. As much as he wishes to erase the passage of time from the treatment of genius, there is no small irony in the fact that all but one of his figures harkens from the post-Renaissance era, and three of them from within a century of the book’s publication. The passage of time, with its attendant cultural and political evolutions, opens up new possibilities for genius and greatness, and thus leaves the title of “representative” always available for a new generation of thinkers and doers. Thus F. O. Matthiessen’s reading of *Representative Men* as a heroic failure needs some revision. For Matthiessen, Emerson’s inability to produce a full account of Jesus, who might have been the key binding exemplar, marks the weakness of his text: “Looking back at this book a dozen years later, he said that he had sensed when writing it that Jesus was the ‘Representative Man’ whom he ought to sketch, but that he had not felt equal to the

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task.” For Matthiessen, this omission stands in for the failing of the text as a whole. Emerson’s treatment of his central subject, “the genius of humanity,” emerges only as a “very amorphous” concept, insufficiently precise to provide the kind of inspiration that Emerson intended. In Richard R. O’Keefe’s reading, by contrast, this “amorphous” quality is precisely the point, as none of Emerson’s figures can, taken alone, be said to rise to the heights of his ideal “Man Thinking” and “central man” (the latter concept stemming from a dreamlike entry in his journals):

This deficiency in each figure explains why each chapter of the book includes a very negative criticism; these are ‘partial portraits,’ to borrow Gertrude Stein’s suggestive phrase. Having read the whole book, the reader puts together in his own mind these six ‘representatives’ and may then conceive of what Emerson means by a ‘central man.’ Each figure represents one fragmented face.

And perhaps that central concept of the full “Man Thinking” can be even better illustrated through the addition of a wider array of fragmented faces, black and white.

As a means of concluding this discussion of the idea of the representative man, I turn to additional figures who, though unnamed within Emerson’s or Brown’s text, can be said to enter into their catalogues in light of this expanding sense of representativeness. In Emerson’s case, the significance of slavery as a fundamental obstacle to the kinds of knowledge and experience he advocated would register slowly

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89 Ibid., 635.
and in various ways over the course of his career. His remarkable orations on “Emancipation in the British West Indies” and “The Fugitive Slave Law” themselves consider the representative significance of a host of “common farmer(s) and labourer(s)” whose struggles have much to teach us about the challenges of justice and freedom. Similarly, his accounts of “The Emancipation Proclamation” and “Abraham Lincoln” are of particular interest for their depiction of an organic evolution towards freedom. The Emancipation Proclamation itself becomes representative of human capacities. But perhaps most striking of all is his portrait of “John Brown” just before his death.

In John Brown, Emerson sees a fundamental “idealist” who “believed in his ideas to that extent that he existed to put them all into action.” Here, the contiguity of ideas and political action makes them nearly equivalent. Equally striking is Emerson’s awareness of the flux of historical opinion: “It is easy to see what a favorite [Brown] will be with history, which plays such pranks with temporary reputations.” 91 Within Emerson’s own approach to capturing history, as well as within the annals of national history, Brown indeed appears more profoundly just and significant after the fact. He is a representative man after Representative Men, standing in for a new kind of political advocacy that Emerson could not fully articulate before, and his example illustrates that

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potential categories of thought and action will continue to emerge as history continues onwards.\textsuperscript{92}

In \textit{The Black Man}, too, it is among the unnamed that we find one of the most striking representative figures. The playful subversiveness that Brown evinces throughout the text is perhaps brought to its highest levels in one of the most curious entries in the volume, “A Man without a Name.” This sketch reads like a short story, and opens in a welcoming mid-West domestic space:

\begin{quote}
It was in the month of December, 1852, while Colonel Rice and family were seated around a bright wood fire, whose blaze lighted up the large dining room in their old mansion, situated ten miles from Dayton, in the State of Ohio, that they heard a knock at the door, which was answered by the familiar "Come in" that always greets the stranger in the Western States.\textsuperscript{93}
\end{quote}

The stranger turns out to be a runaway slave, and his account of his travails constitutes the bulk of the sketch. This gives way to a discussion amongst the white main characters, Colonel and Squire Loomis, about the legal and political ramifications of helping the runaway on his journey to Canada. Loomis objects to Rice’s benevolent attitude, and presents an argument about national belonging to make his point: “If you aid him in reaching Canada, and we should ever have a war with England, may be he'll take up arms and fight against his own country.” The runaway slave can no longer

\textsuperscript{92} For Emerson’s shifting stance towards violent protest, see Michael Ziser, “Emersonian Terrorism: John Brown, Islam, and Postsecular Violence,” \textit{American Literature} 82, no. 2 (2010): 333-360.

\textsuperscript{93} Brown, \textit{The Black Man}, 278.
remain silent. He gives a rousing speech in which he decries his allegiance to the United
States and insists that “if it comes to the worst, I will die fighting for freedom.”

The speech convinces Loomis to change his views, and the narrative winds to its
close around the key question of the runaway’s name. His response constitutes the
highly symbolic conclusion to the tale:

"I have no name," said the fugitive. "I once had a name,—it was
William,—but my master’s nephew came to live with him, and as I was a
house servant, and the young master and I would, at times, get confused
in the same name, orders were given for me to change mine. From that
moment, I resolved that, as slavery had robbed me of my liberty and my
name, I would not attempt to have another till I was free. So, sir, for once
you have a man standing before you without a name."94

The still-unnamed fugitive represents the struggle for liberty in its purest form. He, like
John Brown in Emerson’s oration, comes to embody his ideas and ideals in full, and by
virtue of his anonymity represents the thirst for true freedom desired by all slaves. What
is particularly unusual about this sketch, though, is that it is never marked as a
fictionalized or embellished narrative. It is simply placed in the midst of the more
straightforward biographical sketches and anthological entries that surround it. This is
particularly striking in light of the fact that the story of Brown’s “Man Without a Name”
in many ways resembles that of Brown himself—not only in his given name, William,
but also in his birth in Kentucky and his upbringing as a slave in Missouri. Yet there are
significant differences as well, the most striking being that this renunciation of his given
name does not correlate with Brown’s own insistence on keeping the name “William.”

94 Ibid., 283-84.
This near-mirroring becomes even more strange when we consider that the story was reprinted and expanded in *The Negro in the American Rebellion*, wherein the story goes on to have the nameless man take on the name of George Loomis, the initially-condescending Squire. John Ernest suggests that this weird mixture of autobiography and invention is one of Brown’s many “intertwined and transformed stories” that “force[s] one to locate all of Brown’s work where Brown’s biographer locates [the sketch of Joseph Jenkins]—namely, ‘in the shadowland between the real and the imaginary.’”

Yet there is another way of reading the tale, particularly in the case of *The Black Man*. For it also brings Brown himself into the pool of representative men and women, while allowing him a degree of critical distance. “A Man Without a Name” is not the only autobiographical selection in *The Black Man*. Prior to “The Black Man and His Antecedents,” there is a “Memoir of the Author” that is derived from his earlier slave narrative and the variants that had been published as prefaces to his earlier books. Brown addresses not only his early life as a slave and the means of his escape, but also his growth into a public intellectual and his productive and transformative travels through the cultural capitals of Europe. Coming as it does before the full catalogue of biographical sketches, the “Memoir” seems to serve a primarily functional role, to give authority to Brown’s arguments about slavery, as is the case in Brown’s other works. Indeed, the “Memoir” ends with a letter from an English supporter who speaks highly of Brown’s skills as a writer and orator.

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95 Ernest, *Liberation Historiography*, 337.
Given the theme and form of the volume as a whole, however, we may well take the “Memoir” as an additional entry within the array of biographical pieces. Considered in this light, the “Memoir” becomes a fascinating text, both inside and outside of Brown’s vision of black representativeness. Significantly longer than any of the proper sketches, the “Memoir” can be seen as a meta-critical observation on Brown’s role as the mediator of this constellation of disparate figures. As the individual who is able to bring these voices together and place them within a coherent, holistic narrative, Brown himself becomes perhaps the most significant of all these representative figures. John Ernest makes the provocative point that the numerous contradictions and ambiguities of Brown’s historical writings are best regarded as a part of Brown’s efforts “not to write history but rather to make history possible.” As we have seen, Brown’s *Black Man* makes new interventions into the historical record through its complex reworking of the form of the representative men anthology. By cleverly marking himself as the arbiter of this intervention, Brown not only makes black history possible, but also makes possible a new kind of historian, a new kind of historical consciousness.

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96 Ibid., 340.
In the previous chapter, we saw how William Wells Brown’s work of collective biography, The Black Man, complicates the idea of transnational historical representation. In the earlier work for which he is best known, the historical novel Clotel: or, The President’s Daughter. Brown is similarly invested in the possibilities for narrating a complex national history. In Clotel, the fate of the eponymous protagonist is powerfully intertwined with the fate of the nation’s social and political ideals. While the fact of Clotel’s descent from Thomas Jefferson links her quite literally to the genealogy of the nation, Brown amplifies this links through a carefully constructed series of subplots and shifts in setting that turn the historically-based story into a complex novelistic narrative.

The scene of Clotel’s death is a particularly potent moment in the novel’s engagement with national history. Having seen the glory of freedom on the borders of Canada, and having risked all that she had worked for to return to Richmond and save her daughter, Clotel is re-enslaved and is being prepared for a slave auction in Washington, D.C. She chooses to run with abandon from this fate, and ultimately leaps from a bridge to her death rather than face a return to enslavement. Brown drives home the irony of this tragedy in a brief paragraph:
Thus died Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, a president of the United States; a man distinguished as the author of the Declaration of American Independence, and one of the first statesmen of that country.¹

The distance between the heights of Jefferson’s career and the lows of Clotel’s fate is immediately evident. More interesting, though, is the emphasis on Jefferson’s role as an author of national independence as well as a founding father of American politics. The ensuing passage in Clotel links authorship and fatherhood further, as Brown responds to those who would see American as the “cradle of liberty”: “if it is, I fear they have rocked the child to death.”² Jefferson’s efforts to help (figuratively) father the nation are tarnished by his abandonment of his (literal) children. In giving birth, as it were, to a narrative of national being, Jefferson also gave birth to a parallel narrative of disenfranchisement and degradation through the life of his daughter.

Brown’s historical novel is fascinating because it brings these parallel narratives of national development into contact with one another, and shows that the standard story of America’s rise as a democracy cannot be separated from the more troubling narrative that traces the painful imprint of slavery. The effect of such a stark juxtaposition is not unlike that achieved by Frederick Douglass in his scathing 4th of July address, in which his admiration for the roots of American political identity is complicated by his striking insistence that he (as a black man) stands outside of the realm of national progress. Both Brown and Douglass illustrate that the nature of

² Ibid., 183.
historical truth is always shaped by the kinds of stories we tell about the past. Any collection of historical facts is best assimilated into the mind through the medium of narrative, and the shape of a historical narrative carries with it significant implications about the meaning of that history. In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricoeur goes so far as to say that “time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative.”

For Ricoeur, time remains merely an abstract continuum until it is ordered by human principles of sequence, cause and effect.

In this chapter, I show how the engagement with the lineages of slavery impacts the form of two rich works of narrative fiction: Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855) and George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes* (1880). In particular, I am interested in revealing how Melville and Cable rework the conventions of the historical novel (the narrative genre that brings temporality and historicity most pointedly to focus) in order to capture the profound epistemological and social implications of slave insurrection. For both writers, slave insurrection represents not simply resistance to an established slave order, but a provocative challenge to accepted understandings of personhood, individuality, violence, and time. Significantly, the Haitian Revolution lingers in the near background of both novels. Both Melville’s and Cable’s narratives take place in the years just before or after 1800, and thus both are situated in the early years of the American republic as well as within the duration of the Haitian Revolution. This overlap

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is significant, I argue, because both novels are concerned with how American history can be reconstructed in light of the hemispheric practice of African slavery and the often-violent forms of resistance enacted by the enslaved. While there is great power in Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s claim that the Haitian Revolution was “unthinkable even as it happened”—that it was, in other words, an event of such profound consequences that it could not be fathomed within the stark understanding of racial difference and black inferiority at the time—I would like to explore what happens when authors attempted to make the events in Haiti and in other slave insurrections thinkable through narrative.4

Beyond the direct connections of each work to the Haitian Revolution, which are fascinating in their own right and have received much scholarly attention, the two narratives register the aura and epistemological impact of the Haitian Revolution, and of slave resistance generally.5 I argue that the complex narrative forms of the two works are the result of the effort to engage with the resonances of slave revolt, and that their divergences from the conventions of the historical novel illustrate the impact of the African diaspora on Western conceptions of time and knowledge. Several critics have linked the ethical and political ambiguity of these works, their cryptic images and unsettling encounters, to the conventions of the Gothic.6 I want to push this idea further

4 Trouillot, Silencing the Past, 73.
by arguing that the Gothic resonances of the narratives reflect not only the murkiness and ambiguity inherent in the subject matter, but also the strained efforts of Melville and Cable themselves to narrate that subject matter. Benito Cereno and The Grandissimes, published between fifty and eighty years after the events they depict, provide a stunning view of the impact of African diasporic history on the very texture of the historical novel in America.

The way in which the genre of the historical novel is deployed by Melville and Cable allows them to register the ambiguities of race within a form that is often noted for its ability to provide a picture of a society as a whole. In Georg Lukács’ seminal works on the origins and nature of the novel, The Theory of the Novel and The Historical Novel, the categories of the universal, the systematic, the typical, and the individual are used to elucidate the peculiar achievements of the novel (and particularly the historical novel) as a literary form. By working through Lukács’ usage of these terms, we will see how the historical novel (as a genre) is connected to the genre of collective biography explored in the previous chapter, and we will also establish a foundational system of novelistic practice that will be undercut in significant ways by the works of Melville and Cable. Lukács’ theory of the novel is built around the fundamental difference between

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7 In my treatment of the evolution of narrative form in relation to complex American cultural tensions, I follow a line of reasoning similar to that of Priscilla Wald in Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
the novel and the epic. Whereas the ancient epic was able to capture a “concrete totality,” a state of existence in which ethical codes and social practices were absolute, “the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.”

The “transcendental homelessness” that is characteristic of the novel is thus an expression of a modern way of being in which the individual must actively define a relationship to the systems that constitute social relations. Hence, biography, the tracing of individual lives through all of their misguided and limited efforts, is the central narrative form of the novel:

The fluctuation between a conceptual system which can never completely capture life and a life complex which can never attain completeness because completeness is immanently utopian, can be objectivized only in that organic quality which is the aim of biography.

Here Lukács provides much insight into the ethical operations of the novel, suggesting that in the modern world there are no clear answers to the questions of existence, only the unfulfillable drive of the individual to “attain completeness.”

Later, in The Historical Novel, Lukács considers how a constellation of characters (biographies) can, taken together, be said to produce an “immediate impression of an entire society in movement.” The novel (and, particularly, the historical novel) does so

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9 Ibid., 77.
by appealing to the “typical,” by linking characters to social “types” in order to flesh out the contours of society at large. In the novel, however, the expression of the typical is not a simple matter:

The relation of the uniquely individual to the typical is treated in a slacker, looser and more complex fashion in the novel. While the dramatic character must be directly and immediately typical, without of course losing his individuality, the typical quality of a character in a novel is very often only a tendency which asserts itself gradually, which emerges to the surface only by degrees out of the whole, out of the complex interaction of human beings, human relations, institutions, things, etc.  

To put it otherwise, the novel must capture “not the concentrated essence of some particular trend, but, on the contrary, the way in which the trend arises, dies away, etc.” Thus, we read society at large into the novel through the array of narrative moments the novel traces. Each narrative moment (depicting, say, an encounter between individuals of different socioeconomic standing, or an encounter between an individual and a social institution) gives us access to some “typical” aspect of that society. According to Lukács, then, the task of the reader is to read outwards from these seemingly-individualized narratives, to find the “typical” through inductive reasoning.

Lukács’ model ultimately depends upon the legibility of characters and actions to the reader of a novel. Even in the effort to allow for greater nuance in noting that typicality is “often only a tendency which asserts itself gradually,” Lukács remains attached to an eventual legibility. The character or action must have a discernable place

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within the social totality. As we saw in the previous chapter, the engagement with the complex history of the transatlantic slave trade, and with the diasporic identities that arose out of that history, complicates the Western understanding of typicality. Similarly, in *Benito Cereno* and *The Grandissimes* we encounter figures of the African diaspora who reside at the limits of Western epistemology, and who challenge the efforts of whites to “read” them. As we will see, the figures of Babo in *Benito Cereno* and Bras-Coupé in *The Grandissimes* fundamentally elude understanding. Their incomprehensibility and irreducibility to any stable “type” forces us to rethink the relation of the novel to history, and ultimately, to rethink the nature of history itself.

As a way of amending or reworking Lukács’ thinking on the novel, we can build upon Edouard Glissant’s astute insights into the aesthetic and philosophical impact of a centuries-long legacy of transatlantic slavery and its aftermath in *Poetics of Relation*. As an aesthetic practice, “Relation” provides a powerful alternative to Lukács’ model, opening up new routes of connection as well as embracing certain kernels of opacity that resist entry into the social totality. Early in *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant alludes to work by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari which serves as a foundation for his own project. Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between "arborescence" and "rhizomatic" thought in *A Thousand Plateaus* is adapted by Glissant in his exploration of "rooted" and rhizomatic approaches to culture, language, and politics. The root, explains Glissant, is a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this [Deleuze and Guattari] propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a
network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently.\textsuperscript{11}

In Glissant’s reading, the rhizome significantly “maintains . . . the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root.” In other words, the rhizome is not devoid of any form whatsoever, but is instead capable of adapting and refiguring its form. For this reason, the rhizome becomes a powerful tool in thinking of cultural relations. Glissant maintains that “the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other” ought to be the grounding paradigm for any intersection between cultures.\textsuperscript{12} With each instance of contact, the individual develops in a new way—one is never tied unshakably to an original root, but is able to grow and reform as experiences multiply. The "Relation" of Glissant's title refers to this interweaving of cultural elements.

Glissant is particularly concerned to find an alternative to the Eurocentric desire to know other cultures, which has tended to occlude difference-as-such in the name of a universalizing humanism:

Understanding cultures . . . became more gratifying than discovering new lands. Western ethnography was structured on the basis of this need. But we shall perhaps see that the verb \textit{to understand} in the sense of "to grasp" \textit{comprendre} has a fearsome repressive meaning here.\textsuperscript{13}

Later, Glissant returns to the discussion of this verb, and notes that "the verb \textit{to grasp}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 26.
\end{flushright}
themselves”—this is "a gesture of enclosure if not appropriation." In these two passages, Glissant describes the potential damage that can arise from any supposition of "transparent" understanding of another culture or even another individual. For Glissant, the belief that one can possess total knowledge of another (individual or culture) is inherently reductive and misguided.

In opposition to the assumption of transparency that has been a distinguishing feature of Western thinking, Glissant proposes a universal embrace of what he calls "opacity." "The opaque," writes Glissant, "is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence." For Glissant, opacity becomes a powerful grounding paradigm for the interrelation of cultures. Glissant does not mean to promote ignorance, or to dismiss any attempt whatsoever to interact with or learn of another culture. Rather, his conception of opacity consists of a "gesture of giving-on-and-with" that acknowledges differences and "opens finally on totality." Glissant's ideal is an acknowledgement that no individual can ever fully know any other. This notion returns us to Glissant's interest in the rhizomatic approach to knowledge. Since "opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics," they provide a means of knowing people and ideas through their interrelations rather than through a presumptuous transparent categorization of the things themselves. Glissant explains that "to understand these [opacities] truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on

14 Ibid., 191-2.
the nature of its components." His conception of "Relation" thus enables a complex transnational mode of cultural contact that appreciates difference while working towards a nuanced sort of totality.

Glissant’s model of intercultural engagement offers a powerful model for understanding the workings of Melville and Cable’s historical novels. In *Benito Cereno* and *The Grandissimes*, we see the complexities that emerge as the conventions of the historical novel are brought to bear upon elements of an opaque “otherness.” The two narratives reveal the particular epistemological challenges that arise from the engagement with the African diaspora. The conventional understanding of the historical novel is reliant not only on a relatively-transparent relation between narrative and reader, but also on a clear intentionality on the part of the author. Melville and Cable’s narratives reveal, however, complex networks of authorial intentions and obsessions that further resist the appeal to transparency. The ambiguities of form and intent in these works are central to their narrative impact. These are fundamentally works of inter-cultural experimentation, efforts to parse out the meanings of slavery and of violent resistance to slavery, that go to the very limits of Western thought.

In what follows, I work through the epistemological implications of *Benito Cereno* and *The Grandissimes* by attending to the intricacies of each work’s form and context. I begin by arguing that both narratives are fundamentally shaped by a character’s search for knowledge and clarity. The disruption of that search by the encounter with an

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15 Ibid., 190-92.
irreducible African figure (or figures) reveals the extent to which the ideas circulating around the African diaspora force a reconception of Western thought. Next, I delve into the textual and historical contexts for the two novels in order to show the complexities of Melville and Cable’s engagement with sources on Africa and African-descended peoples, and to illuminate the multiple (often implicit) historical resonances of their historical novels. I conclude by arguing that the use of African dance in both works gives us powerful insights into the overall meaning of their nebulous networks of authorial intentions and obsessions, historical echoes, and narrative ambiguities. Fundamentally, this chapter is about what happens to the form of the historical novel when it encounters the opaque, irreducible specter of the African.

3.1 Emplotting Interpretation: The Making of Meaning in Benito Cereno and The Grandissimes

The narrative structures of both Benito Cereno and The Grandissimes are built around the effort to acquire knowledge. By following the efforts of central characters to gain accurate knowledge about the ambiguities that surround them, we as readers similarly move towards greater clarity and certainty. Following Peter Brooks’ Reading for the Plot, I will focus above all on the manner in which Melville and Cable emplot their narratives, unfurling their respective narrative worlds through the careful release of information both to characters within the texts and to readers.16 We will see how

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profoundly the central conflicts of each work, in both cases centered on a black slave whose actions produce a tortured effect on white characters, inform the structures of the works. Despite their move towards the apparent resolution of ambiguity, Melville and Cable’s narratives ultimately suggest that the emergence of an African diasporic identity within a society built around the subordination of African-descended peoples poses a significant challenge to Western conceptions of knowledge and history.

Melville’s novella *Benito Cereno* revolves around the pursuit of knowledge. American captain Amasa Delano’s effort to understand what he sees aboard the *San Dominick*, a curious slave ship he and his crew encounter off the coast of Chile, provides the basis for the bulk of the narrative. We see the narrative unfold from Delano’s naïve perspective, and the ways in which he interprets (or attempts to interpret) the things he sees are our only guidelines for the majority of the narrative. From his initial uncertainty about the *San Dominick*’s failure to follow maritime protocol, to his bewilderment at the foreboding behaviors of the ship’s slave cargo, to his continual misgivings about the ship’s captain, Don Benito Cereno, Amasa Delano’s perplexity is central to the novella’s interrogation of the white encounter with black resistance. His inability to recognize that what he is seeing in the curious mannerisms of Captain Benito Cereno and the surreal posturings of the slaves is in fact a farce enacted to hide the realities of slave insurrection gives way at last to the troubling “truth” of the situation before him. In charting Amasa Delano’s search for clarity, and in capturing the ambiguities that linger well after the
“truth” is revealed, Melville provides a remarkable representation of the epistemological significance of a (white) encounter with violent slave resistance.

The remarkable mixture of feigned transparency and actual incomprehensibility in the behaviors of Benito Cereno, Babo, and the remainder of the San Dominick’s crew and cargo produces an unsettling atmosphere throughout the novella. The ship itself presents a “baffling” spectacle from the moment of its first sighting due to its unsteady movements and in its failure to display a distinguishing flag. Observing the strange, uneven motions of the San Dominick as it comes within sight, Amasa Delano notices that the foreign vessel "showed no colors." The ship thus fails to participate in a common "custom among peaceful seamen of all nations." In this first description of the San Dominick from afar, Melville thus makes visible the role of shared Euro-American conventions in sea-transit. These conventions and regulatory measures turn the sea, a space of apparent freedom and interconnection, into a space that extends the strictures of imperial or national sovereignty. The "singular" maneuvers of the Spanish vessel mark another point of departure from the conventions of Euro-American sea travel. The San Dominick moves "too near the land" and exhibits "apparent uncertainty" in its motions, and thus appears to be out-of-sync with the rhythms of the maritime trade. The

curious behaviors of the ship leave Delano uncertain how to proceed with the *San Dominick*.\(^{18}\)

The initial ambiguity surrounding the *San Dominick* gives way to an excessive demonstration of transparency once Delano boards the ship. The continued success of the slave revolt aboard the *San Dominick* hinges upon the ability of the former slaves to maintain the illusion that the balance of power remains unchanged. Under the orchestration of Babo, the slaves emulate the normal conditions of control and submission aboard the slave ship, and yet the performance consistently rings false. Immediately following Captain Delano’s arrival onboard, the ship’s entire populace joins together "in one language, and as with one voice" to relay the (falsified) story that accounts for the current condition of the ship.\(^{19}\) The histrionic excess with which the words are spoken counteracts the very lucidity that they are meant to achieve. Furthermore, the behaviors and physical orientation of the slaves on the ship resist intelligibility. The "four elderly grizzled negroes" who sit on the beams above the deck, singing a "continuous, low, monotonous chant" are characterized as "sphinx-like," possessing a mysterious knowledge of what goes on beneath their gaze. Confusion is further propounded by the slaves who clean hatchets on the deck, and at intervals

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 2372, 2374.
"clash[ ] their hatchets together, like cymbals, with a barbarous din." The combined effect of this sonic and visual incomprehensibility almost wholly dissipates what little intelligibility is provided by the unified utterance.

Similar failures of transparent performance are evident elsewhere in *Benito Cereno*. The elaborate padlock system that confines Atufal’s "gigantic" body serves to symbolize the supposed dominance of white over black aboard the ship. This dichotomy is played out to the point of excess. When Captain Delano suggests that it might be reasonable to "remit" Atufal’s penalty if his infraction "was not something very serious," Babo immediately responds, as though to himself, "proud Atufal must first ask master’s pardon. The slave there carries the padlock, but master here carries the key." This injunction is intended to solidify the absolute division of power between master and slave that the lock and key imply, but instead it merely emphasizes the extent to which these "significant symbols" have become nothing more than symbols. The hyperbolized representation of the relation between the padlock and the key serves only to confound their supposedly natural presence within the ship’s operations.

Delano’s inability to decipher the behaviors of the *San Dominick*’s crew is accentuated by the continual usage of an unusual *either/or* syntactic structure that, as Philip Fisher argues, disrupts the "Aristotelian structure of logical exclusion." In, for instance, the phrase, "whether the ship had a figure-head, or only a plain beak, was not

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20 Ibid., 2375.
21 Ibid., 2384, 2385.
quite certain,” something more complex than a logic of exclusion is taking place.22 With the knowledge that the ship has been the site of a slave revolt, and the further knowledge that the skeleton of the former captain of the ship has replaced the original figure-head, we recognize that neither of the apparently mutually exclusive possibilities is precisely accurate. Thus, while Melville’s uncanny either/or syntax marks on the one hand the insufficient effectiveness of the feigned performance on the San Dominick, it also, on the other hand, reveals the flaws that make logical transparency an untenable illusion. As Fisher observes, since "the first term [of Melville’s either/or phrases] is preserved and regrounded in the second possibility, a denial or a negation only increases the uncertainty."23 Even as it traces the failures of the black slaves to bring their revolt to its final ends, then, Benito Cereno also continually shows that Delano’s entire way of thinking is incapable of perfectly grasping what he sees before him.

Once Delano finally comes to recognize that a slave revolt has occurred aboard the San Dominick, it appears as if everything has at last been revealed—transparency, it would seem, has been achieved. The "flash of revelation" that uncovers the truth about the San Dominick to Captain Delano has the effect of "illuminating in unanticipated clearness, his host’s whole mysterious demeanor, with every enigmatic event of the day, as well as the entire past voyage of the San Dominick." The affected performance can no

22 Ibid., 2374.
longer be sustained once Benito Cereno jumps into Delano's boat with a knife-wielding Babo just behind him. Strikingly, the language used to describe Delano's moment of revelation suggests that he has achieved complete knowledge. Not only does Delano come to understand what has happened in a broad sense (i.e. that a slave revolt has occurred), but he also gains something like omniscience in the acquisition of "unanticipated clearness" that permits him to understand "every enigmatic event of the day" and the "entire past voyage" of the ship.24 In Amasa Delano's apparently clear understanding of the events that have transpired, Euro-American transparency reasserts itself in a somewhat ironic fashion. Delano fails to grasp the permanent epistemological shift that the slave revolt has produced. In his naïveté, he presumes that once the escaping slaves are captured, the former order of mastery and servitude can be reinstated.

The elaborate deposition that attempts to reconstruct the events onboard the San Dominick appears to give greater credence to the transparent “truth” about what has happened. Using rational, legal language, the deposition traces out the events of the San Dominick's slave rebellion in a linear, purportedly objective fashion. It is the formal elaboration of the "clearness" with which Delano sees everything following the moment of recognition. Yet even though the capture of the slaves and the swift operation of the legal system seem to indicate the success of the slaveholding system over the rebellious slaves, it is evident that the transparent logic of domination will no longer suffice.

24 Melville, Benito Cereno, 2413 (emphasis mine).
Indeed, when Delano attempts to reassure Benito Cereno at the close of the novella—"the past is passed; why moralize upon it?"—he fails to understand that in the wake of rebellion no one can simply return with comfort to their former positions within the hierarchy. The "shadow" that is forever cast upon Benito Cereno by the "memory" of his forced submission to Babo suggests that the transparency and easy dichotomization that are essential to the slave system have been irreparably fractured.25 The complex knot that is thrown to Amasa Delano midway through *Benito Cereno*—a "combination of double-bowline-knot, treble-crown-knot, back-handed-well-knot, knot-in-and-out-knot, and jamming-knot"—signifies the perplexing incongruities that abound aboard the *San Dominick*.26 Within the space of the narrative, the moment of revelation in which each of the preceding events falls into place for Delano ostensibly solves the riddle proposed by this tangled knot. Yet by the narrative’s close, it is clear that nothing has been resolved. The permanent damage done to Benito Cereno’s psyche suggests the implications of slave rebellion for Western epistemology: accepted categories of identity, power, and law are forever called into question. The epistemological knot cannot be untangled.

Whereas Melville’s novella is a small-scale work (both in length and in the spatial restrictiveness of its setting) with remarkably large implications, George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes* (1880) is a more wide-ranging historical novel that details the cultural complexities of New Orleans’ incorporation into the United States.

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25 Ibid., 2426.
26 Ibid., 2395.
The setting of the novel—New Orleans just after the Louisiana Purchase—provides an abundance of material for the exploration of a constellation of historical connections among French, English, African, and Caribbean cultures. The illustrious Grandissime family is at the center of the narrative, and its members occupy a range of social statuses and voice various political positions. In many ways, the family is itself representative of the contradictions and possibilities within New Orleans culture: its members include Agricola Fusilier, the elder head of the family who views blacks with distain and cleaves strongly to the traditions of Creole culture, Honoré Grandissime, the broad-minded and wealthy representative of a more progressive younger generation, and Honoré Grandissime, f.m.c. (free man of color), the disenfranchised doppelganger whose liminal racial position puts him outside of all social categories.

Written largely in the mode of historical romance, Cable’s *The Grandissimes* is amenable in part to Lukács’ analytic lens. The various figurations of racialized identity and social standing in the novel lend themselves to treatment along the lines of typicality, as revealing the kinds of clashes of perspectives that would lead to significant transformations in New Orleans society. The hybridity of Creole New Orleans is a large source of the novel’s interest.²⁷ The frequent snapshots of idiosyncratic “Creole”

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²⁷ Indeed, Cable makes it clear throughout the novel that New Orleans culture was in a state of dynamic flux before the major change to American sovereignty. In his suggestive essay “American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon,” Lawrence Buell explores the potential utility of twentieth century postcolonial experiences as a model for the retrospective study of America’s break from England. Following the logic of his argument, we might here observe that if there is any lesson that the paradigmatic African postcolonial novel, *Things Fall Apart*, can tell us about cultural encounter, it is that the tendency on the part of any group to homogenize the other is short-sighted, and better able to produce mythological platitudes than real
mannerisms and neologisms lend the novel a proto-anthropological flair. In his exploration of African presences in American literature, Keith Cartwright illuminates not just the polyglot character of Cable’s New Orleans, but more particularly the Afro-Franco overlap: “Cable goes to great pains to show the degree to which the Creoles (and Southerners as a whole) have been marked by a West African semiotic. The Creoles tend to speak Gombo French among themselves, and many of them [. . .] speak African languages such as Wolof.” While the members of the Grandissime clan are the focus of much of the narrative, the fugitive slave Bras-Coupé is the figure around whose memory many of the key conflicts in the narrative arise. Deceased before the events of the narrative, Bras-Coupé is nonetheless at the center of the narrative, as we can see in the various ways in which different characters engage with his spectral legacy. It is in the relation of the surface narratives of the Grandissime family and the subterranean narratives linked to Bras-Coupé that the novel eschews a Lukácsian reading.

knowledge. For each society, each cultural space, already possesses its own history —its own entanglements with the threads of global transformation—before an outside force intervenes. Likewise, New Orleans is a conglomeration of symbols and meanings, a concentration of global dynamics, with or without the “studious” eye of Joseph Frowenfeld looking upon it and categorizing what he sees. Lawrence Buell, “American Literary Emergence as a Postcolonial Phenomenon,” in American Literature, American Culture, ed. Gordon Hutner (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 592-612.

28 For Cable’s usage of Creole in The Grandissimes, see Gavin Jones, Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in Gilded Age America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), particularly Ch 4., “White Writers, Creole Languages.”

Indeed, these details were a part of the novel’s great success among admiring readings, including Mark Twain, whose own efforts at capturing authentic regional dialect would have an even more profound impact on the landscape of American literature. The significance of dialect in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is charted in Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

29 Keith Cartwright, Reading Africa into American Literature, 195.
It is not solely culture that is “creolized” in the New Orleans of Cable’s novel—
narrative, too, undergoes radical transformations by way of its hybrid affiliations.  
Writing three-quarters of a century after the events he describes, Cable is able to 
illuminate the peculiar ways in which competing narratives of identity, place, and 
culture came into juxtaposition around the “birth” of the American New Orleans. The 

novel begins with two significantly-juxtaposed chapters, each of which emphasizes the 

novel’s investment in genealogical and historical knowledge. The first chapter 

introduces the characters of the historical romance—the aristocratic Creole 
Grandissimes, among them the fiery elder Agricola Fusilier, as well as the 

disenfranchised De Grapion women—in the context of a masque. Appropriately, the 
array of costumes betrays both the circuitous origins of the Grandissime clan (their dual 
heritage from “Iberville’s Dragoons” and “Indian Queen” Lufki-Humma) and the way 
in which identities can be reshaped anew, something that will be alternately contested or 
endorsed by numerous characters throughout the novel.

If the first chapter of *The Grandissimes* emphasizes the importance of genealogical 
knowledge *within* Creole society, the novel’s second chapter instead brings us into the 
complex society of New Orleans from the outside, as a newcomer enters this internally-
conflicted community just as it begins its transition into American sovereignty. In this 
second chapter, we are introduced to Joseph Frowenfeld, the central character around 
whom the dramatic and romantic events of the novel will occur. He functions as a
participant-observer within the narrative. Frowenfeld is a German-descended American who moves with his family to the new New Orleans, only to see them die from fever shortly after arrival. Frowenfeld himself barely escapes the same fate, and his experience under the spell of the fever is indicative of the type of experiences to come:

On the second day while the unsated fever was running through every vein and artery, like soldiery through the streets of a burning city, and far down in the caverns of the body the poison was ransacking every palpitating corner, the poor immigrant fell into a moment’s sleep. But what of that? The enemy that moment had mounted to the brain. And then there happened to Joseph an experience rare to the sufferer by this disease, but not entirely unknown—a delirium of mingled pleasures and distresses. He seemed to awake somewhere between heaven and earth reclining in a gorgeous barge, which was draped in curtains of interwoven silver and silk, cushioned with rich stuffs of every beautiful dye, and perfumed ad nauseam with orange-leaf tea. The crew was a single old negress, whose head was wound about with a blue Madras handkerchief, and who stood at the prow, and by a singular rotary motion, rowed the barge with a tea-spoon. He could not get his head out of the hot sun; and the barge went continually round and round with a heavy, throbbing motion [. . .].

The state of feverishness described here—subsuming the scene with a quasi-surreal intensity—becomes an apt metaphor for the experience of cultural defamiliarization that Frowenfeld experiences upon entry into New Orleans society. In the mingling of exotic sights and smells, and in the curious position of the black woman whose actions place her both as captain and as servant, this feverish reverie establishes the contours of the cultural estrangement and reconfiguration that will be the subject of the narrative. The novel itself, taken as a whole, might be thought of as a fever-narrative of historical

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entanglements, in which layers of reality and myth become increasingly intertwined. The trappings of historical fiction belie the anxious, ambiguous depths of Cable’s narrative achievement.

Frowenfeld’s struggle to make sense of the community in which he finds himself and its various members drives the narrative structure of *The Grandissimes*.  

As an outsider to the community, Frowenfeld is uniquely positioned to taste the flavor of Creole culture with a full sense of its eccentricities. When Doctor Charlie Keene begins recounting the complex genealogies of key characters, Frowenfeld is bewildered:

> To Frowenfeld—as it would have been to any one, except a Creole or the most thoroughly Creoleized Américain—his narrative, when it was done, was little more than a thick mist of strange names, places and events; yet there shone a light of romance upon it that filled it with color and populated it with phantoms.

Because we see the novel’s various romantic and tragic subplots revolve around the axis of Frowenfeld, his gradual accumulation of knowledge (and his efforts to make sense of the totality in which he finds himself embroiled) mirrors the form of the novel as a whole. For Frowenfeld, knowledge is often gathered in a piecemeal, experiential fashion, as various characters report details about caste, genealogy, race, or political perspective to him. At one point in the narrative, Frowenfeld’s efforts to understand New Orleans are characterized as a new set of “studies” as he “resolved . . . to begin at once the

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31 Indeed, Charles Swann has suggested that “the New Orleans of the novel is [. . .] very much a story-shaped world—one articulated by the narratives—the lies, the gossipy tales, the myths, the histories—that the inhabitants tell each other.” Charles Swann, “The Grandissimes: A Story-Shaped World,” *Literature and History*, 13:2 (1987): 257-77.

The very idea that New Orleans needs to be parsed out, as though it were an encrypted network of signs and symbols, itself bespeaks Frowenfeld’s (and by extension, the reader’s) position as an outsider looking in upon a complex cultural matrix.

While the plot-arcs of historical romance surrounding the Grandissime clan and the regionalist curiosities of New Orleans Creole culture appear to be the primary elements of the novel’s narrative, these are simply the surface effects of a deeper subterranean narrative surrounding Bras-Coupé, a fugitive slave and maroon whose effects on the Grandissime family continue after his death. Bras-Coupé is a resistant slave who categorically refuses the terms of constraint forced upon him by the slave system. When his insubordination goes too far, and his life is threatened by members of the Grandissime clan, he escapes to the swamps and becomes a maroon, returning to New Orleans periodically to instill disobedience amidst the slave population and spread the teachings of voodoo. Bras-Coupé is at the core of the novel’s narrative economy, even if he directly occupies only a small portion of the text. We see this both in Cable’s own remarks on his work—it’s evolution, its position within his increasingly politically-charged writing career—as well as within the narrative logic of the novel, which emphasizes Bras-Coupé’s connections to several members of the Grandissime clan and as well as to its enemies.

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33 Ibid., 102-103.
Following a number of hints about Bras-Coupe’s significance to various characters, and to the broad social climate of New Orleans in the early sections of the novel, we are finally provided with two chapters that purport to reveal the full details about this figure, “The Story of Bras-Coupe” and “The Story of Bras-Coupe, continued.” These chapters fall almost exactly in the center of the text, and are presented as a curious amalgam assembled from numerous sources. The story of the maroon fugitive slave is told to Frowenfeld three times and, presumably, in three different ways, on the same day, by Honoré, Honoré f.m.c., and by Raoul, the singer of folk-songs and the painter of folk art. The version of the story printed in the text does not, we are told, “exactly follow the words of any one of these” storytellers. Indeed, the full “meaning” of Bras-Coupé as an individual and as a symbol is never exhausted in the novel. Within the meta-narrative of Frowenfeld’s “study” of New Orleans, Bras-Coupé emerges as an insoluble problem, a cryptic symbol of black resistance that never quite enters the heart of New Orleans culture and yet shapes everything which happens there.

3.2 Palimpsests of History: Textual and Historical Precedents for Benito Cereno and The Grandissimes

If Benito Cereno and The Grandissimes are both narratives driven by the pursuit of knowledge in the midst of ambiguous and conflicting symbols, signs, and behaviors, then we must consider what it means that each novel provides us with an apparent

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34 Cable, The Grandissimes, 169.
resolution of the central mystery or ambiguity. In my reading, the apparent resolution within the plot of the fundamental tensions of race, enslavement, and power represents a shallow or naïve (though not precisely false) knowledge. Thus, in *Benito Cereno*, Amasa Delano believes he has discovered the *entire* truth about the *San Dominick* once he realizes that a slave insurrection has occurred. His subsequent actions, resulting in the capture of Babo and his fellow rebels, and leading to the production of the lengthy “Deposition” that reaffirms the place of law, are based on this naïve knowledge. The “Deposition” itself *documents* this naïve knowledge, solidifies it with the rational language of international law and serves as an artifact of that naïveté. Melville shows the falsehood of the apparent resolution in the final section of the narrative, which follows the “Deposition,” immediately establishing that some further knowledge as yet remains unspoken: “If the Deposition have served as the key to fit into the lock of the complications which precede it, then, as a vault whose door has been flung back, the *San Dominick*’s hull lies open to-day.”35 The brilliant emphasis on the conditional here forces us to consider that there is a kind of knowledge that still lies, as it were, outside the vault. Benito Cereno, unlike Delano, is not restored by the return of clarity and legal authority. His encounter with Babo has forever altered his sense of things.

Similarly, in *The Grandissimes*, the apparent jubilation of the closing chapter, with its celebration of successful romantic couplings (in consonance with the genre of historical romance) is fiercely undercut by the death of Agricola and the suicide of

35 Melville, *Benito Cereno*, 2425.
Honoré, f.m.c., and, more profoundly, by the continued significance of the broad, pervasive truths represented by Bras-Coupé and by those who continue to act in his memory. Cable’s numerous references to “the shadow of the Ethiopian” that lies over Creole culture mirrors the epistemologically-muddled “shadow” cast upon Benito Cereno by “the negro” Babo. For both writers, the encounter between a radically-resistant black slave and white society results not merely in a clash over political positions, but in a fundamental change in the fabric of social knowledge, which is not temporally-bound to the period of enslavement.

I argue that the epistemological dilemma represented in each novel takes on its full, wide-ranging significance because of Melville’s and Cable’s complex engagements with key textual and historical predecessors. An excavation of the extra-textual resonances of the novels suggests that their formal and narrative power derives in part from their layered engagement with the intricate histories and textual remnants of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. In one of the most provocative sentences in Benito Cereno, Melville captures the way in which Delano’s sudden recognition of racial insurrection alters his very sense of time: “All this, with what preceded, and what followed, occurred with such involutions of rapidity, that past, present, and future seemed one.”36 In much

36 Ibid., 2412.
the same way, the two novels gather up the sediment of moments past and make them a part of their narrative fabric.37

In the case of *Benito Cereno*, the texture of the primary narrative—capturing Amasa Delano’s perspective as he encounters the *San Dominick*—is complicated by the inclusion of excerpts from Melville’s source, Amasa Delano’s *Narrative of Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres*, reprinted almost verbatim, with minor (but significant) emendations on the order of dates, places, and small details.38 The adjustment in the date of the action from 1805 to 1799, as well as the alteration of the ship’s name to the *San Dominick*, suggest Melville’s effort to invoke the revolution on Haiti (Santo Domingo). Furthermore, the mere inclusion of excerpts from Delano’s account of the deposition within a narrative text so deeply invested in exploring questions of authenticity, accuracy of perception, and historical meaning is significant. By its very presence, the intertextual “Deposition” suggests a kind of official closure to the epistemological ambiguities of the case: in the eyes of the law, the actions of the insurrectionary slaves have been accounted for, measured, and reprimanded in turn.

Of course, the tête-à-tête between Delano and Cereno in the brief epilogue to the narrative belies any sense of comfortable closure. Delano’s encounter with blackness

37 Ian Baucom argues that the history of the Atlantic is best regarded as a history that “accumulates” over time around its tragedies and networked connections. See Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 39-40.
38 Jeannine Marie DeLombard traces the complex relationship between Delano’s *Narrative* and Melville’s interpolated deposition, focusing on the significance of contracts in the two works: “If Melville’s novella speaks to the relationship among slavery, law, and literary production in antebellum America, it may do so not just through the haunting final image of Babo as silent posthumous witness but, rather, in the excessive, contradictory verbosity of its assembled legal and literary texts.” Jeannine Marie DeLombard, “Salvaging Legal Personhood: Melville’s *Benito Cereno*,” *American Literature* 81, no. 1 (2009): 38.
(and with Babo in particular) has left him indelibly scarred. More damaging than the
terror of Babo’s violence, however, is the breakdown of Cereno’s very apparatus for
making sense of the world.\(^{39}\) Thus, the “Deposition” as we have it fails to account in any
meaningful way with the psychological and epistemological impact of Babo’s actions. In
this respect, the document mirrors the remarkable “Confessions of Nat Turner,” which
purports to explain (as delusional) the actions of the prophetic insurrectionist but
manages only to permit the imprint of his genius and the scope of his ideas to enter wide
circulation.\(^{40}\)

Melville’s many minor alterations to the Deposition from Delano’s original text
indicate the contours of Melville’s understanding of Africa and of Africans.\(^{41}\) Of
particular interest, as Keith Cartwright notes, Melville distinctly changes the ethnic
identities of the slaves, who were said to be uniformly of Senegalese origins in Delano’s

*Narrative:*

[Melville] hides [Babo’s] Senegalese identity until Cereno’s final
deposition. In fact, Melville does away with the Senegalese identity of all
of Babo’s cohorts. Since there was a romanticized and voluminous
literature on the supposed moral and intellectual superiority of

\(^{39}\) In *Freedom’s Empire*, Laura Doyle traces a long tradition of “swoon narratives” that derive from an
engagement with the complexities of trans-Atlantic networks. Following Doyle, we can say that Cereno’s
frequent fits of faintness throughout the narrative of *Benito Cereno* suggest the intersection of bodily registers
of anxiety, the historical conditions of slavery, and the epistemological limits of Western thinking on slavery
and power. See Doyle, *Freedom’s Empire: Race and the Rise of the Novel in Atlantic Modernity, 1640-1940*

\(^{40}\) “The Confessions of Nat Turner, the Leader of the Late Slave Insurrection in Southampton, VA”

\(^{41}\) Sterling Stuckey explores the impact of African sources, particularly accounts of the Ashantees, upon
Melville’s composition of *Benito Cereno*. Sterling Stuckey, *African Culture and Melville’s Art: The Creative
Senegalese, Melville may have feared that Senegalese—ironically Sambo’s main source—were the one group for whom sentimentally racist readers may have found a Sambo performance least “natural.”

In Melville’s retelling of the encounter, all of the slaves except for Babo are Ashanti, perhaps as a means of emphasizing their supposedly-innate cruelty. As Cartwright cleverly puts it, Melville’s “rebellious replotting of the Senegalese rebel plot” tells us a great deal about his intended engagement with his source material. The fact of the slave leaders’ literacy (likely in Arabic) in the actual historical proceedings suggests a further complication of the dichotomy of savagery and civilization. While Babo’s intellectual capacities in the narrative—his head is a “hive of subtlety”—are not seen to be connected to literacy, the original document already asks the troubling question of what it means to knowingly enslave individuals of demonstrably high intellectual capacity.

There is, in fact, more subtlety in Melville’s handling of the ethnic origins of the slaves than Cartwright’s assessment acknowledges and, furthermore, there are a handful of seemingly-minor details that point to a potential alternative reading of the entire narrative. In Amasa Delano’s Narrative, the transcript of the deposition notes that the key instigators of the uprising were to be found among “twelve full grown negroes,

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42 Cartwright, Reading Africa into American Literature, 187.
43 Ibid., 185.
44 Ibid., 186.
aged from twenty-five to fifty years, all raw and born on the coast of Senegal.” Melville breaks this group of twelve into two significant groups (one comprising four slaves and the other comprising six) and sets his key characters, Babo and Atufal, aside:

Four old Negroes, born in Africa, from sixty to seventy, but sound, caulkers by trade, whose names are as follows:—the first was named Muri, and he was killed (as was also his son named Diamelo); the second, Nacta; the third, Yola, likewise killed; the fourth, Ghofan; and six full-grown Negroes, aged from thirty to forty-five, all raw, and born among the Ashantees—Martinqui, Yan, Lecbe, Mapenda, Yambaio, Akim; four of whom were killed;... a powerful Negro named Atufal, who, being supposed to have been a chief in Africa, his owners set great store by him.... And a small Negro of Senegal, but some years among the Spaniards, aged about thirty, which Negro's name was Babo [...].

The names of two of the “four old Negroes” (along with the name of the son, Diamelo) and several of the names from the group of six “Ashantees” are taken from Delano’s original list of twelve (of whom nine are given names), as are Atufal and Babo. The ambiguity of the birthplaces of the group of four old slaves, “in Africa,” and of Atufal, “supposed to have been a chief in Africa,” stand in stark contrast to the specific invocations of Ashantee and Senegalese origins.

In the case of the “Ashantees,” this specificity allows Melville to establish a distinctive group identity, marking off six slaves as particularly ferocious and foreboding (since, as Cartwright notes, “Ashantee,” or Ashanti, would have been read by Melville’s contemporaries as “violent and aggressive”). These six are the hatchet-

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45 Amasa Delano, A Narrative of the Voyages and Travels, in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres: Comprising Three Voyages Round the World, Together with a Voyage of Survey and Discovery on the Pacific Ocean and Oriental Islands (Boston: E. G. House, 1817).
46 Melville, Benito Cereno, 2417.
sharpeners whom Amasa Delano first beholds upon boarding the San Dominick and taking his “first comprehensive glance” of the spatial arrangement of the slaves. These six, “unlike the generality,” are said to have “the raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans.” The references to this grouping (as with the four older slaves, the “oakum-pickers”) through the remainder of the text treat them only as a unit, indistinguishable as individuals. Thus, for instance, Delano later asks Cereno about the presence of “these Ashantee conjurers here.” In a more significant moment, their hatchets serve as a rhythmic backdrop for Delano’s recollection of numerous strange sightings on the ship: “By a curious coincidence, as each point was recalled, the black wizards of Ashantee would strike up with their hatchets, as in ominous comment on the white stranger’s thoughts.” The combination of foreboding and (in light of the eventual truth) irony here is striking, as is the rhythmic character of this contribution, since rhythm (in dance and music) is central to Melville’s engagement with African culture.

The depersonalized grouping of particularly “raw” Ashantees stands in opposition to the patently cerebral Babo, whose machinations revolve around the ability to construct a masquerade for Delano and his crew. Thus, Melville separates black physicality (the Ashantees) from black intellectual capacity (Babo). In light of this curious division, it is significant that Babo is the only slave designated as Senegalese in Melville’s version of the story. Furthermore, both in Delano’s Narrative and in Benito

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47 Ibid., 2375.
48 Ibid., 2383.
49 Ibid., 2388-9.
Cereno, the rebellious slaves insist on being taken directly “to Senegal or to the neighboring islands of St. Nicholas,” though in Melville’s version this request comes directly and solely from Babo.\textsuperscript{50} Thus, “Senegal” as a specific African location takes on a particularly symbolic role within the narrative economy, in a way that has not been given full consideration. As we saw earlier, the logic of the colonial slave-trade (and the merchant trade at large) consists of the movement between points, which are established ports of departure and ports of arrival. Glissant refers to this type of linear movement from one precise locus to another as the ”arrowlike projection” of colonial and mercantile aims.\textsuperscript{51} The slave rebellion that leads to black command of the San Dominick enables the disruption of the ”arrowlike projection” of the commercial path. The intention of the slaves to bring the ship to Senegal, where they can achieve freedom from the slave systems of the Americas. Ironically, this represents a reversal of the accepted order of transit, by which slaves were brought from the coast of Senegal to the Americas. Thus, the intended path of the rebel slaves involves a curvature (or an ironic mirroring) of the ”arrowlike projection,” and opens up the emancipating qualities of the sea. Under slave command, the ship becomes something like an autonomous floating territory.

Melville’s modification of the African origins of the slaves has the effect of creating a schism between the Ashantee and the Senegalese, distinguishing them as

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 2418. DeLombard notes that the arrangement to travel to Senegal is documented in a contract between Babo (representing the slaves) and the whites, and she addresses the role of such a contract in conferring (legal) personhood upon slaves. DeLombard, “Salvaging Legal Personhood,” 40-1.

\textsuperscript{51} Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 29.
“types” of African character. The alterations to Delano’s text also bring the figure of
“Senegal” as a place into clearer focus, as it is more striking that Senegal should be the
destination of the slaves given that only one of their number (their leader Babo) is of
Senegalese origins. In part, this suggests Babo’s profound command over the entire
grouping of slaves. But if Senegal-descended slaves were, as Cartwright suggests,
equated with a higher level of sophistication, then Melville’s emphasis on the
remarkable intellectual force of Babo might also be meant to connect to his homeland as
well. If the “Senegalese” Babo is a “type” of African intellectual capacity, then “Senegal”
itself might be read as a bastion of African intellect, a counter-monument to European
denigration.

The function of “Senegal” within the text gains in significance when we consider
the publication history of Melville’s text. When Benito Cereno was first published in three
successive volumes of Putnam’s Monthly, the introduction to the deposition contained an
inconsistency, as the text describes the case as proceeding “against the Senegal negroes
of the ship San Dominick.” When the novella was collected the following year in The
Piazza Tales, the word “Senegal” was excised from that same line, likely for logical
consistency, since the deposition (in Melville’s version) goes on to highlight the non-
Senegalese origins of all the slaves excepting Babo. This lapse in the original publication,
deriving from a direct replication of Amasa Delano’s Narrative, gives the curious
impression that all African-descended slaves might be designated “Senegalese.” Given

52 Putnam’s Monthly, Dec. 1855.
the symbolic (and “typical”) valences surrounding Senegal in the novella, this is a profound suggestion indeed, as it would imply that the entire host of slaves shares “Senegalese” identity to the extent that they exemplify black intellect. The effect of Babo’s encounter with Benito Cereno is to forever rupture the epistemology that would use African intellectual inferiority to justify slavery.

The disruption of Western epistemology by the slave rebellion is also apparent in the novella’s paradigmatic scene, in which Babo shaves Benito Cereno within the cuddy, bringing all the ironies of power into focus. The physical space of the cuddy reveals the decay of Western order, as it contains shattered signifiers of the imperial Spanish origins of the ship and its slave-bearing mission. The muskets, the "claw-footed old table" with a "thumbed missal on it," the "misshapen arm-chair," and the "flag locker" are in a jumbled array. Since the former divisions of the cuddy into various quarters have been knocked down, the entire space becomes "one spacious and airy marine hall" which to Delano’s eye melds "dormitory, sitting-room, sail-loft, chapel, armory, and private closet." Philip Fisher argues that the cuddy "contains too many overlapping facts" and thus "suffers from simultaneity." Fisher suggests that this simultaneity represents "a picture of any aftermath whatsoever to slavery" in its juxtaposition of spaces and its destruction of cultural icons (as in the usage of the Spanish flag as an “apron” around Cereno’s neck). More provocatively, however, we can read this scene as a representation of the

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psychological and epistemological crumbling that occurs when Western though confronts the idea of African intellect directly. The dismantling of sovereign authority in the scene is symbolized in the assemblage of flags which no longer hold any meaning: “A flag locker was in one corner, exposing various coloured bunting, some rolled up, others half unrolled, still others tumbled.” When Babo selects a flag to tie around Cereno’s neck, we are told that Delano “was amused with an odd instance of the African love of bright colours and fine shows, in the black’s informally taking from the flag-locker a great piece of bunting of all hues, and lavishly tucking it under his master’s chin for an apron.”

That it turns out to be the Spanish flag is only part of the irony. Delano’s naïve belief that Babo’s selection must derive from “the African love of bright colours” belies the reality that it is a calculated expression of power. Delano’s naiveté conditions even his understanding of the slave revolt, and by the end of the novella, he is unable to process Babo as anything other than a demonic symbol of evil. By focusing instead on the complex relation of Benito Cereno to Amada Delano’s Narrative, however, we see the effort with which Melville opened up an alternate view of Babo, of Senegal, and of the slaves in general. A counter-reading of Benito Cereno allows us to consider that even as Babo stands as the incarnation of evil from the Euro-American perspective, he may also stand as a figure of reason and heroism from an African perspective. While Melville tells the story from the former perspective, he perhaps unintentionally opens up a way of
reading Babo heroically that manages to make Babo’s overlap with Toussaint L’Ouverture (and the text’s deliberate overlap with the Haitian Revolution at large) more complex as well. Its rich layers of historical reference make Benito Cereno a narrative about the process of the Euro-American response to slave revolt, as well as about the Western response to the supreme violence of Haiti (from bewilderment and perplexity to moral and legal “explanation”). At the same time, the narrative economy leaves open the possibility that the actions orchestrated by Babo (and Toussaint, as the references multiply) were not merely just, but were brilliantly heroic, and might open up an alternative cartography that would valorize Senegal (and Haiti) and dismiss European claims to knowledge and dominion, leaving them crumpled in a corner like ruined flags.

Whereas in Melville’s claustrophobic narrative of an encounter with racial insurrection, meanings expand outwards to incorporate entire segments of transatlantic history, Cable’s expansive novel provides a full spectrum of social positions and perspectives, thus making its author-sanctioned defense of black rights more straightforward. Readers in Cable’s time and critics in the intervening years have often noted that Cable’s treatment of an often-backwards Creole culture on the decline in the face of a growing U.S influence works quite nicely as a commentary on Reconstruction America, in which Southern culture must transform in the hands of Northern principles. And certainly, Cable’s explicit positions on issues of racial justice in the decade
following the publication of *The Grandissimes*, particularly his essay “The Freedman’s Case in Equity” (1885), certainly support this reading of the historical novel as a veiled commentary on Cable’s own moment. But as is the case with *Benito Cereno*, authorial intentions go only so far in capturing the lasting fascination of the text.

As many critics have noted, the kernel of inspiration that paved the way for *The Grandissimes* is to be found in the central sections on Bras-Coupé. Cable had been working on a story “about a proud African king enslaved and sent to Louisiana” in the 1870s, entitled “Bibi,” and sent it to publishers for consideration, only to have it rejected.\(^55\) While Cable went on to write more successful stories about New Orleans in the “local color” mode (many of them collected in *Old Creole Days*), he remained dedicated to finding a way of bringing “Bibi” into print. The way in which he did so, by blending elements of his short story (of which no manuscript survives) with a series of myths surrounding the historical maroon slave known as Bras-Coupé, and inserting that composite narrative into the core of a novel itself seemingly about Creole culture and its transitions during the Louisiana Purchase, makes for a rather remarkable confluence of historical meanings.\(^56\) Cable’s quasi-obsessive attachment to this piece of narrative allows us to see the rhythmic appearances of Bras-Coupé in the narrative prior to the central “The Story of Bras-Coupé” as markers of the novelist’s own need to bring that

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character into focus in the course of a large, complex novel which is in some sense a “frame” for that central tale. But the interest of the Bras-Coupé episode goes well beyond the nuances of authorial composition. For Bras-Coupé, collapsing as he does different historical moments and numerous insurrectionary actions, is a marker of the multivalent historical afterlives of black resistance, whether in the large-scale form of the Haitian Revolution or in the many smaller-scale group insurrections in the United States and the Caribbean or in the alternative social spaces of maroon societies.

In his comparative study of Benito Cereno and The Grandissimes, Keith Cartwright offers a critique Cable’s novel on the grounds that Cable is unable to represent Bras-Coupé with sufficient skill, whereas Melville’s portrait of Babo reveals the author’s fascination with the insurrectionist’s ideas:

Melville’s narrative identifies with Babo’s plotting to such a degree that Melville becomes a co-plotter with the Senegalese insurgent. Melville makes use of existing stereotypes concerning Africans in order to plot the reader’s response. Cable’s Bras-Coupé is also born of stereotypes—the royal captive, the superior Wolof/Senegambian, the uncommon slave—to play upon the sympathies of a genteel readership. However, Cable acquiesces to sentiment and racial ideology instead of confronting and wholly subverting the Africanist characterizations of Creole society. Nowhere does Cable deeply identity with his exceptional Senegalese subjects as Melville did with Babo.57

While the modern critical consensus would tend to agree that Melville’s novella is in the end better able to capture the ambiguities of racial encounter, it seems curious to highlight identification and sympathy with certain characters as the marker of authorial

57 Cartwright, Reading Africa Into American Literature, 202.
success. Indeed, I argue that what is striking about Cable’s text is not so much the
effectiveness of Bras-Coupé as a fully-developed, sympathetic character as his ghostly
presence within the entire fabric of the narrative, the way in which the entire range of
potential responses to slavery collects around this figure.

Cable’s obsessive fascination with his narrative of Bras-Coupé is reflected in the
broad meanings that come to be associated with the slave. Early on in “The Story of
Bras-Coupé,” we learn the meaning(s) behind the epithet by which the slave, formerly a
West African prince, is known:

His name, he replied to an inquiry touching that subject, was - - ,
something in the Jaloff tongue, which he by and by condescended to
render into Congo: Mioko-Koanga, in French Bras-Coupé, the Arm Cut
Off. Truly it would have been easy to admit, had this been his meaning,
that his tribe, in losing him, had lost its strong right arm close off at the
shoulder; not so easy for his high-paying purchaser to allow, if this other
was his intent; that the arm which might no longer shake the spear or
swing the wooden sword, was no better than a useless stump never to be
lifted for aught else. But whether easy to allow or not, that was his
meaning. He made himself a type of all Slavery, turning into flesh and
blood the truth that all Slavery is maiming.58

Here, even the name Bras-Coupé operates on a figurative level, and requires further
interpretation. And in turn, Bras-Coupé himself appears to stand as a “type of all
Slavery.” In addition to these figurative layers, a historically-grounded investment in the
slave’s origins suggests Cable’s multivalent purposes. If Senegalese vs. Ashanti identity

58 Cable, The Grandissimes, 171.
is the marker of Babo’s superior status by birth in *Benito Cereno*, then in *The Grandissimes*

it is the distinction between Jaloff (Wolof) and Congo identity that is paramount.\(^{59}\)

The breadth of Bras-Coupé’s significance as a “type of all Slavery” is further compounded by the multiple ways in which he emerges throughout the text. Frowenfeld’s efforts to construct “The Story of Bras-Coupé” from the versions of three different story-tellers is only a part of the multiplicity surrounding Bras-Coupé. We also have the curious multiplication surrounding the name by which he is known, translated (begrudgingly) into Congo and in turn into French (and finally into English within the novel). The whispers about Bras-Coupé’s story begin as soon as the Frowenfelds enter the proximity of New Orleans, and his presence punctuates the novel in a rhythmic fashion. Thus, we first see a man aboard the bark that brings the Frowenfelds to New Orleans speak of having “had to run from Bras Coupe in de haidge of de swamp be’ine de ‘ahitaation of my cousin Honoré.”\(^{60}\) When Frowenfeld first encounters Honoré Grandissime, not yet knowing for certain the identity of his interlocutor, it is in the very graveyard that houses the body of Bras-Coupé.\(^{61}\) Later, Raoul Innerarity expresses a desire to paint what unquestionably would be a remarkable “pigshoe” (picture) of the renegade slave. And in the closing turns of the narrative, a wax figure of a bras-coupé—a severed arm—is used for symbolic effect within a voodoo-driven attack upon Agricola Fusilier: “He removed the lid and saw within, resting on the cushioned bottom, the

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\(^{60}\) Cable, *The Grandissimes*, 10.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 38.
image, in myrtle-wax, moulded and painted with some rude skill, of a negro’s bloody arm cut off near the shoulder—a bras-coupé—with a dirk grasped in its hand.” These multiplying images and representations of Bras-Coupé hint at his sustained role at the center of the narrative, and suggest the way in which slavery (of which he is “the type”) enters into all aspects of New Orleans society.

Even as he comes to stand for the wrongs of slavery in general, however, he also becomes attached to more particular facets of historical resistance to New World slavery. Thus, his initial escape to the swamps surrounding New Orleans carries the weight of numerous famous maroon colonies, for instance, in Jamaica or in the Great Dismal Swamps. Cable’s evocation of the terrain in which Bras-Coupé resides captures the significance of the experiment in which Bras-Coupé “was practically declaring his independence on a slight rise of ground hardly sixty feet in circumference and lifted scarce above the water in the inmost depths of the swamp.” This stark, physical declaration of independence, perched as it were on the most fragile, unstable ground conceivable, is given further significance by Cable’s descriptive language of the den’s surroundings:

And what surroundings! Endless colonnades of cypresses; long, motionless drappings of gray moss; broad sheets of noisome waters, pitchy black, resting on bottomless ooze; cypress knees studding the surface; patches of floating green, gleaming brilliantly here and there; yonder where the sunbeams wedge themselves in, constellations of water-lilies, the many-hued iris, and a multitude of flowers that no man had named;

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62 Ibid., 314.
63 On maroon communities throughout the Americas, see Gomez, Reversing Sail, 110-20.
here, too, serpents great and small, of wonderful colorings, and the dull
and loathsome moccasin sliding warily off the dead tree; in dimmer
recesses the cow alligator, with her nest hard by; turtles a century old;
owls and bats, raccoons, opossums, rats, centipedes and creatures of like
vileness; great vines of beautiful leaf and scarlet fruit in deadly clusters;
maddening mosquitoes, parasitic insects, gorgeous dragon-flies and
pretty water-lizards; the blue heron, the snowy crane, the red-bird, the
moss-bird, the night-hawk and the chuckwill’s widow; a solemn stillness
and stifled air only now and then disturbed by the call or whir of the
summer duck, the dismal ventriloquous note of the rain-crow, or the
splash of a dead branch falling into the clear but lifeless bayou.64

This terra incognita, a combination of Edenic flourishing life and grim or unpleasant
ecological realities, is the home of the fugitive.65 It stands outside of human time even as
it bears the weight of millennia of organic evolution, and thus associates Bras-Coupé’s
activities with a deeper temporal register.

The Haitian Revolution too becomes affiliated with Bras-Coupé through the
figure of Palmyre Philosophe, his reluctant wife. Though she never truly loves him (as
her affections were directed at Honoré Grandissime, white), she finds in Bras-Coupé a
mirror of her own insurrectionary spirit:

Her admiration for Bras-Coupé was almost boundless. She rejoiced in his
stature; she revelled in the contemplation of his untamable spirit; he
seemed to her the gigantic embodiment of her own dark, fierce will, the
expanded realization of her lifetime longing for terrible strength.66

65 Monique Allewaert explores the relation of the ecological space of the swamp to the resistance to slavery
Her fascination with his physicality and spirit make him the fitting vessel for the “lesson” she wishes to teach him, a lesson gleaned from her knowledge of Haiti:

She had heard of San Domingo, and for months the fierce heart within her silent bosom had been leaping and shouting and seeing visions of fire and blood, and when she brooded over the nearness of Agricola and the remoteness of Honoré these visions got from her a sort of mad consent. The lesson she would have taught the giant was Insurrection.

Her inability to teach this lesson of Haitian Insurrection, as Bras-Coupé escapes to the swamps without her, only manages to make her “fifty times the mutineer she had been before—the mutineer who has nothing to lose.” After his death, her sustained rage and use of voodoo in her unceasing effort to undermine the Grandissime family continues the legacies of both Bras-Coupé and Haiti.

Frowenfeld, Cable’s mouthpiece of balance and reason, ultimately shuns the insurrectionary response to slavery by positioning Bras-Coupé and Honoré, f.m.c. as representative of opposing approaches to racial justice (violence vs. legal advocacy). The narrative’s careful mirroring and near-mirroring of characters (most prominently, of two Honorés and of Bras-Coupé and Palmyre) reaches an important point when Frowenfeld proposes to Palmyre that Honoré Grandissime, f.m.c. could take the “place of Bras-Coupé” as her love and partner in defense of black rights. The f.m.c. is, quite literally, figured as a replacement for Bras-Coupé and for the insurrectionary spirit he represents. As Frowenfeld explains, the f.m.c. stands in a position to make real and positive change through his crucially different intention and method:

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67 Ibid., 184.
You see, [. . .] he understands their wants. He knows their wrongs. He is acquainted with laws and men. He could speak for them. It would not be insurrection—it would be advocacy. He would give his time, his pen, his speech, his means to get them justice—to get them their rights.68

Palmyre’s dismissal of this plan points to a fundamental difference in perspective that cannot be overcome. She has chosen insurrection as her means. At the end of the novel, just before the jubilatory romantic pairings that close the narrative, the prospect of Palmyre and the f.m.c. becoming a unit is explored and then tragically ended, as the f.m.c. commits suicide by drowning, symbolizing perhaps the impossibility even of a legalistic approach to racial oppression in a society still driven by a Manichaean racial divide.

3.3 Dances of the Night: The Carnivalesque and the “Shadow of the Ethiopian”

As we have seen, both Melville and Cable build complex networks of historical meaning and psychological devastation in their narratives. *Benito Cereno* and *The Grandissimes* narrate the very conditions of gaining and processing knowledge, and in so doing highlight the conventional ways in which nineteenth century white society rationalized black violence even as they open up alternative ways of reading that violence. Another motif that enters both narratives, and that ties together the layers of psychological and physical rupture, is that of performance, and particularly of dance. In both narratives, African-derived dance forms play an important role in the subversion of

68 Ibid., 291.
the slave system. Following the previous section’s exploration of the resonances of earlier texts and Atlantic histories in *Benito Cereno* and *The Grandissimes*, I argue here that the incorporation of elements of African culture (specifically in the figurations of dance) is not simply a sign of the authors’ investment in intercultural representation. Instead, these moments of direct engagement with an “African” cultural form reveal the extent to which both narratives are haunted by their engagement with the idea of Africa. In attempting to engage with “opaque” rituals and epistemological perplexities, Melville and Cable create works whose formal complexities speak more fully to the epistemological impact of the African diaspora than either author could have intended.

As we saw earlier, the machinations of Babo in *Benito Cereno* are fundamentally grounded in the histrionic appearances of the slaves before Amasa Delano and his crew. The entire display is a kind of carefully-orchestrated dance, with figures moving in accordance with specific rhythms (the Ashantees with their hatchets), and others such as Babo using the spaces of the *San Dominick* for carefully-orchestrated purposes. But dance proper enters the narrative as well. In the same way that the Ashantees are seen to rhythmically strike their hatchets in turn with Delano’s thought-processes, their physical movements come to signify the violence of their rebellion once the truth of insurrection has been made clear. Following an initial “sooty avalanche” of “the whole host of negroes” over the bulwarks, out of their proper positions within the pantomime in pursuit of Don Benito, a more exuberant display appears:
[. . . ] glancing up towards the San Dominick, Captain Delano, now with scales dropped from his eyes, saw the negroes, not in misrule, not in tumult, not as if frantically concerned for Don Benito, but with mask torn away, flourishing hatchets and knives, in ferocious piratical revolt. Like delirious black dervishes, the six Ashantees danced on the poop.

The dance of the Ashantees stands for their freedom in the new conditions of clarity. Ironically, once the “mask” of staged performance is “torn away,” a freer form of physical expression ensues.

In this particular instance in Benito Cereno, what is striking above all is not that Melville establishes the idiosyncratic characteristics of this dance as authentically Ashantee (or even “African”), but that he blends the imagery of spontaneous effusions of (murderous) delight with the Bacchanalian delirium of “dervishes.” This dance thus captures the almost surreal character of the Ashantees’ will to violence and, in light of their significant presence as keepers of rhythm earlier in the narrative, suggests a newfound freedom from the constraints of rhythm and pretense. The delirium of the scene mirrors the psychological convolutions in Delano’s mind at the emergence of the truth before him.

In what is an even more remarkable display of the interplay between African dance and Euro-American mentalities, Cable uses the “Calinda dance” to significant effect in The Grandissimes. As Bryan Wagner has suggested, Cable’s firsthand study of

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69 Melville, Benito Cereno, 2413.
70 Sterling Stuckey has explored Melville’s complex engagement with slave music and dance, particularly in the context of the chapter “Midnight, Forecastle” in Moby-Dick. Stuckey’s research suggests the extent to which Melville’s choices were grounded in his reading of key textual sources. Stuckey, African Culture and Melville’s Art, 89-98.
dance in “Congo Square,” and his interviews with those who knew the historical Bras-Coupé and his reputation as a dancer, allowed him a deep engagement with African-derived forms of dance in his work. At a significant moment in The Grandissimes (in the remarkable Chapter 17, “That Night”), a dance performed in a slave-yard has a hypnotic effect on Frowenfeld in the course of his musings:

Certain of the Muses were abroad that night. Faintly audible to the apothecary of the rue Royale through that deserted stillness which is yet the marked peculiarity of New Orleans streets by night, came from a neighboring slave-yard the monotonous chant and machine-like tune-beat of an African dance. There our lately met marchande (albeit she was but a guest, fortified against the street-watch with her master’s written "pass") led the ancient Calinda dance and that well-known song of derision, in whose ever multiplying stanzas the helpless satire of a feeble race still continues to celebrate the personal failings of each newly prominent figure among the dominant caste. There was a new distich to the song to-night, signifying that the pride of the Grandissimes must find his friends now among the Yankees:

"Miché Hon’ré, allé! h-allé!  
Trouvé to zamis parmi les Yankis,  
Dancé calinda, bou-joum! bou-joum!  
Dancé calinda, bou-joum! bou-joum!"?2

The free-flowing, evolutionary drive of the critique carried within the Calinda dance and song reveals its complexly-interwoven cultural and social significance. The “monotonous chant and machine-like tune-beat” may remind us of the rhythmic clanks of the Ashantee hatchets in Benito Cereno, but here this rhythm is present in a ritual that is private to the blacks (though audible to Frowenfeld and others) and yet directly

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?1 Wagner, “Disarmed and Dangerous.”  
engaged with white society (as commentary and response). The “multiplying stanzas” of
the song match the larger range of meanings in the novel as a whole, which continue to
expand and gain new historical-cultural referents.

In *State of Exception*, Giorgio Agamben explores the significance of the anarchic
feasts and festivals that have played a great role in different times and places within
human history, those spectacular events "characterized by unbridled license and the
suspension and overturning of normal legal and social hierarchies.” In Agamben’s
understanding of the feast-carnival, they are, moreover, spaces in which the expectations
of the culture and the law can be temporarily overturned: "men dress up and behave like
animals, masters serve their slaves, males and females exchange roles, and criminal
behavior is considered licit or, in any case, not punishable.” For Agamben, these cultural
moments "bring[ ] to light in a parodic form the anomie within the law, the state of
emergency as the anomic drive contained in the very heart of the *nomos.*”73 That is, the
feast shows the legal order to be a travesty, to be non-permanent, and to be capable of
utter transformation. In a similar fashion, the slave-yard dance, permitted by the
masters, allows for a temporary reversal of power as it makes a parodic travesty of the
legal and social order.

Interestingly, though, the narrative characterizes (and emplots) the Calinda
dance as a private event, occurring behind walls and outside of the slave system’s grasp.

Even in the brief description of the dance and its chant quoted above, the events are not

so much depicted in specific, direct detail as they are outlined. Cable’s narrative method presents the dance as something just outside of reach, just outside of sight.

Compounding this feeling of distance is the fact that the entire scene is filtered through the consciousness of Frowenfeld, who unconsciously overhears it as he drifts into a contemplative reverie. His concurrent musings show a striking interplay between song, dance, and the workings of the mind:

Upon every side there seemed to start away from his turning glance the multiplied shadows of something wrong. The melancholy face of that Honoré Grandissime, his landlord, at whose mention Dr. Keene had thought it fair to laugh without explaining; the tall, bright-eyed milatraise; old Agricola; the lady of the basil; the newly-identified merchant friend, now the more satisfactory Honoré, - they all came before him in his meditation, provoking among themselves a certain discord, faint but persistent, to which he strove to close his ear. For he was brain-weary. Even in the bright recollection of the lady and her talk he became involved among shadows, and going from bad to worse, seemed at length almost to gasp in an atmosphere of hints, allusions, faint unspoken admissions, ill-concealed antipathies, unfinished speeches, mistaken identities and whisperings of hidden strife. The cathedral clock struck twelve and was answered again from the convent tower; and as the notes died away he suddenly became aware that the weird, drowsy throb of the African song and dance had been swinging drowsily in his brain for an unknown lapse of time.74

Here, we may recall the feverish forms of thought that we saw earlier in Frowenfeld’s efforts to understand the nuances of Creole genealogy and society. Furthermore, the nature of the Calinda dance and the accompanying song of derision provides a curious parallel to (or inversion of) Frowenfeld’s efforts at deciphering Creole genealogy, as it “celebrate[s] the personal failings of each newly prominent figure among the dominant

caste.” The slaves reveal their intimate familiarity with the genealogies of caste only in order to parody those genealogies. In this way, Frowenfeld’s musings are being unconsciously accompanied by their very inverse, by a cultural form whose aim is to disband the linkages Frowenfeld strives to reconstruct.

The depiction of unconscious influence in this scene provides us with an apt metaphor for the narrative structure of *The Grandissimes* and of *Benito Cereno*. In both works, each effort of Euro-American epistemology to make sense of the idea of Africa (and of the African) is undercut by an atmosphere (a whispered “song,” if you will) of derision, an alternative black epistemology that threatens to invert the very conditions of society. Melville and Cable have written “historical novels” of a kind, but the genre is transformed beyond their control by their engagement with an Afro-Gothic (or perhaps Voodoo-Gothic) sensibility. The texts are themselves haunted, revealing to the careful reader not only the specific racial conflicts they describe but a more pervasive aura of anxiety and uncertainty, as even their own narrative logic threatens to be dissolved from within.

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75 In this, I am extending Teresa Goddu’s contention that narratives of race in American literature have often turned to the Gothic as an appropriate mode of expression. What Melville and Cable achieve is a Gothic sensibility that arises from a transatlantic network of associations with Africa. See Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

76 To say that these narratives lay the groundwork for Faulkner’s staggering explorations of historical meaning as a chronicler of the American South as global meeting-point is not simply to relegate them to the status of ill-formed, less effective earlier models. Instead, it gives us a means of following the evolution of narrative forms more carefully, and allows us to see in the way in which these narratives strove not only for a new multigenre “historical” form, but also raised new prospects for the epistemological work that narrative can perform. On the hemispheric and transatlantic depths of Faulkner’s achievement, see Edouard Glissant, *Faulkner, Mississippi*. 

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At the beginning of the very chapter in which the Calinda dance is depicted, the narrator of *The Grandissimes* provides some thoughts on night:

> Do we not fail to accord to our nights their true value? We are ever giving to our days the credit and blame of all we do and mis-do, forgetting those silent, glimmering hours when plans - and sometimes plots - are laid; when resolutions are formed or changed; when heaven, and sometimes heaven's enemies, are invoked; when anger and evil thoughts are recalled, and sometimes hate made to inflame and fester; when problems are solved, riddles guessed, and things made apparent in the dark, which day refused to reveal. Our nights are the keys to our days. They explain them. They are also the day's correctors. Night's leisure untangles the mistakes of day's haste. We should not attempt to comprise our pasts in the phrase, "in those days;" we should rather say "in those days and nights."77

Following Cable, we can say that historiographic night must be taken into account as well as day. That is, we must draw out—into the realm of knowledge—the many narratives of historical passage, whether they be conventional, visible stories or hidden, whispered stories. *Benito Cereno* and *The Grandissimes* register the schismatic cluster of alternative narratives that “the shadow of the Ethiopian” has produced in American (and broader Atlantic) society, and each work gives us a rich narrative form that is able to capture some trace of those alternative narratives. Melville and Cable, through their engagement with the African diaspora, force us to take departure from the realm of clear representation in order to see what we find in a nebulous realm of overlapping histories.

77 Cable, *The Grandissimes*, 93.
4. Educational Institutions, the Self, and (Black) Civilization: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Edward Wilmot Blyden on the Location(s) of Knowledge

For nineteenth-century black would-be intellectuals, one of the primary obstacles to success was the scarcity of opportunities for higher education. While a certain level of intellectual self-improvement was achieved by many notable figures, prominent among them Frederick Douglass, opportunities for organized instruction were often hard to come by, particularly at the university level.¹ The reading groups and ad hoc “classrooms” assembled in the name of religious practice and instruction during slavery, or the secretive meetings of enslaved or free blacks to advance goals of literacy or political agendas (retelling the stories of Nat Turner or Toussaint L’Ouverture or circulating and reciting David Walker’s Appeal), represent a significant effort to provide education even without the formal endorsement of traditional educational institutions.² By the first decade of the twentieth century, we can see a number of new dimensions and directions in black education, with the figures of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois as exemplary public figures. Whereas Washington would inaugurate a tradition of black schools known for their emphasis on technical skills and white patronage, Du

² See Martin Delany, Blake: or, The Huts of America for numerous (fictional) representations of ad hoc black intellectual gatherings. Slave narratives such as the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself and Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a School Girl both depict unconventional forms and avenues of learning and serve, as texts, as illustrations of their respective authors’ literary attainments. On the history of African-American reading groups, see Elizabeth McHenry, Forgotten Readings: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
Bois opened the way for the advancement of black causes through the pursuit of higher education at both black universities and bastions of learning such as Harvard.³

Whereas previous chapters have focused on the impact of the African diaspora on literary and historical forms and genres, in this chapter I will address one of the central institutions around which questions of knowledge and development revolve: the university. In what follows, I trace the origins and significance of the idea of an African university as articulated by the Liberian writer and educator Edward Wilmot Blyden. In Blyden’s work, we find a remarkable treatment of the meaning of a university in Liberia (or elsewhere in West Africa), not simply as a means of education for Africans, but as a beacon of black civilization resonating throughout the global African diaspora. In the context of nineteenth-century movements towards romantic nationalism, often centered around the contradictory pairing of folk culture and forms and institutions of elite education, Blyden spoke for the advancement of a unified idea of Africanness and African intellectualism that would cross national borders as well as oceans.⁴

Furthermore, Blyden’s conception of the black university provides a new context for the

³ In “Of the Training of Black Men” from The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois captures both the promise and the problems of black higher education through the second half of the nineteenth century.

history of black higher education in the United States, even as it participates in and complicates broader nineteenth-century debates about the role of the university.

In what follows, I reaffirm the significance of Blyden’s educational philosophy by way of an intertextual reading of two educational addresses: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s remarkable Phi Beta Kappa address of 1837 (afterwards known as “The American Scholar”) and Blyden’s inaugural address as President of Liberia College, “The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education for Africans” (1881). Separated by nearly half a century, the two addresses speak to widely divergent contexts and objectives. Yet the many threads of continuity between the texts allow us to see Emerson and Blyden as thinkers committed to similar ideals of intellectual independence and profoundly-creative intellectual development. In his search for a new form of education that will be a departure from accepted institutional practices, Blyden resembles Emerson, whose “American Scholar” address proposes a radical reconception of intellectual development. By reading the two addresses as expressions of profound optimism and faith in alternative prospects for education, we can see the significance of Blyden’s views as ideals rather than regarding them primarily as failed (or incompletely-realized) initiatives. Blyden’s address of 1881, like Emerson’s of 1837, is significant as much (or more) for its embrace of inspiration and potentiality as for its presentation of concrete objectives.
I begin with a study of the evolution of Blyden’s educational thought in order to illustrate his conception of the general function of an African University as well as to explore his move from a Western-derived curriculum to a more African-centered curriculum. I argue that his evolution as a Pan-African thinker developed out of specific relationships with the United States and its particular racial dilemmas. The remainder of the chapter uses a comparative close reading of Emerson’s “American Scholar” address and Blyden’s “The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education for Africans” to draw out the complexities of Blyden’s vision of an African university and an African-centered form of knowledge. While Emerson is to some degree a direct influence on Blyden, I am more interested in the broad implicit linkages between the two thinkers. Emerson’s expansive views on the nature of intellectual development provide a fascinating framework for thinking through the idea of a black university, even if that was not his intention.

My comparative study of the two addresses works through two key thematic issues: first, I explore Emerson and Blyden’s differing conceptions of the space of the educational institution. Emerson’s diffuse model of development relies upon an unspoken relation to institutions of higher education in order to ground its freedoms, while Blyden affirms the radical implications of establishing a black university in the first place. By comparing both works to a tradition that views knowledge as an organic whole, I explore how Emerson and Blyden manage to make organic unity a means of
liberating thought rather than constraining it. The second major thematic element I explore involves the relation of knowledge and multiplicity. I argue that for both Emerson and Blyden, the engagement with variety (and otherness) is central to intellectual development. Blyden’s increasing attention to African-centered forms of knowledge and curricula in particular leads to a striking conception of liberal education that stands as a powerful response to John Henry Newman’s *The Idea of a University*. Above all, this chapter argues that Blyden’s educational philosophy and practice needs to be treated as an important part of African American educational theory and intellectual history.

### 4.1 The Idea of a (Black) University: The Arc of Blyden’s Educational Philosophy

In his Introduction to Blyden’s *West Africa Before Europe* (1905), J. A. Casely Hayford makes a striking claim for Blyden’s singularity by contrasting him with two of the leading African-American thinkers of the time:


> What do I mean? I mean this, that while Booker T. Washington seeks to promote the material advancement of the black man in the United States, and W. E. Burghardt Du Bois his social enfranchisement amid surroundings and in an atmosphere uncongenial to racial
development, Edward Wilmot Blyden has sought for more than a quarter of a century to reveal everywhere the African unto himself.\(^5\)

While Casely Hayford’s comments obviously could not take into account the complexities in the later developments in the careers of Washington and Du Bois, he nonetheless makes a striking point about the distinctiveness of Blyden’s project as well as the span of time over which Blyden stood as a leading representative of Pan-African causes. Yet Casely Hayford’s distinction between the “provincial” African-American activists and the “universal” Blyden needs refinement since, as I will argue, Blyden’s educational philosophy developed through a complex relationship with America and African Americans.

Born in St. Thomas in 1832, E. W. Blyden eventually made his way to Liberia by way of a circuitous route. He traveled to the United States in 1850 in the hope of pursuing higher education. Upon finding his options limited, he intended to return to St. Thomas. At the encouragement of the American Colonization Society, however, Blyden went instead to Liberia to continue his education and to explore the meaning of his African roots.\(^6\) Thus, even in the early stages of his association with Liberia, the racial disparities of American higher education proved fundamental to Blyden’s developing thought. Apollos O. Nwauwa notes, quite rightly, that Blyden’s experiences in America...

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“would reshape and sharpen his future racial attitudes,” but more remains to be said about the fundamental intersection of Blyden’s evolving Pan-African philosophy with the racial and educational contexts of the United States. Not only was Blyden fundamentally impelled in his quest for education by the obstacles he encountered in the extant U.S. system, but he would also begin his search for an “African university” in Liberia, a colonial experiment in West Africa founded in 1822 by the American Colonization Society.

In many ways, the very structure of Liberia’s relation to the United States generally, and to African Americans in particular, implied a kind of African essentialism, a way of thinking about blackness as an extension of a (vaguely West) African rootedness. Until the time of its independence in 1847, Liberia was governed in close connection to the United States government. Curiously, in promoting a return to Africa, the American Colonization Society was also forging a much stronger lived experience of relation between the U.S. and Africa, which would in turn give additional weight to Pan-African modes of thought. Blyden’s arrival in Liberia in 1851, shortly after its independence from the United States, revealed to him a complex social structure consisting of primarily Western-educated “Americo-Liberian” immigrants and a largely illiterate and socially scorned indigenous population. In the midst of this matrix of racial possibilities and pitfalls, Blyden became intimately involved in the establishment of Liberia College in 1862. At its inauguration, Blyden was one of three permanent faculty

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7 Ibid., 2.
members, alongside Alexander Crummell and J. J. Roberts (himself a former Liberian President, and, with Crummell, a subject in Brown’s *The Black Man*).

In his Inaugural Address at Liberia College, in January of 1862, Blyden establishes his early perspective on the functions and form of the African university. This early address provides us with a glimpse of the general significance of an African University, in Blyden’s view, even as it reveals a problematic view of the indigenous Liberian population. At this early point in his thinking, Blyden exuberantly expresses the symbolic significance of Liberia College for black persons worldwide even as he advocates a familiar Western liberal arts curriculum (heavily promoting the classics, his own specialty and first academic love). We can see the dualism of African and Western influences when he presents a highly symbolic narrative that captures the triumphant foundation of Liberia College:

This is an auspicious day for Liberia, and for West Africa. [. . .]. Perhaps this very day, one century ago, some of our forefathers were being dragged to the hold of some miserable slaver, to enter upon those horrible sufferings of the “middle passage,” preliminary to their introduction into scenes and associations of deeper woe. Today, their descendants having escaped the fiery ordeal of oppression and slavery, and having returned to their ancestral home, are laying the foundation of intellectual empire, upon the very soil whence their fathers were torn, in their ignorance and degradation. Strange and mysterious providence!

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In this remarkable passage, Blyden deploys a commonly circulated providential narrative of Liberia as the redemptive response to the traumas of slavery in the Americas.

While the first line of the paragraph quoted above speaks to the resonance of the founding of Liberia College throughout “West Africa,” it is with particular emphasis on the fruitful novelty of Liberia that Blyden makes his appeal. The very existence of Liberia is regarded as a boon for “this benighted shore.” The power of the narrative of Liberian triumphalism is particularly potent in light of the fact that Blyden’s speech is contemporary with the American Civil War. In the context of U.S. debates and bloodshed over the future of slavery, Liberia stands for Blyden as an already-extant solution. Particularly striking is the manner in which Blyden shapes this redemptive narrative not around political freedom, but around intellectual advancement. Thus, the symbolism of the physical return to Africa is completed by the evolution from the “ignorance and degradation” of the captured slaves to the capacity of modern Liberian intellectuals to “lay[ ] the foundation of intellectual empire.” Blyden posits an essential link between the creation of the nation of Liberia and the project of developing black

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9 Wilson Jeremiah Moses chooses the beginning parameter of his study *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* based on the significance of the year 1850, during which the passage of the reinforced Fugitive Slave Act in the United States prompted many black Americans to give up hope in a permanent solution on U.S. soil. Accordingly, the interest in Liberia and Ethiopia (as symbols if not as real destinations) in the second half of the nineteenth century has its roots in this moment. See Moses, *The Golden Age*, 8. By the 1860s, however, when the U.S. was in the throes of civil war, the sense that black assimilation into U.S. society (in some form) would be the best solution to the problems of racial injustice became increasingly pronounced, and the interest in emigration to Liberia waned accordingly.
knowledge. Thus, Liberia College is a natural outgrowth of Liberia’s national project of black development.

Blyden’s reference to a modern Liberian “intellectual empire” serves as a reminder of the imperialistic foundations of Liberia itself, in which the “benighted” natives stand at some distance from the “enlightened” Americo-Liberian immigrants of the new nation. The complex relationship of the new College to the indigenous population is further elucidated when Blyden compares the efforts of modern Liberians to establish institutions of education to the efforts of Colonial New Englanders. Citing De Tocqueville’s discussion of the history of schools in the early American colonies, Blyden emphasizes the primacy of education among the priorities of the colonists:

We are informed that the forests were yet standing; the Indian was still the near neighbour of the largest settlements; the colonists were yet dependent on the mother country for the very necessaries of life; and the very permanence of their settlements was as yet undecided, when they were erecting high schools and colleges.\(^{10}\)

Here, Blyden notes that the eventual development of the colony derived from this early focus on education, and thus argues that Liberia must similarly build up its educational institutions as quickly as possible. The emphasis on the precarious condition of the early American colony is particularly noteworthy. The spectral presence of the Indian amidst the unknown and unhewn forests becomes, as Blyden continues, an important analogy for his country.

\(^{10}\) Blyden, “Inaugural Address,” 99.
Blyden moves from New England Southward to the early colony of Virginia in order to illuminate the importance of education even in the face of (violent) adversity. Writing of the tragic example of the early University of Henrico, he notes, “we may form some idea of the weak state of the [Virginia] colony, when we learn that the University was destroyed by an Indian massacre, and that the colony came very near being exterminated.” In spite of this early failure, however, the colony was able to put the College of William and Mary into “successful operation” later in the same century. This eventual success on the part of a tenuously-built colony is meant to reassure Blyden’s audience about the prospects of success for establishing a College in Liberia: “Why then should not Liberia, after forty years’ existence, having secured the confidence and respect of the aboriginal tribes, enjoy the means of superior education?”11 This curious phrase puts the ambiguous relationship between the Liberians and the “aboriginal tribes” directly on display. Even as Blyden lays a claim for Liberia as a source of universal black pride, he draws a firm line between Americo-Liberians and indigenous Liberians. Following the analogy with the American Indians, Blyden implies that the indigenous peoples must give way to the advanced civilization of the modern Liberian nation.

Blyden’s tendency to view Liberia as a colonial enterprise similar to the early American colonies (and, moreover, to celebrate that similarity) marks the limits of African unity in Blyden’s early educational purview. While even in this early address,

11 Ibid., 100.
there are traces of Blyden’s evolving Pan-Africanism, and while there is little doubt that he regarded the project as fundamentally beneficial to the race at large, the hostility or even indifference to indigenous customs, practices, and histories that we see here reveals a limited conception of black unity. If anything, there is a suggestion that members of the diaspora who have lived outside of Africa, or who were educated in the West, share a common bond that has little to do with Africa itself.

Accordingly, Blyden argues that the curriculum of Liberia College should not be an idiosyncratic or specifically African one, but rather a liberal education modeled after Western examples. Central to Blyden’s conception of the nascent Liberia College, and of his role as Professor, is his investment in the study of literature and language (particularly the classics) as a means of cultivating a rounded intellect. He argues that while the conditions of Liberia are in many ways unusual, or even unprecedented, the nature of the education offered to Liberian students should not be fundamentally different. In response to those who would argue that Liberians “need a peculiar kind of education; not so much colleges and high schools, as other means, which are more immediately and obviously connected with our progress,” Blyden counters that

It shows a painful ignorance of history, to consider the present state of things in Liberia as new and unprecedented, in such a sense as to render dispensable those most important and fundamental means of improvement, which other countries have enjoyed. Mind is everywhere the same; and everywhere it receives its character and formation from the same elemental principles. If it has been properly formed and has
received a substantial character, it will work out its own calling, solve its own problem, achieve its own destiny.\textsuperscript{12}

Blyden’s effort to continue the aims of Western liberal education while also speaking to the needs and interests of an oppressed diasporic population is the central duality of Blyden’s early educational philosophy.

Yet even at this early point in his thinking, Blyden makes a compelling case for the significance of the Liberian university. Blyden’s early efforts at Liberia College, and his nascent philosophy of an African university, are themselves radical. The mere application of the European-originated conception of a Liberal Education in a non-European context raises remarkable considerations about the meaning of knowledge and its transmission. The classic trope of the imperial translatio studii has been refigured through the very act of consecrating a black-led African University. Furthermore, the concentration of black knowledge in a specific institutional site represents a new dimension of historical possibility. In a sense, the originating idea of Liberia College is to continue, but also to institutionalize, the kind of intellectual broadening and redressing achieved in William Wells Brown’s \textit{The Black Man}.\textsuperscript{13} Liberia College itself becomes, in

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 97-8.

\textsuperscript{13} Interestingly, Blyden is not included among Brown’s representative figures. On the other hand, Alexander Crummell, another Liberian immigrant with deep ties to the founding of Liberia College, receives glowing treatment, though with scant attention paid to his specific activities in Liberia. Interestingly enough, within a year or two of the 1863 publication of \textit{The Black Man}, Crummell would decide to return to the U.S. to continue his efforts to advance the race. In this respect, his career trajectory is rather opposite to that of Blyden, whose commitment to Africa-in-itself grew continually stronger. See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, “‘Cambridge Platonism’ in the Republic of Liberia, 1853-1873: Alexander Crummell’s Theory of Culture Transfer,” \textit{The Wings of Ethiopia: Studies in African-American Life and Letters} (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University, 1990).
this sense, both the *proof* of black intellectual potential and the *guarantor* of future black intellect. Even as his views on the indigenous population changed significantly, Blyden’s conception of Liberia College as a beacon of inspiration reaching throughout the African diaspora would remain fundamental to his vision.

Blyden’s thinking on the black university would continue to evolve through the next decades. He taught at Liberia College through the 1860s, until political exigencies forced him to temporarily leave the country. Growing conflicts between mulattos and “unadulterated” blacks in theAmerico-Liberian population led to the politically-motivated assassination of President Roye, with whom Blyden was closely allied, holding the position of Secretary of State for several years.14 Blyden’s concern for his safety resulted in his move to Sierra Leone in 1871. While he remained firmly committed to the development of Liberia, he began to develop an increasingly broad philosophy of Pan-African unity, focused now not solely on Liberia (with its very specific configuration of relations to the United States) but on West Africa (and perhaps, on Africa as a whole). Perhaps unsurprisingly, his conception of racial unity tended to focus increasingly on “pure” blacks, but it also broadened in scope to include members of the indigenous populations. Blyden began to develop his view that there was a fundamental “African personality” that linked African and African-descended peoples, and that distinguished them from Western peoples.

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14 This suggests a larger problem in the making of nineteenth-century diasporic connections. As in numerous other locations—notably, Haiti—the tensions between “full-blooded” and mulatto members of the diaspora frequently led to intellectual and political impasses.
The impact of his newly-broadened view of the potential for African higher education was borne out in his subsequent activities in Liberia, after he returned later in the 1870s. In 1880, Blyden accepted the esteemed position of President of Liberia College, and by that time his thinking on the African University had reached a point of great sophistication. He became increasingly invested in developing a model of university education that would emphasize indigenous African traditions and the significance of Islam and Arabic on the continent as well as more conventional Western curricula. By this point, he had already begun to incorporate the teaching of Arabic and Islam into his teachings. While he achieved great success in implementing his educational vision at Liberia College in particular, Blyden’s full ambition of an African University as a site of diasporic pilgrimage was never realized, and his ambitious aims for a new African curriculum failed to find support among either Westerners or the Americo-Liberian elite. While Blyden remained committed to his ideals, and wrote on the subjects of education and native culture through the end of his life, the prospects for realizing his ideals in practice grew increasingly slim after the 1880s.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{15} Many of Blyden’s published works merit sustained (or renewed) critical attention. In one of his most significant published works, \textit{Christianity, Islam, and the Negro Race} (1887), Blyden presents a compelling parallel narrative tracing the damaging impact of Christianity and the ameliorating influence of Islam on the African continent. Though himself a professed Christian, he maintained that on the whole Christianity, particularly as preached through various missionary channels, had had a damaging effect on the self-image and prospects for improvement of Africans.

Towards the end of his life, he published \textit{African Life and Customs} (1908), which aimed to develop his life-long interest in characterizing and celebrating a distinctive “African personality” through more scientific, proto-anthropological means. This text is a kind of prelude for the more aesthetically and intellectually rich Francophone tradition of negritude developed later in the twentieth century by figures such as Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor.
One of the significant contexts for the relative failure of Blyden’s ambitious educational project is the European Scramble for Africa in the second half of the nineteenth century. Blyden’s most effusive pronouncements on the potential for a truly African university were being made just on the cusp of European efforts to divvy up the terrain of the continent. By necessity, then, the prospect for any kind of Pan-African objective was being cut short by newly-rigid divides of colonial language and colonial governmentality. While Blyden himself sought to argue for European imperialism as a useful (though temporary) means of forcing the rapid modernization of the continent, the realities of imperialism meant that the nature of that modernization would be unquestionably European in conception and execution. Blyden’s call for an African-centered conception of University education would be increasingly drowned out by a Eurocentric conception of progress and civilization.

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16 See Nwauwa, “Empire, Race, Ideology,” 16-17. As Nwauwa summarizes, towards the end of Blyden’s life in the first decades of the twentieth century, Blyden’s project simply did not fit with colonial realities: “From 1900 history began to move somewhat backward as the highly educated elite began to shrink in numbers and became less educated, with leaders of less vision than Blyden, Grant and Johnson. European cultural and racial arrogance grew and African miseducation [sic] became almost an article of faith. [. . .]. Consequently the idea of an African university, which had received some serious thought in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, was entirely rejected by British colonial officials for almost fifty years” (17).

17 The development of Blyden’s educational objectives and his conception of black civilization can be meaningfully contrasted with the work of the Argentine philosopher, educator, and politician Domingo Faustino Sarmiento. In his primary work, Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism, Sarmiento advances a Manichean contrast between “civilization,” which is associated with European models of knowledge and education, and “barbarism,” which dominates in Argentina’s interior plains, and threatens to destroy civilization if it is not curbed. Blyden’s move from a similarly-Eurocentric conception of knowledge and civilization towards an increasingly-inclusive conception of Africanity and African knowledge shows a radically-different course of intellectual development in a similar context. Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism, trans. Kathleen Ross (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

For Sarmiento’s influence in Argentina and in Latin American letters broadly, see Diana Sorensen Goodrich, Facundo and the Construction of Argentine Culture (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996) and
4.2 The Organic Unity of Knowledge: The Role of the University and the Nature of Knowledge in Emerson and Blyden

By 1881, when Blyden delivered his Inaugural Address as President of Liberia College, “The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education for Africans,” his fundamental views on the idea of the African university were firmly established, and would remain relatively consistent throughout the remainder of his life even in the face of harsh adversity. This address thus offers us an important view of Blyden’s educational thought at its most salient and in its most optimistic register. Similarly, Emerson’s “American Scholar” address, delivered early in his writing career, contains some of his most strident claims about the nature of knowledge and education, and elucidates many concepts that would be central to all of his subsequent work. In what follows, I will provide a comparative, dialectical reading of these two ambitious addresses in order to illuminate how Blyden’s thinking on the university participates in a wider set of intellectual discussions about the functions and curriculum of the university. Emerson, himself a radical thinker on the subject of individual development in relation to educational institutions, opens up new ways of thinking about the significance of Blyden’s achievement (and about various forms of black self-education throughout the nineteenth century) by providing a framework for a reconsideration of Blyden’s...

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fundamental connection to the United States. Conversely, Blyden implicitly shows us the limits of Emerson’s expansive vision of development, and thereby reaffirms the place of African-centered knowledge within the totality of human thought.

The two addresses establish the complexities of their projects from the very outset. The opening paragraphs of Emerson’s 1837 address are to some degree its most conventional portions, yet they contain kernels of the rich arguments that will follow. Emerson quickly sets forth a distinction between "the exertions of mechanical skill" that seem to be the foremost accomplishments of the United States at his time, and the sort of intellectual "labor" that will arise once Americans "fill the postponed expectation of the world." At first glance, this appears to be fairly routine rhetoric on the need for America to emerge as a cultural force on the world scene. Yet the barrenness Emerson sees in mere "exertions of mechanical skill" suggests a much wider critique of modern professionalization and mindless labor that will become clear in the course of the address. Similarly, Emerson’s appeal to an end to "our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands" is both conventional and novel. As Kenneth Sacks notes, Emerson’s address can be easily placed in a long tradition of Phi Beta Kappa speeches on the relation of American thought to European. In no way does his stated interest in ending the "long apprenticeship" indicate a radical departure from

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his predecessors. Indeed, Emerson himself acknowledges that his subject—"the AMERICAN SCHOLAR"—is "the topic which not only usage, but the nature of our association, seem to prescribe to this day." Even here, however, Emerson manages to insert his own vision. His opening invocation of tradition suggests the way formalities and associations tend to "prescribe" certain actions to the exclusion of others.

There are, however, several other ways in which the language of the address’ opening passage hints at what will be the far more radical aspects of his argument. The invocation of the term "apprenticeship," for instance, is more interesting than it may seem. Once we begin to explore the details of Emerson’s argument, it will become increasingly clear that his approach to individual development owes much to the model expressed in Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship, in which "apprenticeship" is undertaken along highly capricious and individual lines rather than according to the precepts of a professional guild.20 Additionally, Emerson offers remarks on the need for indigenous expression of American experiences: "Events, actions arise, that must be sung, that will sing themselves."21 While, again, this appears to cater to the same sort of rhetoric that the society tended to encourage in its tradition of moderate, fairly conservative speakers, there is also the hint of a radical appeal to the language and

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labors of society’s commoners, an appeal that will be made quite explicitly later on in the address.22

Each of the nuanced strands of thought raised at the outset of the address is brought together and complicated once Emerson advances his neo-Platonic framework for the unity of knowledge, focused on an ideal “One Man” that comprises the entirety of society, with each individual representing a part of the overall “body.” As we saw earlier, this conception of knowledge provides a powerful analogue for the concept of representative men, but as William Wells Brown’s The Black Man demonstrates, the totality of the black “Man” must be established before blackness can meaningfully be taken up into the totality of the “One Man.” For the present purposes, I want to draw attention to the physical, organic aspects of the metaphor. The “One Man” that is the representation of the totality of knowledge has become fragmented in the modern world, such that “members [of society] have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.” Emerson’s exploration of a vividly-fleshy conception of knowledge in the context of the university and other educational institutions suggests his engagement with a larger set of debates over the compartmentalization and specialization of knowledge in the university, found particularly in nineteenth century German educational philosophy. Within the university, the danger of segmentation without

22 Sacks also notes the relation of this language to Emerson’s later direct influence on Walt Whitman’s poetic project. See Sacks, Understanding Emerson, 11.
attention to the whole is revealed even in the growing numbers of distinct university
departments and the student’s increasingly-intense focus on one area of concentration.

As early as 1805, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling would make prescient
remarks on the dangers of overemphasizing specialization in the study of the sciences,
framing his argument in terms of a conception of an organic totality of useable
knowledge. In *On University Studies*, Schelling addresses his concern that "universal
culture is neglected in the individual’s concern for his profession."\(^2^3\) For Schelling, it is
essential that any thinker understand the relation of individual ideas to "primordial
knowledge," the totality "which in the phenomenal world exists only in separate
branches, no longer as one single great tree of knowledge."\(^2^4\) Thus, while it is inevitable
that each individual must adopt a specific course of study, any work in a single scientific
field loses its value when it does not have a bearing upon the "organic whole of the
sciences." This need for a sense of the whole is particularly pressing in light of the
growing recognition that all fields of study are intertwined. Schelling claims to write in
an age "when matters that long seemed remote from each other are now recognized to
be quite close, when every tremor at or near the center is communicated quickly and
immediately to the parts."\(^2^5\) This conception of the proximity and interrelation of
seemingly distant phenomena and ideas turns the realm of knowledge into an ecological


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 7.
system in which causes and effects are linked in complex ways. In an increasingly-globalized modern world, by implication, the forms of knowledge in areas divided by great spatial distances will also interact with and influence one another. In this way, Schelling, like Emerson, advances a system of thought that implicitly opens up a newly-inclusive global network of knowledge that could include African (and its diaspora).

Yet there is also a strain of coercion in Schelling’s model of knowledge that reveals the dangers of organic life as a strict analogy for education. Because of the organicism of primordial knowledge, Schelling asserts, certain approaches to knowledge will necessarily prove inconsequential and will thus need to be expelled from the system: "Every thought not conceived in this spirit of unity and totality is intrinsically empty, of no account. Whatever cannot be incorporated into this active, living whole is dead matter to be eliminated sooner or later—such is the law of all living organisms."26 To a striking degree, then, Schelling promotes conditions of constraint similar to those Emerson deplores in the institutional university. Schelling’s strictly scientific approach to the acquisition of knowledge leaves out the range of subjective experiences and outbursts of individual genius that are for Emerson at the center of the scholar’s development. While Emerson is clearly invested in a holistic vision of human knowledge, his holism diverges from that of Schelling insofar as it resists the tendency to take the work of preceding generations of thinkers as absolute points of reference. Whatever its appeal as an abstract model, Schelling’s vision of an organic totality of

26 Ibid., 11.
primordial knowledge must be attached to a rigorous, exclusionary institutional apparatus if it is to have any applicability in the phenomenal world.27

Using Schelling’s philosophy of knowledge as a counterexample helps us see more precisely what distinctive characteristics Emerson’s scholar possesses. Above all else, the key to Emerson’s scholar lies in the insistence that the intellect ought to be developed out of a complex interaction with his environment rather than handed a pre-established set of principles and methods. Emerson thus pushes the organic framework of Schelling forward by embracing contingency and potentiality. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson discusses the significant intellectual influence of “nature,” which is “the first in time and the first in importance of the influences upon the mind.” By placing nature at the forefront of intellectual development, Emerson expands the boundaries of “education” well beyond the walls of the schoolroom. If the human organism’s interaction with its milieu is the key determinant of development, then the school or university is only one milieu among many in which learning and advancement of thought will occur.

The specific processes by means of which an engagement with nature results in educational advancement are numerous. Emerson claims that the mind, through its

27 To the extent that this is true, Schelling’s view aligns with the brief sketch of the nineteenth-century German university found in Bill Readings’ The University in Ruins. According to Readings, the writings of such thinkers as Friedrich Schleiermacher were central in defining the university as an institution that would preserve rational elements of tradition through time without the threat of revolutionary transformation. Bill Readings, The University in Ruins. (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard UP, 1996): 64.
engagement with nature, will come to a deeper understanding of the natural and spiritual worlds and their relations. First, there is the relationship between the infinitude of the natural world and its cycles on the one hand, and the expansiveness of the human spirit, "so entire, so boundless," on the other. Next, there are the developments triggered by the mental processes of classification and the recognition of natural relationships: "system on system shooting like rays, upward, downward, without centre, without circumference, — in the mass and in the particle nature hastens to render account of herself to the mind." It is precisely in the attempt to make cognitive order out of the chaos of the world that the mind achieves development. Even the complexities of modern science are said to emerge directly out of the fundamental principles learned in nature: "science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity in the most remote parts."28

Emerson’s orientation towards the idiosyncrasies of the milieu in which the scholar finds himself leads Stanley Cavell to draw a connection between the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau and later work in the ordinary language philosophy of J. L. Austin, Wittgenstein, and himself: "the sense of the ordinary that my work derives from the practice of the later Wittgenstein and from J. L. Austin, in their attention to the language of ordinary or everyday life, is underwritten by Emerson and Thoreau in their devotion to the thing they call the common, the familiar, the near, the low" (34). For Emerson, there is an intimate relationship between everyday experiences

and the realm of philosophical inquiry. In one of the most famous passages of *Nature*, for instance, Emerson describes a progression whereby the simple act of “crossing a bare common” leads to a profound experience of revelation: "Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.”

It is precisely the accidental or unexpected character of this event that accounts for its profundity. For Emerson, philosophical insight is far more a matter of chance and experience than of diligent study and scholarship. And it is in this manner that Emerson’s quasi-organic model of the totality of knowledge differs from Schelling’s, for he is open to the prospect of continual transformation and reorientation. Emerson never forecloses the prospect that radical new insights might rearrange the entire field of knowledge.

Whereas Emerson conceives of the acquisition of knowledge as a free-form, cumulative process that occurs outside of the limitations of settled institutions, Blyden offers a provocative challenge in his insistence that black civilization fundamentally needs an established institutional repository of black knowledge. In his 1881 address as President of Liberia College, Blyden establishes a position on African education that is remarkably different from that propounded two decades earlier at the establishment of the College. In reading his 1881 address, we can see how his more fully-developed

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thinking on African education incorporates European and indigenous African traditions, and reframes the very concept of civilization.

Unlike Emerson, Blyden had no need to ease his way into his provocative claims at the outset of his address. Yet we can see a similar complex network of purposes in the opening of his address, wherein Blyden calls attention to the radical novelty of the Liberia College experiment:

A college in West Africa, for the education of African youth by African instructors, under a Christian government conducted by Negroes, is something so unique in the history of Christian civilization, that wherever, in the civilized world, the intelligence of the existence of such an institution is carried, there will be curiosity if not anxiety as to its character, its work, and its prospects.  

Here, Blyden presents a view of Liberia College from without, and specifically from a Euro-American perspective. From that vantage point, the college is a curiosity and (potentially) a source of anxiety. The imagined response of “curiosity” and “anxiety” among Western onlookers stems in part from the uncertainty about the future directions of the nation and its educational institutions. Blyden thus opens his address with an acknowledgment of the complex relation of Liberia College to the West (and, perhaps, to nascent European empire in Africa), setting up for what will be a provocative vision of black education.

Blyden quickly establishes a model of relation of part to whole much like that of the “One Man’s” limbs in relation to the entire body. The apparent specificity of Liberia

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College in fact stands for a much broader effort to raise the intellectual level of the African continent as a whole. Thus, the entirety of existing institutions and practices in Liberia must be seen as “only temporary and transitional,” an unfinalized first effort, while “when we advance further into Africa, and become one with the great tribes on the continent, these things will take the form which the genius of the race shall prescribe.” The sense of temporality evoked in these lines is particularly striking. Whereas, as we have seen in Chapter One, for Emerson intellectual wholeness occupies a relatively eternal or ideal plane of temporality, for Blyden all is new and still evolving. In a brilliant rhetorical move, Blyden goes on to say that “the civilization of that vast population, untouched by foreign influence, not yet affected by European habits, is not to be organized according to foreign patterns, but will organize itself according to the nature of the people and the country.” Here, the progress of “civilization” does not stem from European precedents, but instead evolves naturally out of African cultures themselves. In this way, the concept of civilization is detached from the context of European imperialism.

While Blyden’s educational pronouncements are, of course, closely tied to the institutional space of the college, they nonetheless open up new ways of thinking about such academic spaces. Blyden refutes the perspective that European practices and methods should be imported wholesale to Liberia, arguing that such “a priori” educational arrangements leave no room for the specificities of context:
They have not, perhaps, sufficiently borne in mind that a college in a new country and among an inexperienced people must be, at least in the earlier periods of its existence, different from a college in an old country and among a people who understand themselves and their work.\textsuperscript{31}

Blyden’s call for an educational institution emerging organically from its specific environment marks a fulfillment and a refinement of Emerson’s appeal to the educational impact of “nature.” Blyden’s efforts at Liberia College represent an effort to bring Emersonian principles of individual development to bear on a new type of institution. The institution itself is designed to grow out of its milieu. Similarly, Blyden’s numerous remarks that the past failures of black education can be blamed largely on an obsession with imitating Euro-American forms serve not simply as a replication of Emerson’s similar views (on the subservience of America to European tradition), but as a complex \textit{extension} of them.

Like Emerson, Blyden insists that Liberia College’s advancement depends on a perpetually-creative engagement with the past:

The process is slow and sometimes discouraging, but after a while we shall reach the true methods of growth for us. The work of a college like ours, and among a people like our people, must be at first \textit{generative}. It must create a sentiment favorable to its existence. It must generate the intellectual and moral state in the community which will give it not only a congenial atmosphere in which to thrive, but food and nutriment for its enlargement and growth; and out of this will naturally come the material conditions of its success.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 83.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 83-84.
This image of organic growth very neatly ties in with Emerson’s characterizations of development-in-place, yet it also suggests the need to create the environment necessary for such development. Thus, the “generative” function Blyden describes is not quite the individually-derived “creativity” of Emerson. Rather, what must be generated in the early phases of Liberia College is a broad cultural “atmosphere” that will, in turn, allow for and embrace the possibility of more sophisticated expressions of individual intellect. Blyden’s attention to the fundamental need for a cultural climate of intellectual fertility suggests that Emerson’s creative model of individual development itself depends upon the existence of such a climate. Blyden forces us to recognize that Emerson’s critique is founded on the very institutions he denigrates.

4.3 Redefining the Contours of Knowledge: The Engagement with Multiplicity and the Making of African Knowledge

In spite of their differing views on the significance of institutions, Emerson and Blyden share in their educational visions a commitment to the engagement with multiplicity. Both argue, in different ways, that the essential need of the intellect is to reach outwards into new, hitherto unexplored epistemological territory. As we saw, the first and broadest influence on the scholar as discussed by Emerson is “nature.” The second key influence that Emerson describes appears, at first glance, more conventional: it is “the mind of the Past,—in whatever form, whether of literature, of art, of institutions, that mind is inscribed.” Yet Emerson hardly accepts these inscriptions of
past thought without reservation. Books in particular are deemed valuable tools in
Emerson's educational scheme, but only when they are used properly. With a series of
striking metaphors drawn both from the experimental sciences and from the mystical
precepts of alchemy, he evokes the manner in which books are produced by their
authors. The process whereby the experience of the world is filtered through an
individual mind and returned to the external world in the form of a book consists of
transmuting life into truth. In proportion to the completeness of the
distillation, so will the purity and imperishableness of the product be. But
none is quite perfect. As no air-pump can by any means make a perfect
vacuum, so neither can any artist entirely exclude the conventional, the
local, the perishable from his book [. . . ].

Each attempt at registering the world through language is necessarily partial and
restricted by temporal constraints. In the invocation of the "perishable" features of every
book, Emerson comes close to Schelling's vision of a totality that must constantly
expunge ineffectual thoughts and methods. The difference lies in Emerson's attention to
temporality. Whereas Schelling conceives of an organic whole that is "primordial" and
immutable over any span of time, Emerson instead insists that changes in human
thought over time require new statements of the same principles, new ways of seeing a
transformed world that archival materials could not possibly fully grasp. Thus, "Each
age, it is found, must write its own books."

Accordingly, Emerson draws a firm distinction between "the sacredness which
attaches to the act of creation,—the act of thought" and the faulty sacredness attributed

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33 Emerson, “The American Scholar,” 1137.
to the finished book by later generations. When the book in itself becomes an object of idolization, original thought and engagement with the world, which ought to be primary, fall to the background. The books of the past may well contain traces of wisdom, but this wisdom is incomplete and insufficient until it is taken up by the scholar and instilled with new creative life. With emphatic urgency, Emerson stakes out his claim that "to create,—to create,—is the proof of a divine presence." Emerson specifically chastises the tendency to develop programmatic institutions and systems out of book worship. He is deeply fearful that the excessive attention paid to specific authors and their texts will lead to a situation wherein the well-known book becomes a "tyrant" over spontaneous intellect: "Colleges are built on it. Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking." When the scholar is taken in by the text in itself, "Man Thinking" gives way to the mere "bookworm." This entails not merely a decline in potential, but in fact a dangerous reorientation of priorities. Emerson declares that he "had better never see a book than to be warped by its attraction clean out of my own orbit, and made a satellite instead of a system." The scholar ought to be a system of creative energies in and of himself/herself, with various books passing through in the role of satellites.

Emerson opposes his model of the singular creative genius to "the book, the college, the school of art, the institution of any kind," all of which "stop with some past utterance of genius." Instead, books ought to be conceived of as tools useful in the completion of the core project, which is the development of the individual intellect.

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34 Ibid., 1138.
Books will serve the scholar most during "idle times," as inspiration, whereas "when he can read God directly, the hour is too precious to be wasted in other men's transcripts of their readings." In moments of transcendent insight, then, the world itself becomes a sort of text that the scholar must "read." The idea of the world-as-text again expands the realm of education and knowledge beyond the familiar spaces of the classroom and the library into the experience of the ordinary. The entire universe is a composite text that can enlighten the observant scholar. Taken together with the address' early musings on the modern person's "amputation from the trunk" of holism, these thoughts provide a framework for a qualified organic conception wherein the world of knowledge is one breathing, ever-developing system which the scholar must engage with, but which is also open to creative transformation at his/her touch. The institutionally-sanctioned idealism implied in Schelling's "primordial knowledge" is here replaced by a model in which there is no mediating power between the individual and the totality of knowledge. There is, accordingly, no certainty that the universe of knowledge for one scholar will match that of another scholar. For Emerson, knowledge is united in a series of perpetually-expanding universes that, in conjunction, comprise a forever-widening multiverse.

Blyden’s characterization of liberal education in Africa contains some striking correspondences as well as some notable differences from Emerson’s vision for an engagement with the sources of past knowledge. Thus, consider Blyden’s critique of
learned Africans, which reads in many respects like Emerson’s account of the
“bookworm” who possesses vast knowledge, but lacks a generative impulse:

There are many men of book-learning, but few, very few, of any
capability, even few [sic] who have that amount or that sort of culture
which produces self-respect, confidence in one’s self, and efficiency in
work. Now why is this? The evil, it is considered, lies in the system and
method of European training, to which Negroes are everywhere in
Christian lands subjected, and which everywhere affects them
unfavorably. Of a different race, different susceptibility, different bent of
color from that of the European, they have been trained under
influences in many respects adapted only to the Caucasian race. Nearly
all the books they read, the very instruments of their culture, have been
such as to force them from the groove which is natural to them, where
they would be strong and effective, without furnishing them with any
avenue through which they may move naturally and free from
obstruction. Christian and so-called civilized Negroes live for the most
part in foreign countries, where they are only passive spectators of the
deeds of a foreign race; and where, with other impressions which they
receive from without, an element of doubt as to their own capacity and
their own destiny is fastened upon them and inheres in their intellectual
and social constitution. They deprecate their own individuality, and
would escape from it if they could.35

The first sentence of this passage, with its reference to an empty book-learning, is
particularly analogous to Emerson’s example of the “bookworm.” Yet what follows is a
complex critique of the very potential sources of knowledge for the would-be Liberian
scholar. For in the encounter with Western traditions of thought, the African finds not
sources of potential inspiration, but rather sources of self-alienation. Here, Blyden aims
to delineate a complex process of “involuntary impressions” that goes far beyond the
more blunt racism of “direct teachings which are not only incompatible with, but

35 Ibid., 87.
destructive of, [the African’s] self-respect. Thus, it is not even the content of Western books and other sources of knowledge that Blyden is faulting here. That is a more obvious and categorical wrong in the education of black persons. Instead, Blyden describes a kind of cultural (or racial) difference that is present in all European texts, and that is registered unconsciously by the African who studies only foreign thought. Over time, this insinuating sense of difference results in self-alienation on the part of the educated African. When he speaks of being forced “from the groove which is natural to them,” Blyden is referring to his growing conviction that there are elements of African character that differ fundamentally from European character. Blyden, in a manner and for a purpose markedly different than those of Emerson, aims to make education that allows Africans to be active creators rather than “passive spectators.”

In their commitment to the embrace of multiplicity, both Emerson and Blyden pose provocative challenges to conventional attitudes on the role of the university. We have seen that Blyden advocated a Western-derived liberal education from early on in his Liberian career. His specific conception of a “liberal education” had changed rather drastically by the time he delivered his Inaugural Presidential address in 1881. By setting Emerson and Blyden against one of the most compelling nineteenth-century treatments of the value of a liberal education, that of John Henry Newman, we can see more clearly how their perspectives push in new directions, and how, ultimately, Blyden’s conception of the African University reframes the entire idea of “liberal education.”

Ibid., 88.
In the speeches and essays that comprise his *Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman offers a striking vision of breadth in university education. While Newman's arguments were developed in order to justify the creation of a Catholic university in Dublin, and are thus intimately linked with their original context, they also provide a sweeping philosophy of liberal education and its impact on intellectual development that has far wider applicability. In one of the most fascinating and succinct statements of his conception of knowledge, Newman suggests that "All that exists, as contemplated by the human mind, forms one large system or complex fact, and this of course resolves itself into an indefinite number of particular facts, which, as being portions of a whole, have countless relations of every kind, one towards another." Under this model, each of the sciences represents "partial views or abstractions" of the extant whole, and it is the job of each such perspective, with its attendant differences of scale and methodology, to offer corrections or modifications of the others. Thus, Newman calls for a complex interdisciplinarity that prohibits the dominion of any given approach to knowledge.

There is grave danger in a strict bias towards one science or another:

> Were I a mere chemist, I should deny the influence of mind upon bodily health; and so on, as regards the devotees of any science, or family of sciences, to the exclusion of others; they necessarily become bigots and

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39 Ibid., 42.
quacks, scorning all principles and reported facts which do not belong to their own pursuit.\textsuperscript{40}

Without perpetual refinement brought about through dialogue with other fields, each science will fall into a state of hermetic enclosure and irrelevance.

For Newman, one of the central roles that the university can play is in encouraging a broad-minded perspective amongst its students. The university can achieve this aim most productively by promoting the acquisition of a liberal education. In Newman’s characterization, the "habit of mind" formed through such education possesses the attributes of "freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom."\textsuperscript{41} It is, importantly, not inculcated into the student in any prescriptive sense, but is rather a pattern of thinking developed out of a balanced intellectual climate: "It is an acquired illumination, it is a habit, a personal possession, and an inward endowment."\textsuperscript{42} One arrives at this point not through mechanical training but by means of a higher form of education that is capable of reshaping the cognitive tendencies of the mind. Yet if Newman’s liberal education inculcates a mode of being rather than a specific set of ideas, it also emphasizes stability and balance. Significantly, Newman equates "liberal knowledge" with "a gentleman’s knowledge," thus suggesting its relative conservatism and antipathy to radical ruptures.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 77.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 83.
This intellectual conservatism carries into Newman’s perspective on the dangers of shifts in one’s fundamental perspective. In *The Idea of the University*, Newman takes up the question of precisely what "intellectual enlargement" consists of and how one goes about acquiring it. Mere *exposure* to manifold new facets of knowledge proves to be insufficient. The "enlarged" mind must possess "knowledge, not only of things, but also of their mutual and true relations." A process of "digestion" of experiences must occur if novel experiences are to carry any value for the intellect. In order to illustrate his nuanced conception of exposure and intellectual enlargement, Newman presents a number of examples, including the experience of entering a "great metropolis" for the first time, of viewing the far reaches of space through a telescope, and of travel, by means of which one comes "into contact with the principles and modes of thought of various parties, interests, and races, their views, aims, habits and manners, their religious creeds and forms of worship.”

In each case, the experience of a new perspective or cultural matrix has a profoundly *disorienting* effect:

He has a feeling not in addition or increase of former feelings, but of something different in its nature. He will perhaps be borne forward, and find for a time that he has lost his bearings. He has made a certain progress, and he has a consciousness of mental enlargement; he does not stand where he did, he has a new centre, and a range of thoughts to which he was before a stranger.

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44 Ibid., 98.
45 Ibid., 96.
For Newman, this sense of disorientation must not, however, lead one to adopt a newly-discovered cultural or scientific perspective at the expense of all those that preceded it. Particularly dangerous is the prospect of rejecting one’s religion in favor of a foreign creed. Newman acknowledges that the idea of such a wholesale restructuring of one’s cosmology can offer "an intoxication" of the mind and spirit that is highly appealing, but insists that such temptations mustn’t be acted upon.

The figure of the seafaring man is used by Newman as an symbol of the distinction between merely possessing a wide range of experience and achieving true enlargement of mind: "Seafaring men . . . range from one end of the earth to the other; but the multiplicity of external objects, which they have encountered, forms no symmetrical and consistent picture upon their imagination; they see the tapestry of human life, as it were on the wrong side, and it tells no story." The seafaring man is a symbol of an excess of experiences (or ideas). He lacks the deep grounding that would afford one the privilege of encountering the unfamiliar without succumbing to its appeal. Moreover, and this is for Newman the crucial point, the seafaring man has no capacity to link each experience to an overarching whole: “Nothing has a drift or relation; nothing has a history or a promise. Every thing stands by itself, and comes and goes in its turn, like the shifting scenes of a show, which leave the spectator where he was.” When we consider the example of Blyden, however, we recognize that the nature of this “relation” is

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always subject to debate. Newman’s images of stagnant (or even harmful) multicultural encounter leave no room for anything like an African-centered knowledge, let alone an Africa-inclusive knowledge. While this ambivalence towards otherness (particularly religious otherness) is in part a reflection of the context in which Newman delivered his ideas, his insistence on restriction gives weight to a dangerous and paradoxical possibility of a constrained liberalism.

Emerson and Blyden both push against such constrained intellectual liberalism by deliberately positioning new, untried areas of experience and thought as central to the development of the intellect. The third and final category of influence (following “nature” and the “mind of the past”) discussed at length in "The American Scholar" is action. Emerson explains that this is essential (though lesser in importance than the sort of pure engagement with the world discussed above) because of its role in the

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47 To say nothing of the implications when read against Edouard Glissant’s Poetics of Relation. See, for instance, his affirmation of poetry as a kind of freeform boating: “This is why we stay with poetry. And despite our consenting to all the indisputable technologies; despite seeing the political leap that must be managed, the horror of hunger and ignorance, torture and massacre to be conquered, the full load of knowledge to be tamed, the weight of every piece of machinery that we shall finally control, and the exhausting flashes as we pass from one era to another—from forest to city, from story to computer—at the bow there is still something we now share: this murmur, cloud or rain or peaceful smoke. We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone” (9).

48 The paradoxes of Newman’s investment in “universal knowledge” and the parochialism of his views on specific curricula are the subject of Sara Castro-Klarén, “The Paradox of Self in The Idea of a University,” in Newman, The Idea of a University, ed. Turner: 318-38. Citing Charles Taylor, Castro-Klarén defends the embrace of “otherness” in education (Castro-Klarén, “The Paradox of Self,” 337): “While the modern authentic individual must and can seek truth for himself—truth conceived as a process of discovery—he nevertheless is not alone. In his quest for re-cognition he seeks the opinions of others. Regardless of his position in the master and slave power game, the individual, like language, is always situated dialogically, so the recognition of the good in himself requires an engagement with others. As Taylor has commented, ‘A perfectly balanced reciprocity takes the sting out of our dependence on opinion, and makes it compatible with liberty.’ The remedy is not rejecting the importance of the other’s gaze; it is to enter into a different contract in which others’ freedom and equality can be honored.”
production of thought: "The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action. Only so much do I know, as I have lived.” This view of action essentially transplants the earlier thoughts on nature onto the realm of the social. In both cases, Emerson is at pains to affirm the value of engagement with one’s immediate surroundings, thereby grounding his educational philosophy on an ontological principle of development-in-place. This principle of place leads to a scheme for social engagement that favors wide-ranging exposure to diverse social contexts. Emerson insists that the scholar will accrue many benefits from "launch[ing] eagerly into th[e] resounding tumult” of the social realm. Indeed, taking up his earlier claim that knowledge of nature is analogous to knowledge of the soul, Emerson lays out a quasi-imperialistic vision of the relationship between experience and knowledge: "So much only of life as I know by experience, so much of the wilderness have I vanquished and planted, or so far have I extended my being, my dominion.” Mental processes are thus delimited or expanded according to the circuits of physical mobility along which the scholar passes.49

This "dominion” is not, however, achieved instantaneously. If experience provides "the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products,” the relationship between the experience and the thought is nonetheless imprecise and unpredictable. There is no immediate correspondence between a given action and a resultant thought; rather, "In some contemplative hour, it detaches itself from the life

49 Ibid., 1140.
like a ripe fruit, to become a thought of the mind." Emerson’s usage of this organic image indicates that the development of the thought occurs by means of a natural process, yet he insists that the process cannot be predicted in the way that the growth of fruit could be. Once the fruit ripens, on its own time, the result is transformative. The experience that has long dwelt in the memory banks is "transfigured" into a transcendent idea. Due in part to this uncertain process of transmutation, and in part to his conception that thought and action form a cyclical whole, the one propelling the other onward, Emerson insists that experience must be actively sought out. Like books, experiences can always stimulate further thought: "When the artist has exhausted his materials, when the fancy no longer paints, when thoughts are no longer apprehended, and books are a weariness,—he has always the resource to live."50

As we have seen, Newman had deep reservations about the impact of new experiences and new locales on the enlargement of the mind. Emerson, by way of contrast, affirms that all experiences do have intellectual utility, even if we cannot predict when or how they will be of use. In some sense, Emerson advocates an approach to the world wherein one is open to the "intoxication" by new ideas and places so feared by Newman. Accumulated experiences represent a stockpile of potential energy that will inevitably be unleashed: "So is there no fact, no event, in our private history, which shall not, sooner or later, lose its adhesive inert form, and astonish us by soaring from

50 Ibid., 1141.
our body into the empyrean.”\textsuperscript{51} Emerson’s radically-individualistic conception of transcendence allows for the possibility of spontaneous revelation, and will not remain tethered to familiar ideas and structures of thought, let alone to the staid rituals of religious and educational institutions. Every experience, no matter how mundane or how remarkable, will be transformed into a valuable thought with time.

It is not merely in his call for a turn to experience that Emerson’s vision of scholarship resists institutional models of development. It is also in the \textit{variety} and in the \textit{kinds} of experience he advocates that he reveals his radical break from top-down educational models. Taking up once again the conception of the world as a text that can be read and transcribed, Emerson asserts that intercourse with persons of different occupations and different social strata has a tangible impact on the scholar’s command of language:

> If it were only for a vocabulary the scholar would be covetous of action. Life is our dictionary. Years are well spent in country labors; in town—in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with many men and women; in science; in art; to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language, by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions. […] This is the way to learn grammar. Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the workyard made.\textsuperscript{52}

Experience thus grants us the foundations of a grammar and a vocabulary with which to express manifold human perceptions and perspectives. In the same way that one "must take the whole society to find the whole man,” then, one must also engage with the

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 1140.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid., 1141.
whole society in order to achieve the capacity to represent that society with appropriate
language. Moreover, Emerson holds that it is essential for the scholar to come into
contact with the labors and language of workers as well as the social elite, of women as
well as men. The intellectual mind is thus characterized for Emerson not as a stable
entity within which knowledge accumulates, but rather as a dynamic force always in the
process of being created, and only developed in proportion to its exposure to diverse
experiences, ideas, and places.

Towards the end of the address, Emerson continues his celebration of the
ordinary by turning towards trends in literature that mirror the political and social
"elevation of what was called the lowest class in the state." Emerson detects a
blossoming tendency among writers to take as their subject the common experiences of
the people surrounding them: "Instead of the sublime and beautiful, the near, the low,
the common" have become central objects of artistic attention. In this democratizing
tendency of literature, whereby society’s "extremities are made active," Emerson detects
signs of "new vigor" in the social body. Explicitly alluding back to his early metaphor of
the society as a mass of scattered body parts unable to understand their relation to the
whole, Emerson makes it plain that literary inclusiveness is one central means by which
that body can become reassembled. By forcing us to recognize traces of the universal
and the transcendent in the routines of ordinary life, such literary productions hint at the
unification of all humanity:

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Ibid., 1145.
What would we really know the meaning of? The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body;—show me the ultimate reason of these matters;—show me the sublime presence of the highest spiritual cause lurking, as always it does lurk, in these suburbs and extremities of nature [. . .].

The close attention to these "suburbs and extremities," then, leads to a vision of transcendence and sublimity. Having engaged with the multiplicity of necessary influences, the scholar must himself or herself become a "university of knowledges."

Here, Emerson conflates the institutional sense of university with the meaning derived from the root "universe," which implies both totality and uniqueness. The singular "university" must contain the multiplicity of the plural "knowledges." The individual thus replaces the institution as the repository of knowledge.

Blyden’s turn towards the study of indigenous practices as well as Islam and its alternate patterns of influence on the African continent is framed in similar terms, and in fact allows us to push further on the “commonness” of Emerson’s examples, opening up the encounter with enslaved and free blacks to the realm of meaningful experience. Blyden cleverly uses two quotations from British intellectuals to capture the disharmony that has come from an over-reliance on European tradition:

Lord Bacon says that “reading makes a full man;” but the indiscriminate reading by the Negro of European literature has made him, in many instances, too full, or has rather destroyed his balance. "The value of a cargo," says Huxley, "does not compensate for a ship being out of trim;"

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54 Ibid., 1146.
and the amount of knowledge that a man has does not secure his usefulness if he has so taken it in that he is lop-sided.\textsuperscript{55}

In order to remedy this imbalance, Blyden begins by proposing a more carefully-tailored restructuring of a traditional liberal education. Following a conventional division of human intellectual history into six “epochs,” he powerfully asserts that the most recent two epochs, the very core of the modern period, should be excluded (at least early on) from an African curriculum, in spite of the fact that “Shakespeare and Milton, Gibbon and Macaulay, Hallam and Lecky, Froude, Stubbs and Green, belong to these periods.”\textsuperscript{56}

After all, in addition to (and often in connection with) these brilliant writers and thinkers, the modern era also produced “the transatlantic slave trade [. . . ], and those theories theological, social, and political [that] were invented for the degradation and proscription of the Negro. This epoch continues to this day, and has an abundant literature and a prolific authorship.” Blyden thus discerns the dark underside of European modernity, its fundamental interrelation with the transatlantic slave trade, in a way that prefigures many commentators in the twentieth century and beyond.

Blyden is also keen to expand the bounds of knowledge about indigenous languages, literatures, and histories. His remarks on this point illuminate the problem of exclusion that necessarily accompanies a traditional model of liberal education as promoting a “gentleman’s” knowledge:

\textsuperscript{55} Blyden, “The Aims and Methods,” 94.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 95.
It will be our aim to introduce into our curriculum also the Arabic, and some of the principal native languages, by means of which we may have intelligent intercourse with the millions accessible to us in the interior, and learn more of our own country. We have young men who are experts in the geography and customs of foreign countries; who can tell all about the proceedings of foreign statesmen in countries thousands of miles away; can talk glibly of London, Berlin, Paris, and Washington; know all about Gladstone, Bismarck, Gambetta, and Hayes; but who knows anything about Musahdu, Medina, Kankan, or Sego only a few hundred miles from us? Who can tell anything of the policy or doings of Fanfodreh, Ibrahima Sissi, or Fahqueh-queh, or Simoro of Boporu only a few steps from us? These are hardly known. Now as Negroes, allied in blood and race to these people, this is disgraceful; and as a nation, if we intend to grow and prosper in this country, it is impolitic, it is short-sighted, it is unpatriotic; but it has required time for us to grow up to these ideas, to understand our position in this country.57

Thus, for Blyden the cultural forms of the indigenous peoples of Africa function much like the working class rhythms of speech and action do for Emerson, as a means of reenergizing the limbs of the holistic body and thus enabling greater productivity and creativity. The crucial difference, of course, is that Emerson’s thinker is in a position to make use of all around him with little differentiation. For Blyden, indigenous tradition represents not only an untapped cultural and intellectual resource, but potentially a new grounding for a black identity.

Thus, the evolution of Blyden’s thought from his earlier address at the consecration of Liberia College to his inaugural address as President of the College is most visible in his shifting attitudes towards the indigenous Africans. Towards the end

\[^{57}\text{Ibid., 101-102.}\]
of his Presidential address, he makes it clear that he is looking for a new foundation for (Pan-)African identity:

All our traditions and experiences are connected with a foreign race. We have no poetry or philosophy but that of our taskmasters. The songs that live in our ears and are often on our lips are the songs which we heard sung by those who shouted while we groaned and lamented. They sang of their history, which was the history of our degradation. They recited their triumphs, which contained the record of our humiliation. To our great misfortune we learned their prejudices and their passions, and thought we had their aspirations and their power. Now if we are to make an independent nation a strong nation we must listen to the songs of our unsophisticated brethren as they sing of their history, as they tell of their traditions, of the wonderful and mysterious events of their tribal or national life, of the achievements of what we call their superstitions; we must lend a ready ear to the ditties of the Kroomen who pull our boats, of the Pesseh and Golah men, who till our farms; we must read the compositions, rude as we may think them, of the Mandingoes and the Veys. We shall in this way get back the strength of the race, like the giant of the ancients who always gained strength, for the conflict with Hercules, whenever he touched his Mother Earth.58

In Blyden’s educational philosophy, we can see quite clearly a parallel to Emerson’s image of the One Man segmented into disparate parts. But here, the very identity and core qualities of the united man are in the process of being formed. Rather than representing modernity’s tendencies to shatter an original unity, we see a new conception of blackness in potentia, on the cusp of being realized in the very throes of modernity.

58 Ibid., 105-106.
4.4 The Liberian Scholar and the (African) American Scholar: A Synthesis

As I have shown throughout this chapter, Emerson provides a useful counterpoint for a reading of Blyden’s educational philosophy. But Emerson also has a more direct bearing on the text of “The Aims and Methods of a Liberal Education for Africans.” Towards the end of the address, Blyden makes interesting use of a choice quotation from another of Emerson’s addresses, that of 1838 before the Literary Society of Dartmouth College, known as “Literary Ethics.” The lines Blyden cites emphasize the sense of novelty and individual enlargement that one experiences while viewing the freshness of morning. He inserts them with no direct commentary as a way of elucidating the manner in which Africans can achieve the “sublimity” of other great races. The discussion of the sublime itself derives from reference to lines from Longfellow’s “A Psalm of Life” (quoted in Blyden’s text):

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time;

Longfellow’s lines in turn point us in the direction of the “great men” Emerson and Brown discussed in their works of historical collective biography. Even setting that network of relations aside, however, the quotation from Emerson is a striking choice:

"Whilst I read the poets," says Emerson, "I think that nothing new can be said about morning and evening; but when I see the day break, I am not reminded of these Homeric or Shakespearian or Miltonic or Chaucerian pictures. No; but I am cheered by the moist, warm, glittering, budding, melodious hour, that takes down the narrow walls of my soul, and
extends its life and pulsation to the very horizon. That is morning, to cease for a bright hour to be a prisoner of the sickly body, and to become as large as nature."

Here, Blyden’s vision for the African University comes into direct contact with Emerson’s conception of individual genius, and in so doing, enlarges Emerson’s body of work just as morning enlarges the individual soul.60

It is, however, the broader thematic relationship between “The American Scholar” and Blyden’s educational philosophy that illuminates the profound significance of Liberia College itself as an institutional experiment. He remarks that “it is painful in America to see the efforts which are made by Negroes to secure outward conformity to the appearance of the dominant race.”61 Even “in Africa, where the color of the majority is black, the fashion in personal matters is naturally suggested by the personal characteristics of the race, and we are free from the necessity of submitting to the use of ‘incongruous feathers awkwardly stuck on,’” there is nonetheless a form of “bondage” in “our indiscriminate and injudicious use of a foreign literature.” Following Emerson’s conception of the individual as “university of knowledges,” we might say that Blyden

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59 Ibid., 107.
60 Appropriately, in 1900, on the cusp of his decline into the background of Liberian educational philosophy, Blyden delivered another address at Liberia College, entitled “The Liberian Scholar.” The title of this address suggests a direct engagement with Emerson, and in the body of the address, Blyden makes the difference-in-similitude of his project and Emerson’s most clear: “What we need is applicability to our surroundings. There is much that is superfluous in the foreign ideas that we have imbibed, much that is deficient, much that is injurious. Hence the necessity of the means of thorough culture at home to produce, not the European scholar, not the American scholar, but the Liberian scholar.” See “The Liberian Scholar,” Liberia Bulletin (1900): 11-22. Rpt. In Hollis R. Lynch, Black Spokesman: Selected Published Writings of E. W. Blyden, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (New York: Humanities Press, 1971), 265-6.
61 Ibid., 89.
advances the very possibility for such individual intellectual wholeness through the intermediary concretization of black knowledge within a single repository, Liberia College. In contrast to black education in traditional Western facilities, or even the early black colleges in the United States, which are tied too intimately to the American conditions of racialized thinking, Blyden validates the project of a uniquely African institution of learning.

Above all, Blyden’s intended changes to the Liberia College curriculum will be “more suited to the development of the individuality and manhood of the African.” Here, Blyden builds upon Emerson’s suggestion that true individual development must precede national unity. For Blyden, the future of the entire race is contingent upon the development of self-worth and African pride in every member of the African diaspora. The final paragraph of Blyden’s address emphasize the function of Liberia College as a concrete means of disproving claims of African inferiority, a kind of living example of black intellectual fertility:

The time is past when we can be content with putting forth elaborate arguments to prove our equality with foreign races. Those who doubt our capacity are more likely to be convinced of their error by the exhibition, on our part, of those qualities of energy and enterprise which will enable us to occupy the extensive field before us for our own advantage and the advantage of humanity—for the purposes of civilization, of science, of good government, and of progress generally—than by any mere abstract argument about the equality of races. The suspicions disparaging to us will be dissipated only by the exhibition of the indisputable realities of a lofty manhood as they may be illustrated in successful efforts to build up a nation, to wrest from nature her secrets, to lead the van of progress in

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62 Ibid., 84.
this country, and to regenerate a continent.\textsuperscript{63}

Here, Blyden uses the term “regenerate” to describe the project of Liberia College.

Earlier in the address, however, Blyden summarizes his objectives for Liberia College by declaring that “the work immediately before us, then, is one of reconstruction.” The significance of the choice of the word “reconstruction” at this moment, by an individual with a deep attachment to and vested interest in the outcome of American Reconstruction, illustrates another striking way in which Blyden’s thinking is tied to the United States. Indeed, the entire project of Liberia College with respect to the African diaspora as a whole constitutes a kind of “reconstruction” that is parallel to that within the United States.

In many ways, then, Blyden’s thinking emerged out of direct and indirect engagements with American social, political, and cultural dynamics. Yet the virtual erasure of Blyden from the annals of the African-American literary and philosophical tradition, coupled with the sense that his project was in a general sense a failure, has hitherto foreclosed the possibility of reading the academic career and philosophy of W. E. B. Du Bois as a continuation or extension of Blyden’s work.\textsuperscript{64} The fading into the

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 107.

\textsuperscript{64} Hollis R. Lynch, Blyden’s primary biographer, contended that the two figures had little if any contact during their lives, and there are but a few scattered notes (on Du Bois’ part only) of one writing about the other. In contrast, consider Du Bois’ inclusion of the essay “On Alexander Crummell” in The Souls of Black Folk or Marcus Garvey’s vociferous acknowledgement of Blyden as an influence. See Lynch, Introduction to Black Spokesman, xxxiii-xxxiv. Wilson Jeremiah Moses, on the other hand, is able to cite a letter from Du Bois to Blyden in 1909 in which the former proposed an Encyclopedia Africana, an idea which never came into fruition. See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Afrotopia: The Roots of African American Popular History (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 18.
background of Blyden’s vision of an African University in the final decades of the nineteenth century coincides with Du Bois’ ascension to a position of intellectual eminence through education at Fisk University, Harvard University, and the University of Berlin. But while Du Bois’ early career would seem to support the pursuit of higher education through a combination of newly-emerging black universities and traditional institutions of higher learning as an increasingly-viable solution to the predicaments of black education in the United States, the form of Pan-Africanism he developed over the remainder of his life complicates this early history. In the course of his life as a whole, Du Bois fundamentally enacts the model of development associated with the “Liberian” (or “African”) Scholar. That is, Blyden’s thinking helps us see Du Bois as always linked to the fundamental idea of the African University and of an African-oriented form of knowledge, even when his efforts focused most directly on the United States. To read Du Bois’ complex journey in higher education as fundamentally belonging to the tradition of Blyden—just as we have read Blyden continuing (and transforming) the tradition of Emerson—allows us to see Blyden’s efforts to establish and theorize an African University as central, and not ancillary, in the evolution of African-American educational philosophy.

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The preceding chapters have traced the impact of an idea of Africa—an idea often formulated out of imagination, fantasy, and heuristic exigencies as well as from focused contact with or study of the African continent—on the nineteenth-century cultural forms of historiography, the novel, and the university. By focusing on the network of associations and literary productions that surround these three areas of knowledge, I have presented a rich narrative of the interpenetrations of American and African diasporic thinking. In this concluding Epilogue, I explore the somewhat different dynamics that emerged in early-to-mid twentieth-century reckonings with diaspora. In what follows, I explore the Ethiopianist plotlines in two novels—Pauline Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* (serialized 1902-3) and J. E. Casely Hayford’s *Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation* (1911)—and I show how the two novels illuminate tendencies that would find fuller expression in W. E. B. Du Bois’ *Darkwater: Voices from the Veil* (1920). In many ways, *Of One Blood, Ethiopia Unbound, and Darkwater* bring together the thematic strands of the preceding chapters, and thus offer a fitting lens through which to view the evolution of those strands. Each work employs a complex mixture of genres in the effort to explore the deep historical resonances of Africa, and the prospects for a Pan-African future. Each work focuses on education in the (Western) university as a source of internal disharmony, and emphasizes the restorative function of an affirmation of African roots and connections. Partly because of their overlap with
the previous chapters, these novels offer us a means of seeing more clearly how the contexts of Pan-African thought were beginning to change at the turn of the twentieth century.

In all three of these texts, figurations of Ethiopianism crop up in relation to a variety of other issues, including matters of national and international politics, millenarian mysticism, trajectories of scientific and archaeological discovery, and the manifestations of deep psychology and its pseudoscientific applications. The striking juxtapositions of these elements in these works suggest the extent to which black internationalism was being pulled in multiple different directions as the twentieth century unfolded. I argue that these works reflect the ways in which an evolving anthropological understanding of the idea of cultural plurality (following the work of Franz Boas in particular) and the specific political matrices of anti-colonial struggles across the African continent complicated earlier models of black (inter)nationalism.1 While appeals to Pan-African affiliation continued to be made, and carried with them significant intellectual and political power, their engagement with “Western” intellectual trends would be made on necessarily different terms.

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In its broad strokes, the narrative of Pauline Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* provides a synthesis of the ideas explored in the previous chapters. Protagonist Reuel Briggs, a biracial, Harvard-trained medical doctor with a deep interest in psychological theories of the hidden self (following William James and his French interlocutors, Pierre Janet and Alfred Binet), begins the novel passing for white. His curious position both inside and outside of the dominant American institution of higher education makes his case an interesting counterpoint to the implied debate between Blyden and Du Bois explored at the end of the previous chapter. That is, his racial identity (because hidden) is not a factor in his ability to pursue an education, but it instead provokes an internal identity struggle. Reuel’s internal crisis is displaced onto his scholarly obsession with hidden facets of identity and consciousness, with "what might be termed 'absurditites' of supernatural phenomena or mysticism."\(^2\) Obsessed with the puzzles of human consciousness, Reuel holds "that the wonders of a material world cannot approach those of the undiscovered country within ourselves—the hidden self lying quiescent in every human soul."\(^3\)

Early on in *Of One Blood*, Reuel gives a practical demonstration of his occult knowledge when he reanimates the ostensibly dead African-American singer Dianthe Lusk. Having "advanc[ed] far afield in the mysterious regions of science, he had stumbled upon the solution of one of life’s problems: *the reanimation of the body after*

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\(^3\) Ibid., 448.
Yet the success of the experiment has the side effect of dislocating the Dianthe’s consciousness, producing a "dual mesmeric trance." She recovers only slowly after much time has passed, and experiences spontaneous, convulsive seizures during this period. In this Gothic trajectory of the narrative, Hopkins pushes towards a reading of the complexities of the black self that is analogous to Du Bois’ “double consciousness.” Using the narrative intrigue of the occult and mystical sciences, Hopkins characterizes the impact of racialized oppression on the individual psyche.

This occult, Gothic setting is associated exclusively with America in the novel. When the narrative of Of One Blood proceeds with Reuel accompanying an expedition to Egypt and Ethiopia in the hope of uncovering the Ethiopian roots of Western culture, the narrative turns towards the mode of imperial romance. As Reuel uncovers a hidden Ethiopian society, separated from the West for millennia, and is found to be the long-lost descendent of its ancient leader, the logic of Ethiopianism explored in earlier chapters becomes a direct plot device. The uncovering of the ancient civilization of Meroe in the

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4 Ibid., 464.
5 Ibid., 472.
city of Telassar serves a quasi-Utopian function within the narrative. The narrative’s blend of genres—Gothic and occult elements (associated with the U.S.), exotic adventure in the manner of the imperial romance (the expedition in Africa), and the discovery of a kind of Utopia (the bounties of the hidden civilization of Meroe)—is crucial to its overall treatment of diasporic affiliation, as the Utopianism of Telassar serves as a solution to the dilemmas of the Gothic and imperial romance modes.

Reuel’s arrival in Telassar brings about a fundamental reunification of his divided identity. As he awakens out of unconsciousness to find himself in Telassar, we are reminded of the earlier scene in which Dianthe emerges out of unconsciousness: "from profound unconsciousness, deep, merciful, oblivious to pain and the flight of time, from the gulf of the mysterious shadows wherein earth and heaven are alike forgotten, Reuel awoke." As Yogita Goyal has suggested, the form of personal "awakening" that Reuel experiences in Telassar acutely resolves the crisis of the divided self experienced on American soil: "the primary American self can recall the memory of a secondary African self, and the simultaneous consciousness of both selves can heal the fracture caused by racism. Double consciousness here is not a state of permanent

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7 By thinking of Hopkins’ mystical Ethiopia in terms of the genre of utopian fiction, we can link Hopkins’ effort to various late-nineteenth-century utopian novels, including Edward Bellamy’s Looking Backward: 2000-1887, William Dean Howells’ A Visitor from Altruria, William Morris’ News from Nowhere, and Samuel Butler’s Erewhon. In this sense, one of the particular achievement of Hopkins’ “utopia” is its complication of the transparent, economically-driven vision of progress detailed in Bellamy’s Looking Backward. M. Giulia Fabi proposes the concept of “race travel” to characterize the sense of dislocation that arises when African-American characters enter “utopian” spaces in turn of the twentieth century narratives. See M. Giulia Fabi, Passing and the Rise of the African-American Novel (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), particularly Chapter 2, “Race Travel in Turn-of-the-Century African American Utopian Fiction.”

8 Ibid., 544.
tension, both debilitating and enabling, but a malady that can be healed by Africa.”

Thus, Hopkins produces a narrative solution to the problem set forth in the first section of the novel. The journey to Africa unlocks a hitherto hidden aspect of the self, and resolves the ambiguities of the Gothic mode.

At the end of the novel, following a brief return to the Gothic terrors of America, we are told that "Reuel Briggs returned to the Hidden City with his faithful subjects, and [. . .] [t]here he spends his days in teaching his people all that he has learned in years of contact with modern culture.” This is a markedly different form of “emigrationism” from what we saw, for instance, in the historical efforts to populate Liberia with former slaves. Paradoxically, in the novel only Reuel will benefit directly from the rediscovery of Telassar, even as the narrative logic implies that the return to Africa is a means of restoring balance and wholeness to a schismatic self. Yogita Goyal’s reading of the novel’s conclusion as “an imperialist approach to Africa for purposes of resolving the problem of racial identity in the United States” is suggestive, but perhaps too strongly put. The novel stages countless tropes of the imperial romance (e.g. a quest for hidden treasure, battles with lions, and encounters with unruly natives) only to undercut them once Reuel finally reaches Telassar and achieves his destiny.

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9 Yogita Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 47.
11 Goyal, *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature*, 51.
Indeed, the problem of imperialism in Africa is taken up directly in the final paragraphs of the novel. Significantly, Reuel observes, "with serious apprehension, the advance of mighty nations penetrating the dark, mysterious forests of his native land."

The idea that Ethiopia has now become “his native land” is itself quite striking, as it indicates that Reuel’s former life has been somehow erased by the discovery of his royal “hidden self.” Above all, though, European imperialism represents a very real threat to any kind of African autonomy (even of an imagined, Utopian type). The “dark, mysterious forests” of Africa emerge as a positive alternative to the European imperial desire for geographical division and material exploitation of the African continent.

Reuel’s plaintive rhetorical appeal against the destructiveness of colonialism—“Where will it stop? [. . .] What will the end be?”—leaves open the final relationship of Telassar to the international world. Before long, it would appear, Telassar’s isolation from the world will end in the face of the encroachments of Europe.

The gestures towards European imperialism in Africa at the end of Of One Blood suggest the increasing entanglement of African messianism with stark political realities, and J. E. Casely Hayford’s Ethiopia Unbound: Studies in Race Emancipation picks up on this complex dynamic, representing the potential future of Ethiopianism from an African nationalist perspective. Ethiopia Unbound has long been of interest as one of the first English-language novels by an African author.\(^\text{12}\) Hayford, a layer and intellectual from

Gold Coast (later independent Ghana), had a rich education in England, and contributed through his writings to the cause of greater Gold Coast (and Pan-African) political awareness. His novel, like Hopkins’ *Of One Blood*, is a multigeneric affair, but it is less compelling as a cohesive work of fiction. The jarring, disorganized structure of *Ethiopia Unbound* has suggested a lack of artistry on the part of its author. Unintentionally, however, the chaotic form of the novel (tying together traditional narrative chapters, dream-visions, direct polemic, and finally, prophesy) captures something of the position in which Hayford found himself with respect to the prospect of Gold Coast nationalism, as aesthetic interests were necessarily closely tied to political interests.

The primary narrative of *Ethiopia Unbound* focuses largely on protagonist Kwamankra, in many ways a fictionalized version of Hayford himself, an intellectual whose rebukes to British pretensions as well as to the efforts of blacks in the U.S. to resolve the crises of race within U.S. society constitute the most striking political arguments of the text. Some of the additional plot lines are brief and incompletely developed, but a few of them contribute to the overall impact of the novel. In one lengthy chapter, while under the effects of anesthesia, Kwamankra’s consciousness enters into the mystical realm of the gods and of the dead. There, he is able to rejoin his deceased wife and daughter. This episode, which brings together traditional African religious systems and Western literary mysticism and allegory, illuminates one of the

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most prominent elements of the novel; namely, its insistence that an innate or deep-rooted African “spirituality” is one of the crucial contributions of Africa to the world. In this, Hayford follows his mentor Blyden’s conception of an “African personality.” In the course of the narrative of *Ethiopia Unbound*, mysticism grounds even the highly-rational intellectual achievements of Kwamankra, allowing him to represent the realms of rational argument and spiritual fullness simultaneously. In the same way that the generic multiplicity of Hopkins’ *Of One Blood* leads to a striking, but often paradoxical, vision of black futurity, Hayford’s *Ethiopia Unbound* reflects the anxious position of a thinker struggling to form a cohesive plan for African nationalism and internationalism.

Another striking formal element of the novel is its turn to forms of direct polemic in its final chapters. A cluster of three chapters, each prefixed “Race Emancipation,” combines direct authorial appeals with interpolated speeches purportedly given by Kwamankra (much of the material of which is derived from earlier work by Hayford himself). The second of these chapter in particular removes us from the narrative world of the novel, opening with a direct remark on the purpose of the novel as published artifact: “In the name of African nationality the thinker would, through the medium of *Ethiopia Unbound*, greet members of the race everywhere throughout the world.”13 In what feels like an explanatory afterword, Hayford goes on to explore the current meanings of African nationality on the continent and in the context of the U.S. “race problem.” Yet in the following chapter, “Race Emancipation: The Crux of the Matter,”

this line of discourse reenters the narrative in the following manner: “Thoughts like these [including, it would appear, the entire contents of the preceding chapter] were stirring men’s minds when the Pan-African Conference met in the Gold Coast in the year 1905.” In this way, Hayford both articulates his political views directly and embeds them within a larger narrative structure, creating an unusual composite form that reflects his uncertain perspective.

The novel’s final chapter takes up this same kind of direct political posturing, but does so by moving forward to an imagined political climate in the year 1925, in which the significance of African civilization is recognized around the world, and the Gold Coast has entered the realm of international politics. This prophetic episode imagines a future that will resolve the threatening tensions we saw raised by Thomas Jefferson, nearly one hundred and fifty years earlier: “what was to have become a great race war had become a mighty truce.” In this final chapter, and throughout the book, “Ethiopia” is invoked as a synonym for Africa (and the African diaspora) as a whole. This curious usage of “Ethiopia” results in a perspective that emphasizes a national cause directly alongside a conception of Pan-African unity. Thus, in the final chapter, a detailed account of the contributions of each of Gold Coast’s largest ethnic groups to the national polity is accompanied by rhetoric bespeaking “Ethiopia’s” achievements in nationality and civilization in quasi-mystical terms. This central tension between a broad Pan-African ideal and a necessary nationalist focus marks one of the key developments in the

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14 Ibid., 182.
intellectual history of the African diaspora. While in the nineteenth century, Liberia was, as an independent nation, an anomaly, the by the early twentieth century nationally-focused movements for reform or anticolonial agitation were necessitated by the consolidations of the imperial project.

The tension between Pan-Africanism and nationalism is pronounced in Hayford’s treatment of leading black intellectuals from throughout the diaspora. The first of the three sections on “Race Emancipation” focuses on the thought and influence of E. W. Blyden as a Pan-African innovator. Within the chapter, Kwamankra travels to the United States to deliver his address on Blyden before a crowd at Hampton University. The speech focuses on the significance of Blyden’s appeals to “universal” black causes, and opposes this to the particular and “provincial” focus of black American intellectual Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. The material on Blyden is taken directly from Casely’s earlier Introduction to Blyden’s book *West Africa Before Europe* (1905), as discussed in Chapter Three, and is modified only slightly so as to fit the context of a scholarly address. Hayford frames the lecture on Blyden as a kind of corrective lesson to those African Americans who might overlook his significance.

In the narrative of *Ethiopia Unbound* as a whole, Blyden is treated as a messianic figure. Chapter XV, “As in a Glass Darkly,” allegorizes the divisions of the African continent amongst the European powers, and its narrative of disruption and dislocation concludes on a note of hope:
In the self-same era a god descended upon earth to teach the Ethiopians anew the way of life. He came not in thunder, or with great sound, but in the garb of a humble teacher, a John the Baptist among his brethren, preaching racial and national salvation. From land to land, and from shore to shore, his message was the self-same one, which, interpreted in the language of the Christ, was: What shall it profit a race if it shall gain the whole world and lose its whole soul?\(^\text{15}\)

The ensuing discussion of Blyden suggests that he is this god among men, a figure who will be able to restore a sense of “Ethiopian” unity in the midst of colonial divisions. We have already seen in the previous chapter how the colonial context hampered Blyden’s ambitions for an African University. Colonialism produces an internal struggle that threatens the unity of the individual consciousness much in the same way as American race relations do in Du Bois and Hopkins. What Hayford emphasizes, though, is the contrast between Blyden’s (and his own) view of African self-pride and wholeness, on the one hand, and the African-American perception of a fundamentally divided self, on the other.\(^\text{16}\)

Hayford uses a critique of Du Bois to establish his position more clearly. Hayford takes issue with Du Bois’ conception of “double consciousness,” and argues that Du Bois’ fault is his lingering attachment to the “American world—a world which yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 160.

\(^{16}\) As Yogita Goyal notes, Hayford argues for a stable, confident African personality at precisely the moment when “British and African thinkers were beginning to believe that the [British-run] missions were producing not the vanguard of a new African civilization but racially alienated misfits.” Goyal, Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature, 117. There is, however, irony in Kwamankra’s claim to represent authentic “Africanness.” His lack of interest in the unlettered masses, and his ambiguous relation to both Gold Coast traditions and British society, suggest the complexities lying beneath his asserted “wholeness” of character.
revelation of the other world.”

Hayford replies by exploring the roots of “self-consciousness”:

Now, self-consciousness obviously depends upon self-revelation after which comes self-realisation. But has the Ethiopian sojourning in America, and, for that matter, even in Liberia and in Sierra Leone ever realized himself? [. . .] No, it has not yet occurred to him to arise and go to his Father, regardless of the taunts of the surly elder son. [. . .] Listen to his cry: “Who shall deliver me from the burden of these unreconciled and irrenconcilable strivings?” Listen! Not so long as he turns away from the Father’s house and elects to remain a slave in soul. To be a puzzle unto others is not to be a puzzle unto one’s self.”

For Hayford, the condition described in Du Bois’ writings is a peculiarly American predicament, one that can be solved through a return (whether physically or intellectually) to Africa. Hayford argues that one’s environment is paramount, noting that Du Bois “writes from an American standpoint, surrounded by an American atmosphere.” For Hayford, “authentic” African identity must be willfully achieved. In the character of Kwamankra, we see quite clearly a figure who is self-possessed and comfortable with both Western and African traditions, religions, and modes of argument, and who is able to navigate the realms of foreign education and colonial

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17 Goyal suggests that Hayford’s “attack on Du Bois displaces other anxieties such as his relationship to the unlettered masses, to the chiefs, to the colonial authorities, and even to his own incomplete Englishness.” Goyal, Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature, 108. Part of the curiosity of Hayford’s novel comes from our greater familiarity with the more schismatic representations of identity in later colonial and postcolonial African novels by Chinua Achebe, Ngugi Wa Thiong’o, Tsitsi Dangarembga, for instance.
18 Ibid., 180-1.
19 Hayford’s condemnation of not only America but also Sierra Leone and Liberia on the same grounds is striking, particularly in light of Blyden’s attachment to Liberia. Blyden himself evinced a different, more fruitful kind of intellectual “double consciousness”—he experienced life both outside of Africa, as a member of the networked diasporic, and as an African national. Curiously, the route taken by Reuel in Of One Blood Reuel achieves precisely this kind of double awareness, though in an irreplicable manner.
20 Ibid., 182.
authority without diluting his sense of self. Hayford fears that Du Bois’ conception of double consciousness will offer only a kind of false consciousness, contributing to identity crises in black individuals who ought to focus on creating a secure sense of “African” identity.

Of course, Du Bois moved increasingly towards Pan-Africanism in the course of his career, and thus, in a sense, he followed Hayford’s suggestion quite literally. By the time he published *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* in 1920, he had taken on an active role as international leader of the Pan-African Congress, and was more thoroughly invested in the relationship between the plight of African Americans and the plight of Africans. Du Bois’ use of “Ethiopianism” in *Darkwater* finds significant expression in Chapter III, “The Hands of Ethiopia.” In the course of this brief chapter, Du Bois, like Hopkins and Hayford, manages to bring together numerous strands of early twentieth-century Africa-oriented thought—redemptive readings of African influence on the West, an exploration of nationalist ambitions on the continent, and a prophetic, millenarian mysticism surrounding the future of Africa. Most striking of all, however, is the central discussion of a potential “African World State” that might emerge on the African continent. Acknowledging that Liberia and Abyssinia (Ethiopia) must retain their independence (and excluding the unusual cases of Northern Africa and South Africa), Du Bois proposes that unless France and England immediately allow

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21 Eric Sundquist suggests that Hayford’s *Ethiopia Unbound* was a direct influence on the composition of *Darkwater*. See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, 558, 610.
independence for their African colonies, then it will be apposite to form a conglomerated “African State” comprising the majority of the center of the continent.

Thus, Du Bois proposes a project analogous to the Zionism that arose in the late nineteenth century within the Jewish diaspora. Du Bois’ imagined “African Zion” will serve as a beacon of black civilization, in Blyden’s sense, but importantly it need not be the site of a mass back-to-Africa movement.22 Rather, it will be a focused, realized “homeland” for members of the African diaspora, providing a concretization of the idea of diasporic unity. In this conception of an African World State,” Du Bois elegantly ties the millenarianism of Ethiopianism to the modern realities of nationalism. Significantly, Du Bois notes that although this ideal African nation seems like “an impossible dream,” it is rendered thinkable by World War I (“the nightmare of 1914-1918”). The concept of an African mega-state is less outlandish in the wake of a period in which “we have seen the impossible happen and the unspeakable [has] become so common as to cease to stir us.”23 For Du Bois, then, the twentieth-century world is a place in which the very contours of sovereignty, nationality, and empire can be reformed in the smallest period of time. Here, the temporal scale of civilizations and nations is not long, but is short, mutable, contingent.

22 The phrase “African Zion” comes from Eric Sundquist’s overview of Ethiopianism in To Wake the Nations, 554.
If Hopkins and Hayford show us the extent to which the early twentieth-century ideal of Ethiopianist unity became entangled with deep psychology, nationalism, and imperialism while maintaining its fundamental mysticism, then Du Bois takes the overlap of these elements to its limit in the wake of World War I. In the world of modern warfare, the mystical is replaced by the unthinkable. The different trajectories of the twentieth century meant that Pan-Africanism had more defined roots in specific nationalist contexts, but it also helped occlude the dynamic dialecticism of nineteenth-century engagements with Western tradition. The routes of the twentieth century have pushed us increasingly to regard Pan-Africanism and other forms of African (inter)nationalism as part of more specific and separate intellectual traditions. This makes it harder to look back on nineteenth century diasporic appeals as anything but backwards, ill-formed, and ungrounded. Instead, this dissertation has insisted that we can and should see the nineteenth century as a moment of intertextual possibility, of movement betwixt and between intellectual traditions, as a time in which conceptions of Africanity and its attendant forms were not yet codified, and in which their engagements with similarly-emergent American intellectual forms produced striking results.

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Biography

Shea Bigsby was born in Vestal, NY in 1984. He completed his undergraduate education at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he graduated Summa Cum Laude with a B.A. in English in 2006. At Buffalo, he received the College of Arts and Sciences Dean’s Outstanding Senior Award in English and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. As a graduate student at Duke University, he was awarded the James B. Duke Fellowship and the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Fellowship in Undergraduate Instruction. He received his Ph.D. in English from Duke University in 2012.