

“No More Shall Be a Dull Book”: The Aesthetics of History in Antebellum 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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## Abstract

In the first half of the nineteenth century, historians in the United States described their work as an aesthetic practice. The romantic nationalist George Bancroft claimed that historical writing ought to provide readers with a series of beautiful images that would “secure the affections” of the American people for the U.S. Constitution. William H. Prescott, author of volumes on the age of conquest, introduced his most popular work by claiming that he wanted to present his readers with a “picture true in itself” and, through his vividly imaginative descriptions, “to surround them in the spirit of the times.” For this generation of historians, their magisterial texts were not simply more or less true accounts of European experience in the New World or the story of the nation’s revolutionary origins, they were paintings in words—expressionistic and romantic images that would make the passions, conflicts, and virtues of previous generations available to their readers as an imaginative experience.

Scholars have long understood the various forms of historical consciousness of the nineteenth century as producing national, imperial, and racial orders in their imagination of the United States as the locus of a linear and progressive flowering of liberty in the New World. My project supplements these totalizing accounts by examining the central texts of nationalist history through the lens of literary analysis to

demonstrate how their aesthetic dimensions both enabled and disrupted such a political and temporal imagination. Romantic history emerged in an era of pronounced temporal crisis for the United States. On the surface, these historians sought to provide readers with experiences of an otherwise inaccessible revolutionary past that would help bind a nation confronting fears about dissolution in exponential westward growth, immigration, and the sectional crisis over slavery. Yet, when we look closer at these texts, we realize that they contain covert recognitions of the vitality of struggles for freedom taking place elsewhere—in Haiti, Mexico, or West Indian abolition—that exceeded the terms of U.S. racial republicanism and claimed futures at odds with nationalism’s sense of historical preeminence. Both compelled and horrified by the assertion of black freedom throughout the Atlantic world, the beautiful and haunted images of romantic history registered the irruptive force of transatlantic political movements nominally inadmissible within U.S. historical discourse.

While romantic historians developed aesthetic norms for confronting and disavowing alternatives to national orders of time and political progress, abolitionist writers held fast to these disruptions to construct an aesthetics of slave revolution. In the second half of my dissertation, I examine the trajectory of this black radical tradition from the abolitionist historians of the antebellum period to the twentieth-century thinkers who adapted and transformed these aesthetics into a comprehensive anti-imperialism. Considering writings by William C. Nell, Martin R. Delany, W.E.B. Du

Bois, and C.L.R. James I argue that this tradition did more than reconstruct histories of black political life that had been suppressed by white supremacist orders of knowledge. These writers vitalized history with alternate models of freedom as immediate, proliferating, and eruptive—even when they also sought for signs of racial progress in a linear model. In their vivid descriptions of an experience of freedom that was irreducible to linear models of progress, these texts produced what Walter Benjamin once described as “the constructive principle” in materialist history: “where thinking suddenly halts in a constellation overflowing with tensions, there it yields a shock to the same.” This shock of overflowing tensions is the moment when history becomes aesthetic—when imaginative excess overturns the narrative form of history. I ultimately argue that the aesthetics of history can help us reconsider the political stakes of historical scholarship, allowing us to think about the writing of history as an ongoing encounter with freedom that always exceeds the limits of factual, analytical, and discursive accounts of what has been.

*To Anne*

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## Introduction

To such survivors, to all the decimated tribes of the New World who did not suffer extinction, their degraded arrival must be seen as the beginning, not the end, of our history. The shipwrecks of Crusoe and of the crew in *The Tempest* are the end of an Old World. It should matter nothing to the New World if the Old is again determined to blow itself up, for an obsession with progress is not within the psyche of the recently enslaved. That is the bitter secret of the apple. The vision of progress is the rational madness of history seen as sequential time, of a dominated future.

—Derek Walcott, “The Muse of History” (1974)

I am ashamed to see what a shallow village tale our so-called History is...  
Broader and deeper we must write our annals.—from an ethical reformation,  
from an influx of the ever new ever sanative conscience.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, “History” (1841)

### *Prologue: Futures Past of Global Democracy*

Little has been more indicative of the United States’ ambivalent investments in international democratic struggle than national media and political responses to the resistance movements and social upheavals begun in 2011 generically known as the “Arab Spring.”<sup>1</sup> During an initial phase of enthusiasm a consensus formed around

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<sup>1</sup> Marc Lynch, one of the first commentators to label the “Arab Spring,” borrowed the name from a separate sequence of protests begun in Beirut in 2005. Lynch, writing for *Foreign Policy*, introduced the term in a typically neo-imperialist formulation that claims distant events as the product of U.S. foreign policy. “Are we seeing the beginnings of the Obama administration equivalent of the 2005 ‘Arab Spring’, when the protests in Beirut captured popular attention and driven in part by newly powerful satellite television images inspired popular mobilization across the region that some hoped might finally break through the

seeing in the protests in Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Libya, and elsewhere conjoined potentials for improving U.S. relations in the Middle East and a new foothold for the global spread of democracy. A frequent rhetorical collapse of U.S. interests into democratic values was on clear display in Barack Obama's May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011, address on Middle Eastern Policy when, after detailing his administration's positions on the events of the previous few months, he invoked a mythic comparison: "[t]here are times in the course of history when the actions of ordinary citizens spark movements for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has been building up for years [...] the defiance of those patriots in Boston who refused to pay taxes to a king, or the dignity of Rosa Parks as she sat courageously in her seat" (qtd. in Dwyer). While neo-imperialist conflations of freedom with the spread and influence of U.S. political and economic capital have long been a feature of governmental proclamations about foreign policy—and were heavily employed in the adventurist rhetoric surrounding the previous administration's invasion of Iraq—Obama's flair for the mytho-historical reveals a lesser remarked upon temporal and affective layer to this imaginary. The contemporary moment of global upheaval is, for United States power, an event that effectively took place in the past at

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stagnation of Arab autocracy? Will social media play the role of Al-Jazeera this time? Will the outcome be any different?"

some point in a sequence that had begun in 1776 and we might infer ended with the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The logic of neo-imperialism on display is a double articulation of spatial closeness and temporal distance. The mythic past is the lens through which America can inspire and interpret revolutionary events that are increasingly close to the United States by way of the flows of global capital and media, but temporally distant and only now beginning to catch up to an American present from which such forms of political action have been circumscribed. While employed to naturalize American power and neo-liberal economic and political goals, this myth of history generates a whole series of desires and anxieties that seek reflections and affirmations of national history in the spectacle of democracy elsewhere.

Is it any wonder then, that in the years since the first rumblings of Middle Eastern revolution, the changing tides, victories, frustrations and violence of revolt and repression have instigated a series of reversals in the existential theater of U.S. partisan politics? William Kristol, a proponent of Bush-era neo-conservatism, voiced concerns early that the administration's positions on the Arab Spring might be naïve, even as he alternately claimed that the movement "deserves to be greeted with enthusiasm and support." Even Kristol's tentative, nominally realist, embrace of these political movements came with its own articulation of a historical myth of domestic politics: "[a]nd who knows? Helping the Arab Spring through to fruition might contribute to an

American Spring, one of renewed pride in our country and confidence in the cause of liberty.” Inverting the temporality of Obama’s invocation, Kristol read the Arab Spring as a signal not just for a mythical American past, but also for a present in which affective attachment to that past has withered. In this formulation, witnessing (and perhaps guiding) the emergence of new Middle-Eastern democracies should renew such attachments—taken here as something of a national birthright—and the mediated closeness of revolution abroad should, in a sense, bring us back to a mythic past in which we were as passionately invested in our own freedoms.

As conservative criticisms of Obama’s rhetorical support for the ending of the Mubarak regime in Egypt and his approach to military intervention in Libya became more insistent, they tended to hinge on the same fantasy. On the one hand, Senator John McCain supplied the talking point that Obama had “led from behind” in Libya. The weight of this charge was in the suggestion, often repeated throughout conservative media sources, that Obama’s actions in office did not demonstrate a sufficient affective attachment to forms of “freedom” that only could be articulated through invocations of national history. On the other side, self-proclaimed realists took up Kristol’s earlier skepticism to raise anxieties about the specter of instability in the Middle East and the growth of Islamic fundamentalism. This response was memorialized by an infamous *Newsweek* cover that proclaimed the widespread existence of “Muslim rage” by way of a

dubiously de-contextualized photograph of protesters, faces frozen and distorted in a forever incomprehensible yell. This debate produced the Arab Spring as unfathomably other to U.S interests and democracy and thus incommensurable to the terms of national history Obama had invoked in his earlier speech. For many, in line with ongoing attempts at de-legitimization, the failure of the Arab Spring to re-enact American history also marked Obama as potentially foreign to that past; he became a symbolic bearer of the fraying of the affective attachments that Kristol had once hoped the Arab Spring might revitalize.

These two seemingly contradictory strands of anxiety and desire came together in the debate and investigations into the attacks on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney raised these concerns throughout his campaign. He suggested alternately that the attack proved that Obama had been naïve to identify in the Arab Spring a democratic movement in line with U.S. interests and that Obama's immediate response to the attack revealed that Obama himself was not acting in line with "our" interests and that his administration had attempted to cover-up the nature of the attacks in the initial aftermath, so as to obscure this twin failure. Many of Obama's defenders in the political media have wondered about the rationality of such arguments, seeing the accusation of naiveté as logically contradicting the accusations of nefarious, counter-American motivations. Picking apart Republican arguments, Matt Steinglass

wrote in a widely circulated blog post for *The Economist* that “the underlying accusation about Benghazi is that the Obama administration deliberately mischaracterized the terrorist attack there as having grown out of a spontaneous demonstration because that would be less politically damaging. Such a cover-up would have made no sense because the attack would not have been less politically damaging had it grown out of a spontaneous demonstration” [emphasis in the original]. Although Steinglass expressed exasperation at partisan attacks he implicitly accepted their underlying logic; popular opposition to American power abroad signifies a failure of democracy equivalent to outright insurgency. Either way such rhetoric bespeaks the possibility that Obama had dangerously misread the situation in Libya. Admittedly, Steinglass’s intention was to protect the Obama administration from such attacks, but in defusing the charge of nefarious motivations he inadvertently raises the specter of naiveté—and either way, Obama had failed to continue a democratic tradition birthed in a mythic past.

Arguments like those of Steinglass—mostly expressions of partisan frustration—remain on the surface of political discourse. They fail to account for the habits of thought, fantasies, and emotional investments that, nevertheless, make such seemingly incredible arguments compelling to at least some. Those arguments are so powerfully enticing not because they rest on realist approximations of credible motivations, but because they articulate existential claims about the nation in relation to a more widely

articulated desire to discover reflections of its own history in foreign space. The central hermeneutic that enables such an articulation is the one previously taken up by Obama himself; events elsewhere can be recognized as democratic movements by way of their repetition of mythic national history. As those events swerve from that limited legibility (as almost inevitably they would, occasioned by different circumstances, constrained by different structures of power and capital, and conducted by agents who do not always fit a nationalist or liberal image of political subjectivity) then a misreading (such as Obama's) becomes both naïve and suspicious. Since the reading of the present through the lens of history has been coded as both a matter of political knowledge (understanding the Constitution, identifying allies) and emotion (vigorous feelings for liberty, stewardship of freedom) a missed recognition becomes the occasion of national existential crisis and the anxiety that we have become alienated from our own mythical past. This coming together of the interpretive power of history with political emotion exemplifies the ongoing consequences of the aesthetics of history whose genealogy this dissertation intends to trace.

I begin with these recent political debates not to make a partisan critique—both major parties reproduce the mytho-historical hermeneutic that generates the anxieties and desires I have begun to trace. Rather, I want to call attention to how contemporary dramas in political discourse are underwritten by an aesthetic vision of history and

democracy concerned with the power of political actors to identify the continuities and breaks between the past and future as a matter of vision and feeling. This “structure of feeling,” to use Raymond Williams’s vital phrase, is the system of desires and emotions produced by United States neo-imperialism, understood in a double sense. First, neo-imperialism refers to a global economic and juridical structure in which a previous model of direct colonial domination has been supplanted by investments of capital, legislation of trade agreements, and international development directives that takes the “developed” nation that supplies and extracts capital as its teleological model.<sup>2</sup> Second, it is a discourse of nationalism, long incubated, that takes the imperial state as the central source of trans-historical, global values (democracy and liberty) and imagines a global future as already articulated in the national present. Neo-imperialism abstracts and re-encodes global space in a hierarchical matrix of relative temporal distance and closeness to alternately economically developed and/or advanced democratic states.

That mythical temporal re-encoding of global space is riven with violence. Talal Asad has argued that the mythical aspects of how the modern liberal state justifies its global power should not be considered yet another layer of ideological obfuscation beyond which a rational and just modernity can be achieved. Rather, the aspiration towards universal liberal democracy is itself a myth. Asad powerfully suggests that such

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<sup>2</sup> The now-canonical description of the material aspects of this international order can be found in Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* (2000).

a myth is based in the violence “of universalizing reason itself. For to make an enlightened space, the liberal must continually attack the darkness of the outside world that threatens to overwhelm that space” (59). In liberal political discourse in the United States, the aspiration towards universal democracy rewrites global space on a teleological temporal axis in which each nation is viewed as working to catch up, as it were, with the paradigmatic narrative of modern political and economic development: U.S. nationalist history. But in the deviance of contemporary events from that paradigm—from a past that would provide a stable model for imagining the future—the same political discourse comes to embrace violence against the agents of these ruptures not only to protect the future of the liberal order, but also to contain the existential crises occasioned by sudden shocking knowledge that the mythical national past may no longer be a guide to the future. This dissertation project seeks to understand this political imaginary as an aesthetics of history: a formal code for the imaginative description of what progress towards democracy looks and feels like. This aesthetics encodes richly sensate descriptions of history with a powerfully affective sense of the relationship between the past and the future. It was first produced in the confrontation of antebellum nationalist historians with events in the Atlantic World that sought to push beyond the racial limits of U.S. democracy. In what follows, I conduct a genealogical inquiry into how this aesthetic’s tendency to produce deeply unstable

political affects first became a habit of thought in hegemonic understandings of the relationships among history, nation, race, temporality, and the global future of democracy.

*The Temporality of Historical Nationalism*

My genealogical examination of this aesthetics looks to the nationalist and imperial moment of the decades between 1830 and 1860 that saw the writing and publication of the first major nationalist histories. These histories, primarily concerned with European colonial encounters and conflicts in the Americas between the years of discovery and the American Revolution, aimed to produce a concrete sense of time as culminating in the emergence and spread of democracy in the New World with the United States as the privileged agent of what would have been called historical providence. While the general sense that the United States held some significance as a bearer of a democratic future was widespread in the political rhetoric and literary cultures of the first half of the nineteenth century—John O’Sullivan’s 1839 invocation of “the great nation of futurity” in *The Democratic Review* remains its most remarked upon formulation—these historians were some of the first to produce a thorough affective

mapping of history along a teleological axis aimed at the emergence of the nation.<sup>3</sup> Scholars of the period have tended to associate these formulations of providence with the expansionist violence of “Manifest Destiny,” and the direct domination and subjugation of American Indians, but they have only recently begun to interrogate the consequences of this project as an affective matrix of indirect domination and imperialism. My dissertation proposes reading this discourse as generating an early forms of the emotions that would structure felt responses to the neo-imperialism of the late nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century. Like the travel writing analyzed by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* (1992)—a genre from which these historians borrowed both knowledge of foreign locales and techniques of describing and coding space—antebellum historical writing was not merely an interpretation of a narrowly defined national past, but a mode of encountering and interpreting contemporary events by reading them through a model of temporal progress that they named Providence.

The names of many of the historians engaged in this project remain familiar—George Bancroft, Edward Motley, William H. Prescott and Francis Parkman—but with few exceptions their works have long vanished from professional respectability and

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, the use of providence to describe the success of the American Revolution (prospective and retrospective) predates the 1830s, but the histories written by the generation of the so-called revolutionary historians like Mercy Otis Warren were more limited in scope. I am here interested in how such a large variety of events on the American continent besides the American Revolution were unified not only by an overarching narrative of national progress but also romantic feelings of veneration for national potential in scenes of past struggle.

popular appeal. They remain, to both the guild of historians and American Studies scholars, examples of the corrupting and destructive force of nationalism on historical objectivity and critical thought. In his account of nineteenth-century historiography, David Noble went as far as to label the antebellum generation as “historians against history”: founders of a tradition of historical writing in thrall of an ideology of American Exceptionalism that reproduced the Puritans’ prejudices against American Indians at the expense of moral complication and material specificity. More typically, historians have merely dismissed the writings of this generation as constituting a pre-objective and thus pre-professional past.<sup>4</sup> Even as the centrality of objectivity to history has come under question by theorists inspired alternatively by structuralism, the genealogical inquiries of Michel Foucault, feminism, and post-colonial studies, few have thought to re-examine the purported pre-professionalism of the antebellum generation.<sup>5</sup>

One exception to this silence is Eileen Ka-May Cheng’s useful study of early national American historical writing, *The Plain and Noble Garb of Truth* (2011). Through painstaking historical recovery, Cheng reconstructs the system of epistemic values under which these historians wrote and researched. Central to this system was the

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<sup>4</sup> For an account of the co-emergence of the twin values of objectivity and professionalism in historical research and writing see Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream* (1988).

<sup>5</sup> Notable challenges to historical objectivity include Hayden White’s *Metahistory* (1973); Keith Jenkins’ *Rethinking History* (1991); Joan Scott’s *Gender and the Politics of History* (1999); Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* (1997); and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* (2007).

concept of impartiality, which was seen as the proper exercise of judgment by the trained historian. In contrast to objectivity, which sought to constrain the subjectivity of the historian to allow for the presentation of facts without personal prejudice, impartiality asked historians to become actively involved in the construction of their texts by isolating and highlighting educative examples of moral action and providing commentary on how history demonstrated the providential emergence of American democracy. In Cheng's assessment, the nationalism of these historians was not a corruption of their professional standards, but an ideal measurement of moral truth that allowed them to apply impartial judgments to the text of the past. Moreover, as Cheng demonstrates, these judgments were hardly as monolithically prejudiced against the native populations of the Americas as previous assessments of historical nationalism had once supposed. Since nationalism was a regulative ideal, the set of values associated with it was often rallied in judgments critical of European settlers.

While Cheng's work looks to occasion a re-examination of an epistemic system in isolation from the prejudices of the one that replaced it, it does little to unearth the ways that this regime of historical knowledge functioned as a structure of feeling for an increasingly expansionist and imperialist nation. American studies scholarship and literary criticism has been more attentive to these concerns in a general sense, even if historical writing itself has often been left under-examined. A still dominant reading of

the relationship between nationalism and history bases its claims on Benedict Anderson's materialist account of how literary forms produced a sense of what he calls linear "empty time." In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson argued that print forms that first emerged in the eighteenth century – primarily the newspaper and the novel – helped replace a pre-modern, religious sense of time based on cyclical models of recurrence and fulfillment in which the past and future subsisted within the present with a modern temporal structure of succession and simultaneity. Under this emergent temporality, the past and the future were firmly separated from the present through the production and division of a succession of calendric dates. This structure of time allowed for national forms of imagined communities based on a sense of sharing the same, empty, moment of time in a linear procession to succeed religious and kinship groups rooted in local 'full' continuities across longer cycles of time. As Anderson wrote, an "American will never meet or even know the names of more than an handful of his fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity" (26). In this reading, the writing of national history in the antebellum period helped to consolidate the sense of linear time that already subsisted in the national form. An historian like George Bancroft, whose magisterial *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the Continent* (1834-1860) was one of the major works of the period, wrote history as a

progressive, linear sequence of dates whose teleological direction was the American Revolution and the emergence of democracy in the New World. Thus, nationalist history contributed to the expansionist projects of the 1830s and 1840s by projecting forward a providential sense that the trajectory of time itself was towards the successive expansion of a U.S. “Empire of Liberty” – as Jefferson had put it – and democracy. Moreover, it produced the present as the horizon of an emergent national future over which the community of citizen subjects could claim full authority.

Research in a number of fields has raised doubts about this totalizing portrait. Even before Anderson was writing, scholars of early American political and religious formations, including J.G.A Pocock, Bernard Bailyn, and Sacvan Bercovitch, had suggested that such forward looking nationalism had always operated in conjunction and competition with classically Republican and Puritan senses of time as entropic, corrupting and in constant need of revitalization through the performance of political virtue or prophetic jeremiad.<sup>6</sup> However, this body of work has not stopped the frequent shorthand association of Andersonian empty time with nationalist modernity. As Lloyd Pratt has pointed out in a complex intervention, even in the so-called spatial turn in

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<sup>6</sup> See J.G.A. Pocock’s *The Machiavellian Moment* (1975); Bernard Bailyn’s *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967); Sacvan Bercovitch’s *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975) and *The American Jeremiad* (1978). For a somewhat more recent resuscitation of the implications of these arguments for temporality that details the political stakes of the antebellum historical novel see Philip Gould’s *Covenant and Republic* (1996).

American Studies—which has done so much to trouble linear periodizing distinctions in scholarship—it is often taken for granted that the abstractions of linear time are functional throughout a global modernity. In his *Archives of American Time* (2010) Pratt stages this problematic in a compelling reading of Laura Doyle's *Freedom's Empire* (2008). That book seeks to challenge dominant accounts of transatlantic modernity that drew distinctions among nationalist, imperialist, and racial political formations. In place of a picture of three discreet discourses that developed at separate times and only sometimes operated in conjunction, Doyle locates in the Anglophone novel of the eighteenth century a figure for a form of transnational imperial and racial identity that she argues underwrote a whole series of historically particular articulations. She labels the novel's dramatization of the process of abstraction that alienates and then recodes identity in a transatlantic formation as the "Atlantic swoon": "[t]he self in an Atlantic swoon moment faces an abyss, losing an old social identity as it faints—only to reawaken, uprooted and yet newly racialized" (7). This new self experiences its own freedom of activity across a transnational economic sphere as predicated on its subjective position within a national-racial community of Englishness, and later, American-ness. And, as Doyle points out, this compensatory sense of belonging to a "free people" was always felt in distinction to racially marked figures of abjection whose own material and discursive abstractions from locality by Atlantic economic currents could not be retroactively imagined as a

decision made in freedom. The “Atlantic swoon” was not an actual event, either in history or in the life of the individual; it was a fantasy that grounded the modern liberal subject in nationalist, imperialist, and racial terms.

Pratt’s point of contention with Doyle’s thesis is not with the expanded spatial scale of its analysis of forms of modern subjectivity. Indeed, one of her most profound contributions to an understanding of an Atlantic modernity is her contention that national belonging was articulated alongside forms of racial and imperial dominance. Rather, Pratt’s concern is with her implicit reproduction of a totalizing Andersonian model of a modernity founded through the abstraction of selves into a linear, empty time. He reads Doyle’s work to suggest that print-culture in Atlantic modernity produces a singular racialized form of subjectivity “from which there is neither escape nor shelter” (194). Pratt challenges this totalizing analysis of modern subjectivity and time (taken as representative of the “spatial turn” as a whole) by arguing that, even within print culture and the hallowed form of the novel, time was split and fractured, never fully cohering into a simple, modern, forward-moving simultaneity. Referring to the early nationalist and antebellum period (often associated in American studies with the emergence of such modern temporality), Pratt suggests that, “this particular temporal conjecture was deeply inhospitable to the consolidation of national and racial identity” (3). In place of singular articulations of race, nation, and imperialism that

supposedly emerged with print culture, Pratt offers up the experience of modern time as traceable only on a series of fractures between linear temporality and other forms of circular or cyclical time. Relying on post-colonial studies and the work of Homi Bhabha and Ian Baucom in particular, Pratt argues that modernity was not the progressive displacement of pre-modern temporalities with linear time, but the co-articulation of multiple temporalities defined in a hierarchical relationship with each other.<sup>7</sup> Pratt's argument allows us to further grasp how modern subjectivity was (and is) for everyone an uninhabitable structure of subjectivization (to paraphrase Judith Butler) and the experience of modern time has always been hybrid and fractured.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the laws of race and nation that produce and abstract the modern subject also produce a frame for reading other temporalities as "pre-modern" forms of belonging that the modern individual feels herself to be alienated from, haunted by, superior to, and/or desirous of.

For Pratt, there are vital political stakes in post-colonial theory's concept of hybridity that he wants to import into American Studies. He argues that the problem with the spatial turn's inattention to temporality is that it forgets "one of the central, (if often forgotten) points of postcolonial studies" (196). The hybrid temporalities of

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<sup>7</sup> See Bhabha's "DissemiNation" (1990) and Baucom's "Globalit, Inc." (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Butler's arguments about the uninhabitability of modern abstract structures of subjectivity are developed in detail in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997).

modern print forms (and especially the novel) constitute their readers as also inhabiting multiple, fractured times. Thus the dominant subject position, “the white-man, the Anglo-American subject, the Englishman, the American,” and its claim to authority over modernity, other subject positions, and the future “is hybrid too” (196). Another way to phrase Pratt’s point would be to suggest that critical genealogies of power need to be careful not to reproduce both power’s claim to ontological purity and its claim to totalizing domination of all political possibility and action. As Foucault suggested, with a slightly different but still relevant valence in *The History of Sexuality* (1976), life escapes.<sup>9</sup> The operation of power to produce situations of dominance and purity—and we might say, because of the national political subject’s claims of authority over it, Andersonian “empty time” is one such situation—is never complete because its claims are founded only on fictions of the natural or necessary and the deviant or, in this case, backwards and regressive, that it produces to displace and manage its own contradictions.

Pratt’s incisive book moves from this argument into an exploration of the other forms of hybrid temporality encoded in literary genres like the historical romance, south-western humor, and African-American life writing, that, whatever their

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<sup>9</sup> I thank Fred Moten for calling attention to the importance of this passage. Foucault’s emphasis is on the inability of biopolitical regimes to fully integrate and dominate its object: “it is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them” (143).

hesitations and under whatever duress, operated within, but also against, a nationalist discursive matrix. But Pratt's argument has distinct unarticulated implications for how we think about genres like nationalist history that seem to be aimed at producing modern linear models of temporality in their visions of progressive time. What if we consider these texts as also impure and struggling to produce an image of and feeling for singularity in time that is riven by crisis and absence? The period that saw the production and encoding of a progressive national authority over the future also witnessed successive eruptions throughout the Atlantic world that actively sought the production of futures alternative to those projected by U.S. nationalism and imperialism. Central to my analysis are the slave revolts, revolutions, and political agitations throughout the Atlantic that resulted in what the historian Robin Blackburn has described as the overthrow of colonial slavery. As his history of anti-slavery revolt in the years between 1776 and 1848 describes, the first half of the nineteenth century saw a large number of challenges to colonial slave regimes, which resulted in the "destruction either of the colonial relationship, or the slave system, or of both" in the large majority of New World colonies (3). An understanding of modern temporality that privileged the Haitian Revolution at the turn of the century, the ending of the slave-trade by Britain, West Indian Emancipation, the abolition of slavery in the majority of the former Spanish colonies of Central and South America upon achieving colonial independence, and slave

revolts within the domestic boundaries of the nation (rather than the institution of republican governance) would have to view the antebellum United States as one of the most backward and regressive spaces in the New World.

This is not to suggest re-reading history along another progressive trajectory in accordance with a different set of values than those held by antebellum nationalism. Eric Williams and Marcus Wood have made the links among abolitionism, exploitative capitalist domination, and the emergence of middle-class values clear.<sup>10</sup> Such a narrative of progress could just as easily serve to justify current capitalist relations and global power structures as displace them (as in liberal and neoliberal arguments that the capitalist west helped end slavery and is the primary agent of global humanitarianism). Rather, I want to insist on the acknowledgement that the dual overthrow of European colonialism and slavery in the New World demonstrated the eruptive capacity of popular resistance movements to introduce a multiplicity of political potentials. As Blackburn writes: “[d]espite the mixed results of anti-slavery in this period the sacrifices of slave rebels, of radical abolitionists and of revolutionary democrats were not in vain. They show how it was possible to challenge, and sometimes defeat, the oppression which grew as the horrible obverse of the growth of human social capacities and powers in the Atlantic world of the early modern period” (30). In the terms of this study, such

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<sup>10</sup> See Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) and Wood’s *The Horrible Gift of Freedom* (2010).

an acknowledgment entails the recognition that, just at the moment in which nationalist historians were articulating an aesthetic vision of history through which U.S. imperialism would come to interpret and code global eruptions of democratic struggle as reflecting a national past, the mythical claim of America to futurity was at its most tenuous, shaken by the speed at which the Atlantic world was moving beyond forms of political freedom domestically admissible.

As I will show, historians and politicians came up with powerful ways to limit and dominate these claims to alternate futurity, but they were also haunted by these feelings for other futures (and other pasts). It might be argued, without placing undue emphasis, that the eruption of these non-national futures was a primary motivating force in the production of the imperial aesthetic code.<sup>11</sup> There is no need to assent to this claim, however, to identify that, at the very least, nationalist providential history was produced under conditions that challenged the foundations of its claims of authority over the future. Just because, in retrospect, the indirect forms of power produced in this moment have come to exercise a global hegemonic force, there is no reason to retroactively impose a stability that hardly existed in the moment of its articulation. As I demonstrated in the prologue, even today after the so-called “end of history” when

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<sup>11</sup> Admittedly, David Kanjanjian makes a compelling case for the emergence of neo-imperial racial formations as early as eighteenth-century mercantilism and for the presence of its governmental logics in the African colonization movements of the antebellum period in *The Colonizing Trick* (2003).

American power can seem insurmountable, the rhetorical affects produced by this matrix are highly unstable, fractured, and consistent generators of crisis.

*Romance and Desire*

These unstable affects were present throughout the texts and rhetoric that attempted to announce the nation of futurity in the antebellum period. Historians sought to quell domestic fears that the U.S. indeed had no special claim to the future—that sectional chaos or royalist retrenchment were the inevitable outcomes of a community that lacked shared traditions and social habits—by producing shared affective attachments to the symbols and myths of the nation. George Bancroft captured this intention well in his introduction to the first volume of his history. Taking account of the potentially centrifugal forces in the national community, he counters each with a description of the centripetal: “[n]ew states [...] forming in the wilderness” are bound by “canals [...] the use of steam on our rivers [and] railroads” that “annihilate the distance.” “Religion, neither persecuted nor paid by the state, is sustained by the regard for public morals and the convictions of an enlightened faith.” And, although “[a]n immense concourse of emigrants of the most various lineage is perpetually crowding to our shores” they are bound “by the principles of liberty, uniting all interests by the

operation of equal laws, blend[ing] the discordant elements into a harmonious union” (1: 2; ed. 1879). This complacency in synecdoche, powerfully expressed through a totalizing list of the flows of labor and technology in a modern capitalist democracy that would not be out of place in a Whitman poem, is the rhetorical structure of Bancroft’s historical knowledge.<sup>12</sup> As Bancroft ends his introduction, “it is the object of the present work to explain how the change in the condition of our land has been brought about; and, as the fortunes of a nation are not under the control of blind destiny, to follow the steps which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory” (1: 3; ed. 1879). History helps bind the national community because it produces the knowledge that the democratic nation is not a contingent, unstable formation. Rather, it suggests that the entirety of the past,

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<sup>12</sup> The use of synecdoche here refers to Hayden White’s tropological analysis of nineteenth-century rhetorics of history. In White’s terms, we might read Bancroft’s approach as taking metonymic figures that would disaggregate the nation into discreet elements (relations of part to part) and supplementing them with integrative synecdoche (relations of part to whole), which in turn enables them symbolize national totality. To explain, a list that only featured the first part of his dyads would be disintegrative and metonymic. In such a list “states in the wilderness” would refer to other political units like the juridical person or local governance, even as it raises the specter of the ur-instance of the Puritan “errand in the wilderness”; religion uncontrolled by the state would reference other discrete private practices, familial or local communal rituals, even personal hygiene; and “the immense concourse of immigrants” indirectly calls to mind the already diverse populations of the Americas at the moment of colonization well before national integration. However, in the list Bancroft produced each of these figures is supplemented by another figure of binding. Canals and trains both literally annihilate distance through speed of travel, and figuratively bind the nation as a circulatory network, symbolizing a total integration of an economic and bodily whole. Other models of totality, the inner light of faith, and the regulative juridical equality, also play roles in a bodily rhetoric of the nation, as the heart and the head of a standard metaphysics of the person. In Bancroft, the aggregation of these units into national form is both the object of historical inquiry—the past it imagines as the truth of its tropes—and its rhetorical function.

despite apparent contingencies, has been purposefully directed towards the present form of political organization. It eases the anxieties of the open horizon of the present by invoking a (mythical) stable and knowable past.

However, there is another function of national history in the antebellum period that is best understood as processing and mediating forms of political desire. Throughout the antebellum period the impossible contradiction of America was the production of the nation as the vanguard and future of liberty and democracy during the continuation, entrenchment, and expansion of slavery even as, increasingly, the Atlantic world was moving towards emancipation. Scholars have long located throughout this period a sense of belatedness in its often obsessive and filiopietistic backward gaze. But this sense of a lack in the antebellum has rarely been read against the presence of revolutionary activity in various constructed elsewhere (as of course, some of those elsewhere were within current and future boundaries of the United States.). Although inquiries into antebellum culture have mostly abandoned this line of inquiry for being too focused on elite cultures of domination at the expense of the more complicated and more productive forms of resistance, dominant accounts of the oedipal character of the historical experience of political elites have gone unchallenged.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Russ Castronovo's *Fathering the Nation* (1995) complicates this oedipal narrative to a considerable degree, and his insights are echoed in the argument that follows, but his study still takes that narrative (and the scope of national space) as a starting point.

In *Patricide in the House Divided* (1979), the psycho-historian George Forgie helped set the terms of this reading; he described the central crisis of the political theater of the antebellum period as lying in a generational experience of the “problem of ambition in the post-heroic age.” The widespread availability of both formal history and sentimental books that celebrated the heroism of the founding generation produced the sense of a “dramatically sharp” “contrast between the heroic past and commonplace present” (33). As he wrote, the experience of this generation was based in “the sense of having been born with the Republic and of belonging to a latter age than its beginnings,” and thus having been “born too late to experience the revolution but in time to have been raised by the generation that fought it” (7). Forgie argued that this psychic conflict was coded in the terms of the Freudian family romance. Because so much of the historical literature about the founding generation relied on a sentimental rhetoric of the nation as a family, it became inevitable that the political dramas of the next generation would play out in a rhetorical dialectic between filiopietism and patricidal ambition that sought to displace the achievements of the fathers with that of the sons. So, for instance, in Forgie’s account the “Young America” movement that helped produce the concepts of linear national futurity was, at root, an outpouring of a desire to both embody and displace the heroism of the founding generation. If we were to ascribe to this overly totalizing narrative on its own terms then we could read the temporal project of national

history in the antebellum period as two-fold; its first feature was to open up a space in the future for heroic activity in continuity and linear sequence from the acts of the founding generation. This would, in effect, ameliorate the psychic conflict between filio piety and fratricide by producing history as sequential and forward looking, inspired by past actions, keeping faith with fathers, without being overburdened by their example. Second, we might perceive that the reading of history gave antebellum readers mediated access to the heroic actions and passions of the previous generation, filling the lack in modern life through compensatory aesthetic experiences.

Forgie himself stages this problematic of compensation in a relatively compelling reading of the economic conditions of the post-heroic generation. He argues that the model of the nation as a family first emerged in a moment when, for economic reasons, “actual fathers ceased to provide more or less automatic models of roles their sons would grow up to play” (28). The early years of the nineteenth century in the United States was a moment in which artisan systems of occupation, where sons would apprentice with either their actual father or another familiar figure in their community, were being disrupted and displaced by the expropriation of labor and goods occasioned by the onset of the industrial revolution, the emergence of the factory system, and the

economic binding of the country through a rapid decrease in travel times and costs.<sup>14</sup> As a result, Forgie argued, the internalization of the values of the father central to Freud's description of the family drama entered into the public sphere. As he puts it, "[a]t a time when expanding economic opportunity meant that boys were beginning to need a wider range of models than their surroundings were likely to provide, history stepped in to supply them in the form of founding heroes" (29). In other words, the public romance that constructed the nation as a family already functioned as compensation for a specific experience of alienation through industrialization. Claiming these other fathers followed a loss of an original father in a nationwide process of economic expropriation.

Forgie reads the sentimental discourse of the national family as, intrinsically, an argument against an abstract discourse of a liberal rational state. This sentimentalism suggested that emotions were "not only a legitimate but also an essential matter of public concern, and that it was essential for Americans to extend natural affections, originally directed towards objects close at hand, to the far wider realm of the Republic" (5). The originally compensatory formation of a public historical fatherhood becomes, in sentimentalism, an essential productive force in public life. At this point, from the perspective of the developments in American Studies in the more than three decades since Forgie's book emerged, objections to his argument begin to pile up around his

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<sup>14</sup> For a thorough analysis of the effect of this process on personal and political life in a single city (New York), see Sean Wilentz's *Chants Democratic* (1984).

clear reification of the historically contingent and politically dubious distinction between the public and the private. However, I think there remains something useful about his account even if it needs to be read critically. Rather than acceding that the movement of private familial and psychic life into public political discourse was occasioned by industrial expropriation, we might argue that industrial expropriation created both the “lost” psychic intimacy of the family romance and the compensatory reproduction of that romance in the political sphere. There was not, before industrialization, a set of “natural” affections that were then expropriated into the discourse of the nation, but rather the discourse of the nation produced the model of the family as its authorizing, natural, ground. That produced experience of lack helped generate a political public in the terms of a national family romance by making the nation the site of potential psychic recovery and reintegration, which, in turn, could only be achieved by the fulfillment of the promise of the founding fathers. Romantic historical writing served to ground that fantasy of reintegration by producing aesthetic images of the experiential fullness of the founding generation’s central claim to heroism against subsequent generations’ lack. The founding generation, having been agents of their own liberty, were viewed as having founded themselves as abstract national subjects in ways that were desired but unavailable to their successors. These images allowed for a felt intimacy with the “lost” fathers, such as in the famous biography of Washington by Parson Weems, which

concluded by allowing the reader to accompany the president at his deathbed and then gain a glimpse of his entrance into heaven.

*History as an Aesthetic Practice*

My use of the concept of aesthetics to describe how the romantic historical project sought to provide readers with such compensatory, mediated experiences of revolutionary fullness is derived, first of all, from these historians' own engagement with romantic aesthetic theory. Historians like Bancroft and Prescott were deeply influenced by European and American Romanticism, both as a school of historical thought that had important sources in the works of Johann Gottfried Herder, and as a model of literary production confronting the end of state patronage and increased marketplace competition by placing value on the creativity of the individual author. As George Callcott has argued, the influence of Herder was profound throughout the romantic period and helped shape the ideas about history and culture that led to the development of nationalist thought in Europe and America. His central contribution to history was his rejection of Enlightenment historiography's emphasis on universal abstract oppositions like superstition and reason in favor of a more thorough recognition of the differences among human cultures and their independent growth and

development. Herder developed this argument in his essay, *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774), which in its title and content was a response to a paradigmatic Enlightenment philosopher, Voltaire. Herder's emphasis on differentiation helped shift the focus of historical research from the abstractly universal to the national and racial. Herder also deployed a modern understanding of temporality focused on linear concepts like growth that were an immanent aspect of human culture, thus moving away from religious or Enlightenment abstractions (as employed by Voltaire or Hume) and cyclical rises and falls rooted in eternal, transcendent moral laws (a la Gibbon).

Neither of these shifts—from idealist to culturally produced value and from transcendent to immanent time—belied the Euro-centrism of the historiography produced in Herder's wake. Rather they served to ground an understanding of history that increasingly searched in events (rather than through abstract deduction) for the emergence of freedom, morality and Christianity in the development of individual cultures—which were now understood as nations or proto-nations. Romantic theories of history served to make history a central discipline for human self-knowledge. History became a form of writing that sought to observe and demonstrate the reconciliation between ideal moral laws and human life and tradition. Reflecting his own romanticism, Bancroft would claim in 1854 that history is the study of man's growth in self-

knowledge rooted in the discovery that God's Providence is not a "boundless power," or a "abstract and absolute cause" but an "infinite fountain of moral excellence and beauty [...] a creative spirit, indwelling, in man, his fellow worker and guide" (24-25).<sup>15</sup>

At the same time, the archetype of the romantic man of letters provided a basis from which many of these historians understood their position in society and the marketplace. Bancroft frequently compared historians to poets; "it is because God is visible in History that its office is the noblest except that of the poet" ("The Necessity..." 16). And stories that surrounded the composition of Prescott's long works on Spanish history and the Conquest focused on the historian's blindness and his heroic struggle through disability (with the aid of secretaries) to produce lasting, extensively researched works of history. Many of these historians were at the vanguard of their profession, and predate its academic institutionalization. They had to navigate the difficulty of making a living from history with growing demands to professionalization and the commitment of economic resources to a project that, financially, rarely could ever be more than a part-time occupation. Most antebellum historians were patrician Whigs from New England who had other sources of income or pursued law or the ministry before eventually committing to history. Bancroft was a major exception, and had a lengthy political career in the Democratic Party, serving to appoint Hawthorne to the Salem

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<sup>15</sup> Bancroft and other American historians' influence from Herder are further explored in Callcott's *History in the United States* (1970).

custom's house position commemorated in the preface to *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and to be himself appointed as Polk's Secretary of the Navy during the U.S.-Mexican War. (Even so, this involvement in politics was a subject of abiding criticism from other historians). Although relatively popular, the sales of these historians could not compete with historical novels or the popular histories that Gregory Pfitzer has explored in his *Popular History in the Literary Marketplace* (2009). Like Emerson and other romantics who struggled with their relative marginality and the lack of a support system for literary endeavor in a democratic and capitalist culture, these historians saw themselves as moral instructors and seers of the national order whose work (as philosophy and as a high art) was more important than the imperative to sell.<sup>16</sup>

This self-perception does not mean that they were not responsive to or challenged by the success of more popular forms like the historical novel. Some, like Parkman and Motley, tried their hand at popular novel writing, while Prescott repeatedly emphasized the importance that histories have character, plot, and compelling central interests. They also participated in literary culture more broadly, writing reviews of novels and poetry in publications like the Everetts' *North American Review*, giving orations on prominent occasions and communicating extensively with other literary authors to discuss both the details of historical information and descriptive

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<sup>16</sup> The canonical study on the relationship between romantic literature and the marketplace in antebellum America is Michael T. Gilmore's *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (1985).

techniques for best portraying character and building dramatic interest. To a large degree, they saw themselves as both the philosophers and poets of the nation—observing not so much eternal rules for the proper administration of state power and political will in exemplary incidents (as did their predecessors in the revolutionary generation of historians) as working to make apparent the sources and energy of a new abstract entity, the American people, in carrying forward the promise of historical and democratic progress.<sup>17</sup>

The blurred border between historical and literary production came together with their philosophical influences to drive these historians to focus intently on the ways in which historical writing could provide readers with the “experience” of distantly past events. Prescott introduced his *Conquest of Mexico* (1843) by claiming that he desired to “paint a portrait not only true in itself, but, if I may so express myself, make the reader a contemporary of the sixteenth century.” At the outset of composition of his history he wrote in his journal:

In short the true way of conceiving the subject is not as a philosophical theme, but as an epic in prose, a romance of chivalry [...] for surely there is nothing in the compass of Grecian epic or tragic fable, in which the resistless march of destiny is more discernable, than in the sad fortunes of the dynasty of

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<sup>17</sup> This focus on the growth and development of an abstract subject, “the American people” is most obvious in Bancroft’s work. However even histories not nominally about U.S. history, such as Prescott’s works on Spanish Empire, work to display the character of a “people” who, for at least a period of time, could become the instruments and agents of historical progress.

Montezuma. It is without doubt the most poetic subject ever offered the pen of the historian. (31)

Prescott conceived of writing history as an art form akin to the medieval romances that he had reviewed in the *North American Review*; it had to convey through its narrative ideas a profound emotional sense of the sweep of history. It was not only as narrative that history could excel as art, capturing the true tragic or romantic character of events, but also through rich descriptions of the emotions, sights, and sounds of another time and place that would make these abstract ideas discernible to the reader in an aesthetic image. Each historical incident would be a discrete episode or event that brought together many sensate and emotional particulars under a unifying idea of progress.<sup>18</sup> Bancroft endorsed this view of history as an exercise in narrative and description—in making history present—when he suggested in an oration delivered to the New York Historical Society in 1854 that “as certainly as the actual bodies forth the ideal, so certainly does history contain philosophy” (16-17). For Bancroft, as for Prescott, history was an art that manifests philosophically deduced laws of morality within the flux of time through the description of actual events. Both Parkman and Motley endorsed and

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<sup>18</sup> Rodolphe Gasché (along with Jacques Rancière) has argued that history and aesthetics emerged at the same moment in the eighteenth century as two structurally isometric “modes of non-rationalist cognition that correspond to individualities constituted in analogy to reason through extensive determinateness into concrete and sensible unities” (146). In other words, they were both discourses that imagined that determinate and particular objects of perception could be unified under a single idea and logic without recourse to an external rational law. He goes onto to suggest that history might indeed be a subset of another aesthetic discipline, poetics, even if they are not identical. See “Of Aesthetic and Historical Determination” (1987).

expanded on these ideas in their own works, and even Richard Hildreth, often considered the anti-Bancroft in his criticism of nationalism in history, evinced at times an aesthetic sense of what constitutes the real moral content of history.<sup>19</sup>

The market pressures that led to these historians insisting that their works be vivid and full of life and interest were clearly numerous. And they were responding to the dullness they perceived as characteristic of many of the revolutionary chronicles of an earlier generation, which had sold poorly and were mainly read by other historians. They were also responding to the imperatives at the center of transatlantic romantic culture's reaction against the Enlightenment. Bancroft was perhaps the most vehement in taking up this anti-Enlightenment stance, seeing in the materialist philosophy of Locke and Hume a degrading anti-spiritualism that could not escape the "humiliating yoke" of the senses and whose main "characteristic [w]as a refusal to recognize the infinite" ("The Necessity..." 27). At the same time, Bancroft as thoroughly rejected academic and idealist philosophy that relied only on reason to deduce and debate abstract values. As Mark Levin has pointed out in his study of these historians, *History as a Romantic Art* (1959), they rejected both the materialist conceptions of the Enlightenment that saw sensation as the only path to knowledge and an abstract

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<sup>19</sup> I mean that Richard Hildreth's emphasis on "living and breathing men, their faults as well as their virtues" (1: vii), as he put it in the advertisement to his history, is as much an aesthetic determination as an epistemological and moral one.

idealism that removed truth and beauty from the everyday affections and passions of experience. Instead, they saw their works as paths to demonstrating how an ideal moral law (that of progress) manifested itself in the actions and affections of nations and representative individuals in their experience with history, the wilderness, and the forces of reaction. In order to make such history a vivid experience for their readers, they relied on a more or less conventional descriptive vocabulary focused on moral portraiture, descriptions of landscapes and battle, and the emergence and growth of civil liberty, commerce, and the spirit of the people—all ways of visualizing an underlying order as “indwelling” and animating human time and progress.

The second reason I have chosen to use the concept of aesthetics is to distinguish it from the way “the literary” has often been employed in studies of historiography. The concept of the literary in historiography has tended to be more limited, concerned with narrative at the exclusion of the other two poles. This is because in the area of historiography, the category of the literary has been delimited by its role as a central concept in debates over the possibility of objectivity and scientific history. While generations of historians committed to “objectivity” had, like David Noble, criticized the romantic generation for their literariness, the more recent post-modern challenge to historiography that originated with Hayden White’s work in the 1970s highlighted the unavoidably discursive and literary aspects of all historical writing. Critics of Bancroft

(and perhaps simply the myth of Bancroft) could no longer simply claim that contrary to the objective histories of Leopold von Ranke or Richard Hildreth, Bancroft had imposed a literary and narrative form on his history. White had shown that even Ranke's work emplotted history in comedic and socially integrative narrative form that had conservative ideological consequences. Where objective historians of the past had desired to reach objectivity by reducing subjective and ideological components of historical narration, White argued that language itself was not and could never be a neutral medium and that narrative form, standardized tropes, and ideology suffused any attempt to recount the story of an event. As he wrote, historical narratives are "verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have in the sciences" (82). In other words, history has always been literary and needed to become more self-conscious about its linguistic and formal messages, or as White put it, "emplotment" in literary tropes and narratives. Keith Jenkins, a follower of White and the neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty took this line of argument further in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that historians had to view their work as a constructive project that was not primarily about uncovering factual truth about the past but was rather an articulation of societal values and political desires.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Jenkins's *Re-Thinking History* (1991).

I have chosen to move emphasis away from the literary and narrative as concepts in my analysis of romantic history, preferring to place it on the category of the aesthetic. Part of my concern with the concept of the literary is that, despite White's own level of detail concerning tropes and metaphors in historical texts, his primary influence has been narratological, providing a method for reading history for plot structures while not attending to its other uses of imaginative language and concepts. This has been the case with otherwise valuable studies of antebellum historiography by Philip Gould and John Ernest that I will engage at various points in this work.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps a concept of poetics—a process of literary making—would be adequate to track in detail the disruptions and resistances in the text that I want to focus on, but I think aesthetics is the more effective term for how it describes the way images become coded with complex affects that suggest the presence of an underlying metaphysical ground (progress or providence) while relying on the text's surface effects like emotion, sensate description, and, yes,

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<sup>21</sup> Both Gould and Ernest make Bancroft into a symbol of the totalizing progressive narratives of time that critics of the ideologies of Manifest Destiny and of slavery had to contend with to announce their differences with the power structures of antebellum America. Gould's *Covenant and Republic* (1996) focuses on complicating our understanding of how Puritanism got taken up by antebellum writers. He poses his argument against a view that he claims extends from Bancroft to Sacvan Bercovitch that situates Puritanism "consistently in the context of a progressive/millennial mode of historical progress" (55). Similarly, in *Liberation Historiography* (2004) Ernest writes that "African American historical writing [...] necessarily involved the deconstruction of various narratives and philosophies of history—from Hegel to Bancroft to the rhetoric of Independence Day celebrations" that had repressed the story of "a scattered" African-American community" (67). Neither of these accounts opposes Bancroft's nationalism with historiographical ideals like materialism or critical and scientific objectivity, instead emphasizing how literary form investigates and revises historical form. Yet, they treat the overarching narratives and philosophy of history projected by Bancroft as an accomplished textual fact. They stage their interventions against the ideal object intended by thought and not the actual texts that Bancroft and Prescott produced.

narrative form to do so. I also use the word aesthetics because of the frequency of aesthetic metaphors in romantic history. These historians constantly relied on the language of painting and portraiture to describe their writing, and the effects they intended are just as frequently described as beautiful. Finally, I think aesthetics better captures the experiential imperative that drove romantic historical writing.<sup>22</sup>

The aesthetics of history were responsible for the compensatory experiences of self-liberation central to romantic nationalism. In my first chapter, I will lay out how this aesthetic produced a fantasy of continuity between past and future. Chronicling the emergence of a romantic and progressive philosophy of history in the works of Bancroft and Ralph Waldo Emerson, I argue first that the ideology of progressive history was a

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<sup>22</sup> Two other recent thinkers of aesthetics and emotion have been influential on my thinking, as well. Rei Terada's *Feeling in Theory* (2003) provides a re-reading of the emotional content of texts that rejects a depth-to-surface model of emotion based in a romantic concept of an expressive subject that would prove its existence through its ability to express itself in works of aesthetic genius. In its place, Terada develops a deconstructive theory of emotion, focused on how emotion attests to the absence of such subjective intentionality and, thus, emotion's presence as a textual effect that subsists without regard for how or why it was expressed. This deconstructive reading has informed my sense that the aesthetics of history in antebellum America does not track the emotional life of any actual or ideal national subject in response to history, but registers discursively a desire for an "indwelling" experience of history that would displace contemporary sites of agency, revolution, and crisis into second-hand textual resolutions. In addition, Jacques Rancière's recent rereading of aesthetics in texts like *Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (2009), *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (2010), and *Aisthesis* (2013) has provided a basis for thinking about how these romantic texts imbued sensation and emotion with deeper, metaphysical significance. While the extent of Rancière's intervention into the critique of the category of the aesthetic in modern critical theory cannot be recounted here, his fundamental insight that art engages with, reproduces, and intervenes in political regimes through what he calls the "distribution of the sensible" is a basis for much of my analysis. Just as for Rancière, the modern political order is based on regimes of appearance (who and what actors are allowed to speak, how those actors are identified through appearances, and what deeper metaphysical orders power projects as an authorizing ground of those appearances), antebellum historians imagined providence as dwelling in the appearances of historical events and those actors who gave order to time and futurity.

reaction against the growing radicalism of anti-slavery politics that increasingly promoted a much more thorough break with the past than was admissible to nationalism. Second, I show how Bancroft's aesthetics depended on the very models of temporality it attempted to disavow. These histories made claims on a specifically American futurity in the context of an Atlantic world that was opening up possibilities of other futures not dominated by the U.S. model of progress. The emotional nationalism performed by the romantic history was articulated as a disavowal of these alternate modernities.<sup>23</sup> While the reasons for this are obviously complex, it seems useful to recall here David Roediger's vital argument that central to the compensatory formations of belonging produced in the aftermath of industrialism was a racially oppressive allegiance to "whiteness."<sup>24</sup> We might also recall that the central political drama of the antebellum years was a series of procedural compromises that served to

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<sup>23</sup> This concept of disavowal is adapted from Sibylle Fischer's *Modernity Disavowed* (2004). In that book, Fischer argues that the territorial consolidation of radical anti-slavery in the Haitian revolution was a fundamental fact of "the cultural and political landscape [of] the age of revolution," (1) although it was often only present in the discourse of the era "as unspeakable, as trauma, utopia and elusive dream" (2). However, in 20<sup>th</sup>-century arguments over the emancipatory or oppressive potentials of a "modernity" thought to have emerged with the twin forces of bourgeois and industrial revolution, Haiti has only ever been discussed as either a "more or less pure" instance of an emancipatory modernity or as utterly previous and/or oppositional to its oppressive structures. In place of these models, Fischer suggests the Haitian revolution induces us to re-think modernity under "the headings of colonial heterogeneity, displacement, and discontinuity." This is the modernity that she claims has been "disavowed" from conceptualizations based on ideal or pure European models. Fischer also proposes "disavowal" as a figure for the presences of the Haitian revolution and its suggestion of heterogeneity in the political desires and nightmares of the nineteenth-century Atlantic world—both as an eruptive dream or trauma and as displaced from official avowal.

<sup>24</sup>See Roediger's *Wages of Whiteness* (1991).

prolong the sectional crisis of slavery. In other words, the contemporary struggles of transatlantic anti-slavery were both vivid living examples of groups looking to found their own political and personal independence, and conducted by agents and through political forms viewed by hegemonic models of subjectivity as impossible bearers of liberty. It is my contention that the forms of aesthetic compensation produced by nationalist history also contained disavowed seeds of recognition and desire for the forms of democratic struggle that had been circumscribed from national space.

These texts evince the consistent eruption of racial figures of alternate futurities that the historians of the period struggled, at the cost of great formal instability, to reintegrate into the aesthetics and linear providence of national temporality and romance. In the second half of my first chapter, I extend my analysis of the racial hauntings of the antebellum historical imagination by examining Emerson's writings and lectures on the philosophy of history. I contest that Emerson was a deeply engaged theorist of historical aesthetics, more in line with the thoughts of romantic nationalist historians than has previously been acknowledge. Emerson adopts and critically revises many of the aesthetic concepts deployed by antebellum historians, and in doing so discloses the conditions and limits that structured how historians made the past an experience for their readers. Emerson's thinking about history results in a figure, the

sound of “rats in the wall,” that reveals how the racial hauntings of antebellum history disrupted and rewrote the temporalities of the nation.

In my second chapter, I analyze one of the major romantic historians of the period, William H. Prescott, and his extremely popular *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843). At this point, the proto-imperialism of the antebellum historical project re-emerges as a central concern. This text demonstrates that, in the place of an open recognition of Atlantic anti-slavery, the desire for the experience of liberation takes the form of a romantic aesthetization of Mexico as a space in which national subjects can re-live the self-founding of previous generations through the liberation/conquest of foreign space. In my reading, the temporal aesthetic of imperialism takes shape out of the psychic trauma of a disavowed national desire and the fantasy of liberation plays a compensatory role in the loss of revolutionary experience in the U.S. That loss is not a fact of belatedness, but only produced retroactively as “post-heroic” by a hegemonic discursive structure that looks to ground its loss in something other than a recognition of a divergent futurity. Prescott’s history, although a narrative of the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, produces a fantasy of world history as a series of providential liberations

by white European men that brings about the global future against threatening racial others who are ontologically barred from being bearers of futurity.<sup>25</sup>

Conducted by agents consciously excluded from progressive time, but able, as in the Haitian Revolution, to radically effect history, slave revolution featured in nationalist history as an apocalyptic break in temporal continuity. Slave revolution in the Atlantic world was perhaps the *sine qua non* of the threats to national progress envisioned by nationalist historians. The second half of this dissertation accordingly turns away from nationalist history to abolitionist histories and nineteenth and twentieth-century writing about slave revolution. By engaging history as a discourse and an aesthetic project, abolitionist writers had to confront its romantic form and its deployment of race to portray disruptions in national time. I begin the third chapter by examining abolitionists and literary writers who intuited the relationship between the language of beauty within which nationalists had clothed their images of progress and the subjection of black

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<sup>25</sup> Frantz Fanon was the first and most famous analyst of the racial ontology of modernity in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1952), and his work has recently been revived by afro-pessimist scholars, including Ronald Judy, Jared Sexton, Frank Wilderson, and of course, in Orlando Patterson's now classic work *Slavery and Social Death* (1985). Wilderson has defined racial ontology succinctly: "[i]n leftist metacommentaries on ontology [...] subjects' paradigmatic location, the structure of their relationality, is organized around their capacities: powers subjects have or lack, the constituent elements of subjects structural position with which they are imbued or lack prior to the subjects performance [but] in [leftist/Marxist's] putative embrace of working-class incapacity there is also from the standpoint of the Slave, a devastating embrace of human capacity---that which the Slave lacks [...] the structure of the Slave's domination [is] something infinitely more severe than exploitation and alienation" (8-9). Temporal capacity is a matter of political ontology; it is the capacity of subjects to enter into and shape political time and progressive futures, and at the ontological level (before action) antebellum history denies its racial others the capacity to enter into that temporal relationship with other subjects. This is despite any obvious demonstrated capacity in actual actions (of anti-imperial and anti-slavery resistance) to make a political future immanent.

bodies and political life necessitated by slavery, including the abolitionist William J. Watkins, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Herman Melville. This chapter continues with a discussion of the black abolitionist historians who wrote about the slave revolution while confronting and revising the aesthetic norms of nationalist history. My dissertation ends with a coda that considers writings from more openly anti-imperialist moment, the early twentieth century. I argue that the aesthetics of history can offer vital insights into how W.E.B. Du Bois and C.L.R. James reimagined the history of political modernity and the United States in *Black Reconstruction* and *The Black Jacobins*. These now classical works of revisionist history reimagine the role the black masses had in shaping the history of the modern Atlantic world, but their intervention into historiography extends beyond their production of a new category of materialist analysis. James and Du Bois revise a fundamental image of romantic history, and in doing so produce new temporal affects and a new imagination of futurity at odds with modernity's violent reduction of the past and future to the present political order.

With Derek Walcott, I believe that "the sense of history in poets lives rawly along their nerves" ("The Muse of History" 40). The rawness of the poet's sense of history described here is the temporal hybridity—the potential that the past and future can be experienced in the present—that makes aesthetic history possible at all. But it is also what radically unsettles romantic history's reduction of the past and future to a linear

order projected from the present. My dissertation ultimately suggests that even nationalist historical writing has been desirous of alternative articulations of political possibility, yet, because it is unable to contain such displacements of linear national time, it re-codes such eruptions as temporally past and spatially other—objects and not agents of imperial fantasies of liberation. That aesthetic project was always subject to a temporal hybridity that emerged in the vivid sensate descriptions of texts whose goal was to make the past feel present to the reader. As Prescott hesitatingly suggests in the introduction to his *Conquest of Mexico*, “I have endeavored [...] to surround [the reader] with the spirit of the times, and in a word, to make him, if I may so express myself, a contemporary of the sixteenth-century” (6). Although Prescott here seems to limit his suggestion of sensory time travel with excessive qualifications, his need to distance himself from what he clearly intends should point us towards the complicated desire he expresses here. After all, the sensate wanderings of Prescott’s history were spatial as well as temporal and, in bringing his reader into the history of a space in which slavery had been abolished at the moment of colonial independence, what he wanted to present may have seemed dubious for reasons other than its scientific implausibility.

In Walcott’s argument about New World poetry it is just that co-presence of history, not as an object of discourse, but, in his formulation, as a sensation—here, a taste—that occasions the possibility of the eruption of a “democratic vista”: “The great

poetry of the New World [although Adamic] does not pretend to [...] innocence, its vision is not naïve. Rather, like its fruits, its savour is a mixture of the acid and the sweet, the apples of its second Eden have the tartness of experience" (40-41). For Walcott the past is not a constraint, construed as either a linear temporality of progress or a melancholy repetition of oppression, rather the true history of the New World has been "the amnesia" of "the slave." Amnesia here is not a forgetting in the sense of not remembering past and present domination and violence, but a forgetting of "history" — a discourse that tries to dominate the future through its knowledge of the past. This amnesia that feels history rawly in its nerves — in the tartness of all its knowledge — generates the possibility of a "politics of elation," found in the sheer potential of the new. This dissertation closes with a consideration of how politically radical writers have articulated a different aesthetics of history, and how an understanding of history that focuses on the aesthetic, as a site where a vision of history comes together with political desire, can help us imagine other temporalities of the future. In tracing an arc from hegemonic neo-imperial myths of historical temporality to the hybrid eruption of democratic possibility in the multiple sensations of history, this project asserts that central to any consideration of how historical writing can function as an occasion for political action and thought is how the aesthetics of history makes us feel the radically unsettled time of the nations under our feet.

## 1. Dull Books and Shallow Village Tales

History is distinguished from all other sciences in that it is also an art. History is a science in collecting, finding, penetrating; it is an art because it recreates and portrays that which it has found and recognized. Other sciences are satisfied simply with recording what has been found; history requires the ability to recreate.

—Leopold von Ranke, “On the Character of Historical Science” (~1830)

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature* (1836)

Even the most skeptical readers have seen something iconoclastic in Emerson’s polemic against history. Whether they endorse his visionary proclamation of innocence or find in it a troublesome evasion of historical and political reality, critics have taken Emerson at his word that he was fundamentally at odds with the filiopietistic culture of the antebellum United States.<sup>1</sup> Yet, many of the historians of the antebellum period shared Emerson’s sense that the relationship between the past recorded in history and

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<sup>1</sup> Older critics, particularly mid-century liberals formulating ideals of American Exceptionalism, promoted the former view. See, R.W.B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (1955) and F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance* (1941). The anti-exceptionalist critics of the 1980s and 90s revised this view into a critique of Emerson and his followers’ supposedly de-politicizing transcendental ideology. See Carolyn Porter, *Seeing and Being* (1985), Christopher Newfield, *The Emerson Effect* (1996), and John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson Tomb* (1996). These views of Emerson’s “innocence” and supposed avoidance of politics and history has been thoroughly challenged by other critics: directly in Eduardo Cadava’s *Emerson and the Climates of History* (1997) implicitly by Len Gougeon’s research into Emerson’s engagement with abolitionism. See his *Virtue’s Hero* (1990).

the demands of the present and the future were troubled by the pace of recent events. George Bancroft, perhaps the most well known nationalist historian of the nineteenth century, introduced the first volume of his *History of the United States* (published in 1834, two years before *Nature*) with a preface emphasizing that the apparent incommensurability of the present with the past was a problem historical writing had to overcome. In a brief introduction, he contrasted the “new states forming in the wilderness; canals intersecting our plains and crossing our highlands [...] our wealth and population [and] the immense concourse of immigrants [...] crowding our shores,” with the “unproductive waste [...] destitute of commerce and political connection” that had characterized the same territory “little more than two centuries since” (1: 2-3; ed. 1879).<sup>2</sup> As Bancroft formulated it, writing history was an important pursuit because the continuity between past experiences and present challenges was no longer self-evident. He described historical writing as able to “explain how the change in the condition of our land has been brought about” by “follow[ing] the steps by which a favoring

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<sup>2</sup> Two major editions of Bancroft’s work were published in the nineteenth century. The first was an eight-volume edition whose publication run stretched from 1835-1860. The first three volumes were published well before the final five, as Bancroft’s work was delayed by his participation in Democratic politics and the Polk administration in the 1840s. Those three volumes were republished in the middle of the 1850s as the remaining volumes were being released. After the Civil War Bancroft revised and abridged his initial eight volumes down to six, published in a Centenary Edition in 1879. He later expanded this edition to ten volumes, with additional volumes written at the end of his life on the framing of the Constitution and early national history. I have in all cases attempted to use the first eight-volume edition, as my historicist concerns are primarily with the decades between 1830 and 1860. But due to missing volumes in the university library, their age, and lack of significant republication since the nineteenth century, I have had to rely on the Centenary Edition in a few instances. The changes between the editions are primarily abridgements and corrections of mistakes in historical scholarship. Citations from the Centenary Edition will be noted with the date of publication (1879), those from the original will not.

Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory" (I: 3; ed. 1879). While Bancroft and Emerson approached the problem of historical change differently, both identified a fundamental distance between past and present experience that either had to be explained, at risk of the past becoming useless to the present, or was a reason for challenging the accepted authority of the past over present and future generations.

I begin this chapter by highlighting the shifting temporalities that underwrote some of the most important writing about history in the antebellum period in order to question dominant accounts of the political distance between history and literature. Literary critics are accustomed to thinking about nationalistic historical writing in the nineteenth century as a monolithic ideological discourse: a large-scale meta-narrative that glorified the founding fathers, naturalized emergent U.S. imperialism, and entrenched forms of racial and gendered domination and political exclusion without registering any sense of the material opposition to such an abstract ideology. In contrast, scholars have treated novelists, poets, and other literary writers with more nuance, seeing in their works more productively imaginative responses to the political conflicts of the nineteenth century. Some scholars have sought out writing that challenged the dominant narrative, introduced counter-myths, and/or resisted the forms of oppression

encoded into its narrative structures.<sup>3</sup> Others have simply treated the literary as profoundly haunted by the racial and sexual contradictions of the nation— unconsciously responsive to politics if not actively critical. Where history has been treated as a static discourse of power, the literary has often been vindicated as more active, opening up the possibility of thinking, like Emerson, through alternate relationships with the past, present, and future that subvert history’s authority. This chapter begins with a challenge to that opposition between history and literature in order to suggest that historians like Bancroft shared with literary writers a sense of the temporal shifts that marked the first half of the nineteenth century and wrote romantic and aesthetic responses that are capable of being read as closely and with as much subtlety as what we normally have considered imaginative literature.

In order to overcome the growing distance of the past, history became an aesthetic project that sought to provide readers with imaginative descriptions of what temporal progress looked and felt like. Historians wrote aesthetically for two reasons. First, it was a way to imagine the writing of history as a recuperation of a past whose meaning had become obscured by historical change as an *experience* for readers in the present, mediated by texts conceived as works of romantic art. Second, historians sought

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<sup>3</sup> For example we might look to Carolyn Karcher’s important introduction to Lydia Maria Child’s *Hobomok*. Although a powerful recovery of a vital text, Karcher draws an overly broad distinction between official myths and ideology about race and history (as found in the work of historians and Cooper) and a structural affinity between white women and American Indians that produced Child’s critical revisions of New England history. Doing so collapses the complexity of the nominally hegemonic discourses (history and Cooper) while overstating the radicalism of Child’s criticisms of discourses on race and imperialism.

to provide an experience of the past precisely because it was in the past (and not in the conflicted present) that they most clearly could identify what progress looked and felt like, thus providing a seemingly stable experience of the (metaphysical or otherwise) conditions that grounded the national community and its future. This imagination of progress was central to forms of national and racial identity because the stability of the nation was being challenged in the antebellum period by convulsive changes and new forms of political resistance and radicalism that proposed absolute breaks with the past. These alternative relationships with time included Emerson's radical rejection of historical authority and the political temporalities demanded by abolitionist immediatism and Atlantic slave revolt.

A period of unprecedented social and political change, the nineteenth century occasioned major contradictions in temporal experience. The nation was expanding rapidly, growing westward in leaps and bounds that, despite the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny, profoundly unsettled the sense many had of the form of the nation and the subjects that composed the community represented by the U.S. government. This period of expansion was marked by massive technological advancements in communication and transportation. The building of canals and railroads and the invention of the telegraph bound together and brought into intimate contact an unstable and rapidly

changing nation.<sup>4</sup> As Anne Baker has argued, these developments led many writers and observers to an anxious search for national form in a quest to define a stable shape of the nation in geographical, political, idealist, and aesthetic terms.<sup>5</sup>

While the nation grew geographically, the political community was also expanding and constricting at a rapid pace. As mass white male suffrage was introduced and the character of American politics was irretrievably altered by the growth of the democracy movement and the second party system, citizenship became increasingly restricted. Where women and even some free blacks (who owned property) had been able to vote in some northern states during the early national period, after the introduction of universal suffrage, citizenship and voting rights were delimited in stricter racial and gendered terms. Just at the moment in which Democratic politics was redefining political time as a progressive struggle of the people against entrenched privilege, more and more people in the United States were being denied participation in national political life. As a result (but also perhaps as an instigating force) women, American Indians, abolitionists and slaves sought out alternate forms of belonging that crossed and upended national citizenship and sought out alternate futures, pasts, and presents, including a history of slave revolution in the Atlantic world that peaked in the

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<sup>4</sup> The territorial, geographic and political convulsions of the period are expertly detailed in Daniel Walker Howe's *What God Hath Wrought* (2009).

<sup>5</sup> See Baker's *Heartless Immensity* (2006) as well as Paul Giles's *The Global Remapping of America Literature* (2011) for thoughtful discussions of how geographic form interacts with literary form.

Haitian Revolution but continued in the revolts and antislavery movements of the nineteenth century.

As the nation moved rapidly into a future, many were haunted, on the one hand, by the rapidity with which it might be losing itself and its identity in new political geographies, and on the other by being deprived from participation in and dominated by political and material progress. It is in this moment that the magisterial works of romantic nationalist history were conceived and produced, just as Emerson and others wrote their rebellious subversions of historical authority. Both discourses were responses to the shifting conditions of temporal experience in the antebellum United States, or what Reinhart Koselleck (in a discussion of the emergence of philosophies of progress in a European context) has called the “temporalization” of history.

Temporality, in Koselleck’s usage, defines the ways the relationships among the past, present, and future have been understood throughout history. As he argues in his *Futures Past* (1985), a process that began in Europe in the eighteenth century and accelerated in the nineteenth displaced the past from the present and generated the possibility of imagining the future as open-ended and not conditioned by what had come before. While it is evident from a work like Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” (1819) that from quite an early date in the nineteenth century authors in the United States understood the limits of known history for understanding their future, it was also possible for them to imagine enough continuity between the heroic actions of the past

and the political problems confronted in their present to avoid inducing Van Winkle's feeling of uncanny repetition. They could see history, under an older Enlightenment conception, as space of moral philosophy where a stable set of values governed both past and future. As Philip Gould has argued, it was clear to writers as late as the 1820s and 30s (like James Fennimore Cooper and Catharine Maria Sedgwick) that history was a form of writing where contemporary ideas about political virtue could be contested in works concerned with the past.

The quotation from Emerson in the epigraph demonstrates the degree to which such a sense of continuity became increasingly strained. As Koselleck put it, the growth of philosophies of historical progress meant the "destruction of the exemplary nature of past events and, in its place, the discovery of the uniqueness of historical processes" (32). Just as the sense that the contemporary moment took part in long-term historical processes was growing—that life indeed had a historical character—so could history itself, in Emerson's other famous phrase, become a "dull book." The shifting temporal horizons of the early nineteenth century are key to understanding the massive amount of historical writing produced in the same period and the huge increase in its popularity in the marketplace. This historical writing sought to overcome the experience of a profound gap between present and future, and it was central to how a national past was consolidated as the groundwork of the emerging discourses on race and national

identity that increasingly relied on ideas of progress as a basis for social and political hierarchy.

Lloyd Pratt has argued that progress was not a natural form of temporal experience and that it was not the only temporality available to antebellum Americans for understanding the relationship between time and the nation. But, in the work of these historians it was asserted as a dominant structure of feeling because its presentation was so aesthetically powerful. It relieved senses of conflict and crisis in the national temporal order in powerful romantic images that internalized racial and temporal hierarchies as a matter of feeling, vision, and imagination. As Anthony Bogues has argued in *Empire of Liberty* (2010), the emergence of American imperial power was more than a matter of political domination: it was the encoding of a particular, historically contingent, way of life as an expression of natural human capacities, felt to be universally true in the mind's interaction with the external world. Historians like Bancroft were central to a process by which, in becoming aesthetic, historical writing helped produce a way of sensing and feeling time that disavowed other political and temporal possibilities in the antebellum period. As such, history was a central imaginative genre in producing the structure of feeling that has shaped responses to U.S. imperial power for nearly two centuries.

This chapter takes up Emerson and George Bancroft as two of the dominant voices in the cultural process that, for a brief period of time, brought to the fore a mode

of historical writing defined by its aesthetic power. Aesthetics was not the only way historians conceptualized history in this period, and some writers of history reacted against what they called Bancroft's "lack of taste" — a product of his romantic and nationalist enthusiasm and seeming lack of awareness of complexity and contrasting voices.<sup>6</sup> History was also conceived judiciously as an impartial narrative that carefully weighed the rights and wrongs of various actors and in proto-professional terms as a discipline that researched carefully into the past in order to reveal the truth of events.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in all the major works of the period, from Bancroft's histories, to those of William H. Prescott, Francis Parkman, and John Lothrop Motley, we find what Donald Ringe in his study of romantic literature once called "the pictorial mode": an effort to descriptively visualize past events as paintings that demonstrated the forward movement of progress across a natural landscape and against forces of resistance — variously pre-Columbian Empires, Native Americans, and the European despotic past. This aesthetics of history

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Bowen, a prominent reviewer of history, attacked Bancroft for his "lack of taste" and obvious political investments, and hence lack of impartiality in a letter to Lorenzo Sabin in 1845. This attack captures a common refrain in criticism of Bancroft: that he was too obviously a political Democrat and that his partisanship impinged on what should be a professional calling as a historian. Other prominent historians like Richard Hildreth and John Lothrop Motley wrote history implicitly as a reaction against Bancroft's overt patriotism and lack of complexity. Motley introduced his *Rise of the Dutch Republic* by emphasizing his patient work in archives, the need for temperance in history and by claiming that "neither that liberty [of the Dutch Republic] nor ours was born of the cloud-embraces of a false Divinity with, a Humanity of impossible beauty." — all of which are clearly comments on Bancroft's enthusiasm and aesthetic excesses. Nonetheless, these historians still relied on an aesthetic discourse that conjoined beauty to heroism to describe the progress of liberty in the past.

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent account of the variety of intersecting epistemological and aesthetic imperatives that shaped historical writing in the antebellum period see Cheng's aforementioned *The Plain and Noble Garb of Truth* (2008).

was a visualization of time that described portraits of the movement and spread of liberty through the New World (and sometimes the Old) and the organization of space and subjugated populations in the providential violence of civilization. In this rewriting of history as an aesthetic project Emerson's literary voice is critical but not divergent. He wanted history to provide readers with profound experiences of human possibility so as to supplement and overcome the limits of the present to experience. But lacking an ideological commitment to the nation or to progress, his writings touch on the limits of history for figuring temporal experience and its boundaries in racial and temporal alterity. In what follows, I provide a reading of the emergence of the aesthetics of progress in antebellum history in the context of antebellum domestic politics over race and slavery. In following chapters I will expand that scope to show the role that aesthetics played in the cultural imaginary of U.S. imperialism.

### *Progress and Abolition*

By 1854, when Bancroft delivered his oration "The Necessity, the Reality, and the Promise of the Progress of the Human Race" at the fiftieth anniversary of the New York Historical Society, his reputation was that of a prophet of the future of the Union who saw beyond the tumultuous order of events to the underlying causes of history with a

placid faith that the “universal mind” of the people would overcome all obstacles.<sup>8</sup> In this count, the lecture of 1854 did not disappoint. Employing transcendentalist rhetoric to nationalist ends, it celebrates the fifty years of progress since the founding of the New York Historical Society as a time in which Bancroft “dare[d to] assert that, in some branches of human activity, the period we commemorate has done more for his instruction and improvement than all that went before” (19). Despite the placid surface of Bancroft’s declaration of faith in historical progress, this lecture registers the crises slavery and anti-slavery presented to such a model of temporal continuity. In it, Bancroft is profoundly troubled by the challenges presented to his philosophy of progress by the call of radical abolitionists for a complete break with the national past and the present of slavery. In order to disavow the ethical crisis generated by this alternate political temporality, Bancroft worked to curtail its promise of immanent justice into an expectation of a future whose coming would be permanently deferred in order to maintain the continuity of time itself.

The New York Historical Society was one of the first major societies of its kind in the U.S. (predated only by the Massachusetts and Connecticut Historical Societies, founded in 1791 and 1799, respectively). The primary collectors of archival material

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<sup>8</sup> As his most recent biographer has written, the first volume of Bancroft’s history “earned immediate welcome for its historical arguments against the gloomy forecasts [of his contemporaries]. The nation received a scholarly, if not soberly written, reminder that the past had also been out of joint, that it had not been a smooth harmonious development” but that the nation had overcome all those obstacles in its progress into the future (Handlin 129).

about colonial and national history, the historical societies outpaced even the largest university libraries in the size of their collections (Callcott 41). For historians like Bancroft they were central sites for conducting research, as well as important engines for funding historical research, publishing monographs, and disseminating the norms of scholarship for a discipline that would not find a home in the American academy until after the Civil War. Because the societies were in large part funded by the membership of prominent figures in the local community, including politicians, ministers, and attorneys, a commemorative lecture like Bancroft's was not a small affair addressed to a only a small coterie of intellectuals. It was reported on by local newspapers, published by the society, and distributed to all of its members, including the soon to be president, James Buchanan (Kelly 96). As such, it is perhaps one of the definitive public statements of the role the institution of history was imagined to play in the development of the nation before the Civil War.

The surface ideological implications of Bancroft's philosophy of progress in the context of antebellum politics were various and give a clue to how this temporal conservatism could take the form of a progressive philosophy, but we need to go beyond them to get to a sense of Bancroft's affective disavowal of other, more disruptive, models of temporality. In the 1830s, he announced his political affiliation with the Democratic Party, and his dialectical model of an ongoing political conflict between a "party of progress" and a "party of the past" that would result in mediated

reform—adapted from Sir Walter Scott, among others—justified the party politics model that the Democrats endorsed and the Whigs claimed to oppose.<sup>9</sup> Progress, as Bancroft envisioned it, underwrote westward expansion and imperialist wars as both a tool in spreading the institutions of liberty across the continent and (in the growth of new settlements in the west) a source of renewal in the political system. Progress also served, in Bancroft’s history, to justify past practices of slavery even while promising its natural dissolution. As Bancroft wrote in the first volume, slavery was an “unjust, wasteful and unhappy system [...] fastened upon the rising institutions of America [...] by the mercantile avarice of a foreign nation” (1: 126; ed. 1879). He went on to suggest that, given its impossible contradiction with institutions of freedom, it would necessarily come to an end through the inevitable agency of progress. And yet, in the third volume, published in 1850 as abolitionist agitation was increasing, Bancroft relied on progress to partially justify the past of slavery, arguing that “in the midst of the horrors of slavery and the slave trade, the masters had, in part at least, performed the office of advancing and civilizing the Negro” (3: 408). In each instance, progress served to overcome and mediate apparently insoluble conflicts about the nation and its future.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> George Dekker has described how the conflict between a “party of progress” and “a party of the past” structured the fictions of Scott and Cooper, helping to shape the historical consciousness of U.S. culture in his study, *The American Historical Romance* (1990).

<sup>10</sup> David Brion Davis highlights Bancroft’s position on slavery as one of his key examples of how intellectuals resolved the “philosophical problem” slavery presented in cultures committed to the freedom and enlightenment in the introduction to *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (1966). He writes: “While Bancroft saw a basic contradiction between slavery and America’s mission, he resolved the dilemma in a

However, beyond these evident political implications, it is also clear that, to Bancroft and his listeners, progress was more than a narrative about the nature of history, it was an indwelling feeling evidenced and made possible by each individual's love for liberty that could be activated and renewed through the writing and relating of history. A recent biographer notes that the 1854 lecture at times reads as "less a statement of democratic dogma than a hymn to God" (Handlin 254). Coming as it does in the midst of the fervor of the 1850s, Bancroft's faith in progress and the will of the people, perceived by the New England Whig culture in which he was raised as radical in the 1830s, became increasingly conservative and seemingly oblivious to the facts of history that surrounded him. According to Handlin, Bancroft had, in fact, grown disillusioned with the Democratic Party, and was beginning to see his history as the most effective platform for addressing the public and pushing for a resolution to the political crises of the present. More than a political ideology, progress summoned a national community to its indwelling feeling for a future beyond the tumult of the present.

Slavery weighed heavily on Bancroft's articulation of this feeling for progress, however, as was evidenced by his frequent rhetorical elisions of the consequences of its

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manner that was apparently satisfactory to most of his countrymen. The institution was alien to the nature of the New World; it had been imposed on the people against their will, and the guilt thus fell upon an already guilt-sickened Europe. Yet in a larger view, even slavery appeared as part of the providential plan for the redemption of the human race" (24).

persistence in the United States. In attempting to account for the progress that had been experienced in the previous fifty years since the founding of the New York Historical Society, Bancroft claimed that he was “not here refer[ing] to our own country, because it is all together new [...] I speak rather of results in which the old world takes it share”

(19). Bancroft’s nationalism had always been at once a form of universalism. Throughout this lecture (as in his history) he makes claims on behalf of the equal potential of all men in all times:

Every man is in substance equal to his fellow man. His nature is changed neither by time nor by country. He bears no marks of having risen to his present degree of perfection by successive transmutations from inferior forms; but by the peculiarity and superiority of his powers he shows himself to have been created separate and distinct from all animal life. He is neither degenerating into such differences as could in the end no longer be classified together, nor rising into a higher species. Each member of the race is in will, affection and intellect consubstantial with every other. (9)

While much of this language is inflected by his friend Emerson’s approach to history and universality, the particular emphasis against theories of degeneration, climate, and species differentiation within the human race is a refutation of the racial theories then circulating in southern and Democratic Party circles.<sup>11</sup> The language of consubstantiality is an implicit partial endorsement of abolitionism, which had repeatedly focused on that theme throughout the period. For Bancroft, progress was not found in the growth of particular groups, civilizations, or even of individuals; it was a shared condition of the

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<sup>11</sup> For the development and spread of these and other racial theories in the antebellum period see George Fredrickson’s *The Black Image in the White Mind* (1971).

entirety of the human race. It was an indwelling capacity to push human institutions towards a more just and free moral order. But in stepping away from the specificity of the United States here Bancroft discloses the pressure of slavery on his vision.

Bancroft endorsed the view that the United States had a special (i.e. exceptionalist) purpose in bringing about that progress. As he proclaimed, “[o]ur country is bound to allure the world to freedom by the beauty of its example” (36). Thus, it is significant that, in this commemorative essay looking to celebrate the achievements of the community he was addressing, he turned his focus away from the United States and back towards Europe. We can attribute Bancroft’s inability to directly assess progress in the United States in the nineteenth century to a strategy for processing the sense of national crisis felt throughout the 1850s. He never says this directly, but his logic can be summarized by the following; although domestically progress might be hard to discern in the tumult of expansion and sectional crisis, the example of the U.S. had already inspired renewal abroad, evidencing the work of Providence at home. What Bancroft did say when he descended from abstract categories is found in a series of attempts to anticipate possible objections to his overall vision of progress. In discussing the status of women, Bancroft argued that “[i]t may seem at variance with our theme, that as republican institutions gain ground, WOMAN appears less on the theater of events [...] yet the progress of liberty, while it has made her less conspicuous, has redeemed her into the full dignity of her nature” and then celebrates woman’s role as

man's "companion, his counselor, and fellow-martyr" (22). For all his progressive rhetoric concerning material progress, scientific knowledge, individual freedom, and the dignity of laboring classes, Bancroft evinced a reactionary politics when it suited his purpose. He consistently refuted counter-evidence to progress by circumscribing the equality of those groups whose positions had become more marginalized in the national order over time.

In confronting slavery, he deflected from the questions of national institutions and race into a discussion of the abolition of serfdom in Prussia:

The fifty years which we celebrate, have taken mighty strides toward the abolition of servitude. Prussia, in the hour of its suffering and its greatest calamities, renovated its existence partly by the establishment of schools, and partly by changing its serfs into a proprietary peasantry. (23)

In the United States, the most recent significant change regarding the future of slavery was the Compromise of 1850 and the expansion of the Fugitive Slave Law. The legislation signed in the compromise had endorsed the doctrine of Popular Sovereignty (by which newly incorporated states were granted the ability to decide for themselves the legality of slavery), overturning the previous balance achieved between the slave and free states by the Missouri Compromise and opening the door to slavery in territories acquired in the U.S.-Mexican War, including California. The compromise also extended the reach of Fugitive Slave Law, allowing southern slave owners to make claims of ownership against any black person in the northern states without the need to

bring them to trial. As the historian David Potter has written, the purpose of the compromise:

[W]as to put a stop to agitation over the slavery question. But to accomplish this the compromisers adopted a law to activate the recapture of fugitive slaves [...] Any measure that required the sending of men from freedom into slavery would have caused strong revulsion at best, but the fugitive slave law, as enacted contained a number of gratuitously obnoxious provisions [...] In the eyes of many northerners [the law] meant that the federal government had not-only gone into the business of man-hunting itself but also required every freeborn American to become manhunter on occasion. (130-131)<sup>12</sup>

In the United States, the legislative power of the slave states, the potential future expansion of slavery, and the juridical association of race with slavery had all recently been vastly expanded, while Bancroft attempted to claim great progress in the cause of abolition by deflecting attention to the status of Prussian serfs.

Bancroft's earlier willingness to embrace a more universal view and move away from the United States in his celebration of progress comes back here as an inability to attend to the worsening prospects of abolition. If philosophies of progress emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to make sense of the changing relationship between past and future evinced by the age of revolution (as diverse commentators including Reinhart Koselleck and Georg Luckács have argued), then the perception of

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<sup>12</sup> The specific provisions that conscripted the federal government and average citizens into the recapture of fugitive slaves were "the denial of the alleged fugitive any right to jury trial." It allowed the cases of slaves to be tried by court-appointed commissioners in which the commissioner would be paid "a \$10 fee in cases in which the alleged fugitive was delivered to the claimant, but only a \$5 fee in cases when he was set free." And, perhaps most outrageously to citizens of states whose public sentiment was increasingly against slavery, the law "empowered federal Marshalls to summon all citizens to aid in enforcement of the Act." (Potter 131)

regression becomes a serious problem for exponents of progress. The more conservative Whig historians had formulated a theory of so-called “backwards” progress to help explain phenomena that did not seem to augur progressive futures. As a historian of the Whig Party, Daniel Walker Howe, puts it, “[f]or them, real progress was not something likely to happen automatically; it required careful, purposeful planning. Social progress took place much as the education of the individual did, through careful cultivation of what was valued and rigorous suppression of that which was not” (21). As such, society could easily revert to earlier states if the worst qualities (for many Whigs, slavery, expansionism, political corruption, partisanship, and class conflict) were allowed to fester. Compare their view with Bancroft democratic faith in progress’s inevitability:

Every thing is in movement, and for the better, except only the fixed eternal law by which the necessity of change is established; or rather except only God, who includes in himself all being, all truth and all love. The subject of man’s thoughts remains the same, but the sum of his acquisitions ever grows with time, so that his last system of philosophy is the best, for it includes every one that went before. (36)

For Bancroft, progress was its own necessity: an indwelling principle that could do nothing but advance because all actions led towards a more advanced future of greater material knowledge, freedom, and self-consciousness. Slavery was an aberration for Bancroft, but one marked as belonging to an earlier era that would necessarily wither away. How then could he confront the truth that slavery was rapidly expanding in the 1850s?

Part of the problem was that such expansion had seemed to Bancroft and others to call into being far more radical rejections of U.S. nationalism by abolitionists than had previously been encountered. Ultimately, abolitionists were formulating quite different temporal models from the progressive politics of the Democrats that harkened back to prophetic religious traditions and eighteenth-century philosophies of natural rights. This temporal model has been termed immediatist abolition by David Brion Davis and others looking to acknowledge its difference from progressivism.<sup>13</sup> Immediatism was a philosophy that emerged out of eighteenth century abolitionism and natural rights philosophy. As the British abolitionist Granville Sharp argued, slavery was a violation of “common law, the law of reason, and the law of God,” and called for “immediate redress, because to be in power, and to neglect even a day in endeavoring to put a stop to such a monstrous injustice and abandoned wickedness, must necessarily endanger a man’s eternal welfare” (qtd. in Davis 1962: 211).

The temporal dimension of such immediatism was of a piece with radical Enlightenment philosophy; political rights were to be enacted regardless of the currently existing state of affairs, because to operate in violation of natural or moral law was a graver danger than the rejection of social or political traditions. The value of the past over the present was reduced to a zero degree in immediatism. As Davis argued,

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Insko has further discussed the temporal character of immediatism in “Immediatist Abolitionism and Romantic Presentism” [unpublished conference presentation] (2014).

although immediatism had roots in the eighteenth century, when it returned and gained in strength in the 1830s in the United States it was perceived as a far more radical philosophy than it had been in the earlier period. In the interceding years, the idea that natural right could be imposed on a social situation without destructive upheavals confronted conservative and nationalistic reactions to the French Revolution that insisted such idealism was disastrous for the social order. In the United States, this conservatism was reflected in the increased emphasis of the framers of the Constitution and the early historians of the American Revolution on the continuity between the new legal order and traditions of English civil liberty.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this conservative turn, abolitionism in the United States was dominated in the early nineteenth century by gradualist and colonizing currents that sought the end of slavery in careful reform and tried to alleviate fears about the effect of emancipation through the colonization of ex-slaves outside the United States in Liberia and elsewhere. In Davis's words, "[t]here was a wide-gap [in the nineteenth century] between the abstract proposition that slavery was wrong, or even criminal, and the cautious formulation of anti-slavery policy" ("The Emergence of Immediatism..." 214).

As both legal abolitionism and slave-revolution advanced across the Atlantic world, immediatism became the dominant strand in many branches of U.S. abolitionism.

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<sup>14</sup> As Michael Kammen once argued, in the early national period in the United States, the revolution became non-revolutionary. See his *A Season of Youth* (1978).

Although many white abolitionists, including Garrisonians and the so-called “conscious Whigs,” came to embrace variations on the immediatist position, black abolitionists drove the rejection of the temporal delays of Bancroft’s philosophy of progress and began to theorize new relationships between time and freedom from the 1830s on. As I will suggest in my third chapter, immediatism’s call for black entry into national political time is only part of the story of the temporalities produced by these texts. But it was that call that progressives like Bancroft found most disruptive in their visions of the political future and to which they responded most vehemently. For David Walker, any continuation of slavery was a continuation of a history of murderous cruelty, fundamentally at odds with both his evangelical Christianity and the rights white Americans had claimed for themselves at the American Revolution. Other writers like Martin R. Delany, Frederick Douglass, and James Theodore Holly saw in real and imagined scenes of slave revolt the demand for an immediate end to slavery and the arrival of a future that had been too long prolonged. The essence of this renewal of immediatism was a messianism, in which a higher moral law entered into human affairs in visions of slaves striking out for their own freedom, rejecting a past and present of enslavement.<sup>15</sup> This radicalism was in contrast to the progressive visions of Bancroft, who could only imagine an end to slavery in the eventual growth and spread of

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<sup>15</sup> Lloyd Pratt has explored the messianic temporalities of anti-slavery thought in the antebellum U.S. in his essay, “Progress, Labor, Revolution” (2000).

institutions of liberty radiating outward from those groups (white men) who had already claimed it for themselves. Immediatist abolition was, in striking ways, a fundamental rejection of progressive ideology.

Throughout the 1854 lecture Bancroft seemed to acknowledge the moral credibility of such immediatist politics while insisting that it would fundamentally uproot society and break with the culmination of human knowledge and self-consciousness in institutions through the destructive imposition of abstract moral laws. His response to radicalism was not dissimilar to conservative political philosophy going back to Burke, but rather than rejecting it wholesale, he adapted it into a normatively progressive political vision that transformed the moral order desired by radicals into a inevitable but endlessly deferred telos. Here is how Bancroft described the interaction of different political groups as inevitably serving progress:

The course of human destiny is ever a rope of three strands. One party may found itself on things as they are, and strive for their unaltered perpetuity: this is conservatism, always appearing wherever established interests exists, and never capable of unmitigated success, because finite things are ceaselessly in motion. Another may be based on theoretic principles, and struggles unrelentingly to conform society to the absolute law of Truth and Justice; and this, though it kindle the purest enthusiasm, can likewise never perfectly succeed, because the materials of which society is composed partake of imperfection, *and to extirpate all that is imperfect would lead to the destruction of society itself.* And there may be a third, which seeks to reconcile the two, but which yet can never thrive by itself, since it depends for its activity on the clashing between the fact and higher law. [emphasis added] (11-12)

While not exactly dialectical—Bancroft portrayed progress as not so much a synthesis of the real and ideal as the former catching up with the later—he deployed a synthetic

model that sought to bring conservatism and radicalism under the umbrella of his own progressive ideology. The theory, at an abstract level, mediated conflicts in society over the political function of time without acceding either contradictory model validity. For Bancroft, as much as the retrenchment of slavery was a problem, radicalism was a more fundamental threat because, unmediated, it would in his own words, “lead to the destruction of society itself.” By deflecting from the expansion of slavery in the United States Bancroft diffused the moral immediacy of abolitionist radicalism in order to assert the ultimate capacity of progress to maintain a continuity between the past and a more advanced future—a continuity that radicalism would reject.

Bancroft’s attempt to generate the nation itself as a mediating agent that would maintain continuity while pushing towards a utopic future relied on disavowing its role in furthering nominally “unprogressive” orders like slavery and the forces (often ambivalent or hostile to American nationalism) that would call attention to and oppose that history. He also incorporated a moral claim against slavery into the deferred temporal scales of justice proposed by the philosophy of progress. Deeply embedded in the way Bancroft developed his progressive philosophy, both in this lecture and in his histories, is a feeling for a future of moral advancement and justice that is made palpable in his rhetoric and descriptions of the past. Thus, he both incorporated and disavowed such radicalism into his writing of history. His writing worked to embed the promise of

immediatism (as a universal and near religious capacity to desire freedom) into the prolonged rhythm of progress.

In the lecture, he repeatedly emphasized how progress was found in a feeling for the rhythm of lived experience coming together with knowledge of higher laws. As he claimed:

It is the glory of man that he is conscious of this law of his existence. He alone is gifted with reason which looks upward as well as before and after, and connects him with the world that is not discerned by the senses. He alone has the faculty to *combine thought with affection*, that he can lift up his heart and feel not for himself only, but for his brethren and his kind. [emphasis added] (8-9)

For Bancroft, universalism and a feeling for universal equality were the engines of progress, but only as they came to be expressed within forms of human self-knowledge that are cumulative rather than radical. Philosophically, Bancroft's progress was dependent on incorporating an acknowledgement of the higher law of immediatist abolition, which it then sublimated into a feeling for a future that would slowly express itself over time—but would be deferred indefinitely. If the new temporalities of the eighteenth and nineteenth century disrupted the sense of continuity between the past and future, Bancroft imagined the nation as an agent that mediated the tempo of change so as to make continuity and progress commensurable, at the expense of a more radical claim to justice. He imagined the writing of history as a way to recover a sense of continuity in the past in how it could produce feelings for a promised, but ultimately deferred, future. And, as I will show in the reading of his histories that follows, he

accomplished this vision of continuity through a racial aesthetic that leveled all forms of opposition to “progress” into violent apocalyptic visions of the destruction of “society itself.”

*Seeing and Feeling Progress*

The original publication of Bancroft’s history was divided into three major parts. The first three volumes deal with the colonization of the land that would go on to compose the United States, the middle three concern the causes of the American Revolution, and the final two (the final volume not published until 1860) recount the story of the Revolution itself. While the first volume (1834) begins by speaking of the vast differences in the American landscape between the onset of colonization and the Jacksonian era, the emphasis throughout is on establishing the causes of that change as an effect of a deeper continuity and the growth of institutions and values in the nation’s formation. After three chapters discussing the early voyages of discovery, Bancroft embarks on a long discussion of the first years of the Virginia settlement and the administrations of the early colonial assemblies. By the end of the fourth chapter, which concludes in 1661 with the administration of Sir Francis Wyatt, Bancroft has claimed that “[t]he system of representative government and trial by jury thus became in the new hemisphere an acknowledged right. On this ordinance Virginia erected the

superstructure of her liberties. Its influences were already wide and enduring, and can be traced through all her history" (1: 125; ed. 1879). From the very outset of his history, Bancroft establishes that his model of national progress is concerned with continuities that cut through and bind together historical changes into unified patterns of development and growth. Liberty is not so much formed by diverse historical currents in the foundation of the United States as found ready-to-hand in its history, sustaining itself through time in the affections of colonists until, due to England's betrayal of liberty, the nation must assert its independence.

Throughout the history, Bancroft describes liberty as found not just as a metaphysical presence in the details of various colonial administrations, legal structures, and governing institutions, but also as a feeling that suffuses the actions of national and proto-national heroes. A large part of Bancroft's prose is aimed against an understanding of liberty that would remain at the level of verbal abstraction, as in volume seven, when he celebrates Washington as:

[A] man of action, and not of theory or words; his creed appears in his life, not in his professions, which issue from him very rarely, and only at those great moments of crisis in the fortunes of his country, when earth and heaven seemed actually to meet, and his emotions became too intense for suppression. (7: 398)

A proper feeling for liberty as exemplified by Washington, then, is not a matter of testimony; as Bancroft reiterates throughout, a feeling for liberty suffuses his "whole being" and "the law of his nature" (7: 398). What, we might then ask, is the proof of that "alignment" with liberty that would establish a given actor as an agent of progress?

Bancroft, himself a writer and a politician, confronted the limitations of language as testimony for emotion.<sup>16</sup> Although it is feeling and not “professions” that proves “no philosopher of the eighteenth century was more firm in support of religious opinion: none more tolerant or more remote from bigotry,” than Washington himself, Bancroft can only describe Washington’s own feeling, “the essence of his character,” in such professions of his virtue. In order to supplement such empty phrases, Bancroft employs vivid descriptions of action that, beyond just relating factual details, are meant to encode such feelings for liberty and communicate them to a reading audience as expressions of a deeper continuity in feeling between the past and present beyond the language that conveys them.

Bancroft’s model of feeling as a driving force in history abides in actors and institutions until it emerges in dynamic displays of action in important historical events. The proof of progress is its ability to weather and overcome crisis. Without a situation that calls for action, the ideals of progress remain, in Bancroft’s estimation, the empty “professions” of abstract philosophers that lack feeling and belief. Thus, at the center of the aesthetic norms that emerge in Bancroft’s history in his descriptions of what

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<sup>16</sup> Rei Terada’s *Feeling in Theory* (2003) has recently described this problem at length. Many theories of emotion are based on a “depth to surface” model, in which a subject’s expression of powerful emotion is taken as proof of a rich and substantial inner life. In place of this model, Terada proposes a deconstructive reading of emotion that sees it as a trace in the language that communicates it; a surface effect that cannot ever be ascribed to individual actors, but proliferates across texts without requiring any ground in individual feeling or self-hood. This theory is fundamental to my reading of how Bancroft’s nationalist emotion discloses the insubstantiality of the communal agent of progress, the American people, whose existence he wants to confirm and reproduce by demonstrating and communicating its constituents’ emotional capacity for desiring a future of freedom.

progress looks and feels like are confrontations with other temporal possibilities that are coded as regressive and even apocalyptic. In the early chapters on colonization, Bancroft sets up an opposition between the materialist and economic motives of many of the voyages to the New World and a more sublimated and divine feeling for discovery. The presence of the latter feeling in history is frequently established through descriptions of nature reminiscent of those in Cooper's romances. Describing the English discovery of the Carolina coast, Bancroft writes:

The English commanders were in raptures with the beauty of the ocean, seen in the magnificence of repose, gemmed with islands, and expanding the clearest transparency from cape to cape. The vegetation of that southern latitude struck the beholders with admiration; the trees had not their paragons; luxuriant climbers gracefully festooned the loftiest cedars; wild grapes abounded; and natural arbors formed impervious shade, that not a ray of the suns of July could penetrate. The forests were filled with birds; and, at the discharge of the arquebuse, whole flocks would arise, uttering a cry, as if an army of men had shouted together. (1: 76; ed. 1879)

Bancroft is working off a conventional association of the New World with Eden. The shore witnessed by the English upon arrival is a land of plenty, empty of civilization, but full of natural wonder. It is a scene at the end of time, with the emotional and religious meanings of "rapture" active throughout the passage. Yet, this scene of joy (the bird's cry like the shouts of the men) pauses the narrative, holding a future promised by the scene in deferral as Bancroft diverts from an otherwise dry account of the details of the English command and the ship's provisions. He describes an experience of profound expectation to the reader. More than wealth is discovered in a utopian promise of the

New World. The excess promised by the future is made present as a feeling shared with readers at the very outset of the narrative, spiritualizing imperialism and conquest with other, more profound desires in a text written during a period of unprecedented westward expansion.

Despite his romantic aesthetics of discovery, Bancroft does not mask the violence of the period of conquest. However, he ascribes violence and dispossession to base, material, and unprogressive motivations that he separates from the high ideals of discovery and the nobility of progress. He establishes some of the norms for how he will present these and other deviations from progress in a long section on De Soto's quest for gold in Florida and the Mississippi basin and the subsequent Spanish wars against the Chickasaws. Bancroft associates De Soto's useless journey for material gain with images of slaughter, chaos, and flame. While (ever the universalist) Bancroft describes the Chickasaws as "poor and independent; they were hardy and loved freedom," De Soto's demands for gold and his enslavement of members of the Chickasaw tribe to aid in his quest results in a desperate attack by the Chickasaws on the Spanish and their tragic defeat. Unable to gain access to the future promised by progressive time, and thus, unable to have "faith" in achieving victory over what they perceived to be a more substantial force, the Chickasaws merely destroyed the Spanish provisions without defeating them or expelling them from the land, and this failure to assert their total independence from materialist oppression results in their destruction. At the height of

the battle, Bancroft describes this apocalyptic scene of panic: “[m]any of the horses had broken loose; these, terrified and without riders, roamed through the forest, of which the burning village illuminated the shades, and seemed to the natives the gathering of hostile squadrons” (1: 46; ed. 1879). Here a freedom loving people is destroyed by avarice, prompting a scene that mirrors a very different end of time from the salvific desires awakened in the moment of discovery. The forces of a spiritless age (the avaricious Spanish) burn down Eden. If Bancroft encoded the aesthetics of progress with the expectation of an ideal future, here is an image that exemplifies how he represents threats to progress throughout his history. Every crisis in the progressive order of time is filled with vengeful shades that augur the chaotic end of freedom.

So far as Bancroft stays in the realm of a traditional opposition between the liberty of the English and what is clearly an evocation of the so-called “black legend” of Spanish avarice and cruelty, his aesthetics of history remain relatively static.<sup>17</sup> The text becomes more emotionally powerful and dynamic as Bancroft develops the confrontation between the United States and England. Here aesthetically rich and contradictory temporal images are layered into the description of events torn between progress and regression. In these scenes, apocalyptic violence confronts the forces of progress, but, serene in the expectation of the future, the freedom-loving people of

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<sup>17</sup> For more on the prominence of “the black legend” in nineteenth century culture and formations of U.S. imperialism see María DeGuzmán’s *Spain’s Long Shadow* (2005).

America weather each and every crisis. While Bancroft discusses these developments abstractly and in specific narrations of events, he powerfully evokes a feeling for the achievements of progress in such tense agonistic descriptions, like his famous staging of the Battle of Bunker Hill that closes the seventh volume.

At the outset of the battle (whose description arrives shortly after a chapter entitled "The Revolution Emanates from the People") Bancroft describes the sight witnessed at Bunker Hill as both a contest between opposing forces and a spectacle staged by providence. The battle begins with the shelling of Charlestown by British forces: "[t]he inflammable buildings caught in an instant, and a party of men landed and spread the fire" (7: 422). With that opening volley, "the time for the holocaust was now come." Here, Bancroft draws on the biblical language of fire and apocalypse that has been a pattern throughout his history. Facing this threat to the revolutionary cause, providence seems to become manifest in the historical event and frames the battle as a discrete spectacle in the conflict between universal progress and narrow possessive influence:

As [the British] began to march [on the American positions], the dazzling luster of a summer's sun was reflected from their burnished armor [...] the town of Charlestown, consisting of five hundred edifices of wood, burst into blaze; the steeple of its only church became a pyramid of fire; and the masts of the shipping and the heights the British camp, the church towers, the housetops of a populous town, and the acclivities of the surrounding country were crowded with spectators to watch the battle which was to take place, in full sight on a conspicuous eminence, and which, as the English thought, was to assure the integrity of the British empire, as the Americans believed was to influence the freedom and happiness of mankind. (7: 422-423)

This passage demonstrates what time looks and feels like in Bancroft's history; an almost Manichean, biblical struggle that is both timeless and specifically historical, contributing to concrete advances and witnessed in the past and (by proxy) in the present of the writing and reading of history by those who share in the historical actors' love of freedom. The paragraph encodes abstract ideas about time into the specific description of an event in such a way that makes a metaphysics of progress an element of historical description, attested to by the emotions reported to have been felt by the represented actors and that the image produces as an affect for readers. The spread of that emotion—Bancroft's anticipation that, like the witnesses in Charlestown, readers will feel a passion for liberty in reading the description of the Battle of Bunker Hill—becomes proof of the continuous driving force of a love for freedom in human progress across time and through historical change. Bancroft relies on conventional biblical resonances to develop this emotional impact, while interpolating those resonances into a feeling for the future made vivid in the facts of historical experience.

In Bancroft, the future remains a feeling, made present in the spectacle of conflicts between progress and reaction, but never achievable as a settled state. The eighth volume ends not with the accomplishment of a new era of human well-being after the Revolution, but with the signing of the Declaration of Independence—a moment Bancroft writes as one of possibility and expectation, not of final

accomplishment.<sup>18</sup> Bancroft concludes his history first by arguing, “[h]ere, and in that century, here only, was a people, which by its education and large and long experience, was prepared to act as the depository and carrier of all political power. America developed her choice from within itself.” Then he leaves off with the statement that “the nation, when it made the choice of a day for its great anniversary, selected not the day of the resolution of independence, when it closed the past, but that of the declaration of the principles on which it opened its new career” (7: 474-475). Bancroft’s rhetoric substantializes the collective agent of “the people” (developed throughout his history) as synonymous with the nation, both self-created and mutually generative on the basis of shared expectation of a deferred future. The emotional force of his text on contemporary audiences would help to attest to the continuous existence of this abstract communal agency. He uses the aesthetics of history to produce a continuity of feeling between past and present, manifesting the underlying force of progress in shaping historical time even as his writing discloses progress’s insubstantial existence as an affective trace in the text of history. The text aims at producing an imagined community of readers by aesthetically encoding its images of time with this emotional charge. But that national and universal public committed to liberty can only be found in the text’s capacity to generate the feeling of inhabiting a continuous temporal order.

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<sup>18</sup> After the war, Bancroft revised his history into six, slightly longer volumes, and then spent the rest of his life extending that edition to ten volumes, covering the end of the Revolutionary War, the framing of the Constitution, and some of the history of the nation before the Civil War. But the original plan of eight volumes completed in 1860 only reached to 1776.

That (in)substantive and self-generative agent (the people/nation of futurity) recognizes itself primarily through a feeling, communicated through its own historical experience—understood as both first hand experience and as an experience mediated by the aesthetics of history. As Bancroft would claim in his lecture of 1854, “[t]he progress of man consists in this, that he himself arrives at the perception of truth. The divine mind, which is its source, left it to be discovered, appropriated and developed by finite creatures” (9). History opens up that self-knowledge first by generating the subject and object of that knowledge as a continuous agent through historical change, and then by recuperating past experience to the emotions of the present. Bancroft suggests as much in how he concluded his lecture by directly addressing his fellow historians with the following invocation:

You, brothers, who are joined together for the study of history, receive the lighted torch of civilization from the departing half-century, and hand it along to the next. In fulfilling this glorious office, remember that the principles of justice and sound philosophy are but the inspirations of the common sense, and belong of right to all mankind. Carry them forth, therefore, to the whole people; for only can society build itself up on the imperishable groundwork of universal freedom. (37)

Bancroft positions history as mediating between the original agency of “all mankind” and “the people” of a nation, inspired by a natural feeling for liberty, and the same people’s knowledge of itself and its strivings for freedom. But as I suggested above, such a substantialization of an abstract ahistorical community takes place in his history through the description of the movement for a promised future coming into crisis in

conflicts with backward looking forces. Progress is always supplemented by its opposite in the aesthetics of the text. Thus far I have focused on progress's struggles against Old World, but just as prominent in Bancroft's history are encounters and confrontations with racial difference. In these scenes, Bancroft produces a racial aesthetic that envisions racial difference as a fundamental disruption and threat that the agents of progress have to overcome and suppress to ensure the future political order. This aesthetic reflects Bancroft's ideological disavowal of the disruptions immediatist abolition generated in progressive philosophies of history, and it would help make race a primary element in the palette of romantic historians.

Bancroft's aesthetics of history produced racial difference on the grounds of his perception of the ability of different racial groups to enter into modern time and carry forward futurity. While, throughout the antebellum period, the structure of racism (scientific and political) produced blackness and redness as distinct structural positions with what Frank Wilderson would call different ontological incapacities, I follow Ezra Tawil's study, *The Making of Racial Sentiment* (2006), in suggesting that it is important to recognize the structural continuities in how race was produced as a matter of incompatible natural—or in this case temporal—capacities for inclusion in the modern community in order to understand how the aesthetics of progress produced an affective community around the threat of racial difference. Most fundamental to understanding this affective structure is Tawil's incisive recognition that the portrayal of Indian

resistance to Westward expansion in frontier romances was layered with fears and anxieties about slave revolt.<sup>19</sup> Bancroft's history reflects this racial over-determination. When he turns towards the formation of the American community in confrontation with native tribes, he adapts the apocalyptic descriptive vocabulary he previously utilized to condemn Old World materialism to racialize the backwardness of American Indians and encode the affective formation of the progressive American community in the confrontation with that difference.

The first instance of native resistance sets the tone for the remainder of the history. In describing the Pequod War, he first takes up an impartial voice weighing the legitimate threats felt by the Pequods in the face of the English settlement in Connecticut against the "injuries" that "roused Connecticut to action" (1: 314; ed. 1879). While Bancroft indulged in a romantic racialist idealism about the native tribes and their independence, they remained, in his account, groups that either need to be incorporated within the overall progress of the nation or violently resisted and subjugated if they refused. Bancroft justifies the settlers' pre-emptive attack and massacre of the Pequods by claiming that "the colonists were fighting for the security of their homes; if defeated, the war-whoop would resound near their cottages, and their wives and children abandoned to the scalping-knife and the tomahawk" (1: 315; ed. 1879). Although

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<sup>19</sup> Tawil points out that to recognize the role slavery played in shaping portrayals of Native Americans in literature is not in the interest of "displacing the frontier and installing slavery as the new master narrative for this period of political history. [It is] simply to call attention to their interaction in the formation of American racial categories." (5).

Bancroft's depiction of the massacre is not without sympathy for "Indian helplessness" in confronting the flames and bullets of the English, he portrays the confrontation as essential to growth of the colonies. He concludes his discussion of the Pequot War with the following reflection on the formation of the nascent nationalist community:

The vigor and courage displayed by the settlers on the Connecticut, in this first Indian War in New England, struck terror into the savages, and secured a long period of peace. The infant was safe in its cradle, the laborer in the fields, the solitary traveller during the night-watches in the forest; the houses needed no bolts, the settlements no palisades. The constitution, which on the fourteenth of January 1639, was adopted by them, was of unexampled liberty. (1: 316; ed. 1879)

The singularity (and universality) of progress transforms the groups that oppose it in moments of crisis into accessories to its ultimate victory. Bancroft's portrayals of the Indian Wars suggest that the community of progress comes to witness and know itself in struggles against such racial difference, which are also drawn as threats to progressive time. This is a structure that, as I will show in the next chapter, enabled the aesthetics of history to imagine affective resolutions to the sense of temporal crisis produced by emerging forms of U.S. racial imperialism and fears of slave revolt. In the work of other antebellum historians, the crisis occasioned by racial difference in history mirrors other crises over slavery and imperialism in the decades between 1830 and the Civil War. For now, it is enough to recognize that, in Bancroft's vision of the past, not only are native groups deprived of any feeling for the future, unless they accept subordination to English civilization and temporality their resistance and violent suppression become constitutive parts of the formation and growth of the national community. Race is an

essential part of the historical and emotional experience of community and continuity Bancroft wanted his readers to access in his history, and it is not an accident that he celebrates the “liberty” of the Connecticut constitution as an outcome of the Pequod War.

In response to the possibility that the present or the future would irretrievably break with the past, Bancroft formulated a theory of progress that established the growth and continuity of a national community through rapid historical change and periods of dire crisis. He worked to substantialize this abstraction through the aestheticization of past events, turning history into an emotionally potent genre that would communicate a feeling for liberty across generations and attest to a deeper shared experience. But the communal agent he produced was aimed at the disavowal of more radical approaches to temporality that demanded immediate justice regardless of any claims to national cohesion or stability. Bancroft sublimated that demand into a feeling for the future that deferred its arrival. At the same time, by producing that feeling through the description of scenes of crisis, he structured it as the experience of a racialized national community, violently suppressing the desires for the future of those who resisted the will of progress as apocalyptic threats on par with those presented by the materialist Old World empires. Racial difference became an unavoidable element in antebellum history’s palette, central to its many images of temporal crisis. Race was unaccountable excess in the feeling of progressive time. And, as I will show in what

follows, in Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings on the philosophy of history that excess returns in an eruption of difference that exposes the hollowness of romantic history's claims to universality.

*Emerson and History's Present*

Emerson was most focused on history at the outset of his career, but his formulations were an important influence on his friend Bancroft's more abstract ideas about history. Emerson's most famous two sentences about history, "[t]here is one mind common to all individual men [...] Of the works of this mind history is the record," were echoed in Bancroft's 1854 lecture's constant repetitions of the theme of the "divine mind" and "the great collective mind of man" that shapes all of history ("History" 237). However, the implications each drew from their shared assertion of universality and commonality diverged widely. Emerson claimed repeatedly that the whole of history should be "explained from individual experience," while Bancroft, likely in direct refutation of this idea, argued that "the life of the individual is but a breath; it comes forth like a flower, and flees like a shadow. Were no other progress, therefore possible than that of the individual, one period would have little advantage over another" (10). Where, for Emerson, all history can be related to the life of an individual, for Bancroft, progress ensures that the culmination of the diverse experiences of individuals over time

amounts to far more than individual consciousness. Emerson entirely rejects the idea that progress could be traced over historical timescales: “[t]herefore is there no progress to the race. Progress belongs to individuals and consists in becoming universal” (EL 13-14). Nevertheless, Bancroft and Emerson were friends, and it is likely that their debate over race versus individual progress helped shape the substance of both of their ideas about history. As such, Emerson’s early lectures and writing on history can be read as a particularly intuitive critical reading of Bancroft’s nationalist history.

Emerson’s overriding concern in the lecture that introduced his series “The Philosophy of History” and the first essay of the *First Series*, “History,” is that historical texts as they have been written were not providing readers with substantial enough access to the truth of the past and were instead forming one vast “dull book.” He begins his lecture with the following observation:

It is remarkable that most men read little History. Even scholars, whose business is to read, complain of its dullness. This fact may suggest that it is not rightly written for it should, should it not? correspond to the whole of the mind, to whatever is lovely and powerful. No man can think that this all containing picture if seen in good light could be void of interest. (EL 7)

Emerson’s metaphor is typically optative, and like historians of the period, emphasized the analogy between historical writing and painting. Antebellum historians utilized the painting metaphor to address the formal totalities of narrative they strived for and the way they used visual description to make past moments of time present to their readers. Emerson’s use of this metaphor (as is common in Emerson’s work) shifts and adapts

these meanings, developing correspondences among art, history, vision, and the activity of thought. History is an interesting pursuit for Emerson not because it records or displays the individual facts of the past or even makes them present to a reader as experience or feeling, but because it unlocks hidden potentials within individuals that help them grow towards universality.

The difference between Emerson's thinking on history and that of historians was in their understanding of the temporal depth of historical writing. Bancroft thought of history as representing and making accessible the events, ideas, and passions of a past era to the present to aid in the cumulative self-knowledge of the human race in its struggle for democracy and liberty. For Emerson, it is the very past-ness of the past that is insubstantial. History is rather an attempt to de-sediment the accumulation of experience in the present, making specific, once obscured, layers visible to readers. As Emerson writes, "[i]f the whole of history is in one man, it is all to be explained from individual experience" (15). The present is a zero degree annihilation of the past, transforming it into a textual record (history) that either is or is not useful to contemporary experience. Despite the loss of the past occasioned by the present, each existent thing in nature is an accretion of all its past associations and intertwining with other things:

Nothing but God is self-dependent. Every being in nature has its existence so connected with other beings that if set apart from them would instantly perish. An ear of corn is very far from being a simple nature; it is a very composite one;

it is a cord of many strands which light, heat, water, air, carbon, azote compose. Is man less complex? On the contrary. (EL 17)

Such accretions of associations in nature are what can be laid out in a good history, one that would properly “correspond to the whole of the mind.” As Emerson goes on to suggest, “[m]an is powerful only by the multitude of his affinities, or, because his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being” (EL 17). These intertwined affinities are the substance of each and every consciousness, but because any given individual’s experience is limited, knowledge of those affinities remains limited. History fills in the role of second hand experience, calling out to dormant affinities in readers to reveal every person’s full human potential to themselves: “[u]nder the light of these two facts, that the mind is one and that nature is its correlative, history is to be read and written [...] There is nothing but is related to me, no mode of life so alien and grotesque but by careful comparison I can soon find my place in it; find strict analogy between my experiences and whatever is real in those of any man” (EL 19).

Emerson reads and adapts Bancroft’s and others’ history for their aesthetic elements, emphasizing history as a vehicle for experience. The moments in Bancroft’s history in which his aesthetic descriptions make it possible for contemporary readers to feel themselves as experiencing the flow of history and progress first hand, become, in Emerson’s re-reading of history, the lived (rather than mediated) experiences of each individual that remained buried in the “the knot of roots” known as consciousness, “whose flowers and fruitage is the world,” before they are brought into the light by the

second hand experiences related in history (EL 17).<sup>20</sup> As a reading of Bancroft, however, Emerson's thinking about history comes up against the racial visions of his aesthetics. Although Emerson rejects the idea of national progress for a more pluralistic liberalism, more narrow and nationalistic narratives shaped the histories that Emerson read. In particular, the aesthetic experiences that called out to present consciousness were shaped by anxieties over race, slavery, and imperial expansion. These histories generated a feeling for the future based on racial division to produce their aesthetic effects. Because Emerson's texts rely on and displace conventional ideas and meanings, they tend to be, in the words of Eduardo Cadava, both "symptomatic and critical" of the dominant cultural and political logics of his historical moment. The dual symptomatic and critical aspect of Emerson's thought is never more the case than in his writings on history, where the racialized aesthetics of his contemporaries return as an eruption of race into his universalizing theory that leads him to question his overall model of history and his ideas about sedimentation and correspondences. Reading this part of Emerson's thought as a symptom and critique of history's racialized aesthetics opens up a fuller understanding of the problems of race and revolution in those texts.

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<sup>20</sup> Although Emerson uses organic metaphors often that point towards an affiliation with romantic nationalism's tropes of growth and development, my reading draws on recent scholarship on Emerson has called attention to his knowledge of natural processes and his more ecological deployment of these metaphors. See, Lee Rust Brown's *The Emerson Museum* (1997) and Joan Richardson's *A Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007).

After a series of claims for the correspondence between history and individual experience that had been developed in his lecture and stated in even stronger terms in the essay "History," Emerson concludes the latter by claiming, "[t]hus in all ways does the soul concentrate and reproduce its treasures for each pupil. He, too shall pass through the whole cycle of experience. He shall collect into focus the rays of nature. History no longer shall be a dull book. It shall walk incarnate in every wise and just man" (255). The visual art metaphor with which he began his thinking on history has expanded into a fuller optative spectrum, encompassing a correspondence between optics and mental function, and tracing a fullness of meaning in the way light brings vision to an eye. Then, pausing he shifts registers to ask, "[i]s there something overweening in this claim? Then I reject all I have written, for what is the use pretending to know what we know not?" (255). Emerson raises these doubts to recognize the "neighboring orders of being" that have not yet been painted as visually correspondent to experience by history—i.e. the lives of animals and racial others that have been objectified as the natural background to historical progress or painted as forces of resistance. He writes:

I hold our actual knowledge very cheap. Hear the rats in the wall, see the lizard on the fence, the fungus under foot, the lichen on the log. What do I know sympathetically, morally, of either of these worlds of life? As old as the Caucasian man,—perhaps older,—these creatures have kept their counsel beside him, and there is no record of any word or sign that has past from one to the other. [...] Yet every history should be written in a wisdom which divined the range of our affinities and looked at facts as symbols. I am ashamed to see what a shallow village tale our History is. How many times must we say Rome, and

Paris, and Constantinople! What does Rome know of the rat or the Lizard? What are Olympiads and Consulates to these neighboring systems of being? Nay what food or experience or succour have they for the Esquimaux seal-hunter, for the Kanaka in his canoe, for the fisherman, the stevedore, the porter? (256)

As always, Emerson's language is slippery, tracing mental associations rather than producing an analytical argument. The differences he identifies as challenging history (as it has been written) slips from animality to metaphysics to cultural, race, and finally class alterity. We are left to ask if all these differences are so extreme that Emerson can imagine them as equally incommensurable with the project of history, or if any of them are more fundamental to the disruption in Emerson's train of thought.

In my reading, it is an eruption of racial difference that shapes his exclamation of doubt. While it is only at the end of the paragraph that groups of humans seem to enter into his thought, the initial figure—the sound of rats in the wall—is a racial haunting. Not only does the intimacy of the figure suggest the experience of difference within domestic space, the shift to an aural metaphor carries with it the implication of the type of blocked vision that was characteristic of the racial experience of antebellum whites who were haunted by the indeterminate presence of those who had been marked as absent from political and historical space and time. The ambiguity in the prose between an animal object experienced in history and a human subject experiencing history further suggests the indeterminacy of personhood that was a feature of antebellum racial theories and, as we have seen, the very aesthetics of history Emerson was exploring. As in Bancroft's history, the futures desired by racial and political difference

are produced here as unknowable and as potentially destructive to the meaning of all the history that has come before. Those divergent futures are present in the traditional association of rats with death and with the plural: a destructive multiplicity that would bring an end to linear time. The rats in the wall are none other than the unaccountable resistance to slavery and imperialism that agents of progress experienced throughout the New World, made intimate by the institution of slavery.<sup>21</sup> Figured as a tumultuous and chaotic sound in histories of progress, the rats in the wall haunt the aesthetics of history as an alternative future that would denaturalize progressive temporality.

Emerson here is symptomatic and critical: symptomatic of the racial aesthetics that could associate native resistance and black revolution with darkness, death, rats, and meaningless sounds, and critical in his recognition that any attempt to de-sediment the experiences that compose history runs up against these incommensurable eruptions—which must but can never be recuperated to any singular model of history, progressive or otherwise.

Many of the most important works of antebellum history would be aimed at resolving the crises to temporality occasioned by the eruption of disavowed racial difference into the aesthetics of history. Prescott confronted this problem by aestheticizing imperial violence and contributing to the “romance” of conquest felt by proponents of the U.S.-Mexican War. Abolitionist historians had a different problem.

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<sup>21</sup> The theory of racial haunting deployed here is influenced by Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1993).

Because the slave revolutions they wanted to recover were the very thing that romantic history marked as threats in the progressive order of time, they wound up radically revising the aesthetics of history. In these texts, we can observe both the immediatism officially desired by abolitionism and stranger moments that figure freedom as the proliferation of transitory flights from the violence of progress. Throughout antebellum historical writing, aesthetic moments that attempted to describe how history looks, sounds, and feels are haunted by the experience of discontinuity with the past, the unstable production of racial difference, and the crisis over slavery. It was in the attempt to grasp the experience of the past that historians confronted their own times and the divergent futures that escaped their desires for stability and progress.

## 2. The Second Conquest and William H. Prescott's Imperial Aesthetic

In 1847, as the U.S. army marched from coastal Vera Cruz to Mexico City, soldiers began to see themselves in the image of the Spanish *conquistadores* who had followed Cortés along the same route three centuries earlier. One volunteer, John Blount Robertson, remembering the war years later claimed he had enlisted because of a “long cherished desire to visit Mexico, the scene of Cortés’s conquests,” and because “life as a soldier had always been linked with peculiar associations, and war had been clothed in a kind of romance” (66). It is likely that William H. Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Mexico* (1843) had helped provide these romantic garments. A best-seller by the standards of the nineteenth century (selling 175,000 copies in the 1840s), it was read at night in camp during the war by the more educated among the ranks, and when the army occupied Mexico City, those attempting to learn Spanish relied on a version translated by the Mexican historian Lucas Alamán.<sup>1</sup> Observing the many “points of analogy [...], which strike the observer on the spot,” Col. Caleb Cushing wrote Prescott during the invasion to commend him on the accuracy of his descriptions, referring to the war effort then underway as “the second conquest” (qtd. in Johannsen 246). More than just a compelling read, full of useful knowledge of a foreign landscape garnered from

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<sup>1</sup> Information drawn from Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas* (1985), 245-248. Circulation data from Eileen Ka-May Cheng, *The Plain and Noble Garb of Truth*, 44.

travellers' accounts (although it certainly was that), *The Conquest of Mexico* provided an imaginative framework for the conduct of the war. It brought soldiers out of themselves, their homes, and their local allegiances and transformed them into an army serving in the nation's first invasion and occupation of a foreign state with previously acknowledged sovereignty.<sup>2</sup>

William H. Prescott, a fastidious conservative Whig, shared with the more visionary Bancroft aesthetic ambitions that aimed at providing his readers with an experience of the past. He introduced his *Conquest of Mexico* by hesitatingly stating his desire to "make [the reader], if I may so express myself, a contemporary of the sixteenth century"(6). However, in contrast to Bancroft's focus on the continual movement of

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<sup>2</sup> This statement should be taken as flagging a significant development in U.S. imperialism and not as marking an origin. As Amy Kaplan has argued, an exceptionalist narrative of the anti-colonial foundation and mission of the United States has long obscured an accounting of the many formations of American Imperialism, see her "Left Alone With America," (1993). In the aftermath of the Vietnam war, a generation of scholars produced a critique of westward expansion, violence against indigenous peoples and the ideology of Manifest Destiny in what was known as the internal-colonization thesis, see, for instance, Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence* (1973); and Michael Paul Rogin, *Fathers and Sons* (1988). More recently, (particularly after 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq) a rich archive has emerged uncovering a more broadly imagined past of U.S. imperialism. Economic theorists have viewed the Spanish-American war as a key moment in which a transfer of hegemonic authority from Britain to the United States was initiated through the dramatic entrance of the latter onto the imperial scene; see Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994); and David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (2005). In contrast, American Studies scholars have looked to the 1840s and earlier for nascent imperial formations. Amy Kaplan and Shelley Streeby have focused attention on the pressure of imperial power on cultural and identity formations in, respectively, domestic and urban space; see Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2005); and Streeby, *American Sensations* (2002). David Kazanjian and Andy Doolen have called attention to the ways an imperialist imaginary informed the racial and political fears of the early Republic and the strategies that developed for ameliorating those tensions through domination in the Naturalization Act of 1780, the Alien and Sedition laws, and plans for the expropriation of free blacks in the colonization project initially proposed by Thomas Jefferson, see Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick* (2003); and Doolen, *Fugitive Empire* (2005). In contrast to European models, this scholarship has come to view imperialism less as a stable ideology or state structure, and rather, in the words of Doolen, "identifies a more ambiguous and terrifying *process* of power consolidated across borders rather than derived from a single *place*" (xv).

progress and the shared love of freedom among people of vastly different epochs, Prescott was concerned with the differences of character among discrete eras and civilizations and the lessons to be drawn from historical change. Although he was interested in how each civilization contributed to the overall trajectory of human progress, Prescott was committed to adjudicating the differences among civilizations, their relative political, moral, and religious evolution, and the reasons for their rise and/or fall. For Prescott, history was a ladder whose top rung was, at the moment, the United States, but that was a precarious position that had been held by many different civilizations over the course of history. No civilization was above the possibility of eventual corruption and decline and each had a definitive internal potential to ascend the scale of progress.

Nevertheless, Prescott's parsimonious interpretations of civilizational difference were balanced by a countervailing desire to conscript his readers into feeling resonances between the past and present and across cultural (but not racial) differences, all while invoking the sensation of witnessing events distant from everyday experience. In the *Conquest of Mexico*, Prescott frequently asserts the relative barbarity of both the Aztecs and the Spanish, but positions the reader to feel themselves to be among the Spanish, facing a barbaric and backwards civilization and attempting to elevate it through conquest into the flow of modern progressive time. Scholarship on the relationship between antebellum historiography and U.S. racial imperialism has often focused on

history's ideological hierarchies of time and space without paying attention to how those hierarchies are encoded as a matter of feeling and vision in the aesthetics of history.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have observed that historians like Prescott endorsed a providential theory of history that shored up projections of U.S. hemispheric pre-eminence.<sup>4</sup> Such progressive history served imperial and racial power by abstracting time and space into a developmental schema that granted sovereignty and modernity to a society upon the establishment of republican forms of government, while justifying racial violence by placing Native American and African culture at the lowest rungs of civilized time or outside of history altogether.<sup>5</sup> However, while it is banal to observe that history has often been written from the perspective of European victors, there is more to the

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Ringe and David Levin have both written useful studies of the aesthetic preconceptions of romantic historians. However, working before the turn to a more political historicism, they maintained a separation between aesthetics and its politics. Ringe's comment that "Prescott, reflecting a typically nineteenth-century attitude, saw the struggle between Spaniard and Aztec as a conflict between Christian and pagan" reflects the extent of their interest in the latter. See Ringe, "The Artistry of Prescott's 'Conquest of Mexico'" (1953), and Levin, *History as Romantic Art* (1959).

<sup>4</sup> Scholars often utilize romantic history as a symbol of the hegemonic formations against which they pose the cultural work of more critical or resistant texts. However, a number of essays have explored the structural complications of Prescott in particular, including John Ernest's, "Reading the Romantic Past" (1993), and Eric Wertheimer's, "Noctography" (1995). A few recent insightful essays have taken up *The Conquest of Mexico*'s artistic and literary dimensions as well, albeit while only dealing with aesthetics as a matter of genre, see Robert D. Aguirre's, "Annihilating the Distance" (2002), and Jesse Alemán, "The Other Country" (2006).

<sup>5</sup> This draws an imprecise parallel with the developmental theories of progress long examined by post-colonial theory, see, for instance, Chakrabarty's, *Provincializing Europe* (2000). However, because the United States officially disavowed its own imperial authority throughout the nineteenth century, it is important not to be too doctrinaire in adapting a critique of power structures rooted in the centralized bureaucratic administration of the British and French Empires to a context where that authority was distributed through processes and agents often working at a great distance from centralized power and even, in the case of the "filibuster" campaigns in Mexico and Cuba, outside of legal authority. For examinations of the complicated and often contradictory instantiation of U.S. imperial power across the antebellum hemispheric landscape see Gretchen Murphy, *Hemispheric Imaginings* (2005), and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams* (2013).

visionary descriptive vocabulary of Prescott's writing than simple one-sidedness. Prescott's vision of how time functioned in the past helped construct a comprehensive imperialist aesthetic that contributed to how many Americans thought, felt, and experienced U.S. imperial confrontations with their neighbors. This aesthetic was a descriptive visualization of time that offered up images of the growth and movement of liberty through the New World. It was a manner of making providence manifest to readers whose futures were feared to be deviating from the nation's presumptive destiny. A text like Prescott's *History* was not just an imposition of U.S. ideologies about race and progress on the Mexican past, it was discourse on sensation and time that sought make available to readers an experience of the sights and sounds of progress through the description of past events.

As the founding generation receded into idealized memory and the nation confronted the sectional crisis over slavery and expansion, optimism over the American future was profoundly shaken. As suggested in the previous chapter, the construction of national time and space was met with conflicting anxieties and desires about the convulsively expanding form of the nation, and was challenged by signs of resistance to what Andy Doolen has called "the historical trinity of U.S. imperialism—war, slavery and territorial expansion" (xv). As the U.S. Government attempted to secure territorial boundaries between an organized and progressively sovereign space and a disordered sphere of international capital and racial rebellion beyond its frontiers, many were

haunted by images of racial contamination, resistance, deformation, and temporal retrogression.<sup>6</sup> In real and imagined slave revolts throughout the south, such as those attributed to Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, observers—including slave-owners like Thomas Jefferson and even some white abolitionists during the Civil War—saw overdetermined reflections of their own fantasies of the Haitian Revolution’s apocalyptic violence and South American political disorder.<sup>7</sup> New England Whigs had grown concerned that expansionist policy and democratic upheaval would deform national character and upend the proper order through the incorporation of cultural and racial strangers into the body politic. And western Democrats feared that land and slave holding elites would bring an abrupt halt to the growth and spread of liberty through the New World. These visions of hemispheric revolt and national dissolution turned the projected order of space and time inside out, challenging the very models of temporal progress and civilizational order antebellum historians were using to interpret the hemispheric past.

In this context, Prescott’s *Conquest of Mexico* can be read as a reactionary attempt to envision not only the abstract historical order that would ground U.S. sovereignty,

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Bruce A. Harvey has written about the role representations of racial hybridity in South American played in constructions of U.S. national identity in the antebellum period. See Harvey’s *American Geographics* (2001)

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Clavin and Alfred N. Hunt have detailed the role the Haitian Revolution played in antebellum constructions of identity and debates about emancipation before and during the Civil War. See Clavin’s *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War* (2009), and Hunt’s *Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America* (1988).

but also ways of describing and identifying the emergence of that order in its sensate particulars. By linking that future to images of an organized and progressively unfolding past, *The Conquest of Mexico* invited readers to witness, relive and be transformed by the vivid description of the various historical scenes of the emergence and progress of such national values as liberty, Christianity, and property. In order to accomplish this vision, Prescott produced an aesthetics that relied on long established norms for figuring darkness and light in racialized backwardness and the “inevitable” transcendence of civilization to produce powerful images of the agents of progress overcoming crisis and resistance. But this aesthetic encoding of time—of imagining what progress looked and felt like—was haunted by the sense of disorder it attempted to overcome and disavow. Prescott displaced anxieties over slavery and imperialism onto other places and times, endowing heroic actors like Cortés with the power to overcome temporal confusion in violent conquest. In focusing attention on this imperial aesthetic my hope is not merely to help dispel its often still-overwhelming romantic power. I propose that by reading this eruption of the continental past into the crises of Prescott’s present we can uncover the fears, anxieties, and desires about the future that drove Prescott and others to produce an imperial aesthetic. In doing so we can further identify the role romantic history played in making the violence of imperialism a desirable, if fantastic, resolution to the growing sense that the nation was losing touch with its revolutionary promise.

*Providence and the Aesthetics of "Character"*

In the antebellum period, a central concern of U.S. politics was defining its relationship with the new Central and South American Republics. This relationship, although political and material, was also temporal. Were these new nations followers of the U.S. in their entrance into political modernity? How could the U.S. aid their progress away from the European past into new modes of economic and political organization? In defining this temporal relationship, politicians were aided by historians like Prescott who had written voluminously on the "character" of past civilizations. As James B. Salazar has argued, in the nineteenth century, character was a central concept in how the U.S. public sphere constructed individuals and their relative trustworthiness and value to the nation's economic and political life. Character referred to a private quality of discipline in the internal life of citizen-subjects that marked them as suitable or unsuitable for political life or economic partnership. But character was marked by a central contradiction. Because it was only legible to others as an embodied performance, the actual status of character as fact of private internal life was indeterminate. When historians like Prescott invoked character to describe the internal dynamics of entire races and civilizations they also had to confront the tension Salazar identifies between "the sign and referent of character" (5). Given the indeterminacy inherent in the concept,

historians had to develop strategies for reading and interpreting the character of civilizations as manifest in external traits and appearances. Prescott developed the relationship between any given event or civilization and its role in the overall plot of providence through a reading of aesthetic practices that sought for signs of character in expressive cultural forms.

In a series of reviews of medieval and renaissance narrative poetry that he published at the outset of his writing career in publications like *The United States Literary Gazette*, Prescott drew links among poetic form, national climate, and the potential of societies for progress. In one essay from 1826 he wrote, “the poetry of Italy seems to reflect clearly the unclouded skies and glowing landscape, as that of England does the tranquil and somewhat melancholy complexion of her climate” (420). Prescott understood that these poetic traits were related to each nation’s contribution to providential history: “[b]efore the time of Elizabeth, all the light of learning which fell upon the world had come from Italy, and our own literature, like a young and tender plant, insensibly put forth its branches in the direction whence it felt its invigorating influence. As it grew in years and hardihood, it sent fibres deeper into its own soil” (411). Relying on a conventional romantic metaphor, Prescott described history as a cumulative progression of organic national cultures, each taking nourishment from the visible forms of the past while advancing into its own particular role in history that would transmit its character to posterity in expressive forms.

In the next decade, as Prescott turned his attention from poetry to history, these aesthetic theories informed how he imagined his work and how he represented places like Spain, Peru and Mexico in his magisterial volumes. In an essay on nineteenth-century literature, he suggested that although both history and literature can portray “the truth of character,” they must proceed according to different principles. Defending Sir Walter Scott from Chateaubriand’s charge that he had confounded history with romance in the former’s biography, *The Life of Napoleon*, Prescott attempted to manage the epistemological confusion of the era of the historical novel through a theory of how historians may adapt romance to their own productions without losing the claim to documentary truth. In his estimation of the romantic novelist, “it is enough [...] if he give pleasure. And this, everybody knows, is not effected by the strict observance of artificial rules. It is of little consequence how the plot is entangled” (281). In contrast, Prescott thought the historian must be more restrained, resist the novelist’s “most brilliant forms of fancy” in undertaking a process that is “at once slow and laborious,” and only then can the work be “again clothed in elements of beauty” (282). Where a novel is an expression of fancy, ungrounded in the details of plot, history must be meticulously mapped out according to the truth of the “situation” it attempts to represent; it must have established causality derived from research into sources and a feeling for the “essence” of historical events.<sup>8</sup> However, Prescott also suggested that both

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<sup>8</sup> For more on the importance of essence and feeling as modes of knowing and communicating historical

forms are able to appeal to romance for examples of “how to dispose lights and shades so as to produce a striking result” that might best express the “truth of character” (385). In accordance with his aesthetic ideas, if literary nationalism concerned itself with reading works of art to discover the character of the nation, then its cousin romantic history was about clothing history in the best distribution of “light and shadow” to make apparent the character of other times and places, which in Prescott’s understanding would manifest their potential for historical progress.<sup>9</sup> The portrayal of character became a central aspect of the historians’ art, linking it with early nineteenth-century aesthetic theory.

For many, the relationship between such an aesthetic theory and repressive nationalist and imperialist ideologies will be clear. In naturalizing the historically contingent form of the nation through appeals to expressive poetic forms and climate, Prescott reifies the material relations of power into ideological abstractions, and through the language of progress his theory serves to justify imperial and racial hierarchies. While I agree with this assessment, I want to suggest that the reliance of Prescott’s

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truth see George Callcott’s, *History in the United States* (1970).

<sup>9</sup> Broadly speaking this dual imperative of Prescott’s aesthetics to discover and construct the “character” of the societies it represents rests on the influence of the associationist aesthetics of Scottish Common Sense philosophy on U.S. culture and nationalism. For a thoughtful recent account of associationism’s relationship with antebellum literary form see Theo Davis’s *Formalism, Experience, and the Making of American Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (2007). For an older but still useful study see Donald Ringe’s *The Pictorial Mode* (1971).

theory of history on aesthetic categories reveals a hitherto unexamined aspect of romantic history. Its achievement of a coherent vision of global progress depended to a large degree on its ability to make other spaces and times *appear* in a manner that made transparent their role in the plot of providence and their temporal subordination to U.S. republican governance. Given that Prescott and other romantic historians had come to view U.S. national identity as positioned at the forefront of that history, this structure produced its own inevitable crisis. Events and cultures that escaped or resisted definition within the ordered procession of providence—and thus defied its aesthetic norms of visibility (i.e. the forms of government or subjectivity that constituted civilization and progress)—came to signify disruptions in U.S. identity and sovereignty and become a fantasmic screen on which historians projected their fears about national stability. Prescott's *Conquest of Mexico* used vivid and sensate descriptions of historical events to manifest a transcendent force of providence as overcoming just such a dissonance between his aesthetic logic of character and an overdetermined fantasy of Mexican history as unstable and illegible from the perspective of republican modernity.

Prescott's aesthetics of character helps to locate how the indeterminacy of the various constructions of Mexican time that haunted the debates over the U.S.-Mexican war can be conceived as an aesthetic and political problem. As Jaime Javier Rodríguez has argued, far from a clear assertion of U.S. national identity and hemispheric dominance, the U.S.-Mexican war "blurred the comfortable hierarchy between a noble,

progressive, fully authorized United States and a supposedly backward, anachronistic, corrupt Mexico" (13). In place of a coherently readable expression of its role in providence, Mexico became a screen for the anxieties of both anti-war Whigs like Prescott and enthusiastically imperialist Democrats about the shape and direction of national and hemispheric time. The indeterminate position of Mexico in the scale of modern time helped imaginatively produce imperialism as a consequence of nationalism's unstable grasp on the future—an affect of crisis exacerbated by the multiplicity of alternate futures proliferating through the hemisphere in the explosion of revolutionary political activity in the first half of the nineteenth century.

*Fantasies of Mexican Time*

Prescott was a critic of both the annexation of Texas and the war against Mexico. Although a chronicler of conquest, his anti-imperial sympathies were clear in his frequent assertions throughout *The Conquest of Mexico* of the superiority of contemporary morality to that of both the Aztecs<sup>10</sup> and the Spanish, the latter of which he portrayed as ultimately morally compromised agents of a thankfully past (though necessary) age of conquest. Yet, his ultimately heroic portrait of Cortés and his narrative of the liberation

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<sup>10</sup> I use Aztec throughout instead of the more accurate Mexica to emphasize the extent to which Prescott's history is an imaginative projection that had little to do with actual pre-Columbian civilization and to stay consistent with antebellum usage.

of a barbaric and superstitious land into a Christian future was read enthusiastically by those who dreamed of and participated in “the Second Conquest.” In the aftermath of the publication of *The Conquest* in 1843 there was an explosion of interest in the pre-Columbian past of the continent, which resulted in a number of popular histories and historical novels that were either set during the conquest or adapted the terms of romance to more recent Mexican history.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not Prescott’s text was directly responsible for any given person’s association of Mexico with romance, his decision that “the true way of conceiving the subject is not as a philosophical theme but as an epic in prose, a romance in chivalry,” provided the foundation for many of these future imaginative elaborations (*Literary Memoranda* 31). Yet, demonstrating the popularity of a particular fantasy does not explain it; I want to suggest, then, that the power of this vision was in proportion to its utility at easing the psychic tensions that *post-independence* Mexico provoked in the temporal imagination of Whigs and Democrats.

Whig opposition to territorial expansion and a Democrat-led war rarely arose from sympathy with the objects of conquest and it generally agreed with the dominant position that viewed Mexico as an insufficiently sovereign political space. Whig anti-war sentiment was a weak anti-imperialism that only articulated its resistance in the form of prophetic fears over what Prescott called the “most fatal symptom in the history of republics” — i.e. conquest (“Bancroft’s...” 304n). A striking example of the ultimate

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<sup>11</sup> For a useful (if dated) catalog of this literary interest in Mexico see John T. Flanagan and Raymond L. Grismer’s “Mexico in American Fiction Prior to 1850” (1940).

complicity of this rhetoric with the Polk administration's war plan can be found in a prominent Whig response to the president's May 11<sup>th</sup>, 1846 "War Message" to Congress. Polk's justification for the war was deeply disingenuous. Looking for a congressional authorization for the war, he recounted the outbreak of hostilities in a border skirmish a few weeks earlier as entirely the result of Mexican aggression, claiming, "Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil." Left out of this narrative was any acknowledgement that the land where the fighting had occurred laid between the Nueces River and the Rio del Norte (Rio Grande)—territory that had been in dispute since Texan Independence. Polk had likely ordered troops into the contested area in order to provoke a Mexican attack and provide an opening to conduct a war whose territorial goals extended not just to Alta California and New Mexico (the territory gained by the U.S. at the conclusion of the war), but to Baja California and the Yucatan as well.<sup>12</sup>

William Bernard responded to Polk's speech in the *American Whig Review* by decrying the war as "emphatically an Executive war, and brought about, however just and necessary as against Mexico, by a series of the most flagrant and alarming Executive usurpations of the Constitution of the country" (578). Bernard's primary concern was with how the war might undermine the constitutional order. In the Whig account, the war had begun when Polk had ordered troops over the Nueces river and gave their

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<sup>12</sup> See John S.D. Eisenhower, *So Far From God: The U.S. War with Mexico, 1846-1848* (1989), for a thorough account of these events around the U.S.-Mexican border.

commander (future president Zachary Taylor) the unprecedented command that, although he was not to attack Mexican troops, he “may consider hostilities commenced” if Mexican forces were to respond to this provocation. Polk had granted a military commander a power reserved for Congress—that of declaring war. Thus, the Whig position was based on a fear of what the historian Daniel Walker Howe has called “backwards progress”: a sense that the providential destiny of the nation could be interrupted by the re-emergence of phenomena such as tyrannical executive power and the law of conquest that antedated the establishment of republican governance and political liberty (69-95). Despite this perspicuity in regards to Polk’s duplicity, Bernard was comfortable with his assessment of Mexico as an unjustified aggressor.

This refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of Mexican claims over Texan territory dated to the oft-mythologized events of Texan independence and was derived from a vision of Mexico as unable or unwilling to protect the rights of its citizens, making it in some ways akin to the colonizers of the Old World. In the striking image of martyred patriots defending their liberty from the tyrannical Santa Anna at the Alamo, Whigs and Democrats alike had seen a reflection of the American Revolution and the workings of historical providence. As annexation approached in the 1840s, the two parties split over their interpretation of that event. While Democrats saw in the white farmers and slave-owners most closely associated with Texan independence natural

ideological kinsmen, Whigs warned that annexation would turn that previous revolution into an act of conquest.

Prescott articulated this concern with the temporality of Texan independence in one of his rare overt political statements. Upon the re-publication in the 1840s of an earlier review of a volume of Bancroft's *History of the United States*, Prescott added a long footnote stating his concerns with annexation. In the original text, he went to great lengths to praise Bancroft's portrayal of the "extent of Empire" in the colonial era. Recognizing that for Whigs in the 1840s "Empire" had developed a negative connotation in their critique of Democratic policy, Prescott claimed he was unable to let such language "go forth into the world with my name on it." He then expanded upon what annexation might mean for the future of the hemisphere:

The craving for foreign acquisitions has ever been a most fatal symptom in the history of republics; but when those acquisitions are made, as in the present instance, in contempt of constitutional law and in disregard of the great principles of international justice, the evil assumes a tenfold magnitude; for it flows not so much from the single act as from the principle on which it rests, and which may open the way to the indefinite perpetration of such acts. (304-305n)

In his account, annexation would turn the previous revolution—a "just" revolt against a colonial oppressor in the name of self-governance—into an act of conquest. It would rewrite the previous meaning of that event (as an advancement in the progress of liberty across the New World) into an act undertaken in "contempt of constitutional law," establishing a principle for conquest within a republican government that should have advanced beyond that phase of history. Yet, just as in Bernard's weak critique of Polk's

imperialism, the articulation of the norms of U.S. progress depended upon the deployment of Mexico as a counter-image—an aggressor against whom revolt was justified. Thus any claims Mexico had as a nominally republican state that had only two decades earlier thrown off its own colonial shackles were disavowed.

It is not simply that Whigs viewed Mexican temporality as akin to that of a pre-republican colonial oppressor. Mexico's image troubled a linear model of development by inhabiting multiple positions—at once a colonial past, a republican present, and a feared future of decline and tyranny. Prescott gives a hint of the destabilizing force of this image to provoke Whig anxieties about the future of republican liberty.

Ventriloquizing what were likely his own concerns, Prescott wrote:

There are some skeptics, who, when they reflect on the fate of similar institutions in other countries; when they see our sister states of South America, after nobly winning their independence, split into insignificant fractions; when they see the abuses which from time to time have crept into our own administration, and the violence offered, in manifold ways, to the constitution [...] there are, we say, some wise and benevolent minds among us who, seeing all this, feel a natural distrust as to the stability of the federal compact. (302-302)

Although Prescott claims his purpose is assuaging the fears of such “skeptics,” stating in the next paragraph, “hope is the attribute of republics,” the length and descriptive intensity of his litany (which I have edited for the sake of brevity) suggests that many of these concerns were his own. His recitation of Whig fears over various signs of “backwards progress” begins, tellingly, with an oblique but obvious reference to Mexico (certainly the most prominent republic to the south). It then rhetorically links domestic

signs of corruption to the “creep” of dissolution that it has already located beyond U.S. borders. Coming as it does on the heels of a discussion of the relationship among governance, time and space, it is reasonable to suspect that the anxieties invoked in this passage were linked to their being imagined as a result of the porousness of sovereignty in the act of conquest. In other words, Prescott’s opposition to the annexation of Texas and later the war against Mexico might have sources beyond his resistance to conquest in principle and have been derived from an unacknowledged fear that the conquest of that particular space, which had been associated in his mind with “backwards progress,” would enable dissolution to “creep” northward into the national body politic. In these arguments, Mexico, in its temporal instability, becomes a container for U.S. political anxieties over its own future.

This bifurcated fantasy, which evacuated political crises in the U.S. to sources beyond its borders, was on even more vivid display in an anonymous pro-war propaganda pamphlet that shared its name with Prescott’s history, entitled *The Conquest of Mexico!* If Whig rhetoric looked to secure U.S. temporal authority by maintaining the integrity of sovereign space against the haunting semi-sovereignty of Mexico, Democratic rhetoric insisted on the necessity of incorporation of potentially unstable space within national temporality. Portraying the Mexican government as unable to defend the rights of citizens, the pamphlet imagined that the only way to protect the country from re-conquest by a European colonial power was through the addition of the

entirety of Mexico to U.S. territory. In order to establish the necessity of the actions it proposed, the pamphlet relied on rhetoric as slippery about temporality as the Whig opposition was fastidious: “[a] once magnificent but now dissolving state, to which the cabinets of Europe have been looking with solicitude as a prize for their intrigues, is considered by many to be providentially offered to us” (3). This narrative of dissolution and inevitable conquest is (purposefully, I think) hard to map onto historical specifics. The language of “magnificence” seems not to refer to the Mexican Republic; rather, it could suggest both pre-Columbian Mexican civilization and the Spanish Empire. At the same time, the phrase “now dissolving” seems to conflate Spain with its former colony—both of which were understood to be in decline. Thus, the pamphlet invokes the image of “dissolution” not only to make an argument about contemporary Mexico, but also to more broadly mythologize Mexican space as having an insecure temporal status—an association that Whigs like Prescott ultimately shared.

Of course, the Democratic response to this image of Mexico was far more enthusiastic about the opportunities it offered to national becoming. It is here that the romance of conquest overtook the political anxieties collected by Mexico in the U.S. imagination as a fantasy of resolving national temporal crises. The contrast (and continuity) between Whig and Democratic politics is strikingly clear in the pamphlet’s approach to an issue that had been pushed to the side of political discourse—that of Mexico’s juridical abolition of slavery. Political arguments in the lead up to the war

often elided this question, in part because westward growth had already proven to be an explosive issue in the sectional politics of the antebellum period. Nevertheless, abolitionists struggled to make the issue visible in stories of a southern plot to expand their empire of slavery (echoed in Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government") and an outspoken resistance to the war on the grounds that, as Martin R. Delany put it in one of his editorial letters to *The North Star*, the incorporation of Mexican territory into the U.S. "would bring with it degradation and servility to nearly eight millions of freemen, heretofore enjoying the rights and privileges of a free and equal people" (1848).

Rather than merely ignoring the abolitionists' claims, the pamphlet conscripted a nascent free labor ideology into a counter-narrative, suggesting that only through conquest could Mexico be protected from slavery:

But Mexico, with its eight or nine millions of people, many of them emancipated slaves, all of them but little distinguishable in color from the negro, and too poor to be independent of labor, could form a series of States of free laboring men which would stand an impassable barrier to the extension of slavery southward. Slavery cannot exist amidst a vast mass of free laborers. But if not annexed, the declension of Mexico must go on, the slavery of Texas will gradually encroach upon the northern Mexican provinces, and its course be indefinite. Let us be in haste then to reclaim Mexico from her degradation; let us form her into States, giving her, as we must, to a suitable extent, the right of suffrage and representation in our government, and we shall thus save the fairest section of our continent from the curse of slavery. (26-27)

While it is unlikely that the authors of the pamphlet were sincere in their promotion of an imperialist conquest as a principled stand against slavery (and the war resulted in a massive expansion of slave territory), this argument is a significant divergence from the

cultural logic that had married free labor to imperialism during the build up to the war. Christopher Taylor has called this logic “the prosthetics of empire,” describing how the losses to autonomy and independence experienced by workers under industrialization were attached to racial and imperial identities that “redirected the figures by which the working class critiqued capitalism” into desires for “prosthetic” additions to the nation: new territory that would imaginatively fill the wounds left on worker’s by industrial exploitation by providing opportunities for personal regrowth in the west (31). Free labor ideology figured the threat of slavery as debilitating competition for white workers looking to achieve autonomy above what they saw as the degraded status of “wage-slavery” — an autonomy that the pamphlet, in line with the prosthetic logic Taylor identifies, attempted to write into conquest. However, where the dominant rhetoric of free-labor had worked to consolidate a white working class identity in opposition to both slavery *and* “degraded” black labor, the pamphlet articulates a desire for a multiracial block of opposition to slavery in order to secure the rights of labor.<sup>13</sup> While this might contain a seed of opposition to dominant racial logics of the antebellum period, it would be wrong, I think, to read the pamphlet as in any substantial way an act of resistance. Rather, I want to suggest that it attempted to imaginatively appropriate a

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<sup>13</sup> The classic account of the formation of white working class racial identity in the nineteenth century remains David R. Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness* (1991); see also Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*: (1991).

potentially disruptive counter-logic of multiracial democracy into racial imperialism—a romance with difference that reduces it to the same.

To explain this, we have to turn towards the ways democracy had emerged and was imagined in spaces other than the United States. At the heart of Mexican historiography of its own independence was an image of a multiracial peasant rebellion known as Hidalgo's Revolt that set off the revolutionary process in 1810. As Jaime Rodriquez O. has suggested, it is likely that the failed revolt the *criollo* (white colony-born) priest Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla led against *peninsulares* (metropole-born) elites actually consisted of very few peasants, American Indians, or Blacks. However, the image of a great peasant revolt was by the 1840s prominent in politically contested articulations of Mexican identity. Accounts of this history, for different reasons, had "insisted that Indians dominated the insurgent ranks." For instance, the conservative historian Lucas Alamán (a frequent correspondant of Prescott) had tried to distinguish the independence of 1821 from the earlier revolt by claiming that "the ten years war" preceding indepdence was an "effort in which the intelligent party and property-owners, united with the Spanish government, made to repress the vandal-like revolution which would have destroyed the civilization and prosperity of the country" (qtd. in Dysart 120). In contrast, the famous "*Grito de Dolores*," an unrecorded speech Hidalgo gave at the outset of the revolt, has been an ideological resource for liberal reformers and revolutionaries looking to redefine power structures in Mexico, and played a

prominent symbolic role in the political movements that resulted in the Mexican Revolution of 1922.<sup>14</sup> Although in part a historical myth, in the nineteenth century even conservatives like Alamán recognized its call for a hemispheric future that challenged racial and property based republicanism established on the U.S. model.

Although there is not a direct link between the pro-war pamphlet and images of Hidalgo's Revolt, or the guarantee that readers of the pamphlet would have recognized this echo, it is worth viewing the pamphlet as a rhetorical attempt to bring the futures projected by such a history under U.S. authority. Even lacking this particular association, the pamphlet writers were drawing on dominant understandings of Mexico as racially hybrid and abolitionist. In contrast to (but also in collaboration with) the image of Mexico as racially debased, temporally ambiguous, and in need of imperial management, the pamphlet opened up another idea of Mexico as a space that, once ordered by national sovereignty (and presumably its hierarchies), contained potentials for solutions to domestic crises felt over race and slavery. In suggesting this, I am not trying to redeem the pamphlet from the charge of racial imperialism, but to show how Mexico not only collected displaced U.S. anxieties over its own future but also how the act of conquest and incorporation became a repository for fantasies of overcoming these same domestic crises. To answer my earlier question about the role romantic history played in

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<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Suzanne B. Pasztor, *The Spirit of Hidalgo* (2002), a history of revolutionary activity in the northern province of Coahuila. Pasztor traces the symbolic significance of the earlier revolt in the province's "tradition of local autonomy, political independence, and economic self-sufficiency" (30).

addressing the various temporal crises felt in the domestic United States, I want to suggest that the romantic image of conquest produced in Prescott's history worked alongside pro-war propaganda and other romantic texts about Mexico to supply antebellum imperialism with the imaginative projection of an action that would purify the temporal order.<sup>15</sup> The imaginative displacement of temporal crisis enabled the subsequent violent imposition of republican authority so that both nations could be transformed, securing the progressive future of the hemisphere (with the United States as its steward). Prescott's romantic aesthetic, in locating the "character" of Mexico in its temporal dissolution and painting the conquest as a heroic action that could bring disorganized space back into the flow of history, provided readers with imaginative experiences of heroic exercises of authority in shaping the future. This fantasy proved increasingly irresistible to a nationalist public that was confronting the loss of such temporal guarantees in the disorder of slavery and imperialism.

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<sup>15</sup> Here we might also think of the novelettes and sensation literature analyzed by Shelley Streeby, Jaime Javier Rodríguez, and David Kazanjian, but the first of these works, Harry Hazel's *Inez, the Beautiful; or Love on the Rio Grande* (1846) was published after the outset of war. In the construction of U.S. ideas about Mexico before the war the only literary works that likely compare in influence to Prescott's history were Spanish chronicles, like those of Bernal Díaz, which were the basis for two historical romances set during the conquest written by Robert Montgomery Bird: *Calavar: or the Knight of the Conquest* (1834) and *The Infidel: or the Fall of Mexico* (1835). Prescott's history was cited as a primary source for two more historical romances set during the conquest published in the 1840s, Ingraham's *Montezuma, the Serf; or, The Revolt of the Mexitili* (1845) and Maturin's *Montezuma, the Last of the Aztecs* (1845). We might also consider popular travel narratives like Alexander von Humboldt's many works, Madame Calderón de la Barca's *Life in Mexico* (translated and published in Boston in 1843), and John Lloyd Stephen's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatán*, (1841). For more on the U.S. literary interest in Mexico see the aforementioned, Flanagan and Grismer, "Mexico in American Fiction Prior to 1850"; and Iván Jaksić, *The Hispanic World and American Intellectual Life* (2007).

The highly unstable images of Mexico—both enticing and repulsive—circulating in and informing U.S. political debates around territorial expansion and the war presented what was to a large degree an aesthetic problem (which reflected, disguised, and distorted political crises). As I have suggested, Prescott’s aesthetics sought to make visible in the appearance of other times and places their “character” and hence their role in the unfolding of providence. Since Mexico could appear at once like a colonial past, a republican present, and a future disordered by tyranny, racial hybridity, and revolt, its image failed to ascribe to a recognizable position in the spatial and temporal hierarchies projected by the providential vision of U.S. and republican futurity. While the images of Mexico that circulated in political discourse were primarily fantastic projections of national anxieties, they attest to how difficult it could be to draw any coherent line between domestic and international concerns. Democrats and Whigs wanted to see Mexico as a disordered space that could be progressively ordered through conquest or kept definitively separate through consolidation of national boundaries, but slavery and its resistance could make U.S. space look more like factionalized Mexico while making Mexican abolition seem like a desired national future.

Given such imaginative instability, we can read Prescott’s historical romance of a backwards empire liberated into progressive time by heroic and authoritative

conquerors as an enticing aesthetic resolution of the crisis provoked by Mexico, territorial expansion, and slavery. Tellingly, in order to accomplish a striking cathartic power, Prescott appropriated a desire to overcome the resistance to order posed by the existence of slavery into his portrayal of the conquest through frequent comparisons of Aztec ritual sacrifice to southern slavery, thus granting Cortés the status of an almost mythical liberator. At the same time, the threats the Aztecs posed to the success of the Spanish, and thus the liberation of the continent into its progressive future, are figured in terms that relied on widespread fears about black emancipation and revolt. Prescott builds images that figure slavery, resistance to slavery, and the racial others who would make a claim as agents within modern time as crises in the temporal order that must be overcome through violence and conquest.

The overriding imperative of Prescott's history was to demonstrate the necessity of the Spanish Conquest as a condition for the emergence of civil liberty in the New World, and thereby raise the events into a stable position of legibility within the spatiotemporal grid of providence by portraying Spanish and Aztec "character." So, while he often measures his praise of the Spanish, weighing their moral inadequacies from a nineteenth-century perspective against the worthiness of their underlying mission, he maintains a fundamental difference between the Spanish and the Aztecs; only the former can carry forward providential time. Beginning with a long ethnographic section that goes so far as to celebrate some achievements of Mexican

civilization, he repeatedly works to establish the limitations and relative degeneracy of the Aztecs on the eve of conquest. Most fundamentally for Prescott, the Aztecs were a belated civilization, inhabiting the forms of an earlier model, the Toltecs, and were unable to project themselves into the future. He derives this assumption from his description of Aztec language, suggesting that although they produced abstract symbols of totality, such as representing time as a serpent, they lacked the ability to break that time into analytical units.<sup>16</sup> As a result, they imagined time as cyclical and turning back on itself, rather than linear and progressive. Their temporal character presented itself through this manner of cultural expression.

For Prescott, such a temporal imagination captured the essence of Aztec limitations; they looked backwards rather than forwards and were unable to advance beyond a form of civilization that had reached its height centuries before the arrival of Cortés. In other words, Prescott's Aztecs seemed to reflect growing Whig fears about backward progress. The text generates a number of structural associations between Aztec Mexico and trends in antebellum America that Prescott feared augured a temporal crisis, including the suggestion that the Aztec conquest of neighboring states was a source of their downfall; a parallel between the Aztecs' inhabitation of the antedated cultural forms of the Toltecs and the antebellum South's investment in aristocratic

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<sup>16</sup> Eric Wertheimer has been particularly attentive to how Prescott uses the Aztec hieroglyphic as an emblem of a potential for rational advancement that the racialized and feminized Aztecs are unable to activate, necessitating the conquest and providing Prescott with a justification for his visually iconographic descriptions of Aztec civilization. See his *Imagined Empires* (1999).

privilege and honor; and most importantly, an explicit comparison between ritual sacrifice and antebellum slavery. These were both systems that, according to Prescott, “spread the gloom of superstition over the domestic hearth until the character of the nation wore a grave and even melancholy aspect” (*Mexico* 97).

In establishing this comparison, ritual sacrifice was an irresistible image for Prescott: it provided exotic and romantic thrills, referenced Aztec investments in cyclical time and necessity of the conquest, and helped construct his readers as sympathetic towards the Spanish by establishing parallels to contemporary slavery. Take this early description of the ritual:

On the evening of the last day, a procession of priests, assuming the dress and ornament of their gods, moved from the capital, towards a lofty mountain, about two leagues distant. They carried with them a noble victim, the flower of their captives, and an apparatus for kindling the new fire, the success of which was an augury of the renewal of the cycle. On reaching the summit of the mountain, the procession paused till midnight; when, as the constellation of the Pleiades approached the zenith, the new fire was kindled by the friction of the sticks placed on the wounded breast of the victim. The flame was soon communicated to a funeral pile, on which the body of the slaughtered captive was thrown. As the light streamed up towards heaven, shouts of joy and triumph burst forth from the countless multitudes who covered the terraces of the temple, and the house-tops, with eyes anxiously bent on the mount of sacrifice. Couriers, with torches lighted at the blazing beacon, rapidly bore them over every part of the country and the cheering element was seen brightening on altar and hearth-stone, for the circuit of many a league, long before the sun, rising on its accustomed track, gave assurances that a new cycle had commenced its march, and that the laws of nature were not to be reversed for the Aztecs. (73)

The implicitly iterative description—the last day being the last day of a regular festival—alerts us to the conception of time at work. The ritual is one of cyclical renewal,

which, for the Aztecs ensures the continuation of the normal “laws of nature,” (likely an ironic description, calling attention to the ritual’s absurdity in light of scientific knowledge). However, Prescott isolates the regularity of the practice and describes it as witnessed in a single instance. Although priest and captive are typical roles, Prescott singles them out by description—the “flower of the captives”—and then moves into a single instance: *the fire was* kindled, it “was soon communicated to the pyre.” These literal descriptions then give way to expressionistic painting: “the light streamed upward toward heaven [...] with eyes anxiously bent on the mount of sacrifice.” A linear temporality of witnessing a singular instance of a striking spectacle frames the cyclical temporality of the experience for Aztec participants.

Prescott writes the ritual into an aesthetic experience that can be consumed as an image by a reader for its (conventional) associations with terror, wonder, and fear. Prescott’s description raises these associations to the level of a universal, impartial experience, thus addressing his reader as an inhabitant of linear time perceiving events in Mexico as temporal perversions. The aesthetic image corroborates a norm for reading Aztec culture’s position in a spatiotemporal grid of appearances; Prescott made pre-Columbian America visible as a time in subordination to and deviance from U.S. futurity. The parallel between the ritual and antebellum slavery (which Prescott references throughout the text) enables readers to experience a temporally stable

position from which to witness ancient (and contemporary) crises as temporary perversions and not fundamental disruptions.

I describe the desire Prescott encodes into his text in these moments as envisioning an overcoming of “resistance to order” to draw attention to the fact that, although a believer in gradual emancipation, Prescott was hardly an abolitionist, and like other conservative Whigs could be just as disturbed by the fiery rhetoric of the “conscious” branch of U.S. politics as by slavery itself. In an important Whig party newspaper, Daniel Bernard frequently called all abolitionists “fanatics,” and suggested that, although “we may regard slavery to be as great an evil as we can well imagine, still even in the most frightful picture of the most exaggerating abolitionists, it is not to be placed on the scale with the demoralizing effects” of the abolitionists’ attempt to place moral conscience above “the sanctions of political oaths” (xx). While it is possible to read Prescott’s invocation of southern slavery in his description of Aztec civilization as an attempt to teach his audience about the incommensurability of these practices with republican modernity, it does not suggest that he accepted the rights and freedoms claimed for the enslaved by radical abolitionists. Rather, he collapsed the temporal character of slavery and the forces that resisted slavery in his aesthetic portrayal of Aztec resistance to progress.

Jacques Rancière’s reassessment of the interrelation of politics and aesthetics helps us understand the political stakes of Prescott’s temporal conflation of sacrifice,

slavery, and resistance in his aesthetic images. In a number of recent works, Rancière has suggested that politics consists of negotiations and conflicts over what he calls the “distribution of the sensible.” In the normal political order this consists of “the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of existence, of objects posited as common and as pertaining to common decisions, of subjects recognized as capable of designating these objects and putting forth arguments about them” (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 24). In the context of the racial regimes of antebellum America, Rancière’s language is suggestive. Dana Nelson has argued that white republican subjects frequently experienced their own political agency in their capacity to “designate” and “put forth arguments” about a particular category of objects—women, slaves and other racially-marked populations. While Rancière never directly articulates the question of race, the resonance continues in his description of the political order’s perception of a distinction between speech and voice: “but the whole question [of the political] then is to know who possesses speech and who merely possesses voice. For all time, the refusal to consider certain categories of people as political beings has proceeded by means of a refusal to hear the words exiting their mouths as discourse” (*Aesthetics and its Discontents* 24).<sup>17</sup> Under the normal coordinates of sensory experience of the political order in the United States it was not only slaves and free blacks who were

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<sup>17</sup> In a number of recent essays Nancy Bentley has utilized Rancière’s conceptualization of the relation between the political and the aesthetic to think about artistic responses to U.S. racial regimes, see her “The Fourth Dimension” (2009), and “Warped Conjunctions” (2012).

deprived of voice, but an entire realm of discourse associated with resistance to slavery that, through the 1830s, had been literally “gagged” in formal political space. I am referring here to the gag rule that had prevented the reading of antislavery petitions in House of Representatives from 1836-1844. Under this political “distribution of the sensible,” slavery itself was made politically invisible, even as it weighed as a crisis on the constitutional order, and citizenship was established on the basis of designating those silent or muted bodies as lying outside of political space.

Conservative Whigs like Prescott perceived abolitionist speech not as an articulate political position, but merely as a disruptive sound that threatened the forward momentum of the progress. It was not only the power of southern slave-owners that threatened progress, but also the disorder provoked by the resistance to slavery—both in domestic political movements and the political upheavals of Haiti or Mexico—that upended the dominant distribution of political space (as a place where white men designated and debated over black bodies). For such a conservative vision, the problem with the sensible was not its distributed order, but that the intelligible speech of national political subjects could be overwhelmed by the disruptions of anti-slavery and emancipation; white men could be shouted down, slaves could flee and revolt, and political space could be inhabited by non-white representatives from spaces beyond national sovereignty. Although Rancière understands the aesthetic’s ability to re-order the sensible as a potential for radical politics, in Prescott’s history we have a

conservative aesthetic in images of providential time effecting the transcendence of historical actors from such disorder. The “beauty” Prescott produces in his romantic images is that of the progressive unveiling of the antebellum political order from the morally messy conditions of the period of the conquest. To achieve this effect he appropriated some of the force of anti-slavery, not to endorse abolition, but to overcome the disruptions slavery and resistance to slavery made apparent in republican order. His romance also entailed the creation of images of reactionary violence against racially-marked bodies that he figured as depositories of the forces inadmissible in U.S. futurity.

Scholars have long recognized that Prescott’s narrative art relied on stark juxtapositions between civilization and savagery—a feature most prominent in his many vivid descriptions of battle.<sup>18</sup> However, beyond the general framework of Enlightenment and Romantic racism, Prescott specifically incorporated racial fears of the antebellum period, utilizing crises occasioned by shared embodiment to reveal the transcendent entrance of providence into human affairs. His aesthetic incorporation of antebellum crises over resistance to slavery and racial republicanism is most prominent in his use of the aforementioned distinction between speech and voice in his representation of conflict between the Spanish and the Aztecs, as in the following passage:

On they came like an avalanche, or mountain torrent, shaking the solid earth, and sweeping away every obstacle in its path. The little army of Spaniards opposed a bold front to the overwhelming mass. But no strength could

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<sup>18</sup> See Levin, *History as Romantic Art*.

withstand it. They faltered, gave way, were borne along before it, and their ranks were broken and thrown in disorder. It was in vain, the general called on them to close again and rally. His voice drowned by the din of fight and fierce cries of the assailants. For a moment, it seemed that all was lost. The tide of the battle turned against them, and the fate of the Christians was sealed. But every man had that within his bosom, which spoke louder than the voice of the general. Despair gave unnatural energy to his arm. The naked body of the Indian afforded no resistance to the sharp Toledo steel; and with their good swords, the Spanish infantry at length succeeded in staying the human torrent. The heavy guns from a distance thundered on the flank of the assailants, which shaken by the iron tempest, was thrown in disorder. Their very numbers increased the confusion, as they were precipitated on the masses in front. The horses at the same moment, charging gallantly under Cortés, followed up the advantage, and at length compelled the tumultuous throng to fall back with greater precipitation and disorder than that with which they had advanced. (238)

Stripped of their semi-civilized cultural forms, the Aztecs become mere bodies in this violently racist passage, as Prescott's agitatedly shifts between the descriptions of the meaningless but threatening noise of the Aztec force and the supplication of these racialized bodies to Spanish violence. The Aztecs become a tumultuous mass naturalized through metaphor while the voice of the white commander, portrayed as a force of order threatened by the noise of resistant bodies but supported by a more fundamental transcendental "voice" grants the Spanish the moral authority to carry forward providence against these threats progress. This racialization draws on antebellum fears that saw black rebellion and emancipation as violent ruptures in the progress of civilization.

In the early antebellum era, the Haitian Revolution was a well remarked upon and widely known event and there were numerous written accounts in circulation. This

literature was dominated by a picture derived from the writings of Bryan Edwards, a Jamaican slave-owner, who published an account of the revolution while it was still in its early stages under the title *An Historical Survey of the French Colony in the Island of St. Domingue* (1794). In it, he describes “the enormities of the negroes in the northern provinces,” who had “butchered [the whites] without distinction [...] murdering the men and ravishing unfortunate women who fell into their hands” (349). Edwards wrote about these events as a demonstration of “the sanguinary spirit of revenge which characterizes the debased actions of a slave, and which the most ardent advocate for liberty must condemn and deplore,” and closed with the suggestion that:

Experience has shown us, that emancipation, though requisite to make men dignified and good, will not operate without other means to sublimate human nature. The Maroon negroes of Jamaica [...] are not the slaves of white men, but they are still savages in the midst of polished society; and what these are now, it is, alas! to be feared that the negroes of St. Domingo will hereafter be. (373-348)

In the words of the historian Matthew Clavin, Edwards “provided the text for images of the revolution that would haunt generations of American slave owners” (12). The text also prefigures the violent temporal rupture that would continue to mark images of slave revolt throughout the antebellum period (a topic to be discussed at length in the following chapter). In such images, the normal effect of liberty on the development of man towards civilization is interrupted by the “debased” and “sanguinary” violence of the slave. Communities like those in Haiti or Maroon Jamaica were frequently portrayed as having broken away from the terms of modern freedom to live in static savagery with

dire consequences for the lives and property of white subjects and for the progress of civilization itself. Adaptations of this version of the events in Haiti circulated in a number of widely read historical texts, including Sir Archibald Alison's *History of Europe* (1842), and it would be invoked repeatedly in accounts of slave revolts, such as Samuel Warner's "Authentic and Impartial Narrative" (1831) of Nat Turner's rebellion.<sup>19</sup>

Prescott distilled these fears into the image of the naturalized resistance of racialized bodies to the progressive time introduced by the Spanish. In the face of this threat, Cortés's speech strives to single out the Spanish and enable them to push forward out of the tumult and generate political and temporal order. However, because Prescott wanted to write the conquest as more than just the victory of military force, the embodied conditions of Cortés's speech has its own limitations. The necessity that Cortés be heard by those he wants to command for his speech to order the scene of temporal progress allows the Aztecs to begin to overwhelm the Spanish. The dramatic tension of the scene ensures that the threat of shared embodiment gets pushed until the revelation of a transcendental, primary voice of order within the Spanish (as agents of the will of providence) redeems the scene from chaos and confines disorder to the racially marked objects of aestheticized violence. Prescott confronts antebellum images

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<sup>19</sup> Clavin quotes this pamphlet at length in his study of the imaginative role of the Haitian Revolution during the Civil War: "In consequence of the alarming increase of the Black population at the South, fears have long been entertained, that it might one day be the unhappy lot of the whites, in that section, to witness scenes similar to those which but a few years since, nearly depopulated the once flourishing island of St. Domingue" (15).

of racial rebellion as a source of possibly apocalyptic disorder to add cathartic weight to the emergence of providence in his romantic images of history. In doing so he reproduces the dominant political aesthetic of the antebellum U.S. by portraying a white man's voice as giving order to racialized bodies excluded from political time and space.

The text's aesthetic force in revealing the triumph of progress depends on the reiteration of descriptions of the Spanish overcoming threats through their ability to hear a transcendental voice. Again and again, the Aztecs' embodied power to overwhelm Cortés's ordering speech generates moments of crisis. When, on the death of Montezuma, the Spanish cavaliers are surrounded by the furious Aztecs looking to avenge the insults of the occupation of the capital, Cortés attempts to threaten the mass into allowing the Spanish to exit the city, exclaiming that if they do not clear the way "I will make your city a heap of ruins!" This speech is ineffective because, as Prescott writes, "calm in their exterior and slow to move, they were more difficult to pacify when roused; and now that they had been stirred to their inmost depths, it was no human voice that could still the tempest" (428). Again, the civilized exterior of the Aztecs gives way to the fundamental racial "naturalness" that, in its ability to overpower Spanish speech, threatens the emerging providential order. The resilience of the Spanish and their ability to at last overcome and escape the capital to return and conquer the resistant Aztecs is again attributed to the guarantees of something beyond the embodied limitations of their speech.

In calling attention to the limits of embodiment, the text discloses the dependency of Prescott's vision of providence on violence and racial subjugation. Because Prescott could only figure the emergence of providence in a bifurcated depiction of the transcendent and violent ordering of embodied resistance, the only mechanism he gives the Spanish for becoming agents of progressive time is the violent suppression of those who have to become (in the text's representational norms) merely bodies without a capacity for futurity. The aesthetic power of the text to give appearance to providence depends on reducing the Aztecs from a semi-civilized empire to mere containers of non-transcendent embodiment, unable to hear "providence" without first being subjugated within Spanish civilizational order. In these moments, the Aztecs are transformed into rebellious slaves, threatening the national future with their tumultuous resistance to a progressive order. Since the text's aesthetics needs to enact hierarchies of the transcendent over the embodied to generate images of providential "beauty," it is dependent, despite its anti-slavery sympathies, on the most reactionary imagination of racial order and disorder that was available to antebellum writers. In revealing the racial and imperial subjugation that underwrites visions of providential time, these images also attest to the insubstantiality of any metaphysical claims to ground civic liberty to be anything more than justifications for violence. Thus, the text inadvertently reflects how radical abolitionist and black resistance against slavery had disrupted the moral hegemonies of U.S. racial republicanism. In temporally flattening his portrait of the

Aztecs in his battle scenes to imagine them as nothing other than a threat to future progress, Prescott's aesthetic production of Aztec blackness incorporates and disavows the racial antagonisms that abolitionists would identify as fundamental to U.S. ideas of progress.

The final defeat of the Aztecs comes in the form of an image that figuratively liberates Mexico from ritual sacrifice. Symbolic of both the defeat of a backwards barbarism and the racial eruptions that threatened the future order, Prescott's text provided antebellum readers with the cathartic experience of resolving the sense of national temporal disorder that had been affectively associated with slavery and anti-slavery resistance. As Cortés conquers the capital, Prescott describes the destruction of the grand temple thus:

With shouts of triumph the Christians tore the uncouth monster from his niche, and tumbled him, in the presence of the horror-struck Aztecs, down the steps of the *teocalli*. They then set fire to the accursed building. The flames speedily ran up the slender towers, sending forth an ominous light over the city, lake, and valley, to the remotest hut among the mountains. It was the funereal pyre of Paganism, and proclaimed the fall of the sanguinary religion, which had so long hung like a dark cloud over the fair regions of Anahuac. (427)

Revising the language of the previously cited description of a ritual sacrifice, Prescott writes this moment as a message transmitted throughout the Mexican valley by way of symbols of fire and light. Where the completion of the sacrifice in the opening chapters of the book signaled an iterative renewal of the Aztec calendar cycle and was written as a typical occurrence, the destruction of the temple is here given as a singular event. In it,

Prescott presented the powerfully cathartic image of the passing of a “barbaric” practice from the continent in the spectacular destruction of the scene of its ritual entrenchment; an event that would be experienced by readers as freeing the hemisphere from the decayed time of the Mexican past and bringing it into the Christian progressive future.

Such images are what made romantic history so compelling to antebellum readers; in the face of crises and threats that looked and felt like those encountered by the antebellum nation, Prescott’s images provided an experience of the dramatic unveiling of an underlying progressive order in “heroic” action. Yet, despite the appropriation of anti-slavery language to describe the ritual, Prescott’s imagined and desired vision of providence was not in redress or resistance to antebellum racial orders. It reflected a conservative view of slavery, racial revolt, and abolition as linked sources of instability in providential time and it relied on images of violent racial subjugation to ensure its readers of the necessity and inevitability of progress and order. Thus, Prescott’s aesthetics provided an outlet for widespread anxieties about time, slavery and imperialism in a romance of conquest.

The aesthetics of romantic history was a product of historians’ vision of the triumph of linear progress over challenges to the national future. Central to these crises was the problem of slavery and antislavery resistance to American imperialist ordering of the hemispheric future. Prescott resolved this problem through a racial aesthetic that used blackness to portray everything that had to be suppressed to ensure the

progressive future. Thus, blackness was structurally intrinsic to the aesthetic representation of progress as an excess to the temporal order that had to be continually contained. Abolitionists and anti-slavery writers looking to recover histories of black freedom that had been omitted from racist historiography had to confront the aesthetic problem posed by romantic history. Although they often wrote romantically to describe the resistance of slaves to oppression and the growth of black participation in an already defined political and economic modernity, a violent opposition to black freedom structured the aesthetic norms these historians drew on to envision progress. In the next chapter, I take up a series of writers who either recognized the position of blackness and slavery in historical aesthetics or came to upend those norms in the act of writing black history (although not always in its initial framework or conception). More than just a problem of narratives of nationally or racially exclusionary progress that had to be revised with new research, the aesthetics of history were an important field for black writers to contest black exclusion from history and to challenge political visions of time and modernity.

### 3. Abolitionist History and the Aesthetics of Slave Revolution.

Speaking of marks, traces, possible, and probabilities, we come before our readers.

–Frederick Douglass, “The Heroic Slave” (1852)

It is said that the satirists of Paris had christened Toussaint, the Black Napoleon; and Bonaparte hated his black shadow.

–Wendell Phillips, “Toussaint L’Ouverture” (1863)

After returning to the United States following discussions with Haiti’s Emperor, Faustin Solouque, over the possibility of African-American emigration to the island nation, the black abolitionist James Theodore Holly was enflamed with the desire to share his experience of a black government with his companions in the struggle against slavery. A correspondent for Henry Bibb’s newspaper, *The Voice of the Fugitive*, and decided emigrationist, Holly had spent a number of years with fugitive slave communities in Canada and participated in National Emigration Conventions through the 1850s helping to articulate the potential for black self-government and progress. Following his visit in 1855 he composed a lecture, later printed and widely distributed in abolitionist circles, that described the history of Haiti since the revolution, its “civilized progress,” the evidence it gave of black achievement, and the opportunity it provided for those willing to throw off America’s chains and emigrate—which Holly himself did

in 1861.<sup>1</sup> While it is important to acknowledge the limits of Holly's picture of Haiti—his romanticizing of its then government, his ignorance (strategic or otherwise) of the deep-seated divisions in Haiti between state elites and the mass of peasants—he nevertheless found in Haiti a powerful symbol for U.S. abolitionism: a black nation that had established self-government and a degree of economic and industrial modernization.<sup>2</sup> In other words, an embodiment of the very romantic idea of progress that had developed out of America's own travails with expansion, industrialization, and slavery during the era of the Great Transformation.

Holly's rhetoric is rich with the figures and tropes of romantic history. He describes the emergence of Haiti as an unprecedented event in the history of freedom: "never before, in all the annals of the world's history, did a nation of abject and chattel slaves arise in terrific might of their resuscitated manhood" (264) and as "a practical vantage ground which Providence has raised up for us out of the depths of the sea" (279).<sup>3</sup> Its national heroes, Toussaint Louverture and Dessalines, were "godlike" and

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<sup>1</sup> Details on the occasion of Holly's lecture and pamphlet are drawn from *Pamphlets of Protest* (2001), ed. Richard Newman, Patrick Rae and Philip Lapsansky.

<sup>2</sup> Two important works on that deal with the economic and political conditions in Haiti throughout the nineteenth-century (and demonstrate the limits of abolitionists' romanticization) are Michel Rolph-Trouillot's *Haiti: State Against Nation* (1990) and Laurent Dubois' *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (2012).

<sup>3</sup> The language here is striking in its ambivalence between the figures and metaphysics of masculine progress and the instantaneous, almost Lazarean, rising of Haiti from the sea. Even this rhetorically romantic and, in many ways, liberal and progressive text contains irruptions of the submarine sources of black political life generated from its exclusions from historicity, subjectivity, and the destruction of the middle passage.

“heroic” during the revolution and demonstrated acuity at law and advancement of its population in the aftermath, “demonstrating that the negro in independence could carry forward measures of industry for his own benefit as well as for whites” (275). Holly connected heroic and romantic appearances, figures, and events, to descriptions of the advancement and binding of the state by law and industry. His sketch builds toward a description of the sometimes-monarchical government of Haiti as a beacon of liberty, more respectful of personal independence than the United States and its multitude of private despots. He adapted historical aesthetics to generate an image of futurity that subtly, but irrevocably casts a shadow on U.S. nationalism, even as he gets caught in the eddies of romanticism to announce the future he desires as a singular work of progress, grounded by a revolutionary past. Both at odds with U.S. racial republicanism and reproducing its imperial tropes by way of black nationalism, Holly’s lecture demonstrates the power of romanticism at both displacing and revealing the political contradictions of the antebellum era’s visions of the future.

This chapter turns to a series of more or less ambivalent responses to and adaptations of the aesthetics of romantic history written throughout the militant period of abolitionism in the lead-up to the Civil War.<sup>4</sup> It makes two central arguments. First, romantic history shaped the discourse even of those who announced a profound

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<sup>4</sup> In distinguishing a militant period of abolitionism I am harkening back to Benjamin Quarles argument that after 1830 or so, black abolitionism had become less obsequious in tone as it broke from white-led organizations like the American Colonization Society, and articulated its own set of desires and priorities, addressing a larger black literate audience. See, Quarles *The Black Abolitionists* (1969).

skepticism about its central claims. The abolitionist William J. Watkins, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Herman Melville assert that a nation in which slavery is legal could never be beautiful. Watkins and Stowe do this directly, and Melville through his literary irony. But each writer winds up reproducing a desire for a connection between beautiful images and historical progress and thus fails to imagine a future effectively at odds with romantic imperialism.

My second argument is that a number of black abolitionist historians nonetheless developed a more heterochronic vision of time and freedom at the level of image, rhetoric and affect—albeit one still framed as a romantic metanarrative. The different forms of temporality evidenced by these works emerged both from the struggle to articulate the experience of slavery—the repetitious and cyclical temporality of labor that has been described by Lloyd Pratt—and the growing insufficiency of the concept of “progress” for portraying the achievements of abolitionism up to that point in history.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Lloyd Pratt has described the “labor time” of slavery in an essay “Progress, Labor, Revolution: The Modern Times of African American Life Writing” as the “experience of labor under slavery that makes time itself repetitive, circular: time is structured by the calendar of capital accumulation and the strength of the seed; it is not the medium of progress.” (61). Ivy Wilson has stated this dynamic succinctly and its relationship to black self-representation and aesthetics in the antebellum period. Suggesting that the aesthetics of black democracy was always an iterative repetition of the white order’s forms of political representation, that “duplicates the original and alters it as well,” Wilson states “by foregrounding the latent issue of repetition, [we] underline the question of how long and to what degree a peripheral subject must continually reiterate the vocabularies of the nation before he or she is recognized as a constituent of a given polity or, at least, as an influence on how these politics imagine and construe themselves” (9). Wilson’s work is focused on rhetorical and literary forms that articulate a shadow space of black political life that seeks to transform the terms of the dominant order in the aesthetics of political representation. But the time of representation’s shadow is necessarily belated and orbiting around the norms of the nation. His work is powerful, but does not account for how figurations of black freedom throughout the antebellum period inhabited multiple

The ongoing experience of blacks, in and out of slavery, of something akin but irreducible to what white political groups like the Whigs feared as “backwards progress” was a type of temporal absence: both a product and productive of the management and suppression of black life as outside the space of history and politics. And yet, it was a position that facilitated an imagination of freedom as something other than developmental and progressive. These writers discovered in the repeated tragedy of black freedom—its insubstantial appearances and its disruptions by imperial violence—a way to describe the emergence of freedom in history as sustained by the social activation of an unrestrained feeling for the future in the present of experience and its reiteration as an affect in the historical text. In contrast to romantic history’s sense of expectation for a forever-deferred future across a continuous narrative of progress, the texts of black history register an imagination of freedom as a series of iterative breaks. These moments of freedom and immanent futurity are connected not by the continuous feeling of a single “people,” but as an affect that proliferates through both its repeated eruptions in slave revolts and marronage and in the aesthetic re-description and dissemination of those suppressed histories through print and oratory. Against the anti-

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times, orbiting the sacred past, and the Haitian present, as much as it wanted to figure a transformed national future. See, Wilson, *Specters of Democracy* (2011).

black violence of progress, but always hounded by it, black history found a future of freedom in the now of its radical presence.

Haiti, scenes of black revolt and resistance to slavery, and participation of black soldiers in the American Revolution and the War of 1812 are all central images in these texts. Some, like William C. Nell's *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (1855) were assimilationist, looking to recover a history of black participation in the founding dramas of the nation to secure claims on citizenship. Others—most prominently Martin R. Delany's *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852)—researched and wrote about black history in America in order to testify to the injustice of blacks being excluded from U.S. political life and insist on the necessity of emigration. Still others looked at longer histories, making claims on black freedom and equality through appeals to biblical and ancient history, contesting the racist myths of the dominant order with divine and classical knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Each

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<sup>6</sup> Three important works on black history in the nineteenth century have proposed competing models for how these works challenge and interrogate romantic history's portrayal of time. Stephen G. Hall's *A Faithful Account of the Race* (2011) argues that black history is best understood as a return to an older Enlightenment tradition of universal history and its commitment to long time scales, stories of the eternal struggle between slavery and freedom, and a universalism that pre-dates and disrupts nineteenth century nationalism. John Ernest's *Liberation Historiography* (2004) emphasizes the meta-historical aspects of black history, its formal defamiliarization of the romantic narratives of progress that had been denied to African-Americans through techniques like fragmentation and messianic and projective interpretations of the past. Finally, Laurie Maffly-Kipp's *Setting Down the Sacred Past* (2010) focuses on black history as a form of "collective narrative"—in contrast to the well-known genre of personal and life narratives of ex-slaves. In her argument, black history tracks the formation and emergence of a collective black protestant identity in the New World, and its commitments to religious liberation. My own argument draws, to varying degrees, on all of these works, but I'm less interested in the questions of form and identity that shaped these works, and more in how black history registered and theorized a profound ambivalence about temporal experience at the level of its invocation and revisions of the aesthetic categories of romantic history entails shifting

incorporated romantic language, stories of civilizational progress, images of heroism and displays of passion on behalf of liberty only to come up against the impossibility of explaining black history or temporal experience as “progress,” and subtly (and often ambivalently) produced a series of differing figures for the emergence of freedom across time and the type of vision (and hearing) one has to have to detect its faltering but proliferating growths, repetitions, failures and advances.

By exploring the pull of romantic and imperial aesthetic forms within abolitionist culture alongside the works of black history that disrupted and transformed its singular vision I will expand on the racial and political stakes of romantic history in articulating national and transnational fantasies of the future of freedom in the New World.

Romantic history was a discourse of power, seeking to arrest the failure of the nation to become the singular authorizing force of temporal experience in the antebellum period through figurative (but often all too realizable) violence towards the black and blackened others of its imperial aesthetic. It was a resolution to the ideological problem confronted by a nation that claimed authority over the future of liberty even as was responsible for the spread of slavery. But it was a resolution that only displaced tensions and crises, even as they became more pronounced and over-determined by affective

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attention from the form of the texts (their overall narrative structures) and their role in the origins and growth of African-American political and religious cultures, and articulating each text as a theorization of the experience and emergence of freedom in and across time—effects that are registered in diction, breaks in syntax, and descriptions of the sights and sounds of black freedom.

anxiety. The position of blacks in America—of living through slavery directly or through the failures of the nation’s promise of freedom—enabled abolitionist historians to push against the limits of those categories for resolving their own claims on freedom and the claims being made in Haiti, Canada and the West Indies in black experiences with freedom that had been disavowed in official romantic history. Out of the deprivation of the very experience of time that would enable them to imagine a future in the nation, these writers began to see (and hear) other possibilities for imagining freedom. This chapter attends to the limits of categories like progress and beauty for a radical historical imagination and how black abolitionists’ revisions of history challenged traditional political forms like the liberal subject, progress, and nationalism in the militant period of abolitionism before the outbreak of the war that would break the spell of romantic history in its chaotic violence.<sup>7</sup>

*Beauty, Slavery and Imperial Time*

The appeal of romantic history was in the emotional satisfaction of experiencing one’s own position in time as within the continuity of an epic of progress. By providing an emotional assurance of futurity in vividly experiential descriptions of a heroic past,

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<sup>7</sup> Here I am referring to the general shift from romanticism and moral idealism to empiricism and pragmatism in U.S. intellectual culture that Louis Menand has argued was a major effect of the Civil War. See his *The Metaphysical Club* (2001).

romantic historians forcefully displaced the contradictions and anxieties of the present moment onto the scenes of already accomplished and mythologized trials. When George Bancroft lectured on the power beautiful historical images would have in binding and securing the future of a nation in his lecture, "The Necessity, the Reality, and the Promise of the Progress of the Human Race" he was articulating the emotional force many Americans had felt in response to history. But such claims, met at the New York Historical Society with enthusiasm, also announced the problem they disavowed: the lack of consensus over the future within and outside of the United States and the failure of providential time to account for the diversity of experience with the American nation and its violent exclusions. For abolitionists (and others like Herman Melville) who perceived the nation as a scene of contradiction and enslavement, these claims were only so much bombast, exposing in their brassy tones the hollowness of the culture's romance with nationalism. Yet, despite protests, denials and outrage over Bancroft and others' association of national history with the enjoyments of aesthetic beauty, many of the same writers could not forsake the affective power promised by romantic history's imagination of time. They remained attached to the idea that the past could promise something in the future, and that the truly beautiful in history secured their own (more moral) political desires. This attachment to the category of beauty (or in the case of Melville, this inability to articulate a positive counter-aesthetic) trapped them in romantic history's linear vision of time and its reliance on visions of racial subjection to

manage and displace resistant futures. In this section I am concerned with three writers who attempted to disarticulate beauty and nationalism, only to be find themselves caught in the entanglements of beauty, enslavement and imperialism in the romantic imagination.

Interrogations of history through the rhetoric and symbols of nationalism were a recurrent feature of abolitionist writing from Douglass's address, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July" (1841) to William Wells Brown's novel *Clotel: The President's Daughter* (1853). While Garrisonians vehemently rejected sacrosanct nationalist symbols like the Constitution as complicit with slavery, other abolitionist texts incorporated nationalist symbols to decry the failures of the nation to live up to its principles. At the center of these contested discourses are symbols like Bunker Hill, Thomas Jefferson, bells tolling liberty, and chains metonymic for enslavement. And while these symbols carry more or less conventional meanings, they were often presented by way of aesthetically thick descriptions. Bunker Hill could be a shining pillar on a hill or a pile of rocks marking the nation's broken promises. Such descriptive rhetoric enhances, questions, or disrupts a symbol's conventional meaning by enmeshing it in visual and sonic modes of presentation that carry an excess of affect—in other words by making symbolic meaning conditional on the way the symbol is imagined as present to the senses and thus as an

aesthetic object aimed at an (imagined) community of sensation.<sup>8</sup> William J. Watkins, a black abolitionist who wrote a response to Bancroft's lecture in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* made the aesthetic quality of nationalist symbolism clear. For Watkins, Bancroft's invocations of national history as a beautiful object "bound" to allure the world to liberty, sounded out not as a stirring call to national pride, but as a "sounding brass, a tinkling cymbal" that must have "died on the ears of Mr. Bancroft's audience" (256). Watkins deployed aesthetic re-description to craft a forceful and emotional disarticulation of beauty from nationalism and to re-encode the same nationalism with a different set of sensations: the screams and terror of slavery's scenes of subjection.

Watkins begins his rebuttal by associating the scene of Bancroft's lecture with an occasion full of symbolic significance, the Fourth of July, "when everyone knows the Truth has taken a leave of absence" (256). He draws on and contributes to an already

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<sup>8</sup> This formulation also reflects how Jacques Rancière's insight into the concept of aesthetics: "Aesthetics is not the theory of the beautiful or of art, nor is it a theory of sensibility. Aesthetics is an historically determined concept which designates a specific regime of visibility and intelligibility of art, which is inscribed in a reconfiguration of the categories of sensible experience and its interpretation [...] aesthetic experience implies a certain disconnection from the habitual conditions of sensible experience." (1). This disconnection allows perception to inhabit more than simply a knowledge of objects, their construction and their place in society or the social order. "This belief does not hide any reality. But it doubles reality, which the ethical order would like to consider as only one. As a consequence of this [perceiving subjects] can double their working identities; to the identity of the working at home in a defined regime can be added a proletarian identity – in other words, the identity of a subject capable of escaping the assignment to a private condition and of intervening in the affairs of the community" (6). In the case of abolitionist manipulation of nationalist symbols, the added aesthetic qualities generates a doubled mode of perception: one that reads symbols for what they mean conventionally, for their place in a nationalist system of meaning from which various identities are defined negatively and oppositionally (the slave, the free black, the white abolitionist, the sympathetic European) and a second, positive identity – an abolitionist way of seeing an hearing, a community that finds itself and addresses the nation from the position of a shared discernment/perception. See Rancière, "Thinking Between Disciplines: an aesthetics of knowledge" (2006).

rich well of aesthetic metaphors that abolitionists had used to describe the sonic content of that day. These were sounds that those who perceived the reality of slavery, its creation of “a horde of despots” and its “extension, consolidation, and perpetuity of a system of robbery, and plunder, and oppression,” already heard as “unmeaning twaddle” (247). Watkins connects the moral content of nationalism’s symbols and celebrations to their aesthetically jarring sound. This aesthetic discourse serves a two-fold purpose; it rejects Bancroft’s central claim that “[o]ur country is bound to allure the world to freedom by the beauty of its example,” and it consolidates an aesthetic political community whose moral perception is actuated in its members’ aural perception of U.S. nationalism. If you can hear Bancroft’s brassy tones, you become bound to others on the basis of a shared aesthetic and moral knowledge.

Watkins then moves to reveal the true moral and sonic content of Bancroft’s “beautiful example.” With arch irony, Watkins offers “a slight alteration in the phraseology of this sentence. In order to speak the truth, it should read, ‘Our country is bound to allure the world to *Slavery!*’ (256, emphasis in the original). The archness continues throughout as Watkins delivers an abolitionist jeremiad on the tyranny of slavery and the influence of the American government abroad as “only an influence for evil” (257). Responding to Bancroft’s aesthetic language he interrogates his readers’ moral and aesthetic perception of the nation’s history:

Where is its beauty? Is there anything very beautiful in whipping women,

burning them with red hot irons, setting bloodhounds upon their track, tearing their infant children from them, and selling them with other horses and cattle?" This litany of slavery's scenes of subjection continues until Watkins ends, "Anything specially beautiful in our chains and thumbscrews? [...] O what beautiful example does America set before the world! (257)

Watkins sets these images in juxtaposition to the aesthetic category of beauty as the horrifying truths its false application obscures. But what if we take Watkins' rhetorical questions the other way? The breaks in Watkins' grammar register an increasing rhetorical agitation, as if, coming to the terrible recognition that these scenes were precisely what Bancroft meant by beauty, he could no longer disentangle the aesthetic surfaces of the nation's symbols from the moral outrage of slavery. If a chain is beautiful and the nation is bound, what futures can abolitionists envision beyond the irony of "the beautiful example America set[s] before the world"?

The problem Watkins's rhetorical ambivalence registers is that the affective force historians like Bancroft claimed for beauty in binding the nation and securing its future might not depend on moral truth, and that such a binding of a community might proceed despite the hollowness that abolitionists hear. If slavery is a part of the object that Bancroft names as beautiful, then the hollow, brass notes of Bancroft's lecture—the moral and aesthetic dissonance identified by Watkins—are not sufficient to unravel its force or generate a sufficient counter-community of aesthetic discernment. Watkins's final ironic restatement of Bancroft's central argument about the "beautiful example America sets before the world" is haunted by a fear over the possibility that America (as

symbol and as power) will be a force for the reinstatement of slavery in those places where it has been abolished — as had been the case with Texas, New Mexico and was potentially the case with the Yucatan and even Haiti. That the beautiful is merely an appendage of power was a striking and, in the context of antebellum culture and the prominence of moral beauty in abolitionist and reform literature, profoundly disturbing recognition.

While the intimacy of beauty with power and enslavement remains an inference in Watkins's editorial, it is left open as a possibility. Many abolitionist texts are haunted by an anxiety over the need to deny nationalism the truth of moral beauty, and return to figures of sonic brassiness or hollowness to expose the empty claims of nationalism. But, as is the case with Watkins's editorial, the repeated attempts to replace beauty with other sounds and images of slavery meant that the aesthetic community of abolitionism was all too often imagined as constituted around the spectatorship of black suffering and abjection.<sup>9</sup> As we will see, there was a concerted effort in black history to provide images of black social and political life beyond the chains and terror of life in the

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<sup>9</sup> I am referring in part here to Saidiya Hartmann's well known analysis of how blackness is constituted in the antebellum period by the display of suffering (and enjoyment). The problem that much abolitionist literature and accounts of slavery reproduces is that, in displaying the suffering of slavery, they produce black subjects as outside of time, dependent upon an often implicitly white community of reform (constituted by a type of aesthetic witnessing) to generate a future beyond slavery. In this gesture slaves are both deprived of time and progress, and a linear form of progress is claimed by the community of reform. This was not a limitation on abolitionist discourse, even if it seems all too recurrent, and there are many examples of abolitionist literature providing representations of slavery that subvert this formal expectation. See Hartmann, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). For more on the subversion of this and similar structures of subjection in black performance in the nineteenth century see, Daphne Brooks's *Bodies in Dissent* (2006).

Americas.<sup>10</sup> But arguments against the myths of national beauty were often complicit with modes of imagining time and history that depended on the spectacle of black suffering—an aesthetics that reproduced the modes of temporal management at work in nationalist history. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was just such a text. In it, Stowe contests a southern patriarchal aesthetic of slavery, denying its status as beautiful, only to reproduce the centrality of figures of black abjection in her linear temporalities of progress and reform.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* demonstrates the entanglements of time, aesthetics, and slavery in Stowe's frequent discourse on the presence and absence of beauty in slavery. The recurring question of whether anything within slavery could be considered beautiful is introduced early when Stowe articulates her rejection of southern propaganda of the patriarchal benevolence of the institution of slavery. Responding to these images, she writes:

So long as the law considers these human beings, with beating hearts and living affections, only as so many *things* belonging to a master,—so long as the failure, or misfortune or the impudence, or death of the kindest owner, may cause them any day to exchange a life of kind protection and indulgence for one of hopeless misery and toil,—so long as it is impossible to make anything beautiful or desirable in the best regulated administration of slavery. (14-15)

Despite this blanket claim that slavery makes beauty impossible, Stowe's narrator—the moral voice of the novel that interprets its events according to a standard of Christian

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<sup>10</sup> Not that this attempt to get outside of slavery does not carry its own set of conceptual and political problems, many of which will be discussed in what follows.

morality—is not entirely consistent. The novel frequently describes certain relationships as beautiful, such as those between Tom and Little Eva or Eliza and her child. Each is a relationship of familial dependency—matriarchal if not patriarchal—even when they cross the barriers between master and slave. But each is also under threat from the insubstantial conditions of these relationships within slavery. At any time, one member may be deformed into a thing, sold away, and subjected to violence that, like Simon Legree’s assaults on Tom, aims at destroying beautiful moral feeling. The narrator functions as a voice of experience that knows about the threats that confront beautiful relationships under the regimes of slavery. Whereas the embodiments of beauty, particularly in the character of little Eva, always retain an air of naivety and innocence, unaware of the futures aimed against its very possibility.

This innocent beauty serves a political purpose in the novel; it opens up an imagination of the type of relationships that are always becoming impossible under slavery, and it anticipates a future of social reformation. Witnessing beauty (and its sacrifice or destruction by slavery) compels many of Stowe’s characters to become abolitionists. In witnessing the destruction of a morality that they were either unaware of or thought absent from the regimes of slavery, they become agents of a form of historical progress. In the always-interrupted “beauty” of her images of a benevolent and familial relationship between masters and servants, Stowe marks out the temporal condition of the antebellum U.S: its present is an interregnum between an idealized

Christian past and a future reintegration of that moral order with the modern political state.<sup>11</sup> That interregnum is New World slavery. Beauty subsists as an innocent fragment of a lost world that has to be sacrificed, in Eva and Tom's deaths, to build a community that would insist on a political overcoming of the present. But the reception of these beautiful images and their immense affective force also serves to generate the sense of what it means to inhabit the present through a structure dependent upon the spectacle of Tom's being degraded and made abject by the regimes of slavery. This image generates temporal affect that, despite its opposition to the conditions of the present, still imagines time as linear. Time only passes through the condition of the contemporary or the modern on its way towards its redemption in a moral order. And the reader, in the experience of such aestheticized violence, potentially enjoys a vision of redeemed future in a figure of abjection.<sup>12</sup> The regime of the beautiful at work in Stowe's text, even in its opposition to the racial orders of the antebellum U.S., still retains the commitment of

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<sup>11</sup> Stowe is not the first to imagine the way an aesthetic reception of the beautiful or innocent could propel political desires for revolution or reform. The German romantic Freidrich Schiller provided the most thorough theoretical articulation of the role of art in redeeming human societies and fueling moral progress, and it is likely a version of his ideas that circulated through transatlantic romanticism to U.S. sentimentalism. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794) and "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry" (1795) he argues that the beautiful in art provides an experience of moral and rational harmony to the senses that is otherwise absent from the modern world. It helps bind a moral community through an "aesthetic education" committed to a reintegration of the moral state. Like in much romanticism, his temporal model is based in a Christian lapsarianism, where the profane present is imagined as laying between a past naïve era of wholeness and a future rational order.

<sup>12</sup> While my use of abjection and subjection in this chapter is fairly conventional, I want to clarify that they are not interchangeable. I use abjection to refer to the condition of being denied entrance into the political order projected by progressive temporality, i.e. being cast off. Subjection refers to the condition of being included in those orders, but within a specific subject position as subservient to other positions.

romantic history to images of racial subjugation and restraint to structure its feeling for futurity.

In contrast to the attempt of sentimental abolitionism to retrieve moral beauty as a driving force of history from the falsity of romantic nationalism, Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* is a far more ambivalent text. Like Watkins's editorial, it suggests that beauty, power, and enslavement are imbricated in the way the United States nationalism subjugates blackness in its vision of the future. Melville's pronounced suspicion of the romantic and the sentimental meant that far from seeing the beautiful as a force that could overcome slavery, he was able to portray its role in the enforcement of slave regimes. Nevertheless, his representation of the upheaval of linear orders in the slave revolt does not suggest any futures beyond a racial apocalypse drawn in terms strikingly similar to those who feared racial revolt throughout the hemisphere.

Scholars have often focused their readings of *Benito Cereno* on Captain Delano's ideological blinders: his inability to perceive the slave revolt that has taken place and his misplacement of suspicion on Cereno. Nuanced accounts of this story pay close attention to how Melville tracks the interrelationship between Delano's perceptions aboard the *San Dominick* and the imbalances of his emotional keel. For instance, Dana Nelson has suggested that Delano's trust and fellow feeling with the Spanish captain depend on a bond generated by the witnessing of scenes of black subjection to white

power.<sup>13</sup> Advancing this line of analysis, Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo have identified how Melville describes these scenes of subjection in distinctly aesthetic terms. They are “artful” compositions that assure Delano of peace and order aboard the ship. In their account, this demonstrates how aesthetic reception is enmeshed in political and social codes. They go on to argue that Babo, the crafter of these images, fashions a “revolutionary aesthetic” that “challenges ideas of individual autonomy” by showing how “aesthetic experience entails far more than the bounded American captain’s consciousness” and opens a space for the disempowered and marginalized to upend the normal relations of power. While these images make Delano think that he and Cereno are in positions of control and authority, he is rather completely dependent on the material control Babo has exercised over his perceptions.<sup>14</sup> My sense of how time and perception works in the novella is developed from this useful insight into the political life of aesthetics.

Throughout, Melville structures a frisson between the time Delano perceives (or perhaps desires) himself to be inhabiting and the temporal and spatial origins of his suspicions and the images that haunt the fringes of his perception. From the outset, Delano searches out signs that he inhabits a normal temporal order—the linear time-scales of historical providence that, as Andy Doolen has suggested, would manage the

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<sup>13</sup> See Nelson’s *National Manhood* (1998).

<sup>14</sup> Kelly Ross has argued that Babo’s creative power is found precisely in his ability to manipulate other’s perception of time in “Heterochronic Time in *Benito Cereno*” [unpublished conference presentation] (2014)

transference of imperial and slave power from a Spanish colonial past to the American future.<sup>15</sup> Melville's adoption of gothic imagery puts this orderly perception of time at odds with the seeming co-presence of other pasts with his present. Among other things, Delano is haunted by visions of medieval Catholicism, strangely occasioned by his initial perception of the *San Dominick* as a monastery. Melville's interest in time is reflected in the early description of the tolling bell. The bell keeps time, giving it order and pushing it forward. All the same, the image's archaic and gothic elements disrupt the stability of the present. In part, the bell helps to conjure the Black Legend of the Spanish Empire's cruelty that, according to Maria Deguzman's insightful analysis, the antebellum U.S. had imaged itself as overcoming.<sup>16</sup> This frequent layering of complicated temporal images produces much of the novella's atmosphere of suspense and tension. On the one hand, these images help to ease Delano's mind allowing him to interpret oddities and anachronisms like Cereno's uniform in terms of a linear historical models (in this instance a fashion that may not yet have gone out of style in South America). On the other, each image produces new confusions by way of their strange persistence and irregularities (the uniform is said to still be in style somewhere, but it also cloaks Cereno in an air of decay).

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<sup>15</sup> See Doolen's *Fugitive Empire* (2005).

<sup>16</sup> See Deguzman's *Spain's Long Dark Shadow* (2005).

Most important in Melville's construction of these temporal frissons are the recurring images that Babo places before Delano to simultaneously suggest a benevolent order and covertly threaten Cereno into obedience. Babo's shaving of Delano produces an aesthetic image of trust between master and servant, both in its intimacy and in its supposed regularity. Like the patriarchal myth that Stowe works to expose, it demonstrates to Delano the recurrent commitment of the slave to the master's decorum and the upkeep of the ship's order by all involved at regular intervals. But as we read (and re-read) Melville's text, the specter of gruesome violence becomes unavoidable. Even more fundamental is the recurrent presentation of Atufal in chains before Cereno every twenty minutes—"his time-keeper" as Delano calls him. The subjection of the "mulish mutineer" suggests that, upon the ship, disobedience has been kept in check and that Cereno's seeming physical frailty belies a deeper exercise of control and command. Immediately before Atufal's first appearance, Delano has been thrown into doubt by Cereno's seemingly superstitious response to the mention of the body of his dead companion, Alexandro Aranda. According to Delano's "modern" understanding of grief, his body should be embalmed and returned to his family to ease the suffering of his passing. The suggestion of this progressive solution to grief, however, throws Cereno into a swoon (since as we will learn the body is attached to the prow of the ship), which Delano interprets as produced by a superstitious and anachronistic belief in ghosts and goblins.

The gothic elements generate further temporal confusion: how can order on the ship be maintained by this captain who seems to exist as if in a different time and place, haunted by invisible terrors? Babo produces the image of Atufal's subjection at this moment to assure Delano of Cereno's authority. Atufal both keeps Cereno's "time" by marking its passing and by producing the time of the ship as stable, consonant with the time-scales that Delano comprehends as modern, linear, and ordered, thus dispelling earlier temporal confusions. However, as is typical throughout the text, this image introduces yet new frissons, particularly in the dissonance between Cereno's bodily frailty and his seemingly tyrannical command. Melville stages this dynamic to produce a tension for both Delano and the reader. Delano, unable to harmonize these appearances in his mind, debates whether Cereno's frailty is an act and if he is a pirate plotting betrayal. Whereas the reader, particularly on subsequent readings of the text, is pushed to interpret Cereno's frailty as related to the threat over his life if he were to speak and dispel Delano's confusions, since he so often falters right when it seems he seems about to communicate something that would reveal the novella's secrets. Thus, at the formal level, the deferred speech of a white commander is held out as a resolution to the gothic plot. This tension over the absence of white speech is a conscious part of Melville's irony; it calls attention to the dependency of a supposed transcendent providential order on the conditions of material embodiment. Cereno's frequent failure to speak causes Delano's perceptions of time to become confused—a tendency that culminates in the

climax of the text. Delano perceives Cereno's leap onto Delano's boat to save his own life as at first a revelation—not of the slave revolt—but of the supposed pirate's long hidden intentions. At this point Melville writes: “[a]ll this, with what proceeded, and what followed, occurred with such involutions of rapidity, that past, present and future seemed one” (733). Lacking the ordering of the speech of a white authority, Delano's perception of time folds in on itself.

The aesthetic images of a benevolent order that Babo had constructed to fool Delano unravel with the latter's perception of time. Those images produced a temporal order out of an aesthetics of racial hierarchy and subjection—but that order was always haunted by gothic pasts and violent futures suggested in Cereno's failure to speak. In the end, these images are unable to actually produce a stable order because the linear time that structures Delano's perceptions depends on both black subjection and white speech—which Cereno (subjected by threats to his material being) cannot produce. It is telling that, after the long deposition that rewrites and imposes a sequential order on the events aboard the *San Dominick* and criminalizes black disobedience to subjugation, Melville ends the text with a discussion between Delano and Cereno in which they attribute their survival to “providence.” Melville ironizes this invocation of the dominant antebellum theory of history. Where their discussion of the “beautiful” and benevolent will that enabled them to survive assures the American of providence's transcendental foundation—and the linear order of time it entails—the Spanish Captain

is haunted by his knowledge of providence's intimate relationship with the unstable suppression of black rebellion.

Delano has often been read as a Melville's diagnosis of the blindness of the stereotypical American to the apocalyptic contradictions emerging in the national order on the eve of the Civil War. It is important however, to keep in mind that these contradictions were always at once internal and transnational, and it is telling that the spatial trajectory of the *San Dominick*—to the south and outside of organized national space—is what opens Delano's perception to confusion. Historians committed to the national order projected an image of space and time that attempted to view the hemisphere as directed towards national republican liberty. But as I have shown in previous chapters, this entailed at once the displacement of national crises onto other spaces, a fantasy of resolving those crises through romantic conquest, and the inevitable instability that resulted when those spaces spoke back to or refused positioning within a set of aesthetic norms that made their temporal signature readable. Slave revolt, and the projection of futures by black political life was perhaps the *sine qua non* of the aesthetically fugitive—a production of difference that was inassimilable to national order. The imperial trajectory of Melville's novel takes us to South America and to Haiti to stage the internal crisis of the forms of temporal perception being produced by aesthetic history. However, it also merely names that crisis as the always-immanent threat of counter-imperial resistance and slave revolution. It fails precisely where the

aesthetics of black history picks up: at imagining a force of freedom at work in the fissures of modern time. For black historians in the antebellum period it was precisely the conflation of temporal modes—“the past, present, and future seeming one”—at the center of white visions of racial apocalypse that opened up a way to think about history other than as a linear narrative of progress. Black writers between the 1830s and the 1850s looked to biblical, ancient, and modern history as sources for imagining a diffusion of multiple scenes and times of black freedom in the modern world at the margins of the space of the nation.

*Black Nationalism and the Problem of Progress*

In 1854, William Wells Brown delivered a strident and prophetic lecture on the history of the Haitian Revolution in London, and then again in Philadelphia. Reflecting the growing militancy of abolitionist discourse in the 1850s, Brown painted a vivid portrait of the destruction of the war from which the revolution emerged:

During the conflict the city [Cap Francais] was set on fire, and on every side presented shocking evidence of slaughter, conflagration, and pillage. The strife of political and religious partisanship, which had raged in the clubs and streets of Paris, and had caused the guillotine to send its two hundred souls every day for many weeks, unprepared, to eternity, were transplanted to St. Domingo, where they raged with all the heat of a tropical climate, and the animosities of a civil war. (14)

Imagining how the spread of the revolutionary conflagration moved from France to its colony as an effect of exclusion of blacks from the new political order and the continuation of slavery, prophesizes its re-emergence in the U.S. South.

And, should such a contest take place, the God of Justice will be on the side of the oppressed blacks. The exasperated genius of Africa would rise from the depths of the ocean, and show its threatening form; and war against the tyrants would be the rallying cry. The indignation of the slaves of the south would kindle a fire so hot that it would melt their chains, drop by drop, until not a single link would remain; and the revolution that was commenced in 1776 would then be finished. (30)

Brown's lecture—with its prophetic imagery, focus on masculine heroes like Toussaint Louverture, and reliance on metaphors of flame to describe the sudden emergence and spread of revolution, its repetition and reiteration—displays many of the key features of black history in the antebellum period. These works adapted and reproduced the framework of romantic history—its attempts to make progress palpable in the aesthetics of revolutionary heroism—even as they came upon the limits of that discourse for accounting for a history of black freedom. Like Brown's deferral of revolutionary closure in the image of "the genius of Africa" rising "from the depths of the ocean," black history reimagined the temporal order of progress so that the present was still within a revolutionary break. In this extended present, immanent demands for freedom could at any moment bring about the fiery emergence of black freedom, unconditioned by the

history of slavery and imperialism it insistently refused.<sup>17</sup> Where romantic historians wanted their readers to feel progress in the (temporal and spatial) past in order to confine and constrain the present and future to a linear continuity, black historians wanted their audiences to feel the ongoing heat of the demand for freedom, and to produce, through their description of the scenes of black revolt further iterations of revolutionary experience.

In attempting to write history to communicate suppressed stories of black achievement and struggle, black historians were entering into a discursive field structured by oppression, imperialism and patriarchy. From the universalist histories of Robert Benjamin Lewis and W.C. Pennington in the 1840s to the militancy of Martin R. Delany and William C. Nell in the 1850s, these writers were far from consistent in their resistance to those forms. Like nationalist historians, they focused on male military figures. Toussaint Louverture, Crispus Attucks, Henry Diaz, Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner all featured prominently in their works. They frequently announced their purpose in writing history as refuting racist blindness of black achievement as such achievement had been defined by the white supremacist and imperialistic society to which they both did and did not belong. These writers were largely black nationalists,

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<sup>17</sup> This reflects Eric Sundquist's observation that unlike the majority of White Americans who understood themselves to one degree or another as a post-revolutionary generation in the antebellum period, black Americans still felt themselves to be within a revolutionary period. I would add to this formulation that sustaining that revolutionary affect was not simply something natural that happened, but was a concerted project that relied on the ongoing struggle for emancipation throughout the world to sustain itself as slavery became more entrenched in the United States. See Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations* (1993).

looking for the history of a yet to emerge black nation out of the fragments of its revolutionary history.<sup>18</sup> Scholars from Wilson Moses to Maggie Montesino Sale and Maurice Wallace have all pointed towards the inherent conservatism of the black nationalist rhetoric and images of the period. As Moses argues “black nationalism [was] a prime vehicle for acculturation processes, because black nationalism in the nineteenth century was much concerned with preserving Anglo-American values and transmitting them, in modified form, to the black community” (11). In *The Slumbering Volcano* (1997), Sale shows how the trope of black masculine revolt was a response to and repetition of constructions of white masculinity that imagined black slavery as a result of African’s feminine reticence to engage in revolutionary struggle. And Maurice Wallace examines how photography of black soldiers serving in the Civil War covered both the suffering and wounds of slavery and the labor of black women with the garments of patriotic service in his essay “Framing the Black Soldier” (2012).

All of these critiques of black militancy touch on the problems presented by the rhetoric of progress for accounting for black political life. Black nationalism, in part, imagined the future of black freedom secured by a nascent, but emerging, black nation (either within or outside of the United States). It imagined the roots of that future political state growing out of the present, and a new national identity bound by a shared

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<sup>18</sup> This concurs with a point made by John Ernest in *Liberation Historiography*. The only way for black historians to imagine a black past that would secure a black future was through an attention to fragmentation—since black history only existed in the wake of its suppression by the slave trade and imperialism.

blackness. Black militancy constructed images of black masculine subjects progressing out of slavery into a realm of universal political recognition (a linear empty time) in scenes of heroic revolt modeled after U.S. nationalist portraits of the American Revolution. Such heroism often, as in the case with Douglass's construction of his own commitment to freedom in witnessing his aunts' scream (as it has been famously analyzed by Saidiya Hartman), depended on the construction of black women and children as merely suffering bodies that need to be saved by men. However, these models of progress and subjectivity that merely repeat and confirm the violence and oppression of U.S. nationalism and racial republicanism are only part of the story of black history in the period. Although the culture of historical knowledge within which these historians wrote was thoroughly dominated by the concept of progress, black experience with national progress, as both a withheld promise and an imminent peril, had resulted in a far more ambivalent and ultimately destabilizing adaptations of romantic norms for representing progress in the black history of the period.

What I am proposing is that instead of viewing these histories from the perspective of the intervening history since then—the failures of Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the post-civil-rights incarceration state—that reveals in such stark terms to us the dangers of the concept of “progress” for speaking about and evaluating political movements, we approach these writers as fellow theorists of progress and its limitations. Critiques of the sexism and complicit imperialism of these texts' reliance on black male

militancy remain valid, but there was also in these texts a powerful re-imagination of the romantic aesthetics of progress that reappropriated them in startlingly radical forms. These historians struggled with progress because the conditions experienced by blacks in the United States in the antebellum period, in and out of slavery, were such that the form of political subjectivity, the entrance of the individual through education and/or a struggle for freedom into universal representativeness and progressive time, had always been withheld by the dominant white supremacist order (and as afro-pessimists would assert the violence of that withholding was constitutive of political modernity).<sup>19</sup> The more black individuals who escaped slavery, who resisted their oppression in revolt, who gained literacy and education and addressed publics about politics, the more the order reacted against black life and political speech in the form of the gag-rule against anti-slavery petitions; the expansion of slavery to the west and south; the refusal to allow blacks entrance to white institutions; the growing surveillance of black life in the south and north after the expansion of the Fugitive Slave Law; and the consolidation of political subjectivity around universal white male suffrage.

As a result, by the 1850s, the idea of progress was exceptionally troubled in abolitionist texts. An interrogation of the concept of progress is on display in William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, for instance where the promise of personal advancement is repeatedly held out to characters—in benevolent owners, marriages, or professional

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<sup>19</sup> See Frank Wilderson's *Red, White and Black* (2010)

advancement and respect—only to be withheld in vivid scenes of separation and abjection that echo in seemingly infinite repetitions across generations. A key example of such repetition is *Clotel*'s own melancholy re-experience of her mother's symbolic abandonment by the nation (in the form of Jefferson), when the white man she has been involved with, Horatio Green, abandons her and her children. Another example can be found on the various published arguments on behalf of emigration written by Martin R. Delany. Here the theme of the blocked possibility of Afro-American advancement returns again and again as he alternates between portraits of black writers and businessmen and accounts of the utter failure of life in the U.S. to sustain their enterprise. Most famously, Delany's pamphlet "The Political Destiny of the Colored Race" (1854) develops a profound criticism of voting rights, a primary demonstration of citizenship and the capacity for political progress. "To have the 'right of suffrage' as we rather proudly term it, is simply to have the *privilege*—there is no right about it—of giving our approbation to that which our rulers may do, without the privilege, on our part, of doing the same thing" (228). What many had seen as a path to advancement and inclusion, Delany decries as the reproduction of the status quo of black subservience in performances of freedom that were in fact a form of coercion and forced consent.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> We may also think about this forced performance of progress along the line of David Scott's idea of "Conscripts of Modernity." In a reading of C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins*, Scott describes the Toussaint Louverture's embrace of the language and discursive norms of the Enlightenment—its romantic commitments to progress and liberation—as necessarily ambivalent: an intervention into a ground of action, modernity, that "was not his to choose...it was the context in which his options were themselves constituted

This ambivalence about progress—and the performance of progress—was also a response to the experience of slavery. Those who had been enslaved simply were not able to experience the time of enslavement as one of growth or progress in the linear model. As Lloyd Pratt has argued, slave labor “makes time itself repetitive, circular: time is structured by the calendar of capital accumulation and the strength of the seed; it is not the transparent medium of progress” (61). This repetition is not, importantly, merely a residual form of temporal experience, within which slaves were held in order to bar their entry into the properly “modern” experience of personal growth and political progress. Nor was it simply a deprivation of time (as scholars like Henry Louis Gates have argued). It was a specific structure of modern capitalism and slavery that produced the slave’s temporal experience as “natural,” outside of politics and history, and existing merely for the cycles of crop production and the extraction of labor, in order to facilitate political control and subjugation.

Histories like Brown’s of the Haitian revolution, or Robert Benjamin Lewis’ *Light and Truth*, often used a temporally marked language of degradation to write about the effects of slavery and the life of the enslaved. In doing so, they were forced to confront

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and made visible and recognizable as options-as-such” (90). This movement in and through the terrain of modernity and modern political forms happens (and has potency in the moment of the Haitian Revolution) despite, in Scott’s assessment, that such a terrain is necessarily tragic for black, anti-colonial politics, since it is structured by racial hierarchies. See Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (2004).

and describe the sudden and startling emergence of the demand for freedom against slavery from the very same “degraded” and enslaved groups. The norms for imagining progress consisted of depicted a long tradition of Anglo-American political forms, their laborious encoding in law, and the occasional heroic champion who would advance the cause of freedom in times of crisis. But the Haitian Revolution, and other instances of slave revolt, presented the radical eruption of freedom from the least “elevated” groups of blacks in the New World, the enslaved population. Similarly, many heroes of black freedom, from Crispus Attucks to Toussaint Louverture were killed and defeated. They were tragic martyrs who never would see the end of slavery and whose accomplishments often produced no discernable material progress, as the flames of revolution they lit were quickly extinguished by the violence of white reaction. Thus, progress was both withheld from free and enslaved blacks in the United States and frequently took the form of imperialist violence against whatever communities had managed to escape the nation’s racial orders.

While the dominant culture of history imposed a progressive model of time as productive of political subjectivity, black history was written from within an intimate awareness that such an experience of time was not the only possibility offered by modernity. Although many abolitionist writers of history relied on categories like progress to imagine a future beyond slavery (as evidenced by the frequency with which words like “elevation” “advancement” and even “progress” are used in the titles of

these documents) from the 1840s onwards these writers began engaging a much wider variety of temporal models to describe black history, some of which scholars have begun to recover. Most writing on temporality in antebellum writing by black authors has focused on the overall narrative and intellectual frameworks of their imagination of time. Stephen G. Hall has argued that writers like Pennington and Lewis were harkening back to Christian and Enlightenment models of history that had utilized stories of the rise and fall of civilizations to explain the relative decline of Africa in the present moment and the inevitability that the United States would undergo such a decline in the future. Lloyd Pratt has read Frederick Douglass' fictionalized account of the 1842 revolt aboard *The Creole*, "The Heroic Slave" (1852), as imagining a messianic time of revolution (at odds with linear temporality) that "brings the past into the present in order to effect an unbending, universal justice for all times. The moment of true revolution is in no way homogeneous or empty but unimaginably full; the moment of revolution conjures all moments at once and distributes universal justice." (68)

Purposefully eschewing any concept of linear progress, both of these approaches to black temporality emphasize the radicalism of Enlightenment and religious calls to justice in the context of progressive and secular post-revolutionary modernity. Yet, they remain dependent on romantic metanarratives that look to absent totalities in the past and the future to ground the value of the fragmented experiences of freedom in the present. Such fragmentation is also a key theme in the most thorough study of black

historical writing in the antebellum period, John Ernest's *Liberation Historiography*. Ernest argues that the desperate black narratives of history were seen by writers and readers as fragments of an absent totality: a future moral and political order that would enable black writers to finally consolidate a coherent history out from under a white supremacist order.

These readings are compelling and accurate as to the intellectual and narrative framework of black historical writing, but they fail to account for how troubled any attempt to recuperate the present to a future beyond slavery that might never come could be to black writers as the antebellum period wore on. The problem of the negative temporal space that black political life had been violently constrained to is narratively disavowed by the projection of fuller futures and pasts, where black freedom would once again be possible. The texts of black history register that problem and a radically different imagination of freedom when they attempt to describe visually and emotionally what black freedom looked and felt like. I want to suggest that we try to think these fragments without the (highly modern and romantic) gesture towards an absent totality—that is, to think them as unredeemable in an absent future order and of substantive value in the present of their experience. What if in their repetition, dissemination, and hesitating growth, these portraits of black freedom produce a feeling for the possibility of freedom in the now, absent a structure of temporal stability that would give root to a singular future? What if we highlight instead the affective and

ethical capacity of freedom in the present tense to institute a break in the temporalities of political progress? Such a temporal imagination registers freedom as proliferating in the feeling of black social life for an unbounded future at the fringes of national time and space and reimagines the spread linear progress to those spaces as a tragic and deathly encounter with imperial violence. This temporal aesthetic was a response not only to the repetitious conditions of slavery, but to how the discourse of progress seemed to bar a recognition of sites of black political activity and freedom that were hesitating in their emergence, unproductive of a future beyond the immediate experience of freedom, and unable to be consolidated in a linear epic of the formation of a black nation or identity because they emerged in such disparate times and places.

The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with three important images in black history and how their portrayal in works by Lewis, Delany and Nell contributed to a black aesthetics of history that proliferates existing experiences of freedom. I will move from Delany's account of Crispus Attucks's martyrdom at the Boston Massacre (the image most loaded with a desire for national inclusion) to Lewis's contributions to the black abolitionist effort to redeem the Haitian Revolution from racist anxieties over black revolt, and I will end with Nell's singular portrait of Black Seminoles. I will show how the aesthetic practice of black history exceeded the boundaries of nationalism and linear experiences of progress. I describe this engagement and revision of nationalist history as aesthetic because it is at the local level of description of the sounds and images

of black freedom that the discourse of progress is interrupted by the impossibility of recuperating black freedom to the violence (and violent aesthetics) of progressive time. Because a scene of progress had to generate the expectation of its own future, it was impossible for these historians to adapt those aesthetic norms to histories of black freedom that had been suppressed and defeated. It is through the struggle to make black freedom apparent as productive of new sites of possibility and resistance that black history radically revised the aesthetics of history.

*The Aesthetics of Slave Revolution*

Just as nationalist historians had used the aesthetics of history to generate emotional experiences of the past that would testify to the continued existence of a national community and thereby ease anxieties over progress provoked by slavery and imperialism, black abolitionist writers utilized aesthetics to produce a community of readers committed to the cause of antislavery. But it became increasingly difficult to imagine the time that they, their historical subjects, and their readers inhabited as constituted in terms of a continuity conceived in terms of linear progress. In the early national period writers like Absalom Jones and Richard Allen made appeals to a predominantly white public on behalf of the ideals of the American Revolution and the universality of the human race. Relying on moral suasion, they observed the lack of

black inclusion in the political life of the nation and wrote to project themselves from that temporally absent position into the capacity to inhabit modern time and make claims on the future. As Benjamin Quarles has demonstrated, the tone of black abolitionism changed radically in the 1830s. As the progress of abolitionism stalled, after having advanced through 1810 with laws against slavery in the northern states and a ban on the international slave trade, and the politically compromised white-led American Colonization Society became the most prominent voice against slavery, black abolitionists grew dissatisfied with the tone of the previous generation.<sup>21</sup>

Large political changes in the 1820s shifted the dynamics of the abolitionist movement. The discourse of American politics became less genteel with the rise of Jacksonianism and universal white male suffrage, while white supremacist attitudes became more entrenched.<sup>22</sup> By the end of the 1820s the further exclusion of blacks from political life in the north and the expansion of slavery into the lower south were punctuated by the prosecution of Denmark Vesey and his companions in 1822 for slave conspiracy and Nat Turner's open revolt in Virginia in 1831. In the midst of these

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<sup>21</sup> Compromised because, as black abolitionists throughout the antebellum period pointed out, the Colonization Society had focused on the removal of free blacks as a way to resolve tensions within the United States, while still maintaining national control over black colonies in Africa. Colonization schemes did not propose a path to emancipation and equality so much as a redistribution of racial hierarchies throughout global space. David Kazanjian has detailed the imperialism at the heart of the colonizing movement at length in his *Colonizing Trick* (2003). See especially chapter two: "Racial Governmentality: The African Colonization Movement."

<sup>22</sup> The concurrent rise of universal white male suffrage with white supremacy has been detailed in Alexander Saxton's *Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990).

upheavals David Walker published his *Appeal*: the definitive statement of the growing frustrations in black communities with the failed promises of the American revolution and the announcement of the agenda of black abolitionism for the next three decades. Rejecting the deference of the past for a sharper tone, Walker's pamphlet spoke directly to a growing black audience for works of political protest and explorations of black history and identity.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to Jones and Allen, Walker's emotionally charged call for action on behalf of justice spoke from what he acknowledged was a position outside the national community, and outside its progress, to radically ask what progress, if any at all, could be claimed on behalf of the nation.

The increasing militancy of black abolitionism from the 1830s onwards resulted in a renewed historical awareness of past struggles against slavery and a sense that any continuity with that past had barred the national construction of which subjects and what events could and could not carry forward the flame of political progress. As many writers came to question the moral suasion tactics of an early generation, they sought out stories of a black past that would inflame black pride and unity while condemning the racism of the nation that had continued to oppress them in seeming contradiction to its revolutionary ideals. T. Morris Chester captured the tone of much of this writing in a pamphlet published in the midst of the Civil War, "[t]ake down from your walls

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<sup>23</sup> For more on the centrality of David Walker in shifting the tone of black abolitionism, see "Introduction" *Pamphlets of Protest*. Elizabeth Ruah Bethel has described at length the cultural processes that formed African-American racial identity in the black public sphere throughout this period in *The Roots of African-American Identity*. (1997)

pictures of WASHINGTON, JACKSON, and MCLELLAN; and if you love to gaze upon military chieftains, let the gilded frames be graced with the immortal TOUSSAINT” (308). Black history found outlets for expression in abolitionist newspapers, oratory in churches and conventions, and pamphlet literature. At the center of this output there were a number of full-length histories published by abolitionist societies. As Stephen G. Hall has pointed out, this writing responded to the call of David Walker to “trouble the pages of the historians,” and much of it was directly shaped by the political concerns of abolitionism and the need to respond to the absence of a black past in dominant accounts of history and then prominent religious and scientific myths of racial inferiority. In contrast to romantic history, which despite its anxiety about progress was written as if progress and continuity were a natural mode of historical experience, the absence of the black past in cultural memory meant that black history had to imagine its audience as capable of being constituted and of sharing in a feeling for freedom on the ground of profound temporal discontinuity.

Martin Delany’s hybrid history/emigration pamphlet, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (1852), contains a powerful example of a discussion of the aesthetic qualities of historical images that registers black abolitionist ambivalence about nationalist models of progress as a necessary foundation for a community committed to anti-slavery. The text is ultimately an argument in favor of African emigration, but it begins with a thorough critique of the American

Colonization Society on the grounds that black American's had every "claim as Citizen's of the United States" and that the colonization plans supported by the society were merely a way to remove "free colored people from the land of their birth, for the security of slaves, as property of the slave propagandists" (58). In order to make his claim on behalf of black citizenship, Delany recounts a great deal of history, primarily in the form of brief biographies of black soldiers who served in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, black scholars, women and men of letters (like Phyllis Wheatley), businessmen, and mechanics. These biographies are a conscious attempt to consolidate a memory of black contributions to the American nation, while at the same time raising communal awareness of achievements that have been excluded and omitted from the dominant culture's historical knowledge. While we might read these biographies as exercises in citizen-subject formation, providing portraits of black women and men as able to experience and participate in linear forms of progress like "elevation" and "moral advancement," Delany suggests that his writing has purpose that exceeds the case for citizenship.

When the text turns to its recovery of black historical figures, about half way through, Delany begins with Crispus Attucks, an African American who was killed in the Boston Massacre. Delany was not himself recovering the story of Attucks. By 1852 it was the centerpiece of contributionist abolitionism, and Delany cites Nell's earlier pamphlet (discussed in what follows) as an important source. Delany introduces his

account of this story stating that he wishes to present Attucks before his reader to “establish our right of equal claims of citizenship with other American people.” But he expands on this rhetoric, suggesting that in remembering Attucks story:

We shall be able to prove, that colored men, not only took part in a great scene of the first act for independence, but that they were actors—a colored man was really the hero in the great drama, and actually the first victim in the revolutionary tragedy—then indeed, shall we have more than succeeded, and have reared a monument of fame to the history of our deeds, more lasting than the pile that stands on Bunker Hill (92).

Here Delany engages a historical discourse on visibility only to subvert it through his shifting aesthetic metaphors. Revolutionary history is a scene—a type of painting—in which he is locating a color—blackness—hitherto unacknowledged. Visual appearance in the present tense is (typically for antebellum history) the arena in which historical truth is established. The second, dramatic, metaphor derives from the discourse of political representation. John Ernest has argued that placing black subjects into the representational theater of politics enabled black writers to make claims on the nation’s laws and future. But what can we make of the final claim to monumentality? Monumental history (after Nietzsche) has typically been described as totalizing and limiting: an exercise of power by history over those citizens who are imagined as collected by the nation. As Russ Castronovo has written, monumentality helps us understand that “it is indeed power that shapes the history that defines people as citizens and collects them in the nation” (109). So does Delany’s monumental imagination subjugate the future of black political life within its own militant terms?

This is an unavoidable aspect of Delany's rhetoric, and he wrote his text as a salvo in the emigrationist contention with the assimilationists over the future of blacks in America. Delany's militarism also contributed to a narrative of race elevation formed in the aftermath of Jacksonian politics that emphasized assertions of masculinity and power to imagine a future in terms strikingly similar to nationalist monumentality (as described by Maggie Montesino Sale). However, it is, in my view, important that the only actual monument that Delany figures in his rhetoric is Bunker Hill, which he describes as a "pile." The Bunker Hill monument had great symbolic significance, both in national myth and as the embodiment of the retrospective bombast many antebellum writers opposed. It was the location of one of Daniel Webster's most famous patriotic speeches, as well as a target of scorn and humor in works Emerson and Melville who saw it as a sign of America's subservience to the past. But rather than simply turning away from this monument and the model of nationalist commemoration it represents, Delany suggests its time is limited, and even—in the language of "pile"—hints at its destruction. In order for Delany to project the type of historical memory that would take Crispus Attucks as heroic and exemplary he has to speculate on it emerging from the ashes of a nationalist memory and its projections into the future. Similarly, writing Crispus Attucks into the great drama of history changes the very terms of that drama from within, shifting historical romance into the tragedy of a martyr whose cause has yet to come to fruition and whose rightful monument is withheld by the forms of

memory that refuse to commemorate him. Black memory in the antebellum period was forced to work within a dynamic where for every claim on representative inclusion in the terms of the nation, another counter-claim emerged that promised a future in which the monuments of that nation would no longer be remembered. These obscure but desired futures would radically revise the present's relationship to the past in ways that black historians could only articulate as fundamentally different from existing modes of commemoration. Delany registers in his discourse on monumentality a recognition that the experience of temporal continuity and of inhabiting a position within an epic of progress articulated by romantic nationalist history was, for black Americans, at the very least withheld to a future that could only be imagined negatively, as everything that was not the present experience of time.

Nationalist discourse had, quite simply, blocked the forms of recognition that black historians sought to provide for the black community. The aesthetic circuit that romantic history imagined between the witnessing of historical beauty and the binding of the contemporary nation in linear present was unavailable to black historians, for whom history was more tragedy than romance. But in place of this linear vision of time, these historians, beginning with Robert Benjamin Lewis and continuing in with Delany and Nell, began to articulate another way of imagining how coming into contact with history could produce a community committed to anti-slavery. They began to imagine the history of slavery as a sort of aesthetic blank, an experience of deprivation, out of

which came the ability to experience freedom differently—not as secured by a past, but as proliferating between and across temporal and spatial borders, both in the past represented in texts and between that past and present in which they were read.

The foundation for this type of imagination was provided by Lewis, who allowed for multiple temporal logics to co-exist in the same work of history in his profligate mixing of sacred and profane time. John Ernest has pointed that Lewis's history was the only truly "Bancroftian" work of black history in its sweeping scope. While its exhaustive accounting of biblical, classical and modern history begins as if it will proceed as a similar linear story of progress (or cycles of rise and fall), moving from the book of Genesis to the Haitian revolution, the order to the text quickly fragments. Lewis constantly advances and reverts, moving back and forth among each major era with little attention to causation or teleology. The organization of the text, while framed by a chronological beginning and ending, is primarily thematic. It is organized into chapters with headings like "Ancient Kings and Wars," "Colored Generals and Soldiers," "The Arts and Sciences." Ernest has explained this organization as "meta-historical" in how it calls attention to the normal linear presentation of historical texts as arbitrary and prods the reader to think through the connections between the Bible and modern slavery. There is a more straightforward and less anachronistic explanation though; Lewis was a minister and orator and he was writing the texts for others like him. The book was not meant to serve as a comprehensive account of black history, but

to recover various stories that abolitionists and preachers could then incorporate into their public lectures and sermons. The organization of the book allows for just such a parsing by enabling readers to easily find stories of the struggle against slavery and black achievement that fit many of the themes that were common in to abolitionist oratory. Lewis himself made no pretensions to originality, and stated at the outset that he “publish[ed] this volume of collections from sacred and profane history, with a determination that correct knowledge of the Colored and Indian people, Ancient and Modern, may be *extended freely*” [emphasis added] (v). Lewis meant for these stories of freedom to be reiterated and dispersed (as he had copied many from earlier texts) so as to establish a widespread imagination of black freedom in his present moment—a moment that contained multiple political and temporal possibilities for overcoming slavery. Lewis structured the text according to its imagined social life in the present, and not according to the order of events in the past. He wanted to articulate discontinuous connections, not provide an epic narrative.

*Light and Truth* is concerned then, not with a singular vision of temporal progress, but the proliferation of stories (and times) of freedom. And where many romantic historians were careful about parsing different orders of time (in distinctions between the sacred and secular, or between European progress and Aztec intransigence) Lewis was more concerned with opening up multiple models of the emergence of freedom rather than insisting on a single order that would secure the future he wanted

to project. The lack of organization has resulted in a reputation as a haphazard, repetitious, and flawed text—a canonical judgment first made by Delany in *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration and Destiny*. Yet, as Stephen Hall reminds us, Delany's complaint derived from his own project of developing a more concrete and materialist account of Africa and blacks in the modern world that rejected earlier religious modes of history. It does not mean that Delany was opposed to the fundamental necessity of proliferating images of black freedom that would exceed the order of historical knowledge. Lewis's a-chronological narrative technique is not at all dissimilar from the thematic approach taken up by Delany in his own history.

As Bancroft's works ceaselessly advance towards the American Revolution, Lewis' text moves, in its haltering and redoubled path, towards a final chapter on the Haitian Revolution, positioning it as the culmination of the struggle for black freedom thus far. Rather than simply recounting what were becoming well known stories of the heroism of Toussaint Louverture or Vincent Ogé at the pinnacle of the revolution's climactic scenes of resistance and revolt, Lewis spends the majority of the chapter on events in Haiti after the revolution. There is a canny recognition in this decision of the need to portray black political life as capable of achieving ongoing organization and stability to effectively petition for representational equality within dominant historiographical norms. But it is those same norms that, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot notes, produced the Haitian Revolution as impossible. Outside of a normal

understanding of history as productive of coherent subjectivities and more or less stable forms of political organization, the Haitian Revolution was unimaginable to many observers all of the world.

As discussed in the last chapter, the dominant portrayal of the Haitian Revolution in the antebellum period (as found in Bryan Edward's history) was one of apocalyptic violence. There was also a more sympathetic counter-image of Haiti circulating in abolitionist writing based on Marcus Rainsford's account in *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti* (1802). But this version was also temporally troubling. Written by captain in the British Army who claimed to have met Toussaint Louverture, it presents the revolution in favorable terms, explaining how, although many had believed "in the talents and virtues of these people [...] it remained for the close of the eighteenth century to realize the scene, from a state of abject degeneracy:--to exhibit, a horde of negroes emancipating themselves from the vilest slavery, and at once filling the relations of society, enacting laws, and commanding armies" (xi). Rainford's text grants Haiti a position of importance in the history of the modern world and it anticipates the problems faced by abolitionists looking to draw on the revolution as a resource for black emancipation. While he attempted to position his reader from the standpoint of an impartial (and thus Euro-American) witness to Haiti, the scene he presents short-circuits normal narratives of progress; former slaves come to inhabit political forms arising "at once" from "abject degeneracy," rather than slowly developing a national culture over

time. There is a sense in texts like these that the writer is struggling against not only previous prejudicial accounts (Rainsford refers to Edward's book by name) but also the incredulity of readers attempting to imagine the temporally impossible.

Already operating outside the norms of progressive history, Lewis reimagines the meaning of Haiti for black freedom. He begins with a brief summation of the initial revolution of 1791-1801:

This most horrid war terminated the expulsion of the whites from all of the island, and the establishment of an independent government, administered by a *colored* people. Dessalines, a chief, was proclaimed Emperor of Hayti, under whose virtue, talents, and bravery, the people of this government succeeded in the arduous struggle for liberty. (386)

In part, Lewis was attempting to portray political upheaval in Haiti in a positive light to correct dominant U.S. fantasies of the apocalyptic violence and dissolution of slave revolution by saying that this revolution's "comparatively peaceful character reflects much credit on the often calumniated people of that land" (389). However, he exceeds the criteria of such judgments by upending the normal temporal conditions out of which liberty was thought to emerge. Lewis layers language drawn from dominant discourse on progress with an alternate vision of futurity that asserts the necessity that liberty be conditioned by nothing in the past.

Take the following claim about the treatment of the defeated regime: "but the clemency of the victorious party, and the moderation they evinced, is much to their honor, and serves clearly to show that Hayti has an improved and improving

people” (391). The language of improved and improving suggests dominant modes of historical development. However, notice that the occasion of the demonstration of that improvement is not what U.S. historians, nervous about political dissolution, would normally consider a sign of progress: i.e., the decay of Boyer’s regime into tyranny and its necessary overthrow. Lewis consciously invokes tyranny and privilege to describe Boyer’s regime to suggest a comparison with the U.S. and the slave system that leaves the latter coming up short. The constantly improving Haiti is not a development in a temporal model of freedom’s emergence and institutionalization authorized by the United States, but away from it into futures unclaimed, but always being announced and made immanent by emancipatory politics of undoing the grip of tyranny (now well understood as slavery) in the New World. And if the revolutionary break marks the conditions of displaying improvement, it is a display of improvement that Lewis has already implicitly denied the U.S., whose history he does not reproduce in any form in his text. Lewis wrests the connotation of “improving” from the context of progress or providence, deploying it to suggest the repetition of a demand for freedom, always articulated as a lived rejection of tyranny.

William C. Nell’s *Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* produces a similar reiterative aesthetic of history in its portrayal of “patriots” whose acts of political resistance cut across and away from U.S. nationalism. While Nell begins the text with descriptions of African-Americans who participated in the foundational scenes of

American Independence, he quickly moves beyond that framework in portraits of slave revolts, the Haitian Revolution, and the resistance of maroons in Florida to the imperialism of the U.S. army. The title of the text, along with an introduction by Harriet Beecher Stowe, obscures the subversions of nationalism found within. Stowe's introduction attempts to describe the quality of the portraits in the text, linking them to standard accounts of national founding and patriotic bravery:

In considering the services of the Colored Patriots of the Revolution, we are to Reflect upon them as far more magnanimous, because rendered to a nation which did not acknowledge them as citizens and equals, and in whose interests and prosperity they had less at stake. It was not for their own land they fought, not even for a land which had adopted them, but for a land which had enslaved them, and whose laws, even in freedom, oftener oppressed than protected. Bravery, under such circumstances, has a peculiar beauty and merit. (xiv)

This address, aimed at sympathetic white audiences, points towards the limitations of the project of merely drawing black soldiers into a previously framed portrait of American history. The presence of black soldiers exceeds the frame of that history, outshining and calling into question what elsewhere had been called the bravery of white soldiers and shifting the criteria for judging the relationship between time and progress. Stowe's description of selfless benevolence on the part of these patriots is at odds with a text whose catalog of black patriots includes not only those who served in the revolutionary conflicts but also heroes of black revolt against the national order like Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey.

Nell's text constantly moves beyond its stated purpose of cataloguing black soldiers lost to history. It starts, as was typical for this type of historiographical work, with Massachusetts and the story of Crispus Attucks. In other words, it starts by placing a black figure at the foundational scene of sacrifice in the cause of U.S. independence and political freedom. And this would seem to be the principle of the work: to recover the obscured presence of black soldiers in the fight for freedom so as to attest to the capacity and deservingness of black Americans for partaking in liberty and citizenship. While Nell does attempt to reconstruct the histories of a number of black soldiers throughout, he exceeds this framework and implicitly questions the idea that the American Revolution had come to an end with the emergence of the United States. In this, Nell does more than simply catalogue figures of black patriotism or revolt, he revises the norms of description in romantic history concerning what the past would have to look and feel like to ground a present and future of freedom. This revision emerges from the fundamental problem Nell confronted in writing about black history in terms of progress: the history of black revolt in the U.S. up to the point of his writing was one of unrepentant failure and retributive white violence. By refusing to make a categorical distinction between the black patriots who served in the successful war for independence and those who fought in unsuccessful revolts, the text demonstrates the inadequacy of linearity and continuity for describing the emergence of a black demand for freedom against slavery and imperialism.

The chapter on South Carolina begins with testimony of black service in the Revolutionary War, but it concludes with a re-telling of the planned revolt and trial of Denmark Vesey in 1822—clearly suggesting a relationship between the former and the latter that nonetheless cannot be traced as one of direct cause and effect or filiation. Although, as some commentators have noted, it is difficult to determine whether this particular instance of slave rebellion was actually being plotted or was merely a phantasm of white paranoia (both were realities of life in the antebellum south, and they fed into each-other), Nell accepts the accounts produced at Vesey’s trial and widely reported at the time that Vesey had indeed plotted a revolt and that his plot involved retributive violence against the white population of Charleston and the surrounding areas. It is possible, then, that Nell was as conscious of the ways white paranoia produced these phantasms of violence as of the frequent resistance of slaves to white terror, and was seeking to conflate the two in furthering the construction of a mythical figure of black liberation. This purpose is attested at the outset of the section in which Nell traces Vesey’s origins to the Caribbean: “[d]uring the Revolutionary War, Captain Veazie, of Charleston, was engaged in supplying the French in St. Domingo with slaves from St. Thomas. In the year 1781, he purchased Denmark, a boy of about fourteen years of age, and afterwards brought him to Charleston, where he proved, for twenty years, a faithful slave” (245). This section brings together the time scales of the revolutionary war and the dissemination of black revolt outward from the Caribbean and Haiti—a

connection that will be re-affirmed at the conclusion of this episode when Nell writes that: “[h]istory, faithful to her high trust, will engrave the name of Denmark Veazie on the same monument with Moses, Hampden, Tell, Bruce, Wallace, Toussaint, Lafayette, and Washington” (247). By placing national heroes, memorializing and authorizing the nation, alongside religious figures and Toussaint Louverture, Nell invites his readers to question what entity history memorializes if not a national culture. What do monuments commemorate if it is not emergence of a singular nation and what times exist alongside that of the nation if Haiti and black insurgents who have been tried and killed by the state are remembered in the same breath as Washington? Nell’s writing articulates two radically disjunctive historical events together to show how the active creation of historical memory in the actions and feeling of resistance bridges the discontinuous without disavowing the tensions and contradictions between these two events.

Such a radical tension can only be maintained though by the activity of revolutionaries that withholds both nationalist violence and the romantic rewriting of history into a false continuity in which those tensions are disavowed. Nell describes the plan of the revolt thus:

In 1822, Denmark Veazie formed a plan for the liberation of his fellow-men from bondage. In the whole history of human efforts to overthrow slavery, a more complicated and tremendous plan was never formed. A part of the plan matured was, that on Sunday night, the 16th of June, a force would cross from James' Island and land on South Bay, and march up and seize the Arsenal and guard-house; another body, at the same time, would seize the Arsenal on the Neck; and a third would rendezvous in the vicinity of the mills of Denmark's master. They

would then sweep the town with fire and sword, not permitting a single white soul to escape. (245-6).

Nell immediately follows this with the statement that “[t]he sum of this intelligence was laid before the Government.” The phrasing leaves ambiguous the status of the plot; such a plan, in all the history of human efforts was “never formed,” and it is only given here, in a text making claims on Vesey as a martyr of black liberation, as the intelligence that was laid before the authorities that resulted in swift and violent suppression. The tenses used in the description also hint at this ambiguity; they suggest a possible future that did not occur, split off at the side of what did, in a biblical image of retribution “sweeping the town with fire and sword” that is promised but left unfulfilled. This unfulfillment, according to Nell, was a product of four years of meetings held in secret in which both futures—that of black revolt and that of betrayal, exposure and white violence—remained possible. The time of unfulfillment, in which futures (and pasts) become immanent in the present moment and are held in tension and multiply historical possibility while withholding the violence of progress, is the substance of the temporal affect that Nell and other black historians wanted to recover. It was imagined as a shared feeling for other temporal possibilities around which a community committed to black freedom could constitute itself in the face of retributive violence against such difference in the national temporal order.

Nell’s text produces, not a romantic portrait that guarantees a future of progress, but an iteration of those revolts and desires that have managed to hold the oppressive

linearity imagined by romantic nationalism in abeyance. History writing becomes a site of that recovery and the production of the continued possibility of opening up such imaginative space because it is where the obscured histories suppressed by nationalist history introduce startling and ambiguous figures of irresolution. To harken back to the ideas of Derek Walcott explored at the outset of this dissertation, history as a structure of feeling and form of knowledge that projects a singular future is here disrupted by an active aesthetic forgetting of that future in a different affective knowledge of what has been and what can be. These works do not just articulate counter-narratives or revisionist histories in the senses we have become accustomed to in the twentieth-century; they produce a feeling for other possibilities in time that disrupts the affective power of nationalist history to transform the past into a resource for securing a sense of the future. They are histories in which non-existent monuments can monumentalize a history of liberation that features Toussaint and Denmark Vesey: histories that have not yet happened but exist in a feeling for resistance and differentiation that withholds and shadows white, nationalist, and imperialist violence.

Nell's text portrays these scenes of irresolution and active forgetting as proliferating, appearing and reappearing across the line of a nominally linear development of freedom. One of the most important sections of Nell's text is his recovery of the story of the destruction of a Black Seminole community at Blount's Fort in Florida at the hand of Andrew Jackson's army. The scene stages an aesthetic

mourning of a lost time of black freedom and a will to recovery it as holding possibilities for rethinking time and political resistance in the present.<sup>24</sup> This history of the Black Seminoles in Florida has not been well kept by modern historians. While most know that slaves in southern Georgia had fled into Spanish held Florida and joined the Native Americans who lived there, only later to be subjugated in the First and Second Seminole Wars as the United States moved to incorporate Florida, few consider it an important site of slave revolution.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as J.B. Bird has documented on his web resource, *Rebellion*, the Black Seminole rebellion from 1835-1838 was the largest slave revolt in U.S. history, consisting of hundreds of plantation slaves in southern Georgia fleeing to join other black Seminoles in Florida in an uprising that consisted of over a thousand slaves. The majority of these slaves were either returned to plantations, or later emigrated west out of Florida when Indian Removal policies reached the peninsula. The word Seminole itself is a corruption of the Spanish *cimmaron*, meaning run-away, the same word from which maroon is derived. While Nell's text is about an event at the outset of the first Seminole war (beginning in 1816) and not directly concerned with this larger slave revolution, both are echoed in his descriptions and his decision to include the Seminoles in his history of "colored patriots." We are very far from the nationalist norms that

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<sup>24</sup> Nell draws on the research of the anti-imperialist Congressman, Joshua Reed Giddings, who would publish his own account of the Seminole Wars in 1858 as *The Exiles of Florida*. Reed's text however is more committed to detailing U.S. atrocities against the Seminoles than accounting for black political life in Florida.

<sup>25</sup> For a full account of the history of the Seminole's resistance to U.S. imperialism, and the tribe's complicated Indigenous and Black identity, see Kevin Mulroy's *The Seminole Freedmen* (2007).

structured the beginning of the text, as Nell navigates the challenges of portraying a revolution that not only failed, but was utterly forgotten both as a revolution and as consisting of slaves.

Here is how Nell introduces the flight of slaves out of Georgia into Florida:

Little is yet known of that persecuted people; their history can only be found in the national archives at Washington. They had been held as slaves in the state referred to [Georgia]; but during the Revolution, they caught the spirit of liberty,--at the time so prevalent throughout our land,--and fled their oppressors, and found asylum among the aborigines living in Florida. (249)

The slaves hold the revolutionary break of 1776 open by fleeing the nation. The ideals of freedom do not progress in one time or place, but rather are reinvented in the spread of ideals in the feeling of the fugitive slaves facing the closure of possibility promised by Nell's past-tense: "the spirit of liberty—at the time so prevalent." He goes on to conflate the idea of resistance with flight "they had effectually eluded or resisted all attempts to re-enslave them" (249). The challenge of telling this story is that there is no romantic violence, and there is no authorization of the present. Everything that happens is a flight from violence and the closure of revolutionary possibility and its scene of action is confined entirely to the past, in that it produces no concrete future political order.

At the same time, Nell clearly wants his reader to feel both the tragedy that befell these "patriots" and the possibility of a different way of feeling and experiencing freedom they make possible. "They were true to themselves and to the instinctive love of liberty which is planted in every human heart. Most of them had been born amidst

perils, reared in the forests and taught from childhood to hate the oppressors of their race [...] of the three hundred an eleven residing in 'Blount's Fort' not more than twenty had been held in actual servitude" (249). The possibility that Nell wants his readers to imagine is that of a life beyond slavery that nonetheless retains a commitment to opposing slavery, since freedom is occasioned by that flight of resistance. It is a form of resistance that emerges from a sense that freedom does not progress out of slavery, but breaks with it as the occasion from which the iterative renewal of liberty emerges.

This freedom is necessarily a threat to the progress it announces a difference from—the narrative of and feeling for linear history it disrupts—and so, as Nell writes, the slaveholders in Georgia petitioned the U.S. government to recapture the fort. Under the orders of Andrew Jackson, American troops are sent to destroy the fort. When word reaches the maroons harbored inside, Nell observes the distress of those inside fearful they will be returned to slavery, and shows how the experience of slavery (of the inability to progress beyond it) also produces and disseminates the force and sentiments of its opposition, regardless of a promised future:

This was observed by an old patriarch, who had drank the bitter cup of servitude — one who bore on his person the visible marks of the thong, as well as the brand of his master upon his shoulder. He saw his friends falter, and he spoke cheerfully to them. He assured them that they were safe from the cannon-shot of the enemy — that there were not men enough on board to storm their fort; and, finally, closed with the emphatic declaration, "Give me liberty, or give me death!" This saying was repeated by many agonized fathers and mothers on that bloody day. (251)

The repetition of the American Revolutionary sentiment at this scene, so distant from American Nationalism, in direct opposition to its official agents, and in a ruin of past imperial incursion into Florida, captures both the intensity of ex-slaves' resistance to slavery and how such a feeling disseminates regardless of gender and national allegiance, projective of an unknowable future that their children promise but that they will never see. The nameless patriarch who speaks is less a nationalist hero of this nascent (and soon to be defeated) group than a conduit for these words of liberty that can be produced and reproduced, or rather, iterated and reiterated outside of the demands of citizenship and subjectivity. It is a social affect, sustained only by the active participation of all the members of this impromptu community without the need to be authorized by concretization into a future of political progress. For the fort is soon to be destroyed and there will be no advancement into freedom and citizenship, only a momentary lived future beyond slavery, felt in the agony of its annunciation.

Nell describes how this scene is commemorated after an explosion has destroyed the fort and all but fifteen inhabitants killed (and those fifteen returned to slavery):

But the dead remained unburied; and the next day, the vultures were feeding upon the carcasses of young men and young women, whose hearts on the previous morning had beaten high with expectation. Their bones have been bleached in the sun for thirty-seven years, and may yet be seen scattered among the ruins of that ancient fortification. (254)

Nell links images of black defeat and abjection, so typical to romantic history, not to the advancement of liberty, but to the advancement of the imperial nation since that day. In

his portrayal, the nation's progress is a scene of death; the drawing of this space beyond the nation into that temporality is a scene of destruction that helps produce the present Nell lives in, where black freedom needs to be recovered from the ruins of history.

However, the recovery of the iterative liberty of the maroons in their reproduction of the words of liberty despite their lack of any claim on being agents of progress or citizens of the nation. As a result, their temporary escape from the violence of progress (living not in a modern industrial society, but in a ruin of past imperialism) produces an entirely different temporal affect than progressive history. Rather than trying to envision pasts that help readers feel secure in progress towards a desired political future, black history carries with the knowledge of where freedom is not and asserts the primacy of flight and continued flights away from the security of the nation as an experience valuable regardless of the violence that has interceded between that past and the present. Each experience with freedom in the past is written as a tenuous and insecure flight into an unknown future, felt as valuable not because it guarantees the present, but because it differs from it, unsettling the sense that the imperial nation's control of the future is inevitable.

By moving from Crispus Attucks, to Haiti, to Blount's Fort, black history in the antebellum period responded to the problems the historical model of progress had created for representing and addressing black political life. Forms of citizenship and romantic nationalism that depended on an experience of time as progress were made

unavailable to black writers by the cyclical times of slavery and the abrogation of the progress of black freedom in imperial violence. But out of that experience came a need to commemorate the mere iteration of the demand for freedom and the fleeting experience of it in scenes that lacked a future or security. Although the language of progress and citizenship hangs over these texts in their scenes of revolt and masculine militancy, they also register other temporal possibilities. They introduce other temporal affects produced by the experience they provide their readers of freedom at the margins of national time and space, capable of spreading only through an escape from the progressive time of the nation. In its ongoing imagination of a time and space beyond slavery (but always haunted by it) that emerges and re-emerges from each experience of oppression and resistance, black history proliferates temporal affects at odds with nationalist history's violent will towards the same.

## **Coda: Romance, The Black Masses, and the Future of the Aesthetics of History.**

What is the political art of historical writing? And how do we evaluate its aesthetic dimensions? This dissertation has been aimed at considering history written in the antebellum period not only as literature, but also as a romantic aesthetic project that emerged at the intersection of nationalist concerns about time, race and imperialism. As I have argued, antebellum romantic history produced temporal affects: feelings for the future encoded in a racialized aesthetic that marked blackness as an unsettling threat and disruption in the providential order of time. So far, my argument has been historicist in nature. I have explored the emergence of this aesthetic in a specific place and time. In this coda I would like to extend beyond that temporal frame to explore two texts from the twentieth century that engage and revise romantic aesthetics for an anti-racist and anti-colonialist project: W.E.B. Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) and C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins* (1938). As will show, both texts are heavily influenced by the aesthetic norms of romantic antebellum history, but their revision of the concept of the black masses points towards how historical writing can produce alternate visions of the past that upend our sense of the present and future.

I have chosen to focus on these two texts for a few reasons. *Black Reconstruction* and *The Black Jacobins* are both romantic texts, produced long after the romantic era, but

sharing many of the aesthetic aspects and political tensions of romantic history. Both are extraordinarily rich literary works written with a great deal of dramatic skill and overflowing with poetic language. And yet, despite the overt literariness of both texts, both have rarely been analyzed as literature. This is more clearly the case with *Black Reconstruction* than *The Black Jacobins*, which has received some limited treatment as literature. While a number of scholars, including Cedric Robinson, Anthony Bogues and Nahum Chandler, have looked beyond Du Bois's historical analysis in order to explore *Black Reconstruction* as a contribution to American and black radical political thought, the book's primary legacy has been as an accomplishment in historiography.<sup>1</sup> At its time, a powerful work of revisionism, *Black Reconstruction* and its famous final chapter "The Propaganda of History" was a polemic against the so-called Dunning School of history, which was ascendant in the academic and popular consciousness of 1930s and served as an ideological appendage of Jim Crow. The Dunning School saw Reconstruction as a disaster brought on the nation by unscrupulous carpetbaggers and was hostile to any acknowledgement of black political achievement during and after slavery. Du Bois's intervention was a rigorous and objective work of historical scholarship aimed at tracing out the agency of black slaves in securing their own freedom during the Civil War and the accomplishments of the short-lived abolition-democracy that had power in the South

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<sup>1</sup> See Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983) Bogues's *Empire of Liberty* (2010) and Chandler's "Of Exorbitance," (2008) as well as his just published *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (2013).

during the years of radical Reconstruction. Although received indifferently in the 1930s, Du Bois's revision of the historiography of the Civil War and Reconstruction has now become the foundation of historical research into the period. As the historian Eric Foner has recently written, "*Black Reconstruction* is replete with insights that have become almost commonplace today but were revolutionary in their implications for the scholarship of the 1930s" (411). Though well deserving its regard as a foundational work of historiography, this epochal achievement has cast a shadow over the text's reception, hiding from view its literary form and incisive revision of historical aesthetics.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, scholars have recently begun to think about *The Black Jacobins* in literary terms. Beyond a biography that emphasized the relationship between James's political and literary pursuits and important writing by Sylvia Wynter arguing for a coherent poetic project across James's fiction and non-fiction, a number of scholars have conducted formal literary analyses of *The Black Jacobins*.<sup>3</sup> Yet, much of this work treats the literary (and more specifically, the romantic form) of James's history as a political problem. Kara M. Rabbitt has suggested that James's political materialism and his analysis of the contending forces that made the Haitian Revolution possible are in tension with his attempt to draw a romantic literary portrait of Toussaint Louverture as

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<sup>2</sup> Du Bois has frequently been treated as a literary writer, but scholars interested in him for these reasons (most famously, Henry Louis Gates and Houston Baker) have focused most of their attention on his career as an essayist and his novels.

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Buhle's *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (1989) and Sylvia Wynter's essay, "Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of the Jamesian Poesis" (1992).

a paradigmatic figure of the revolution. As she argues, “James emphasis on the figure of Toussaint in *The Black Jacobins* may obscure the importance of the elements of resistance James himself will later celebrate in *Facing Reality*—the works (the slaves) themselves and their repeated demonstrations of the capacity for self-government” (128).

In a far more extensive analysis, David Scott in *Conscripts of Modernity* (2004) defends James’s decision to emplot the text as a revolutionary romance, arguing that it enabled James to write his narrative of the Haitian revolution as an anti-colonial allegory with political relevance for the present of the 1930s. As Scott suggests, James’s “indignant vindication of the negated achievements of blacks” in the historical past speaks to “the justice of their anticolonial claims to self-determination and political sovereignty,” in the present (64). However, Scott goes on to argue that the critical saliency of romance was limited to James’s historical moment, where the dreams of decolonization were still unfulfilled. James’s narrative structure emplotted colonialism as a negative force that suppressed the self-determination of the slaves until the slaves overcame that oppressive power and freed themselves. In the 1930s, that narrative had vivid correspondences to the situation of blacks in the West Indies and Africa, which James did not hesitate to point out throughout the text. In Scott’s assessment, the political demands of our “after-Bandung” historical moment are sufficiently different to drain romance of its critical edge. Because we need to re-think colonial power as positive (rather than negative force) that constitutes subjectivities and subordinates them in a

global distribution of power (outside of direct colonial oppression), Scott emphasizes James's revisions in the 1960s that rewrote the downfall of Toussaint as a tragic narrative demonstrating the impossible choices faced by subjects who have been abducted or conscripted into modernity by colonial and imperial power. For Scott, although romance once had critical saliency, it is now a problematic mode for any critical post-colonial project.

In Scott's terms, Both *Black Reconstruction* and *The Black Jacobins* are structured as romances or in Hayden White's analysis of the form, "dramas of disclosure" that describe "the liberation of a spiritual power fighting to free itself from the forces of darkness, a redemption" (152). Just as *The Black Jacobins* tells the story of the dramatic entrance of oppressed slaves into the drama of world history, freeing themselves from colonial oppression, *Black Reconstruction* re-envision the Civil War as a conflict whose terms of encounter were transformed into a war of liberation by the action oppressed slaves took to free themselves and institute a new democracy in the South. In addition, James and Du Bois are self-conscious about the aesthetic power of their histories throughout, frequently acknowledging that the political effects they desire for their texts exceed a merely positivist recovery of a forgotten past. Although both texts make a claim to being objective and scientific in their anti-racist and materialist analysis of the forces that shaped these two great antislavery revolutions, they both contain overt aesthetic appeals to their readers. James begins his history with a preface that

emphasizes the historical moment of its composition by echoing and displacing William Wordsworth's famous idea about poetry as "experience recollected in tranquility": "It was in the stillness of a seaside suburb that could be heard most clearly and insistently the booming of Franco's heavy artillery, the rattle of Stalin's firing squads and the fierce shrill turmoil of the revolutionary moment striving for clarity and influence. Such is our age and this book is of it, with something of the fever and the fret" (xi). In striking contrast to the way institutionalized historians since the end of the nineteenth century had insisted on the suppression of the subjectivity and experience of the historian, James emphasizes the sensations and emotions of the political crises of his moment as shaping forces in his history of the Haitian Revolution.

Du Bois was more circumspect in his acknowledgement of his own perspective than James, but he was no less vigorous in his description of the historical moment in which he wrote. Closing his history with a note of cataclysmic irony, he compared the unfulfilled desires of the ex-slaves and radical reconstructionists—"the finest effort to achieve democracy for the working millions which this world had ever seen"—with the present moment of composition, in which teachers of history propagandize against "the negro." In this present, Du Bois writes prophetically, "in Africa, black backs run red with the blood of the lash; in India, a brown girl is raped; in China, a coolie starves; in Alabama, seven darkies are more than lynched; while in London, the white limbs of a prostitute are hung with jewels and silk. Flames of jealous murder sweep the earth,

while brains of little children smear the hills" (728). It should also be remembered that Du Bois's understanding of all history as "propaganda" echoes an earlier claim he made on behalf of art and literature in "The Criteria for Negro Art" (1926): both are forms that militate on behalf of truth and both are prophetic annunciations of a possible future of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

As suggested above, this romanticism has been perceived as a political problem by many scholars concerned with James. While the romantic plot of *Black Reconstruction* has been less remarked upon, scholars have frequently understood Du Bois's interest in aesthetics and his theory of beauty found in "The Criteria for Negro Art" and *Darkwater* (1920) as an unfortunate and regressive elitism at odds with his commitments to radical democracy and Marxist analysis. Although not an overtly critical account, Robert Gooding-Williams's discussion of Du Bois's aesthetics demonstrates the problem many have identified with his romanticism.<sup>5</sup> As Gooding-Williams argues, Du Bois's conception of beauty was intimately linked with his "politics of expressive self-realization:"

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<sup>4</sup> As Ross Posnock has pointed out, Du Bois use of the word "propaganda" should not be read as if it were a naïve Stalinism that would subordinate truth and beauty to narrow political causes. Rather, Du Bois re-deployment of propaganda was an attempt to overcome shallow perceived oppositions between art and politics. As Posnock writes, Du Bois "turns the aesthetic into a militant part of a political, economic, and cultural movement" (520).

<sup>5</sup> For critical feminist account of the same problem in Du Bois, see Elizabeth Schlabach's "Du Bois' Theory of Beauty: Battles of Femininity in *Darkwater* and *Dark Princess*" (2012). For defense of Du Bois's aesthetics (an elitism) as part of his democratic pragmatism see Ross Posnock's "The Distinction of Du Bois: Aesthetics, Pragmatism, Politics" (1995).

For Du Bois, a politics suitable to counter Jim Crow had both to uplift the black masses—that is, assimilate them to the norms of modernity by battling prejudice and backwardness—and to articulate the ethos of the black folk. In short, it had to be a politics of modernizing “self-realization” (Du Bois’s term) that expressed the spiritual identity of the folk. (206)

Beauty was a tool and product of uplift, where the self-consciousness of the black masses became formalized in folk forms (like the sorrow songs) that would lift them out of backwardness and into modern forms of political self-awareness.<sup>6</sup> In a more critical discussion, Ronald A. T. Judy has argued that this approach to aesthetics led Du Bois into an embrace of black vanguardism that was at odds with his desire for radical democracy.<sup>7</sup> One way to summarize these engagements with Du Bois’s and James’s romanticism would be to suggest that these critics are describing how these romantic narratives of slave agency and art disclose the entrance of oppressed black subjects into the political and temporal conditions of modernity. Their romanticism is a product of a shared meta-narratives of how New World blacks in America and the Caribbean became self-aware, rational agents, committed to their own sovereignty and progress as a people; how they produced vanguard political and intellectual leaders like Frederick Douglass and Toussaint Louverture who embodied the romantic spirit of the people;

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<sup>6</sup> For a very different take on the “Sorrow Songs” that understands Du Bois deployment of them as self-consciously anti-essentialist, technologically sophisticated and as an exploration of the haunting absent presence of a full past in the present, see Alexander G. Weheliye’s “The Grooves of Temporality” (2005).

<sup>7</sup> See Judy’s “The New Black Aesthetic and W.E.B. Du Bois, or Hephaestus, Limping” (1994).

and how that past promised a future after colonization and Jim Crow of political freedom.

This line of argument (which I acknowledge is a conflation of a number of complex ideas) suggests that Du Bois and James took up romanticism and romantic history almost precisely as it had been written by the nationalists of the nineteenth century, only altering it by rejecting its racially exclusive nationalism. They deploy the romantic mode as a proposition about the linear path of political progress, up from slavery and a pre-modern folk culture into modern proto-nations, and in doing so reproduced the political elitism and essentialisms inherent in that narrative.

Romanticism becomes a path by which the temporalities of the modern nation-state and subjectivity are imposed on a pan-African history of anti-slavery and anti-colonial revolt. However, as I have shown in the last chapter, black abolitionists of the antebellum period, lacking the tools of materialist analysis and overt commitments to radical democracy of Du Bois and James, did not reproduce Romantic history so blindly and it is unlikely that their successors in writing histories of slave-revolt would develop such a blindness to the aesthetics of history. The critical view of romance also suggests that the primary thought that went into Du Bois and James's histories was at the level of conceptualization and not in the writing of history. I want to suggest, rather, that because blackness and slavery were already problems in how romantic history envisioned time and progress, James and Du Bois were forced to reimagine the romantic

aesthetics they deployed at the level of description. Both were thinking carefully about how race and time were represented and both offer models for thinking about the disjunctions of the modern experience of time that exceeds the romantic employment of their texts. I want to close this dissertation then with an analysis of a few moments in *Black Reconstruction* and the *Black Jacobins* where I think James and Du Bois are powerfully interrogating the aesthetics of romantic history. Finally I want to suggest that such an attention to aesthetics might be of use in thinking about how we envision political potentials in history without reverting to linear romantic forms that ultimately would re-inscribe nationalist and progressive concerns with linear time and the development of sovereign subjects.

*Revisionary History and the Temporality of the Black Masses*

In order to make this argument and to attempt to see Du Bois's and James's historical aesthetic in a new register, I want to suggest that we consider the central object of their analysis, the black masses, as an aspect of their aesthetic practice. Du Bois and James helped produce this political concept through their visionary revision of its temporal aesthetic. By calling the black masses an aesthetic category I do not mean to refer to an aesthetics of the black masses in a vernacular or folk-cultural sense registered, echoed, or reproduced in Du Bois's or James's writing (as scholars like Houston Baker

have argued, at least about Du Bois), nor is it about their use of materialist category as part of their intervention in Marxism (a la Cedric Robinson). I mean rather the structural role the figuration of the black masses fills in their descriptions of historical events. In antebellum romantic history, the mass of black bodies played a central structural role in how those historians described apocalyptic threats of progressive time. It was a constitutive excess on which was projected the temporal crises produced by imperialism and slavery that had to be constrained by the progress of the nation to secure the future order. In James and Du Bois, the black masses are, in contrast, a central motor of the future, a source of true knowledge of freedom, and an overwhelming source of power whose movements can alter the very course of history. However, there is also a tension in these texts: both writers struggle to envision the black masses as a source of future liberty, but both frequently figure the need for the black masses as such to be educated, taught discipline, and otherwise constrained by the progress of freedom. What I want to explore is whether this traditionally romantic and linear narrative arc—from the explosion of creative potential in the revolutionary break to the constraints of civilizational progress—is ever upended by the way James and Du Bois actually describe the emergence of the black masses onto the scene of history. This can only be done through an aesthetic analysis that understands them to be engaging with the racialized temporal aesthetic of romantic history.

While both *The Black Jacobins* (one of James's earliest works) and *Black Reconstruction* (perhaps the ultimate statement of Du Bois' understanding of history, race and democracy) emphasize the role of the black masses in shaping the revolutions they discuss, they are both works that are surprisingly (at least from a contemporary perspective) focused on the careers of significant heroic individuals and are willing to deploy an antedated great man theory of history—although in a more limited sense than their nineteenth-century forebears. It is well known that *The Black Jacobins* is also, in part, a biography of Toussaint Louverture and an argument for his place among the great men of history. As James wrote, "The history of the San Domingo revolution will therefore be a record of his achievements and his political personality [...] with the single exception of Bonaparte himself, no single figure appeared on the historical stage more greatly gifted than this Negro, a slave till he was 45" (x). *Black Reconstruction*, although more known for its class analysis, also focuses to a surprising degree on the role of exemplary individuals in shaping events, including Frederick Douglass, Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens. Throughout the text there is an emphasis on the growth and education of individuals as essential elements of revolutionary history, in ways that are remarkably opposed to what we might expect of a social history focused on the achievements of laborers and slaves, although perhaps explainable by Du Bois's well known elitism and vanguardism.

Although often structured by such elitism, Du Bois's narrative exposes an aesthetic tension between the roles of elite figures and the oft-surprising actions of the black masses on their own behalf that the author never fully reconciles. Early on Du Bois develops the difference in condition and achievement between the enslaved and free blacks in the antebellum era. Women and men like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman were central to abolition in being proof of the contradictions inherent in slavery and the leadership they provided for resistance movements. As Du Bois writes, "These free Negroes were furnishing a leadership for the mass of black workers, and especially they were furnishing a text for the abolition idealist. Fugitive slaves like Frederick Douglass and others humbler and less gifted, increased the number of abolitionists by thousands and spelled the doom of slavery" (13). Fugitive slaves and free blacks were in their very existence a threat to slavery because they testified to slavery's failure to turn humans into docile property.

In contrast, this is how Du Bois describes the conditions of the enslaved:

Negro slaves in America represented the worst and lowest conditions among modern laborers. One estimate is that the maintenance of a slave in the south cost the master about \$19 a year, which means that they were among the poorest paid laborers in the modern world. They represented in a very real sense the ultimate degradation of man. Indeed, the system was so reactionary, so utterly inconsistent with modern progress, that we simply cannot grasp it today. (10)

While slavery itself is "inconsistent with modern progress," it is also unable to actually prevent the intellectual and political growth of a figure like Douglass, whose existence proves the lie of slavery. Slavery is both degrading, holding its objects out of modern

time and development, and unable to fully accomplish that end. For Du Bois, the key problem is that, unlike the white working class, who were developing through the antebellum period political leadership and agendas, the black workers, the majority of whom were held in slavery, were prevented from entering into those forms of association that would help produce class-consciousness. What they were left with were the few elite personalities who could fill that role and give testimony to the potential of black political life, but who also, because of the conditions of slavery, had to divorce themselves from the experience of slavery and those still in its grip to grow into that political role. In contrast to the overtly romantic structure, there is a fundamental division between the elites and the mass that cannot be resolved by simply claiming that the former are representatives of the latter.

What if we think of this division between the elite and the black masses as one defined by temporality? The white working class had access to the education and political institutions (the right of assembly, voting rights) that enabled them to enter onto the antebellum political stage and participate in the growth (industrial and geographic) of the nation. They were national political actors inhabiting a familiar modern temporality understandable from the perspective of an idealist or in this case, Marxist, philosophy of progress. In contrast, from the perspective of Du Bois's own understanding of progress, he can only describe the black workers as degraded and unable to inhabit those political forms except through the symbolic growth of an elite

few like Douglass. In the racial and aesthetic regimes of modernity within which Du Bois was writing, but also displacing, slaves are a limit condition. Supposedly incapable of progress on their own behalf they are historically portrayed as either needing to be held outside of politics, educated and controlled by a beneficial order, or, in becoming political, an enormous threat to the political order. This figuration of slave revolt as an apocalyptic break emerged in the antebellum period, but retained its vividness in the popular historical imagination during Reconstruction and its failure. In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson has described Du Bois's intervention and displacement of a progressive model of political time at length as a matter of ideological intervention. What I want to suggest is that in the way Du Bois described the politics of the mass of slaves—the sudden emergence of political consciousness from the most degraded conditions—there arises an aesthetic revision of the traditional figuration of the black masses in romantic history that exceeds and disrupts its progressive frame.

That romantic and progressive frame, despite structuring the text, is a matter of ambivalence for Du Bois. As often as he embraces temporally marked language about the progress of slaves, their degradation, and the halting education and achievements of fugitive slave leadership, he was also prone to ironize romantic and nationalist language. Like the black abolitionists who protested Bancroft's aesthetic nationalism, Du Bois saw the institution of slavery as fundamentally incommensurable with any myths of progress. Early in the text, Du Bois takes up the language of aesthetic nationalism and

draws an ironic portrait of the effect of slavery on history, which is worth quoting at length for the way it uses a black figure to put progressive temporality in crisis.

America thus stepped forward in the first blossoming of the modern age and added to the Art of Beauty, gift of the Renaissance, and to Freedom of Belief, gift of Martin Luther and Leo X, a vision of democratic self-government; the domination of political life by the intelligent decision of free and self-sustaining men. What an idea and what an area for its realization—endless land of richest fertility, natural resources such as Earth seldom exhibited before, a population infinite in variety, of universal gift, burned in the fires of poverty and caste, yearning toward an unknown God; and self-reliant pioneers unafraid of man or Devil. It was the Supreme Adventure, in the last Great Battle of the West, for that human freedom which would release the human spirit from lower lust for mere meat, and set it free to dream and sing. And then some unjust God, leaned, laughing, over the ramparts of heaven, and dropped a black man in the midst. It transformed the world. It turned democracy back to Roman Imperialism and Fascism; it restored caste and oligarchy, it replaced freedom with slavery and withdrew the name of humanity from the vast majority of human beings. (29-30)

This highly literary quotation should not be mistaken for offering a chronological sequence of events. Du Bois was well aware of the foundations of American democracy in white supremacy and discusses the connection between the growth of universal suffrage and slavery throughout *Black Reconstruction*. Rather, the sequence Du Bois provides interrogates the temporality and aesthetics of American philosophies of progress. The cruel God who sets down the black man in the midst of plenty is an ironic figure that deflates the typical portrayal of oppressed blacks as exceptions to modern progress, as if they were placed in the midst of a moral social order by a transcendent force. Du Bois's rhetoric suggests both the arbitrary foundations of racial prejudice and the absurdity of those ideas about slavery (still circulating in the 1930s) that understood

it as an intrusion into American politics, rather than an intrinsic part. The black figure that occasions the world's return to forms of tyranny is not a transcendent intrusion of difference into the temporal order of progress, but the very thing visionaries of progress had willfully blinded themselves to in order to envision America in the pure utopian tones Du Bois adopts and ironizes at the beginning of this paragraph. Throughout *Black Reconstruction* the humanity of the black figure is used to show the contradictions in the order whose disavowal of its own history transforms blackness into a transcendent and apocalyptic intrusion. Du Bois is being self-consciously aesthetic here, juxtaposing two portraits of progress and regression to demonstrate the role of blackness in constituting and deforming modern political temporalities. Du Bois identifies blackness as a primary exclusion in the philosophy of progress that returns in its aesthetics as an apocalyptic intrusion.

In *Black Reconstruction*, blackness, and to a greater degree, the black masses, challenge and question the dominant temporal logics of progress, even when Du Bois is adapting that a model of progress to describe the growth of black political self-consciousness. It reveals tensions in the text's overt linear narrative of the advance and defeat of black political life in the "abolition-democracy," because as an aesthetic figure, the black masses remains transcendent to the idea of progress. A key example of how Du Bois interrogates this aesthetic is found in how he describes the emergence of the black masses from southern slavery during "The General Strike." At first, Du Bois

describes the more educated among the slaves as conveyers of the news of the war, and of the opportunity for fugitivity. Here, the opportunity for progress and revolution emerges linearly; representative elites educate and bring up the black masses through traditional forms of class-consciousness. Yet, this secular model of the political is quickly overcome and outpaced by the slaves' transcendent knowledge of their coming religious redemption that, in misperceiving the northern army as a liberating army, transforms it into one. Political progress proceeds apace, keeping the Union together, but the black masses, as a creative agent placed outside of progress, and thus granted a vision beyond the constraints of modern time opens up another order and generates the break of freedom through its creative action.

Du Bois once again employs an aesthetic vocabulary to describe what emerged from this creativity.

A great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side of the seas. It was a new song. It did not come from Africa, though the dark throb and beat of that Ancient of Days was in it and through it. It did not come from white America—never from so pale and hard and thin a thing, however deep these vulgar and surrounding tones had driven. Not the Indies or the hot South, the cold East or Heavy west made that music. It was a new song and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world's ears with a message seldom voiced by man. It swelled and blossomed like incense, improvised and born anew out of an age long past, and weaving into its texture the old and new melodies in word and thought. (124)

Du Bois's aesthetics of freedom questions and transcends the aesthetics of progress.

Where progress is figured as having sources, deep roots, institutional basis, and a shared love of liberty, Du Bois' song of freedom is new, radically transformative of the old

institutions and their intentions. It does not come from anywhere (as if it came from outside of time) and it communicates and drives a creative freedom that does not need other temporal categories to exist and assert itself within linear time. Du Bois is so consciously aesthetic in his language here because the version of progress he is interrogating was itself an aesthetic that made blackness its opposite and excluded it from its visions of the future. Here aesthetics is not primarily visual (although the temporally jarring blackness of earlier sections is important), the black masses are rewritten as aural phenomena in a way that belies linear progress. They are heard, and communicate, recreating themselves and the world around them. This constitutive excess of progressive history returns in Du Bois aesthetics not as it had in romantic history—as an apocalyptic threat—but rather as a fundamentally transformative creative force that reorders linear time.

How can we describe this other time, represented by black figures and the black masses, that erupts into the time of political progress, setting it at odds with itself and reconstituting the flow of political time? Once it emerges, the black masses do not then enter into progressive time, so much as announce a perennial difference in time. The black masses announce an always latent possibility in the slave and colonial regimes of modernity for a different temporal order that is never exhausted by its own betrayal in narratives of black progress towards self-sovereignty. Even within that narrative structure, the aesthetic figure remains in tension with the linear trajectory of time (rather

than violently suppressed, as it is in more traditional romantic history). *The Black Jacobins* develops this perennial potential of the black masses to creatively announce temporal difference even further. Even as James makes excuses for Toussaint's reincorporation of the actual black masses of Haiti into a labor regime not at all dissimilar from the slavery they have just escaped, he figures the black masses as capable of maintaining autonomy even from those figures like Toussaint who claim to be its representative within modern linear political time.

In James's history again we are confronted with the indeterminate temporality of the black masses, both excluded from progressive time and yet of fundamental importance to the future James desired. In another text from the same period, *A History of Negro Revolt* (1938, republished in 1969 as *A History of Pan-African Revolt*), this problem is laid out concisely in a brief discussion of slave revolts in the antebellum south. James offers three rather ambivalent formulations in describing successively Gabriel's, Denmark Vesey's and Nat Turner's revolts. He begins by claiming that on the whole, "[t]he slaves gained nothing by these revolts. No attempt is made to treat them more kindly. Instead revolts are savagely repressed and the severity of slave legislation increased." Then after discussing the scope of Gabriel's revolt he writes, "[y]et these American revolts between 1670 and 1860 follow certain laws. [...] While their masters lived in constant terror, the Negroes themselves seemed unconscious of their revolutionary potentialities when organized on an extensive scale." Then again a page

latter he writes, “[t]he revolt ended as always in failure and bloody suppression. Yet Gabriel and his followers were slave revolutionaries above the average,” and then discusses their plans to exempt Quakers and the French from violence for their anti-slavery leaning. Finally, discussing Nat Turner he writes “[s]o far Nat Turner’s revolt was commonplace. But this revolt had an effect out of proportion to its size,” but gives little sense of what he means by that effect (25).

The ambiguity of this analysis lies in the difficulty of accounting for failed slave revolts within a form of historical writing aimed at recounting linear progress. As in the accounts of abolitionist historians of these and other revolts, the agency of the slaves in resisting their own oppression is a matter of great importance, but because the revolts failed and, in the short term, the oppression only grew more severe James struggles to understand the precise character of that significance. While this is evidently a political problem that has preoccupied much writing about slave experience, it is useful to also understand it as an aesthetic problem that James attempted to resolve in *The Black Jacobins*.<sup>8</sup> In that text the context of the French Revolution and the leadership of Toussaint Louverture opens up the possibility that a slave revolt could become a significant driver of history. At the same time, the agency of the slaves only enters into the narrative through the shaping persona of Toussaint Louverture and a few other

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<sup>8</sup> For a thoughtful discussion and intervention into debates over slave agency in the historiography of slavery, see Walter Johnson’s “On Agency,” (2003).

black leaders. The responsiveness of the black masses to Toussaint enables its constituents to be represented within the flow of historical progress and thus generate concrete historical outcomes.

For instance, this is how James describes Toussaint's relationship with the former slaves during the period of his ascension to a position of power in what was still San Domingue:

Leader of a backward and ignorant mass, he was yet in the forefront of the great historical movement of his time. The blacks were taking their part in the destruction of European feudalism begun by the French Revolution, and liberty and equality, the slogans of the revolution meant far more to them than to any Frenchman. (198)

In James's description, the black slaves of San Domingue have come to participate in a great historical movement. They are vital agents of a major historical shift. But because they have been held outside of the political forms of modern time ("a backward and ignorant mass") they are only able to take up this role through the exemplary leadership of Toussaint, himself an ex-slave who has made a great leap forward into a mastery of modern political forms. The entrance of the slaves into political history depends on their elite representative, but at the same time, the slogans of political modernity ("liberty and equality") belong far more to their ways of knowing and living than to the Frenchmen who are more widely acknowledged as modern political actors. The black masses are both incapable of becoming modern without Toussaint and more fundamentally a force in history than those who we take for granted as political agents.

Despite the discourse of modern political progress that understands the black masses as degraded or backward as a product of their exclusion from progressive time, James writes the black masses as having an excessive capacity for freedom. The black masses bring about the future more decisively than any other group or agent in the text. Thus, for much of the text James emphasizes Toussaint's efforts to constrain and educate the black masses so the colony of San Domingue can more fully enter into modern forms of political sovereignty. It might be surprising that James endorses Toussaint's political suppression of the black masses, but, as David Scott has suggested this is in part attributable to his sense of the impossibility of the options Toussaint faced, beset at all sides by avaricious imperialist nations.

Here is how James describes Toussaint's use of the ex-slaves in the development of San Domingue's economic independence:

The ultimate guarantee of freedom was the prosperity of agriculture. This was Toussaint's slogan. The danger was that the blacks might *slip* into the practice of cultivating a small patch of land, producing just sufficient for their needs. He would not allow the old estates to be broken up, but *bound* by the interests of the labourers to their work by giving them their keep and forth of the produce [...] he *confined* the blacks to the plantations under rigid penalties. He was battling the colossal task of transforming a slave population, after years of license, into a community of free labourers, and he was doing it in the only way he could see. [emphasis added] (242)

In order to ensure the entrance of the black masses into a modern form of political organization they have to be bound and constrained by a leader who can fully represent and direct their interests. The rhetoric here of binding and constraint is haunted with the

slave past from which these workers have just escaped, and in the next sentence James remarks on the relation between the new despotism and the old. Yet, where James's narrative overtly figures this despotism as necessary part of Toussaint's attempts to raise up the black masses from a "degraded and ignorant" past, the sense that this process is a forward and progressive action is put to question by James's inclusion of the potentially contrary desires of the ex-slaves: "[t]he danger was that the blacks might slip into the practice of cultivating their own plot of land." As recent historians of Haiti have argued, this indeed did happen and helped established a long running division in Haitian society between the semi-autonomous rural masses and the urban elite who (often unsuccessfully) attempted to extract capital from the remote regions.<sup>9</sup> The language of slippage ties together the temporal coordinates of progress (as in slipping backwards or down a slope) with an entirely different future of freedom beyond the constraints of progress (as in slipping out of one's chains). This other future of independent agricultural labor was excessive to Toussaint's vision of progress so it had to be constrained, but it remained an immanent potential of the actions of the black masses, who sought to slip beyond the oppressive conditions of modern labor (slave and free) entirely. Again, it is this excessive futurity, beyond and at odds with progress, that

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<sup>9</sup> See Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Haiti: State Against Nation* and Laurent Dubois's *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* for further explications of this phenomenon.

haunts James's concept of the black masses as an aesthetic excess. It is a feeling for the future that cannot be accommodated to modern time.

Though constrained by the framework of a romantic narrative that would see the black masses as a folk that had to be educated into modern political forms by elite political leaders to unleash their potential for historical change, the black masses sets the temporal order of James's narrative into tension. It introduces into the text another order of time that has been excluded from modernity and is set against the progressive future pursued by the elite Toussaint. By the end of the text, the distance between Toussaint and the black masses results in the tragic undoing of a number of revolutionary gains. David Scott sees this tragedy as a result of the constraints placed on Toussaint by the impossible choices of colonial modernity that demanded he maintain economic coercion of labor to maintain abolition, thus setting him at odds with the desires of his people. I agree with this reading and its saliency for our current political moment but also want to suggest that the black masses present an alternative to both the romantic and tragic narrative modes of the text. The black masses, as drawn by Du Bois and James, throws into crisis modern temporalities of progress. It introduces an excessive desire for the future that cannot be accommodated to conventional narrative modes of historiography and forces both authors to confront other futures than what has been. This feeling for a different order in history upsets progressive time, overturning the discursive limits of historical narration with potentials that lie beyond history as such, offering us texts

whose registration of temporality is always doubled, modern and progressive whilst being radically otherwise in the same instant.

The histories that I have analyzed in this dissertation do more than just narrate stories about the past or deploy ideological myths about race and the nation; they encode feelings for the limits and potentials of time itself. Critical scholarship would do well to grasp the lesson of the aesthetics of history. Texts committed to tracing linear connections in the cause and effects of things that happened in the past, whether committed to a philosophy of progress or not, are inevitably aesthetic in the way they produce a feeling for history as a space of limitation and constraint. Linearity is a feeling for limitation, for what must have been and could not have been otherwise. That logic is aesthetic inasmuch as it is not grounded by anything but the narrative production of coherency. The threat of historical scholarship, despite valuable critical aims, is to overwhelm us with the thought of what must be through the limiting and limited narratives structured by a linear sense of temporality. Dormant in the aesthetics of history is the possibility that historical scholarship would aim at the production of different feelings for how the past is connected to the future that would refresh our memory that history can always have been different from what it has been. The affects encoded in our writing are fundamental aspects of our political vision. Writing aesthetically should be a process of producing tensions, not erasing them in the closure of a single time. In daring, like James and Du Bois, to engage with an aesthetic form like

romance we may well run past its limits, as they did, in the revisionary rewriting of its aesthetic codes. Rather than more debunking narratives of ideologically suspect aesthetic modes, we need more aesthetic categories that can expose the limits of our modernity and make us feel the possibility that the future contains more than one possible trajectory and more than a single ordering of the past.

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## **Biography**

Kevin Modestino was born in 1985 to Michael and Karen Modestino and raised in Braintree, Massachusetts. He graduated from Boston College High School in Dorchester, MA (2003) and then received his B.A. in English from New York University in 2007. He completed his doctorate in English at Duke University in 2014. His areas of specialization are nineteenth-century American literature, aesthetic theory, and black Atlantic studies.