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Race, Retreat, and Refuge: Black Voices, American Nature Writing, and Ecocritical Exile

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RACE, RETREAT, AND REFUGE: BLACK VOICES, AMERICAN NATURE WRITING,
AND ECOCRITICAL EXILE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Bryon P. Williams

May 2017

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2017

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ABSTRACT

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May 2017

Dissertation supervised by Professor Thomas P. Kinnahan

While existing scholarship has begun to recognize the extensive environmental experience of African Americans during the nineteenth century, black-authored environmental writing from the era is conspicuously scant in studies and anthologies into the present, even in volumes devoted to ecocritically-inflected texts by authors of color. My dissertation argues that contemporary, racially-aligned divides and gaps in environmental discourse have roots in the 1840s and 50s, when the nature writing genre coalesced into its most enduring form in the works of Henry David Thoreau, literary artist turned cultural icon. This key era—during which black Americans were frequently subject to systematic deprivation of literacy, liberty, and agency—is also the period when the American nature writing genre emerged as a definitive fusion of environmental encounter *and* writing. I contend that there do exist published works from the mid-nineteenth century that include numerous first-person accounts of black eco-actors in

intensive relationship with the natural environment, but that these narratives have been rendered invisible as nature writing (and even black writing) because although the experiences were lived and spoken by black environmental actors, they were written down by a white amanuensis. I read Thoreau's nature writing against a little-studied volume called *The Refugee*, a contemporaneous collection of first-person narratives by black refugees who fled the United States to settle in the wilderness of Ontario, their accounts recorded by abolitionist Benjamin Drew. Thoreau's work establishes a tradition of "retreat" values such as voluntary solitude, individualism, separatism, and universality. Retreat values come to have a hegemonic influence on subsequent environmental discourse. The narratives from Thoreau's black counterparts, however, express a set of "refuge" values that emphasize community, connection, practical experience, and the recognition of inequalities and contingencies. Narratives of refuge work as corrective acts of resistance against the assumptions of easy universality in the white-authored nature retreat. In establishing and fleshing out the dialectical categories of *retreat* and *refuge*, this dissertation brings to light black-authored environmental narratives that serve to unsettle, invigorate, and reconstitute the nature writing genre.

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Introduction

I shall focus on the history of the “green Thoreau,” on Thoreau’s posthumous transformation into an environmental saint, as a barometer of the pulsations, limitations, and promise of green thinking in America—Lawrence Buell

Most nature writing is barricaded with omissions to make it just another gated community—Rebecca Solnit

American nature writing is, to paraphrase Alfred North Whitehead’s famous quip on Plato, often treated as a series of footnotes to Thoreau. And the channels cut by environmental texts of the mid-nineteenth century direct cultural currents far beyond the domains of purely literary influence. In *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing*, Randall Roorda proclaims Thoreau the “progenitor of the narrative of retreat” (27), a branch of nature writing in which the lines between literary action and literal action are intentionally transcended. With Thoreau as model and inspiration, subsequent generations of emulators have embarked on variations of what Lawrence Buell calls “the Thoreauvian pilgrimage” (*Environmental Imagination* 311), from visits to Walden Pond in tribute to an environmental saint, to individual homesteading projects (with corresponding written accounts) based on Thoreauvian principles of solitude, withdrawal, and self-sufficiency. The questions of whether, how, and to what extent readers are intended to treat Thoreau as a model and to imitate his experience stretch from the earliest reviews of 1854’s *Walden* into critical debates of the present. In a December 1854 review, Lydia Maria Child delves into extended and detailed distinctions between the “mere superficial imitator” of Thoreau and those who “follow Mr. Thoreau’s footsteps by being more obedient to their loftiest instincts” (389). Among the most imitated of Thoreau’s acts is the retreat to nature, a move that continues to wield influence on mainstream

environmental thought, and a legacy evident not only in the culture at large but in ongoing academic debates.

In *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (2008), Ursula K. Heise proposes loosening place-based retreat's tenacious hold on environmental thinking, calling it a "visionary dead end if it is understood as a founding ideological principle or a principal didactic means of guiding individuals and communities back to nature" (21) and arguing that it may be a hindrance to the more planetary eco-cosmopolitanism that she sees as necessary. She challenges the assumption of mainstream ecocriticism that "genuine ethical commitments can only grow out of the lived immediacies of the local" (42) and argues that the individual retreats in the Thoreauvian lineage may be "valuable thought experiments" but are useless or even harmful when held up as "principal models" or as "paradigms" (48). One key flaw in intense localism Heise names explicitly: individual retreat projects exemplify the "social and financial privilege" of groups that "typically have access to the financial means, education, occupational flexibility, and time to carry out such endeavors" (48). In response to the problematic limitations of "reterritorialization" ("the environmentalist call for a reconnection with the local"), Heise calls for "deterritorialization": "the challenge for environmentalist thinking...is to shift the core of its cultural imagination from a sense of place to a less territorial and more systemic sense of planet" (55-56).

Heise identifies multivalent privileges (of class, gender, and race) endemic to place-based retreat and proposes that place simply shouldn't matter so much, arguing that going planetary in our thinking is the key to transcending the provincial limits of the local. But other veins of writers critical of mainstream environmentalism argue not that place shouldn't matter but that the wrong *kinds* of places (and inhabitants of those places, human and non-human) have figured too

exclusively in the American cultural imagination. In recent decades witnessing the (sometimes accordant, sometimes discordant) ascendancies of environmentalism, ecocriticism, and the environmental justice movement, critics have described again and again the persistent invisibility of African Americans in mainstream environmental discourse. James Cone asserts that it “is a well-founded belief in the African American community” that “[w]hite people care more about the endangered whale and the spotted owl than they do about the survival of young blacks in our nation’s cities” (138). For Theodore Walker, “[t]oo often what passes for a wider concern inclusive of the environment is in fact a white racially gerrymandered concern which reaches out to include plants and animals while continuing to exclude black and colored peoples” (279). Willis Jenkins cites the ubiquitous Sierra Club calendar, with its “sublime, people-less landscapes,” as emblematic of a “fantastic hegemonic imagination” that “erases past and present traumas” and carries on the “cultural production of white power” (204). In contrast to “nature” and the imaginary sublimity that frequently dominate mainstream conservation discourse, the “environment,” according to the research of environmental sociologist Dorceta Taylor, is more often considered by people of color and by adherents of the environmental justice movement not as “distant wilderness” but as the ordinary places where they “live, play, work, and worship” (Jenkins 55).

The power associated with a “hegemonic imagination” that views the environment through androcentric, Eurocentric, and/or possessive bourgeois eyes is inextricable and frequently even indistinguishable from the privilege Ursula Heise links to the place-based retreat paradigm. Heise’s critique offers timely insights. She is no doubt right that, despite their appeal to the imagination, retreat houses in remote places have limitations as widespread templates for ecological living. Her theory of deterritorialization also serves to expand awareness of how the

everyday places in which people live, work, and play are enmeshed in more extensive “political, economic, technological, social, cultural, and ecological networks [that] shape daily routines” (55). Yet I fear that Heise’s emphasis on abstract networks and on planetary consciousness tends toward yet another overlooking of the people *here* (and their places on *this* continent) who have been ignored and effaced from environmental discourse all along. The leapfrogging of the local and material realities of place toward the abstract and futuristic aspects of deterritorialization strikes me as a new guise for an old impulse: that when we find the cultural narratives of our own place and time lacking, we are tempted to look elsewhere for better stories. Flawed American conceptions—of expansionism, of mastery (over the non-human, the non-white, the non-male), of naked individualism—have generated cultural narratives with damaging social-environmental consequences, and we have often looked elsewhere—to distant lands, the distant past, distant cultures—to import healthier sources of ecological wisdom. Yet perhaps we haven’t found alternative narratives right here at home not because they don’t exist but because we have overlooked them, because our vision is not calibrated finely enough to perceive what is already here, because in our urgency to transcend the often ugly ideological limitations of American environmental stories we have been blind to alternative stories that reside here—within the history of America’s own literary production—alongside, against, and underneath predominant cultural narratives.

Thus my current study aims to resist looking beyond place, toward the abstract and the futuristic, and instead seeks to *recognize*—literally, “to investigate again”— environmental narratives from America’s cultural past. My focus is on black-authored American nature writing of the 1840s and 50s, an era when the nature writing genre coalesced into its most enduring form in the works of Henry David Thoreau, literary artist turned cultural-environmental icon. The core

of my approach is a dialectical reading of two bodies of work: Thoreau's nature writing (especially 1854's *Walden* and 1862's "Walking")¹ against a volume called *The Refugee*, a little-studied 1856 collection of 114 narratives by black refugees who fled the United States to settle in the wilds of Ontario, their accounts written down by white amanuensis Benjamin Drew during his tour of Canada West. While Thoreau and *The Refugee*'s black eco-actors operate in contemporaneous cultural matrices, and while both offer narratives of homesteading, rugged environmental encounter, and ecological belonging, they work toward divergent sets of values that I will establish and flesh out in the course of the study: Thoreau's work institutionalizes an ideology of *retreat*, and the *Refugee* narratives present an alternative (and corrective) system of *refuge* values. Landmark scholarship of recent years has brought to light a rich legacy of African-American environmental texts, but works of black-authored, environmentally-oriented literature—especially prose narrative—from the nineteenth century are conspicuously absent from studies and anthologies. The systematic deprivation of literacy for blacks in the U.S. in the 1800s—from the most brutal regimes of slavery to the sanctioned educational inequalities in every free state—offers itself as only one of many seemingly obvious explanations that would account for the absence of a body of black nature writing. I argue, however, that the dearth of nineteenth-century black environmental works is a function not just of *absence* but of *invisibility*. This culminating argument incorporates a series of intermediate propositions. One is that the past matters to the present—in this case, that the texts examined here hold interest not just for the

¹ Though *Walden* and "Walking" are often treated as products of different stages of Thoreau's career—with his Walden Pond sojourn commencing in 1845 and "Walking" not published until shortly after his death in 1862—the two works receive his most dedicated composition and revision in the middle of this long span. After leaving the pond in 1847, he continually revises and expands the account of his Walden experiment until its 1854 publication, and his first presentation of material in "Walking" comes in an 1851 lecture called "The Wild," with more than a quarter of the eventual "Walking" essay as published originating in journal passages from 1851 and earlier (Adams 145). Almost all of the emigrants whom Drew interviewed in 1855-56 had come to Ontario over the previous ten years, with new legal restrictions in the U.S.—primarily stricter enforcement of Black Laws in northern states, and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850—driving waves of black refugees out.

specialist in nineteenth-century literature but have relevance to ongoing debates over current environmental attitudes, behavior, identities, and scholarship. I begin with absences of black writing and influence in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries in order to clarify the need for rethinking works from the mid-nineteenth century. Mainstream conservation environmentalism today is excessively white, and is so in large measure because it has been excessively influenced by literary and cultural forms that developed in the 1800s (and by the critical approaches that cemented such forms into orthodoxy). This course of argument flows from a number of tributary assertions that deserve examination: that there are current racial divides and disparities in environmental thought and identity; that key roots of such divides can be traced to nineteenth-century socio-literary developments; that in existing scholarship and anthologies there is a glaring dearth of treatments of black environmental works from the nineteenth century, an invisibility causing black nature writing to have had an under-determinative influence on present-day environmental discourse; and that mainstream nature writing, especially the pastoral², Thoreauvian “narrative of retreat” (in its two main guises, the *homesteading* account and the *excursion* account), has had an over-determinative influence on current environmental attitudes and identity. I contend that the invisibility of black works constitutes an enduring form of ecocritical exile from American environmental discourse, an alienation embodied in the actual exile of refugees fleeing the United States long ago.

In Chapter 1, “Black Invisibility in Environmental Discourse: Roots and Legacies,” I present a spectrum of current environmental divides along racial lines. My presentation of these

² “Pastoral” is a slippery term that takes on different shades of meaning when juxtaposed with related terms such as “urban,” “wilderness,” and “georgic.” My use of the term relies on 1] a general sense described by Lawrence Buell as “celebrat[ing] the ethos of nature/rurality over against the ethos of the town or city” including “all degrees of rusticity from farm to wilderness” (“American Pastoral” 23 n1) combined with 2] a more particular connotation of retreat and escape, signified by terms such as *withdrawal*, *womb*, *oasis*, and *cocoon* employed by the critics discussed in detail below.

divides is two-fold. On one hand is the estrangement of African-Americans from environmentalist concerns, documented in personal testimony, demographic and empirical studies, and historical trends. On the other hand are normative links between whiteness and environmental identity, exemplified in the branding of environmentalism through cultural forms that frequently and explicitly cite Thoreau as a spiritual godfather. These divides are evidence of an environmental hegemony in which deep pastoral myths posit nature as an ideologically neutral site of leisure and recreation, myths that valorize pastoral values institutionalized in Thoreau's nature writing. In addition to positing this Thoreauvian over-influence, I also survey canons and collections of American literature and environmental writings to establish that black works from the nineteenth century are conspicuously absent even in volumes overtly devoted to authors of color. The opening chapter uses present, racially-aligned debates to generate the conceptual bifurcations that I argue are rooted in the mid-nineteenth century: tensions between pastoral leisure and environmental necessity, between eco-experience and eco-writing, between environmentalism and environmental justice, and between the freely-chosen *retreat* of the conventional American nature hero and the more desperate *refuge* sought by Thoreau's black contemporaries.

I then delve into the hegemonic headwaters of the nature writing genre in Chapter 2, "Nature Writing and the Apotheosis of the Retreat Author-Hero." This chapter outlines the core elements of the solitary retreat narrative's hegemony and exposes the fault lines in the very foundations of the tradition. Existing genre studies unanimously place Thoreau at the center of American nature writing, and I contend that Thoreau's influence is rooted in key innovations he made upon previous traditions and nature heroes (especially Cooper's Natty Bumppo), developments that emphasize the role of writing. Thoreau's feats of what I call "pastoral

alchemy” lie in his deployment of prevailing philological theories to assert a primordial link between nature and writing. I also investigate this link’s restrictive legacy in subsequent nature writing, focusing on Annie Dillard and her concessions to generic demands as a case study. The chapter concludes with a reading of Thoreau’s own version of the conventional pastoral pairing of light and dark characters (figures who are always male). In Thoreau’s pairing, the Other’s darkness lies not in his race but in his illiteracy, which functions to reflexively emphasize the role of writing as central to the hero’s own identity. Thus in the 1840s and 50s, Thoreau’s influential fusion of eco-actor and eco-author institutionalizes a new cultural icon: the hyperliterate nature hero whose most important exploit is that of writing. This condition aligns with historical realities to form the basis for a pervasive (though not absolute) exclusion of black environmental agents from American discourse. In effect, I argue, the nature writing tradition has been “purified” of non-writing eco-actors, no matter how authentic or redemptive their experience with the natural environment may be.

My long Chapter 3, “Countering the Pastoral Retreat: Recovery, Re-creation, Recognition, and Refuge,” opens with the work of women (nineteenth-century writers and twentieth-/twenty-first century scholars) who have challenged the androcentric and individualistic tendencies at the heart of the hegemony described in Chapter 2. Recovery of women’s work has emphasized texts that identify the threads of individualism, escapism, and masculinism that form the fabric of the dominant nature retreat models. I argue that groundbreaking feminist criticism worked alongside emerging ecocritical theory to constitute a first wave of counter-pastoral scholarship. I then pivot from efforts toward gender inclusion to efforts toward racial inclusion. The efficacy of recovery in women’s writing points to both the promise and the limitations of recovery in other domains of antebellum scholarship. Restrictions

on literacy and liberty for African-Americans in the nineteenth century suggest a relative deficit of public and private writing by black authors, leading many writers and scholars to fill in this blank through a strategy of re-creating, rather than recovering, black antebellum experiences and voices—that is, through retroactively writing down the experience (of others) that was not written down at the time. I focus on the fictional form of the neo-slave narrative and on historical re-creations on the topics of American maroons and of the Underground Railroad. In the comparative scarcity of black-authored eco-texts of the era, such reconstructions serve to fill in gaps left by recovery efforts. I also emphasize a third kind of endeavor, and that is the avenue of *recognition*. I propose that better efforts of recognition would lead us to value antebellum narratives that detail black nature experience, accounts readily available in the annals of America’s own literary production.

This chapter then proceeds to conduct close readings of the texts that deserve belated recognition: the narratives of black refugees who fled the United States to settle in the wilderness of Ontario, recorded by amanuensis and white abolitionist Benjamin Drew in *The Refugee* (1856). While the *Refugee* accounts display recognizable elements (separation, homesteading, and environmental encounter, all expressed in first-person prose) of the nature retreat, they also violate multiple *de facto* conditions for nature writing institutionalized in Thoreau’s works. These sections establish and flesh out the dialectical categories of *retreat* (values manifested in white-authored nature narratives) and *refuge* (values embodied in the black-authored eco-texts). I assert that Thoreau marries existing conceptions of an ideologically neutral “West” and an ideologically neutral body to perfect nature writing’s escape from political realities and into abstract universality. American nature retreats frequently serve as declarations of independence—not *from* America, but rather in deployment of America-as-idea. The speakers in

the *Refugee* accounts, however, disrupt this redemptive tradition by leaving America behind. I also argue that a second site of nature writing's abstraction is the body. While Thoreau crafted in his nature texts a careful effacement of the details of his own embodiment, his black counterparts (who were denied literacy) often pointed to their own bodies *as* texts, turning marks of brutal objectification into signs of memory, authorship, and self-creation.

Finally, in Chapter 4, "Heaven is Under Our Feet: The Granular Work of Black Nature Writing," my study culminates in detailing the significant and necessary contributions to be made—to both black writing and nature writing—by the *Refugee* narratives. The chapter opens with an overview of critics (Jane Tompkins and Richard Rorty) who have theorized the efficacy of detailed fiction and other narrative in promoting social change, with forms such as sentimental novels and slave narratives shifting public opinion in the antebellum era. I adapt this "turn in narrative" in social discourse to the realm of environmental discourse, a domain that has been slower to embrace the full implications of narrative's power as an agent of ethical and political change. I then emphasize the "thick particularity" of the *Refugee* narratives in a series of close readings. On issues being debated in a range of discursive forms (legal, political, religious)—issues such as rights, education, human-nature relations, emigrationism, and emancipation—the *Refugee* accounts *narrativize* the particular lived experience of those on the ground, cutting through abstractions and fostering ethical solidarity. The chapter and study culminate in a revisiting of the modern legacies of old racial-environmental divides, and I conclude in the end that *The Refugee* offers a new and necessary affirmative legacy. By exposing the deceptions in the very foundations of America's most influential environmental myths, the Refugees stand as exemplars in transmuting trauma into beauty.

In this study, depth of attention—given both to the dominant figures of the dominant nature writing tradition and to the corrective accounts in the neglected *Refugee* narratives—has necessary costs to go along with its benefits. The focus on exposing assumptions in the over-determinative works, on generating alternative visions from under-determinative texts, and on keeping the concepts of “retreat” and “refuge” in sustained counterbalance means that other worthy and relevant works often fall outside the present scope of study. Much of the impact that refuge texts have in countering retreat texts comes from formal similarities with canonical nature writing: both are first-person, non-fiction, prose narrative. Those generic boundaries leave out a figure such as George Moses Horton, whose affinities with *Refugee* speakers—an African-American of the same era, the natural world a prominent topic in his work, his status as an “author” who was not always a “writer”—merit some discussion in Chapter 1, but whose form (lyric poetry) diverges from the reigning rationale of detailed treatment. My Chapter 2 explication and critique of dominant traditions means giving extended attention to male authors (Cooper and Thoreau) and male critics. Chapter 3 presents important counter-pastoral visions offered by women authors and scholars, though their work is presented as an overview emphasizing breadth over depth. In the close readings of the *Refugee* accounts, however, women do take center stage as among the most compelling voices of resistance and survival. And canonical black authors with potential contributions to this study also lie beyond its present scope. The works of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Henry Bibb come to mind as first-person prose narratives with some ecological implications. However, these works are self-written, unlike the accounts of *The Refugee*, and the Refugees’ deprivation of literacy is germane to the “refuge” values they exemplify. In addition, the environmental relevance of those canonical texts tends to occur in ecocritical “moments” (many of which have been gathered and

treated by prior scholars) rather than in not only overt but pervasive ecological engagement. The one text that does align with my chosen parameters—black-lived, first-person prose narrative, employing an amanuensis, with a sustained and detailed environmental focus—may be noticeable by its absence, and that is Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*. Northup is absent here due only to my own contingencies of time and space, and I hope that future expansions of this project will give his book the full (and overdue) ecocritical treatment it deserves. For now, other sets of neglected voices are more than up to the task of countering a long line of troubling environmental, cultural, and literary legacies.

Chapter 1

Black Invisibility in Environmental Discourse: Roots and Legacies

“Mainstream environmentalism” is a somewhat loose term open to interpretation, but the meanings of environmentalism have taken shape in recent decades in contrast to rival conceptions from the environmental justice movement. What I will call “Mainstream Green” is an umbrella term that includes core tenets of conservationist environmental activism—such as preservation of scenic wilderness and protection of endangered species—as well as a penumbra of related phenomena that constitute the most visible cultural faces of eco-dispositions: Earth Day, composting, green living, organic farming, and small carbon footprints, as well as the national organizations (Sierra Club, Audubon Society) and consumer retailers (REI, L.L. Bean) whose glossy calendars, magazines, and catalogs propagate “the cultural activities that mediate environmental sensibilities... including birding, hiking, and backpacking” (Allen 127). While “environmentalism” connotes activism, Mainstream Green characterizes as well a range of identities, sensibilities, and lifestyle choices.

The estrangement of African Americans from Mainstream Green concerns and sensibilities is attested to in modes ranging from the comedic to the personal to the empirical. Some cultural criticism takes the form of satire, such as the blog and books series *Stuff White People Like*:

#128 Camping

If you find yourself trapped in the middle of the woods without electricity, running water, or a car you would likely describe that situation as a “nightmare”... White people refer to it as “camping”... Ultimately the best way to escape a camping trip with white people is to say that you have allergies. Since white people and their children are allergic to almost

everything, they will understand and ask no further questions. You should not say something like “looking at history, the instances of my people encountering white people in the woods have not worked out very well for us.” (“Camping”)

Birder J. Drew Lanham also adopts a satirical approach in a column for *Orion* magazine called “9 Rules for the Black Birdwatcher”: “1. **Be prepared to be confused with the other black birder.** Yes, there are only two of you at the bird festival. Yes, you’re wearing a name tag and are six inches taller than he is. Yes, you will be called by his name at least half a dozen times by supposedly observant people who can distinguish gull molts in a blizzard...3. **Don’t bird in a hoodie.** Ever” (Lanham).

Such tongue-in-cheek delivery by turns softens and sharpens the more serious forms of alienation veiled behind the observational humor. Personal testimony from black authors recounts various racial divides in environmental attitudes and experience, divides rooted in personal, collective, and political histories. Poet June Jordan offers a perspective encompassing elements of retreat and writing that inform national myths regarding nature and American identity. Jordan is initially seduced by prevailing cultural norms valorizing the redemptive promises of seclusion in nature. She recalls living alone in a “coastal wilderness”—with only the water, sky, hawks, and jackrabbits for company—and drawing inspiration from a “Great White Man,” a brilliant and successful painter (by universal acclamation a *genius, exemplar, and legend* considered *rich, famous, and wise*) who also lives in his own seclusion a few miles away: “I, a young Black woman poet, duly emulated the isolating rigors of his artistic commitment. Didn’t everyone approve, if not admire, the ostracizing dedication of his art?” (111). Despite having “doubts about [her] paradise of privacy,” Jordan says that “truly traditional/deranged/American images of the good life kept [her] in that wilderness, that willful loneliness” until trauma

imposed upon that paradise: “But someone raped me in the middle of my rented, pseudo-Walden Pond” (111). Jordan proceeds to link the brutality of her attacker to her own willful complicity in cultural derangement:

He had dealt with me as egotistically as, in another way, I had postponed dealing with anyone besides myself...He had acted as though nothing mattered so much as his certainly brute impulse. And was that conduct entirely different from my own, supposing that nothing mattered as much as my artistic impulse, the one that ruled my friends and my family and my neighbors out of my usual universe? (111-112)

Framing her own experience as a dark allegorical inversion of the Thoreauvian retreat, Jordan calls for an end to “[m]isbegotten American dreams [that] have maimed us all,” to “[b]eloved national myths about you and me as gloriously rugged, independent individuals,” and to “American delusions of individuality [that] now disfigure our national landscape with multitudes of disconnected pained human beings” (112), and urges a “great national coming out” as the basis for “collective political action” (114). For Jordan, not only are old, deep pastoral fantasies current and real, but they are symptomatic of a cultural disease to which we are all susceptible.

The intensity and immediacy of personal accounts have counterparts in demographic and empirical findings that further document racially-linked estrangement from Mainstream Green concerns. A key moment in the launching of environmental justice as a national movement came in early 1990, when local advocacy groups sent two letters to a collection of national environmental organizations called the “Group of Ten.”³ Among the concerns expressed in the letters was that while national groups claimed to represent the interests of marginalized

³ The Group of Ten included the Audubon Society, Environmental Defense Fund, Friends of the Earth, Izaak Walton League, National Parks and Conservation Association, National Wildlife Federation, Natural Resource Defense Council, Sierra Club, Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund, and The Wilderness Society. See Pezzullo and Sandler 19 n4.

communities, such communities actually deemed that “racism and the ‘whiteness’ of the environmental movement is our Achilles heel” (Sandler and Pezzullo 3). Together, the letters “called for the environmental movement to review comprehensively and address its own culpability in patterns of environmental racism and undemocratic processes, including its hiring practices, lobbying agenda, political platforms, financial backers, organizing practices, and representations” (Sandler and Pezzullo 4). The letters garnered national press attention and forced major environmental organizations to confront the criticisms. In commemorating his organization’s centennial in 1993, Sierra Club executive director Michael Fischer welcomed “a friendly takeover of the Sierra Club by people of color” so that it would not “remain a middle-class group of backpackers, overwhelmingly white in membership, program, and agenda” (in DeLuca 32). The promises of inclusivity were so dramatic that some die-hard environmentalists called the responses “appeasement” (DeLuca 28) and an abdication of environmentalism’s core commitment to the welfare of non-human wilderness.

Two decades later, whatever results orthodox environmentalists feared from said appeasement are not apparent in empirical data on the demographics of mainstream environmental groups. In July 2014, the Green 2.0 initiative released “The State of Diversity in Environmental Organizations: Mainstream NGOs, Foundations, and Government Agencies.” Authored by environmental sociologist Dorceta E. Taylor, the 192-page report is “the most comprehensive report on diversity in the environmental movement” (Taylor) and consists of demographic studies of “191 conservation and preservation organizations, 74 government environmental agencies, and 28 environmental grantmaking foundations” as well as interviews with 21 environmental professionals (Taylor). The report’s Executive Summary lists twelve major findings, five of which are

1. All three types of environmental institutions have made significant progress on gender diversity, but the gains have mostly gone to white women, and much remains to be done.
2. However, men are still more likely than females to occupy the most powerful positions in environmental organizations.
3. The current state of racial diversity in environmental organizations is troubling, and lags far behind gender diversity.
4. The members and volunteers of environmental organizations are predominantly white. The organizations studied reported a membership of about 3.2 million people.
6. Cross-race and cross-class collaborations are still uncommon in environmental organizations.

The result is what Green 2.0 calls “an overwhelmingly white ‘Green Insiders’ Club” (Taylor).

Both quantitative and qualitative methods play a role in the work of Drew Lanham, who is more than a birder and *Orion* contributor; as a resource ecologist at Clemson University, Lanham studies land ownership and resource use in the American southeast in his ongoing research project called “Defining the African American Land Ethic.” His empirical data documents a steep decline in black ownership of rural land, with, for example, “African-Americans [being] 28.5% of the population” in South Carolina but only making up “about 2% of the forest landowner class” (“Defining”). Such quantitative trends lead to larger qualitative questions such as, “Why would a populace so divested from land want to conserve it?” (“Defining”). Lanham’s team personally approaches individual farmers and owners in a method he calls “divining the land”: through “walks and conversations on landowner properties,” Lanham works to “help assess the African American sense of rural place” (“Defining”). Among the project’s aims are “to tell stories of African American rural landowners and their connections

to and disconnections from the land;...[to] facilitate re-connections to the land such that ecological integrity, economic sustainability, and socio-spiritual ties are re-captured, maintained, and enhanced”; and to document “[a]ncestral themes and appreciation for the past land ethic” (“Defining”). Not only do Lanham’s findings undermine stereotypes and conventional wisdom regarding racially-inflected ecological relationships, but his narrative methodology has particular relevance for elements of my larger study: his “divining the land” is, in microcosm and in a modern context, a striking version of a nineteenth-century approach in which an amanuensis writes down the stories of environmental actors who lack outlets for their personal narratives of ecological agency and connection to place.

Stories and studies from black authors are not the only documents of environmental estrangement, as voices from within largely white Mainstream Green groups often express overtly inhospitable dispositions toward the social implications of environmental issues. Dave Foreman, author and founder of the Earth First! movement, states, “The preservation of wildness and native diversity is *the* most important issue. Issues directly affecting only humans pale in comparison” (34). In “A Wilderness Environmentalism Manifesto: Contesting the Infinite Self-Absorption of Humans,” professor of environmental humanities Kevin DeLuca writes, “Despite the logical inanity of the environmental justice positions and the blatant use of the race and class cards, many environmental movement groups have acquiesced to environmental justice demands” (32). DeLuca further argues that mainstream environmental groups should continue catering to the tastes of the white people who make up their core constituencies:

The United States is not a democracy with power equally divided among each person and his or her vote. Quite clearly, political power rests in the hands of corporations and the upper and middle classes (largely white) and will continue to do so for many more

decades. To these groups, wilderness issues and preservation appeals are more likely to be persuasive than discussions of toxic waste sites. (37)

Rather than question the justice of vast inequities in power, DeLuca cynically favors *perpetuating* the invisibility of non-white people and their concerns so as not to mar the purity of a carefully composed wilderness aesthetic pleasing to the white donor classes.

While these instances of unvarnished hostility from mainstream environmentalists stake out an intentional segregation of human interests from concerns for the non-human natural world, a subtler form of *de facto* demographic segregation emerges from another site of Mainstream Green sensibilities: neo-homesteader movements. In numerous book-length studies of contemporary back-to-the-land movements, demographic data indicates that homesteaders are affluent enough to voluntarily reduce their incomes in their search for simplicity and are highly educated in comparison to the general population. Among the detailed information on myriad practices, values, behaviors, and demographic trends among homesteaders, however, race is a conspicuously absent topic. In the most recent of these volumes, Rebecca Gould finally poses the question, “What about race?” and comments on previous studies, starting with prominent homesteaders (and authors of a previous generation) Scott and Helen Nearing:

The Nearings report that in their many visits with aspiring homesteaders, they never encountered an African American person who voluntarily chose to establish (or return to) a life of small farming and self-sufficiency...Neither [Jeffrey] Jacob [1997] nor [Linda Breen] Pierce [2000] reports on African American or Latina/Latino homesteaders, and homesteading magazines feature white faces in their stories and advertisements. This is not to say that racial diversity in homesteading does not exist, but it is not prominent. (305 n27)

This brief mention of race is buried in Gould's endnotes, but her even raising the topic at all represents a departure from her predecessors, whose silence on race only affirms normative links between whiteness and environmental identity.

Even the titles of these homesteader studies (*New Pioneers*, *Choosing Simplicity*, *At Home in Nature*) align the values of white neo-homesteaders—independence, daring, resistance, fortitude, self-sufficiency, purposeful living, harmony with nature, ecological conscientiousness—with mainstream environmental identities and with American cultural myths. In fact, the “choosing” aspect of the back-to-the-land impulse marks a sharp point of divergence along lines of race and class. Having a choice to turn one's back on affluence and plenty entails privilege that has rarely been acknowledged in studies of neo-homesteading and has never been substantively plumbed. Gould describes the homesteaders she profiles as “playing at farming,” with their simple life characterized as “symbolic action” (64). This “playing” is rooted in deep pastoral myths positing nature as a site of leisure and recreation/re-creation: neo-homesteading is only a recent version of movements in which the natural environment serves as a stage upon which those with enough material and cultural capital to shed old selves can play at creating new ones. The very old leisure/necessity divide continues to form a wedge in racially-aligned attitudes into the modern environmentalist era. When in 1992 local residents organized to protest large-scale hog factories in North Carolina, the activist group included numbers of both white and black members. In a study of environmental attitudes, researchers found that the whites characterized the group's role as “saving the environment” while the black members saw their aim as mitigating the ways in which the hog facilities “negatively affect people” (Allen 121). George Garrison, one of the black activists interviewed for the study, had this to say:

Most of the whites are concerned about the surface waters because *it is recreation for them*. And most of us who live in rural communities [and have old and shallow wells] are more concerned about the ground water because *it is life for us* and the potential contamination of that from the chloroform that comes out of lagoons. (122)

In this episode, the tensions described—between leisure and necessity, between concern for the environment and concern for people, and between surface pleasures and deep survival—encapsulate a larger ideological divide between mainstream environmentalism and the environmental justice movement.

The leisure/necessity split has led many environmental justice activists to hesitate embracing identities or purposes labelled as “environmental.” Lois Gibbs states, “Calling our movement an environmental movement would inhibit our organizing and undercut our claim that we are protecting people, not birds and bees” (in Gottlieb 401). Dollie Burwell, a leader of protests in North Carolina in 1982, recalls that it took her years to consider her causes as environmental ones. She rebuffed interview requests from the Audubon Society magazine, saying, “[T]hey saw me as an environmentalist [but] I saw myself as an activist for justice” (Allen 118). She did not consider environmentalists to be people like her but instead to be “traditionally white males or some wealthier kind of people who can afford to take two or three months and go overseas and protest” (119). Only nine years later, when the 1991 People of Color summit crafted a definition of the environment as “where we worked, where we played, where we lived,” could Burwell say, “That definition allowed me to consider myself an environmentalist” (118). George Garrison also eschewed any identity associated with mainstream movements because he saw environmentalists as being “tree huggers [chanting] go save the whales!” (120). But when the definition of environment changes, so does Garrison’s

sense of identity and purpose: “If we look at environment as holistically, then yes, I am an environmentalist because holistically we are talking about people” (120). The ironies of ordinary, grassroots citizens having to remind environmental experts to think holistically are profound and revealing. An ecology paradigm, in which all members of communities and systems are interconnected in networks of relation, is a bedrock of modern environmentalism, yet mainstream movements have often been slow to acknowledge that human concerns cannot be segregated from strictly “environmental” concerns.

The (In)Visibility of Nineteenth-Century Black Nature Writing

Omissions of non-white and/or non-male authors from canons, collections, and curricula have different valences in different eras. Before deliberate canon redefinitions starting largely in the 1980s, the uncritical, un-self-conscious neglect of women and authors of color in literary studies was lamentable but routine; more recently, such omissions (especially without rationale) smack of obliviousness or willful indifference. Ecocriticism, as a coherent field generally given a birthdate of about 1993 (Armbruster 1), has worked through its infancy and adolescence, and has matured to include ever-widening ranges of perspectives across boundaries of gender, race, class, academic discipline, and critical methodology. For this very reason, omissions and homogeneity are more egregious the more recent the work in question. When Peter Quigley, who in his 2012 study of literary homesteaders chooses to focus exclusively on white male authors, spends his opening chapter and much of his subsequent discussion preemptively fending off the objections of the theorists who, in his view, “unnecessarily politicize the retreat to nature” (3), such defensiveness is necessary because his choices appear so starkly objectionable. Midway through his book, Quigley spells out his rationales for leaving women out of his study, citing “lack of fit”

for omitting Mary Austin and Terry Tempest Williams—they are fine enough writers but there was no “intimate relation with a house” (175) in their works—before claiming, “There are other women writers who have focused on houses in their work, but the quality of the writing didn’t rise to the level of a Terry Tempest Williams, or of a Jeffers, Sanders, Snyder, or Thoreau” (177). He does not bother to excuse (or even mention) the absence of writers of color. Quigley’s rationalizations stand as an all-too-real instance of Rebecca Solnit’s observation that “most nature writing is barricaded with omissions to make it just another gated community” (in Deming and Savoy 3).

Women and Native Americans have in general figured earlier and more prominently than have African-Americans in generalist ecocritical collections and anthologies. In *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, 1996), recognized as the field’s first generalist collection of criticism, women are noticeably present as critics and as authors under discussion, and gender is a prevalent topic of study; Paula Gunn Allen and Leslie Marmon Silko also contribute essays on American Indian literature. There are, however, no black contributors, nor is there mention of any black author in the collection’s index. Among anthologies of primary works, *The Norton Book of Nature Writing* (1990) in its one-thousand-plus pages includes no black writer before Richard Wright, with an excerpt from 1945’s *Black Boy*. Eighteen years later, in *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* (edited by Bill McKibben, 2008), the first black artist to appear in the chronological sequence is Marvin Gaye, who makes it in with the lyrics to 1971’s “Mercy Mercy Me (The Ecology).”

Standards of selection for such collected volumes, of course, depend on answers to the crucial question of “What counts as nature writing?” As many of the statements and titles quoted

here indicate—Theodore Walker’s characterization of environmentalist inclusion as a “white racially *gerrymandered* concern,” Rebecca Solnit’s descriptions of nature writing as a “*barricaded* [and] *gated* community,” the collected volume subtitled *Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*—debates over literature about the environment are often conducted in territorial terms, as contests over inclusion and exclusion, integration and segregation, ownership and eviction, appropriation and removal. These links among the conceptual and the spatial extend to concerns integral to understanding the history of the peoples, lands, and texts under discussion in this study. Turf skirmishes over canonical inclusion mirror in recognizable ways the history of American expansionism and national belonging, with programs of acquisition and exclusion subsumed into tidy master narratives that naturalize inequalities. Works of early black nature writing have remained hidden from view for so long in no small measure because their *authors* had to remain hidden—in the swamps of Louisiana, the mountains of Virginia, the backwoods of Ontario—to elude enslavement, torture, and death. Current ideological displacement bears unmistakable traces of territorial displacement conducted long, long ago.

What patterns of canonical or generic gatekeeping fail to explain, however, are continued absences of representation in volumes overtly designed to open new portals of inclusion for ecocritically-inflected texts by authors of color. Black environmental works from the nineteenth century remain largely absent or scant in a series of collections over the last decade-and-a-half, volumes intentionally aimed at remediating the exclusionary shortcomings of first-wave ecocriticism. In *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (2001), editors Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace cite as a definitive impetus for their volume the late-1990s “direct challenges” to the field of ecocriticism, including “the question of why so few African American voices are recognized as part of nature writing and ecocriticism” and the

argument that “ecocriticism must strive to become more welcoming and attentive to concerns of African American writers and readers” (2). Yet while their collection of scholarly essays expands the boundaries of ecocritical studies to include authors such as Chaucer, Milton, Samuel Johnson, Thomas Hardy, Virginia Woolf, and Robert Frost, only two of the volume’s twenty chapters center on black authors, with Frederick Douglass standing as the only African-American writer before Toni Morrison.

A number of volumes in subsequent years took the relationship of African Americans to the environment as a collection-defining topic. *Restoring the Connection to the Natural World: Essays on the African American Environmental Imagination* (edited by Sylvia Mayer, 2003) includes an essay each on nineteenth-century authors Henry Bibb and Harriet Jacobs, with an additional chapter studying Octavia Butler’s 1993 *Parable of the Sower* within the much older tradition of the slave narrative. *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History* (edited by Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll, 2006) includes historical studies of nineteenth-century topics but deals with no black-authored literary text from the century. Ian Frederick Finseth’s 2009 monograph, *Shades of Green: Visions of Nature in the Literature of American Slavery, 1770-1860*, devotes twenty pages each to studies of Equiano (eighteenth century) and Douglass (nineteenth century) within a larger “literature of American slavery” including writers such as Crèvecoeur, Emerson, and Stowe. In another monograph, *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (2010), Kimberly Ruffin studies at length no works of prose literature from the nineteenth century but does examine poetry of the era from George Moses Horton (antebellum) and Albery Whitman (postbellum).

While my study focuses on prose narrative, a work centered on poetry offers an instructive addition to the volumes listed above. Camille T. Dungy’s anthology *Black Nature:*

Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry includes the works of five poets from the nineteenth century: Paul Dunbar, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, George Marion McClellan, Albery Whitman, and George Moses Horton. While this number appears relatively inclusive compared to the volumes listed above, it represents still a small share of the ninety-three poets included overall. Dunbar, Dunbar-Nelson, and McClellan share certain biographical elements that largely distinguish them from the authors I will examine at length: all were free-born in the second half of the century, all were formally educated and associated with city rather than rural life, and all published their earliest volumes of poetry near the end of the century, linking them to the beginning of a new era (Dunbar-Nelson, for one, went on to figure prominently in the Harlem Renaissance) more than to the continuation of an existing one. Whitman was born into slavery on a Kentucky farm but eventually attended Wilberforce University, with his poetry appearing, as with that of the three poets above, in the post-Reconstruction period. Only George Moses Horton casts a profile with clear likenesses to many of the black nature authors in this study. Born into slavery in 1798 on a North Carolina tobacco plantation, Horton spent his youth laboring on farms and taught himself to read “using spelling books, the Bible, and his mother’s Wesley hymnal” (Page 45). Starting at the age of about nineteen, Horton delivered produce to nearby University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he mentally composed poems and recited (and regularly sold) them to students. Many of his poems were transcribed by students and by novelist Caroline Lee Hentz, also a Chapel Hill professor’s wife, and when his poems first appeared in print as the 1829 volume *The Hope of Liberty*, Horton became “the first black man to publish a book in the South” (Hager 69). While this pioneering feat is enough to preserve Horton’s name for posterity, the further singularity of the achievement lies in a paradox at the heart of my own argument about black nature writing: with his first book, Horton “authored a volume of poetry *before* he

learned to write” (Hager 69). That oxymoronic status as a scribally illiterate writer, along with his art that he composed out of his own authentic experience of the rural world of nature, marks Horton as the only poet in Dungy’s volume bearing strict affinities with other black nature authors of the antebellum era, and sets him apart from the highly educated, non-rural, and later poets who technically share anthological space with him as writers of nineteenth-century nature poetry.

These surveys of black environmental collections are offered here, of course, not as indictments but as indicators of persistent difficulties. Such tabulations elucidate the intractable invisibility of early African-American nature writing even for scholars who state as the very *raison d’être* of their volumes the deliberate opening of avenues and expansion of critical boundaries so as to affirm the essential contributions of black writing and black environmental experience. However, the divergence between these two aspects—writing and experience—presents a core difficulty in locating black environmental works from the nineteenth century. The work of recovery and recognition is a necessary precursor to the work of collection and inclusion. The recognition of black writing has happened alongside the recognition of black environmental experience, but these tracks have been largely parallel with few points of intersection. While Henry Louis Gates reflects on a “back then” (it was only 1985) when “very few English departments...thought of African American literature as canonical” and says that his students today “take the canonical status of black literature for granted” and suggest that he is “exaggerating [and] telling tall tales about a mythical version of Jim Crow in the academy” (Gates 288), a standard body of American literature is now unthinkable without the work of early African-American authors, whose works have invigorated and even revolutionized existing traditions of life writing, captivity narratives, sentimentalism, and verse, and beget new traditions

of folk culture and resistance. At the same time, scholarship has also established the vast and deep environmental experience of African Americans during the century—as laborers, farmers, horticulturists, medicinal herbalists, hunters, seafarers, navigators, maroons, fugitives, pioneers, and homesteaders. The rub is this: the era during which the American nature writing genre emerged as a definitive fusion of experience and writing—in which the eco-actor and the eco-writer *must* be the same figure, with his hand-built house and self-authored book as the bona fides for his status as ecological role model—is the same era in which American historical realities drove a wedge between eco-experience and writing for African Americans. Those who often experienced nature most extensively—the enslaved, the maroons, the fugitives—were also those most likely to be deprived of literacy and liberty and thus authorship. Those who most prominently went on to not only achieve literacy but to author their own experience and produce literature were often those who *left* nature and fled a traumatic rural environment for the domain of the city and solidarity with white abolitionist allies who facilitated access to print culture and outlets for publication.

In the relative absence of environmental literature by black authors (and, for sometimes different reasons, by women) in the latter antebellum period, the work of nature writing's most famous practitioner has come to not only define the genre but to dominate subsequent discourses of environmental thought. Thoreau has expanded to the stature of both nature writing prototype and cultural phenomenon, with Thoreauvian forms and values becoming universalized as epitomizing environmental identity, a trend with lasting, exclusionary consequences. What has been too often left unexplored are the adoptions of Thoreau as a spiritual godfather of environmental identities aligned with race and class, and with sensibilities that line up with whiteness and various related forms of privilege.

Thoreau™: The Pastoral Branding of Environmentalist Identity

Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* outlines the trend of what he calls the “green Thoreau”: Thoreau’s “posthumous transformation into an environmental saint, as a barometer of the pulsations, limitations, and promise of green thinking in America” (24). While part of the phenomenon Buell recounts involves Thoreau’s appropriation as central to an androcentric “cult of wilderness,” the Thoreauvian myth has over time accommodated the experience of more women. Nina Baym says, “[A]s a teacher I find women students responsive to the [wilderness retreat] myth insofar as its protagonist is concerned” (133), and a female-authored *Atlantic* piece (2015) called “Living Like Thoreau in a Cabin in Alaska” lists as the writer’s forebears not only Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Abbey, and McCandless but the “women like them: Annie Dillard, Gretel Ehrlich, Cheryl Strayed” (Saverin, “Living”). While work on the relations between gender and traditional notions of eco-identity has made headway, alignments related to class and race remain relatively unplumbed.

A lot depends on what we are talking about when we talk about “Thoreau.” A September 2015 fundraising letter from the Thoreau Society mentions the organization’s ongoing initiatives—research, public outreach and education, a new visitor center and bookstore at Walden Pond—before making a direct appeal to Society members: “You understand the importance of Thoreau in your life and in the lives of those you have seen touched by his writings. With the upsurge of media glut, Thoreau offers a refuge for those seeking to live a life with intention and authenticity” (Frederick). In the phrase “Thoreau offers a refuge,” the proper noun designates much more than a deceased author’s surname. “Thoreau” here is a synecdoche for an entire edifice of interrelated values: love of nature, ecological wholeness, simplicity, authenticity, self-sufficiency, non-conformity, political courage and resistance, environmental

conscientiousness, artistic integrity and excellence. In invoking this edifice as a “refuge” from “the upsurge of media glut,” the letter deftly updates the thesis of an entire academic treatise—Leo Marx’s positing of the pastoral retreat as an “oasis of harmony” (3) and “cocoon of freedom” (28) from the threat of technological invasion—for a decidedly contemporary milieu. This “Thoreau”—what I’ll call Thoreau™ to distinguish it from the author’s name—functions as a brand, not necessarily in any mercenary sense but in signifying an entire range of adoptable identities, purposes, and values in highly condensed form.

From the earliest days of the environmentalist movement, Thoreau™ has been deployed in the cultural production of mainstream eco-sensibilities. In 1962, in an effort to move Congress to take action on the Wilderness Bill (which had been languishing since 1956), the Sierra Club produced the world’s first coffee table book, *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World*. The first large-dimension, full-color book in the new Exhibit Format series, the oversized volume (with its title, taken from Thoreau’s essay “Walking,” that would become a rallying cry for environmentalists) paired passages from Thoreau with lush nature images from photographer Eliot Porter. Released almost simultaneously with *Silent Spring*, *In Wildness* was in its own ways as influential as Rachel Carson’s manifesto in raising environmental consciousness among the American public and policy makers. In his study of photography’s impact on environmental reform, Finis Dunaway notes that the book’s heft and quality translated into a hefty price: “[t]he book sold for twenty-five dollars...a figure that in 1962 would be equivalent to about \$150 today [2005]” (167). Despite concerns that such a price tag would prove too high, the book outpaced all expectations, selling briskly and going through multiple reprintings before eventually in 1967 becoming the first book in the Exhibit Format series to be released in a paperback edition, in a

version called by reviewers “the most beautiful paperback book in the world” (167-68).

Dunaway summarizes the cultural impact of the volume:

The environmental historian William Cronon...recalls that *In Wildness* “became very nearly a Bible for those young people like myself who came to see the defense of wilderness as a compelling moral mission.” In 1974, a contributor to *Smithsonian* magazine wrote that *In Wildness* wasn’t really a book, but instead “a pamphlet in the tradition of Tom Paine and other propagandists.” It was, he continued, “the set piece of what is certainly the most successful pamphleteering effort of recent history.” (168)

The volume’s photographer, Eliot Porter, himself wrote that “photography is a strong tool, a propaganda device, and a weapon for the defense of the environment” (in Solnit 235), and the Porter-Thoreau book proved to an effective weapon indeed, in terms of achieving political ends (the Wilderness Bill was passed into law in 1964) and in shaping a distinctive and influential vision of the natural world, with the Wilderness Act defining “wilderness” as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (“Wilderness Act”).

The story of coffee-table-book-as-cultural-touchstone includes a tangle of paradoxes exemplifying the Thoreau™ phenomenon, contradictions woven into the fabric of mainstream environmentalism from its very inception: the prohibitive price of a lavish luxury item promoting the wisdom of an author famous for his pecuniary simplicity; the valorization of seeking individual meaning in “a world without machines” (119) presented in a mass-produced volume made possible only by “modern expertise [and] a new photo screening process [producing] 74,00 dots per square inch on vertical pictures and 129,00 for horizontals” (168); the sheer mass of an indoor artifact—“ensconced on many a middle-class coffee table” (166)—that draws on a

philosophy of material minimalism and first-hand experience of the wild outdoor world of nature. Considering that the book appeared during a nascent environmental movement occurring contemporaneously with a civil rights struggle in which black Americans were fighting for even minimal political and economic standing, the story of the volume's success also contains seeds of the environmentalism-environmental justice divide, with the pricey book showing that environmental concerns could be framed and beautified for white middle-class tastes in ways that ugly racial problems simply could not be.

The invocation of Thoreau™ extends into the present in not only championing the sublimity of nature but in packaging as ecologically sound a set of life choices that entail living lightly, simply, and in touch with the natural world. The Tiny House movement is one option in the Thoreau™ line of offerings, with television series, feature films, and glossy magazines promoting a seductive vision of simplifying one's life (in photogenic dwellings as small as 200 square feet or even less, usually tucked in the woods or perched on a bare coastal bluff) in an increasingly complex and acquisitive culture. Even when not invoked explicitly, Thoreau is never far away in spirit from these projects. In a recent issue of *Small Homes* magazine, the editor's introduction lays out a reigning ethos: “[S]mall homes evoke thoughts of a simple and stress-free lifestyle... Well-designed small homes demand lower operating costs and limited upkeep, which can afford their owners the opportunity to work less to pursue personal passions and interests” (Yagid 10). The unnamed godfather of this sentiment is, of course, Thoreau, who in *Walden*, proclaims, “I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living. The whole of my winters, as well as most of my summers, I had free and clear” (69). What one is left to wonder, however, is whether the modern tiny house retreaters can

work less and still afford luxury items such as *Small Homes* magazine, with its single-issue cover price of \$9.99.

In her volume on contemporary homesteaders, Rebecca Gould details the extent to which Thoreau figures as an exemplar and “cultural hero” by back-to-the-landers who see “living close to nature as a means of dissent” and “an experiment in self-cultivation” (37). In a chapter entitled “The Legacy of Thoreau,” various homesteaders by turn invoke the author in such terms as *guide, mentor, model, touchstone, and savior*. Gould also relates a distinctively Thoreauvian aspect to what actually gets cultivated on these farms: “It has often struck me that homesteaders tend to produce as many *texts* as they do vegetables” (25). Gould articulates her conclusions on the motivations behind the writing impulse:

The proliferation of texts demonstrates a *need to tell a story, to give one’s own* accounting of what kind of life had to be rejected and what kind of rebirth was initiated, regardless of the physical, emotional, and financial hardship that such conversions involve...these stories are told because they *have* to be told, because they bear witness to right ways of living and encourage others to follow suit. (25)

When we recall that these white homesteaders typically enjoy the financial and educational privilege to, in emulation of Thoreau, voluntarily assume whatever “hardship” they face, their seeking of *refuge* from plenty stands in stark contrast to the lives of the black *refugees* and *fugitives* (deprived of literacy, homeland, community, and liberty) who were forging their own authentic homesteading experiences in nature at the same time as was Thoreau, the writer-homesteader who becomes the heroic ancestor of those seeking “right ways of living.”

That such class- and race-inflected eco-sensibilities are equated with “right ways of living” worthy of emulation leads to one of the most troublesome assumptions underlying an

environmentalist retreat to nature ethos. There may be no problem *per se* with choices to enjoin a program of purposeful living, with seeking out peace in nature or relief from the frenetic trappings of modern life. What *is* problematic, however, is to frame a retreat to nature as a natural or ideologically-neutral desire or as an option universally accessible to all. With insights from normativity studies never more fruitful than right now—with every normative assumption related to gender, sex, race, class, and ability rightly held up to scrutiny, and categories of the “natural” or the “universal” treated with long overdue skepticism—the normative assumptions behind the appeal of nature (or the appeal of nature writers) are, to my mind, tenaciously propagated into the very present. Such dispositions, to be sure, have a long history. Carol Singley presents the attitudes as leading to the turn of the century canonization of male-authored wilderness romances of the nineteenth century and the neglect of the much more popular books written by women: “Men’s narratives assumed the status of the universal while domestic novels became associated with the particularized, narrow interests of women” (40). Myth and Symbol critics of the mid-twentieth century posited that the pastoral allure of American nature followed from inherent mythic patterns and pre-social psychological structures—that “individuals come before society” and exist apart from it (Baym 132), and that although the protagonists in wilderness retreats all happen to be men, the heroes stand for a universal human nature that extends to anyone with a psyche, even, at least in theory, women.

Peter Quigley contends that the desire for solitary retreat and refuge is “essential to our nature, not an artifice or socially constructed notion” and argues that Gaston Bachelard’s notion of a “hut dream” (a “hope to live elsewhere, far from the over-crowded house, far from the city cares” in a “house [that] allows one to dream in peace”) is a universal “human and well-known dream for a refuge” (72). That both nature and Thoreau as a nature writer have cross-cultural

appeal has also served as evidence that such appeal is more universal than socially contingent. In admiring a romantic Thoreau passage on the sounds of crickets, Chinese author Lin Yutang writes, “Thoreau is the most Chinese of all American authors in his entire view of life, and being a Chinese, I feel much akin to him in spirit...I could translate passages of Thoreau into my own language and pass them off as original writing by a Chinese poet, without raising any suspicion” (128). A literary critic from India asserts Thoreau’s easy concordance with India’s deep traditions linking humans to nature, adding, “I know of many friends who have given the name ‘Walden’ to their homes... Thoreau’s relevance to India is that he articulated an alternative to the industrial era... Thoreau’s place in Indian cultural tradition...has become more relevant in the wake of skepticism about modernism and the depredations of globalization” (Madhusoodanan 44). In July 2015, Ali Taghdarreh, an Iranian who spent the previous ten years preparing the first translation of *Walden* into Farsi, visited Walden Pond to present a lecture, and a correspondent in attendance summed up the reigning spirit as such: “From his little room in Tehran, he recognized the human, the transcendent, the universal in the work of that quintessential American, Henry David Thoreau” (Fallows). Many wonder, with evidence of such widespread relevance to a wide variety of adherents across gender, nationality, time, and space, how could the appeal of nature, or of Thoreau and the seemingly natural human impulses he represents, be culturally circumscribed or socially constructed?

Quigley laments that, according to positions he attributes to his theoretical nemeses, “one of the universals that must be chucked overboard is beauty” and asks, “[W]hy is fairness or justice any [more] a universal than beauty?” (85). But geographer Yi-Fu Tuan is only one of many who have asserted the culturally-determined elements of beauty, especially the beauty of nature:

But haven't people always found it pleasing to stand on an eminence to look at a composition of hills and valleys, woods and meadows? Apparently not. Aesthetic appreciation of a panoramic scene appears to be an acquired taste—a rare taste. Rarer still is the desire to capture the scene in a work of art...[such art] requires...a society that is prosperous and exercises a large measure of control over nature. (109)

Gary Snyder notes that while “there is much nature” in Chinese poetry before the fifth century C.E., it consists of elements of the “forager and farmer’s world up close” and not “broad landscapes”; only gradually did the Chinese “become removed enough from their own mountains and rivers to aestheticize them” (23). The retreat to nature was not a universal dream even in Thoreau’s own day. Maura D’Amore, for example, locates Thoreau within a distinct print culture in which young men drawn into cities by market forces looked to periodicals and handbooks that, along with railroad expansion into the countryside, promised “the benefits of country life within city reach to middle class Americans” and “idealized cottage life just beyond the urban threshold” (58). These print forms, functioning as the *Small Homes* magazines of their day, presented as a realistic option a pastoral retreat fantasy with a decidedly race-, gender-, and class-bound demographic audience. The autobiographical tendencies presented as so natural by homesteaders and nature writers are also socially contingent and based on cultural notions of individualism, subjectivity, and interiority—ingredients definitively baked into the nature writing genre from its formative beginnings.

Black Writing and Green Genres

These critiques do not aim to impugn supporters of environmentalist groups or admirers of nature writing. To reiterate, efforts to live purposefully, to cultivate the peace of solitude, to

seek quietude away from urban life, to enjoy nature, or to devote oneself to environmentalist causes are not inherently problematic. But when an observation that all white, all male selections of ecological icons might have something to do with race or gender is met with charges of illegitimately politicizing matters, there is a problem. When someone suggests that the coincidence of toxic environmental waste sites with the places where poor people or people of color live might be more than happenstance, and is met with charges of playing the race card, there is a problem. The borders of environmental concerns have been carefully drawn so as to include certain elements and exclude others, and calls to widen the scope or look outside the frame are too often met with indifference or hostility. To frame a scene of sublimity in a photograph and proclaim that *this* is nature and thus worth caring about, or take an action such as solitary trekking or individual homesteading and say *this* is meaningful relationship to environment, and to consider anyone who deviates from these norms as, well, *deviant*, are stances that epitomize environmental hegemony. Such hegemonic tendencies extend to the genre of nature writing—in fact, my argument is that they largely *started* with the genre. To take a very limited experience of aesthetic, solitary, and voluntary retreat from plenty and say *this* is refuge, and to take a first-person, self-authored, highly interiorized account of the experience and say *this* is nature writing—these generic boundaries are where the exclusionary hegemony of Mainstream Green environmentalism first became institutionalized. The demands of the genre form the headwaters of subsequent entrenchment of environmentalist attitudes via avenues such as photography, film, popular culture, marketing, activism, and policy—forms that continue to normalize mainstream sensibilities and behaviors as natural, universal, or ideologically neutral, and that disguise wilderness aestheticization or solitary brooding-writing as Platonic givens rather than as the contingent human inventions they are.

What this critique leads to, however, is the need for reforming, and not rejecting, the nature writing genre. Just as I believe it is a mistake to overlook place as an analytic category, I am also wary of overlooking nature writing as a generic category and thus jettisoning the concretizing capabilities of environmental narrative. Narrative theory continues to flesh out the ways in which narrative's distinctive capacities for fostering empathy, imaginative sympathies, and solidarity are increasingly crucial for post-structuralist, post-foundationalist ethical conceptions regarding the environment and human beings, with narrative thick description performing what totalizing disciplines (theology, science, philosophy) do not. My study entails some examinations of how the Thoreauvian nature writing genre came to be and of what it has been as precursors for examining what it can yet become—that is, to lay bare the ideological assumptions disguised beneath veneers of universality and thus open and unsettle the genre. Scholarship on both women's writing and black writing from the antebellum period has presented crucial challenges to long-standing critical orthodoxies. It is time for black nature writing to do its work. If nature writing has been individualistic, it can be communitarian. If it has been exclusively self-written, it can be self-authored in the absence of scribal literacy, and can be authentically eloquent without ornate linguistic artifice. If it has demanded the unification of the narrative voice, it can encompass multivocality. The narratives in *The Refugee*—with their variegated voices, their communal impulses, and their granular, feet-on-the-ground particularity—perform all of this essential cultural work, and more.

When it comes to environmental writing, perhaps the term “genre” is so tied to its linguistic cousin “genus” that genre's role as a classificatory tool overshadows far too much. When we recognize “generate” as another relative of “genre,” however, we are reminded that genre exists in dialogic intercourse with the works with which it is linked, that genre is active

and responsive, both productive of and produced by cultural compositions (see Barwashi and Reiff 4). Previous studies of Thoreau's nature writing have placed him in pre-existing traditions and taxonomies of non-fiction—natural history, travel narrative, backcountry living accounts, and literary almanacs, among others. But the pastoral conflation of art and action—making fantasy a template for actuality—lays the groundwork for a seminal transgression of generic boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. This leap—from a fictional, conservation-minded man of action and nature (Natty Bumppo) who remains highly suspicious of books and writing, to a non-fiction man of action and nature (Thoreau) whose deeds of physical fortitude or environmental expertise are incidental to his more revered (and emulatable) feats of writing and aesthetic appreciation—constitutes the apotheosis of a new cultural hero: the individual eco-actor as eco-author. The type of story this hero inaugurates becomes definitive of the nature writing genre. In *Dramas of Solitude*, Randall Roorda enumerates some essential requirements of the form: “one condition of nature writing...is that human presence or companionship, while not ruled out, is either incidental, beside the point; or it is put at issue...[as an] impediment in the narrative line” (5). Another “important condition of the retreat narrative is that it *not* be a story reported of another”—it is a writer's first-hand, first-person account resulting from a “singularity of vision” (7). The solitariness entailed by these conditions is not only profound but compound—a solitary man writing his own solitary story of his own solitary experience and vision.

These definitional fences work to preclude illiterate or community-minded eco-actors. But the descriptive accounts of the nature writing genre's apparent stability—what it has been—should not be confused with its inherently dynamic possibilities. When we see genre as both generative and generated, then we see “genres as requiring both conformity with and variation from expectations [and] as always unstable, always multiple, always emerging” (Devitt 715). In

this view, despite the hegemonic tendency to root out and exclude deviance from established norms, the inclusion of “variation from expectations” means that genre necessarily entails deviance. In the case of nature writing, the genre that continues to emerge from the productive influx of deviant works would illuminate the profound ties between *literacy* and *literature*, and between *community* and *communication*. The deprivation of literacy and of community is a dual-edged trauma for black nature authors in the nineteenth century. Literate culture depends upon the written and printed letter for transmission and preservation, and oral culture depends upon a community from which and to which spoken communication transmits and preserves cultural identity and continuity. Systematically deprived of the letter and often severed from family and community, black eco-actors experienced a compound trauma—physical, emotional, psychological, and cultural—that has segregated them from recognition as eco-authors. Paul Outka argues that the categories of “sublimity” and “trauma” have corresponded to “the very different ways that a relation to the natural has historically signified along sharply divided racial lines” (4). Kimberly Ruffin describes a dichotomy within the African American experience that she calls the “ecological beauty-and-burden paradox,” saying that while “an ecological burden is placed on those who are racialized negatively, and they therefore suffer economically and environmentally because of their degraded status,” there is also the possibility of “the experience of ecological beauty [that] results from individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils” (2-3). One troubling consequence of the link between whiteness and nature writing has been a legacy of black environmental experience in the nineteenth century that has tipped predominantly toward stories of trauma and burden with relatively few stories that illuminate the beauty side of the paradox. Affirmative black nature narratives exist but have often languished in obscurity or neglect, and I believe that the nature

writing genre can be responsive to stories of beauty and agency that augment the necessary, powerful documentation of trauma and burden.

When it comes to agency and objectification, past stories are related to present identities. Mainstream environmentalists feature in widespread cultural forms as ecological agents and activists, while, despite the energy of grassroots activism in the environmental justice movement, socially marginalized people in an environmental justice paradigm are often ecological objects, that is, *recipients* of trauma, injustice, or neglect, without sufficient political or economic power to overcome entrenched inequities. These differences have some deep roots. Modern homesteaders and other Mainstream Green figures can evoke as a cultural birthright narratives in which their ecological forebears play roles as environmental actors. This seminal nature writing was born from a Transcendentalist matrix that presented the spiritual unity of soul and nature as a universal birthright, as *any* individual can become a “transparent eyeball,” in Emerson’s famous formulation. The spiritual and abstract nature of this union, in which the individual is all subject and no body, lends to its universality, so that the transcendent exhortations can speak across the centuries and across the globe. But these abstract spiritual bonds of man and nature that float to China, India, and Iran can be considered universal only when divorced from American historical realities that marked certain non-abstract bodies (the non-male, non-white) as ineligible for nominally universal birthrights. Those marked for exclusion in the nineteenth century were frequently the objects, and not agents, of environmental action (dispossession, removal, and exile), and objectification persists today. Links among powerlessness, bodies, and agency are real but should not be resigned to as inevitable. Black authors of the nineteenth century, in fact, can serve as role models for transmuting trauma into agency. As will be detailed in the course of this study, Thoreau crafted in his nature texts a careful effacement of the

particulars of his own embodiment, while his black counterparts who homesteaded in the wilds of Ontario often pointed to their own bodies *as* texts, turning marks of brutal objectification into signs of memory, authorship, and self-creation.

Carl Anthony writes of African American environmental history, “We need a new story about race and place in America. This new story is not only about toxic waste dumps and hazardous materials; it is about the fundamental right of a people to have a relationship with all of creation” (206). As with many new stories, this new story may emerge from old stories. In their environmental narratives from the nineteenth century, black nature authors do present themselves and their communities as ecological agents and actors. The most celebrated elements of the most celebrated works of American nature writing—excursion, homesteading, ecological expertise, affinity with home and place, self-sufficiency, communion with God and nature, relations of individual and community, links among writing and self and nature, frontier fortitude, and refuge, among others—are present in these works. But the goal here is not to argue that black authors or their works “qualify” for induction into a hallowed nature writing category. In discussing post-colonial perspectives, Anthony Appiah warns against forcing literature to fit existing and dearly-held interpretative frameworks, saying, “It is not necessary to show that African literature is fundamentally the same as European literature in order to show that it can be treated with the same tools...[or] that African literature is worthy of study precisely (but only) because it is fundamentally the same as European literature” (145); in his view, we should never ask “the reader to understand Africa by embedding it in European culture” (146). In like fashion, I am wary of making black nature works assimilate to existing generic categories so that they can be subject to tried-and-true tools of nature writing ecocriticism. These works are not passively amenable to being wedged into existing classifications, and in discussing the parameters and

conditions of genre, my aims are to generate productive tensions between continuities *and* discontinuities and to examine the ways in which black nature texts themselves can be agents of change and shapers of genre. Stories of actual refugees and fugitives, for example, lend new urgency and poignancy to the entire notion of refuge, and challenges to such foundational themes can call into question the stability of the nature writing edifice as traditionally constructed.

This study aims to carve out new paths from some main tracks already created by scholars I acknowledge as precursors and inspirations. Nina Baym called one of her landmark articles “How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women”; one of my own ambitions could be characterized as examining “How Theories of Nature Writing Exclude Black Authors.” Chapter 3 opens with the feminist critics who first established a body of counter-pastoral scholarship challenging the individualistic, escapist, and universalizing trends in androcentric American literature of the nineteenth-century. Before turning to these critics, however, I will lay out in Chapter 2 just what they were compelled to counter in the first place.

Chapter 2

Nature Writing and the Apotheosis of the Retreat Author-Hero

Characterizing nature writing as a form of cultural hegemony means most simply that one reified slice of environmental expression, with its core of associated values, has become pervasive enough to masquerade as the totality of legitimate environmental expression. Mainstream nature-think derives from a myopic focus on a small selection of elements nested concentrically within much larger, but often ignored, sets of possibilities. Environmental attitudes and identities align with certain features in certain works by certain authors. These authors and works dominate the sub-genres that dominate the larger genres that play an outsize role in cultural conceptions of nature and the human-nature relationship. This dominant version of nature writing has ascended in part through intentionally policed borders of normativity but in larger part through consensus, that soft but deadly effective means of garnering and consolidating cultural supremacy, apparent in both the acclamation of popular appeal and the prestigious attention of intellectuals, scholars, and publishers. In its relation to literary genre, this kind of hegemony is, at bottom, a fiction—and, crucially, a fiction disguised as a common-sense truth.

For nature writing, this means that a particular version—the self-authored account of one's own solitary retreat to nature, epitomized in the works of Henry David Thoreau—has come to define the boundaries of what qualifies: what counts as nature, what counts as writing, what counts as authorship, what counts as authentic environmental experience. This version swells to occupy the whole of the nature writing category, crowding out alternative views or modes of expression, and even precluding the coherent formation of divergent conceptions—for instance, the notion that a book's writer is identical to its author is an axiom so apparent to common sense

that to question it appears absurd. The features by which scholars of the nature writing genre have defined the genre are conditions that not only place Thoreau inevitably at the center of the tradition but that serve to largely exclude others as nature writers along lines of gender, race, and/or class. In this study, I examine a crucial part of what has been crowded out: accounts of black environmental experience, particularly from the antebellum period when American nature writing took on its most distinctive and enduring form. The exemplary text under most extensive examination is a volume of narratives published near the same time as Thoreau's *Walden* (1854). Benjamin Drew's *The Refugee* (1856) relates the first-person narratives of black refugees who fled the United States to settle in the wilderness of Ontario. *The Refugee* has in general garnered little notice from scholars, and for reasons I will detail in the course of this study, it has received almost no attention as either black writing or environmental writing. The challenging of traditional generic boundaries necessitates first outlining those conditions in the genre taxonomies below. And understanding the ascension of Thoreau as nature writing hero requires an examination of how he innovated upon American literature's most prominent nature hero before him, James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo.

In reading these texts—both the traditional and the alternative—I do not jettison the nature writing genre, nor do I feel compelled to move “beyond nature writing,” as the title of one collected edition puts it. While locating flaws in the construction of the genre, I also validate the valuable and even essential cultural work that nature writing performs. What comes to light in reading these texts together are both continuities and discontinuities. At times, the black-authored accounts read like full inversions of the Thoreauvian experience, working as corrective acts of resistance against the hegemonic assumptions of easy universality in the white-authored nature retreat. At other times, the black eco-stories appear as Thoreauvian through and through,

embodying beloved American notions of rugged self-sufficiency, environmental expertise, and ecological belonging. In fact, these neglected environmental texts often do the cultural work of nature writing better than nature writing does—that is, better than the authors, works, tropes, and topics showcased as monuments of the genre.

As a form of hegemony, nature writing is a construction that masquerades as universal, natural, inevitable—in other words, that disguises evidence of its own construction and contingency. But it can only conceal, and not eradicate, such evidence. My approach in what follows is to first examine core elements of the nature writing paradigm (and especially of the solitary retreat narrative) and to expose the hidden fault lines concealed in the very foundations of the tradition. These hairline fractures—along the topics of writing, nature, solitude, retreat, separation, leisure, embodiment, universality, and so on—become the places where the solidity of the entire edifice as constructed comes into question. This loosening allows new space for considering alternative works. In the subsequent chapters, I will read the black-authored environmental texts against the conventional tradition and on their own terms so that these voices of resistance can help unsettle, invigorate, and reconstitute the nature writing genre.

Thoreau is a primary focus of the present chapter and remains to varying degrees a presence throughout, whether as foreground or as foil to other main topics under discussion. My examination is not alone in being a study about nature, writing, and nature writing in broad senses that also cannot escape becoming a study about Thoreau. In the preface to his *Transcendental Wordplay: America's Romantic Punsters and the Search for the Language of Nature*, Michael West introduces Irving, Emerson, Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman and Dickinson as authors under discussion, but four of his fourteen chapters are about Thoreau since “Thoreau did more than any other American—indeed, more than almost any writer one can think

of” to deploy Romantic theories linking nature and language: “How this Concord ne’er-do-well turned himself into a legend, known to millions around the world who have never read his books and revered with religious intensity by some who have, is a complicated story” (xiv).

Complicated, indeed. Lawrence Buell opens *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* by noting that although he is “ultimately less interested in Thoreau per se than in the American environmental imagination generally,” Thoreau is an unavoidable “base of operations” since “no writer in the literary history of America’s dominant subculture comes closer than he to standing for nature in both the scholarly and the popular mind” (2). In Deleuze and Guatarri’s terms, understanding a “major literature” is often a necessary precondition for then examining a “minor literature” that works against the dominant tradition (16). The present discussion will identify areas in which the Thoreauvian hegemony betrays its own contingencies and contradictions, and will also begin to generate the topics that drive subsequent comparisons and contrasts with a “minor” nature writing literature.

Eco-Actors, Eco-Authors: Non-Fiction, Fiction, and the Nature Retreat Hero

Schemas categorizing various forms of nature writing have tended to locate Thoreau within larger traditions of non-fiction prose. In *This Incomparable Land*, Thomas Lyon proposes “A Taxonomy of Nature Writing,” a spectrum of categories that move (in the order he presents them) from works with a predominant focus on non-human nature (and relative absence of the human writer’s own personality) toward works with an increasing presence of the human subject, with personal or philosophical searchings predominating over natural detail. Lyon sets out a spectrum with the following categories (and selected exemplars): Field Guides and Professional Papers; Natural History Essays (John Muir’s *Studies in the Sierra*, Rachel Carson’s *The Sea*

Around Us); Rambles (short excursions near home, such as Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*); Solitude and Backcountry Living (Thoreau's *Walden*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*); Travel and Adventure (Thoreau's *The Maine Woods*, Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams*); Farm Life (Crèvecoeur, Wendell Berry); and Man's Role in Nature (Joseph Wood Krutch's *The Great Chain of Life*, Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*) at the most "philosophical" end of the scale (Lyon 22). The categories at the center of Lyon's spectrum—the ones most representative of the entire genre, the ones in which "natural history and the author's presence" (Lyon 21) are in balance—are also the subsets in which Thoreau's works figure prominently. *Walden* and *The Maine Woods* are listed as exemplars of Backcountry Living and Adventure, respectively, while Thoreau's essay "Walking" (which Lyon does not cite among the Rambles) is arguably the ur-text of American close-to-home excursions, a meta-Ramble so originary that it defies inclusion within the category, more Platonic ideal than example. This taxonomy places Thoreau at the core of nature writing's core, as his works epitomize the forms most definitive of the larger genre.

Like Lyon, Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* also places Thoreau in context among various sub-genres of non-fiction, but to dispel misconceptions that Thoreau's work was somehow *sui generis*, Buell's categorization of "Nature's Genres" focuses on "Environmental Nonfiction at the Time of Thoreau's Emergence" (397). Buell inventories prose forms that predated and often directly influenced Thoreau's writings: Literary Almanacs (William Howitt's *The Book of the Seasons*); Homiletic Naturism (Emerson's *Nature*, Edward Hitchcock's *Religious Lectures on Peculiar Phenomena in the Four Seasons*); Literary Bioregionalism (Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, Susan Fenimore Cooper's *Rural Hours*); The Picturesque (William Gilpin's writings, the illustrated *The Home Book of the Picturesque*); Natural History Writing (Charles Lyell on geology, Audubon and John Bachman

on mammals); and Travel Narrative (from Josiah Gregg to Darwin's *The Voyage of the Beagle*), of which Thoreau was a particular enthusiast (Buell 399-416). Yet Thoreau's work is ultimately as central in Buell's treatment of nature writing as it is to Lyon's taxonomy of the form: Buell's inventory is a reminder appended to his voluminous study of Thoreau's inescapable stature at the head of the nature writing tradition. As one critic puts it, while it is true that Thoreau had prominent precursors such as Gilbert White, it is nonetheless "the Walden story, not the Selbourne one, that consumers of the [nature writing] genre want most to recapitulate" (Roorda 7).

So how does one account for the ascendancy of certain forms of nature writing and of Thoreau's works in particular, both in Thoreau's time and subsequently? Some have addressed the question by way of intellectual and social history; Buell, for example, cites scientific specialization, increasing urbanization, and proliferating literary outlets and markets as preconditions for the mid-nineteenth century emergence of environmental non-fiction as an "important literary enterprise" (398). My own approach will be one of focusing on those categories at the center of Lyon's spectrum and investigating the narrative strategies at work in these core writings, examining how through both form and content—their narrative shape, the tropes they employ, the types of stories they tell, the cultural myths with which they align, and the kinds of protagonists they feature—they have become institutionalized and ultimately hegemonic.

Those sub-genres central to Lyon's spectrum—Rambles, Solitude and Backcountry Living, Travel and Adventure—not only correspond to Thoreau's most prominent nature works ("Walking," *Walden*, *The Maine Woods*) but also map onto other conceptions of Thoreau's place within nature writing. Don Scheese argues that the three titles above function together in

Thoreau's "strategy of pastoral containment" in negotiating tensions between polar forces such as wildness and civilization, Indigenous culture and European culture, or antimodernism and progress (5). Randall Roorda presents the most extensive narrative theory examination of Thoreau in his book-length genre study of what he interchangeably calls "narratives of retreat" and "dramas of solitude." The opening words of Roorda's introduction state his focus: "This study of American nature writing dwells upon what is in my view the central dynamic of the genre: the writer's movement from human society toward a state of solitude in nature. This movement and state I refer to jointly as retreat" (xiii). That such a retreat is both a movement and a state entails that retreat narrative can encompass both the "peripatetic" forms of rambles and adventure travel and the "settling" form of backcountry living accounts. For my own purposes, I will refer to retreat under the two guises of *homesteading* retreats and *excursion* retreats and employ these terms throughout to describe the mutually interpenetrating forms that negotiate between stasis and mobility, or settling and exploring. Homesteading retreat corresponds with *Walden* and with larger American traditions of "founding" texts, while excursion retreat relates to works such as *The Maine Woods* and "Walking," and with American narratives of the "encounter" experience.

Roorda enumerates certain "conditions" of the retreat narrative as a genre. One condition is that the retreat is largely solitary, or at least presented as so: "human companionship, while not ruled out, is either incidental, beside the point; or it is put at issue, figured as an element or an impediment in the narrative line" (5). Another requirement of the narrative "is that it *not* be a story reported of another. It is tacitly first-person" (7). For Roorda, this means that "its antecedents [are] more properly the naturalists Bartram and Audubon or the aesthete Gilpin than yarns about John Chapman or Daniel Boone, however wild and solitary the latter may have

been” (7). A third condition holds that “the nature writer...establishes in the activity of retreat a *role* proper to a certain way of life”; his experiences cannot be too “exceptional” as they must remain “exemplary for others” and not just “personally but socially redemptive” (10). And a fourth condition of the genre is that “the destination of the retreat be figured *as* a community or a web or relations that the writer feels implicated in and is concerned to comprehend—figured, in a word, ecologically—not as mere scene or backdrop against which a lone agent acts exclusively for and upon himself” (11).

This fourth condition actually works in tandem with the first one listed—that is, the retreat is both a movement away from human society and a movement toward non-human companionship—so that my own summary adapted from Roorda’s framework amounts to something like this:

- 1] The retreat figure moves in solitude away from a dissatisfying or corrupting human community and toward inclusion and fulfillment in a redemptive non-human community.
- 2] The retreat figure authors his own story.
- 3] The retreat figure is exemplary to others; his experience is both worthy of emulation and capable of being emulated.

Such ideas prove useful as I alternately affirm and also take issue with Roorda’s claims in my own examination of Thoreau’s ascension to cultural hero status as both eco-actor and eco-author.

Since my detailed account of Thoreau’s role as environmental exemplar serves as a basis for subsequent contrast with the experience of African-American actors and authors who have been ignored in considerations of nature writing, it is worth previewing here the ways in which notions entailed by Roorda’s generic conditions contain the seeds of central tensions explicated at length later on. The initial contrast comes with that first element of the retreaters’ separation

from society. Joel Porte asks rhetorically, “Why is it that Americans...remain perennially fascinated by Thoreau’s example?” (143) before proceeding to argue that Thoreau perfected a perpetually relevant form of American separatism. For Porte, Thoreau’s exemplification of “the spirit of an individual against the domination of society—the spirit of the herd” (144) is part of a “pattern of separation and flight...familiar...in American history, myth and literature” (146), from the collective separation of William Bradford’s pilgrims to the solitary wilderness retreats of Daniel Boone and Natty Bumppo to the separation of Huck Finn from a society insistent on routine brutality and conformist manners. Put another way, American myths often center on a hero ritually enacting yet another in a cultural series of declarations of independence, a sequence in which Thoreau assumes his own place when he comments slyly in *Walden* that the date of his removal to the woods “by accident, was on Independence Day, or the fourth of July, 1845” (84). For Thoreau and his fellow exemplary separatists, such separation is necessary for the “isolate American hero” to seek “the foundation of a more perfect union” (Porte 147), and for Roorda the achievement of such separation constitutes for the retreat hero a central conflict in the narrative quest as he seeks that more perfect union in solitude with nature.

But if separation is the badge of the American retreat hero’s cultural significance, separation is, in the accounts of the black authors to be studied herein, perhaps the greatest trauma to be endured. Along with the physical scars bearing witness to brutality upon one’s own body, separation is a psychic scar beyond full healing, attested to by refugees in Canada and by captives in the United States. Such separation—from family, community, homeland—is presented as the result of impossible choices. Sometimes the choice is between subjection to whipping, deprivation, and torture on the one hand and escape on the other, entailing separation from all that one has known. Other times the options are submitting to familial separation, as

families are broken apart when oneself or loved ones are sold down river, or opting to separate oneself by escaping from the condition of being subject to a master's whim, a desperate choice (often still resulting in severance from family) that is traumatic but seen as the better of two gross evils. That stories of surviving such trauma still culminate in redemption not because of but in spite of separation demands a reconsideration of what counts as "heroic" in a retreat narrative. These divergences in the experiences of separation also form the basis for the distinction between the freely chosen *retreat* of the typical nature hero and the more desperate *refuge* sought by black actors, a conceptual bifurcation germinal to an examination of the nature writing tradition's racial dimensions. Thoreau, for instance, fundamentally characterizes his separation as a move toward leisure, encapsulating his pond-side retreat as "not a hardship but a pastime" (*Walden* 70), a removal more suggestive of contemporary conceptions of leisure (e.g., a corporate retreat or a wellness retreat) than of the desperate *flight* etymologically inherent in the word "refuge."

The next staple condition of the retreat narrative—that the retreat figure authors his own story—serves to largely preclude black inclusion in considerations of nature writing, especially from earlier historical eras. The systematic deprivation of literacy, in whole or in part, for black Americans was pervasive, especially through the antebellum period: education for blacks was routinely criminalized in slave states, and educational deprivations were institutionalized even in free states by inequalities including segregated schools (with black schools subject to closure, poor funding, and inferior resources) and social instabilities brought on by Black Laws and the Fugitive Slave Law.⁴ With regard to environmental writing, those black eco-authors with the

⁴ See especially Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*. In her volume's appendix, Williams compiles "the wording of southern state laws that prohibited teaching slaves and free people of color to read or write" and "the wording of other southern state laws that pertained to literacy" (203).

most intensive or sustained experience with natural environments—whether enslaved on the plantation, hiding as maroons in the swamp, or fleeing the country as fugitives—were often those most subject to the deprivation of literacy, liberty, and authorship. The exceptional African-American who did achieve authorship frequently did so by fleeing the traumatic rural environment; while the prototypical retreat hero flees *to* nature in order to author his own story of separation, the flight *from* nature is frequently a precondition for authorship by black writers. Furthermore, the achievement of scribal literacy becomes an essential ingredient within the most prominent black-authored narratives of the antebellum period. As Henry Louis Gates asserts, the Enlightenment’s linking of humanity to reason, and of reason to literacy, meant that writing became both a signal achievement within the slave narrative and a “commodity” (218) in the production of that narrative. Writing figures *intratextually* as a heroic overcoming *in* the story of the protagonist’s struggle toward full liberation and recognition of one’s humanity, and it also functions *on* the text, as signaled by the ubiquitous *paratextual* elements of prefaces and appendices from the white people who testify that the black author indeed wrote his or her own book—in sum, writing is a provisional certificate of a black author’s full humanity that requires further certificates of authenticity from credible (read: white) underwriters. But if, as Gates says, writing by black authors “was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason” (218), then even published works that include numerous, compelling, first-person accounts of black eco-actors in intensive relationship with the natural environment have remained *invisible* as nature writing because, although they were lived and spoken by black people, they were written down by white men. Finally, the requirement of self-authorship conspires with the previous condition of separation to enact a distinctive cultural trauma on the black subjects under discussion. In the absence of

For educational inequalities in northern states, see Hillary J. Moss, *Schooling Citizens: The Struggle for African American Education in Antebellum America*.

literacy, oral culture becomes even more essential to survival, but oral *communication* requires *community*. Solitude and writing are inextricable in the nature writing tradition and result in enduring cultural works, but orality often faces extinction in solitude. Deprived of literacy, black Americans relied on orality for the cultivation and perpetuation of cultural identity and survival; torn from community by separation, the black refugee's isolation as exile was often total. The result of illiteracy and separation—the deprivation of the visible (the letter) and the invisible (the communal spoken word)—is an enduring erasure and silence beyond measure.

Due to requirements of self-authorship and separation, these are the actors and stories that did not find a place in the accounts of human relationships with the natural environment. Before turning to them, we will first consider the stories that did assume a place at the head of the nature writing tradition, the predominant narratives that cemented writing and separation as indispensable elements of nature writing. The fusion of separation and writing in the nature retreat figure epitomized in Thoreau is a conflation that requires some disentangling in order to examine its constituent elements. One starting point is the categorization of Thoreau's retreat accounts as fundamentally non-fiction. Both Lyon and Buell classify Thoreau's works within schemas of non-fiction genres. Roorda asserts that the first-person requirement of the retreat narrative means that first-person accounts written by historical personages (such as Bartram or Gilpin) are more relevant as antecedents than third-person legends about quasi-historic folk figures such as Johnny Appleseed or Daniel Boone. Yet Porte places Thoreau's separation and flight in a pattern of familiar figures from history (Bradford, Edward Taylor, Jonathan Edwards), legend (Daniel Boone), and fiction (Natty and Huck). Related to this slippage between fact and fiction is the slippage between Thoreau-as-author and Thoreau-as-protagonist, with literary critics frequently comparing "Thoreau" indiscriminately to fictional and non-fictional figures.

Carol Singley presents as a list of retreat characters “Natty Bumppo, Ishmael, Thoreau, or Huck Finn” (41), while another critic states that “Melville...is far less sanguine than Thoreau about nature’s virtues” before writing in the very next sentence that “Ishmael [is] an anti-Thoreau” (Marshall 176). Such conflations of biography and fiction derive in large measure from Thoreau’s own skills as a self-mythologizer, one who is able to disguise the mythic(al) elements of a story delivered (and received) as non-fiction.

In his assertion that the writings of naturalists or aesthetes are more proper precursors of the nature retreat narrative than are the wilderness exploits of Daniel Boone, Roorda presents the distinction as if the most salient difference between the botanist Bartram and the frontiersman Daniel Boone is that the former wrote his own account and the latter did not. Perhaps a more readily apparent difference is that the latter is a national folk hero in ways the former is not. Thoreau bears more resemblance to Boone in this regard, attaining iconic stature in the cultural imagination by embodying core aspects of national myth and identity. So rather than place Thoreau-as-author in a lineage of non-fiction writers, I will examine Thoreau-as-hero in a lineage of fictional characters. Thoreau exemplifies the traits and values of American literature’s most prominent nature hero before him, and in addition to introducing literary-aesthetic sensibilities to the hero’s repertoire, he transmutes the fictional hero’s epic deeds into the emulatable actions of a non-fictional nature exemplar. This influential fusion of eco-actor and eco-author leads to the apotheosis of a new cultural icon: the hyperliterate nature hero whose most important exploit is that of writing.

Pastoral Transgressions

Transgression of the line between fantasy and actuality in American pastoralism is a phenomenon well-established in foundational criticism. Leo Marx argues that the “pastoral ideal...used to define the meaning of America” is rooted in the purely imaginary dream of withdrawing from the world to begin anew “in a fresh, green landscape”; with the discovery of a “virgin continent,” it “seemed that mankind actually might realize what had been thought a poetic fantasy,” with the pastoral ideal of starting over inspiring “various utopian schemes” in America (3). Annette Kolodny notes that the while pastoral vocabulary once belonged solely to the metaphorical world of poetry, the discovery of America led to the “revival of that linguistic habit on the level of personal experience” (8); Kolodny concludes that American pastoral is “the only pastoral in which metaphor and the patterns of daily activity refuse to be separated” (9). Thoreau serves as a case study in a particular variant of this pastoral transgression from art to actuality, and Thoreauvian nature writing becomes hegemonic through the artful disguise of its myth as fact. In his rise to folk hero status, Thoreau’s most important precursor is not the Virgilian shepherd (as Marx suggests) nor the self-effacing naturalist-narrator (as in Roorda) but Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, a fictional protagonist worthy of the American landscape in all its mythic dimensions. Thoreau’s feats of pastoral alchemy lie in moving from the non-literate natural man of action to the hyperliterate natural man of action, and in transmuting larger-than-life exploits into human-scaled ways of life accessible for emulation, bringing the pastoral utopian scheme into the domain of adoptable project in self-culture.

Even a cursory sketch of Natty Bumppo illuminates his aptness as an archetype of American environmental identity. He is solitary, independent, and self-sufficient. His naturalness and authenticity work together as a foil to civilization’s pretensions. His code of principles is as

inflexible as the laws of nature themselves. He also serves as an ideal retreat figure, in his movement both from the settlement and toward the wilderness. He resists entanglements in civilized life, eluding the corrupting complexities of society and the independence-sapping ensnarements of marriage and domestication. Instead, he seeks community in the wild, in intimate familiarity with the forests and with the flora, fauna, and natives who inhabit them. His experiential immersion in the details of the forests (the distinctive plants and animals, the languages and customs of the indigenes) forms the basis for his wilderness competence as he hunts, tracks, and navigates the redemptive hinterlands. As a retreat figure, Natty also functions as a necessary liminal figure, occupying an in-between status as the reader's surrogate intermediary between the civilized and the wild.

These qualities are recognizable also in Thoreau, and beyond these surface likenesses are further similarities that link the two figures. One lies in their accessibility as "hero-types," with the protagonists and their stories exhibiting an archetypal reducibility to icons embodying values in condensed form. Leslie Fiedler argues that Cooper invented the "first embodiment of the ritual drama" (191) that came to be known as "the Western," an archetypal story played out endlessly in television, film, and dime-store novels. This kind of story is "truly mythic, a substantial part of its meaning contained in the bare plot, transcending the limitations of language and surviving even in children's cut editions, television or movie versions and comic books" (Fiedler 192). In like fashion, the "Thoreau story" animates the popular imagination through a certain mythic, "bare-plot" recognizability. Lawrence Buell calls Thoreau "the closest approximation to a folk hero that American literary history has ever seen" ("Thoreauvian Pilgrimage" 175) and devotes the final third of *The Environmental Imagination* to Thoreau's ascendancy as a cultural icon, an "environmental saint" with appeal beyond literary specialists and across lines of occupation and

class.⁵ If Cooper invented the Western, then Thoreau invented the nature retreat, and these potent cultural myths exist far beyond the books in which they were invented. As Fiedler puts it, “It no longer matters whether one has actually read Cooper’s books or not; he is possessed by them all the same” (192). Similarly, one need not read Thoreau’s books to live in a world possessed by the myths they inaugurated. Thoreau’s mythic genre remains even more culturally relevant than does Cooper’s. One reason is the currency and sustained premise of actuality of Thoreau’s story. The Cooper archetype retains potency as an icon, but the closing of the frontier stands as a cultural marker that keeps the events of the Western sealed hermetically in a romantic past, evoked (as detailed in Richard Slotkin’s voluminous work) in popular culture but rarely as a widespread template for real life. On the other hand, Thoreau’s retreat from conformity and “quiet desperation” (*Walden* 8) and toward solace and simplicity remains not only potent as a collective cultural longing but accessible as an actuality to new generations of hikers, homesteaders, artists, and writers. A second reason for the Thoreau story’s cultural efficacy is its versatility as a myth functioning in multiple forms. One form is the “bare plot” Thoreau story, which we may as well call the “Walden myth.” This is a general pattern (man leaves society, finds salvation in solitude and nature) that is appropriated through *additive* adaptation, as subsequent adherents supply enough idiosyncratic details to customize the seed plot for new versions. But the Thoreau story goes beyond this archetypal quality in also lending itself for adoption as a “composite narrative,” one adapted by means of *selection*: from the millions of words in the Thoreau corpus and from Thoreau’s biography as a cultural figure, a subsequent reader can select from a bottomless trove of attitudes, actions, values, preferences, and political stances to build the Thoreau-hero and Thoreau-story he or she wants.

⁵ I am, of course, theorizing myths of American masculinity. Chapter 3 opens with the feminist, counter-pastoral responses to such myths.

But Natty Bumppo is an indispensable template for the enduring environmental hero eventually epitomized in Thoreau and serves as a precursor in two salient ways. First, he is explicitly conservation-minded. Jane Tompkins sees Natty in primarily typological terms, not as a mythic type but as a social type, one of the stereotyped characters she calls “integers in a social equation” (xvi), entities that “stand for fixed values in a system of value” (113). Tompkins focuses on these characters as they stand for social groups according to nationality, race, gender, class, and rank. But another way in which Cooper’s characters function typologically is as avatars of fixed values in an *environmental* equation. In *The Pioneers* (1823), the first-published of the five Leatherstocking novels, the ideological struggle between settler values and nature values constitutes the stage upon which all dramatic action plays out. In the novel, Cooper presents a sequence of set pieces, extended stock scenes in which character types stand in for values on a spectrum of environmental attitudes. The natural entities in question—the trees of the forest, the birds of the sky, the fish of the lake—may change from scene to scene, but the character types are fixed and reinforced as the conflicts are ritually reenacted in each episode. The sheriff Richard Jones and the woodchopper Billy Kirby serve as the arch-utilitarians, whose rapacious appetites for more recognize no bounds: when rods can’t catch all the fish, they bring out the seine-nets, and when long-arms can’t shoot all the birds, they bring out the cannons. Natty is the arch-conservationist, attuned to the delicate balances of use and misuse, predation and conservation. Judge Marmaduke Temple, the settlement’s founder and leader, is the temperate resource manager, mediating between these polar sensibilities. Jones and Kirby dismiss as ridiculous any concerns that resources so evidently plentiful as boundless forests of trees, bottomless lakes of fish, and endless swarms of pigeons could be exhausted (the passenger pigeon of the novel would, of course, become extinct ninety years after the book appeared).

Marmaduke, as a prototype of sustainable thinking, is prudent in managing natural resources for futurity but makes clear that “it is not as ornaments that I value the noble trees of this country; it is for their usefulness” (229). The pragmatic woodsman Natty also recognizes the usefulness of natural entities but operates by a hunter’s code of conservation: “If a body has a craving for pigeon’s flesh, why! it’s made the same as all other creature’s, for man’s eating, but not to kill twenty and eat one” (247). His ethos of minimal consumption (he leaves the pigeon massacre with the one bird he killed with one shot) preserves the integrity of natural populations and of his own moral code, a recognizable antecedent of Thoreau’s philosophy of natural harmony and of material minimalism through the reduction of one’s wants. Natty further voices the fundamental ecological interrelatedness of the natural systems and delivers the “Use, but don’t waste” maxim of his environmental code: “Put an ind, Judge, to your clearings. An’t the woods [God’s] work as well as the pigeons? Use, but don’t waste. Wasn’t the woods made for beasts and birds to harbor in? and when man wanted their flesh, their skins, or their feathers, there’s the place to seek them” (248). For Natty, the fate of man is bound to the fate of nature, and humans must assimilate to natural systems or risk diminishing nature’s, and thereby humanity’s, vitality.

To this conservation ethos of practical interrelatedness, however, Natty also marries a second influential dimension of environmental identity: a higher spiritual-aesthetic communion that transcends utility altogether. While fishing on Otsego Lake with his longtime companion Chingachgook (now the elderly John Mohegan) and the young Oliver Edwards, Natty relates to the youth the days when he had the lake mainly to himself as a hunting and fishing paradise before the arrival of Temple and his settlers. Edwards assumes it had to have been a lonely existence—“It must have been a sight of melancholy pleasure, indeed...without a living soul to speak to”—before Natty immediately rejoins, “Haven’t I said it was cheerful!” (291). Natty

proceeds to recall that in his fifty-plus years of living in the woods, only one other place in his estimation exceeds Otsego, and does so by virtue of its relative inutility: “I can say that I have met but one place that was more to my liking; and that was only to eyesight, and not for hunting or fishing” (292). Natty’s place atop the peaks of the Catskills is a thousand-foot cliff from which he can see “all creation”; the view from on top affords a panorama of “all that God has done or man could do, far as eye could reach” (292). The scene of nature’s rivers and mountains also includes the doings of humans, as he recalls seeing settlements and the smokes of war when “the royal troops burnt the town” (292)—evidence of human expansionism, conflict, and devastation. As he continues the telling of this *one* place superior to Otsego, Natty unexpectedly volunteers yet *another* spot that he “relished better than the mountains” because it was “kivered with the tress and natural” (293). Two miles into the forest from his mountaintop perch lies a magnificent waterfall, a retreat beyond retreat secluded among the trees.

In his subsequent paean to the waterfall he calls “the Leap,” we see Natty at his most aesthetic and spiritual. Akin to Rip Van Winkle’s hollow (also tucked high up in the Catskills), Natty’s pastoral hollow offers a retreat from the cliff-top view of human conflict, as the waterfall locale contains no signs of man and is purely God’s handiwork. The Leap is Cooper’s version of what Leo Marx calls the pastoral fantasy: a “retreat to an oasis of harmony of joy” (3) in a “virtual cocoon of freedom from anxiety, guilt, and conflict” (28). Natty recalls sitting for hours in aesthetic enchantment watching the waters and bubbles fall “like flakes of driven snow” (293). In contrast to the utilitarian who would value such a stream for its service to mankind, Natty proclaims that “the hand that made the ‘Leap’ never made a mill” (293) and credits the “ordering of God’s providence” for the splendor that fosters contemplation, calling the place “a spot to make a man solemnize” (294). Thus there exists a gradation of natural retreats in Natty’s

ecocentric environmental-spiritual terrain. His hut on Otsego stands removed (in practice and in principle) from the village; the ascent to the Catskills summit offers a further removed perspective, a valuable vantage point from which to “look at the ways of man” (293); but only the concealed waterfall—his oasis and cocoon—affords him full communion with the God in nature, and solitude is an essential prerequisite for such communion: “To my judgment, lad, it’s the best piece of work that I’ve met with in the woods; and none know how often the hand of God is seen in the wilderness, but them that rove it for a man’s life” (294). Solitary wanderings in the wilderness afford Natty the apprehension of the divine denied to those spend who their lives in settlements. Unlike the early settlers, who found the wilderness a dreary place of starvation and woe until they cleared it for their own needs, Natty finds belonging in harmonizing with a nature that he sees as a divinely-ordered providence. The result for him is that solitude is not loneliness but its opposite: fellowship in the wilderness community, accepted by the society of the wild and graced by nature’s God.

Such communion is not a given, however, even for the woodsman. As Natty admits to Edwards, “When I first came into the woods to live, I used to have weak spells, when I felt lonesome; and then I would go into the Catskills and spend a few days on that hill, to look at the ways of man” (293). Thoreau relays at greater length his own account of such initial forlornness in *Walden*:

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant...In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of

the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again. 131-132)

Both Natty and Thoreau present such moments as a sort of dark night of the soul, a stage of doubt and despair entailed by the separation from human society, on the threshold of initiation into the society of nature. Persisting through this stage and crossing that threshold—from loneliness to fellowship, estrangement to kinship, solitude to sympathy—leads to inclusion in the larger-than-human community, passing what Thoreau calls “an invisible boundary” (323) beyond which lies a “higher order of beings” and beyond which “solitude will not be solitude” (324). The ecocentric myth of initiation becomes foundational to these nature heroes’ cultural stature.

Thus before Thoreau, Natty Bumppo not only embodies definitive traits of the American nature hero—ecological ideals, conservationist ethos, the marriage of the practical and lofty, nature intimacy, rugged individualism, and self-sufficient competency—but he also takes the steps of nature *retreat* hero: the separation away from corrupting society and the move in solitude toward initiation into communion with nature and nature’s God. Separation and solitude are thus key conditions in nature writing’s hegemony. Yet for all that they share, these two

nature icons diverge on a condition fundamental the new nature hero's role: the condition of *writing*.

If Cooper typologically casts Natty as a stereotyped avatar of environmental values, he with as little subtlety (and as much repetition) casts this man of action as the enemy of books and writing. In *The Pioneers*, Natty proclaims, "But I am a plain, unlearned man, that has sarved both the king and his country...but never so much as looked into a book, or larnt a letter of scholarship in my born days. I've never seen the use of sich in-door work" (134). When the magistrate Hiram Doolittle insists on writing out a bounty order for panthers that the hunter has just killed, the Natty protests, "And what should I be doing with scholar's tools? I want no pen or paper, not knowing the use of 'ither; and I keep none. No, no, I'll bring the scalps into the village" (313-314)—bewildered at the insistence that written descriptions of things are better documents than the things (scalps) themselves. Natty later dismisses as a "bit of paper" (336) the signed warrant that Hiram so officiously wields in trying to forcibly enter Natty's house. During his account of the waterfall, when young Edwards says that the spot Natty describes "is not mentioned in the books," the hunter replies, "I never read a book in my life...and how should a man who has lived in towns and schools know any thing about the wonders of the woods!" (293). In this novel centered on conflicts between what is legal and what is right, and between the authority of civilization and the authority of nature, Natty presents writing as a symptom and agent of society's corruption and aligns himself against the authority of the written word.

In the next Leatherstocking novel, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), the hunter's thoughts on writing become manifestoes in miniature. In an early, extended colloquy with Chingachgook, Natty says of the white people,

I am willing to own that my people have many ways, of which, as an honest man, I can't approve. It is one of their customs to write in books what they have done and seen, instead of telling them in their villages, where the lie can be given to the face of a cowardly boaster, and the brave soldier can call on his comrades to witness for the truth of his words. In consequence of this bad fashion, a man, who is too conscientious to misspend his days among the women, in learning the names of black marks, may never hear of the deeds of his fathers, nor feel a pride in striving to outdo them. (37)

In a later debate with the hapless, tender-footed music teacher David Gamut, who asks Natty to cite the book that warrants his claims, the hunter replies,

Book!...do you take me for a whimpering boy at the apron string of one of your old gals; and this good rifle on my knee for the feather of a goose's wing, my ox's horn for a bottle of ink, and my leathern pouch for a cross-barred handkercher to carry my dinner! Book! what have such as I, who am a warrior of the wilderness, though a man without a cross, to do with books! I never read but in one, and the words that are written there are too simple and too plain to need much schooling; though I may boast that of forty long and hard working years. (134)

When David inquires of this one book the hunter has read—"What do you call the volume?"—Natty points to the book of nature: "'Tis open before your eyes...I have heard it said that there are men who read in books to convince themselves there is a God! I know not but man may so deform his works in the settlements, as to leave that which is so clear in the wilderness, a matter of doubt among traders and priests," leaving Gamut alarmed to learn that he is debating "a disputant who imbibed his faith from the lights of nature, eschewing all subtleties of doctrine" (134).

Taken *in toto*, Natty's views on books dovetail with his environmental stances in a coherent system of values such as experience, manhood, competence, truth, and justice. In this system, books are the enemies of experience: attending to abstract "black marks" of writing obscures the more direct, experiential apprehension of living nature and the God manifested therein. Natty also casts writing as diametrical to manhood: he repeatedly links books to women, children, greenhorns, and the indoor domestic world, and further claims that writing enables cowards to boast unchallenged by face-to-face confrontation. Writing undermines manly competence, as well, another kind of experience leading to the wilderness skills and knowledge that form the basis of Natty's self-sufficiency: the illiterate hunter stands as a foil to the overeducated, soft, green, bumbling youths who become dependent on real men once they step outdoors, their scholar's tools and "subtleties of doctrine" rendered useless. Truth, too, is compromised when books make deceit possible: written accounts, unlike those spoken before a living company of people, can assert their truthfulness without witnesses present to attest to their honesty. And finally, writing too often subverts the justice that is supposedly embodied in the written laws of society, with legality failing again and again to align with fairness. In fact, laws, warrants, and treaties, with all the authority and permanence entailed by the ink of ordered print and signed oaths, are often the agents of injustice, forms of sublimated violence as destructive in their own ways as warfare and bloodshed, and perhaps worse in pretending not to be violence at all. In Natty's moral universe, not only is nature (and all the goodness it entails) supreme, but nature and writing are mutually exclusive. Thus by the time the last of Cooper's Leatherstocking novels appeared in the early 1840s, Natty Bumppo stood as American literature's first and foremost environmental ideal: ecological, conservationist, solitary, pragmatic and romantic at

once. His eco-hero status derives from his extensive and intimate first-hand experience of nature, and this experience is further predicated upon a definitive rift between nature and writing.

A few years later in 1845, Thoreau would undertake the Walden experiment that made him a new, and to this day largely unrivalled, American literary nature icon. Embodying many of the folk hero qualities and cultural values as the fictional Natty—separatism, solitude, individualism, self-sufficiency, unmediated experience, environmental expertise, ecological principles—Thoreau transmutes the eco-hero role through a transformational shift. Of all the exploits this new hero performs—from building the famous house to spending the famous night in jail to forging spiritual bonds with the non-human ecological community—the most important and enduring of his feats is that of writing books.

Nature's Amanuensis: Thoreau's Mythology of Writing

The interlocking steps by which Thoreau innovates (perhaps not in intent, but in effect) upon environmental prototypes before him have the dual effects of elevating him to status of new ecological archetype and of precluding the stories and authors who do not or cannot align with the standards entailed by that ideal. One step is moving the hero and story from the realm of fantasy and fiction into the realm of non-fiction, an instantiation of the pastoral transgression from art to actuality. An essential part of the Thoreauvian myth is that *he really did these things*. Some creative latitude is expected, of course, but not wholesale fictionalizing, a standard upheld in Thoreau's favor by his hagiographers and also held against him by denigrators who wield puerile gossip (the self-sufficient hero was actually a hypocrite whose mother baked him pies and did his laundry) to invalidate everything he ever did or wrote. A second feat lies in healing the rift between nature and writing, in transforming the role of writing from being the enemy of

experience and nature—with the written word being too abstract, domesticated, mediated, and inert to apprehend the vast, living world of nature and its immanent divinity—to being the *product* of experience and nature. Thoreau aspires to *enact* the Emersonian principles linking nature and language. This becomes another element of the myth: the nature disciple, through experiential intimacy with the ecological community, writes in a language that flows from Nature herself, the authentic font of creative powers. Another step comes in moving the eco-hero's exploits into the realm of the accessible—from exceptional feats in formidable sublime landscapes toward eminently emulatable actions in a more hospitable pastoral setting. Action matters still, but the man of action must be accessible to others as a template for living (and his books accessible as a template for writing). Related to emulation is the element of universality that Thoreau carefully cultivates—casting his story in universalist modes of fable and natural symbols (such as dawn or spring), and downplaying or even effacing particularities of embodiment and historical contingency—so that his example is presented as available to all. And binding all these elements together is a comprehensive myth of unity. There is the union of authorship with experience, so much so that experience not self-written is not really experience, and writing not rooted in one's own experience is not really writing. There is also an artistic unity, a “singularity of vision” (Cameron 30) and a singularity of voice beyond the heteroglossia of the novel, with Thoreau's generally assumed to be less like the novelist's and more akin to the orientation of the poet in Bakhtin's formulation: “The poet must assume a single-personed hegemony over his own language, he must assume equal responsibility for each one of its aspects and subordinate them to his own, and only his own, intentions” (Bakhtin 297). This singularity results in what Bakhtin calls “a tension-filled unity of language” (298). Thus, the distinctive and innovative features of the Thoreauvian myth—its actuality, its writing hero, its emulatable scale,

its universality, its unity—are all held together in an overarching “tension-filled unity.” These features are at once the foundations of the story’s hegemonic powers and the locations of greatest tension, the places where, when tested, the myth begins to give away its own secrets.

In characteristically bold fashion, Thoreau opens *Walden* with a sentence that flaunts his story’s fictions from its first lines: “When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only” (3). The sentence sets forth concisely the contours of the American nature writing tradition: first-person authorship, separation, solitude in nature, and self-sufficiency. The balance of generality and particularity in delicate measure sets the tone for a non-fiction fable, one rooted in actualities of time and place. This opening also speaks directly to those foundational features of actuality and writing. With its assertion that he wrote the “bulk” of the book while living alone at the pond, the claim creates an impression of *in situ* composition, anchoring the act of writing to nature and to the retreat experience. Yet we know that *Walden* is among the most famously revised books in American literary history, going through seven complete manuscript rewrites and more than doubling in length from the first draft in 1847 to the published book in 1854 (Ross 155). Strictly speaking, then, Thoreau wrote the “bulk” of the book after he returned to “civilized life,” as he called it later in that opening *Walden* paragraph. This kind of composition was unique in his contemporary milieu: for the most part,

[f]ew of the Transcendentalists cared much for revision; the forms they favored—the journal, the lecture, the essay, the sermon—emphasized spontaneity and pardoned haste...Nothing quite like the wholesale dismantling, reshuffling, expanding, and

reconstructing to which Thoreau subjected his original manuscript can be found among the literary works Transcendentalism produced. (Packer 249)

Nature writing's most influential volume thus opens with a daring equivocation on the relationship between actuality and writing. Thoreau's claim that he wrote his book mainly *in* the woods, as well as the resulting impression that the book is likely more spontaneous and less mediated in consequence of such composition, is belied by the reality that the volume is unusually refined, mediated through hundreds upon hundreds of manuscript pages, over many months and years, written mainly in a busy house in a busy town. The result is a work that is highly artful, in the multiple senses of that term, its artfulness on full display in the opening claim that pretends to immersion and immediacy while disguising the book's own highly mediated refinement.

Even more confounding is that after Thoreau's initial claim that he wrote his book while living in the woods, we are presented with an elaborate account of his life at the pond, and we see the protagonist doing almost everything—building a house, hoeing beans, bathing ritually at dawn, playing the flute, daydreaming, cooking and eating a woodchuck, you name it—everything, that is, *except* writing. But again, the actuality belies this omission. Biographer Robert D. Richardson details Thoreau's prodigious output: “[Thoreau] produced more writing of higher quality over a greater range of subjects while he was living at Walden than at any other period of his life. In twenty-six months he wrote two complete drafts of *A Week*, a complete draft of *Walden*, a lecture on his life at Walden, a lecture essay on Carlyle, and the first third of *The Maine Woods* that is the ‘Ktaadn’ essay” (154). So if, in fact, he didn't truly write *Walden* (at least in bulk) while in the woods, he did write his first book (and much more) there—a fact he thoroughly elides.

Now one might object to such reductive literalism, and assert that equivocation is the mythologizer's stock-in-trade, or that memoirists deal in nothing so much as strategic concealment and revelation—points I gladly concede. The real issue here, however, is that claims of writing's inextricable links with authenticity and actuality have been propagated as the sentries guarding admission to the nature writing tradition. Asking these questions of Thoreau's book—How true is it? Can we trust it? Who wrote it, and how was it composed? Do the facts back it up? What about inconsistencies? Can anyone vouch for this?—is crucial because these are the very questions to which black authors and their stories have been subjected and subsequently dismissed. Along with the struggle for equal political and legal rights comes the struggle for equal *literary* rights, in asking that readers, critics, publishers, and canonizers simply apply standards fairly and consistently, whether in demands for fidelity in non-fiction or allowances for creative license that serves greater truths in fiction, or for innumerable registers of truthfulness in the intermediary domains of the essay and memoir. Holding Thoreau to joyless, pedantic standards is not the real aim; the issues are calling into question the validity and applications of such standards in the first place, and drawing attention to readers' complicity in the hegemony of genre through a selectively wielded skepticism, too often along racial lines.

The assumption of actuality inherent to Thoreau's stance leads to a second claim: that through authentic experience, the true nature writer gains privileged access to the language of nature. In contrast to the stance typified by Natty—that writing alienates one from nature—Thoreau throughout his works makes the case for a fundamental unity of language and nature. A key tenet of the Thoreauvian myth is that his language derives from nature, and that his writing is the product of his first-hand experience with the natural world. Through such intimacy, he taps into nature as the wellspring of his creativity and language, and thus he speaks the language of

nature—or better yet, nature herself speaks through him in his hard-earned role as Nature’s Amanuensis. Thoreau is, like Natty and the natives in Cooper’s novels, wary of writing’s tendency toward abstraction and away from nature, especially in the main currents of Eurocentric and logocentric civilization. As a stance against abstraction in language, Thoreau explicitly roots his concrete language in nature and place. *A Week* opens with a preference for the Indians’ original name for the Concord River—the Musketaquid, or “Grass-ground River” (5)—over the more abstract “Concord” that the English settlers assigned to it: “It will be Grass-ground river as long as grass grows and water runs here” (5). Aligning himself with the aborigines in touch with the natural elements, Thoreau valorizes the particular, distinctive features over the generic and conceptual. The titles of his works exhibit this tendency, as well. In contrast, for example, to Emerson’s more abstract titles (*Nature*, “Self-Reliance,” “The Over-Soul,” “Circles,” “The Poet”), Thoreau’s titles (*A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, *Walden*, *Cape Cod*, *The Maine Woods*, “Ktaadn”) tend to be rooted in particular places, providing an actual ground from which his language and writing spring.

In the “Spring” chapter’s visionary account of the thawing sandbank, an episode that serves as the climax of his Walden experience and narrative, Thoreau communicates a primordial unity of nature, body, and language. In “the laboratory of the Artist who made the world and me” (306), he says, the visible array of flowing patterns exhibit the prototypes of nature’s forms (leaves, feathers), the human body (lungs, veins, lobes of various extremities), and language: the aural phonemes and visual alphabetic letters, with thin letters “l” and “f” corresponding to thin sounds of those letters in the word “leaf” (which denote a thin object), and fat letters (the single-lobed b or double-lobed B) corresponding to the fat sounds of the words “lobe” and “globe” (which denote fat objects). The vision culminates in a bookish metaphor: “The earth is not a

mere fragment of dead history, stratum upon stratum like the leaves of a book, to be studied by geologists and antiquaries chiefly, but living poetry like the leaves of a tree...not a fossil earth but a living earth” (309). His body and his language flow, with the rest of nature, from the same primordial font, and his presence at this aboriginal wellspring—“this one hillside [that] illustrated the principles of all the operations of Nature” (308)—means that his language supersedes the dead leaves of books and springs directly from the same source as nature’s living vegetative leaves.

The links between linguistic expression and natural forms are woven thoroughly into Thoreau’s larger works through pervasive figures of speech in which acts of language and acts of nature are interchangeable. His bean crop becomes a sublimated form of composition in such formulations: he casts his work in the field as “making the yellow soil *express* its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper and millet grass, making the earth *say* beans instead of grass—this was my daily work” (emphasis added, 157). He says that his field “was, as it were, the connecting link between wild and cultivated fields...so my field was, though not in a bad sense, a half-cultivated field” (158)—a notion that serves as a reflexive comment on the aspirations for his own language of composition, in aiming to link wild nature and human culture in fresh, authentic ways. As his cultivation encourages forms of natural expression, so much greater for him is the influence of the natural on his own language: he works in his bean-field “[n]ot that [he] wanted beans to eat” but because “some must work in fields if only for the sake of tropes and expression, to serve a parable maker one day” (162). As nature’s scribe, the parable maker harvests his very language from the natural world.

In the essay “Walking,” Thoreau lays out more overtly his philosophy of the relationship between nature and human language. His view aligns in ways with that of Natty, in that the

abstract, civilized language of books can never contain the wildness and power of nature: “Here is this vast, savage, howling mother of ours, Nature, lying all around, with such beauty...and yet we are so early weaned from her breast to society” (170), a society that consequently produces a tame and too-civilized literature. In all his wide reading, Thoreau can find no existing writing that approaches the reality of nature: “I do not know of any poetry *to quote* which adequately expresses this yearning for the Wild...I do not know where to find in any literature, ancient or modern, any account which contents me of that Nature with which even I am acquainted” (emphasis added, 167). Convinced that he has exhausted the search for extant literature to cite, he lays out the conditions for marshalling the language that more adequately could approach nature’s wildness. Though he presents this in terms of a hypothetical “poet,” the passage delineates the aspirations for his own life’s work:

Where is the literature which gives expression to Nature? He would be a poet who could impress the winds and streams into his service, to speak for him; who nailed words to their primitive senses, as farmers drive down stakes in the spring, which the frost has heaved; who derived his words as often as he used them,—transplanted them to his page with earth adhering to their roots; whose words were so true and fresh and natural that they would appear to expand like the buds at the approach of spring, though they lay half smothered between two musty leaves in a library,—aye, to bloom and bear fruit there, after their kind, annually, for the faithful reader, in sympathy with surrounding Nature.

(167)

This characterization, in combination with Thoreau’s other accounts of his own experience, serves to bolster his own nomination as one who could attain such a language. His farming analogy and the reference to the poet who “derived his words as often as he used them” suggest

that his own first-hand experience in contact with nature is the source from which such suitable words may be derived. This emphasis on deriving words and “nail[ing] them to their primitive senses” also places Thoreau in distinctive intellectual currents, amidst a wave of etymological mania that took hold of Europe and America as philology aspired to the stature of true science.

Particularly appealing was the idea that if one traced words far enough back to their deepest source, that source was always nature. Multiple thinkers formed the matrix for Thoreau’s own versions of this stance. Emerson’s theory of language in his seminal *Nature* states such a conviction as its first axiom: “1. Words are signs of natural facts...Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from such material appearance” (13). Thoreau in his own journal entries and reading lists noted the overt influence of philologists Charles Kraitsir (*Significance of the Alphabet and Glossology, being a Treatise on the Nature of Language and the Language of Nature*) and Richard Chenevix Trench (*On the Study of Words*). These two thinkers in particular informed Thoreau’s *Walden* revisions and expansions in the early 1850s, as he found theory to bolster his own philosophy of language: “Thoreau was finding confirmation of his...long-held belief that language has a primary relation to nature...[Kraitsir and Trench] argued that the underlying unity of language was a physiological one, that all languages are composed of a few basic sounds, that these sounds, these basic phonemes, are the necessary outcome of the encounter of man, mind, and nature” (Richardson 292-93). Coupled with his stance of actual immersion in wildness, this theory of language undergirds Thoreau’s authority as nature writer: nature is the original wellspring of language, and his experiential presence at this font means that his language flows directly from the life-world. Thus his language can obviate the abstraction and tameness of civilization, and he can conquer the divide between nature and writing.

But the conclusions that Thoreau draws from these incipient philological studies outpace the theories themselves, as Thoreau assumes implications for *all* of language (spoken and written) from arguments limited to *spoken* language. Even if oral phonemes did have a natural or physiological basis, the visual alphabetic letters are symbols with an abstract relationship to the sounds they stand for. Despite Thoreau's conviction that nature (a thin leaf), orality (the thin sounds of "l" and "f"), and writing (the thin appearances of the letters "l" and "f") have a primordial unity, this vision is more dream or metaphor than science of language. Thoreau is working to bridge a divide between nature and the written word that goes back much further than Cooper's Natty Bumppo. The ideological tension between orality and literacy dates back to at least the ancient Greeks, with Plato's project to have alpha-numeric literacy, and the abstraction it allows for, finally supplant the oral Homeric mindset that still held cultural sway. The purpose of such abstraction is to liberate the thinking subject from immersion in the natural world, to rescue the *psyche* from what Nietzsche calls, in his critique of Plato, "the rabble of the senses" (Nietzsche 22). For Plato, the immersion in bodily experience so characteristic of the oral mindset "constituted the chief obstacle to scientific rationalism, to the use of analysis, [and] to the classification of experience"; rather than identify with the life-world of nature, humans should instead, through abstraction and alphabetic representation, "become the 'subject' who stands apart from the 'object' and reconsiders it and analyses it and evaluates it" (Havelock 46-47). In Romantic reaction to the alienation from nature entailed by such abstraction, Thoreau proposes to re-immense himself in the life-world and find there a written language that joins him to, rather than divides him from, nature. This remains more ideal than actuality.

A worthy ideal it is, though, and the intrusion of literality here again seems to throw cold water on aspirations of beauty and imagination. But the literalness with which Thoreau's

proposed unity of nature and writing has been taken (and subsequently wielded) requires a certain literalness in testing that proposal, especially in laying the groundwork for examining issues of writing and embodiment in texts long ignored as nature writing. Despite Thoreau's notion that the written word "may be carved out of the breath of life itself" (*Walden* 102), writing is a form of *disembodiment*, a representation designed to exist in the absence of breath and voice. Writing allows material previously carried along in the river of the spoken word and lived experience and sensory immersion to be sieved out of that stream and fixed somewhere else, in books and on shelves, outside of living bodies. Speech is of the body; writing, by design, leaves the body behind. The disembodiment that writing allows for Thoreau is a cornerstone of the universality proclaimed for the example his experience affords others, and this disembodied universality will be taken up in earnest in the following chapters, in contrast to the quite embodied and historically particularized stories of black eco-actors, with their spoken accounts of engagement with the natural life-world.

But where Thoreau's vision fails as a reliable theory of language, it succeeds mightily as a mythology of language, influential down the succeeding decades in the template for the aspiring nature writer. The key pillars—of 1] actuality, 2] writing while in deep, solitary, experiential contact with nature, and 3] writing in a language flowing from nature—constitute the generic expectations that future writers emulate and that subsequent readers expect. A test case in the nature and extent of this enduring influence lies with one of Thoreau's most overtly self-professed apprentices, Annie Dillard, whose *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* Dillard acknowledges as her attempt to write a Thoreauvian book. A 2015 profile, "The Thoreau of the Suburbs," relies on archival material and interviews with Dillard to illuminate details in the composition of a book hailed as a masterpiece of American nature writing. The profile's author, Diana Saverin,

notes her own phase under Thoreau's spell—"I absorbed [*Walden's*] emphasis on solitude and looked for ways to experience it in my own life...I camped alone...I lived in an Alaskan cabin without water or electricity alone"—before turning to another writer's emulation of Thoreau. In poring over Yale's massive archive of Dillard's journals and notecards, Saverin calls what she discovered "evidence of [Dillard's] deliberate effort to join the ranks of American authors who had ventured off into the wild." The effort required must have been formidable, since the solitary nature hero's profile contrasted so starkly with Dillard's situation: female, living with her husband in a suburban neighborhood, with a social calendar of lunch dates and softball games. Dillard "knew what American audiences wanted when she began working on her book"; according to her journal, she considered writing the book as a novel, voiced by an unmarried male narrator living alone in a one-room house inspired by a broken-down cottage she had hiked by. Says Saverin, "Without the constraints of non-fiction, Dillard wrote, she would have the right sex (male), the right number of people (one), and the right home (remote cabin)." Dillard eventually decides to write in her own voice in a non-fiction mode but leaves her husband and their neighborhood out completely, casting her surroundings as a teeming wilderness and emphasizing her solitude. She also wrote most of the book sitting in a college library, at a window overlooking a busy parking lot. Dillard readily acknowledges the omissions, but insists, "I didn't obscure anything, I just left it out"; she did not make things up because, in Saverin's words, "a nonfiction writer has an unwritten pact with the reader: that the writer is telling the truth." In rationalizing the tensions between fiction and non-fiction, or between distortions of commission and omission, Dillard finally calls her choices "mythologizing," noting, "[N]ot that one is aware that one is mythologizing, but you want everything simplified and enlarged."

This is a helpful admission, because what should be clear from all this is not that Dillard moved from fiction to non-fiction, but from one kind of fiction to another. In the space created by her extreme omissions, readers fill in their own blanks, conditioned like Dillard herself by the expectations of genre. Yet Dillard is at times exasperated by the conclusions her audiences draw, saying that readers' notion of the nature writing process is "that you just sit on a tree stump and take dictation from some little chipmunk" (Saverin). But this caricature derives straight from the foundational premises inaugurated by Thoreau, the dictates of actuality, *in situ* composition, and possession of the language to write as nature's scribe. These conditions become the common-sense conventions of the nature writing genre, illustrating how a force as benign-sounding as "conventional wisdom" so effectively does the work of hegemony, as the expected conventions of genre dictate even the most fundamental terms of Dillard's authorial choices. Taking *plein air* dictation from a chipmunk may be a parody of the nature writer's art, but the *writer's* conformity to the genre's codes bears as much responsibility for the distorted stereotype as does the *reader's* assimilation.

Such a conclusion can sound accusatory, but the formation of popular stereotypes rarely follows neatly from the intentions of authors, who can be victims of hegemony as well as its perpetrators. Thoreau, like Dillard after him, often becomes a casualty of his own mythologies. The inherited impression of spontaneous composition as nature's onsite scribe becomes a picture worthy of mockery in Dillard's chipmunk image, and such a picture obscures the intricate aesthetic and ethical work performed by the art that emerges from the much more complex processes actually involved.

The Muddy Other: Writing, Dusky Knowledge, and Disunity in Pastoral Pairings

The conditions examined to this point—actuality, writing in nature, and writing in nature’s language—are seams holding together nature writing’s elements in an overall “tension-filled unity.” These seams are also locations of potential rupture, where those tensions begin to betray the contradictions inherent in the genre. One final seam to probe is the condition of unity, in this case the unity of eco-actor with eco-author, among the most fundamental expectations of the genre, and the almost miraculous feat that Thoreau seems to perform in bridging the deep divide between unmediated experience and abstract representation.

The complications of nature, retreat, solitude, and self-unity are displayed in one of the well-rehearsed themes in the literature of pastoral escapism, and in Americanist criticism of that literature: the pairing of the white, solitary retreat hero with a dark-skinned, same-sexed companion. In his seminal formulation of the trope, Leslie Fiedler outlines a myth that “haunts the American psyche”: “an archetypal relationship...[of] two lonely men, one dark-skinned, one white, bend together over a carefully guarded fire in the virgin heart of the American wilderness; they have forsaken all others for the sake of the austere, almost inarticulate, but unquestioned love which binds them to each other and to the world of nature which they have preferred to civilization” (192). The white bachelor rarely retreats from society alone, paired as he is with a racial Other, an unlettered and more natural man who emanates inherent goodness. The most famous literary pairs are Natty and Chingachgook, Ishmael and Queequeg, Huck and Jim, though the device persists into popular culture in pairs such as the Lone Ranger-Tonto and Han Solo-Chewbacca, and other “twinning” of white and black characters—“invariably male”—in television and movies (Rampersad 50). In its classic versions, the pairing device both derives

from and perpetuates “a sense of black or native American familiarity with Nature, noble in essence and finally inaccessible to the white man” (Rampersad 50).

Left largely unexamined in this pairing trend is Thoreau’s own act of twinning in the scenes with the woodchopper Alek Therien, in which Thoreau foregrounds, at least for this episode within his larger myths of unity, the *disunity* of eco-actor and eco-author. Though far less expansive than the story, for example, of Natty and Chingachgook’s relationship, the account of Therien in the “Visitors” chapter of *Walden* occurs in a relatively lengthy passage (among the *dramatis personae* of *Walden*, only the pond and Thoreau himself receive more thorough characterization) in which striking similarities (and complementary contrasts) between Thoreau and Therien become apparent. Thoreau even augments existing surface likenesses—they are of the same ethnic extraction (French) with similar surnames—by fudging that Therien “was about twenty eight years old” (145), Thoreau’s own age at the time, when the woodchopper was actually thirty-four years old. In this doubling, which casts the two as virtual “doppelganger[s]” (Porte 7), Therien is not a racial Other as in conventional formulations of the light-dark pairing, but other differences—in education, in literacy, in affinities for aesthetic and contemplative reflection—lead Thoreau to conclude, as we will see, that Therien is “dark and muddy” (150) in his own ways.

Thoreau’s portrait presents Therien as the very picture of “natural man.” Therien delights in his wooded life and occupation; he carries a pail of cold woodchuck meat for his lunch; wild birds alight on him and eat from his fingers. Thoreau notes, “In him the animal man chiefly was developed. In physical endurance and contentment he was cousin to the pine and the rock...But the intellectual and what is called spiritual man in him were slumbering as in an infant” (146-7). Thoreau ascribes Therien’s intellectual and spiritual dormancy to his education by Catholic

priests, who, as they do with “aborigines,” only educate the pupil “never...to the degree of consciousness, but only to the degree of trust and reverence, and a child is not made a man, but kept a child” (147). Thoreau does extol Therien for being genuine, simple, and satisfied, but these praiseworthy traits also leave him as an enigma in Thoreau’s estimation: “I did not know whether he was as wise as Shakespeare or as simply ignorant as a child, whether to suspect him of a fine poetic consciousness or of stupidity” (148). So was this figure an undereducated yokel or was he, as a townsman (probably Emerson) described him, “a prince in disguise” (148)? If disguise it was, Thoreau, it seems, tried to get him to remove it, to aspire to a spiritual princehood that could be his, but to no avail: “I never could get him to take the spiritual view of things; the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate” (150).

Ambivalent to the very end, Thoreau closes the portrait with a final burst of simultaneous affinity and disdain. Thoreau praises Therien’s “positive originality” and his rare virtues of “thinking for himself and expressing his own opinion,” phenomena that “amounted to the re-origination of many of the institutions of society. Though he hesitated, and perhaps failed to express himself distinctly, he always had a presentable thought behind” (150). But Thoreau concludes with a revocation that tips his ambivalence toward final disappointment:

Yet his thinking was so primitive and immersed in his animal life, that, though more promising than merely a learned man’s, it rarely ripened to any thing which can be reported. He suggested that there might be men of genius in the lowest grades of life, however permanently humble and illiterate, who take their own view always, or do not pretend to see at all; who are as bottomless even as Walden Pond was thought to be, though they may be dark and muddy. (150)

In whole, the portrait casts Therien as, in crucial ways, the very embodiment of ideals and values championed by Thoreau. Therien is presented as simple, genuine, self-reliant, and satisfied. Rather than accept *prima facie* many fundamental societal institutions (such as money, work, and food), he reasons them out for himself and relies on his own direct experience as the final test of their worth. He is primitive and immersed in his natural life. Finally, the animal, the child, and the Indian comprise, in Thoreau's larger value system, a noble triad of figures standing for uncontaminated and authentic experience of the natural world, and Therien is linked to each, often repeatedly, in the passage. These are, however, the very traits for which Thoreau ultimately and almost pitifully damns him. He is *too* primitive and immersed in his natural being. He is presented as *merely* animal, infant, aboriginal. In Thoreau's moral universe, where wakefulness equals virtue and the cardinal sin is slumber, Therien is a case of arrested development in whom "higher" spiritual capacities are indeed "slumbering"; his low grade of life keeps any potential genius in him "dark and muddy."

What the passage makes clear is that in Thoreau's eyes, the tragedy of Therien is that his immersion in experience and in nature is meaningless, and therefore inferior and wasted, because it does not find expression in *writing*. While Thoreau in *Walden* remains notably silent on his own acts of composition, key attitudes toward writing appear in refracted form in the woodchopper scene. Therien is what we might today call functionally literate: he can and does read at times, to pass time on rainy days, for example, though "[h]is only books were an almanac and an arithmetic" (148). In terms of writing, he displays a handwriting (with proper French accents) in which he takes pride, and has even written letters on behalf of others less literate than he is. But in his own estimation, writing beyond a functional level exceeds his capacities, and he seems awed by those who do display a command of language: "He particularly revered the

writer and the preacher. Their performances were miracles” (147). Even conceiving of writing for more than “simple expediency” is difficult for him: as Thoreau says, “When I told him that I wrote considerably, he thought for a long time that it was merely the handwriting which I meant” (147). Thoreau’s urgings that Therien take a higher view of things extend to the act of writing, but even the difficulties of spelling alone are too daunting: “I asked him if he ever wished to write his thoughts. He said that he had read and written letters for those who could not, but he never tried to write thoughts,—no, he could not, he could not tell what to put first, it would kill him, and then there was spelling to be attended to at the same time!” (148). However admirable Therien’s thoughts may be, in the end they are wasted because he cannot or will not write them down. He “failed to *express* himself distinctly” (150); his thinking and experience “rarely ripened to any thing which can be *reported*” (150); even “genius” ultimately remains “dark and muddy,” and thus worth little, in one who is “permanently humble and *illiterate*” (150). In the encounter with this doppelganger, Thoreau’s tests the limits of his own ideals. Here the romantic rubber hits the realistic road, and the act of pastoral transgression from art to actuality reaches a cautionary boundary. While it may appear attractive to, metaphorically or hypothetically, be as unspoiled and as close to nature as an animal, a child, or a native, in Thoreau’s view no one (of his own station, at least) would actually want to *be* one of these.

This act of doubling discloses a telling fissure in the idealized unity of eco-actor and eco-author. The man Thoreau wrestles is not another but himself, or rather the self that can perhaps only be confronted when beheld in the other. As the more “natural” of the pair, Therien represents for Thoreau both a transcendence of the literate consciousness that can alienate humans from nature *and* a corresponding transgression by which that precious consciousness is abdicated. It may do to profess aspirations to be, as he says of Therien, cousin to the pine and the

rock, but not at the expense of relinquishing the capacity to apprehend, shape, and *write* the artistic vision of that kinship.

As in other light-dark tandems, the darkness in this pair stands as a source of both identification and difference, an object of both attraction and repulsion. The final sentence of the Therien section concludes the ambivalent passage on a note of aversion: lower or illiterate “men of genius” may be as bottomless as Walden Pond, but without the capacity for writing remain “dark and muddy” (150). In “Walking,” however, Thoreau seeks to transcend the too-tame, too-civilized language of civilization by aspiring to a “*Gramática parda*, tawny grammar,” which he calls a “wild and dusky knowledge” (171), with the duskiess here a source of desirable power and authenticity for the writer. Without an overtly racial contrast as in conventional pairings, Thoreau nonetheless employs the imagery of darkness, muddiness, and duskiess to explore tensions between knowledge and wildness, purity and impurity. Especially telling is the contrast of the “dark and muddy” with Walden Pond, which Thoreau hails again and again as nature’s greatest emblem of depth and purity, on both literal (the pond is in fact unique in its remarkable depth and clarity, even more so in Thoreau’s day) and symbolic levels. In affirming that the pond has no discernible inlet or outlet (save precipitation and evaporation) and is thus safe from mixture with other bodies of water, Thoreau articulates a self-reflexive stance on the purity he treasures: “If by living thus reserved and austere, like a hermit in the woods, so long, it has acquired such wonderful purity, who would not regret that the comparatively impure waters of Flint’s Pond should be mingled with it, or itself should ever go to waste its sweetness in the ocean wave?” (194). Separation, solitude, seclusion, isolation, self-containment, austerity, and depth are the conditions—for both pond and hermit—of a closely-guarded purity, especially in

contrast to the others who are “comparatively impure” and with whom “mingl[ing]” must be avoided.

Such sentiments certainly form part of a larger constellation of purifying impulses in Thoreau, most notably in the “Higher Laws” chapter of *Walden*, where we see him at his most monkish. There he laments that (pure) spirit is tethered to (impure) body, with its animalistic appetites for food and sex—“the generative energy” that “dissipates and makes us unclean” when we are not “continent” (219)—and he champions chastity and purity of food (with a diet of water and unleavened bread as his barest possible concessions to bodily cravings), concluding, “Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open” (220). The purity of one’s living conditions and habits becomes an inheritance, wanted or not, passed down to Thoreau’s nature writing descendants. The case of Annie Dillard makes explicit the expectations of purity: “Americans still like what Dillard calls the ‘purity’ associated with living alone in the wild,” with Dillard herself noting, “As a youth I, too, sought purity. Now I know we’re all compromised by impurities...All that stuff about lifestyle is completely irrelevant!” (Saverin). Dillard’s anxieties over her first book’s conformity to literary expectations—Will it be male enough? Solitary enough? Wild enough?—lead to her necessary sacrifices at the altar of generic purity. The demands of purity extend beyond the domain of nature writing to even dictate dominant cultural ideologies of nature in general, as evidenced in numerous contemporary examples from the previous chapter: the canonical gerrymandering that keeps traditions pure of undeserving or deviant works and authors; the editorial purity that rationalizes the exclusion of women and authors of color from an all-white, all-male nature writing collection; the calendar-and coffee table book-propagated wilderness aesthetic that purifies sublime landscapes of past traumas and humans’ existence; and mainstream environmentalists’ desire to keep their purely

non-human concerns from mingling with the ordinary, all-too-human concerns of the environmental justice movement.

That such instances, which exist in a common cultural lineage alongside (and even descended from) Thoreau's work, have overtly racial dimensions is perhaps no surprise since few discussions of purity in America's history can be divorced from issues of race. Even Thoreau's nominally non-racial contrast of the "dark and muddy" woodchopper with pure Walden Pond (and by extension, himself) resonates with depictions in the broader literary and political discourses on race in his own time. Natty Bumppo, that man of many epithets, repeatedly invokes as his favorite epithet for himself "a man without a cross," that is, without a racial cross, a white man of unsullied lineage, beyond the taint of miscegenation. So while the retreat hero stands apart as wilder than the society from which he retreats, the light-dark pairing allows the white nature hero to retreat with the Other whose darkness serves to highlight the hero's own purity. Such pairings entail paradoxical alliances. The light figure (both Natty and Thoreau) may be both partnered *and* chaste. Natty may be culturally crossed *and* racially pure. Thoreau, too, is culturally crossed, partaking (like the woodchopper) in the wild culture of the woods but maintaining artistic and intellectual purity through reflection, introspection, and writing. In traditional pairings, the dusky Other differs from the retreat hero on racial grounds; in Thoreau's case, the muddy Other differs from the nature hero on grounds of authorship and reflective subjectivity.

Beyond these literary parallels, Thoreau's depiction of Therien as too immersed, too childlike, and too animalistic aligns with currents in larger political discourses on race, intellect, and literary art. In Thoreau's judgment, the woodchopper is so satisfied with the simple satiation of his bodily appetites that he lacks the reflective capacity for intellectual or spiritual elevation.

Thoreau damns him with faint praise for anything approximating “artistic” potential: “He was a skilful chopper and indulged in some flourishes and ornaments in his art” (146), and though he can write in the sense of forming handwriting, he can never truly “write thoughts” (148) because “his thinking was so primitive and immersed in his animal life” that “the highest that he appeared to conceive of was a simple expediency, such as you might expect an animal to appreciate” (150). Such descriptions bring to mind notable parallels in the arguments of Thomas Jefferson (in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1787) on, in his estimation, the stunted capacities of blacks. In his assertions that blacks are inherently inferior to whites, and thus unassimilable, Jefferson repeatedly invokes comparisons to animals, noting in particular blacks’ too-bodily existence and their incapacity for reflective thought: “In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection” (670). Jefferson also pinpoints the inability of blacks to create anything, especially out of language, that rises above expediency to anything approaching art: “But never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration” (670). Like Thoreau’s dark and muddy woodchopper, even the black individuals who could technically *write* (Jefferson mentions Phyllis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho, and expresses doubts that they are even the “genuine” authors of the works “published under [their] name[s]”) could never truly *write thoughts* worthy of the “dignity of criticism” (671). Jefferson’s argument crescendoes to a closing note on the imperatives of purity. The conjunction of blackness and slavery in America meant that emancipation is not possible in ways it may have been in ancient Rome, where (Jefferson’s anachronistic application of racial categories notwithstanding) slaves and owners were of the same white race: “Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the

reach of mixture” (673). Jefferson’s case for the deportation and recolonization elsewhere of America’s black inhabitants rests on the premise of inferiority, on deficiencies evidenced in large part by the incapacities for reflective thought and sophisticated writing, and this inferiority, unless removed “beyond the reach of mixture,” threatens the future, purity, and very body of the (white) nation.

Thoreau’s opinions on intellect and writing are not, like Jefferson’s, tied explicitly to race. But like it or not, hegemonies rooted in a purity of exclusion have legacies in America’s norms of environmental and cultural belonging as well as its norms of racial belonging. As received, interpreted, and employed by posterity, the conditions attributable to Thoreau’s work have, for better and for worse, dictated the main currents of nature writing, and to some extent the main strands of environmental discourse in general, in this country. Though not America’s first pastoral retreat hero, Thoreau adds to the hero’s existing features (separation, solitude, union with nature) the elements that transmute the role into that of nature writing hero, delineating precisely just which stances toward nature (literate, leisurely, and aesthetic appreciation), which forms of subjectivity (reflective introspection), and which kinds of nature experience (only that which one writes down, and writes down oneself) satisfy standards of nature writing purity. According to a purity of exclusion, Jefferson’s ideal America is to be purged of its racially-marked black people, no matter how unjust the grounds for their exclusion or how close their ties to family, community, land, home, and country. In nature writing’s purity of exclusion, the tradition has been purified of non-writing eco-actors, no matter how authentic, extensive, redemptive, and heroically resonant their experience with the natural environment may be. In this case, a literacy test differs from a racial test in name only: in the end, the conditions for nature writing’s purity—separation, solitude, leisure, and authorship—combine with legal-

political strictures and lived realities for black Americans in Thoreau's own historical day to become, in their own ways, as racially exclusionary as the most intentional of racist gatekeeping purges.

A generation of feminist scholars has stormed the gates of pastoral writing of the nineteenth century, challenging the exclusion of women authors from androcentric conceptions of both literature and environmental identity. The next chapter opens with an existing counter-pastoral resistance along lines of gender as a prelude to considering extensions of such resistance into the domain of black writing from the antebellum period.

Chapter 3

Countering the Pastoral Retreat: Recovery, Re-creation, Recognition, and Refuge

When Annie Dillard describes the act of mythologizing as making “everything simplified and enlarged,” her characterization applies aptly to the outsize role that the solitary pastoral retreat paradigm has played in American literature, and in particular in nature writing. The simplification and enlargement inherent in the hegemony of the retreat ideal tends to obscure, marginalize, or simply overshadow the nuances and challenges presented in competing paradigms from history and literature. American nature writing has been notably exclusionary along lines of gender and race, but against this hegemony there do exist discourses of challenge. A comparative look at representative instances from the scholarship of antebellum women’s writing and of antebellum black writing, respectively, points to both convergences (shared orientations and principles that counter the individualist-escapist tendencies of pastoral retreat) and germinal divergences (different strategies of literary recovery and rehabilitation) between these domains of study. The identification of common ground and of necessary discontinuities between these counter-pastoral movements has implications for fresh reconsiderations of black-authored works still neglected within tenaciously hegemonic conceptions of nature writing.

The recovery of the cultural and literary contributions of women from the antebellum era has over the last four decades formed one of the most successful chapters in the revolutionary rethinking of American literature as a whole. Such recovery work has had profound implications in particular for the presumptive centrality of the pastoral retreat tradition, emphasizing texts that present visions of communitarianism, integrationism, and feminism in resistance to the inextricable threads of individualism, escapism, and masculinism that constitute the very fabric of the dominant nature retreat models. These retreat elements all converge in the core pastoral

notion of “solitude,” but the concept of solitude exhibits once again the tensions between pastoral fantasy and pastoral actuality. The solitary retreat may function as literary fantasy (the fictional individualist-separatist forever withdrawing toward the frontier, always a step ahead of encroaching civilization) or as cultural fantasy (for young city-dwelling bachelors seduced by a print-propagated vision of the simple life away from the urban crowds), but living alone was in actuality considered more deviant than desirable. Thoreau’s removal to Walden Pond was itself an idiosyncratic alternative to the more common communal retreat enacted in innumerable utopian experiments; Thoreau’s solitude, as short-lived as it comparatively was, was a societal oddity. The 1850 census of Concord reveals, in a population of 2,249 people, only thirteen single-person households, and as Robert Gross notes, “[n]early all were women: old, poor widows and spinsters, without anybody to care for them. Their isolation constituted a cruel necessity, not a philosophical choice” (Gross 186). The solitary fantasy featured a man whose bachelorhood is the badge of his freely-chosen independence; the solitary reality more often featured a woman whose unmarried status signifies inescapable poverty and isolation, when societal norms suggest that you don’t live alone unless you have to.

This doesn’t mean, however, that voluntary retreat and separatism didn’t exist. Thousands of Americans in the 1830s and 40s were opting out of mainstream life; they just weren’t doing it alone. As epitomized in its most famous embodiment at Brook Farm, for example, *communal* retreat sought not to eschew dispiriting society for solitude but rather to found a new society upon healthier ideals. The roles of women were often of particular prominence in such idealistic communities: the fifty-eight women and girls at Brook Farm, forty of whom were unmarried, “enjoyed the best advantages that American culture had to offer” (Kolmerten 175) and “enjoyed freedom from the prevailing social and religious expectations that

defined the ‘cult of true womanhood’ in antebellum America” (Delano 180). In contrast to other figures who represent the limitations of antebellum womanhood—those constricted by unyielding social expectations, by the isolation of widowhood or spinsterhood, or by the grinding difficulties of life in factories and mills—Brook Farm women, married or not, had advantages that included stimulating social and cultural enrichment, and especially educational opportunities, with courses in myriad fields of study attended and taught by women and men alike. The egalitarian ethos extended to the commune’s labor as well: there was no hierarchy of tasks, however menial or not, and all labor was compensated equally, regardless of gender or job. The achievements in which Brook Farm trustee Charles Anderson Dana articulated most pride were that the community had “abolished *domestic servitude*, ...secured education for all, ...established justice to the laborer, and ennobled Industry” (in Delano 183). The abolishment of domestic servitude is technically true—there were no “servants”—but this is complicated by the realities of who actually did most of the work. In the twelve months from May 1844 to April 1845, for instance, the commune’s meticulous records show that of the ten hardest-working Brook Farmers (in terms of labor hours logged), nine were women, five of whom were married and four of whom were single (Delano 188). By these metrics, women did the bulk of the work, but there may at least be some “justice” in the fact that their labor is “ennobled” by virtue of their being recognized and compensated for the work, in departure from the largely invisible and unpaid labor by women that has arguably constituted the bulk of the world’s work since time immemorial. In contrast to the prototypical male retreat, in which the solitary hero seeks freedom in escaping *from* a constricting society represented by figures of women, the communal retreat of Brook Farm sought liberation *in* community through the full development of the women so central to its vitality.

Women are catalysts as well in literary visions that diverge from the male pastoral retreat paradigm, both as nineteenth-century novelists and as the influential critics who have worked to bring those novelists' works (back) into the American literary canon. Starting in the 1970s, an influential sequence of scholars including Nina Baym, Joanne Dobson, Mary Kelley, Annette Kolodny, Lucy Maddox, Dana Nelson, Carol Singley, Jane Tompkins, and Sandra Zagarell have done essential recovery work and established a range of comprehensive social visions set forth in antebellum novels authored by women, conceptions that serve as counterpoints to what Baym calls the "melodramas of beset manhood" championed as definitive of American literature by male critics of the 1950s. Among the most important of these novels is Catherine Maria Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie* (1827), which features its own instance of the same-sex, cross-racial friendship in the pairing of Hope and Magawisca. While the pair in the male-oriented frontier romance seeks retreat from society and into nature, Singley notes that Hope and Magawisca "participate in society, serving as its critics, mediators, and healers" ("Catherine" 47); where the male retreat is escapist, the female stance is "integrationist...without this integration, there can be only fragmentation" (50). Zagarell establishes that while the male retreat romance focuses on "individual liberty," Sedgwick's sisterhood romance offers a "communitarian ethic" in the "identification of individual fulfillment with the achievement of justice for others" ("Expanding" 238). And in contrast to Cooper and the "passive or secondary" women in his novels, Sedgwick demonstrates that women "must play active and essential...roles in American society" (Singley, "Catherine" 47). Thus against the individualistic, escapist, and masculinist tendencies of the dominant pastoral retreat tradition exists a competing paradigm that is communitarian, integrationist, and feminist. This counter-vision awaited a belated recovery, though it was hiding in plain sight in one of the most critically and publicly acclaimed novels of its time, and though

its author held rank with the most esteemed American authors throughout the nineteenth century before subsequently being largely forgotten in the course of twentieth-century criticism.

A second novel, Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow* (1839), counters pastoral escapism while also departing radically from prevailing sentimental modes typified by Sedgwick. Kirkland's novel, in fact, shares much with Thoreau's *Walden* as a biographically-based account of founding a new life in a natural environment beyond the domain of the city. Mary Claver's narrational voice bears striking affinities with Thoreau's: the educated narrator-participant presents a narrative full of allusion, humor, wordplay, wry wit, and satirical social critique—a voice Kirkland was compelled to temper or abandon in subsequent works because it was received as transgressing norms of proper femininity.⁶ The novel's departures from conventions of other retreat and founding texts lie in the communal impulses and utopian aspirations that come into stark conflict with the realities of human diversity and imperfections, and with inhospitable, decidedly unromantic landscapes. In her introduction to the novel, Sandra Zagarell writes that in presenting “the ‘West’ [as] a site where a culture must be created from these heterogeneous and often conflicting groups, ...*A New Home* traces the process of their slow and usually testy mutual accommodation” (xxix). While solitary retreat tends to seek escape from community, a communal founding must negotiate and resolve inescapable conflicts. In having to adapt to the developing village rather than escape it, Mary Claver demonstrates that truly founding a community, and negotiating its endless tensions, is much harder (and harder to write about) than retreating from community. In idealizing foundings and the landscapes in

⁶ “Certainly the assumptions on which comprehensive social critique rested—the writer's ability to analyze the foundations of social and cultural practice and authority to pronounce skeptically on the ways of the world—was quintessentially at odds with prevailing constructions of femininity” (Zagarell “Introduction” xvi); after hostile receptions following the publication of *A New Home* (her first book), Kirkland “appears to have thought of herself henceforth not just as a writer, but as a woman writer—a writer who needed to preserve her status as a respectable woman by observing certain proprieties when appearing before the public” (xvii).

which they are sited, escapist pastoral narratives often depict an individual retreat to nature that is tidy enough to find archetypes for its expression. In Kirkland's communal founding, the messiness of human society resists mythic simplification, and instead necessitates the acknowledgment of open-endedness, resolutions that are provisional at best, and the perpetual deferment of utopian gratification.

At the same time that new theories were spurring these vanguard reconceptions of old texts, parallel developments in incipient ecocritical thinking began to lay out the implications of new anti-foundationalist theories for the old idea of ecology.⁷ The counter-pastoral, communal elements brought to light by feminist scholarship have counterparts in the ecological alternatives to the self-focused nature writing paradigm. A framework of ecology entails shifts toward relationships (rather than atomistic entities), horizontal networks (rather than inflexible hierarchies), and complex systems (rather than reductionistic collections of parts). Such revolutions are reflected less in works of solitary retreat than in works (literary and critical) that embody corresponding lit-theory shifts—from hierarchical Great Chains to flattened ontological ranks, from atomistic subjects to relational networks of subjectivity, from essentialism to historicism, from logocentrism to sentiment and affect, and from stable, abstract universality to contingent and negotiated and emergent commonality.

In sum, groundbreaking feminist criticism worked alongside emerging ecocritical theory to constitute a full-fledged first wave of counter-pastoral scholarship. The critical framing of the novels above exemplifies the far-ranging success with which feminist scholars deployed new approaches toward the productive ends of recovery and reinterpretation, and this early re-theorizing of sentiment and communal subjectivity set into motion trends evident to this day in

⁷ German scientist Ernst Haeckel first used the term "ecology" in 1866 to describe a branch of natural science emerging in the wake of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*.

contemporary waves of theory and recovery. Joanne Dobson describes the “ethos of connection” that animates literary sentimentalism, an “emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal” (266). Dobson emphasizes sentimentalism’s challenges to the individualism, separatism, and masculinism that undergird the pastoral retreat ideology: “In many of the classic men’s texts of the era, the ultimate threat to individual existence is contamination of the self by social bonds; in the sentimental vision, the greatest threat is the tragedy of separation, of severed human ties” (267). Sandra Zagarell’s conception of the genre she identifies as “the narrative of community” also counters foundational assumptions of escapist individualism: in contrast to the “Western belief in the heroic indomitability of the self,” narratives of community “take as their subject the life of a community (life in ‘its *everyday* aspects’) and portray the minute and quite ordinary processes through which the community maintains itself as an entity. The self exists here as part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit” (“Narrative” 499). This emphasis (presented nearly thirty years ago) on communal networks of interdependence and on the minutiae of the ordinary and everyday has recognizable descendants in contemporary fields such as affect theory. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, editors Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth identify a similar emphasis as one of the eight “main orientations” of “affect’s theorization”: they identify the work that “attends to the hard and fast materialities, as well as the fleeting and flowing ephemera, of the daily and the workaday, of everyday and every-night life, and of ‘experience’ (understood in ways far more collective and ‘external’ rather than individualized and interior)” (7). While Dobson felt compelled to admit in 1997 that “sentimental values...are not currently intellectually fashionable” (280), the contemporary landscape on the

contrary shows such early counter-pastoral values to be at the very heart of current and ascendant theoretical fields.

Ongoing recovery and reinterpretation of antebellum works continues to exhibit affinities with key developments in current fields such as affect theory. In counterpoint to the focus on the individuated self in mainstream transcendentalism, Jeffrey Steele identifies the “sentimental transcendentalism” embodied in the writings of Lydia Maria Child and Margaret Fuller, especially after the two writers each moved to New York City in the 1840s. Faced with new sets of social problems, Child and Fuller as journalists “combined the transcendentalist commitment to the self-reliant self with a more general awareness of how public feelings shape political action” (Steele 207-208). Sentimental transcendentalism “moves beyond private sentiment” and seeks to establish the “transcendent, collective foundation of feelings and values that circulate throughout society” (208). In their description of another of affect theory’s main orientations, Gregg and Seigworth assert that modes emphasizing collective feelings “have progressively left behind the interiorized self or subjectivity” and emphasize instead “resonant worldings...including atmospheres of sociality, crowd behaviors, contagions of feeling, [and] matters of belonging” (8). The sentimental transcendentalism of Child and Fuller offers yet another alternative legacy to the individualistic, highly interiorized ideals institutionalized in the transcendentalist modes of Emerson and Thoreau, nineteenth-century ideals still at the center of theoretical debates well into the twenty-first century.

Thus the bedrock assumptions of individualistic, pastoral escapism are tenacious to this day not only in nature writing but in perhaps all of literary studies, and ongoing efforts of recovery are essential to countering the dominance of the retreat paradigm and its associated values. The efficacy of recovery in women’s writing points in key ways toward the promise of

recovery in other domains of antebellum scholarship. Henry Louis Gates relates his own strategy of adopting for race theory the methods of gender theorists that he saw as having pioneering success. Gates says that he conceived of his edited collection “*Race, Writing, and Difference*” (special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, 1985) after receiving Elizabeth Abel’s edited collection *Writing and Sexual Difference* (special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, 1981). Gates writes, “It seemed to me that Abel’s strategically edited collection could be a model for those of us who cared about race and ethnicity” and that such emulation “could help...move the study of African and African American literature from the margins of literature departments to the vital center” (Gates 287-88). But recovery may not achieve comparable results in all fields, as not all endeavors of rehabilitation benefit from the same range of materials subject to excavation. In the collection *Toward a Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism* (2014), the editors note, “This is a project in archeology and reinterpretation. Well over half of the authors engage with newly recovered or rarely consulted manuscripts and printed texts” (Argersinger and Cole 7). The particular restrictions to literacy and liberty for African-Americans in the nineteenth century, however, suggest a relative deficit of black-authored “manuscripts and printed texts” available for recovery: a paucity of written accounts of black experience—when seen against the range of materials cited in the collection above, either in public forms (published literature and periodicals) or private forms (letters, diaries, journals, commonplace books)—may constitute a comparative blank at the heart of much antebellum black expression. This absence is by no means absolute, of course, and the importance of recovery and rehabilitation work is evidenced in multiple landmark instances: John W. Blassingame’s incorporation of slaves’ letters in *Slave Testimony*; Jean Fagan Yellin’s use of unearthed letters to confirm the authenticity of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents* (a work that had previously been deemed “not credible” by Blassingame in

The Slave Community); Henry Louis Gates's recovery and editing of Hannah Craft's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig*; Carla Petersen's recovery of sermons, lectures, and writings by black women in the antebellum North in *Doers of the Word*; Eric Gardner's unearthing of Edmonia Goodelle Highgate's publications in the weekly *Christian Recorder* newspaper; and Elizabeth McHenry's study of African American literary societies in *Forgotten Readers*. The notable intersections of race and gender in these examples illustrate, of course, that women's writing and black writing exist not in siloes but in mutually interpenetrating spheres of study, a reality especially evident in promising cross-pollinations between slave narratives and sentimental novels.⁸

Actual black literacy rates (along with the very definition of "literacy") in the nineteenth century are notoriously difficult to gauge and are the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Heather Williams in *Self-Taught* compiles the numerous laws related to black literacy in the South (203), and Hillary Moss in *Schooling Citizens* documents the extensive educational inequalities in northern states. Numerous scholars nonetheless operate in a vein of optimism about recovery. Efforts such as Elizabeth McHenry's to challenge undercounting by "chart[ing] definitions of literacy we may have overlooked in the past" (12) tend to focus elsewhere than on the rural or environmental actors who are my central concern; McHenry defines the scope of her work on literary societies, for example, as dealing with "free blacks in the urban North" (23). Christopher Hager remains largely agnostic on the issue of literacy rates, positing the practical impossibility of measuring historical literacy and holding that "literate" and "illiterate" are vague and messy categories, anyway (46). In the spirit of bolstering optimism for projects of recovery like his own, Hager downplays the effects of anti-literacy laws by pointing out wide

⁸ See Cindy Weinstein's "The Slave Narrative and Sentimental Literature" and *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, Shirley Samuels, ed.

inconsistencies in their enforcement and effects (41-42). Frances Foster Smith, citing her own discovery of “Theresa—A Haytien Tale,” asserts that “there are many, many published texts and unpublished manuscripts hid[ing] in plain sight, waiting only for the sufficiently diligent readers to find them” (633). Gates calls his recovery of Hannah Craft’s novel a confirmation of Ralph Ellison’s suspicion of a “surprising degree of ‘free-floating literacy’ among the black slaves of the nineteenth century” (Gates 87). Such optimism and success stories are heartening, and my positing the possibility of a relative deficit means just that—that *relatively* speaking, the restrictions on literacy and education for blacks in the antebellum period, whether *de jure* or *de facto*, has implications for the prospects and methods of illuminating black experiences and voices of the era. One implication is the consideration of approaches other than “recovery.”

So this crucial black recovery work notwithstanding, a comparative deficit of public and private writing by black authors, especially those enslaved and/or living in the South, has led many writers and scholars to fill in this blank through a strategy of *re-creating*, rather than recovering, black antebellum experiences and voices—that is, through retroactively writing down the experience (of others) that was not written down at the time. One branch of this effort is documentary in nature, such as the Federal Writers’ Project that in the 1930s commissioned writers to collect oral histories from thousands of formerly enslaved people and to preserve their dictated accounts in writing. A more imaginative avenue toward re-creating the black antebellum voice lies in modes such as the neo-slave narrative.⁹ In his 1999 volume on the form, Ashraf Rushdy defines neo-slave narratives as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the

⁹ As Valerie Smith notes, “According to conventional wisdom, the term ‘neo-slave narrative’ originated with Bernard W. Bell’s 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. Bell described ‘neo-slave narratives’ as ‘residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom,’ although over time that definition has expanded to include a more diverse set of texts than Bell’s initial description could have anticipated” (168).

conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (3).¹⁰ Many of the formal and constitutive elements at issue in the genre are concerns residing also at the center of debates on nature writing: the cults of autonomous individuality and unified subjectivity, as well as the agency of unlettered actors. The neo-slave narrative builds on New Left social history of the 1960s by presenting “slaves as subjects in their own rights rather than simply objects of white oppression” (Rushdy 228-229). The form also hinges on what Rushdy calls an “insistence on intersubjectivity”: the authors’ “play with voices alerts us to the fact that each of these novelists is developing an intersubjective model for the construction of subjectivity; in each case, the narrating subject is not an autonomous individual but part of a communal, collective whole” (231). After noting key assumptions (identified by Richard Ohmann) undergirding the formation of the American literary canon—premises holding that “individual consciousness, not the social or historical field, is the locus of significant happening” and that demands of individualism entail “the pursuit of a unique and personal voice” (in Rushdy 232)—Rushdy concludes,

The Neo-slave narratives contest this premise of individualism and challenge the singular voice in which it is articulated...[T]hese novelists dwell more on the communal subject positions of the antebellum slave narrators...in order to represent and endorse forms of intersubjective communication in which rugged and autonomous individualism is rendered suspect and reactionary...[they] produce communal voices...while resisting the extreme version of individualism the author of their formal prototype endorsed. (232)

The neo-slave narratives’ strategy of appropriation and subversive alteration—adopting the first-person stance and other narrative elements while challenging the individualism and unified

¹⁰ Rushdy in his volume calls Ernest Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* the first true neo-slave narrative (6), and Rushdy examines at length the following neo-slave narratives: Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, Shirley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose*, and Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage*.

subjectivity—reminds us that the solitary pastoral retreat is far from the only form straitjacketed by such generic constraints.

The original antebellum slave narrative, too, became tethered to individualism, almost always relating the experience of a single personality whose name dictated the title and topic of the narrative. The towering giant of the original form, Frederick Douglass, in large part succeeded literarily by conforming to the individualism of the autobiography, with the arc of a single life adhering to the demands for “individual consciousness” and a “unique and personal voice” that Rushdy cites as central to American literary expectations. No matter Douglass’s own emphasis on the communal bonds he held dear, signified by a pervasive “we” in his accounts, the reception of his narratives often insisted on seeing only the “I” at the center of his struggle.¹¹ An 1855 *Putnam’s Monthly* review of Douglass’s second narrative illustrates the tendency:

Our English literature has recorded many an example of genius struggling against adversity...yet none of these are so impressive as the case of a solitary slave, in a remote district, surrounded by none but enemies, conceiving the project of his escape, teaching himself to read and write to facilitate it, accomplishing it at last, and subsequently raising himself to leadership in a great movement on behalf of his brethren. (in Davis and Gates xvii)

The review outlines in microcosm the hegemonies of individualism central to both nature writing and the antebellum slave narrative: the solitary struggle, the remoteness of the hero, the

¹¹ One representative instance of such communal solidarity from *Narrative of the Life*: “For the ease with which I passed the year, I was, however, somewhat indebted to the society of my fellow-slaves. They were noble souls; they not only possessed loving hearts, but brave ones. We were linked and interlinked with each other. I loved them with a love stronger than anything I have experienced since. It is sometimes said that we slaves do not love and confide in each other. In answer to this assertion, I can say, I never loved any or confided in any people more than my fellow-slaves, and especially those with whom I lived at Mr. Freeland's. I believe we would have died for each other. We never undertook to do anything, of any importance, without a mutual consultation. We never moved separately. We were one; and as much so by our tempers and dispositions, as by the mutual hardships to which we were necessarily subjected by our condition as slaves.” (67)

essentialness of self-achieved literacy to the progression of the self toward humanity and freedom, and the greatness of the individual genius, highlighted by contrast with the complete *lack* of agency among his unlettered brethren, who await salvation from the hero who must first work out his own selfhood by “raising himself” through solitary self-advancement. Such a reception showcases emphatically the strains against which the neo-slave narratives work.

While imaginative re-creations such as neo-slave narratives speak to African-American literature and experience in a general sense, more recently scholars have turned to historical evidence to re-create the distinctive *environmental* experiences of antebellum black Americans. In *Slavery's Exiles: The Story of the American Maroons* (2014), Sylviane Diouf notes that American marronage is a phenomenon vastly understudied (and even denied) in comparison to maroons in other countries (Cuba, Suriname, Hispaniola, Brazil, Jamaica, Colombia, French Guinea), where an abundance of resources (missionaries' records, slave hunters' diaries, settlement maps, and even descendants retaining inherited cultural memory into the present) has made a history of marronage visible and well-documented, and thus more readily recoverable. Asserting that “over more than two centuries men, women, and children made the Southern wilderness their home” (1), Diouf pieces together trial testimonies, legal documents, geographical studies, and interviews of former slaves to “help reconstruct the maroons' stories in their own voices” (13). Diouf challenges the conventional wisdom that these runaways were temporary truants or migrants passing through on the way to a distant free land—the subjects of her book, she says, “went to the Southern woods to *stay*” (1), and her study details the expertise in shelter, seclusion, hunting, farming, medicinal remedies, and navigation necessary to make a home in mountains, forests, and swamps long presumed inhospitable for extended inhabitation.

In *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* (2013), Cheryl LaRoche describes her approach as “using the land as a document and relying on archaeology and community and church histories” (ix) to re-create experiences of flight, resistance, and community: “Combining history and geography fosters an expanded understanding useful for recognizing and recovering African American participation beyond sites normally associated with the Underground Railroad” (x). For LaRoche, geography and landscape offer evidence that “emphasizes the self-determination of free blacks” who were “ensuring their own liberation” through black communities and black churches beyond the “larger better-known abolitionist centers” (x). By moving beyond much of the historian’s traditional domain—“Where the historical record was thin, I relied on archaeology and studied the cultural landscape,” she writes (x), even physically “walk[ing] the rocky terrain” (xvi) herself to imaginatively retrace migration routes—LaRoche resists the written record’s claims to exclusive authority, and the subversion of that authority in turn emphasizes the agency of her subjects, the original resisters who, while not leaving copious written accounts of their resistance, nonetheless worked communally toward their own liberation. Just as modern scholarship has challenged the “great man” model of individual self-improvement and literacy epitomized by Douglass, LaRoche dislocates the “great centers” of (frequently white-led) abolitionism common in popular conceptions of the Underground Railroad, and unearths more obscure networks of the ordinary and the everyday: the black churches, settlements, and routes that emphasize agency, communal solidarity, environmental intimacy, and efficacy.

Thus in addition to recovery—the discovery, authentication, rehabilitation, and interpretation of extant writings that have been lost, ignored, marginalized, or discredited—the work of re-creation serves as a powerful counterpart. In the comparative scarcity of black-

authored antebellum writings—when recovery may not have the same efficacy or do all of the work that it might in other fields of inquiry—such reconstructions serve to fill in gaps left blank by recovery. Many of the necessary efforts to fill in a great blank at the center of black antebellum experience have come through endeavors of recovery and endeavors of re-creation. In addition to these two avenues, I propose to emphasize a third kind of endeavor, and that is the avenue of *recognition*.

To recognize (etymologically, to think on again or to investigate again) has two senses most germane to its application here: 1] to belatedly see what has previously been obscured, and 2] to grant standing, validity, acceptance, or credit to someone or something. While distinct in ways from recovery and re-creation, recognition is also inherently related. Successful recognition—of a text’s authenticity or provenance, for example—often serves as a necessary precursor to recovery, collection, and inclusion. Failures of recognition, however, have in large part necessitated the extensive efforts of re-creating experience not written down at the time. Projects of re-creation—whether documentary, imaginative, fictional, historiographical, or some hybridized variation—are all in some broad sense amanuentic in nature, as they entail producing a written account on behalf of those who did not or could not write down their own stories. Neo-slave narratives challenge entrenched notions of individualism and unified subjectivity, addressing in fictional form speculative questions such as, *What might narratives like those of Frederick Douglass have looked like if not shackled by hyper-individualistic modes of narration and reception?* Ishamel Reed’s neo-slave narrative *Flight to Canada* meditates upon the overarching question, *What if a slave narrative could actually challenge and complicate the conventional wisdom of Canada as a racial paradise?* Sylviane Diouf’s historical reconstruction of American maroon experience asks in effect, *What if the black people who went to the*

wilderness to stay, and whose resistance and intimacy with the natural environment were so profound, could have preserved in their own voices their stories of environmental encounter and belonging? Cheryl LaRoche's archeological investigation of black migration wonders, *What if stories of the Underground Railroad focused on particulars of geography and diffuse communal networks, and emphasized the active resistance and agency of black communities instead of centering on salvific white abolitionism?*

But better efforts of recognition—both in calibrating our vision to see more clearly what has been obscure, and in granting standing to texts, authors, and experiences long excluded from the American nature writing tradition—would lead us to see that *all* of these questions already *are* addressed at length in published antebellum narratives that detail black nature experience, accounts readily available in the annals of America's own literary production.

Recognizing Black Eco-Texts

In the opening pages of *Long Black Song*, Houston Baker offers a stark proclamation on the relationship of black Americans' history to a particular strain of beloved myths by which America has conceived of itself: "The legends of men conquering wild and virgin lands are not the legends of black America...and the tales of pioneers enduring the hardships of the West for the promise of immense wealth are not the tales of black America" (2); in black tales, he continues, "[T]here are few muscular and terrible heroes who save society with their boundless vigor and ingenuity" (13).

One wonders how Baker, in all the expansive reading he documents, missed the story of John Little? Deferring his narrative's historical and geographic particulars until after we hear its events, let's first appreciate Little's account as simply what Baker calls a "tale." Born into

slavery in North Carolina, Little was not only deprived of education and separated from every family member as a child, but he was “inhumanly abused” (Drew 190) by a series of cruel masters, treated “worse than a dog” (189). Despite these brutalities, Little possessed an uncommon spirit of resistance and self-worth, rejecting the very possibility of his racial inferiority and even proudly boasting, “There is no white blood in me; not a drop” (206). In his masters’ efforts to break his spirit, Little was relentlessly beaten with canes, fettered in shackles and stocks, and scarred by whippings that only seemed to strengthen his iron resolve: after graphically relating one owner’s extended program of systematic brutality, Little concludes simply, “After three months, he found I was too stubborn for him to subdue” (194).

Having been separated from his wife Eliza when she was sold to another plantation and he was sent to market to be sold away, John Little undertakes a series of intrepid escapes to eventually find his way back to his wife—“I was very muscular and smart,” he says of himself (196). Along the way he is jailed; after contracting measles and being quarantined in the jail kitchen, Little seizes on his relative seclusion and escapes. He is pursued and shot in the thigh—“the bullet went to the bone,” he relates, “and is there yet” (195). Hiding in the woods and surviving on acorns, Little eventually finds Eliza and they set off together on a long and dangerous odyssey. Barefoot¹² and without food or shelter, they push onward. Night after night, they cross rivers of swift black waters, with Eliza straddling a log and holding on to their scant belongings, and her immersed husband pushing the log across in the all-enveloping darkness.

After reaching the last outpost of civilization, the Littles press onward still beyond the frontier and into the unknown: “[W]e marched right into the wilderness, where there were thousands of acres of woods which the chain had never run round since Adam” (204). Their

¹² Eliza Little relates, “My shoes gave out before many days,—then I wore my husband’s old shoes till they were used up. Then we came on barefooted all the way” (Drew 213).

rugged exploits are the stuff of American legend: “At night we made a fire, and cut down a tree, and put up some slats like a wigwam. This was in February, when the snow was two feet deep... We made our bed of cedar boughs from a swamp” (204). Settling in and chopping wood day and night, John and Eliza without aid of “cattle, or horses, or help” (205) build a log hut and clear fields, fending off numerous bears and “big, savage wolves...howling about [them] night and day” (205). After obtaining some seed on credit, the Littles in their first year raise 110 bushels of wheat and 300 bushels of potatoes, cultivating only with hoe and rake. Eliza works side by side with her husband, sharing in all of the logging, planting, and harvesting necessary to found a new life in an initially inhospitable wilderness.

The Littles’ pioneering perseverance eventually turns to prosperity. A few years after their arrival, John reports on the progress: “I have one hundred and fifty acres of land: one hundred and ten of it cleared, and under good cultivation: two span of horses, a yoke of oxen, ten milch cows and young cattle, twenty head of hogs, forty head of sheep; I have two wagons, two ploughs, and two drays” (206). In his telling, Little’s catalog swells to near extravagance in its sheer bounty:

I raised seven hundred bushels of wheat last year, two hundred bushels of potatoes, one hundred bushels of peas, two hundred and fifty bushels of oats, ten tons of hay; fattened fifteen hundred weight of pork, one ox, besides other produce of less consequence. I have now growing fifty acres of wheat, eighteen acres of oats, ten of peas, one acre of potatoes, and twenty acres of meadow grass: I have horses, oxen, cows, hogs, sheep, and poultry in abundance. (207)

John Little comes to consider himself a “respected, independent farmer”: “I...can lend or borrow \$2000 any time I am asked, or choose to ask for it. I don’t say this for the sake of boasting—I

say it to show that colored men can take care of themselves” (207). In holding himself, his family, and his farm up as exemplars, Little articulates an ethos that deserves a rightful place among classic American statements linking land and independence from writers such as Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, and Thoreau:

I would like to show [my farm] to those stout, able men, who, while they might be independent here, remain in the towns as waiters, blacking boots, cleaning houses, and driving coaches for men, who scarcely allow them enough for a living. To them I say, go into the backwoods...and you can secure an independent support. I am the man who has proved it; never man came into an unsettled country with lesser means to begin with. Some say you cannot live in the woods without a year's provisions—but this is not so: I have come here and proved to the contrary...If there is a man...who says the colored people cannot take care of themselves, I want him to come here and see John Little. (206)

If “the image of the yeoman farmer provided an important locus of American self-definition” (Sweet 98) from the pre-Revolutionary era forward, then Little’s enactment aligns with enduring “ideologies of farming” (97) while also updating those ideologies so as to encompass shifting market and racial realities of the nineteenth century.

Thus John Little’s narrative embodies distinctively American elements in ways both broad and particular. As a potential folk character, Little is almost too good to be true as an archetype of frontier ruggedness: not only does the “muscular and smart” hero swim mighty rivers, march barefoot into a frigid wilderness, and successfully fend off savage wolves and bears, but he also bears the name of “John Little,” an appellation (the everyman given name, the disarmingly ironic surname) that practically begs to head legend and song. His experience manifests recognizable traits of independence, self-reliance, entrepreneurship, upward mobility,

and agrarian manhood so central to American self-conceptions. His narrative, in both content and form, displays close affinities with the American nature writing genre. Most fundamentally, it is a first-person, prose account of encounter with the non-human natural environment. More particularly, his story serves as a narrative of pastoral retreat—pastoral in valorizing the rural over the urban, retreat-oriented in the familiar pattern of moving from dissatisfying human society and toward fulfillment in a “wilder” natural world. And even more specifically, Little’s narrative functions as a quintessentially American version of the nature retreat, and that is the “founding” strain of nature writing, in which the acts of homesteading and settling are declarations of independence by which American ideologies of separatism and self-identity are deployed. It is not enough to leave the old order behind; the retreating hero must then found a more perfect order that bears out the utopian promise definitive of America, and even, as John Little does, stand as an exemplar of audacity, optimism for the future, and recompensed sacrifice.¹³

John Little’s exploits appear to align unmistakably with the tales that Houston Baker asserts are *not* the tales of black America, “the legends of men conquering wild and virgin lands” and “of pioneers enduring the hardships of the West for the promise of immense wealth,” with their “boundless vigor and ingenuity” (Baker 13). How has Little’s story remained invisible as such a tale? His story was certainly not hidden from public view. Little’s narrative was published in 1856 by John P. Jewett and Company, one of the most widely read publishers of the day, whose contemporaneous publications included *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Maria Susanna

¹³ Such homesteading retreats enact in microcosm the ties between separatism and founding that are central to the macroscopic American political project. As Gordon S. Wood notes, the founding of a republic “meant more for Americans than the simple elimination of a king and the institution of an elective system. It added a moral dimension, a utopian depth, to the political separation from England— a depth that involved the very character of their society” (47).

Cummins's *The Lamplighter* (1854), the two bestselling books (save the Bible) of their time. Sharing a publisher with these books that were not only bestsellers but veritable sensations meant that the volume containing Little's narrative was in ways as mainstream and visible as a publication could be. John Little's engrossing story appeared alongside numerous other personal narratives of success, accounts full of daring, perseverance, environmental encounter and expertise, pioneer fortitude, and utopian deliverance. A primary question arises: How did these narratives escape recognition as the great American stories they seemingly are?

A primary answer follows: As lived by John Little and his fellow pioneers, these stories of American promise —accounts that embody definitive themes of independence, frontier spirit, and affinity for the land—took place, and could only take place, *outside* of America. The West that held such promise for John Little was Canada West, the hinterlands of Ontario's Queen's Bush territory, beyond a border that separated Little's land of opportunity in Canada from an American land of bondage and legally inscribed racial inferiority. Further secondary factors also help account for the obscurity of Little's and others' narratives. Pioneer foundings in America are a fountainhead of identity and cultural inheritances (literal and symbolic) for subsequent generations of heirs. But John Little's farm does not pass down to heirs, and his experiences do not inaugurate a cultural heritage. His prosperous founding, as rock-solid as it sounds, is too tenuous to last. Little eventually sells his farm and emigrates to Haiti, still in search of home, independence, and fully inclusive nationhood, driven onward in pursuit of his ever-deferred utopia. No one knows what became of Little in Haiti, but the decline of the Haitian emigration movement portends disappointment (see Brown-Kubisch 216).

The permanence and endurance of a homestead, however, have not been stringent prerequisites for the influence of a founding-in-nature narrative. Nature writing's most important

and ordinary homestead, Thoreau's house at Walden, served as his residence for a little more than two years before he relinquished it for village life again. Despite the substantial facilities at Walden Pond now commemorating Thoreau's residence there, the house itself actually disappeared soon after his departure. Two years after Thoreau left Walden in 1847, the house was moved to a nearby farm and used to store corn, and its new owners eventually "used fragments of Thoreau's house to enlarge and repair buildings on their farm" (Maynard 165). The house site, too, disappeared quickly. As early as 1862, just after Thoreau's death, his friend Ellery Channing looked for the cellar hole but could find no trace of the site as "the old field reverted to forest" (Maynard 156), and it was not until 1945 that the site was archeologically excavated and its location definitively determined.

The point here is that Thoreau's homestead, like John Little's, did not last long (in fact, even as long as Little's), yet Thoreau's founding came to exert the most enduring influence of any retreat settlement in all of American environmental consciousness, if not in all of American letters. And this is, of course, because the most important creation emerging from the Walden project was not a self-built house (as famous as it is) but a self-written *book* detailing the experience. The house does not last, but the book most emphatically does, and anchors an entire cultural heritage down the ages. John Little, however—while every bit the eco-actor that Thoreau is, and with a narrative that is every bit the embodiment of independence and frontier ruggedness so central to American identity—nonetheless remains obscure as such because he is not even recognized as the author of his own story. Little is the protagonist and even the narrator of his account, but the credited "author"—that is, the *writer*—is white abolitionist Benjamin Drew, the amanuensis who recorded Little's story and compiled it along with 113 other dictated

narratives in the 1856 volume *The Refugee: or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, with sole authorship credited to Drew.¹⁴

Thus despite all they may share with works in the mainstream pastoral retreat tradition, the *Refugee* narratives fail the *de facto* nature writing requirement inaugurated by Thoreau, the condition by which the eco-actor and eco-author must be the same figure, with self-authorship perhaps even more essential to recognition and authenticity than is environmental experience. Compounding such matters is the fact that contemporaneously with Thoreau, Frederick Douglass was institutionalizing a form of black writing in which self-authorship is as essential as it is in nature writing. In the Douglass vein of slave narrative, the liberation-actor and liberation-author must also be the same individual: whites may be enlisted to testify to the book's black authorship, but the black hero's writing of his own story is, as for the nature hero, arguably his most important action of all. With Thoreau-as-writer the archetype of the nature hero, and with Douglass-as-writer the archetype of the liberation hero, the *Refugee* narratives of the same era have, despite their similarities in content with these other forms, failed to qualify for recognition as either nature writing or as black writing, for while the *Refugee* accounts are lived and narrated by black actors, they are written down by a white man.

In addition to lacking these related elements of permanence and self-authorship, the *Refugee* narratives violate another nature writing condition that will be detailed in earnest in this chapter's subsequent discussions. American foundings, whether the solitary nature retreat or the pioneering migrations toward a (usually western) frontier, frequently serve as declarations of

¹⁴ On its title page, the volume is entitled in full *A North-Side View of Slavery. The Refugee: or Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada. Related by Themselves, with an Account of the History and Condition of the Colored Population of Upper Canada. By Benjamin Drew*. The spine reads *The Refugee or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves. Drew*. In this study I refer to the volume (which includes Drew's own introduction and editorial commentary) as *The Refugee* and refer to the dictated accounts, either individually or taken together, as the "*Refugee* narratives." I also retain the proper noun in referring to the speaker/s as Refugee/s.

independence—not *from* America, but rather in deployment of America-as-idea. The necessary retreat from society functions as a redemptive separation, one seen not as a severance from America but a distillation of the utopian American project. And as codified in the ideas of writers from Emerson to Frederick Jackson Turner, this project entails moving closer to America only insofar as one moves, literally or figuratively, *away* from Europe. This definitive independence, redemptive of both the self and the nation, operates on individual and societal levels, as the “individual (again and again) re-creates both himself and American democracy [in] a ‘perennial rebirth’ out of the womb of the American frontier” (Johnson 25), the advance of which “has meant a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines” (Turner 34). The retreat narratives in the *Refugee* accounts, however, disrupt this spatial and ideological vector by not only being oriented by a northern, and not western, frontier (and one that entail’s another nation-state’s boundary, and not just so-called “open territory”), but by also by quite intentionally and emphatically leaving America behind. Unlike the retreats deemed redemptive of America, the flights in *The Refugee* are amputations from America in favor of Europe and the opportunities and legal protections offered in the imagined communities to which Ontario belonged, with settlers even boasting triumphantly of their rejection of America’s oppressive republic and their escape to the liberties of England’s much freer monarchy (Drew 335). Thus attention to the *Refugee* narratives means not only recognizing neglected versions of the retreat to nature but also questioning the myths of America embedded in and propagated by traditional nature writing.

Reading *The Refugee* against the conventional nature retreat genre serves to both recognize works ignored by that tradition and to unsettle the genre itself in the interest of invigorating it. In challenging core assumptions, I read the *Refugee* narratives against the work of

Thoreau, both because a] Thoreau's works codified the conditions of the genre, remain definitive of the form, and epitomize its multiple sub-genres, and b] the contemporaneity of Thoreau and the *Refugee* authors (namely, the 1840s and 50s) allows the works to be examined within common frameworks of literary, cultural, political, and historical contexts of the time. Reading these works born from contemporaneous matrices generates the productive tensions necessary to unsettle hegemonic assumptions. While the nature writing tradition of course extends far beyond Thoreau, he does loom so large that my approach of treating him as a synecdoche for the larger genre proceeds from the admission that, to paraphrase Whitehead's famous comment on Plato, all American nature writing is, for better or worse, often treated as a series of footnotes to Thoreau. I understand this not as a normative statement—for this is not necessarily how things *should* be—but simply as a descriptive statement, for this is how things, to my mind, predominantly have been.

A comparative approach of considering of the *Refugee* narratives within the nature writing genre begins with a foundational question: What is nature writing about? Most fundamentally, the genre consists of prose, non-fiction accounts of personal experience with the non-human natural world, narrated in the first person. American nature writing has been definitively marked by the element of retreat, what Randall Roorda calls “the central dynamic of the genre: the writer's movement from human society toward...nature” (xiii). Retreat narratives tend to cleave, though not always neatly, along two lines. There is a “founding” branch of retreat, homesteading accounts that align with American traditions of settling narratives, a central nature writing sub-genre that Thomas Lyon labels “Solitude and Backcountry Living” (22). There is also an “excursion” strain of retreat (the close-to-home “Rambles” and extended “Travel and Adventure” categories also central to Lyon's taxonomy), peripatetic accounts that align with

larger American traditions of “encounter” texts. The similarities of the above conventions of content lay the basis for reading the *Refugee* narratives against both homesteading accounts and excursion texts.

But American nature writing is also “about” an entire range of values, orientations, and conventions beyond the contents of any given narrative, and these are where productive divergences emerge between white-authored nature works and the black-authored narratives. Retreat narratives generally spring from a tripartite fountainhead of pastoral ideology: individualism, separatism, and masculinism. The hero’s deeds of retreat are predicated upon a multivalent security taken for granted: security of literacy and education, of legal-political inclusion, of his labor and property, of agency over his own body. The genre promotes a set of elements related to the act of writing: the narrative must be self-written in an aesthetic and highly reflective mode, with the eco-actor/author’s deed of writing among his central heroic actions. Another prime value is unity—of voice, of narrative line, of vision—as the singular writing hero assumes command over every aspect of his narrative. This complete control extends also to the hero’s economic-political security: the hero can enact a freely chosen and visible utopian experiment marked by liberty and even leisure because he is so secure of his societal inclusion that he can afford to relinquish it for dramatic effect. The Thoreauvian retreat narrative is also about universality: the hero is held up as exemplary and representative, a template applicable to any who choose to emulate him. This deed of universality requires abstraction and an effort of strategic disembodiment, effacing the particulars of one’s own embodiment so as to serve as a model that transcends the limitations entailed by concrete and particular—and politically determinative—markers of bodily difference. The *Refugee* narratives of refuge contest the core values inherent to the retreat tradition. Table 1 (at this chapter’s end) offers a snapshot of

convergences and divergences that lays the basis for establishing *retreat* and *refuge* as distinctive analytical categories in this study's comparative readings.

These values and orientations are not peripheral to the nature writing genre—they, as much as the contents of any given narrative, actually constitute the genre and its hegemony. Familiar ingredients of nature writing—flora and fauna, mountains and forests, the changing of seasons, musings on the divinity of nature and the coarseness of human society—exist atop the deeper substructure of the genre's animating conceptual principles of solitude, separatism, agency, literacy, leisure, and universality. These elements have coalesced into a nature writing dogma dictating the kind of nature that counts, the kind of experience that counts, and the kind of story that counts in meeting the genre's demands. My aim in reading retreat narratives and refuge narratives comparatively is a reconsideration of just what the genre can, and should, contain.

The Refugee

Despite the scant scholarly attention it has received, *The Refugee* in its cultural and historical context occupies a unique position in the larger transatlantic, transnational, and hemispheric webs in which it is enmeshed. Drew's interviews with the Refugees in 1855-6 and the volume's publication in 1856 come shortly after the release of *Walden* in 1854, and the past events (mainly of the 1840s) relayed by *Refugee* speakers and by Thoreau in his book were contemporaneous. In the larger discourse of slavery and the legal-political status of blacks in America, the Drew volume's granular accounts of particular rights and oppressions came in the midst of numerous momentous and related events, including the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the release of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and the Dred Scott decision in 1857. In its most extensive scholarly treatment, *The Refugee* receives a few pages

from Winfried Siemerling (2015) within a larger discussion of black emigrationism in Canada (a discussion focused on figures such as Henry and Mary Bibb, Mary Ann Shadd, and Martin Delany). While briefly considered for their historical or ethnographic relevance in a few studies, the *Refugee* accounts have not been read closely as narratives for their cultural or literary significance.

The first part of Drew's title for the volume—*A North-Side View of Slavery*—signals Drew's explicit intent to counter the pro-slavery depictions expressed in *A South Side View of Slavery* (1854) by Boston pastor Nehemiah Adams, who was critical of Stowe's portrayal of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Drew's introduction includes a statement of purpose that sets forth his own aims in countering views such as those Adams espoused. The second part of the title, *The Refugee*, suggests a singular and representative figure, but the 114 narratives in the volume elude such tidy consolidation. Drew's title conveys unity and convergence, but the contents speak of multiplicity and divergence, with a striking diversity of voices, opinions, values, and experiences. In Drew's book, there simply is no representative refugee—there are, instead, refugees plural. Finally, the title's third component, *Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, is similarly misleading. Of the 114 speakers in the volume, thirty-one of them were free or moved to Canada from a free state; that is, more than a quarter of the refugees were seeking refuge not from slavery but from the injustice and intolerable conditions in so-called “free” states. Even the scholars who have provided the closest treatment of the volume have imbibed an inexactness over the status of the Refugees and their accounts. In his Introduction to a 2008 edition of *The Refugee*, George Elliot Clark calls the volume “a compilation of African-American fugitive slave and ex-slave memoirs” (10), and Siemerling in *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered* says that Drew “transcribed the statements of over one hundred former slaves”

(123). Taking Drew's title at face value obscures the fact that slavery was not the only racial evil faced by blacks in America; while abolition was understandably of paramount concern, ignoring the flight of free blacks obscures the detailed indictments of unjust laws in free states, enables the notion that abolishing slavery would constitute deliverance from oppression, and perpetuates the linguistic (and thus conceptual) deception performed by the very term "free state." If Drew's volume were named according to its actual contents, a more fitting title might be *Refugees from America, and Their Myriad Just Reasons for Fleeing the Free and Slave States*.

The multiplicity of voices and narrators complicates already complex notions of authorship. In the decade before *The Refugee*'s release, Thoreau and Douglass institutionalized the unity and singularity of authorship in the two forms ascending contemporaneously with the experiences related in the *Refugee* accounts: the self-authored nature retreat narrative (with the unified eco-actor/author) and the slave narrative (with Douglass's writings cementing the importance of the single personality, and with the ability to write one's own life as the capstone of one's liberation). Yet even slave narratives that did employ an amanuensis (the accounts of Sojourner Truth, Josiah Henson, Henry Box Brown, and Solomon Northup are among notable instances) tended to carry the proper name of the individual protagonist and credit the narrator as the author of her or his own life and story.¹⁵ The Drew volume, however, credits sole authorship to Drew himself and carries in its title not the name of a distinctive personality but a nameless, representative abstraction—The Refugee—that conveys a unity and homogeneity belying the diversity and particularity contained within the volume's narratives (where the name of each individual does head her or his own story). Modern reissues of *The Refugee* reflect ongoing

¹⁵ The relationships between (and definitions of) the roles of narrator, author, writer, and collaborator in these instances are varied and highly contestable. My aim is noting that, unlike *The Refugee*, even narratives that employed an amanuensis still centered on a named individual, and the volumes' titles, covers, and title pages give credit for the story to that individual.

reconsiderations of its authorship. A 1969 edition from Addison-Wesley identifies itself as “*The Refugee: A North-Side View of Slavery*, by Benjamin Drew, with an introduction by Tilden G. Edelstein.” A 2004 Dover edition, however—which, according to the Bibliographical Note on its copyright page, is “an unabridged republication of the work originally published in 1969 by Addison-Wesley,” including Edelstein’s introduction—bears as its title “*Refugees from Slavery: Autobiographies of Fugitive Slaves in Canada*, Edited by Benjamin Drew.” The revised title credits authorship to the refugees themselves while recasting Drew’s role as that of editor, a decision reflecting the intervening decades’ revolutionary sea-changes in sensibilities on the very nature of authorship, authority, and writing.

Drew within the 1856 volume pens a brief (two-page) Author’s Preface, an extended (sixteen-page) Introduction, and a brief introduction to each of the communities he visits, usually conveying population statistics, a general description, or distinguishing characteristics (such as quality of schools or predominant trades). In his Preface, Drew reports the “colored population of Upper Canada” (27) as 30,000 residents and emphasizes the necessity of being able “to hear from the refugees themselves their own opinions of their conditions and their wants” (28) as an antidote to rumors, speculation, and misconceptions. Drew characterizes his own role as such: “While his informants talked, the author wrote: nor are there in the whole volume a dozen verbal alterations which were not made at the moment of writing, while in haste to make the pen become a tongue for the dumb” (28). While we should not be tempted to take too literally Drew’s claim of a pure transcription—his prose does not, for example, aim to capture spoken dialect—his statement conveys values central to his endeavor. Drew casts the reigning logic of the roles played—the refugees as agents and authorities, he as scribe—while also succinctly intimating a paradox at the heart of the entire amaumentic endeavor: though it is imperative to hear

from the refugees in their own voices, the agents who speak for themselves nonetheless remain “dumb” without the authority and capabilities of the “pen” he alone wields. The refugees can speak, but they cannot write, and without the authority of writing, they remain, in effect, voiceless.

The number and diversity of accounts in *The Refugee* resist the desire for a “representative” voice. In presenting such a wide spectrum of experiences and attitudes, the narratives instead work to diminish stereotypes and overgeneralizations. In key ways, the *Refugee* narratives perform for black migrant experience what Caroline Kirkland’s *A New Home, Who’ll Follow* does for the white frontier migration account, disrupting myth-laden and monolithic frontier stereotypes by acknowledging the messy difficulties of mutual cultural accommodation. Sandra Zagarell finds a definitive Americanness in the multiplicity and diversity Kirkland emphasizes in her novel’s narrative of founding: in Montacute, “something new is born, a pluralistic, polyphonic culture that honors the original viewpoints and practice of each constituent group and may well represent the future of America itself” (“Introduction” xxix). The most salient difference, of course, is that the black founders in *The Refugee* have concluded out of desperation that the “future of America” does not include them, and that they must found their emergent communities outside of America altogether.

Another element fundamentally distinguishes *The Refugee* from other first-person works relating experiences comparable in one way or another—Kirkland’s novel, Thoreau’s retreat narratives, Douglass’s liberation narratives—and that is the multitude of first-person narrators within the volume. In other first-person narratives, the single narrator provides a reigning subjectivity, serving to unify disparate elements in an organized narrative coherence. The *Refugee* narratives, however, are presented without any apparent comprehensive narrative logic

and without any indication of intentional juxtaposition of one speaker's account to another's. They appear in the order in which Drew encountered each speaker and community along a generally northeast to southwest progression across Ontario; Drew himself in his preface notes that "[t]he narratives were gathered promiscuously from persons whom the author met with in the course of a tour through the cities and settlements of Canada West" (28). Such promiscuousness and multiplicity present their own challenges in the resulting unwieldiness of the collected narratives. *The Refugee* accounts offer the first-person immediacy of the autobiography, the slave narrative, or the nature retreat narrative, but without the overall unity of voice and story that help make those forms comprehensible. In like fashion, the *Refugee* narratives offer the multivocality of the novel but without the novel's narrative arc and narrational control that keep its polyphonic elements in relation. If all narratives have a reigning grammar of some kind, then the logic of the *Refugee* volume is a kind of parataxis writ large, a serial presentation of side-by-side accounts without connective structures or a master narrator to unify the disparate accounts. The resulting quality is one of accumulation and aggregation rather than of development; the "promiscuously" gathered accounts as collected convey egalitarianism rather than strategic subordination. By not ranking or privileging the speakers or accounts in relation to one another, the collection in its very form grants to each speaker the democratic equality he or she sought in fleeing the United States. While Ashraf Rushdy contends that the fictional form of the neo-slave narrative had to be invented so that a "play with voices" and "communal subject positions" could challenge "the extreme version of individualism" (231) that marked the antebellum slave narrative, the *Refugee* volume—with its aggregative, egalitarian, communal, and multivocal features—offers a little studied but contemporaneous and non-fiction alternative to the individualistic slave narrative.

Within the mainstream founding-in-nature retreat narrative, the escapism of the protagonist is matched by an escapism in the execution and intent of the genre. *The Refugee's* emphatic challenge to the nature retreat's hegemonic elements lies in refuting two distinctively American fantasies that Thoreau perfects in his retreat writings: the "blank West" (as a proxy for nature itself) and the "blank body" as escapes from politics. Blankness and "escape" here signify an erasure of the concrete realities and inequalities of America-as-practiced and the positing instead of the universal and ideologically-neutral abstraction of America-as-theorized. These abstract, blank domains become the sites in which the pastoral experience of voluntary and solitary retreat to nature becomes universalized as definitive of American environmental identity. The black-authored accounts of *refuge*, however, fill in the blanks left empty by the escapist accounts of *retreat*. In examining the pastoral nature retreat as not only a subset but a distillation of definitively American experience and identity, I argue that Thoreau achieves in his retreat works a perfect marriage of the blank West and blank body, the neutral, hypothetical, and race-free terrains upon which the American utopian project unfolds. These two fictions taken together constitute an escape from fraught political realities and into an abstract refuge of displaced, disembodied universality. The *Refugee* narratives serve as corrective disruptions of these fundamental American fantasies.

The Blank West

Though calls for American literary nationalism had been circulating since the turn of the nineteenth century, Emerson starting in the 1830s crystallizes such sentiments and lends them the urgency of cultural crisis. In "The American Scholar," he goes beyond calling for American writing that is distinctive from but coequal with the literature of Europe, instead asserting that

American cultural energy and maturity (especially after fifty years of political independence as a nation) depends upon a severance from European influence, a separatism warranting the essay's later designation as America's Intellectual Declaration of Independence. Emerson opens by announcing that "[o]ur day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close" (43) and builds to the culminating declaration, "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe" (59), defining America's culture and character—its individualism, independence, and boldness—by the extent to which it moves away from European timidity, tameness, and decorousness. Though Emerson invokes the American land in referring to the "[y]oung men of the fairest promise, who begin life upon our shores, inflated by the mountain winds, shined upon by all the stars of God" (59), the environment remains emblematic rather than geographic in his message. Thoreau takes up Emerson's mantle and innovates from there: he gives Emerson's unstated obverse of European tameness the explicit name of "wildness," and takes Emerson's cultural separatism and casts the figurative "distance" from Europe in spatial-environmental terms, identifying a terrain (nature) and a direction (West) into which the individual may retreat to found self and culture anew, and thereby enact a definitively American independence.

In "Walking," arguably the most influential nature essay ever written (one published posthumously in 1862, but composed in the 1840s and 50s, contemporaneously with the discourse of Manifest Destiny), Thoreau devotes an entire middle section to the West. Despite Thoreau's professed misgivings in other writings about the moral and political implications of America's westward expansion, the West he presents here is an idealized realm of freedom, wildness, and possibility, and he universalizes the westward pull by presenting it in the language of myth and of biological science (with westward movement a form of migratory instinct seen in

wild animals). Like Emerson, Thoreau presents the individual as becoming more American as he moves away from Europe: “Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free...I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe” (234). In Thoreau’s version of *translatio studii*, “[t]he Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the Old World and its institutions” (235). In this manifesto urging the forgetting of Europe as the grounds for fully realizing America, there is another deliberate forgetting, as well: the eliding of the violent realities and moral failings of expansion, realities Thoreau condemns in other less-influential works. Thoreau’s abstract West is American character purified and distilled to its essence, and he concludes, “As a true patriot, I should be ashamed to think that Adam in paradise was more favorably situated on the whole than the backwoodsman in this country” (238). In this sense, “Walking” has a companion piece in *Walden*, in which Thoreau dramatizes his own experience as an American Adam, offering in his own example proof that the freedom-in-nature he champions is indeed universal and available to all, his own homesteading project a literally emulatable template for any who choose to follow his example.

Thoreau’s portrait of an idealized West in “Walking” culminates in the essay’s most famous words: “The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world” (239). The syllogism inherent here implies a question: If West equals wildness, then what happens when we run out of West, thereby exhausting the store of wild nature that perpetually regenerates and preserves American character? This anxiety animates Frederick Turner Jackson’s frontier thesis (first presented in 1893), in which Turner further entrenches pastoral retreat elements of individualism, wildness, foundings-in-nature, and rejection of Europe by placing them at the heart of his recapitulation of American history: “The advance of the frontier has meant a steady movement

away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines” (34). The individual encounter with wilderness is for Turner the experience that generates American cultural and political forms, and his quintessential American is the lightly-rooted backwoodsman, the pioneer who “strikes into the woods...and becomes the founder” (45) of a new order, but who can “dispose of his cabin...and break for the high timber” (45) when subsequent neighbors move in and encroach on his independence. Turner presents the archetypal retreat-founder as the central agent of American history, and “the demand for land and the love of wilderness freedom drew the frontier ever onward” (47). Land and freedom work together to form that most American of concepts: opportunity. For Turner, the country and the concept are synonymous: “Since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity...each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past” (59). Whereas Crèvecoeur had seen frontier wildness as a seduction for his children that could “preclude their returning to the manners and customs of their parents” (623), such return to the customs of one’s cultural ancestors, broadly conceived, is precisely what Thoreau and Turner, as advocates of West-as-wildness, are revolting against in defining America and its freedom in diametrical opposition to Europe.

In Turner’s conception, key parts of the past that the frontier allows escape from are the national, ethnic, and racial distinctions among various immigrant groups. Turner sees America’s natural environment as the grounds for a miraculous process of unification: “[i]n the crucible of the frontier the immigrants were Americanized, liberated, and fused into a mixed race, English in neither nationality nor characteristics” (47), with even formerly indentured servants (of European descent) able to transcend class limitations and at the frontier become equal Americans. Of

course, this “field of opportunity” has its unspoken limits, with Turner’s silence deafening on the issue of those for whom racial markers may not disappear so readily. In *“White Flight” and Westward Expansion*, John Dippel cites Huck Finn’s urge to head West and “light out for the territory” at novel’s end as a telling instance of this cultural fantasy. For Huck, “the West offers a fresh start, a new beginning...a place where he and his companion, the former slave Jim, can become friends”; Huck’s hope for the West exemplifies an American “faith in the untrammelled natural world *out there* somewhere...where people were still good, and good to each other, no matter the color of their skin” (Dippel 1). Like Turner’s portrait of the Western frontier as a place where race disappears, Huck’s dream is of the West as a “romantic refuge, a postlapsarian Garden of Eden” (1) where people can together escape a past of racial discord.

If the idealized Western frontier is a place where people can escape a racial past to become an American “mixed race,” the actual West entailed a more exclusionary utopia. While African Americans after the Civil War began form a more visible part of the West’s history as exodusters and Buffalo Soldiers, before the war many white pioneers headed west not just to escape the past but to escape blacks: as Dippel argues, “[o]ne of the factors pushing pioneers westward was race...For them, a major attraction of the West lay in tis racial exclusivity” (2-3). While subsequent scholars have offered theories that challenge Turner’s too-tidy story of the frontier (with Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zones” and Annette Kolodny’s “borderlands” most prominent among them), Turner’s myth of a blissfully race-free and universally accessible natural world into which any may voluntarily retreat has maintained a tenacious hold on American self-conceptions. In his discussion of Michelle Obama’s speech at the 2016 Democratic National Convention, political journalist Jamelle Bouie recounts the first lady’s casting of the nation’s history—“That is the story of this country, the story that has brought me

to this stage tonight, the story of generations of people who felt the lash of bondage, the shame of servitude, the sting of segregation, but who kept on striving and hoping and doing what needed to be done so that today I wake up every morning in a house that was built by slaves,” she said—and deems it a “radical message” in contrast to what Bouie calls the nation’s default myth of “the voluntary society”:

Overwhelmingly, when telling the story of America, our presidents lean on the idea of a voluntary society—a nation of frontiersmen and immigrants who came willingly to these shores to find freedom and opportunity. Throughout their time as president and first lady, Barack and Michelle Obama have taken a different approach. Their America is a nation of immigrants. Their America is the melting pot of civic cliché, sure, but it’s also a place of people who didn’t have a choice, who were brought here as chattel and forced to work under the lash, but who kept their belief in better days and salvation. In their hands, this isn’t just an American story; it’s *the* American story, testifying to the virtues of struggle, faith, and perseverance. (Bouie)

The West (and the wild nature it signifies) of Thoreau and Turner is the ground for just such a voluntary society, an ideal space where race is erased—indigenous peoples removed or eradicated, ethnic distinctions among European immigrants erased to achieve a “composite nationality” (Turner 51) otherwise known as “whiteness,” and non-European peoples ignored altogether.

But while Turner’s outer West has a geographical limit that can be reached with the closing of the frontier (its legacies, as well documented by Richard Slotkin, presented symbolically in film and popular culture), Thoreau’s terrain of freedom is an *inner* wilderness, a spiritual domain never exhausted and thus taken literally by emulators to this day, a fiction taken

as an actuality. Recall that two groups of homesteading disciples presented in this study's opening chapter—the nature writers discussed by Randall Roorda and Peter Quigley, and the financially secure neo-homesteaders who produce more texts than crops—are exclusively white (and overwhelmingly male). Here is laid bare a deception inherent in nature writing's pastoral legacy: a supposedly universally accessible experience is in practice sharply circumscribed by racial exclusion. Nature writing in the homesteading vein at once situates eco-experience and eco-writing in a specific site and in a unique individual—and is thus radically local and particular—while also unsituating such experience and writing from any particular limitations of place and body, thus positing a radical universality. The hegemony of pastoral retreat affirms normative and exclusionary links between whiteness and environmental identity while maintaining an innocence premised on claims of universal inclusivity. At the same time Thoreau was deploying this sleight-of-hand to champion the West as a distillation of American freedom from Europe, another group of eco-actors, excluded in practice from the West's universal dream, were seeking freedom in another direction, beyond America altogether. While pastoral myth presents westward migration as a freely chosen retreat from the metaphorical bondage of Europe and the past, black refugees were migrating northward toward Europe as embodied in British Canada, in desperate flight from the actual bondage of their present-day America.

Refugees from America and the Wages of Exile

Slavery was far from the only form of oppression from which the *Refugee* speakers sought refuge; more than a quarter (thirty-one) of the 114 narrators were free (*de jure*) or had resided in a free state (*de facto*). Among these, the reason most frequently given for crossing to Ontario is the desire for legal rights and protections. Many Refugees cite Black Laws designed to

discourage black residency, and others describe laws denying or limiting rights to own property, to bequeath or inherit land and possessions, or to seek redress in court.¹⁶ Numerous former residents of free states cite the passage and enactment of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 as the catalyst that at last drove them to flee the United States. Other motivations for leaving a free state include personal safety, especially the fear of being kidnapped into slavery; the opportunity for their children to go to school and receive a decent education; and acts of racial discrimination and prejudice. Some mention that prejudice is present in Canada, as well, but the difference is that racists in Canada do not have the law on their side; as Refugee John D. Moore puts it, “[Whites] have not got the power to carry [prejudice] out here that they have in the states. The law here is stronger than the mob—it is not so there” (Drew 169). Though a handful of speakers mention general abstract benefits such as “true liberty” or “respect” or “opportunity,” the overwhelming number of motivations are for specific, concrete rights and benefits: legal standing, adequate schooling, property rights, and economic opportunity, most fundamentally the right to fairly enjoy the fruits and wages of one’s own labor.

In contrast to pioneers in America seeking freedom in moving away from England and Europe, black migrants express again and again a preference for Canada and its British legal-political system as explicitly superior to the American system they fled. Refugee Alexander Hamilton states plainly, “I am naturalized here, and have all the rights and privileges of a British subject” (Drew 173). Other settlers elaborate on the legal and political particulars that make

¹⁶ For instance, Refugee David Grier relates, “From Ohio, I came here on account of the oppressive laws demanding security for good behavior” (Drew 335). Grier refers to a required bond, one of many provisions constituting Ohio’s Black Laws: in addition to restrictions “prohibiting blacks from giving court testimony in cases involving whites...African American immigrants to Ohio were required to post a five-hundred-dollar surety bond with the local court, a requirement intentionally beyond the means of most people but designed principally to deter further black immigration. As this legislation indicates, the majority of Ohioans may have opposed slavery (or its extension), but they did not desire a multiracial society” (Eslinger 86-87).

Canada preferable to America in their eyes. Ephraim Waterford, who was born free but bound in Virginia until age twenty-one, settles (before emigrating to Canada) in Indiana and without benefit of education makes a prosperous life: “I left on account of oppression in Indiana. I had a farm of forty acres paid for, and I had the deed. A law was passed that a colored man could not devise real estate to his wife and children, and there were equally unjust laws enacted. I told them ‘if that was a republican government, I would try a monarchical one’” (335). Waterford’s flight from oppression in Indiana illustrates the distortion inherent in the term “free state,” and further undercuts myths equating America with liberty and the English monarchy with tyranny, with Waterford finding greater legal and property rights (not to mention opportunity for his children to receive an education) in the freer English system.

Another of the Refugees Drew interviews is the Reverend Alexander Hemsley, who had been released from slavery in a prominent fugitive slave case decided by Chief Justice John Hornblower of New Jersey in 1836. The Hornblower decision, considered “the most radically antislavery state supreme court opinion before the 1850s” (Finkelman 115), was arguably the most important fugitive slave verdict to date, as it implicitly challenged the constitutionality of the federal Fugitive Slave Law of 1793 (though not explicitly, since it dealt with state and not federal law), and the decision was widely revived by abolitionists for its potential applicability to the new Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 (Finkelman 113-114). About sixty years old and bedridden at the time of Drew’s visit, Hemsley opens his account with a relatively lofty statement on liberty, rare among the generally pragmatic concerns expressed by other *Refugee* speakers: “My idea of freedom during my youth was that it was a state of liberty for the mind—that there was a freedom of thought, which I could not enjoy unless I were free—that is, if I thought of any thing beneficial for me, I should have liberty to execute it. My escape was not owing to any sudden

impulse or fear of present punishment, but from a natural wish to be free” (54). Hemsley proceeds to relate the details of his escape from Maryland to New Jersey (where had worked for nine years and made a good living but was denied full property rights) and his subsequent court case, and says that in spite of being declared legally free by Justice Hornblower’s decision, the risk of being captured was too great to remain in the United States. Hemsley recounts his feelings on at last crossing over to Toronto: “When I finally reached English territory, I had a comfort in the law—that my shackles were struck off, and that a man was a man by law. I had been in comfortable circumstances, but all my little property had been *lawed* away. I was among strangers, poverty-stricken, and in a cold country” (58). The relief on reaching a land of law and liberty in English territory is especially telling from a man who had actually *won* his major legal case in the U.S. but felt still the shackles that deprived him of liberty and full humanity; in Hemsley’s testimony, English law recognizes his humanity while American law was often the means of injustice, with his hard-earned property having been “lawed away” from him. Revealing (and poignant), too, is Hemsley’s assertion that his new “comfort in the law” is worth its heavy cost: for his rights, he pays the price of exile, severed from his loved ones, property, and homeland.

Reverend Hemsley eventually gains a foothold in the countryside near St. Catharines, and though “enfeebled in health” (59) clears five acres of pines to establish a farm. Nonetheless, his sense of exile plagues him still: “[F]or years after I came here, my mind was continually reverting to my native land. For some ten years I was in hopes that something might happen, whereby I might safely return to my old home in New Jersey” (59). He scours newspapers, and what he reads dashes rather than encourages such hopes, as he finds ongoing confirmation that returning would entail great risk to him. After years of such limbo, Hemsley reaches a final

realization. Despite never having the material comfort and prosperity he had once had in New Jersey (due to his sickness, his home in Ontario, in fact, has a mortgage against it), he makes an emphatic judgment: “I then made up my mind that salt and potatoes in Canada were better than pound-cake and chickens in the United States. Now I am a regular Britisher. My American blood has been scourged out of me; I have lost my American tastes; I am an enemy to tyranny” (60). Thus in contrast to pervasive American pastoral narratives in which freely chosen westward retreat is a further distillation of American liberty—with retreat the reenactment of a national story rooted in escape from British tyranny—the northern vector of Hemsley’s flight tells a different story altogether. In his telling, bolstered by lived experience and well-documented historical events, the U.S. is the land of tyranny and British Canada a land of refuge—colder, and for him lonelier and less comfortable, but above all free.

In contrast to the lack of standing and security for blacks in American courts of law, the experience of refugee Alfred T. Jones points to a British legal system fully inclusive of immigrants from the United States, while also disclosing the transatlantic dimensions of Refugees’ experiences and narratives. Jones says, “I expect to go to England shortly on a suit at law involving my title to a large property on Dundas Street, valued at \$45,000. The case has been through chancery in the provincial court, and I have now appealed to the House of Lords. I am winding up my business preparatory to leaving” (152). Jones, enslaved in Kentucky before escaping by writing himself a pass that he admits “was not spelled correctly” (151), is now part of a prospering community in Canada West, and he matter-of-factly describes his plans for appearing in person before Parliament, empowered by the English rights he rightly sees as superior to the treatment he had endured in America.

Despite such emphatic statements of preference for British legal-political rights, numerous *Refugee* speakers disclose the unbearable tension of exile, the tragedy of loving the laws of England while loving the land (and often the people) of the United States, a land many still refer to as home. No fewer than fifteen Refugees state explicitly that they liked the United States and would, despite many having secure and prosperous lives in Canada, return to the States if slavery were abolished and legal equality were upheld. One of Drew's first interviews is of a heretofore unknown (to the public) Harriet Tubman, who has been in hiding due to her clandestine work in abetting refugees in fleeing the U.S.¹⁷ In her first ever public statement, Tubman relates, "I have seen hundreds of escaped slaves, but I never saw one who was willing to go back and be a slave. I have no opportunity to see my friends in my native land. We would rather stay in our native land, if we could be as free there as we are here" (52). Subsequent speakers offer details that flesh out the principle Tubman expresses in her very brief statement. Aaron Siddles escaped from slavery in the South and, before eventually emigrating to Canada, settled in Indiana, where his rights were still few: "Living in Indiana, I was dissatisfied with the laws of the country. I had a good deal of property there; it was not safe, for any loafing white might destroy or steal, and unless a white man were by to see it, I could get no redress" (250). He reports that while he has rights in Ontario—"I removed to Canada, where I would have an oath equal with any man...where I would have every right that every man has. I brought \$10,000 into

¹⁷ Born into slavery in Maryland, Tubman escaped to Philadelphia in 1849. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, she emigrated to Ontario and helped found the St. Catharines Fugitive Aid Society (Brown-Kubisch 9). Estimates of her activity range from a dozen transborder trips and seventy rescued individuals (Siemering 95) to nineteen trips and 300 fugitives; no matter the exact numbers, Tubman "rescued several family members along with relatives of fugitive slaves already living in Canada West" (Brown-Kubisch 247 n24). Winfried Siemering notes that the "brief narrative published by Drew in 1856 was the first notice the public received of her existence, although her activities were previously known to a number of Underground Railroad stakeholders" (95). She brought her first group of "passengers" to Canada West in December 1851 (Siemering 95).

Canada with me, and I find profitable employment for my capital here (251)—he nonetheless has paid a heavy price for gaining his most fundamental rights. He states,

Excepting for the oppressive laws, I would rather have remained in Indiana. I left one of the most beautiful places in that country—everybody who sees it says it is a beautiful place. I had a two-storey frame house, with piazza—good stable—and every arrangement about the premises was nice and convenient. I had abundance of apples, peaches, quinces, plums, and grapes. I paid my taxes and felt hurt and angry too, that I was not allowed my oath—there was no justice in it...I suffered oppression in being obliged to leave my place to claim my rights as a man. (251)

Although Siddles had suffered the scourge of enslavement, having even been sold to what he calls “one of the worst negro-traders that ever was” (249), what drives him to flee a land he loves is not the brutality of slavery or the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law (evils that understandably dominated the attention of abolitionists), nor is it the fear of being captured; what drives him instead is the legally-inscribed oppression he endures in a nominally “free” state. And this is where Siddles lays responsibility for his exile: “I blame for this the Tories and turncoats of the free states. They don’t put in right men that are true to their country. They are chosen to represent the free states, but they act with the South. Just exactly what they call dough-faces” (251). Despite the pain of separation, Siddles finds exile preferable to the injustice present in both slave and free states.

But while Canada may offer a refuge from such oppression, it is by no means a paradise for all Refugees. Many realize their full rights only after a process of discrimination, failure, and hard lessons. Robert Nelson of Colchester says that “the prejudice is higher here in this place than in any part of Canada” (333), and he relates a history of whites cheating black immigrants—

many of whom, deprived of education, are in Nelson's description "as ignorant of figures as a hog is of holiday" (333)—of wages, labor, and land. Eventually black residents uncover various deceptions at work (whites manipulating scales and figures, or taking over an expiring land lease after black immigrants had spent years clearing the trees and stumps) and seek to cultivate their own land rather than work for whites, and "[t]hey have consequently become freeholders, and are of some consequence at the polls" (333). The Canadian border is no panacea, as equality is often a complicated process, but at a minimum, according to Refugee John D. Moore, "[Whites] have not got the power to carry [prejudice] out here that they have in the states. The law here is stronger than the mob—it is not so there" (169). North of the border, at least there are rights to be had as Refugees work toward their full legal inclusion.

In America's deepest pastoral myths, the ideal freedom universally bequeathed to every individual by America's land—expressed in the notion of a blank and idealized West, a catchword for wild nature itself—is actually predicated upon unspoken legal-political belonging. The ideal homesteader-founder—the Thoreauvian retreator or Turner's frontier pioneer—seeks this West to escape constricting civilization, to declare independence anew in further execution of the American utopian project, moving diametrically away from British tyranny. But this West indeed turns out to be a utopia, that is, a no-place. Black Refugees from America present a powerful counter-narrative. The opportunity to live out one's affinity for America's land is a privilege whose racial exclusivity has the force of law, as one's home and land are insecure even in so-called free states. This exclusivity not only undercuts the universality essential to the nature retreat paradigm, but it exposes the blank West—the race-free realm in which American freedom is concentrated—as the fiction it is. The nature retreat recapitulates America's origin story as a land of opportunity, with new generations of freedom-seeking founders constantly looking west,

away from the burdensome civilization and monarchy of the Old World. The *Refugee* actors disclose the innumerable transatlantic realities that dispel such myths, fleeing northward (and even sailing eastward to the House of Lords) to find liberty and equality in the British monarchy. They seek nature, yes, in the wilds of Canada West, but they at the same time seek *more* civilization, the legal protections and civil liberties denied them in the United States.

Refugees' homesteading experiences, while displaying the familiar rugged independence of the nature retreat, also encompass the precariousness of exile. In examining dialectics between sentimental literature and slave narratives, Cindy Weinstein notes that while separation from family is a staple in both genres, an important difference remains: "Losing the biological tie is critical (indeed, virtually all sentimental novels begin with this loss), but unlike the slave, like [Henry] Bibb, for example, who repeatedly wants to reconnect with his biological family, the sentimental protagonist finds a family that is superior to the one into which he was born" (127). A parallel dynamic writ large exists in the different outcomes of separation in the retreat narrative and the refuge narrative, respectively. The retreat hero's separation from society delivers him into a superior non-human "community" in an idealized realm of nature. Refugees, on the other hand, find a new country superior in terms of legal freedom, but they remain forever plagued by the desire to reconnect with the country from which they are separated. The Refugees' environmental engagement and even affinity in creating homesteads and livelihoods in Canada's wilderness come at a heavy price: amputation from what they consider their native land in America. Severed from yet another home, Refugees inhabit a compound exile, a diaspora-beyond-diaspora that refutes the ideal America-as-theorized in the pastoral nature retreat and exposes the tragic realities of America-as-practiced.

The Blank Body

To this idealized blank West, Thoreau marries the notion of the “blank body” as a second idealized, unmarked site of the universality central to nature writing’s retreat pastoralism. Emerson, once again, is foundational. In *Nature*’s famous “transparent eyeball” passage, Emerson posits a radical unity of soul and nature and God, a union awaiting the ordinary individual as he walks across a common: “I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God” (6). The erasure of the boundaries between the individual and the divine universe presents such experience as an inclusive birthright available to all. The spiritual and abstract nature of this union, in which the individual is all subject and no body, lends to its universal accessibility. Emerson’s visionary scene exhibits a philosophical idealism he outlines more formally at the outset of *Nature*, where he lays the metaphysical cornerstone of his manifesto: “Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men *and my own body*, must be ranked under this name, NATURE” (italics added, 3-4). Emerson’s nominally benign affirmation of this Platonic dualism as the foundation of his Transcendentalist philosophy, articulated in the universalist language of metaphysics, in reality disguises an exclusionary freedom reserved for the select: the freedom to *not* be identified with one’s body, to relegate one’s body to the realm of the “not me,” to treat one’s own body as a voluntary aspect of the self. Emerson’s abstract disembodiment is universal only when untethered from concrete American historical and political realities; then, as now, bodies matter, and only some bodies are so normative as to become transparent. Other bodies (the non-male, the

non-white) have been persistently marked for difference and exclusion, not so easily cast off or theorized out of view.

The higher laws of Emerson's Transcendentalist metaphysics, by which one's body must disappear in the interest of spiritual union with the collective Oversoul, have their secular counterparts in the American Revolution's higher laws of political inclusion, by which particular bodies are effaced in the interest of extending universal rights to the abstracts "persons" of the founders' rhetoric. Disembodiment as a central factor in American political inclusion is a trend well documented in scholarship on the relations between the individual body and the body politic. Michael Warner argues that "the principle of self-abstraction" is at the center of republican citizenship; the principle "is a ground rule of argument in a public discourse that defines its norms as abstract and universal, but it is also a political resource available only...to those participants whose social role allows such self-negation (that is, by persons defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital)" (42). Bruce Burgett extends the corporeal implications of the abstraction Warner identifies: "Citizens...are those persons whose bodies vanish at the boundary between public and private life, while [political] subjects are persons whose eccentric corporeality disqualifies them from public life by rendering their bodies all too visible...Modern republicanism positions the body not only *at* but *as* the vanishing point of the body politic" (13). Burgett also emphasizes the centrality of writing in Warner's conception: print gave citizens the means by which to "imagine forms of political authority that were rational and noncoercive to the degree that they were abstract and disembodied. Citizens, in other words, gained political power only insofar as they were able to represent their local and embodied experience as universal and disinterested through the medium of print" (13). As will be the case with

Thoreauvian nature writing in the discussion that follows below, print is the vehicle of abstraction by which particular bodies disappear and universal rights extend to all “persons.”

Karen Sanchez-Eppler focuses on the rhetorical sleight-of-hand that allows the “fleshy specificity of embodied identities” to be “masked behind the constitutional language of abstracted and implicitly bodiless ‘persons’” (1). She cites the feminist theorists who challenge the inherent privilege of bodily invisibility: “Their arguments suggest not only that this juridical ‘person’ has always implicitly occupied a white male body, but, more important, that success in masking this fact has secured and legitimized the power that accrues to that body” (3). Sanchez-Eppler zeroes in on the *voluntary* nature of embodiment for those who occupy the “right” kinds of bodies: “All the ‘men’ who, Thomas Jefferson declared ‘are created equal’ shed their gender and their race; in obtaining the right to freedom and equality they discard bodily specificity. The problem, as feminists and abolitionists surely suspected, was that women and blacks could never shed their bodies and become incorporeal ‘men’” (3). In other words, disappearing one’s body is not a voluntary option for those with bodies marked by difference, and thus exclusion, from the norms disguised within universalist rhetoric.

In the nineteenth century, when feminists and abolitionists increasingly demanded that America’s lofty founding rhetoric of universal opportunity, freedom, and equality be taken literally, the tensions between Revolutionary disembodiment and embodied realities reach a state of untenable crisis. Thomas Jefferson had, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, offered “as a suspicion only” (672) his theory asserting that what he called the “political” challenges of integrating blacks into the state were rendered moot by the more fundamental “physical and moral” inferiorities inscribed in the very bodies of black people. Carolyn Sorisio details the new discourses that arose to justify social inequalities on the basis of science, with entire schools of

thought aiming to follow through on Jefferson's suspicion with elaborate studies of the bodies in which race and gender ostensibly resided:

A new set of scientific "laws," supposedly establishing the physical inferiority of women, Negroes, and Aborigines, were said by proponents of slavery and opponents of women's rights to replace the Declaration of Independence's "higher law"...[Revolutionary] rhetoric held forth the promise of natural and higher laws of innate equality, but often masked the reality that political rights were allocated only to those who inhabited bodies marked white and male. (1-2)

In sum, the discourse of universal rights holds that abstract equality exists in inverse proportion to the corporeal visibility of actual bodies, and language (especially as codified in the authority of print) is the tool with which this disappearing act is performed: writing gives unmarked bodies the power to disappear while masking the exclusion of the marked bodies excluded in practice from this ideal and bodiless America.

Along with the blank West, the blank body is the second site into which Thoreau retreats from fraught political realities and into an idealized refuge of displaced and disembodied universality, as his erasure of actual bodies performs for abstract environmental inclusion what the Declaration had done for abstract political inclusion. In his conception of the body, Thoreau builds upon the Emersonian dualism that casts the body as "not-me," most notably in the "Higher Laws" chapter of *Walden*, where we see him at his most monkish, lamenting that (pure) spirit is tethered to (impure) body, with its animalistic appetites for food and sex. Thoreau's response is to establish full agency over his body: since the bodily "comforts of life" are "positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind" (*Walden* 14), he enacts his ascetic program of Spartan deprivation, minimizing the corporeal necessities of shelter, clothing, fuel, and food. He

champions chastity and purity of diet, with a regimen of water and unleavened bread as his barest possible concessions to bodily cravings, and he concludes, “Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open” (220). Whereas Emerson’s image of disembodied communion with God and nature in the transparent eyeball passage is of a transcendent *moment*, Thoreau’s transparency of body is enacted daily through ascetic discipline, his spiritual desires fulfilled in inverse proportion to the needs of his body—a body over which he enjoys mastery: “Every man is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the God he worships... We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones” (221). In Thoreau’s founding-in-nature project, the body becomes—along with his house, his bean-field, his book—yet another site of utopian self-determination, another domain over which he assumes full, creative agency.

But while Thoreau in some sense objectifies his own body by asserting a spiritual mastery over it, he tempers any potential corporeality by rarely if ever *particularizing* his body. When he does refer to constitutive individual body parts, he speaks of them simply as generic, representative instances at hand of *a* body, unmarked by anything distinguishing them from another human body. From this writer heralded for his powers of finely delineated physical description of everything from architecture to fern leaves, what he does not describe is his own distinctive body. Thoreau’s act in this regard is nature writing’s founding instance of what Donna Haraway in her work on discourses of science characterizes as the “leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere”: “This is the gaze that mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, that makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation. This gaze signifies the unmarked

positions of Man and White” (283). This unmarked position is a cornerstone of the proclaimed universality that allows Thoreau as exemplar to be influential and emulated into the present.

Such universality deploys the stratagem of disembodiment into new domains, aligning with other culturally-embedded attempts to purify political and philosophical discourses of bodily presences, and thus masking the concrete inequalities of an America inclusive in theory but exclusive in practice. As Jefferson and other founders employed the disembodied “person” to present inalienable democratic rights as universal, and as Emerson presents the disembodied metaphysical subject as heir to a universally accessible communion with God in a spiritual democracy, Thoreau likewise elides his own unmarked body so as to universalize his example of redemptive, solitary retreat to nature. And as with the theorists before him, the power to make bodies disappear resides primarily in the power of writing. In his telling, Thoreau exercises complete power over his body, which, as much as the texts he writes, is the product of his creative control and is revisable to his satisfaction. Through the power of writing, Thoreau enjoys a power compounded, with control over not only his body but over the representation of his body. In order to make voluntary environmental communion appear universal, Thoreau deploys writing to carry out a series of essential deceptions. He writes his own particular body out of view while also writing his own act of writing out of view, with the *Walden* narrative covering all traces of the composition he performed daily and prolifically. Taken together, these feats constitute the central fiction at the heart of nature writing’s hegemony, to be one thing while appearing to be another. In Thoreau’s influential example, this means to inhabit a quite particular site (squatting on his wealthy friend Emerson’s land a mile from a cultural hub) while appearing universally representative of being at home anywhere in nature; to inhabit a particular body (white and male) while appearing to inhabit a representative body free from any

contingencies of particularity or political inclusion/exclusion; and to write prolifically while appearing to do everything but write in the nominally non-fiction story of his own experience.

The Scars of Refuge

In this marriage of the blank West and the blank body, nature writing establishes forms of environmental identity that are predicated on retreat from political-corporeal particularities and realities. In turning to the *Refugee* accounts, we face those realities. Where the paradigmatic narratives of *retreat* center on volitionality and universality, narratives of *refuge* center on oppression and particularity, especially with respect to the body. As exemplified in Thoreau, the retreat hero enjoys agency over his body and his labor; future Refugees, especially those enslaved, usually enjoyed neither. The retreat hero treats his body as erasable and revisable; for Refugees, however, racial markers, scars, and disfigurements are indelible. The retreat hero may hide his body from view, while his black counterparts relay being subjected to dehumanizing public inspection and violation of their bodies. And the retreat hero through writing maintains control over his own representation, while Refugees deprived of literacy depend upon a white amanuensis for a lasting printed record of their lives and narratives. Yet the Refugees perform a corrective act of reappropriation, seizing conditions once oppressive—the visibility of one’s body, the presence of wounds and scars—and transmuting these signs of trauma into vehicles of expression, memory, and agency. Deprived of alphabetic text as the visible sign of their lived experiences, these black eco-actors frequently point to their bodies *as* texts, and in seizing *authority* over their own bodies and the inscriptions made upon them by previous brutalizers, speakers thus assert *authorship* of their own lives and identities.

Numerous Refugees punctuate their narratives by indicating wounds incurred during their flight and escape; many carry lead in their bodies still from gunshots years ago. As he relates his daring escape, John Little notes, “A bullet and a buckshot entered my right thigh; the shot came out, but the bullet went to the bone, and is there yet. It injured a sinew, so that my foot hurts me to this day when I walk” (195). Henry Banks says of his escape from Virginia, “I was shot by one of the white men. I caught the shot from my legs to my shoulders—all over my back. About a hundred shot holes were counted in my back—they were ducking shot, and are mostly in me now. I suffer from them now in my right arm, if I do any work” (89). William Street notes that in addition to his other scars—“I have the marks, here they are on my wrist” (264), he says of restraint injuries—that he too carries shot in him still from a shotgun blast (263). John Holmes says that not only was he shot during his flight—“I saw the flash and was peppered all over with shot” (161)—but that he was repeatedly attacked by the “large and savage dogs” tracking him: “they bit me in a great many places—the marks of their teeth are all about my knees” (162). The wounds suffered during their flights underscore both the lethal risk of attempting escape and the belated (and hard-earned) agency over their own bodies that now justifies those risks. Along with the psychic wages of exile, the lead within their bodies is a cruel reminder of brutality’s cost into the present, but in using their scars as the texts of their liberation narratives, Refugees author their own accounts of the journey from objectification to agency, their bodies bearing witness as no written text could.

Still other *Refugee* speakers attest that human violence is only one of numerous bodily dangers entailed by a long northward escape into the unknown, citing the marks left by perilous environmental encounters. William Johnson states, “[I have] been able to do no work on account of my frozen feet—I lost two toes from my right foot” (51), but he proclaims his disfigurement a

sacrifice preferable to the alternative of enslavement: “My feet were frostbitten on my way north, but I would have rather died on the way than to go back” (51). The particular trauma that Johnson relates quite literally embodies the moral and political disfigurements entailed by Refugees’ amputation from their homelands in the United States. Henry Morehead is driven to attempt a desperate escape from Kentucky with his family when his wife and children are ordered to be sold down South: “I would rather have followed them to the grave, than to the Ohio River to see them go down. I knew it was death or victory—so I took them and started for Canada” (174). Morehead averts death but pays a bodily price for the journey: “I was on the road longer than I should have been without my burden: one child was nine months old, one two years old, and one four. The weather was cold, and my feet were frostbitten, as I gave my wife my socks to pull on over her shoes” (175). Despite such hardship, Morehead puts these costs into perspective: “With all the sufferings of the frost and the fatigues of travel, it was not so bad as the effects of slavery” (175). Not only does Morehead’s desperate search for refuge read as a powerful counterpoint to the freely chosen retreat of the solitary pastoral hero, but the family’s communal flight challenges the individualism and separatism central to the retreat narrative. The nature writing tradition lionizes the unencumbered bachelor and his homesteading self-reliance, but such heroism seems cheaply bought in contrast to the fortitude and *mutual* reliance of husband and wife, father and mother, as they bear the awful responsibility of keeping their family of dependents intact at all costs. Solitude and separation may be the hallmarks of the retreat hero, but these refuge heroes risk death and disfigurement to avoid separation and to pursue the more difficult route of seeking liberation *together*.

Along with the men who recount the bodily sacrifices of seeking refuge beyond the U.S., women in *The Refugee* offer some of the most compelling testimony of former brutality and

assert authority over their life stories by disclosing their scars as texts. A Mrs. Ellis of St. Catharines recalls her former life while enslaved in Delaware: “I did a great deal of heavy outdoor work—such as driving team, hauling manure...I have been whipped with a wagon whip and with hickories—have been kicked and hit with fists. I have a bunch on my head from a blow my master gave me, and I shall carry it to my grave” (63). Mrs. John Little’s body tells numerous stories of abuse: “Here are three scars on my right hand and arm, and one on my forehead, all from wounds inflicted with a broken china plate”—a plate she herself did not even break (210). Little continues, “I handed the pieces to [my mistress], and she threw them down on me: they cut four gashes, and I bled like a butcher. One piece cut into the sinew of the thumb, and made a great knot permanently...This long scar over my right eye was from a blow with a stick of wood” (210). Just as she turns these corporeal marks of violence to her own ends in depicting her life experience as a survivor, Little transfigures other past traumas into tools of self-determination. To illustrate the white planters’ “way of taking care of the sick and weak,” Little tells of a “weakly woman named Susan, who could not stand the work, and she was sold to Mississippi, away from her husband and son” (212). To avoid such a fate for herself, Little says that even though “the hot sun made [her] so sick [she] could not work” (212) she persists in hoeing cotton until her hands are “badly blistered” and eventually become hardened (211). In carving out a new life in the Queen’s Bush wilderness, however, Little recognizes the strength resulting from her forced labor and her formidable journey north, and she deploys it in the execution of her new freedom: “I got to be quite hardy—quite used to water and bushwhacking; so that by the time I got to Canada, I could handle an axe, or hoe, or anything. I felt proud to be able to do it—to help get it cleared up, so that we could have a home, and plenty to live on” (218). Little’s spirit of constructive resistance is representative of the Refugees’ experience, as

she reclaims authority over her own body and labor, transmuting the burdens of oppression into tools of liberation.

Like Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Little, Nancy Howard bears an indelible mark of violence, and to a greater extent than any other speaker in *The Refugee* fully incorporates her scars into her narrative. Howard recounts once forgetting a fork while setting the table, resulting in her master's "hitting [her] on the head with the carving-knife" (69). She continues, "The blood spurted out—you can see" (69), and here her scar erupts directly into the printed text. In one of the only instances in the entire volume in which he editorializes in the course of another's narrative, Benjamin Drew inserts a bracketed statement: "[Here the woman removed her turban and showed a circular cicatrice denuded of hair, about an inch in diameter, on the top of her head]" (69). Like the scar kept covered beneath the turban, Drew's presence is usually concealed, but the interpolation here serves as a kind of scar on the text, a rupture in which the presence of Mrs. Howard's scar necessitates the disclosure of his presence as witness. Howard presents her visible bodily text so that it is transcribed into the visible alphabetic text that only the literate amanuensis can produce. So while the violent master is an inscriber of the bodily scar, and while the amanuensis is the inscriber of its trace in print, only Howard herself (though denied the powers of inscription) qualifies here as *author*: she does not make the marks, nor can she erase her scars, but she does in her way overwrite them by authoring a life in which her scars are subdued and made subservient to her now freely-made life and life story.

Yet not all marks are tamed as such. After relating the numerous ways in which she was beaten with all manner of weaponized objects, Mrs. Howard says, "It seemed to me I could not bear another lick. I can't forget it. I sometimes dream that I am pursued, and when I wake, I am scared almost to death" (69). The enduring psychic scar of past brutality is not a mark to be

wrapped beneath a turban and disclosed at her discretion, but a trauma that erupts beyond the bounds of her will. The inextricable links of body and psyche here undermine the kind of Transcendentalist dualism in which one's soul is liberated by ignoring or controlling the body over which one enjoys full agency. In the Refugees' testimonies, bodily experience and psychic experience are of a piece, with mental and emotional trauma as permanent and debilitating as the most extreme physical abuse. Not only do scars serve as a form of memory, but memory is indeed itself a scar.

George Johnson endures and witnesses innumerable forms of physical abuse, but it is another practice he deems even more abusive: "Whipping and slashing are bad enough, but selling children from their mothers and husbands from their wives is worse" (71). Just as the Thoreauvian retreat hero's voluntary relinquishment of possessions is predicated on the security of property rights, and just as the retreat hero's voluntary denial of his body's desires is predicated on the security of having agency over his own body, so too is the retreat figure's voluntary solitude and separatism predicated upon the security of remaining with family and community should he wish. In "Walking," Thoreau idealizes the courage to declare independence from kin and community: "If you are ready to leave father and mother, and brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again...then you are ready for a walk" (150). However figurative or hyperbolic the intended sentiment, such separation nonetheless becomes foundational to the nature retreat genre so influential on environmental identity, with a condition of the genre being "that human presence or companionship" is an "impediment" (Roorda 5) in the narrative. In sharp counterpoint, separation in the black-authored refuge narrative is the gravest trauma; inflicted from without, as cruelly as any scourge, separation is the psychic wound that does not heal, even after bodily wounds may have closed.

In fact, arguably the most damaged speaker in the *Refugee* volume is a woman who says almost nothing of what she has suffered physically but is forever haunted by what she has seen others endure. Mary Younger opens her account by introducing herself as a witness:

I was reared a slave, and have *seen* a great deal of barbarity in the State I came from.

Many a time I have *looked* out in the moonlight, and *seen* my little children, just able to walk to the fields, carrying buckets of water to the hands. They used to carry the buckets on their heads: they would wear off the hair, and I used to make pads to protect the sore places where they carried the buckets. (emphasis added, 239)

Like this opening passage, the rest of her narrative is suffused with the burden of vision and witness. In recalling a former neighbor who was burned with hot irons by her mistress, Younger says, “I have seen the burns with these eyes” (239). She has watched slave women she knew whipped to death, and she has had her capacity as witness wielded against her in barbarous ways: “Where I was raised, my children were often whipped till the blood ran, and then [the white overseers] would call me to see if I looked ruffled about it, and unless I looked pleased, I knew they would whip me” (240). As difficult as it is to imagine a cruelty worse than compulsory indifference to the abuse of one’s children, Younger closes her account with an even more devastating fate brought on by the compound trauma of witness, memory, and separation from those children:

The barbarity of slavery I never want to see again. I have children now who have got the yoke on them. It almost kills me to think that they are there, and that I can do them no good. There they are—I know how it is—it brings distress on my mind—there they are, working till late at night; off before day; and where there is no humanity—where the lash is not spared.

Younger may never want to see the barbarity of slavery again, but what her testimony makes clear here is that she will never to the end of her days *stop* seeing it. Forever plagued by the psychic trauma of memory and separation, Mary Younger bears not a scar but an open and never-healing wound.

In its excess and its overtly spectacular dimensions, the nineteenth-century brutality detailed by *Refugee* speakers exhibits striking commonalities with the public torture Foucault describes as passing out of favor as a judicial punishment after the eighteenth century. In its excess, Foucault notes, torture often “take[s] place after death...pursu[ing] the body beyond all possible pain” (34). Refugee Isaac Williams recalls a fellow slave in Virginia who, after an attempted escape, was dragged running after the overseer’s horse buggy and beaten to death after being whipped until the lash cut through to the organs beneath. Williams says that then “[t]he employer...caused the man’s heart to be taken out and carried over the river” (Drew 72). Foucault also claims that public torture “must mark the victim: it is intended, either by the scar it leaves on the body, or by the spectacle that accompanies it, to brand the victim with infamy” (34). In addition to the ubiquitous physical scars in the volume, Refugees testify as well to the brands of infamy inflicted by spectacles of dehumanization. Isaac Williams proceeds to describe his former owner: “My master owned a yellow girl, who, he feared, would run away...He tied her across the fence, naked, and whipped her severely with a paddle bored with holes, and with a switch. Then he shaved the hair off of one side of her head, and daubed cow-filth on the shaved part, to disgrace her—keep her down” (73). The horror of the abuse lies not simply in the physical pain. One could beat even a beast into submission, but the cruelty here relies on a strategic and visible exploitation of the victim’s distinctively human vulnerabilities, especially those rooted in her race and her gender: the overtly sexual power wielded in the exposure of her

naked body and the removal of her hair, and the further defilement aimed at stigmatizing her as object of shame and disgust.

The scars and abuses detailed by these black eco-actors and pioneers were being inflicted at the same time that white American writers were laying down a template for environmental identity that has maintained its hegemonic influence down the ages. While seminal authors were carefully erasing the particulars of their own embodiment, making their own bodies invisible so as to universalize their redemptive pastoral experiences, black homesteaders *fill* their accounts with the particular and exploited bodies that testify to the costs of struggling toward liberation and agency. Thoreau's perfect marriage of blank nature and blank body affords a refuge from the moral and political realities of inequality, so as to transcend exclusions entailed by particular markers of corporeal difference. In what follows, we shall see that for black refugees, it is the refuge of actual nature that affords the invisibility their marked bodies often need in order to survive the flight from America.

Table 3.1

“Retreat” as exemplified in Thoreau’s <i>Walden</i>	“Refuge” as exemplified in <i>The Refugee</i>
Self-written	Self-voiced, but other-written
Eco-actor = Eco-author; hero is the writer; hero’s literacy is assumed and essential	Each narrative’s hero (and its “I”) is not its writer; hero has been deprived of literacy
Figure seeks freely chosen <i>retreat</i>	Figures seek necessary <i>refuge</i>
Retreat emphasizes leisure—a voluntary experiment, and a voluntary return to society at experiment’s end	Refuge emphasizes necessity; driven by desperation
Retreat is public and visible; hero retreats in plain sight of the society from which he withdraws	Flight is marked by necessary seclusion and concealment
Project of founding is a utopian distillation of American ideals; separatism epitomizes the American project	Project of founding is a repudiation of America, a necessary amputation from America
Separation is desirable, valorized, redemptive	Separation is tragic and traumatic
Individualistic; solitude is desirable	Communal; community and connection are desirable
Figure enjoys original agency over one’s body and one’s labor	Figure lacks initial agency over her/his body and labor; marked by oppression
Assumes the universality of the actor’s experience; hero is representative and exemplary; his example is a template available to any who choose	Depicts the contingencies and limitations compelled by lived realities; acknowledges inequalities of choice
Figure secure of his rights; security undergirds the retreat project	Figures deprived of most basic rights; insecurity animates the flight from deprivation
Figure seeks (largely symbolic) exclusion from society; so secure of his inclusion that he can “sacrifice” it as a form of protest	Figures desperate for inclusion—morally, legally, politically, economically
Figure seeks refuge from plenty, to escape the dangers of having too much; sees ownership (of land, of material possessions) as a burden	Figures seek refuge from deprivation, from the dangers of having too little; they seek land and material security
Narrative marked by unity—of voice, of narrative arc, of vision, of hero’s development	Narratives marked by multiplicity and divergence—diversity of voices, identities, stories, experiences
Posits a self that is disembodied; the particulars of the hero’s embodiment are effaced	The particulars of embodiment are emphasized
Tends toward the <i>ideal</i> ; central elements (nature, literacy, the body, homesteading, farming, animality, separatism) are idealized in lofty, utopian terms	Tends toward the <i>practical</i> ; emphasizes the pragmatic and material aspects of such central elements
Hero rejects being “over-humanized”; valorizes his animal nature, while immune to the ill effects (bodily mistreatment, lack of freedom) of being treated as an animal	Refugees seek to be fully humanized—to escape equation with the bestial or sub-human

Chapter 4

Heaven is Under Our Feet: The Granular Work of Black Nature Writing

In the antebellum era, debates on the morality or legality of slavery often centered on questions about the status and very nature of black people in America. To what extent are blacks educable and assimilable into the body politic? Could blacks ever be citizens? Whether slavery is abolished or not, should blacks remain in the U.S. or recolonize elsewhere? From the perspective of whites in power, these questions rested upon a more fundamental set: To what extent are people of African descent fully human? How much are “they” like “us”? To which circles of moral and political consideration do blacks merit inclusion? Such questions were debated in a wide range of cultural forums: political tracts, legal cases, sermons, lectures, pamphlets, editorials, and studies in so-called racial science. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, however, prominent *narrative* forms seized public imagination in ways that the aforementioned discursive forms could not. Sentimental novels (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, most influentially) and slave narratives (with Frederick Douglass’s leading the way) demonstrated the efficacy of detailed narrative in dramatizing and particularizing black lives so as to garner empathy, foster solidarity, and shift public opinion. At the same time, Thoreau’s accounts of his retreats to nature were establishing the first-person, non-fiction narrative (rather than frontier fiction, the Emersonian essay, or the Romantic lyric) as the definitive literary mode for nature writing. In this concluding chapter on the role of antebellum black nature writing, I will adapt the “turn to narrative” in social discourse to the realm of environmental discourse as a basis for examining the ways in which the *Refugee* narratives, in diverging from both contemporaneous black writing and nature writing, stake out a unique contribution to both traditions.

Narrative, Sentiment, Society, and Nature

Jane Tompkins and Richard Rorty offer paradigm-shifting rationales for favoring sentiment-appealing narrative over psychologically complex fiction-as-art (Tompkins) or over metaphysical disciplines (Rorty), elevating efficacy in spurring social change over entrenched criteria such as timeless truth or aesthetic superiority. Their stances are rooted in praxis: as “attempts to redefine the social order” (Tompkins xi), narrative appeals to sentiment are more effective in achieving ethical solidarity, and such social change is more important than authors’ or books’ being “enshrined in any literary hall of fame” (xi) or, for Rorty, winning abstract ideological debates.

Rorty’s ideal is human solidarity, which is “to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination” (xvi)—that is, “created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people” and “redescription of what we ourselves are like” (xvi). The goal of solidarity entails a reliance on means particularly suited to its demands: “This is a task not for theory” (xvi) but for “thick” genres such as ethnography, journalism, and especially the novel. For Rorty, recognizing the essential roles of such genres “would be part of a general turn against theory and toward narrative” (xvi).

The aim of Rorty’s utopia of human solidarity is to eliminate cruelty. Rorty means by “theory” the outmoded approaches of “metaphysical culture” to issues such as cruelty: in a “metaphysical culture, the disciplines which were charged with penetrating the many private appearances to the one general common reality—theology, science, philosophy—were the ones

expected to bind humans together, and thus to help eliminate cruelty” (94). Rorty promotes instead an “ironist culture”¹⁸:

Within an ironist culture, by contrast, it is the disciplines that specialize in thick description of the private and idiosyncratic which are assigned this job. In particular, novels and ethnographies which sensitize us to the pain of those who do not speak our language must do the job which demonstrations of a common human nature were supposed to do. (94)

Rorty champions Tompkins’s treatment of sentimental fiction as a “political enterprise” (Tompkins 126) rather than an “artifice of eternity” (126), with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* arguably doing more to “sensitize” its antebellum readers “to the pain” of those considered Other than scores of discursive tracts, editorials, and studies combined.

Environmental thinking has been slower to integrate the implications of narrative than has social theory. In adapting the narrative turn in social ethics to the domain of environmental ethics, the efficacy of thick narrative over abstract theorizing becomes apparent. Aldo Leopold’s “The Land Ethic,” considered the “germinal twentieth-century work of eco-philosophy” (Oelschlaeger 42), exhibits a Rortian bent in asserting that human ethics function progressively—that is, they depend upon expanding our notion of who or what belongs to our community, of enlarging our circles of moral consideration. This means, in Leopold’s equivalent of an ecological Golden Rule, concern for the entire more-than-human community: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (225). The ethos of human connection in Joanne Dobson’s

¹⁸ Rorty: “I use ‘ironist’ to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance” (xv).

treatment of sentimental fiction is here extended as connection within more comprehensive webs of ecological belonging.¹⁹ Leopold proceeds to argue, “no important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions” (209-210), and goes on to affirm that “[w]e can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in” (214). Leopold shares with sentimental novelists (and their scholars) the stance that a change in loyalties is paramount. But his declaration proclaims the importance of change without offering a blueprint. The question remains: How? *How* do we change our loyalties and affections? How do we come to see, feel, understand, love, or have faith in something not already within our spheres of moral consideration?

Theoretical (in the Rortian sense) approaches to such questions have remained mired in outworn metaphysical models of rational moral theory. Paradigms of moral philosophy have tended to be egoistic and psychocentric, locating the criterion for moral standing in some sort of psychological capacity, usually rationality or sentiency. The extension of subjective, psychological capacity to some Other, however, fails to work when the other in question is not an individual but a whole (a biologic population or community, a species, an ecosystem, etc.) that does not possess egoistic psychology. The hold of rational metaphysics, however, is tenacious not only on Leopold—he tries to theorize his way out of the non-psychological/holism impasse by conceiving of the earth itself as a superorganism with a soul or consciousness—but on subsequent thinkers into the modern environmentalist era. Sentiment and imagination are frequently derided in theories promoting moral standing for non-humans, with advocates strict in

¹⁹ Dobson: “Literary sentimentalism, I suggest, is premised on an emotional and philosophical ethos that celebrates human connection, both personal and communal, and acknowledges the shared devastation of affectional loss” (266).

clarifying that their arguments are rooted in rationality and not in sentiment toward other beings. In *Animal Liberation*, for example, Peter Singer, “heaped scorn on ‘sentimental appeals for sympathy’ toward animals and avowed that his animal welfare ethic was grounded exclusively in ‘basic moral principles which we all accept; and the application of these principles to victims...is demanded by reason, not emotion’” (Callicott 150-51). But defensive theoretical gymnastics would be unnecessary if Leopold, Singer, and others could drop a habitual aversion to sentiment. For Rorty, theoretical arguments about human rights have little efficacy in promoting human solidarity in practice; since solidarity is fashioned through sentiment and imagination, he favors the thick particularity of narrative genres such as the novel. In like fashion, foundationalist arguments about the rights of plants, animals, and ecosystems have less potential effect than narratively reimagining our moral relationships, and our conceptions of ourselves, so that we achieve ecological solidarity.

Thus the implications of narrative for environmental ethics should be specified and emphasized: the Thoreauvian retreat narrative and the nature writing genre it inaugurated have done the cultural work of changing loyalties and affections deemed so central in Leopold’s ecological ethic. Through particularizing in compelling fashion human kinship with places and with fellow earth-inhabitants, nature writing dramatizes ecological solidarity. Rather than theorizing of the entire earth as a person, so to speak, so it fits into existing metaphysical models, nature writing narrativizes the process of treating nature as a society, with each being treated not as an “it” but as a “Thou” with moral standing rooted not in rational logic but in affectional relation. Detailed narrative—like other cultural forms such as landscape photography or nature documentary films—works in using sentiment toward the ends of ecological solidarity.

To take one representative instance, Thoreau creates a first-person narrational stance that is remarkably multi-voiced and that warrants attention for its innovative forms of heteroglossia. The language diversity ranges across idiomatic registers (with aphorisms from lofty Hindu texts and from common folk humor) and world languages (ancient Greek and Latin, all manner of modern European languages, and Native American languages, with Thoreau's studious glossary of Indian terms appended to *The Maine Woods* to assist in the reader's navigation of the book). Thoreau's polyphonic art even crosses boundaries of species, in his phonetic renderings of the non-human voices that speak what he calls "the *lingua vernacular* of Walden Wood" (Walden 272): the "*Hoo hoo hoo, hoover hoo*" of screech owls (125), the "*tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk, tr-r-r-oonk!*" of bullfrogs (126), the "*day day day*" and "*phe-be*" of tit-mice (275), and the "*olite, olite, olite,—chip, chip, chip, che char, —che wiss, wiss, wiss*" of the song-sparrow (311). Annie Dillard characterizes as unfair readers' notions that nature writing means taking simply dictation from a chipmunk, and the stereotype does damage in precluding more careful appreciation of the value of what Thoreau is doing in these passages: he *is* taking dictation from animals. Rather than *describe* the sounds of his fellow forest-dwellers, Thoreau *transcribes* them, a choice with profound ethical and narrative implications. In Rorty's case for narrative's ethical role, literature has the capacity for *demonstrating* commonality: "In particular, novels and ethnographies...sensitize us to...those who do not speak our language" (94). Herein lies the essential cultural work of nature writing: Thoreau's work does for environmental ethics what novels or ethnographies do for social ethics in Rorty's conception. Rather than argue for the standing of the non-human, or speak on its behalf, Thoreau gives it the dignity of its own voice: by experientially including it within the sphere of linguistic intelligibility, Thoreau by extension includes it within the sphere of ethical intelligibility, as a Thou and no longer an "it." The ethical

efficacy of thick description, along with the persuasive effects of immersion in a narrative's sensory details, provides a fresh reaffirmation of immersive nature writing's value.

Thoreau's writings on retreat from human society and assimilation into natural communities enjoy an enduring cultural legacy. But as I have argued, Thoreau's voluntary relinquishment of societal inclusion proceeds from the security that such inclusion is already a given. The particularities of his experience with the more-than-human world are predicated upon strategic elisions of realities governing the all-too-human world from which he retreats. Thoreau helped bring lofty nature discourse closer to earth, proclaiming in *Walden*, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" (283). The thick nature narratives he produces may be more grounded in particulars than discursive debate, but they are still more abstract and idealized in key ways than the embodied, bare feet-on-the-ground, praxis-rooted experience of black eco-actors who enjoy no such security. Their stories of refuge not only deal with America-as-practiced in ways that stories of retreat do not but also narrativize issues—rights, education, recolonization, rurality, liberation—being debated among black thinkers and communities themselves, in the U.S. and in Canada.

Retreat and Pastoralism in Antebellum Black Narratives

The element of solitary retreat at the heart of nature writing is a rare phenomenon among narratives of black experience in antebellum America. Two odd stories depict retreat as far from redemptive. In *The Life and Adventures of Robert, the Hermit of Massachusetts, Who has lived 14 Years in a Cave, secluded from human society* (1829), white author Henry Trumbull relates the travails of Robert Voorhis (whom he reportedly interviewed), a well-known recluse who lived in a secluded hut on the banks of the Seebonk River. After being kidnapped from his family

(wife and two children) and sold into slavery, Robert escapes multiple times and ends up working on a ship between Salem and India for twenty years. When he eventually learns that his wife committed suicide and that his children are also dead, he withdraws from human society, living out a lonely existence in a gloomy cell (that Trumbull compares to a hog pen) and tending a small garden patch. While some scholars have taken at face value Trumbull's professed hope that "this account of Voorhis's life would provide funds to help him live a more comfortable dwelling" (Prince), others point to much more cynical means and ends, citing evidence that Trumbull lifted the story from an 1826 news article and that Trumbull even schemed to burn down Robert's hut to generate publicity for his book (Chacko and Kulcsar 9-10).²⁰

A tale of equally bizarre provenance is *The Surprising Adventures of Wild Tom, of the Island Retreat, a Fugitive Negro from South Carolina*, an appendage to the 1855 publication of a slave narrative (formerly appearing in pamphlets) by Reverend Thomas H. Jones. The *Wild Tom* narrative tells the story of an escaped slave driven mad by the degradations of enslavement and spurred by the murder of his wife to escape to live in the swamp, repeatedly rampage in revenge, and kill an overseer before eventually being lynched.²¹ But while the autobiographical account of Reverend Jones can be seen as "a textbook example of nineteenth-century black America's most lasting contribution to literature," the Wild Tom appendage is an excerpt lifted straight from a white-authored work of fiction, Richard Hildreth's novel *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore* (Davis 191). Thus not only is the story of Wild Tom, like the account of Robert the

²⁰ Chacko and Kulcsar argue that Trumbull, who also "recorded" the Israel Potter memoir that was the primary source for Melville's Potter novel, never let "facts...get in the way of a good story" (6) and conclude that in the case of Voorhis, "Trumbull perpetuated an elaborate hoax while making a significant amount of money from the story of an impoverished black man" (10).

²¹ "This adventure tale provides a counterpoint to [Rev.] Jones's memoir. In this second story, the fictional Thomas begins as a model worker and a Christian, but unlike Uncle Tom, he is driven over the edge of sanity by slavery's sanctioned mistreatment and oppression, transforming him into Wild Tom, a dangerous, irrational and uncontrollable slave... [W]hile the moral plea against slavery might still appeal to the abolitionist audience, the trickster Tom's violence... play[s] into white fears about black masculinity and miscegenation" (Williamson).

Hermit, a bastardized tale with a strange genealogy, but the two stories are tragic and even dystopic, with solitude in nature far from the redemptive state it is in canonical nature writing.

While one possibility for the enslaved is retreat to nature, which turns out badly in these (white-authored) narratives, another option is retreat from rurality altogether for the safer confines of the city. Michael Bennett argues that Frederick Douglass inaugurated an “anti-pastoralism” that has characterized African-American culture ever since. For Bennett, Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life* “[r]evers[es] the well-known narrative progression of the pastoral from corrupting city to revitalizing nature” (198). The *Narrative* exhibits “the author’s efforts to leave behind the cruelty he encounters in rural nature for the relative safety of the urban environment” (198)—a security residing in the “proximity of other eyes and ears in the city” (198) belonging to the crowds whose gaze placed a check on the behavior of brutal masters who operated in seclusion on rural plantations. Douglass’s anti-pastoralism “speaks to the relevance of ecocriticism for African American studies generally and particularly for a black literary tradition that, from its inception, has constructed the rural-natural as a realm to be feared for specific reasons and the urban-social as a domain of hope” (198). While acknowledging Melvin Dixon’s and others’ treatments of wilderness as “a major topographical feature of African American literature” (196), Bennett considers such usages more metaphorical than geographical and concludes that “African Americans and their culture have, since the time of Frederick Douglass, increasingly been involved in a process of urbanization” (197).

The stark dichotomy between tragic rurality and hopeful anti-rurality—between nature on one hand and liberty or even survival on the other—embodies a thorny set of issues (writing, liberation, environmental encounter) in antebellum black nature experience. Those black eco-actors who have the deepest intimacy with the natural environment—the maroons, the

enslaved—are those likely to lack liberty and literacy, and thus lack the means of authoring their own experience, necessitating the historical recreations such as Sylviane Diouf’s work on maroons. Those figures, like Douglass, who do achieve liberty and literacy do so by fleeing the traumatic natural environment. The stories of black nature retreat that do get written down, such as the Robert the Hermit and the Wild Tom narratives, are often authored by whites and end in tragedy and despair. Solomon Northup displays environmental expertise in his narrative, but his account is of a Dante-esque journey through the hellish plantations and swamps of the Deep South before he is restored at last to the more secure domains of a northern city—a relative security at best, since he is kidnapped from a city in the first place. First-person accounts of redemptive pastoral experience do exist, however, in the *Refugee* narratives. They have remained largely unrecognized because a] they hide within a book bearing only a white author’s name and b] they are told from outside of America, in a land where choices between rurality and liberty are not mutually exclusive. These narratives of refuge perform unique cultural work. Alienated from a black writing tradition that portrays the non-urban as traumatic and from a nature writing tradition rooted in self-authored books valorizing solitary (and voluntary) retreat, these stories constitute an affirmative and redemptive vein of black pastoral experience.

Numerous Refugees explicitly express favor for the country over the city. For Alexander Hemsley, the issue is one of personal and cultural history: “When I reached English territory [in Toronto]...I was among strangers, poverty-stricken, and in a cold country. I had been used to farming, and so could not find in the city such assistance as I needed: in a few days, I left for St. Catharines, where I have ever since remained” (Drew 58-59). Estranged from his native land and loved ones in the U.S., Hemsley seeks familiarity in a life beyond the city; he joins up with another man to farm five acres and make ends meet as he starts a new life in a strange land. As

unfamiliar as the people and climate of Canada are, the city is more unfamiliar still. In his frontier homesteading account, John Little offers a statement that could be mistaken for a passage from Jefferson, Crèvecoeur, Thoreau, or Turner. Little chastises city life for its independence-sapping limitations: “I would like to show [my farm] to those stout, able men, who while they might be independent here, remain in the towns as waiters, blacking boots, cleaning houses, and driving coaches for men, who scarcely allow them enough for a living. To them I say, go into the backwoods of Queen Victoria’s dominions, and you can secure an independent support” (206). Freed from the service-oriented economy of the city, Little gains not only the economic independence of being a landholder but further enjoys the human benefits of dignity and agency. On the portrait of labor presented by Crèvecoeur, Larzer Ziff writes, “Throughout the letters, free labor is happiness...people express their happiness in work. Labor is their clearest and cleanest expression of their relation to the world. But where people own neither the soil on which they labor nor the results of their labors, they do not express themselves by their work but are crippled, made mute, oppressed by it” (24). Amid the innumerable accounts in which Refugees attest to being “crippled, made mute, and oppressed” in literal ways, John Little offers up life and labor in the city as forms of trauma, as well. For Little, his own soil and his self-possessed labor are forms of expression too often denied to other blacks, both those enslaved on plantations and those dwelling and working in cities.

While the *Refugee* narratives diverge from a tradition of black anti-pastoralism, they contest even more dramatically the pastoralism of white-authored nature writing, in which the retreat is a privileged experiment, available to the few in practice but universalized as available to all in the abstract. In their emphasis on the *practicality* and *necessity* of their flight through and to natural environments, Refugees highlight by contrast the *voluntary* aspects of the retreat

hero's relinquishments. The conventional American retreat protagonist chooses voluntary exile, dispossession, and material poverty, and takes for granted agency over his own body, elective options not afforded to black Refugees (unless they flee the United States altogether). Yet another voluntary relinquishment of the white retreat hero is the sacrifice of his own humanness: in dramatizing the superiority of nature over human society, Thoreau (despite some reservations below) rhetorically rejects civilization and valorizes his own animal nature. At the same time, his black counterparts are struggling to assert their humanity and not be equated with the animal, non-human, or sub-human. In *Walden*, the retreat from civilization and toward nature embodies a criticism of the extent to which society-dwellers are overhumanized, with unnecessary luxuries and technologies alienating humans from the redemptive wildness within them. Thoreau exhibits characteristic contradictions on the animality of humans. He repeatedly denigrates the woodchopper Therien for remaining mired in his animal nature, with his "higher" faculties and aspirations stunted. Thoreau is likewise repelled by his own animal cravings, his body a sluggish beast to which his soul is tethered. The animal may be emblematic of nature's integrity and interrelatedness, but Thoreau betrays his stance that no human (especially one of his status) would actually want to *be* one. Yet among Thoreau's aspirations in his retreat experiment are to have "as simple a diet as the animals" (61), to dwell in a shelter "as open and manifest as a bird's nest" (245), and to "spend [his] day more as the animals do" (210). His extensive intimacy with the creatures of his environs, and his professed preference for their company over human company, even if for dramatic effect, have a legacy. Again, the relevance lies less in the pastoral fantasies Thoreau expresses than in the pastoral literalness with which the spirit of being "less human and more animal" is taken by subsequent environmental heirs. Dave Foreman states with dead sincerity one of the cornerstones of his deep ecology: "[W]e believe we must return to

being animal” (34). The relinquishment of one’s humanity, like the other voluntary sacrifices upon which the nature retreat often proceeds, relies upon having security in the recognition of one’s humanity to begin with.

Refugees display a different kind of contradiction entailed by animality. Their accounts are pervaded with the degradation of being treated as sub-human and with their struggles to have even their basic humanity recognized. Yet in the environmental experiences necessary to their survival and flight, Refugees recount in detail the deep ecological belonging that results from having to behave as true denizens of nature—in assimilating to the distinctive requirements of different environments and in developing the eco-wits to securing the food, shelter, seclusion, navigation, and transport necessary for survival. As for creatures at home in their habitats, nature offers black eco-actors refuge and sustenance, an inclusiveness denied them in the power structures of nation and plantation.

In describing the conditions from which they fled, Refugees are explicit in linking their treatment by masters and overseers to the treatment of animals by human owners. Just as domestic animals are considered beasts of burden and commodities subject to bodily inspection and auction, so too are the enslaved. Former slaves recall being treated not only as sub-human but often as sub-*animal* according to the plantation’s chain of being. Mrs. Nancy Howard says of her masters that “they would speak better to a cow or dog” (69) than they would to her. John Little says of the meager provision allowed to him and his fellow slaves, “We usually ate it at the time the horses ate” (190), and Williamson Pease asserts that the beasts were often better off: “In Arkansas...the people were treated worse than brutes. Horses and mules have food by them all the time, but the slaves had four pounds of fat bacon a week, and a peck of corn meal—not enough to last some men three days” (134). Little attributes the brutality he suffered not to any

sense of crime or punishment but to his sub-human status in the eyes of his master: “He abused me like a dog—worse than a dog—not because I did any thing wrong, but because I was a ‘nigger’” (189). Little later behaves as a beast would out of sheer necessity; while hiding in the woods at night, he and his wife must consume a stolen ham uncooked: “We dared not make a fire to broil it, so we ate it raw; like a dog” (203). In attempting to convey the depths of their dehumanization, speakers often depict the slave body *as* meat being processed for consumption. An anonymous woman describes “a field hand that had died under the lash”: “From his neck to...his legs, the flesh was raw and bloody—completely cut up with two bullwhips by the overseer and driver. It looked as sausage meat when you chop it” (176). Mrs. James Seward recalls, “My brother was whipped on one occasion until his back was as raw as a piece of beef, and before it got well, master whipped him again” (62). John Little recounts his own sufferings under the lash: “The overseer went on with the bull whip. How many they put on, I don’t know, but I know that from the small of my back to the calves of my legs, they took the skin off, as you would skin beef. That’s what they gave me that day—the next day, I had to have some more” (193). Treated as meat, the enslaved body is more than simply objectified, suffering a fate even worse than that of the beasts: while an animal is led to slaughter but once, the slave is subjected to a hellish program of serial butchery.

Objects of brutal degradation on the farm, Refugees depict the dehumanizing effects of slavery on master and slave alike by portraying them in terms of predator and prey, with power and fear dominating all relations. William Grose says of being sent to market, “I was beside myself to think of going south. I was as afraid of traders as I would be of a bear” (95). Another Refugee says of his brutal former master, “His name sounded around there as if he had been Satan himself: the colored people were as afraid of him as they would be of a lion out in these

bushes” (193). In relating his long and dangerous escape north, John Little recounts, “I was hunted like a wolf in the mountains, all the way to Canada” (209). His comparison is less a folk simile than it is an accurate description of his travails: pursued by hounds and hunters day and night, Little is literally the quarry in a deadly hunt.

Just as Refugees reclaim authority over their brutalized bodies and turn their scars into signs of survival and renewed self-determination, however, so too do they wield creaturely behavior in reclaiming agency over their lives. Escaping detection in the wild requires Refugees in flight to develop and execute a wide range of adaptations and skills. Unlike for the retreat hero, seclusion is paramount. Not only does the security of the white nature hero allow his retreat to be visible, but the retirement must be public so that the retreat can fulfill its exemplary functions. Stanley Cavell places Thoreau’s retreat in the tradition of the jeremiad: the retreaters’ job is “to perform an experiment, a public demonstration of a truth; to become an example to those from whom [he] departed” (11). For Cavell, Thoreau’s homestead at the pond “was just far enough to be seen clearly. However closely Thoreau’s ‘literary withdrawal’ resembles those of the Romantics, in its need for solitude and for nature, the withdrawal he depicts in *Walden* creates a version of what the Puritan Congregationalists called a member of the church’s congregation: a visible saint” (11). While the American nature retreat requires visibility, though, refuge mandates invisibility and seclusion. Thoreau lists as the bare necessities of survival food, clothing, fuel, and shelter (with shelter included for offering protection from the elements, especially in winter). Refugees have a further necessity not required by the retreaters secure of his rights and safety, and that is seclusion. As vulnerable as any prey in the wild, black Refugees must conceal the visible, auditory, and olfactory traces of their presence, and in doing so, develop a repertoire of eco-wits allowing for survival in the refuge that nature affords them.

Unlike their white nature hero counterparts, Refugees emphasize the utility of natural environments—not as commodities, but as means of survival. While Natty Bumppo champions a secluded waterfall for its aesthetic inutility, and Thoreau valorizes the swamp for its utter uselessness in human eyes, black eco-actors must “use” the environment toward their human ends of life and liberty; a swamp turns out to be quite useful indeed. Purifying nature of its utility is yet another luxury not afforded to all. In Refugee accounts, to be an animal on the farm is to be exploited, owned, brutalized, and consumed. But to behave as an assimilated being in the wild holds out the possibility of cultivating one’s connection to the environment toward the ends of freedom and agency. In the service of such moral and even ecological aims, the utility of the environment ennobles humans and nature alike.

Strategies of seclusion in *The Refugee* often display elements that have become familiar tropes in slave narratives: disguise, concealment within cargo, throwing off the track of pursuers. The multiplicity of speakers, however, lends the composite portrait of escape a range and diversity beyond the experience of a single protagonist. The variety of terrains across so many experiences presents a wide repertoire of ecological intelligences. “Thinking like a mountain” is in Aldo Leopold’s formulation an ideal of environmental identification and empathy, but Refugees in the totality of their accounts must think like mountains, swamps, rivers, and forests; like dogs, wolves, snakes, and burrowing prey. In some survival stratagems, escapees occupy a “border” existence between nature and society. Edward Hicks in his long odyssey alternates between staying out in the bush for entire winters and also hiding in human worlds. He packs himself under feet of stored cotton in a barn during the day and sneaks into a blacksmith shop at night to remove his shackles (Drew 244). Donning a disguise enables his passage on a boat for Pittsburgh (247). He is also aided by fellow blacks along his way; they offer him food, and one

family hides him beneath the children's mattress to elude patrols (247). Hicks and other speakers often survive as what Syviane Diouf classifies in her "maroon landscape" as "borderland maroons" (as distinct from those in the "hinterland"): those figures on the periphery who inhabit "the wild land that bordered the farms and plantations and the cities and towns" (5). Hicks traverses the human and natural worlds as necessary, exploiting the food and tools of society to his ends: "I knew all about that neighborhood, and which way to go. I got me an old scythe-blade, and broke off a piece and made me a knife... Then I killed me a pig, took him on my back and walked five miles. I dressed him, singed off the hair, and before he was fairly dressed, I had his ears on the coals broiling" (245). In Hicks's telling, sharp distinctions between social and natural geographies do not exist, the domains working in tandem to abet his flight from oppression. Mrs. John Little recalls that while she and her husband hid in the bush, "John managed to keep [them] well supplied with pies and bread" (218) stolen from bordering farms. The Littles occupy the borderlands with the wolves who also navigate between the forest and the farm, hiding and raiding in fluid cycles of sustenance. The Littles must keep their eyes on the wolves and also on the "party of men and boys on horseback" (217) who patrol the borderlands. In this hybridized geography, not only are borders between the human and the wild transgressed, but distinctions between predator and prey shift as well, with the roles of hunter and hunted anything but fixed. A cumulative effect is the obscuring of boundaries between humans and creatures, as Refugees must think like both in adapting to the ever-changing terrains and dangers of the moment.

Refugees seek seclusion across a wide range of natural elements and habitats. Many hide in water. John Holmes is among numerous escapees who wade into the mud and water of the swamp to elude the humans, horses, and hounds in pursuit (165). Edward Hicks aims to hide in

some willows along a creek but must do even more to outwit his skilled pursuers: “The bloodhounds that day, of their own accord, having such knowledge, gave me a little race; I went down into the creek, nothing out but my head, among big water moccasin snakes, which I kept off with a stick” (244). Other Refugees exploit a variety of habitats. William Street behaves as a field rodent or bird might to escape predation: “I ran to an open field where there was a little grass, and lay down. They did not see—they hunted about and gave up” (263). Street later “got into a tree that had been burned out, and stayed in it till night” (263) to avoid detection, exhibiting his versatility in adapting to the habitats at hand.

In many instances, seeking shelter and seclusion becomes more than a momentary need; numerous Refugees find and create dwellings that serve as long-term “homes” in the wild. Isaac Williams recounts fleeing into the bush with a fellow escapee named George: “We were out three weeks, during the last of which we made a cave by digging into a cliff at the head of the creek. The Southern men who saw the cave (as we heard afterwards when we were in jail) said they never saw so complete a place to hide in” (77). On another leg of their journey, Williams and his companion create a den, reminiscent of an instinctive preparation for winter: “It now came on to rain, so that we were obliged to dig a den in the ground, expecting to stay there until spring, as we thought it would be too cold to travel in the winter, and that in the warm season we might live on fruits by the way” (80).

It is Refugee James Adams, though, who offers the fullest accounts of trusting one’s instincts to find shelter and seclusion in the borderlands and hinterlands. Adams tells how he and a companion were aided by some white allies: “We were told to go up on the mountain very high, where was an Indian cave in the rocks. From this cave we could look a great distance around and see people” (46). Despite the vantage afforded by such a spot, however, the escapees

feel exposed, and their instincts lead them elsewhere: “So instead of staying there, we went down the mountain to a creek where trees had been cut down and branches thrown over the bank; we went under the branches and bushes where the sand was dry, and there we would sit all day” (46). As perhaps only the pursued could understand from experience, seeing is perhaps less crucial than not *being seen*. Exemplifying an ethos of praxis over theory, these Refugees find deliverance not in a high place above the world but in a low place, on the ground, subsumed into the life-world and natural environs. Adams’s descriptions of natural places are suffused with passages that are emblematic in their echoes: an “unbroken wilderness of hills and mountains” (47), a “rough place of bushes and rocks where we could lie concealed” (46), “a thicket of briars close by the road” (49). This more generalized geography lends the landscape Biblical and mythical resonances that link the particularized experience of the Refugees to larger symbolic geographies of liberation and salvation. If Adams’s environmental fable has a moral, it likely lies here: “We soon reached an old stable in the edge of a little town; we entered it and slept alternately one keeping watch, as we always managed while in the neighborhood of the settlements. We did not do this in the wilderness—*there* we slept safely, and were quite *reconciled*” (48). Despite all the perils of the wild—exposure and hunger, snakes and wolves—only the civilized world is dangerous enough to mandate perpetual vigilance for one’s safety. For black Refugees, America’s moral geography is one in which civilization is fatal, and the wilderness a refuge.

Mythology always defers to particularity in the narratives, however, and the granular aspects of dwelling *in* nature are matched by detailed accounts of mobility *through* the environment. Just as Refugees scan landscapes for their utility as settling-places, they also read nature in their excursions through and across it. As one of his four requirements that qualify a

work as an “environmental text,” Lawrence Buell in *The Environmental Imagination* says that “[s]ome sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant of a given is at least implicit in the text” (8). Refugee John Holmes on his journey explicitly reads the land as in process, noting with expert eye the signs of its former uses: “Among those woods I have seen, where there are large trees, the old corn hills and tobacco hills, where it used to be planted” (164). In attending to social history as part of the land’s natural history, Holmes brings to mind Thoreau’s *Walden* description of the processes by which nature is effacing the signs of socially-marginal figures—slaves and free blacks, immigrant railroad laborers, a poor potter—who had all dwelt at the pond over the years. The “environmental eye” sees not undifferentiated or static nature, but an ongoing story encompassing human and non-human alike.

The myriad means by which Refugees read and process their own ways through various terrains lend their narratives the imprimatur of “environmental texts.” Much of their migration is celestial in nature, using the sun and North Star to chart their passages. It is *terrestrial* knowledge, however, that predominates in Refugee navigation; true to form, these eco-actors survive by attending to their feet on the ground. Navigation is multivalent—at least as important as *finding* one’s way in the wild is skill in *hiding* one’s way from those in pursuit, another kind of ecologically-attuned adaptation. Covering one’s tracks is a staple in many slave narratives’ accounts of flight, but the *Refugee* stories are unique in their varied and multi-vocal catalogue of eco-specific techniques. Herbal knowledge abounds in the accounts—Harry Thomas says that upon reaching Canada, he even “practiced up and down the province as a physician, from the knowledge [he] had obtained from a colored man in Mississippi, who knew roots and herbs” (277)—and such expertise serves no more essential end than evading detection. Edward Hicks gathers wild onions to elude hounds, and he shows pride in outwitting dogs less experienced than

he is: “They chased me that day, but could not follow me beyond the place where I had put on the onions. It takes a mighty old hound to follow that track” (243). Isaac Williams gives hounds portions of his food to keep them quiet and advises other runaways to “keep clear of the hounds by rubbing the soles of their shoes with red onion or spruce pine” (80). John Warren uses red pepper to confuse the scent of dogs, but when he is up against the “\$400” super-hounds bought and trained especially to track runaways, he digs deep (in literal ways) into his ecological repertoire: “Another way that I have practiced is to dig into a grave where a man has been buried a long time, get the dust of the man, make it into a paste with water, and put it on the feet, knees, and elbows, or wherever I touched the bushes. The dogs won’t follow that” (179). The eco-intelligence on display here exemplifies a principle at the center of the Refugees’ reigning ethos, demonstrating that the practical and the cosmic are of a piece. A key cultural contribution of nature writing in general has been in the narrative particularizing that brings lofty principles closer to earth, weaving grand visions out of the minute operations of discrete natural operations, and Refugee John Warren’s testimony here offers a parable of ecological wholeness built from the practical: death begetting new life in an economy of regeneration, the corpse abetting the survival of a human pursuing freedom and agency, and escaping cycles of oppression offensive to the moral order of nature.

The feet-on-the-ground ethos of practicality exercised by Refugees in natural environments is indicative of an all-pervasive pragmatism on an array of nominally non-environmental issues. The narrative form affords needed dramatizations of debates conducted discursively on a number of fronts. As black and white leaders alike considered the issue of black recolonization, with Mary Ann Shadd and Martin Delany especially prominent in debates on removal to Canada, *Refugee* narratives particularize in dramatic fashion both the benefits and

costs for blacks in leaving the U.S., the dual outcomes of more liberty and the grave human price of exile from one's native land. Another central issue was education. Later broad debates pitting preferences for practical knowledge (Booker T. Washington) against advocacy for classical, liberal education (W.E.B. Du Bois) have precursors in mid-nineteenth groups created to educate black emigrant groups in Canada. The British-American Institute, for instance, emphasized vocational "training in manual labor as the most pressing issue in black education at the time" (Siemerling 92). On the other hand, groups such as the Buxton Mission School and the Wilberforce Educational Institute promoted a classical "literary and intellectual" (93) education, prompting "criticism not only from prejudiced whites sceptical of the intellectual abilities of the Black settlers but from members of [the Institute president's] own community who considered his recommendations impractical, even impossible, for all but a small minority" (Murray 65). With no consensus on the aims and methods of schooling, the education debate became both polarized and perennial.

The *Refugee* narratives, however, once again dramatize in detail the effects of education (or its absence) in *practice*. Their granular testimonies stake out a more realistically complicated picture beyond the dichotomies in conceptual debates between practical learning and book learning. Refugees attest again and again that literacy is desirable and even essential, but rarely do they call for literacy for other than quite tangible benefits; in their valuations, literacy is inextricably practical. A few speakers do express thoughts on education bordering on the generalities beyond the strictly pragmatic. Aby Jones says of slavery, "I believe it is ruinous to the mind of man, in that it keeps the keys of knowledge from him: it is stupefying to man" (150). John Francis reflects on the benefits of education for his own children: "It would be well to have the children taught, that they should improve themselves as a means of elevating their race.

When my children get old enough to read, I intend to instruct them about slavery, and get books to show them what we have been through” (188). For Francis, education is essential in providing personal and cultural history, and in securing the future of his people.

More often, though, Refugees emphasize the myriad practical costs of being denied literacy. In fact, John Francis himself laments that his fellow black settlers in the Queen’s Bush “have many drawbacks: as they can keep no books or accounts, they are liable to be over-reached—and are over-reached sometimes” (189). This becomes pervasive in the narratives: even with legal equality in Canada, blacks face chronic economic inequality when hampered by the inability to navigate the everyday manipulations of numbers and letters entailed by commerce, labor, and property. Robert Nelson details the varied ways in which illiterate blacks are easily cheated of wages (333). Thomas Hedgebeth, one of many speakers who was born free but denied an education still, says, “I cannot read or write. A free-born man in North Carolina is as much oppressed, in one sense, as the slave: I was not allowed to go to school” (253). Now living in a free society in Canada, Hedgebeth pays an ongoing price for his deprivation: “My ignorance has a very injurious effect on my prospects and success...I am now engaged in a troublesome lawsuit, about the title of my estate, which I would not have got into, had I known how to read and write” (253). In Hedgebeth’s experience, freedom and oppression are not simple binaries: freedom has very real limitations when one’s economic security is constantly imperiled through the manipulation of written figures. John Holmes, too, asserts that even basic literacy can be the difference between financial success and failure: “If I had any knowledge how to calculate and scheme, I should be worth \$10,000...It cannot be expected that men who have just got away from slavery should look far ahead: they are only looking for today and tomorrow” (168). Philp Younger articulates a similar sentiment: “I suffer from want of education. I manage

by skill and industry—but it is as if feeling my way in the dark” (233). The equating of knowledge with light and of ignorance with darkness is an archetype employed to memorable effect throughout American slave narratives, but for Refugees, illumination is no celestial metaphor—it is the practical light to navigate the world on equal terms. The visual image of shortsightedness or blindness as a chronic condition dramatizes the tenacity of oppression, even after crossing a political border into nominal freedom. Newly gained equality in the abstract is no guarantee of equality in practice. Like the bodily scars they bear from the physical brutality of their pasts, illiteracy constitutes another chronic disfigurement.

Refugee John Warren—the same man who developed a range of environmental expertise in outwitting his pursuers with his “corpse paste”—relates his own extensive efforts toward literacy while he was enslaved: “I bought a copy of the letters in writing of a white boy in Mississippi, for half a dollar. It was a good price, but I did not mind that. I kept that copy of the letters three years, and learned to write from it. I practiced nights and Sundays...I got so I could write, but I had nobody to show me, and did not know how to hold the pen” (178). The immediate outcomes of his efforts are not lofty principles of mental emancipation or intellectual enlightenment, nor are his aims to sharpen his rhetoric or read for himself God’s Word. The payoff is more tangible: with his hard-earned and rudimentary education, Warren says, “I wrote three passes for myself” (178), one for each stage of an escape he has planned. As much as his material knowledge of the wild bush, or his behavioral knowledge in eluding men and hounds in pursuit, Warren’s literate knowledge is a first-order and pragmatic necessity for navigation and survival.

The intersections of literacy, pragmatism, and equality bring the experience of Refugees within larger conceptual debates on race and literacy. Refugee Henry Gowens asserts, “If the

colored people had come into Canada with a knowledge of reading, writing, and arithmetic, there would now be no difference between them and white people, in respect to property or business. They would have been just as skillful, just as far advanced in art and science as the whites. But they have to contend with the ignorance which slavery has brought upon them” (143). In Gowens’s conception, inequality-as-practiced—in the details of reading, writing, and figuring—is the basis for broader economic, social, cultural, and intellectual inequality. Gowens’s words embody issues in Henry Louis Gates’s outline of the role of literacy in the Enlightenment’s revival of the “great chain of being” concept: “after...Descartes, *reason* was privileged or valorized, above all other human characteristics. Writing...was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason. Blacks were ‘reasonable,’ and hence ‘men,’ if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of ‘the arts and sciences,’ the eighteenth century’s formula for writing” (218). Such a rubric entails multiple hierarchies: reason over other faculties, writing over other capacities, vision over other (and more immersed) modalities, and whites (in consequence of who did most of the writing) over blacks. Thoreau invokes hierarchies of literacy and humanity in carving new and influential channels of nature writing. In departure from the nature hero Natty Bumppo before him, who views the abstraction of letters as a hindrance to authentic experience of nature, Thoreau champions high literacy and denigrates even the “lower” writing of the functionally literate woodchopper Therien, who can form letters but cannot “write thoughts” (148), saying of Therien’s “simple expediency” that it was “such as you might expect an animal to appreciate” (150) and thus relegating the woodsman to the level of not-quite-man in high nature writing’s chain of being. But the Refugees’ narratives work to counter such hierarchies of human capacities, and are thus not only egalitarian but ecological. In refusing to segregate sentiment from reason, practical knowledge from literate knowledge, the sublime from the immanent,

survival from liberation, and humans from nature, their narratives embody holistic and horizontal networks of interrelationship in place of inflexible and ultimately unnatural hierarchies.

The culminating issues to which Refugees contribute their unique pragmatism are the topics of slavery and liberation themselves. While there are in the narratives the rare expressions of generalizations such as “true liberty,” “respect,” or opportunity,” or for larger ambitions of improving the race, the Refugees’ rationales are overwhelmingly and securely grounded in particulars. Amid circulating frameworks for arguing against slavery—on grounds legal, moral, religious, political, or scientific—Refugees articulate repeatedly that slavery breaks the laws of God, but their actual arguments center less on moral issues of right and wrongs and more on the practical ways in which the system of slavery simply does not work. Their personal immersion in the workings of slavery has given them first-hand experience of the extraordinary resources, in economic costs and human costs, required to maintain such an extensive system of oppression in practice. In noting the enormous cost and effort of surveillance alone—expensive hounds, recovery expeditions, security patrols—numerous speakers offer a straightforward proposal that would be both easier and cheaper for all involved: free the slaves and pay them a wage. And in response to further ubiquitous arguments from slaveholders that slavery must be maintained to keep blacks from exacting revenge, Refugees assert that emancipation would be *less* dangerous. David West says, “I believe that if slaveholders were to say, ‘Here, boys, you are free; you may go to work for me at so much a day’—if ‘twas done all over the South, there would be no trouble” (101). Edward Hicks affirms such a notion: “If the white people were to set the slaves free, and offer to hire them out, they would jump at the chance: they wouldn’t’ cut throats” (248). Williamson Pease argues explicitly that emancipation would be safer for slaveholders, stating, “I think the slaves ought to be set free: I don’t think they would cut their masters’

throats—if they would do that the time would be while they are oppressed” (135). In John Little’s view, the whites’ fear is not simply a pretext for maintaining slavery—“The slaveholder IS afraid of his slaves: it cannot be otherwise”—but such a complaint rings hollow in Little’s blisteringly frank assessment: “They have all the laws and customs of the country in their favor, and yet they find something to grumble about” (210). Little points out a practical drawback for whites of such self-inflicted fear: “When I was travelling in the North, I found that men worked days, and slept nights without fear, because they were honest. At the South they do not have this comfort. The overseer watches through the day, and the master in on the lookout at night...They are doing wrong in robbing the slaves and so they are uneasy nights” (209). Little’s account is a true-to-life parable on conscience, with wrongdoers paying for their crimes with sleeplessness and troubled minds.

Beyond the psychic, emotional, and physical costs of perpetual fear, speakers attest to the financial expense of surveillance and pursuit. William Street says that his former master was compelled to purchase highly coveted bloodhounds that were often more expensive than the human chattel they were trained to pursue (240). John Warren puts such expense into a larger ledger comprising the lived costs of an apparatus not only immoral but simply not worth the price. He notes the prohibitive costs of specialized hounds (179). He describes the chronic anxiety of “white folks down South” who stay alert all night “watching for runaways, and to see if any other slave comes among theirs, or theirs go off among others” (179). He proceeds to assert that the anxieties of oppression make, from the slaveholders’ perspective, the enslaved less productive than they would be as wage-laborers: “I believe that if slaves were hired and paid for their labor, they’d all go to work, and they would do a great deal more work than they do now, for they would not be thinking all the time about running away, and fighting their overseers”

(179). Warren cites his own experience: “Now I don’t study all day about running into the woods, nor dream of it nights, as I used to” (179). He now enjoys not only liberty in the abstract but true peace of mind and the fruits of time not spent in constant turmoil.

Conclusion: A Legacy of Refuge

The upshot from the *Refugee* narratives is a comprehensive ethics of the particular, a necessary contribution to both mainstream nature writing and to a tradition of black anti-pastoralism. The feet-on-the-ground ecological experience in the narratives extends to an expansive feet-on-the-ground pragmatism on issues from emigrationism to education to liberation, a thick practicality rooted in lived experience and idiosyncratic self-determination. We should return here to where this study started, to the enduring legacies of racially-aligned veins of antebellum nature narrative. The scars and abuses detailed by these black eco-actors and pioneers were being inflicted at the same time that white American writers were laying down a template for environmental identity that has maintained its hegemonic influence down the ages. While those seminal nature writers were carefully erasing the particulars of their own embodiment, making their own bodies invisible so as to universalize their redemptive pastoral experiences, black homesteaders fill their accounts with the particular and exploited bodies that testify to the costs of struggling toward liberation and agency. Lest we think such issues are relics of a bygone era, irrelevant to current attitudes related to environmentalism or environmental justice, modern testimonials often tell a regrettably familiar story. In what Rob Nixon calls an expression of “jingoistic transcendentalism” (239), contemporary writer Rick Bass champions a retreat orientation, proclaiming an ongoing American exceptionalism rooted in idealized peopleless landscapes:

The unprotected wilderness of the West is one of our greatest strengths as a country. Why place that strength in jeopardy? To lose Utah's wilderness would be to strip westerners and all Americans of a raw and vital piece of our soul, our identity, and our ability to imagine... The print of a deer or lion in the sand, in untouched country, as you sleep—it is these things that allow you, allow us, to continue being American, rather than something else, anything else, everything else. (in Nixon 239)

From Thoreau through Fredrick Jackson Turner and into the present, the eco-identity inherited by Bass assumes as a given an ecological deliverance that is in fact predicated on an unspoken substructure of privileges that are not universally distributed in America, particularly to African-Americans: legal rights, political standing, equitable literacy and education, security of one's property and labor, untainted air and water, and bodily agency. Deprivation of (and concern for) such discrete rights amounts in toto to a comprehensive exclusion from the Mainstream Green identity too often considered by conservationist environmentalists as constituting a definitive national birthright.

Testimony from black authors details such exclusion, outlining enduring racial divides in environmental attitudes and experience, on levels personal, collective, and political. In "Reflections on the Purposes and Meanings of African American Environmental History," Carl Anthony recalls his presence at a Berkeley, California, public hearing in the mid-1980s. During a meeting on plans to redevelop a landfill on the Berkeley waterfront—a hearing in which nearly all of the 300 attendees opposed any development and insisted on "saving" and "protecting" the waterfront environment—one of the few African Americans in attendance (and the only one to speak) stood up to express his approval of development: "I am from South Berkeley. The young people who live in South Berkeley don't have any jobs...the [development] company has

promised twelve thousand jobs. You can't eat open space. You can't eat the environment" (Anthony 201). Anthony then relates his own reaction to the audience's response: "What happened next disturbed me greatly. All these people who opposed the waterfront development began booing him, saying, 'Go back to back to South Berkeley'" (201). The incident leads Anthony to a stark realization: "The large body of environmentalists in that room shared a sense of history and purpose, a frame of reference, that was different from the history and purpose of this African American man" (201). Calling the meeting a life-changing moment, Anthony cites the moment as his first overt awareness that while American environmental history had acknowledged loss among non-human nature—"the destruction of the forests; the degradation of landscapes; the loss of wolves, bears, cats, and birds" (200)—it had not adequately addressed the degradation to which African Americans had been subjected as a result of environmental attitudes, behaviors, and policies.

In "Black Women and the Wilderness," Evelyn C. White testifies that her own attitudes toward nature are inextricably rooted in both race and gender, and are considered aberrant from conventional dispositions. On her experience as an invited teacher at a women's writing workshop in the foothills of the Oregon Cascades, White recalls, "I did not welcome the steady stream of invitations to explore the great outdoors" (377). Faced with persistent calls from students and colleagues to join in on ventures to hike and swim in the forests, White makes whatever excuse necessary to avoid such outings. While she enjoys the occasional glimpse of the river or trees from a classroom window, her resistance to the outdoor adventures deemed so universally pleasurable and redemptive by her cohorts is resolute: "I didn't want to get closer. I was certain that if I ventured outside to admire a meadow or to feel the cool ripples in a stream, I'd be taunted, attacked, raped, maybe even murdered because of the color of my skin" (378).

White locates her individual fears in a deep collective history: “My genetic memory of ancestors hunted down and preyed upon in rural settings counters my fervent hopes of finding peace in the wilderness. Instead of the solace and comfort I seek, I imagine myself in the country as my forebears were—exposed, vulnerable, and unprotected—a target of cruelty and hate” (378).

Citing her memories of as a child gazing endlessly at a *Jet* magazine photo of a dead Emmett Till’s “ghoulish” face, White notes that Till had been sent from his home in Chicago to “rural Mississippi to enjoy the pleasures of summer with relatives” (380) and links her own trepidation to the shattering of the promise nature had held for the fourteen-year-old Till: “In his pummeled and contorted face, I saw a reflection of myself and the blood-chilling violence that would greet me if I ever dared to venture into the wilderness” (380). The outings that held pleasures—hiking, wading, fresh air, remoteness, solitude, communion with nature—considered so natural and innocent by White’s colleagues instead evoked for her yet another visible, black, and broken body.

In her contrast between the easy eco-pleasures of her cohorts and her own deep-seated vulnerabilities, White articulates the old retreat-refuge divide for the present era, and like the Refugees of a century and a half ago, she populates the empty and peopleless natural world with a torn and distorted and inescapably visible body. The objectification that destroyed Emmitt Till’s body is woven into everyday lived experience, in less graphic but nonetheless devastating forms of violence and neglect. Recent ethnographic environmental studies document “the different life conditions that racially and ethnically marked people typically face and thus the aspects of the environment likely to concern them” (Allen 121) and report on key findings of surveys and interviews:

Black peoples' actions and inactions are rooted in their experiences of not having the political position to affect decisions that profoundly affect their lives, being treated like objects by doctors and many other professionals who minister to their needs, and having to fit into institutions that provide no respect for their cultural traditions or life experiences. (122)

Evelyn White's account also highlights a doubleness and alienation at the heart of much black environmental experience. Some divides are between divergent, racially-aligned attitudes: Paul Outka argues that the categories of "sublimity" and "trauma" have corresponded to "the very different ways that a relation to the natural has historically signified along sharply divided racial lines" (4). Other times the divide is within black eco-experience itself. Evelyn White says that over many years she had dreamt of leaving the city for a home in the countryside, but her house-hunting ventures had always been torn between two conflicting emotions: "elation at the prospect of living closer to nature and a sense of absolute doom about what might befall me in the backwoods" (378). Kimberly Ruffin describes a dichotomy within the African American experience that she calls the "ecological beauty-and burden paradox," saying that while "an ecological burden is placed on those who are racialized negatively, and they therefore suffer economically and environmentally because of their degraded status," there is also the possibility of "the experience of ecological beauty [that] results from individual and collective attitudes toward nature that undercut the experience of racism and its related evils" (2-3). One troubling consequence of the link between whiteness and mainstream environmental identity has been a legacy of black environmental experience that has tipped predominantly toward stories of trauma and burden with too few stories that illuminate the beauty side of the paradox.

Affirmative black nature narratives such as *The Refugee* have often languished in obscurity or neglect, but new environmental histories need stories of beauty and agency that augment the necessary, powerful documentation of trauma and burden. Eco-actors in *The Refugee* navigate the doubleness of burden and beauty. Torn by exile, they carry in their minds and bodies the bullets, scars, and memories of past traumas into their new lives. Yet in their resistance and their struggle for their fundamental human rights, and in their narratives' challenge to America's foundational environmental myths, the Refugees serve as exemplars in transmuting trauma into beauty and agency. The final narrative in *The Refugee* belongs to Eli Johnson. In addition to witnessing and enduring all forms of physical abuse as a slave in Virginia, Johnson suffers other indignities. He is forced to work on the Sabbath and prevented by his master from attending Saturday night prayer services. After a new master promises him some money for voluntary overtime work chopping wood, Johnson is denied the money, with which he wanted buy a new hat. "Isn't that hat good enough?" asks the master, to which Johnson replies, "It don't turn the water, and I see the colored people wearing respectable hats, and I want one to wear to meeting" (345). In recalling his eventual escape, Johnson says, "I received assistance from kind friends, and reached Canada without difficulty about five years ago. I have had a serious time in my life" (346). Johnson indeed finds refuge in Canada: "I felt so thankful on reaching a land of freedom that I couldn't express myself. When I look back at what I endured, it seems as if I had entered a Paradise. I can here sing and pray with none to molest me. I am a member of the Baptist Church, and endeavor to live a Christian life" (346).

Johnson's words that close the *The Refugee* are perhaps best appreciated when read against one of Thoreau's most famous sentences from *Walden*, the words inscribed on the large sign that today commemorates his house site as a destination of environmental pilgrimage.

Thoreau writes, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (90). *The Refugee* ends with Johnson as well expressing the desire to live a life worthy of having been lived by his values: “I rent a piece of land, and make out to live. My family is sickly, so that I have not been able to purchase land. But I am not discouraged, and intend to work on while I have health and strength, and to live such a life as I should wish when I come to die” (346). As an enduring cultural touchstone for environmentalist identity, Thoreau extols the pastoral retreat ideals of separation, solitude, self-reliance, universality, and leisure amidst an idealized nature, a utopia in which his retreat is “not a hardship but a pastime” (70). For the Refugee Eli Johnson, the environment offers a sober beauty rooted in a different set of realities: the mutual reliance among friends, family and community; the contingencies of lived experience; the necessity of work; the freedom to worship or sing, or to enjoy the ordinary dignity of a new hat as the fruit of one’s labor. In his clear-eyed assessment of the world’s injustices and in his determined optimism to exercise agency over his own life, Johnson stands as a touchstone for environmental and ecocritical justice down the ages. The retreat to utopia is, literally and etymologically, a journey to no-place. Johnson and his fellow Refugees remind us all that Paradise must start with the world beneath our feet, the *actual* places where we live, play, work, and worship.

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