



Chapter Title: Douglass's *Animals*: Racial Science and the Problem of Human Equality

Book Title: *Antebellum Posthuman*

Book Subtitle: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Book Author(s): Cristin Ellis

Published by: Fordham University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1xzh0z9.4>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Fordham University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Antebellum Posthuman*

JSTOR

Douglass's Animals: Racial Science and the Problem of Human Equality

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” It is no secret that the liberal revolution these words seem to promise—affirming the basic political equality of all humans—was not, and arguably still has not been realized in the nation these words helped to envision. The truths the Declaration of Independence finds so glaringly “self-evident” are, in fact, far harder to make out in the text of the U.S. Constitution, which creates some humans only three-fifths equal, and in the voting laws of the early republic, which rendered most Americans something less than equal by imposing sex and property requirements on the franchise.

Today we tend to describe this inconsistency as the product of hypocrisy: despite professing egalitarian principles, the founders in fact held racist and sexist prejudices that allowed them to justify disenfranchising so many Americans. The legal history of U.S. voting rights, however, suggests a slightly more complicated story, for the initial justification for limiting the franchise in the early republic in fact did not depend upon a notion of biological inferiority. It was, instead, not until the wave of democratizing

reforms in the early to mid-nineteenth century that the doctrine of natural inequality became necessary to the justification of voter exclusion. Thus ironically—or something worse—it was an upsurge in the egalitarian sentiment that “all men” really ought to mean all *biological humans* that helped to crystallize the dehumanizing discourse of modern biological racism that this chapter will explore.

Despite the revolutionary liberal rhetoric of the Declaration, the laws of suffrage in the early United States remained largely unchanged from the colonial period and thus reflected the more conservative political ethos of British republicanism.¹ On this theory, voting is not a natural human right because rationality—the precondition for political suffrage—is not an inalienable trait of all humans. Instead, republicanism holds that rationality is a faculty that may be enabled or disabled by one’s financial condition. Owning property gives one a rational stake in the nation—“a permanent common interest with, and attachment to, the community,” as George Mason puts it in the Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776). By contrast to the landed man’s rational interest, John Adams suggests, “Men who are wholly destitute of property” are as “dependent upon others . . . as women upon their husbands or children on their parents” and thus are not in a position to exercise the “good judgment” of “independent minds.”² The property restrictions on voting in the early republic thus implied that, whether or not all humans have a *capacity* for reason, the power to exercise that rationality is contingent upon the ideological freedom conferred by economic independence. On this eighteenth-century view, then, limiting the franchise to propertied men did not specifically entail denying the *humanity* of nonvoters; instead, the prevailing republican logic presumed that humanity, alone, is not a sufficient qualification for full political personhood.

All this began to change in the first half of the nineteenth century, when a wave of democratic reforms across the states reduced or overturned the property requirements for suffrage. “Stated simply,” Alexander Keyssar reflects in his comprehensive history of U.S. voting rights, “more and more Americans came to believe that the people (or at least the male people—‘every full-grown featherless biped who wears a hat instead of a bonnet’) were and ought to be sovereign.”³ The extension of the franchise to nonpropertied white men in the early nineteenth century thus not only expanded voting rights; crucially, it rearticulated their justification. The new laws rejected the notion that rationality is a power contingent upon freehold property: as one Virginian scoffed, the old arrangement was “ludicrous” in that it effectively proposed “to ascribe to a landed possession, moral or

intellectual endowments.”⁴ Instead, those endowments were presented as a speciological endowment characteristic of humanity (hence the tongue-in-cheek taxonomic reference to “featherless biped[s]”). The new democratic doctrine unequivocally held “*that every man has a right to vote, simply because he is a man.*”⁵

In the wake of this reconceptualization of the justification for suffrage, remaining restrictions on the vote posed a conspicuous philosophical problem. For if the right to vote derives from a rationality that is inborn in all speciological humans, then to deny a class of persons the right to vote is tantamount to denying their humanity. It is therefore, of course, no mere coincidence that the U.S. abolitionist and feminist movements were both born at this moment in the early nineteenth century. In 1829, at the crest of this wave of democratizing reforms, David Walker penned the opening salvo of what would become the radical abolitionist movement, citing the democratic promise of the Declaration and challenging white Americans to “tell me if their declaration is true—viz., if the United States of America is a Republican Government?”⁶ Two years later, inspired by Walker’s example, William Lloyd Garrison likewise invoked the Declaration to call for “the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population.”⁷

In making their appeals, Walker and Garrison exposed a contradiction in the democratizing spirit of the age that slavery’s defenders found themselves suddenly pressed to justify. Over the ensuing three decades, a wide variety of proslavery arguments would circulate, but none were more effectively calculated to deny Black equality while preserving the democratizing impulse of the era than those that asserted the innate, biological inferiority of Black humanity. If the expansion of the franchise had affirmed the political equality of all biological men, these new proslavery arguments set out to prove that not all biological men are biologically equal. Accordingly, in the 1840s and 1850s the political exclusion of slaves—like that of women and Native Americans—increasingly came to be justified biologically. The proliferation and popularization of racial science in these decades thus marks an important shift in the debate over slavery: what had begun as a debate over whether the enslavement of humans is morally acceptable increasingly became a debate over whether Black humans were, biologically speaking, fully human to begin with.

To be sure, racist and misogynist prejudices were hardly new in the 1830s. The biological arguments that circulated in this era did not invent the idea of innate inferiority, but they did reinvent it by transposing it into empirical language and legitimating it with the stamp of scientific authority. Thus, as the historian Mia Bay argues, although racism may have been

old, *scientific* racism—“a rationalized ideology of Black inferiority”—was a relatively recent invention which gave racial discrimination an unprecedented air of objectivity and cultural authority in the antebellum era.⁸ Scientific racism was an outgrowth of racial science, which emerged in the eighteenth century as a field of inquiry that proposed to apply the methods of natural history to the study of the human species. As we shall see, racial science housed a number of competing theories over the years, not all of which were overtly racist—or, more accurately, all of which were racist to different degrees and in different ways. But underneath this internal diversity, racial science was unified in its assumption that human identity is conferred biologically, and that our moral and cognitive characters are essentially embodied traits. From its earliest beginnings, racial science propounded the notion that “the intellectual man is inseparable from the physical man; and the nature of the one cannot be altered without a corresponding change in the other.”⁹

The increasing centrality of race as a justification for slavery—and thus the increasing centrality of racial scientific discourse to both pro- and antislavery argumentation in the late antebellum era—is a significant historical development. In this chapter, however, I will argue that to understand the full impact that racial science had on the American political imaginary, we must also look beyond the role it played in racist defenses of slavery. For even more profoundly, as I shall argue, the biologism implicit in racial scientific discourse (whether pro- or antislavery) presented a potentially fatal challenge to the then still novel liberal ideals of universal human rights and equality. In place of the abstract and uniform figure of Man typically invoked in liberal democratic discourse, biologism draws attention to our embodied diversity: empirically speaking, no two persons are the same. Seizing upon the fact of diversity, racial science concluded that humanity, or *Homo sapiens*, is in fact fractured into a variety of distinct taxonomic subtypes. Regardless of whether it was being used to bolster or to dismantle racist prejudice, then, racial science forwarded a newly biological conception of the human that erodes the universalizing imaginary enshrined in liberal politics. From this new embodied perspective, belonging to the human race no longer ensures one’s basic similarity nor, therefore, one’s basic equality with other members of the species.

This chapter investigates this crisis in the meaning of “the human” by tracing its effects on the remarkable transformation of Frederick Douglass’s antislavery thought during the decade or so of racial science’s ascendancy in antebellum discourse. In the late 1840s and 1850s, Douglass reinvented his stance on slavery. Parting ways with the Garrisonian abo-

litionists and abandoning their platform of disunionism and pacifism, he made new alliances in New York, throwing his weight into electoral politics and his money into his newspaper and John Brown's armed resistance. Among the myriad factors that contributed to his transformation, I highlight Douglass's growing sense that the battle for freedom must not only be a campaign against slavery but against racism and the pernicious ideology of Black inferiority that midcentury ethnology was then fortifying. As an example of how the growing influence of racial discourse altered anti-slavery argumentation, Douglass is a fascinating case not because his response to racial science was typical, but because it was not. Douglass's writings of the 1850s show him to not only have sensed the importance of being able to frame his antislavery argument "ethnologically" (as a number of contemporary Black writers had begun to do), but to have *also* been keenly alert to the steep costs associated with doing so. In his response to racist science, Douglass refutes Black inferiority on ethnological grounds but seems to recognize that simply by acknowledging racial difference—even if just to deny its political significance—he is weakening his case for human equality. "Let it once be granted that the human race are . . . naturally different in their moral, physical, and intellectual capacities," he ruefully observes, "and a chance is left for slavery."¹⁰

As I shall argue, Douglass solves this problem by developing a new strain of argument against slavery that is materialist yet not racist—an argument that, speculatively and at great political hazard, brackets the question of Black humanity and embraces the materiality and animality of the human. This difficult argument emerges intermittently across Douglass's writings of the 1850s and sits uneasily alongside his continued affirmation of Black humanity and racial equality. It becomes particularly loud in his prophecies of an imminent racial conflict, whose violence, as I shall demonstrate, he proleptically justifies by portraying this as the natural and ineluctable expression of a universal biological instinct for self-preservation. In these moments, Douglass invokes a rhetoric of assertive Black "manhood" that is paradoxically animalistic, proposing that Black Americans can best demonstrate their humanity through acts of physical resistance that Douglass consistently compares to the violent resistance of animals. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, the comparison to animals allows Douglass to present racial uprising as not only natural but, because natural, *inevitable*—if the intolerable conditions of Black life in America do not change.

Thus just when it would seem to have been most urgent to disavow all comparison to nonhuman animals, Douglass begins to think more consistently through them, and it is my contention that he does this not in spite

of but because of the rise of racial science and the dehumanizing discourse of Black animality it fostered. Recognizing the ways in which racial science's materialism erodes the epistemic assumptions underlying appeals to human rights and equality, Douglass develops a rearguard defense against this new onslaught, framing an antislavery argument that is strategically agnostic toward the "question" of his race's humanity. As it diffusely takes shape in his late antebellum writings, this new strain of antislavery thinking depicts the systematic oppression of Black Americans as a moral crime that is, moreover, a mounting national liability: a practice that is "dangerous as well as wrong."¹¹ Although he by no means abandons his moral opposition to slavery, Douglass's late antislavery writings supplement that moral critique with a new strain of thinking that works from a logic of risk rather than wrong. Tactically engaging racial science's biological reconceptualization of the human, Douglass experiments with a new, materialist antislavery argument that is indifferent to the question of the slave's—or anyone else's—humanity.

Racial Science's Challenge to Human Equality

By 1850, racial scientific accounts of Black inferiority had become deeply woven into the fabric of the proslavery position, providing a seemingly authoritative rationale, coolly removed from the subjective chaos of moral sentiment, for the wisdom and justice of slavery.¹² Proslavery ethnologies suggested that Black Americans were, at best, innately dependent humans (like women and children), and perhaps even not quite human: "A man must be blind not to be struck by similitudes between some of the lower races of mankind . . . [and] the Orang-Outan," write the authors of *Types of Mankind*.¹³ This racist science was answered by antislavery ethnologies, many written by prominent Black thinkers, that decried this bestialization and fought to establish the full humanity of the Black race. To appreciate the true scope of the impact that racial scientific discourse had on the slavery debates, however, we must look beyond this antebellum struggle between pro- and antislavery ethnologies. As crucial as it was to empirically discredit racist science's attempts to dehumanize and bestialize Black Americans, the very fact that this was a debate *between* racial sciences—that, in other words, racial science had become a vital new battleground in the debate over slavery—was itself consequential. For, as I shall elaborate below, quite apart from its political usages, the materialist logic of racial science fundamentally challenges basic assumptions of humanistic ethics and liberal democracy. To understand the political significance of racial

scientific discourse, then, we must learn to recognize how, from the beginning—in its basic conceptual premises, which became more explicit over the course of its historical development—racial science undermined Enlightenment notions of universal human rights and equality.

The field of racial science was born when eighteenth-century natural historians began to apply their empirical and taxonomizing procedures to the study of humans. Racial science was, in this sense, an attempt at reflexivity: much as the word “race” had originated as a term of art in sixteenth-century animal husbandry before migrating to its usage in humans, the discipline of racial science originated out of a taxonomizing science originally developed to systematize and instrumentalize the nonhuman world. Racial scientists proposed to study humankind as a species like any other animal, endeavoring to enumerate, describe, and account for the causes of embodied diversity.

By its very premise, then, racial science undermined the categorical distinction between humans and animals. Humanism differentiates the human from the animal by positing that humans are uniquely in possession of a moral quality (reason or soul) that marks humanity’s exceptionality to nature—its independence from its animal body and freedom from the chains of physical causality. By contrast, natural history restricts its inquiries to physical phenomena, and from this strictly empirical perspective, as the eighteenth-century godfather of taxonomy, Carl Linnaeus, observed, there is hardly “a distinguishing mark which separates man from the apes, save for the fact that the latter have an empty space between their canines and their other teeth.”¹⁴ Linnaeus proposed to sidestep the incommensurability of humanism’s doctrine of human exceptionalism and natural history’s commitment to empirical evidence by suggesting that the question of humanity’s moral nature “belongs to another forum” than natural history, a deferral he signals in his landmark volume, *Systema naturae* (1775), by suspending his taxonomic system at the human, refusing to identify this species by any distinguishing physiological marks. Instead, he designates humankind by the curious epithet, *Homo nascem te ipsum* (“Man know thyself”)—a singularly recursive construction that Giorgio Agamben reads as a nod to the aporetic logic at the heart of Western humanism, the circularity by which humans do not prove but simply assert their moral and ontological exceptionality to animal life. But if Linnaeus thus foresaw and sought to deflect a confrontation between empirical and humanistic discourses of humankind by suspending the former, eighteenth-century racial scientists were not so cautious and forged ahead with their speciological rearticulation of humanity.

In doing so, they were developing a discourse that not only undermined the doctrine of human exceptionalism and natural rights but moreover remade the logic of human equality. In natural history, as Linnaeus reminds us, facts are determined by observation: what makes this five-pointed body human and that five-pointed body starfish is a matter of distinguishing physical marks, anatomical forms, and other measurable traits. In order to qualify as true by the standards of scientific authority, propositions like the doctrine of human equality therefore had to be empirically verifiable: the equality of one person to another had to be a demonstrable, measurable “fact.” Accordingly, as Winthrop Jordan observes, “From the facts of natural history, [racial science] spoke for an equality among men which derived from their corporeal sameness. . . . Men had been created equal by the Creator, yes, but the evidence for this creation now lay in man’s physical being.”¹⁵ In other words, natural history’s empirical episteme demanded that human equality be manifest: equality could not inhere in a strictly inward and disembodied human trait—an unobservable soul or rational freedom—and still count as *true*. Thus instead of arguing for a universal moral equality or shared human nature, racial scientists sought to ground the doctrine of human equality in demonstrable physical likeness. Seeing is believing.

As equality migrated from an inward to an outward trait, the corporeal diversity of human bodies consequently became freighted with unprecedented significance. As Irene Tucker argues, empiricism’s “demand that universalism be not simply a political aspiration but something that might be *experienced*” caused the visible attributes of persons—and most especially skin color—to take on political import as a sign of a person’s categorical likeness (or not) to others in the political body.¹⁶ That racist ideology was on the rise in the West in the same historical moment when democratic and antislavery sentiment was spreading can seem like a glaring hypocrisy, or at least evidence of a conservative retrenchment against the Enlightenment’s liberal ideals.¹⁷ But Tucker’s point is that, however antithetical they may seem, abolitionism and racialism are equally logical outcomes of the Enlightenment, expressing its commitments to liberal universalism and the empirical method, respectively.¹⁸ The necessity of empirically confirming human equality made physical diversity fraught with political meaning to a degree it had not been before. And thus, previously negligible to the question of human likeness, material embodiment—and more particularly, the infinite diversity of bodies—now posed a powerful obstacle to liberal universalism.

This impasse, however, was not fully apparent before Douglass's day. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the reigning paradigm in racial science, termed "environmentalism," worked to reconcile physical diversity with human equality by asserting the latent empirical likeness of all humans. This theory held that all humans descend from a single ancestral stock (an idea called monogenism), and that this original human race diverged as humans dispersed across the globe and came under the influence of different climatological and social circumstances. "The pliant nature of man is susceptible of many changes from the action of the minutest causes," Samuel Stanhope Smith explains in his *Essay on the Causes of the Variety of the Complexion and Figure in the Human Species*, "and these causes habitually repeated through a sufficient period of time, can create at length, the most conspicuous differences."¹⁹ Environmentalism was not antiracist: its expositors generally described racial diversification as a process of degeneration from the original and ideal racial standard embodied in Europeans.²⁰ However, the same scientists also proposed that the process of racial degeneration could be reversed—that nonwhite races were capable of reverting to the original, ideal form of humanity (could quite literally turn *white*) through changes in climate and education.²¹ By treating racial differences as secondary acquisitions superimposed over an original and inalienable (if only virtual) empirical sameness, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century environmentalism finessed the tension between embodied diversity and human equality.

This uneasy *détente* fell apart in the nineteenth century, when environmentalism increasingly lost ground to more rigidly essentialist theories of race. The first wave of the new ideology arose in conjunction with romantic philosophy, at one step removed from the discipline of natural history, which celebrated the distinctiveness of different races and national *volk*. Like environmentalism, romantic racialism believed racial differences to be the product of adaptations to local climate and culture; however, it tended to view these differences as irreversible once acquired, and deeply determinative of personal identity. The fixity of race in romantic racial theory thus revoked environmentalism's notion of a latent human uniformity; however, romantic racialists generally did not use the permanence of racial difference as an excuse for erecting a divinely ordained hierarchy of human races. "There was in fact some tendency to celebrate diversity, as showing the richness and plenitude of the human spirit," George Fredrickson notes.²² The result was a discourse that was not aggressively racist, although it was essentializing and often patronizing—as, for instance, when

George Catlin enthuses over “the proud yet dignified deportment of Nature’s man” in his *Letters and Notes on . . . the North American Indians* (1841), or when Moncure Daniel Conway praises Black Americans for bringing “an infusion of this fervid African element, so child-like, exuberant, and hopeful.”²³ As these stereotypes attest, even absent overtly racist intentions, romantic racialism codified a new view of race that was much more difficult to reconcile with a universalizing discourse of “the human.” Transforming race from a reversible acquisition to a permanent identity determined by deep biology, romantic racialism ushered in a new era of racialist thinking in which, as Frederickson describes it, conversation increasingly tended “to start from a common assumption that the races differed fundamentally.”²⁴

This new aesthetic of difference paved the way for a much more aggressively racist strain of racial science known (because its leading expositors published in America) as the “American school” of ethnology. In 1839, at the tail end of a decade of increasing racial conflict in the United States (with the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830 and its brutal implementation thereafter; Nat Turner’s Rebellion in 1831, Black Hawk’s war in 1832, the Amistad mutiny in 1839, the organization of the immediatist abolitionist movement and underground railroad, and the galvanization of their proslavery opposition), Philadelphia physician and naturalist Samuel George Morton published *Crania Americana*, a craniometrical study of the indigenous peoples of North and South America. Morton’s work inaugurated the American school of racial science by reviving a lesser eighteenth-century racial theory known as polygenism. Unlike monogenism, polygenism holds that the human races were created separately, constituting originally distinct and unrelated populations. “Each Race was adapted from the beginning to its peculiar local destination,” Morton asserts in *Crania Americana*; “In other words . . . the physical characteristics which distinguish the different Races are independent of external causes.”²⁵ The American school’s case for polygenism relied heavily on Morton’s craniometrical research as well as the work of the renowned Swiss-born Harvard naturalist, Louis Agassiz (on whom more in Chapter 2), and American Egyptologist George Gliddon. More unusually, American school ethnology was aggressively promoted to lay audiences by nonscientists, including the savvy propagandist Josiah Nott, as well as John Van Evrie, George Sawyer, and Samuel Cartwright.

The American school’s polygenist brand of racial science gradually gained ground through the 1840s, but it was with the publication of Nott and Gliddon’s *Types of Mankind* in 1854—a monumental compendium of

polygenist ethnology—that its thesis reached a new apogee of popularity. Despite *Types*' cumbersome eight hundred pages and even heftier \$7.50 price tag, this lavishly illustrated volume sold out in four months and went through ten editions by 1870.²⁶ Drawing from a smorgasbord of anatomical, zoological, archaeological, and philological research, and liberally quoting from the work of other prominent ethnologists (both polygenist and not), *Types* gathered evidence that “mankind is divisible into *distinct species*” and that “the differences existing between the races of men are of the same kind as the differences observed between the different families, genera, and species of monkey or other animals.”²⁷ Nott and Gliddon thus explicitly denied that the slave is “a man and a brother”; instead, they argued that “the human race” is a misnomer, obscuring a much more attenuated taxonomic reality. By 1860, this polygenist thesis had won important converts among the shapers of Southern opinion, including editors of *DeBow's Review* and *Southern Quarterly Review*, John C. Calhoun, James Henry Hammond, and Jefferson Davis.

At midcentury, racial scientific discourse in the United States was thus a heterogeneous yet consequential free-for-all. Scientifically, polygenists and monogenists disagreed over the nature of human origins. Among themselves, environmental and romantic monogenists further disputed the nature of racial difference, debating whether racial characteristics were fixed or mutable, and whether interracial mixing was physiologically possible and, if so, whether it was sociologically desirable. Theologically, all sides laid claim to biblical authority. (Although monogenists had an easier time of this, given the congruence of their vision of humanity's single origin with the doctrine of Adamic descent, many polygenists also worked hard to prove that the theory of separate human creations accorded with Scripture.)²⁸

But what is most perplexing, these competing biological and bio-theological arguments were attached to a strikingly fungible range of political ideologies. To be sure, polygenism had very strong ties to proslavery politics (Douglass estimated that “Ninety-nine out of every hundred of the advocates of a diverse origin of the human family” were proslavery apologists).²⁹ Polygenists certainly came the closest to claiming that Black and Native American peoples constituted distinct and inferior species of humanity taxonomically closer to the animal life over which the biblical God granted Adam's descendants dominion.³⁰ For this very reason, however, many proslavery advocates decried polygenist science. To men like George Fitzhugh, whose defense of slavery turned on its being a benevolently patriarchal system more humane than Northern capitalism's brutally

impersonal “wage slavery” (Southern “slavery protects the weaker members of society, just as do the relations of parent, guardian, and husband,” he insisted), polygenism’s literally dehumanizing thesis was anathema. “It encourages and incites brutal masters to treat negroes, not as weak, ignorant, and dependent brethren, but as wicked beasts without the pale of humanity,” Fitzhugh objected.³¹

Meanwhile, that polygenists were likely to be proslavery does not mean that monogenists were not. As nineteenth-century racial science had increasingly come to perceive race as a deep and permanent feature of identity, monogenism became increasingly consistent with patriarchal proslavery ideologies like Fitzhugh’s (think, for instance, of Moncure Conway’s praise for the “child-like” exuberance of the African race). Proslavery racial science thus also encompassed monogenist theories like that of the Reverend John Bachman, whose treatise on *The Doctrine of the Unity of the Human Race* insists “that nature has stamped on the African race the permanent marks of inferiority,” rendering this race inherently dependent beings, like women and children.³² As tracts like Bachman’s prove, monogenist “unity” presents no necessary impediment to proslavery politics, affirming Nott and Gliddon’s claim that “the doctrine of unity gives no essential guarantee of universal liberty and equality.”³³

Indeed, what Nott and Gliddon seem to recognize is that racial science’s challenge to the doctrine of human rights does not turn on the question of human origins (shared or separate) but rather inheres in racial science’s antagonism to the idea of a shared human nature. Increasingly and across the board, nineteenth-century racial discourse moved away from eighteenth-century environmentalism to portray race as a fixed and determining feature of moral identity—indeed, as Bay has shown, even Black ethnologists in this era (whom I will discuss below) assigned transhistorical characters to the races, reifying race as a meaningful marker of moral difference. This emphasis on human diversity emptied the category of “the human” of moral significance: instead of indicating a fundamentally shared moral essence, humanity now functioned as a speciological designation that guaranteed a baseline morphological, but not moral, similarity. From this perspective, the differences between polygenist and monogenist racial sciences recede: whether human races represent different species of humans or simply different varieties of a single species starts to look like a taxonomic squabble of minor political importance. For, either way, midcentury racial science seemed to reveal that there simply is no universal “human nature,” nor any “great fundamental laws of humanity to which all human passions and human thoughts must ultimately be subject.”³⁴ Thus if poly-

genism seemed to suggest that the slave was not, in fact, “a man and a brother” to white Americans, monogenism suggested that the fact of the slave’s humanity might, after all, be moot, since to be recognized as a human in the new empirical dispensation now only specified a nominal biological likeness that made no claims about your moral endowments. To be speciolegically human did not guarantee your equality with other humans and thus did not vouchsafe your entitlement to the same human rights.

But though it is fair to conclude that antebellum racial science was more overtly racist than eighteenth-century racial science, in another sense what we are seeing is not simply the rationalization of racial prejudice but the belated unfolding of the incommensurability of empirical and liberal democratic discourses of the human. As I have argued, racial science’s empirical epistemology precludes it from asserting an essential moral equality that is not also materially measurable. Given that, from a strictly materialist perspective, measurable equality is impossible (no two bodies could ever be empirically identical), the materialist outlook of racial science (of any stripe) necessarily throws the liberal assertion of human equality into doubt. In this sense, racial discourse reverted to the hierarchical view of “the human” enshrined in the republican doctrine and voting laws of the early republic, which likewise represented the human race as unevenly capable and hence unequally qualified for political rights.

Over and above the debate between monogenists and polygenists, then, the underlying shift to an empirical discourse of “the human” enshrined in all strains of racial science undermined democratic arguments for universal equality and human rights by disabling the logic according to which those arguments operate. Across the spectrum of its political affiliations, racial science’s biological conception of the human was transforming what it meant to recognize someone as human. Transposing “the human” from a moral to a taxonomic designation, racial science’s empirical epistemology destabilized the liberal democratic conception of humanity, exploding the latter’s abstract uniformity into an embodied diversity and placing humans in an ontological continuum with nonhuman life. The rationale for equality and human rights—the idea that “all men are created equal”—once again rested on ideologically shifting sands.

Antislavery Ethnology: Douglass Responds

Given the difficulty of aligning racial science with liberal humanistic doctrine, it makes sense that many antislavery advocates simply refused to engage with it. Leading abolitionists like Garrison, Theodore Weld, and

Wendell Phillips remained staunch humanists through the 1850s, rejecting the invidious distinctions of race. “Convince me that liberty is not the inalienable birthright of every human being, of whatever complexion or clime, and I will give [the Declaration of Independence] to the consuming fire,” Garrison pronounced in 1854, the year *Types of Mankind* was published.³⁵ For these abolitionists, human equality is a right endowed by the exceptional yet unobservable moral value that is inherent in all humans irrespective of race, gender, or other features of human embodiment.

And yet, for all its ideological purity, this principled indifference to racial distinctions became a liability to the antislavery cause. Like it or not, racial science was increasingly central to the debate over slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War. Surveying the landscape of proslavery argument in 1861, one Southerner wryly observed that the case for slavery was now being made “theologically, geologically, oryctologically, paleontologically, archaeologically, chronologically, genealogically, orismologically, philologically, etymologically, zoologically, osteologically, myologically, ethnologically, psychologically, [and] sociologically.”³⁶ Here was an arsenal of empirical and quasi-empirical discourses to which abolitionism’s moral platform had no way to directly respond. When men such as Josiah Nott demanded evidence of human equality, asserting that “numerous attempts have been made to establish the intellectual equality of the dark races with the white; and the history of the past has been ransacked for examples, but they are nowhere to be found,” abolitionists like Garrison could not provide proof without abandoning their moralistic high ground.³⁷ This abstention cost them, Frederickson argues: “The inability of the abolitionists to ground their case for the Black man on a forthright and intellectually convincing argument for the basic identity in the moral and intellectual aptitudes of all races weakened their ‘struggle for equality’ and helps explain the persistence of racist doctrines after emancipation.”³⁸

But of course, that invoking humanity’s “inalienable birthright” or innate moral essence no longer constituted an “intellectually convincing argument” for human equality was precisely the problem. If equality must be empirically demonstrated to be compelling, then liberal humanism has already lost crucial ideological ground. In this sense, racial science’s influence worked to disable Garrisonian-style abolitionism’s primary rhetorical strategy, moral suasion. For once moral standing is understood to inhere in a being’s embodied attributes or capacities, testing and measurement become the only sure ways to decide how a being ought to be treated. Hence, as the philosopher Cora Diamond argues, the idea “that what is involved in moral thought is knowledge of empirical similarities and differences”

deflects us from the work of examining our consciences and the promptings of moral sentiments such as sympathy, compassion, pity, and love.³⁹ Instead of consulting our hearts, we are tasked with analyzing the marks and features of the other—an empirical project in which, as Dana Nelson and Kyla Schuller point out, sentiment is banished as irrelevant if not misleading, replaced by a “male sensibility” that is embodied in the disciplined sensuality of empirical methods, privileging purity, professionalism, and self-control.⁴⁰ As racial science’s cultural authority grew, it threatened to moot moral suasion by suggesting that the question of whom or what deserves our full sympathy is a topic “upon which science alone has the right to pronounce.”⁴¹

The rapid ascendancy of racial scientific discourse in the late 1840s and 1850s may thus help us to account for Frederick Douglass’s dwindling faith in moral suasion in these years. As we know, his ideological and political stance underwent a transformation between 1847 and 1851, during which time he moved to Rochester, founded a newspaper, the *North Star*, began to associate with James McCune Smith and Gerritt Smith of the Liberty Party, and finally broke with the Garrisonians by publicly proclaiming the U.S. Constitution to be an antislavery document. From this point forward, he renounced the Garrisonian platform of disunionism to throw his weight into electoral politics, and he abandoned their pacifistic commitment to moral suasion to embrace an increasingly fiery rhetoric of racial uprising—words he backed up with deeds by providing material support to John Brown. To many observers both then and today, Douglass’s foray into political and even militant antislavery circles has seemed like a concession to expediency—a calculated betrayal of his lofty humanistic ideals.⁴² In his 1899 biography of Douglass, Charles Chestnutt somewhat apologetically accounts for this decade by explaining that Douglass was not above “subordinating the means to the end.”⁴³

But if it is the case that the Garrisonians retained the moral high ground, as we have just seen there is also evidence to suggest that lofty arguments were losing traction against racist prejudices that were, with the help of midcentury racial scientific discourse, luxuriating in the light of newfound cultural authority. By 1850, after two decades of abolitionist appeal, the number of slaves in America had doubled, and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law made the likelihood of emancipation seem to be, if anything, on the wane. Moreover, by this time Douglass’s personal experience of freedom had also been soured by the racism he encountered in the North—prejudice he experienced even among his Anti-Slavery Society colleagues, and which became all the more evident to him after his sojourn in Ireland

and Great Britain, where he noticed that, for the first time in his experience, “no delicate nose grows deformed in my presence.”⁴⁴ Thus though Douglass certainly did not cease to believe that slavery is morally abominable, he does seem to have concluded, as Marianne Noble suggests, “that moral sense was evidently so overwritten by racist ideology that it was not useful in the fight for justice.”⁴⁵ As Douglass became convinced that America would not be free until racism was defeated, he repositioned himself to fight not only for emancipation but also for racial equality, and in doing so he seems to have realized that moral suasion alone would not defeat the ideology he was up against.

Indeed, Douglass watched the rise of racial scientific discourse closely and with growing alarm. After the publication of *Types of Mankind* in 1854, he was sufficiently convinced that “Messrs. Nott, Gliddon, Morton, Smith, and Agassiz” were now being “duly consulted by our slavery propagating statesmen” that he felt compelled to respond to their science directly.⁴⁶ He did this in the form of an address entitled “The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered,” delivered at Western Reserve University in August of that year (in what was also the first U.S. commencement address given by a Black American speaker).⁴⁷ The public demand for a transcript of this speech was apparently clamorous enough that Douglass ventured to republish his text as a pamphlet—a move that also indicates how central biological discourse had become to the discussion of slavery, and how urgent it now seemed that slavery’s opponents be able to frame their case “ethnologically.” Indeed, in his opening remarks, Douglass justifies his topic by remarking that science was now established as a crucial arbiter of racial politics. “The relation subsisting between the white and Black people of this country is the vital question of the age,” he writes, and “in the solution of that question, the scholars of America will have to take an important and controlling part.”⁴⁸

In writing “Claims,” Douglass was contributing to a tradition of Black American ethnographic writing that stretched back to the late 1820s.⁴⁹ Well before racial science had become a lynchpin of proslavery discourse, Black activists, editors, ministers, and men of science had become aware and alarmed by racial science and “felt compelled to disprove, rather than dismiss, even the earliest, tentative arguments for Black inferiority made by white Americans.”⁵⁰ Thus, for instance, two decades prior to the formation of the American school of ethnography, John Russwurm, an editor of *Freedom’s Journal*, decried craniological speculations that the Black race was endowed “with faculties little superior to the tribe of the Ourang Outangs,” and forms “something between man and brute creation.”⁵¹ Re-

sponding to similar accusations in 1837, Hosea Easton ruefully observed, "What could better accord with the objects of this nation with reference to Blacks than to teach their little ones that a negro is part monkey?"⁵² Against such bestializing racial theories, Black ethnological writers constructed counterarguments that blended aspects of eighteenth-century environmentalism with romantic racialism. Men such as Russwurm, Easton, Henry Highland Garnet, and James Pennington argued that Black Americans suffered "an intellectual and physical disability or inferiority" that was directly caused by the "damning influence of slavery."⁵³ However, once emancipated, they argued, Black Americans would be free to develop the unique characteristics that are truly endemic to their race. These "true" characteristics were typically understood to include intellectual gifts, as demonstrated by the genius of ancient Egyptians and Ethiopians, who "astonished the world with their arts and sciences."⁵⁴ "The world now would be in a heathenish darkness, for the want of that information which their better disposition has been capable of producing," Easton writes.⁵⁵ The race was also understood to be naturally endowed with a particularly Christ-like moral temperament, a capacity for long-suffering endurance that contrasted sharply with "the love of gain and the love of power," which were understood to be "the besetting sins of the Anglo-Saxon race."⁵⁶ "Nothing but liberal, generous principles, can call the energies of an African mind into action," writes Easton, who looks forward to an age, after the "continual scene of bloodshed and robbery" that has characterized the era of white dominance, in which Africa's sons will naturally "take the lead in the field of virtuous enterprise, filling the front ranks of the church, when she marches into the millennial era."⁵⁷ Whereas the extant character of the Black race in America was understood to be the product of social conditioning, these latter intellectual and moral endowments were understood to be expressions of the race's natural and permanent character; this blend of environmentalist and romantic racialist rationalization typifies the Black ethnological tradition that Douglass inherited.

In taking up ethnological discourse, these men sought to do what the Garrisonians would not: refute racist science on its own empirical terms. But if their adoption of ethnological discourse helped to challenge the cultural authority of proslavery science, their strategy did not come without price. On the one hand, as Bay notes in her masterful study of Black ethnography, the effort to combine environmentalism with romantic racialism produced an inherently contradictory theory of racial difference. "By assigning transhistorical characteristics to the races, African-American

thinkers seemingly undercut their own environmentalist explanations of human differences,” Bay explains.⁵⁸ This ambivalence might itself be seen as a symptom of a more basic problem: simply engaging in racist discourse required Black writers to concede to the notion of racial identity, reifying the idea that racial differences fragment human likeness, making the principle of human equality more difficult to uphold. Hence Bay suggests that Black ethnologists were, “to some degree, ensnared by the idea of race even as they sought to refute racism’s insult to their humanity;” as she argues, Black ethnology’s “arguments for difference and equality were beset by some of the same difficulties contained in the late nineteenth-century white segregationist doctrine of ‘separate but equal.’”⁵⁹

Given this logical difficulty, it is not surprising that some Black activists called for racial separatism, invoking the romantic idea that nations had to be racially homogeneous. In the same year Douglass wrote “Claims,” Martin Delany published his manifesto of Black nationalism, “The Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent,” announcing that “we are not identical with the Anglo-Saxon,” and arguing that Black Americans must therefore emigrate elsewhere: “A people, to be free, must necessarily be their own rulers.”⁶⁰ For Delany, however, racial segregation is only a temporary solution to the problem of human difference; ultimately, he anticipates an apocalyptic future showdown between the world’s races, “upon which must be disputed the world’s destiny,” and in which “every individual will be called upon for his identity with one or the other” race.⁶¹ Controversial though it was, Delany’s antagonistic separatism offered a solution to the logical tension between difference and equality by doing away with the latter.

The larger context of Black ethnological writing and the problems it faced prepares us to recognize just how nuanced Douglass’s self-positioning is in “Claims.” If Douglass was determined to answer racist science on its own terms, he nonetheless seems to have been acutely aware that doing so meant conceding vital ground in the struggle for human equality. At the same time, he was also determined to stave off Black separatism (a policy he did not endorse), which meant that he would have to navigate an alternative route through the internal contradictions of the Black ethnological tradition. Juggling his ambivalence toward racist discourse and his commitment to a multiracial America, Douglass constructs an argument in “Claims” that is curiously double-voiced. The bulk of the essay sets out to refute the dehumanizing theory of polygenism by putting forward a fairly conventional environmentalist defense of racial unity. In these principal sections of “Claims,” Douglass marshals archaeological and physiological

evidence to support the thesis that the world's existing racial lineages converge in ancient Egypt and that their subsequent divergence reflects "the effect of circumstances upon the physical man."⁶² And yet, at the outset of the essay, Douglass signals his wariness of the ideological concessions that this kind of ethnological argumentation wrings from him. Indeed, if the main body of the essay offers an environmentalist defense of human unity (along with occasional assertions of racial distinctiveness), its opening and closing remarks introduce a countervailing, speculative strain of thinking that trenchantly queries the assumptions that underpin the racialist discourse the main body takes up. In other words, "Claims" manages to simultaneously deploy and detonate racial science. Bracketing—even preempting—the essay's central argument, Douglass's framing remarks embrace racial science's embodied conception of the human only to challenge the notion that embodiment has anything to teach American politics.

In his opening remarks, Douglass invites us to ask what the assignation "human" means in the first place. As he points out, the question at hand is really two: before approaching the question of humanity's multiple or "common ancestry," he must first address the question of "the manhood of the Negro." In the effort to prove that he is "a man," Douglass admits he finds himself immediately at an impasse: "I cannot . . . argue; I must assert."⁶³ This impulse to assert his humanity by fiat rather than empirical demonstration echoes Linnaeus's designation of the human as the being who must recognize itself as such (*Homo nascem te ipsum*). Linnaeus arrives at this aporetic self-reference because he recognizes that what we mean by the human when we invoke it in humanistic discourse is ultimately a matter of moral rather than empirical judgment and thus belongs "to another forum" than natural history. But if man is therefore the animal that recognizes itself as not-animal—if human life is that which deems itself morally exceptional to animal life—Douglass is also aware that self-nomination is a privilege that has been revoked for members of his race. His own assertion of his humanity is thus rendered inadmissible by the racism that presumes him to be subhuman until proven otherwise, obliging him to first "establish the manhood of anyone making the claim."⁶⁴

This catch-22 forces Douglass to seek other means of demonstration besides assertion, and so he gamely proceeds to review the criteria according to which humanists have historically distinguished human from animal kind. "Man is distinguished from all other animals, by the possession of certain definite faculties and powers," he reminds us, including the power of self-recognition: "Men instinctively distinguish between men and brutes." But here Douglass's argument again threatens to collapse, for having named

the ability to instinctively distinguish between human and animal as a characteristic mark of the human, he proceeds to point out that “The horse bears [the Negro] on his back. . . . The barnyard fowl know his step. . . . The dog dances when he comes home, and whines piteously when he is absent. All these know that the Negro is a MAN.” Douglass offers this animal testimony as proof of his humanity, “presuming that what is evident to beast and to bird, cannot need elaborate argument to be made plain to men.” But the irony of this evidence is as rich as it is paralyzing. For, on the one hand, one cannot help but notice that it is “brutes” *rather than* “humans” that here demonstrate the capacity to “instinctively distinguish between men and brutes.” By the classical criteria Douglass has just rehearsed, these animals are therefore more reasonable—more *human*—than racist Americans, who have come to rely on specialized sciences to tell them what every barnyard animal already intuitively knows. But in a further irony, these animals’ testimony to Douglass’s humanity is inadmissible for the same reason that he has already recognized his own is—because of its presumed animality. Douglass’s effort to distinguish himself from an animal thus manages to reify the categorical moral difference between men and animals even as it simultaneously demonstrates the logical indefensibility of this distinction’s aporetic center. Emphasizing the obviousness of the moral boundary between humans and nonhumans (“a distinction as eternal as it is palpable,” he insists), Douglass’s now twice-failed efforts to invoke it highlight the insusceptibility of this boundary to rational argumentation. If only human speech is admissible testimony to one’s humanity, then one must first be acknowledged to be human before one can testify to one’s humanity. In “Claims,” however, Douglass does not linger to press this point. Instead he merely gestures to this circular logic by concluding his opening discussion where it began: “I assume . . . that the Negro is a man,” he reiterates, and without further comment, shifts tack.⁶⁵

Douglass now reframes the question before him: assuming his race is human, he proposes to consider whether the races are genealogically related. Still he delays his ethnological argument here, prefacing the case for monogenetic descent that he is about to deliver with reflections on science’s susceptibility to bias and distortion. “Science is favorable to distinction,” he notes, cautioning that it tends, by disciplinary habit, to proliferate types regardless of whether those distinctions *matter*. Indeed, Douglass here presents science as a kind of aesthetic—“a demand for classes, grades, and intellectual capacities,” a *taste* not just a technique for discriminating between things. Building upon this insight, he observes that “fashion is not confined to dress” since science, too, has its vogues: “Scientific writers, not

less than others, write to please, as well as to instruct,” and hence they may “unconsciously . . . sacrifice what is true to what is popular.”⁶⁶ Moreover when the case is race, the room for bias—unconscious or otherwise—is irremediably broad, for as Douglass observes, “viewed apart from the authority of the Bible, neither the unity, nor diversity of origin of the human family, can be demonstrated.”⁶⁷ It is, in other words, “impossible to get far enough back” to definitively determine humanity’s origins, leaving ethnologists to weigh the evidence on both sides—a task in which “the temptation . . . to read the Negro out of the human family” does battle with the desire to uphold “the credit of the Bible” and to honor “the instinctive consciousness of the common brotherhood of man.”⁶⁸ By way of preface to the ethnological argument he is about to launch, then, Douglass gives us a discourse on the myriad ways in which science, too, is subject to unempirical bias.

Douglass’s prefatory remarks in “Claims” thus cast doubt both on racial science (with its disciplinary and extradisciplinary biases) *and* on humanistic discourse (with its groundless self-assertions), leaving us to cast about for an authority that could help us to definitively answer “the vital question of the age.” In this way, the essay’s opening provocatively creates what Jared Hickman describes as “a situation in which the rhetoricity of all knowledge-claims is somewhat uncomfortably exposed.”⁶⁹ Indeed, the vacuum of authority extends even to Douglass, who has by this point preempted the force of the ethnological argument he is about to deliver. Had Douglass concluded his essay by resting his case for monogenism, we would have been left with an essay that is perversely self-defeating. Instead, at the end of “Claims” Douglass expressly lets his case for monogenism unravel in order to reframe the question of his humanity once again. In his final paragraphs, Douglass abruptly turns aside from his exposition of human unity to acknowledge the possibility that science will ultimately side against him. “What if all this reasoning be unsound?” he speculates; “What if ingenious men are able to find plausible objections to all arguments maintaining the oneness of the human race?”⁷⁰ In a climactic final pivot, Douglass sets aside his defense of monogenism to make one last pitch for “the claims of the Negro” from a slightly different materialist perspective. Here Douglass invokes a new authority to fill the vacuum his essay has exposed; unlike the essay’s earlier candidates, this authority is immune to “the rhetoricity of all knowledge-claims” because it makes no claims to truth, only power.

Working in an entirely new vein, the conclusion of “Claims” frames an alternative theory of human rights that does not depend upon establishing

that all races share a common identity. In other words, as Douglass shows us, the genealogical debates that absorb racial science may not, in fact, be decisive. “I sincerely believe, that the weight of the argument is in favor of the unity of origin of the human race, or species,” he assures us, but

What, if we grant that the case, on our part, is not made out? Does it follow, that the Negro should be held in contempt? Does it follow, that to enslave and imbrute him is either just or wise? I think not. Human rights stand upon a common basis; and by all the reasons that they are supported, maintained and defended, for one variety of the human family, they are supported, maintained and defended for *all* the human family; because all mankind have the same wants, arising out of a common nature. A diverse origin does not disprove a common nature, nor does it disprove a united destiny.⁷¹

The major claim Douglass makes here is that even two races of “diverse origin” may nonetheless, serendipitously, share a “common nature” and therefore be entitled to the same rights. But this discussion also introduces a rather different line of argument. Alongside his image of a biologically unrelated “human family” conjoined by a “common nature,” Douglass describes a biracial nation related by mutual interests (“wants”) and bound together by a “united destiny.” In pointing to this “united destiny,” Douglass reminds us that genealogical kinship is not the only form of relation there is. Geographical proximity—the shared nature that is one single American landscape—produces its own kind of relations, as neighbors cannot help but impinge on each other in going about the business of seeing to their “wants” in a shared physical economy. And the thing about these kinds of relations is that they bind populations together through interdependence and mutual vulnerability regardless of whether those populations are homogeneous or diverse.

In this sense, Douglass’s appeal to an American future bound to a biracially “united destiny” sets up a new kind of argument on behalf of the claims of his race. As Foucault observes, “the subject of right and the subject of interest are not governed by the same logic,” and in his closing remarks, Douglass underscores this difference by suggesting that denying his race’s demand for freedom is not only not “just” but also not “wise.”⁷² Against the conclusions of white segregationists and Black emigrationists, he insists that “the Negro and white man are likely ever to remain the principal inhabitants of this country.” Ironically repurposing proslavery arguments about how the African race is uniquely designed to withstand

hard labor in harsh climates, he notes that “the history of the Negro race proves them to be wonderfully adapted to all countries, all climates, and all conditions,” thus proving that, barring genocidal “extermination” (“not probable”) or mass exodus (“out of the question . . . [the Negro’s] attachment to the place of his birth is stronger than iron”), “all the facts in his history mark out for [the Negro] a destiny, united to America and Americans.”⁷³ Whatever racial differences might divide them, Black and white Americans, Douglass suggests, will inevitably remain united by *another* “common nature” in the national landscape to which their “common destiny” is bound. And in this shared physical environment, interdependence is unavoidable even if other forms of relation (familial, ideological, or sympathetic) are not.

Having established the inevitability of ongoing proximity, Douglass closes with the clear and ominous warning that acknowledging his race’s right to freedom, life, liberty, and knowledge is therefore not just right but *prudent*.

Whether this population shall . . . be made a blessing to the country and the world, or whether their multiplied wrongs shall kindle the vengeance of an offended God, will depend upon the conduct of no class of men so much as upon the Scholars of this country. . . . There is but one safe road for nations as for individuals. . . . The flaming sword of offended justice falls as certainly upon the nation as upon the man. God has no children whose rights may be safely trampled upon. The sparrow may not fall to the ground without the notice of His eye, and men are more than sparrows.⁷⁴

With these portentous words, Douglass suggests that to refuse to accommodate the interests of Black Americans is to put the interests of white Americans in peril. Couched in the language of divine vengeance, Douglass summons the specter of an imminent Black uprising against the “multiplied wrongs” of slavery and racial oppression, presenting the ethnological “Scholars of this country” with the prospect of their own violent death as a different kind of rationale for granting that Black Americans are entitled to freedom. Moreover, in this shift from identity to interests, the significance of the ethnological question with which Douglass started (is the Negro human and related to the white race?) falls away. For the problem of proximity—which necessarily presents a choice between peacefully accommodating one’s neighbors’ needs or else denying their interests with violence—remains the same regardless of who (or what) the

players are. Indeed, as Douglass's citation of Matthew 10:29 above suggests (and as passages discussed in the next section of this chapter will underscore), the same truth holds for men as for sparrows: "God has no children whose rights may be safely trampled upon."

Thus without relinquishing his claim to humanity, Douglass concludes "Claims" by bracketing the relevance of that claim's controversy. Instead, he points to the problem of interdependence—of the mutual vulnerability to which we, of all species, are exposed by virtue of our proximity in a terrestrial "common nature," the resources of which we all rely on to supply our needs and wants. What is so fascinating, then, about this final pivot in Douglass's response to ethnology is the way that the prospect of our physically "united destiny" takes him beyond the question of "the human"—beyond, that is, both liberal humanist and racist logics that make moral consideration contingent upon speciological belonging. In the next section, I will explore how Douglass develops this nonhumanistic reasoning across his other writings of the 1850s. As we shall see, animals, animal instincts, and the physical laws of nature loom large in this work, supplementing his moral critiques of slavery and appeals to human sympathy with a new logic of material risk and existential necessity.

Abolitionist Animals

The rising cachet of scientific racism in American political discourse in the 1850s made it increasingly urgent for abolitionists like Douglass to disavow any similarity between slaves and animals, and yet his writings of this decade are in fact strewn with animals, deliberately courting animal comparisons in ways his earlier writings do not. In the very historical moment in which he might have had the most at stake in distancing himself from animals he starts to think more regularly through them about the moral claims—and perhaps more important, as I shall suggest, the amoral claims—that the nonhuman world holds on the human. For through the animals he represents—animals that stampede, rear, kick, and bite—Douglass highlights the speciotically universal instinct to violently resist any threat to one's life and liberty, marking these things as basic, more-than-human rights. I will thus argue that Douglass's identifications with animals in the 1850s are part of his systematic effort to frame an abolitionist argument that is strategically agnostic toward the question of his race's humanity—an argument that operates outside of the liberal discourse of human equality and moral right by tactically embracing, instead, the specter of human animality and the threat of physical violence. In other

words, I suggest that Douglass embraces animals in the 1850s not in spite of but because of scientific racism and the doctrine of Black bestiality it codified.

Around the same time Douglass published “Claims,” he was also at work on a revised and expanded version of his autobiography, titled *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which he published the following year in 1855. The rewritten text includes a striking alteration in his account of the pivotal year he spent hired out to Mr. Covey, a man known locally for “breaking” slaves. As Douglass had recounted in *The Narrative*, on his first day at Covey’s he was whipped for losing control of a team of “unbroken oxen” who twice make a break for freedom, overturning their cart and destroying a gate in their stampede. In his retelling of this scene in the 1855 autobiography, Douglass inserts a curious moment of reflection, set off on its own in an uncharacteristically short paragraph in the text. Now, in the midst of this harrowing experience, the young Douglass stops to take note of his likeness to the oxen causing him so much trouble. “I now saw, in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen,” he writes. “They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I. Covey was to break me, I was to break them; break and be broken—such is life.”⁷⁵

In 1855, Douglass was well aware of the compelling reasons to disavow any “points of similarity” between himself and these beasts of burden—reasons that had, if anything, grown more acute in the interim since his first autobiography. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* betrays no such inclination to sympathy: where comparisons between slaves and animals appear in this text, it is to critique the glaring injustice of a system in which “horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all [hold] the same rank in the scale of being.”⁷⁶ Yet despite the intervening ascent of ethnological discourse and the seemingly authoritative support racist science lent to the idea that the African race comprises, as Russwurm encapsulates it, “something between man and brute creation,” *My Bondage and My Freedom* underscores two basic commonalities: both oxen and slaves are subjected to an overwhelming physical power and, when pressed, both may also assert a violent force of their own.

This lesson is even more explicit in the opening scene of Douglass’s 1854 novella, *The Heroic Slave*. During a quiet moment in the forest, the story’s hero, Madison Washington, observes the bold behaviors of the wild animals around him and ruefully contemplates his own acquiescence to slavery. “Those birds, perched on yon swinging boughs . . . though liable to the sportsman’s fowling piece, are still my superiors,” he chides himself. “They *live free*, though they may die slaves.” Noting that even a nearby

“miserable” snake, “when he saw my uplifted arm . . . turned to give me battle,” Washington confesses, “I dare not do as much as that. I neither run nor fight, but do meanly stand,” answering the lash with “piteous cries.”⁷⁷ The example of these forest animals leads Washington to conclude that he, too, has a natural right to self-determination, and the scene ends with his resolution to resist: “Liberty I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it,” he proclaims. Thus echoing Patrick Henry’s iconic revolutionary ultimatum, the rousing conclusion of Washington’s forest soliloquy (which carries on for several more climactically declamatory lines), rings with an eloquence that Ivy Wilson glosses as “an exercise in liberation through literacy”—a performance of both Washington’s and, by extension, Douglass’s rational intelligence.⁷⁸ However, the irony of Douglass’s callback to Patrick Henry here is that, in this case, Washington’s willingness to martyr himself for his liberty is explicitly modeled on the defiant freedom of birds and snakes. The humanism implicit in Washington’s insistence that liberty is “the inalienable birth-right of every man” is thus preemptively undercut by the fact that this is a lesson he has learned by observing the inalienable instinct of animals to live free or die. Rather than exemplifying Washington’s uniquely *human* rationality, then, his principled insistence upon self-determination here appears as a belated obedience to a much more basic and universal instinct for self-defense. The right to freedom does not depend on one’s species designation—in fact, we might say that, on this view, freedom is not a “right” or moral entitlement at all so much as it is a reflexive urge that is built into the nature of organic life.

Douglass seems to have begun developing this line of thought as early as 1851—before he had weighed in on racial science, but when he was deeply embroiled in rethinking his relation to the U.S. Constitution. In that year, Douglass wrote an editorial on the “Christiana Riot,” an armed skirmish that erupted in a border town of Pennsylvania when a Maryland farmer arrived to reclaim four fugitive slaves and was rebuffed by a local party of primarily free Black men who assembled to defend the fugitives. By the end of the fighting the Maryland farmer was dead and the four fugitives, as well as the freeman who had housed them, were en route to Canada (aided in a leg of their escape by Douglass himself). What inspired Douglass’s editorial on this first real test of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law was a rumor that the federal government intended to indict the four fugitive slaves for treason, a proposition Douglass found outrageous. As he argues in his paper, it makes no sense to try a man for treason against the government that enslaves him:

The only law which the alleged slave has a right to know anything about, is the law of nature. This is his only law. The enactments of this government do not recognize him as a citizen, but as a thing. In light of the law, a slave can no more commit treason than a horse or an ox can commit treason. A horse kicks out the brains of his master. Do you try the horse for treason? Then why the slave who does the same thing? You answer, because the slave is a man, and he is therefore responsible for his acts. The answer is sound. The slave is a man and ought not to be treated like a horse, but like a man, and his manhood is his justification for shooting down any creature who shall attempt to reduce him to the condition of a brute.⁷⁹

Douglass's diatribe here is deceptively simple. On a first reading, he seems to call back to humanism's founding assertion of the "natural law" that distinguishes between animals (who are slaves to their nature) and men (whose rationality renders them autonomous from biological compulsion, and hence morally accountable beings). Thus Douglass points out the hypocrisy of legally denying the slave's humanity while proposing to hold him morally responsible for his actions. However, Douglass's reasoning here also moves outside the lines of this very rationale that he invokes. For even as he suggests that the slave who shoots his master is a moral agent, while the horse that brains his master is not, the argument he ultimately advances is that *neither* horse nor slave could rightfully be hauled into court. As he explains, the slave's act of violence can only be judged by natural, not national law, and according to natural law the act is innocent, since by nature a man has a perfect right to "[shoot] down any creature who shall attempt to reduce him to the condition of a brute." Under this description, the slave's resistance becomes morally identical, not antithetical, to the resistance of the horse, who likewise kicks his master when his master attempts to "reduce him to the condition of a brute." Thus though Douglass attributes the slave's right to self-defense to his "manhood," the analogy he draws to the instinct for self-preservation in a horse testifies to the trans-specific universalism of this natural law—"manhood," in other words, shades here into something more like "self-assertion."⁸⁰ Neither men nor horses will tolerate being treated like beasts, and in violently resisting their oppression they exercise an instinctive and naturally ordained right to self-defense. This passage therefore courts a very different reading than the one I began with. Instead of simply locating the slave's right to freedom in his humanness, the passage ultimately suggests that this right is universal—that freedom is synonymous with the instinct for self-preservation common to all autopoietic life.

Douglass's rebellious animals thus conjure a rather different conception of freedom than the one that has typically circulated in discussions of Douglass's growing militancy in the 1850s. Readers ranging from Martin Luther King and Malcom X to Eric Sundquist and Russ Castronovo have noted how passages like these strategically invoke the founders' appeals to natural law in justifying the violence of the American Revolution in order to preemptively justify the armed uprising against slavery that Douglass now anticipates.⁸¹ These citational echoes have prompted heated debate about whether deploying the founders' idiom signals Douglass's cooption by America's patriarchal and white supremacist national legacy, or whether this is instead an example of subversive appropriation, an act of what Castronovo terms "discursive passing."⁸² While I'm sensitive to these concerns, I think this debate fails to account for Douglass's revolutionary animals. Through these nonhuman figures, Douglass conjures scenes of violent resistance in which the question of that violence's justifiability is superseded by its naturalness, or biological inevitability. For Madison Washington to learn of his natural right to liberty from a snake, or for the young Douglass to recognize the necessity of violently resisting Covey from the oxen who resist his own whip, suggests that Douglass might not, after all, have much at stake in whether Black revolutionary violence will be deemed rational rather than animalistic. In place of the higher moral law that documents such as the Declaration assert, Douglass's rearing snake, stampeding oxen, and kicking horse refer to a different kind of natural law—a material force that is prior to moral calculation, an embodied imperative for self-preservation in the face of which questions of justice and legal precedent wither away.

Put differently, Douglass's writings in the 1850s endeavor to *naturalize* natural law, locating moral rights not in humankind's transcendental reason or immortal soul, but in the instincts and energetic economy of the material body (human or nonhuman). Thus, although he invokes the American Revolution as his precedent, in Douglass's hands natural law is not simply a paralegalistic justification for violent resistance (as America's founders and Garrisonian abolitionists deployed it), but moreover functions as a mechanistic explanation of that violence's material necessity. This conflation of moral law with physical laws makes freedom curiously hard to distinguish from automaticity—hence the tortured ambivalence of the Christiana Riot editorial, which cannot decide whether self-defense is a moral action or an instinctive reflex. This ambivalence is even more apparent in another of Douglass's editorials on the aftermath of the fugitive slave law, provocatively entitled, "Is It Right and Wise to Kill a Kidnap-

per?” (1854). Here Douglass defends the killing of U.S. Marshal James Batchelder at the Boston courthouse during the failed attempt to rescue Anthony Burns by arguing that Burns’s right to freedom was upheld by a moral law that is as inexorable as the physical law of gravity. As Douglass asserts, by defying this moral law Batchelder therefore forfeited his right to life in the same way that a man who “flings himself from the top of some lofty monument, against a granite pavement . . . forfeits his right to live [and] dies according to law.” In other words, Douglass reasons, “As human life is not superior to the laws for the preservation of the physical universe, so, too, it is not superior to the eternal law of justice.”⁸³ Here again we can see how Douglass’s conflation of moral and physical law throws the concepts of justice and freedom, as we know them, into turmoil. For if the “eternal law of justice” is understood to operate as mechanically as the physical law of gravity—if, that is, the act of shooting Batchelder is no more voluntary than the pavement’s “act” of crushing a suicidal jumper—then undertaking to justify Batchelder’s murder seems as irrelevant, in the first place, as attempting to defend the moral legitimacy of falling downward. If justice and gravity act upon us as natural necessities, their moral virtue is superfluous.

This is, again, an ideologically risky move for Douglass to make at this moment. For although his materialized account of rights allows him to frame his case for racial equality and justified violence within the empirical idiom of “the human” that racial science makes authoritative, it also breaks down the moral distinctions (between humanity and animality, and between moral and amoral actions) that might otherwise seem to form the crux of that case. But herein, I think, lies the force of his naturalization of natural rights, for it suggests that however the “question” of Black humanity is decided, a violent racial uprising against slavery is nevertheless not only possible but in time *guaranteed* by the mechanisms of physical law. That even the simplest nonhuman organisms resist harm by fight or flight—that nature itself hates oppression in the same lawful way that it abhors a vacuum—means that slavery is materially unsustainable in time, attempting as it does to pervert and repress the liberty-loving physics of the natural world.⁸⁴ Thus Douglass concludes, in an 1857 editorial announcing that “Peaceful Annihilation of Slavery Is Hopeless,” that “the recoil, when it comes, will be in exact proportion to the wrongs inflicted.”⁸⁵ If the equitable proportionality of this projected racial violence (in “exact proportion to the wrongs inflicted”) would seem to be an argument for its justice (echoing Robert Levine’s sense of the self-restraint implicit in what he dubs Douglass’s “temperate revolutionism”), that word “recoil”—drawn

as it is from the mechanical physics of springs stretched too far and guns that go off—simultaneously works to move the violence it conjures into the amoral realm of automatic and compulsory action.⁸⁶ As such, antislavery violence comes to look as unstoppable as it is unavoidable.

As we saw at the end of “Claims,” in the face of the persistent denial of his race’s humanity, Douglass begins to supplement his critique of slavery’s injustice with warnings about its risk: slavery, he argues, is “dangerous as well as wrong.”⁸⁷ As he suggests, even those listeners who refute his humanity and deny that his race is endowed with inalienable rights will nonetheless soon find themselves obliged by sheer necessity to accommodate his claims or else brace for a kick to the head. Thus he proposes that “whatever character or capacity you ascribe to” his race, and however the questions of slavery’s moral, legal, and theological justifiability are popularly decided, slavery is structurally unsustainable. It has, he writes, “no means within itself of perpetuation or permanence,” and must therefore either be abolished or implode.⁸⁸ There is no appeal to humanity or morality in this new argument’s reasoning; instead, in line with the biological dispensation that racial science augurs, Douglass attributes antislavery violence to an instinctive demand for self-determination that is inherent in all organic being, and in so doing appeals to the no less compulsory and unreflective instinct for self-preservation among his white audiences.

But if this new strain of argumentation sidelines appeals to white sympathies, it does not dismiss the political importance of sentiment. On the contrary, it doubles down on it by suggesting that a knowledge of rights manifests in embodied instincts, affects, appetites, and desires, rather than through the transcendental operation of reason. Thus, for instance, in the same scene of *The Heroic Slave* in which Madison Washington learns to imitate the instinctive self-assertion of wild animals, George Listwell, a white man eavesdropping on Madison’s soliloquy, is instantaneously converted to abolitionism, finding that Washington’s speech “rung through the chambers of his soul, and vibrated through his entire frame.”⁸⁹ As a number of critics have noted, the sonic imagery here emphasizes the embodied and even erotic nature of Listwell’s reaction, underscoring the corporeality of this moral conviction.⁹⁰ Conversely, Douglass represents moral oppression as an experience that is as much an affront to the body as it is to reason. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he amends his memorable description of slave songs by noting that he once “heard the same *wailing notes*, and was much affected by them. . . . during the famine of 1845–6” in Ireland.⁹¹ Of course, Douglass’s comparison here works on many fronts at once: there is political strategy in linking slavery to injustices in Europe

so as to align American abolitionism with a transnational revolutionary movement, and there may also be financial interest in it, since Douglass raised significant funds for his newspaper abroad.⁹² However, this comparison between the slaves' "melancholy" songs and the sounds of people literally starving also lends the slave's "grief and sorrow" all the existential urgency—all the physiological desperation—of the Irishman's dying complaint. On this view, moral wrongs register as corporealized burdens in the body—forming what Douglass elsewhere describes as "pent up energies of human rights and sympathies."⁹³ Like any other compiled physical stress, these pent-up energies may be absorbed by the body only up to a point.

In this regard, my analysis of Douglass's abolitionist animality diverges from recent critical readings of Douglass's response to the problem of human difference in the racial scientific 1850s. In her astute reading of animality and biopolitics in Douglass's work, Colleen Glenney Boggs also argues that Douglass does not outright denounce but rather recodes the bestialization of Blackness in racial science in ways that show him to have been willing to abandon the discourse of rationality (a move that, as Boggs points out, "flies in the face of roughly thirty years of commentary on African American writing that has emphasized the acquisition of language and literacy as a key liberatory tool").⁹⁴ On Boggs's reading, Douglass turns away from the language of rationality (as the distinguishing mark of the human) in order to make the body (human or nonhuman) "the basis for a relational subjectivity" premised upon the shared language of suffering. Thus she argues that Douglass "treats the pained body as the locus of an embodied language that bespeaks the cruelty endemic to slavery's symbolic order," challenging audiences to reimagine subjectivity as something that extends to all beings who are subject to suffering, regardless of racial or speciological difference (including the capacity to cognize a "symbolic order").⁹⁵ Along related lines, Brigitte Fielder demonstrates how frequently abolitionist texts deploy "domesticated animals to mediate their readers' sympathy for enslaved people," a substitution that allows them to frame an "alternative model of sympathy that deprioritizes notions of sameness, acknowledging that even humanist sympathy can function across relations of alterity."⁹⁶

Like Boggs and Fielder, I find that Douglass's animals respond to the problem that racial (or, as polygenism codifies it, speciological) difference seems to pose to interracial sympathy and recognition. But if, like Boggs, I find that Douglass's defiant animals draw our attention to the shared vulnerability of all embodied beings, unlike Boggs I am particularly interested in how Douglass invokes that vulnerability not in order to engender

a sympathetic connection across speciological differences but to convey a timely reminder of the violence that suffering unleashes, lighting up the precariousness of proximity and the necessity of mutual accommodation with or without intersubjective sympathy or recognition. Whether or not Madison Washington feels an affinity with “that accursed and crawling snake,” he acknowledges the force of its bodily threat to him and therefore accedes to its demand to be left alone. In this way, proximity constitutes a community around the material interrelations of diverse bodies that is not contingent upon kinship or affects of solidarity. In keeping with Lloyd Pratt’s reading of “strangerhood” in Douglass’s late antebellum writings, then, I suggest that Douglass’s animals identify “an ineluctable barrier to mutual intelligibility that also functions as a kind of hinge point for mutuality.”⁹⁷ In his turn to the animal body, Douglass develops a new strain of antislavery rhetoric in which relations of sympathy and intersubjective recognition take a backseat to material relations of proximity, embodied necessity, and mutual exposure.

But this new argument also creates difficulties for Douglass since, unlike his appeals to sympathy and moral conversion, his invocations of slavery’s systemic risk can seem to leave audiences with very little to do. By the lights of his new, materialist antislavery logic, slavery not only *ought* to be abolished, but it inevitably *will* be, with or without white America’s consent, lending this argument a fatalistic providentialism uncharacteristic of Douglass’s earlier work. Thus, for instance, in his powerful Fourth of July address, Douglass boldly asserts that “the doom of slavery is certain”—vouchsafed not by a preponderance of antislavery votes or by the sure vengeance of an angry god, but by the much more diffuse and not-quite-human agency of what he describes as “the obvious tendencies of the age” toward globalization and (which turns out to be the same thing) freedom.⁹⁸ As he tells us, “No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference,” for “intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as well as on the earth. Wind, steam, and lightning are its chartered agents. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together.”⁹⁹ Although the nation-dissolving “intelligence” Douglass alludes to here is clearly communicated by human technologies—“wind, steam, and lightning” metonymically referencing oceanic navigation, railroads, and telegraphs—his heavily allegorized prose distances these circulations and the “intelligence” they spread from human action and intentions. Instead, the globalizing “tendencies of the age” he describes here take on the impersonal dimen-

sions of a world spirit or hidden hand—an emergent systemic rather than strictly human force whose fugitive and deterritorializing freedom of circulation Douglass most directly identifies with “agents” of matter itself.

Thus this essay’s famously fiery denunciation of American hypocrisy ends on a paradoxically quietist note. Bracketing the issue of racial difference (“Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man?,” Douglass sighs; “The time for such argument is passed”) and likewise waiving its earlier call for a recommitment to American Revolutionary ideals, Douglass’s jeremiad concludes by heralding emancipation’s inescapability: in this essay, abolition is both the means of national repentance and the globally wrought apocalypse that awaits an unregenerate nation.¹⁰⁰ And thus instead of reaffirming American self-determination, Douglass’s natural law rhetoric ends by challenging the very notion of individual and national sovereignty that the founders had originally used that rhetoric to defend. In Douglass’s empiricized version, the nation’s naturalness indicates its inability to “shut itself up from the surrounding world,” highlighting its exposure to and imbrication within a global community of human and nonhuman beings interrelated through biological, geophysical, ideological, and economic systems whose multiplied complexity no individual nor nation could hope to finally control. It is, consequently, unclear what role is left in this climatological drama for Douglass’s audiences to play. As Carrie Hyde argues in her brilliant reading of weather in *The Heroic Slave*, by “depicting nature as the principle agent” of antislavery resistance, “Douglass is able to suggest that opposition to slavery is more fundamental than the actions of any one individual or group.”¹⁰¹ Indeed, he suggests that opposition to slavery may originate in forces that are not human at all.

In this respect, Douglass’s Fourth of July prophecy is not only antiracist and transnationalist but also posthumanist. Resurrecting the discourse of natural rights as a self-executing modality of natural *laws*, Douglass turns the founders’ liberal humanistic logic on its ear by making freedom an involuntary instinct of the body and an inexorable tendency of matter itself. Far from marking a uniquely human autonomy from natural laws, this empirical freedom is all but indistinguishable from physical necessity. Moreover, it conjures an empirical public that likewise breaks from the founders’ nationalistic vision. For whereas America’s liberal institutions convoke a public constituted by formally equal and enfranchised individuals conjoined by contract and brought together by rational, deliberative debate, Douglass’s revolutionary animals and abolitionist oceans point to a public that comprises all earthly beings whatsoever, conjoined by material interrelations and brought together by the ongoing struggle to

satisfy their basic “wants”—including, most basically, the freedom to pursue those interests. Access to this embodied public is not restricted by qualifications—one need not be accredited as “rational,” or “human,” or “morally free” to participate in it. On the contrary, the polemical force of this embodied public is that participation in it—and thus exposure to it—is strictly unavoidable, a condition of being. In his invocations of an empiricized natural law, then, Douglass makes an end run around the efforts of some racial scholars to definitively exclude his race from the ranks of the human by dismantling the humanistic logic that makes humanity a criteria for political participation in the first place. As Bruno Latour might describe this, Douglass renounces the arbitrary distinction between “natural” (passive, animalistic) and “political” (free, human) action, challenging us “to redefine politics as *the entire set of tasks* that allow the progressive composition of a common world.”¹⁰² If racial science should succeed in disproving our “common nature,” it cannot deny this common world: with this insight, voiced in “Claims” and developed across Douglass’s images of natural violence in the 1850s, Douglass twists racial science’s empiricism to his advantage, demonstrating how its embodied and hierarchical account of the human might in fact sponsor a more capacious and inclusive postnationalist and nonhumanist vision of worldly community.

From our contemporary standpoint, this may seem like a powerful (or at least fashionable) move. Douglass’s insistence upon the way in which proximate bodies impinge on each other regardless of their political status boldly renounces what Mel Chen describes as humanism’s “animacy hierarchy”—the systematic denial of nonhuman agency by which humanism licenses the political exclusion of, and moral indifference to, racialized, animalized, and objectified bodies.¹⁰³ However, this liberatory renunciation also comes with steep costs to Douglass’s politics, for, as we have just seen, it erodes the liberal politics he is otherwise inclined to champion. Thus if Douglass’s antislavery materialism defuses the force of denials of Black humanity, it does so by giving up on the unique moral and political value of human belonging and mooted the question of racial equality—both of which (unique moral value and racial equality) he was understandably keen to claim for Black humanity. While his insurgent bodies clearly resist objectification, their agency cannot serve Douglass as proof of their liberal personhood. Instead, his embodied public is full of unowned agency, agency that (like freedom, on his redescription) is not a property of persons but rather percolates up from materiality itself. Although antislavery, this materialist riposte to racial science leads Douglass a long way off from the liberalism he might like to inhabit.

To be sure, Douglass never explicitly formulates the challenges his materialism poses to the liberal principles he champions. However, his sense of their contradiction may be registered in the reluctance with which he turns to this argument. As it appears in his late antebellum writings, this antislavery materialism functions (like the antislavery violence that he usually summons it to justify) as a kind of position of last resort. Indeed, in “Claims” his appeal to our materially “united destiny” explicitly appears as the essay’s last line of defense against polygenist racial theory, and in his Fourth of July address it again emerges only after his appeal to America’s liberal principles is exhausted. Such reluctance suggests, as I have already speculated, that Douglass was a liberal driven to develop a materialist argument against slavery by the popular ascendance of racial science and empiricism’s cultural authority, more broadly. But if, on this view, Douglass’s embrace of embodiment is a local strategy and not the political endgame, the same cannot be said of posthumanist materialisms today, raising the question of whether the illiberalism of materialism’s politics is fully registered in these theories. I will return to this in Chapter 4, where I will suggest that the question of the contradictions between materialism and liberalism is one whose absence has shaped posthumanism’s failure to rigorously theorize its relation to racial and social justice traditions.

By way of conclusion, I would like to look at one final example of Douglass’s antislavery materialism that lights up its illiberal and nonhumanistic tendencies. I have argued elsewhere for the burgeoning materialism and “amoral abolitionism” of *My Bondage and My Freedom*; rather than recapitulate that argument here I would like to return to *The Heroic Slave* which, as Douglass’s only foray into fiction, allowed him to distill his ideas with vivid concision.¹⁰⁴ We have already seen how the novella’s opening scene naturalizes natural law by identifying Madison Washington’s natural right to freedom with the instinctive self-assertion of animals in the forest. At the end of the novella, in the climactic scene of Washington’s successful mutiny aboard the *Creole*, Douglass again rewrites the rational violence of American Revolutionary liberalism as natural, inhuman, and involuntary violence—a demand for freedom that is systemic to the material order of being.

Like the prior three episodes of the story, which are narrated by Mr. Listwell, this pivotal episode is also narrated by a white character, Tom Grant. Grant survived the mutiny aboard the *Creole* and now, two months later, relates the story to an audience of dubious fellow sailors at a Richmond coffeehouse. He is goaded into the retelling by a sailor named Williams who blames the affair on mismanagement: “All that is needed in dealing

with a set of rebellious darkies, is to show that ye're not afraid of 'em," Williams scoffs. "A drop of blood from one on 'em will skeer a hundred."¹⁰⁵ Routing the narrative of the mutiny through Grant's defense of his defeat thus allows Douglass to specify precisely what, in the eyes of this unsympathetic white Southerner, overmastered him. And as Grant tells it, the lesson of the mutiny is a curiously blended one. For on the one hand, contrary to Williams, Grant insists that Washington is proof that "there are exceptions to this general rule" that "[Negroes] are ignorant," and Grant leaves the *Creole* affair convinced that "this whole slave-trading business is a disgrace and scandal to Old Virginia."¹⁰⁶ However, when pressed, Grant does not ascribe the mutiny's success to Washington's exceptional intelligence and bravery. Instead, he compares the mutiny to a hurricane or maelstrom, a natural disaster in the face of which "we lose our indignation and disgust in lamentation of the disaster, and in awe of the Power which controls the elements."¹⁰⁷

In Grant's eyes, then, Washington's agency disappears into the impersonal forces of nature, and this eclipse is borne out by the account he gives of the role of the weather in the mutiny's events. Grant was knocked unconscious early in the fighting and, upon waking, attempts to rally the crew, who have retreated to the ship's rigging. But Washington interrupts Grant's efforts with an eloquent defense of the justice of his cause, invoking his namesake's example: "God is my witness that LIBERTY, not malice, is the motive for this night's work. . . . We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, so were they."¹⁰⁸ If *The Heroic Slave* were a conventionally liberal story, this speech should have been the end of it. But in fact it makes little impression on Grant. For although he "forgot [Washington's] blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech," these evidences of Washington's equal humanity are nevertheless not enough to overcome Grant's racial prejudice: "It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776," Grant confesses. "But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior."¹⁰⁹ Thus rational discourse and appeals to shared principle fail to end Grant's standoff with Washington; instead, it is finished by force. First, there is the sheer force of Washington's desire for freedom: Washington tells Grant that if they come near "a slave-cursed shore" he will set fire to the ship's magazine and blow them all "into a thousand fragments," an oath that convinces Grant "that resistance was out of the question." Next, as if to underscore Washington's threat of fragmentation by fire, a storm suddenly blows up, howling with sublime fury and threatening to splinter the ship. If Washington's

threat convinced Grant to defer his resistance, the ocean's threat momentarily convinces him to forget his objection altogether: "For awhile we had dearer interests to look after than slave property." It is thus not Washington's idealistic rhetoric but the storm's existential threat that ultimately engenders cross-racial cooperation here, activating everyone's "dearer interests" in survival than in preserving "slave property." Looking grimly out upon the spectacle of "the dreadful hurricane," Washington calmly proclaims, "Mr. Mate, you cannot write the bloody laws of slavery on those restless billows. The ocean, if not the land, is free." With this, his last reported line in the novella, Washington identifies his freedom with the exigencies of a "restless" nature that has compelled Grant to acquiesce to Washington's demand for freedom despite his continued denial of Washington's equal humanity. *The Heroic Slave* thus frames emancipation as a matter of self-preservation, as Grant finds his imminent death far more persuasive than any of Washington's rhetorical appeals on behalf of his own human rights.

But the point here is not simply that Douglass allows Washington's rational agency—his heroic resistance and the humanness it evinces—to be eclipsed by the ocean's sublime and irrational power. Rather, the point is that by the naturalistic logic with which the story begins—the logic that identifies the right to freedom in "animal" instincts—Washington's violence *is of the same order* as the ocean's: both are construed as elemental forces impersonally inscribed in the "restless" or freedom-loving order of matter. One measure of the radicalism of this conceptual move is that, in modeling Washington's uprising on the unruly ocean, Douglass in fact embraces the argument that Daniel Webster had advanced in 1842 in an attempt to re-enslave the people of the actual *Creole*, who had been officially liberated when the mutineers landed at Nassau. As Carrie Hyde reminds us, on the day of the historical mutiny there had been no storm; instead, Douglass's invented storm seems to derive from Daniel Webster's subsequent effort to establish that the British lacked jurisdiction when they freed the *Creole* by arguing that the mutineer's "unlawful force" ought to be regarded like the "stresses of weather" (according to maritime law, when foul weather drives a vessel into port, it is exempted from becoming subject to the laws of that country).¹¹⁰ Hyde suggests that Douglass's squall "strategically reappropriates natural metaphors as a figure for natural rights," converting Webster's conflation of violent mutinies and violent weather into a "universalizing rhetoric of natural law as a model for political reform in the United States."¹¹¹ I concur with Hyde's analysis but wish to add that the natural law Douglass hereby invokes is conceptually alien

to the one to which Madison Washington's forebears appealed, and that the mechanisms of political change this naturalized natural law envisions likewise exceed the deliberative rationality and national self-constitution the founders' liberal institutions enshrined. This is what Douglass means by taking seriously Webster's de-animating conflation of slave uprisings with bad weather: his naturalization of natural rights drains the rational agency out of Washington's revolutionary action, transforming freedom from a human prerogative into an ontological imperative. As Douglass's 1850s writings suggest, far from distinguishing the free (human beings) from the materially determined (nonhuman beings), this natural freedom percolates throughout the world, finding expression in snakes and birds no less than in transatlantic commerce and violent weather. And where this irrepressible urge breaks out—in stampedes, uprisings, and cyclones—it confronts those in its way with their own freedom: fight, fly, accommodate, or die.

Douglass's depictions of freedom's empirical imperative in the 1850s thus bracket the question of racial difference and human equality that both liberal and racist discourses had made to seem paramount to the question of slavery and the prospect of a multiracial national community. And yet by making freedom an instinct of matter, his antislavery materialism creates problems for the notion of rational agency and human autonomy that ground liberal humanist doctrine. My next chapter will further explore this erosion of agency in antislavery materialism by turning to the late work of Henry David Thoreau. Like Douglass, Thoreau also followed the rise of racial science closely, adopting and adapting its empiricism in ways that indelibly reshaped his antislavery politics in the 1850s.