

Natural History and Personhood in Early America

By

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### ***Abstract***

*Natural History and Personhood in Early America* draws on science studies and posthumanist scholarship to investigate the emergence of normative personhood in American literature between 1770 and 1830. In this period, normative personhood came to be defined as an increasingly individuated category focused on self-reflection and consistent interior life. The first-person prose texts this project examines tell a different story, about the more eccentric personhoods that simultaneously arose from legal frameworks, material pressures, and individuals' own first-person claims. *Natural History and Personhood* assembles a literary history of these less cohesive persons. Across my chapters, nonhuman narrators like atoms and lice disturb the fantasy of rational subjectivity in political satires. Psychiatric patients' claims to be salamanders and other nonhuman beings disrupt the connection between appropriate self-perception and effective speech in the records of Benjamin Rush. Accounts of infected beds and their circulation reconfigure discourses of race, materiality, and legal responsibility in the context of yellow fever. Passenger pigeons destroy crops and forests, animating John James Audubon's struggle to produce both taxonomy and biography.

Taken together, these chapters develop three critical interventions. First, this project brings together a new archive for early American literary studies, with the core concerns of natural history in the Atlantic World at its center. Second, the project offers ways of thinking *across* competing theories of personhood. Rather than investigating one cohesive tradition of personhood, I collate competing theories of the person and make use of the gaps between these models. Third, the project develops a rich account of the outside forces that can determine persons, as a way around the political problems associated with consolidated individuality and liberal individualism. The project's rethinking of personhood thus contributes to contemporary attempts to imagine the future of both the human being and the political subject.

## ***Introduction***

### ***1. Argument***

An incredible array of actors occupy the position of the first-person observer in texts composed around 1800. First-person observers included the supposedly self-possessed subjects of Euro-colonial scientific enterprise, whose work relied on the labor and knowledge of indigenous, enslaved, free black, and female informants. These human observers were joined in literary culture by persons who claim to be particles, plants, animals, and objects. And all these narrators' observations were troubled by disruptive nonhuman entities.

The myriad first-person observers present in the project's archive present an opportunity to bring posthumanism and early American studies together. The lens of posthumanism is anachronistic to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is nonetheless useful for considering texts from this period because it demands a politics without bounded individualism. The "post" of posthumanism suggests a time after the age of the human, or in some cases, projected into a technofuture. Increasingly, however, scholars have catalogued the ways posthumanist discourse draws on indigenous and settler ideologies that existed alongside colonization and the production of liberal government.<sup>1</sup> This project's archive records narratives

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<sup>1</sup> See Ellis, who examines *antebellum posthumanism*, positioning the antebellum period as an appropriate "post," after the peak of an ideology that separated the human mind from matter (p. 6). Indigenous studies scholars like Lisa Brooks critique posthumanist and new materialist scholarship's Eurocentrism, pointing out point out that ideologies of distributed agency and entwined human and nonhuman being are neither new nor exclusive to white or Western philosophical traditions. Instead, these ideas are central to many indigenous understandings of the world. Scholars like TallBear and De Line call for the decolonization of posthumanism.

about human persons entwined with and defined by constitutive relationships to nonhuman entities.

The first-person is not obviously a feature of posthumanist literary culture or resistance to the forms of writing that bolster liberalism. In this project, however, I trace the ways first-person prose registers uncertainty about the status of the human and weds nonhuman actors, from bugs to furniture, to human speech. This project holds onto first-person observation as a specific feature of empiricism, a way of producing knowledge based in sensory observation and translated into detailed description and categorization. To link posthumanism's imperative to think against bounded individual human subjects *with* early American empiricisms is to enliven histories of the Americas for pressing contemporary concerns, while also recognizing the ways the tenants of posthumanist ideology can and did coexist with racist and colonial violence. The project thus links scholarship about the history of empiricism with more contemporary theoretical lenses. I write about people who claimed to be nonhumans, satires narrated by atoms and lice, accounts of furniture during fever epidemics, and the difficulty of describing overwhelming swarms of birds. These texts produce a literary history of the disaggregated and fragmentary forms of personhood that persisted into the early national period, as well as the ways first-person prose must negotiate the parameters of normative human personhood.

Drawing on scholarship that examines natural history's generic features, historical and political contexts, and aesthetic concerns – especially studies by Susan Scott Parrish and Christopher Iannini – I bring together an archive of generically diverse texts that draw on observational norms and the preoccupations of natural history writing.<sup>2</sup> The texts I examine

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<sup>2</sup> Iannini argues that natural history is an literary genre central to the evolution of prose narrative in the eighteenth-century world. He tracks the relationships between the growth of the West

exhibit a relative lack of concern with interior life and open possibilities for rethinking human personhood and the category of the “person” as a valid testifier and observer. While some actors in this dissertation deliberately resist or reshuffle the structures of observational authority (for instance, the salamander patient of chapter two), some of the observations that blend human and nonhuman in this dissertation are accidental or inevitable (as in chapter three and four).

Analyzing these texts in relationship to early American empiricisms and the parameters of knowledge-making and sensory experience provides an opportunity for considering the relationship between humans and nonhumans and the category of the person as a valid testifier and political agent, while linking historical and literary accounts of empiricism bring the field into conversation with ongoing theoretical conversations about these issues. As I examine these first-person texts, I draw on ways of thinking about personhood from political theory, posthumanism, and new materialism. This archive, gathered to the side of canonical literary texts, helps us ask: What if observation fails to produce cohesive subjects, to hold persons away from the objects they observe, to make categorization possible? What openings emerge from these failures to separate human persons from animals, objects, and other nonhumans?

My project begins with the 1760s and stretches into the early national period, when the emergence of the nation and the conservative closure of the revolutionary 1780s and 1790s

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Indian plantation as “a new kind of social institution and economic institution” essential to the rapid expansion of European colonial empires in the New World and the rise of natural history as “a new scientific discipline, intellectual obsession and literary form.” The conjunction of these forms, Iannini argues, fundamentally structured the practice of letters in eighteenth-century America (3, 16). Focusing on natural history’s combination of empirical reportage and meticulously literary description, Iannini resists the notion of natural history as extra-literary. This argument informs the ways I understand natural history to influence broader literary contexts.

foreclosed many of the more radical possibilities made available in the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Choosing to focus on the ongoing aftermath of earlier empiricisms and their rhetorical norms, I seek a literary history that disrupts histories of first-person prose narration that move teleologically towards the emergence of the psychological novel in the nineteenth century. These teleological accounts position first-person prose as valuable because of the ways it produces and represents psychological interiority – a depth model of personhood linked to the rise of liberal individualism. In focusing instead on empirical observation and forms of first-person prose that are not oriented around a cohesive interior life cordoned off from the outside world and its many nonhuman occupants, I aim to locate gaps in and ways around the forms of power increasingly attached to self-reflection and self-regulation in this period.<sup>4</sup>

The observational prose central to empirical observation shapes American writing across genres, including those I treat in the chapters of this dissertation. To be sure, observational first-person prose is not necessarily disruptive or liberatory. Observation by Anglo subjects participated in and legitimized colonization. As Mary Louise Pratt argues, travel narratives and natural history writing were essential to the production of empire in the eighteenth- and

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<sup>3</sup> Parrish sets up a distinction between visions of science in the Americas prior to the 1763 establishment of British continental majority and its possibilities *after* an established British majority, as science was increasingly codified into an instrument of American nationalism.

<sup>4</sup> In *The Order of Things* (1966/trans. 1970), Michel Foucault describes the emergence of a “classical episteme” organized around visible resemblance in the eighteenth century. The taxonomy that emerged from careful visual examination was a tool for the management of the natural world, the demarcation and policing of the boundaries between human and nonhuman, and imperial colonization and settler colonial nationalism. In Foucault’s account, around 1800, this obsessive surface-level description gives way to the comparative anatomy of the nineteenth century, with its focus on internal systems rather than visually organized external features. In this modern episteme, “life” as “an obvious threshold beyond which entirely new forms of knowledge are required” emerges. This dissertation’s archive sits at the cusp of these epistemes, and I am interested in the ways norms of the classical episteme linger into the modern episteme.

nineteenth-centuries. In these “anti-conquest” texts, ostensibly passive imperial envoys traveling in the name of “science” participated in reimagining the natural world of the Americas as new, unpopulated, and available for European conquest. As Pratt writes, the main protagonist of “the anti-conquest narrative is...the ‘seeing-man’...he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess” (7). Natural history’s observational focus allowed colonial observers to participate in forms of conquest that were not explicitly militaristic, preparing colonial locales to enter European knowledge structures and justifying other more explicit forms of violence.

As the taxonomic efforts of natural historical observers sent out from European centers described and cataloged plant and animal specimens as part of an imagined global nature, taxonomy also worked to categorize human beings and produce racial distinctions (see for example Edward Long’s “Observations on the Gradation in the Scale of being”). Natural history’s forms of observation and organization aimed to produce a form of human personhood that was separate from and in control of the objects it observed,

The violences authorized by empirical observation were central to colonial expansion in the Americas. Scholarship about eighteenth-century natural history has tracked the emergence of these observational and taxonomic orders, while also locating ways taxonomy and other empirical knowledge making practices are frustrated, resisted, and infiltrated by other forms of knowledge. Critics including Parrish and Iannini have argued that abundant novelties of American nature were central to the taxonomic projects of European empire. Parrish argues that in the British colonial world, in practice, colonial naturalists in the metropole were so curious about American nature that they were willing to accept testimony about its novelties from an well-positioned observer, including African and Native observers, Anglo women, and otherwise

marginalized Anglo-colonial men.<sup>5</sup> This insatiable curiosity thus sometimes produced agency for otherwise marginalized observers. Scholars including Sarah Knott, who works on medical correspondence, and Britt Rusert, who studies black practitioners of natural science, build on Parrish's argument. While some scholarship focuses on the ways writers contributed knowledge to empirical frameworks, others emphasize that debates about taxonomy were protracted, and the confident declaration of empirical evidence taxonomic categorization was always in tension with an open acknowledgement of uncertainty. These uncertainties too could open unexpected avenues for authority.<sup>6</sup>

Scholars of the Americas have also looked to alternative traditions of knowledge-making altogether to decenter European colonial power, focusing on conflicts between European ways of thinking about the body and the natural world and African and Native American traditions, and

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<sup>5</sup> As Parrish writes, for Foucault, “natural history in the eighteenth century represented the eradication of history, fable, hearsay, anatomy, smell, and touch from a field of knowledge restricted to a surface visibility and a language shorn of memory....[and] made viable a ‘pure tabulation of things.’...The American colonies both support and disrupt such historiography of the European Enlightenment” (9). As Europeans engaged in “thingification” of American nature, Parrish notes that residual practices informed by alternative relationships to nature and exchange continued to thrive (9). These practices “were also being embedded in and sent — in letters, reports, catalogs, histories, travel narratives, sketches, and watercolors — back to metropolitan centers where they asserted their strangeness, or their lingering familiarity” (10). Acknowledging the centrality of non-European knowledge and practices in the Americas helps show that naturalists’ “images and texts reflect a struggle within institutional science between, on the one hand, acknowledging the influence of the polycentric curiosity of the colonies on its own fact-building practices and, on the other, envisioning science as part of the imperial ‘improvement’ of non-European spaces” (10).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Theresa M. Kelley argues that plants functioned with a “resilient hiddenness,” defying “the Linnean regime of visibility” and the logic of taxonomic organization, especially outliers like ferns, mushrooms, lichens, and algae, who cannot be codified using the standard sexual criteria that structures Linnean taxonomy (5).



on instances in which empiricism was not itself central to making knowledge.<sup>7</sup> If, as Toni Wall Jaundon argues, one of the violences of empiricism is that it insists that we all live in the same reality and that Anglo-colonial subjects have the right and capacity to produce a shared reality for all people in colonial contexts, preserving alternative traditions of knowing and understanding – like obeah, in Jaundon’s work – is a core form of anti-colonial resistance.<sup>8</sup>

This dissertation’s archive consists of writers and figures in a range of positions along the continuum of Anglo-colonial and early national knowledge making, from the narrators of conservative satires to the practitioners of early national medicine to their deviant patients. While some of these writers, like John James Audubon, wish to inhabit the role of seeing-conquerors described by Mary Louise Pratt, others, like the patients described by Benjamin Rush, emphatically disrupt normative ways of knowing and being. This project, then, considers the ways exteriorly oriented first-person prose and emphases on the nonhuman could be a useful tool for building and resisting authority. Examining this array of writers and the figures that infiltrate their texts – atom, louse, salamander, dirt, bed, flock – invites a reconsideration of the relationship between first-person prose and the production of normative personhood.

The next sections of this introduction outline personhood and first-person prose as key terms for my analysis. With those key terms in place, I then outline some of the ways I think

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Allewaert, Wisecup, and Gómez, as well as Rusert, who builds on Parrish’s work directly but also examines practitioners who were not interested in conforming to the expectations of or participating in mainstream (and primarily white) scientific communities.

<sup>8</sup> As Jaundon writes, “[i]t is this ambition of a stable, shared common ground that obeah contested for colonial authorities. Indeed, the fictional quasi-factual accounts of obeah that populate the late-eighteenth-century literatures grappled explicitly with the possibility that persons gathered together in a scale such as the hemisphere or the planet may not share the same world, the same space, the same time” (720).

recovering this archive is useful for thinking with contemporary and future problems. The closing section of the introduction expands on the key interventions of my project and outlines the argument of each of my chapters.

## 2. *Personhood*

In common usage “person” is often understood as synonymous with “human,” but it’s not. “Person” is a legal and social category designating an entity with rights and responsibilities. Not all human beings get counted as persons in this sense, and not all persons are human beings. While defining personhood in law was a key task in both social contract theory and the legal systems that emerged from it, the term remains unstable across the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. This is also true in the twenty-first century, when activists celebrate the designation of mountains and animals as nonhuman persons, electronic personhood is considered a frontier of political ethics, and fetal personhood laws aim to eliminate abortion rights.<sup>9</sup>

As a term, “person” is a site for reckoning political power. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, John Locke’s theory of personhood was central to the emergence of more representative forms of government and discourses of liberal rights. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke defines a person as an organization of material parts held together and made identical by self-consciousness over time. Consciousness is what allows Locke to produce the

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<sup>9</sup> On recent advocacy for nonhuman personhood, see Roy, Sebo, and “The Nonhuman Rights Project.” On the EU committee’s recommendations for the recognition of electronic personhood, see Hern. For a concise history of advocacy around fetal personhood, see *ProPublica*, “The Personhood Movement.”

person as a consistent agent with rights and responsibilities, despite the material discontinuity of the body. Consciousness produces a distinction in Locke between *substance* – the matter that makes beings; *man* – an organization of the matter, an animal or organism; and *person* – a self-conscious, organized body of matter.<sup>10</sup>

While Locke articulates a clear definition of organized personhood in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, personhood is a flexible category, in ways that are both damaging and compelling. As Monique Allewaert points out, personhood can be a useful way of identifying potentially agentic entities outside the category of the citizen subject, since “‘persons’ as organized and conscious units precede the legal recognition given to them as such” (10-11). Constraining the lens for considering personhood, however, does not produce clarity. The category of the legal person is itself deeply uncertain, not least because the law recognizes both *natural persons* – individual human persons – and *corporate persons* – composite entities incorporated under the law and recognized as entities bearing rights and responsibilities. Legal personhood was and is also a category used to inflict extraordinary violence, particularly as it was applied to, withheld from, and reshaped for enslaved people. As Angela Naimou writes, “By now it is commonplace to say that the legal history of racial slavery belies the promise of liberal political philosophy and challenges its premise of abstract legal personhood as the sign of formal equality for every person under the law. After all, the captive and enslaved were recognized in the law as human and as persons of a certain kind as part of the taxonomies (shifting, unstable, and incoherent through they are) that construct and order the meanings of personhood” (6). As a figure both within and outside of the law, the “person” is an apparently rigid but in fact

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<sup>10</sup> Colin Dayan points out the difficulty of distinguishing between persons, humans, animals, and matter in Locke’s *Essay*, as consciousness seems at times to inhere where it should not. Dayan argues that Locke’s obsession with consciousness as the thing that makes the person comes back to undo the very security around subjecthood it is supposed to produce. See Dayan Chapter 4.

extraordinarily plastic category. The person is a figure “whose plasticity, artificiality, and instability is often obscured by its apparent naturalness as a synonym for any human being. The legal person – as a subject of certain rights and duties recognized before the law – is the originary legal fiction and the foundation of modern politics” (Naimou 27).<sup>11</sup> The power of this fiction – that the parameters of personhood are obvious – is made evident by corporate personhood, which sounds unsettling or “startling” only because “personhood has been so tightly fitted onto the figure of the human in Western law that we mistake the mask for the skin and the skin for the psychic personality of human beings” (24-5). Understanding the deep uncertainty and malleability of “person” as a legal term helps make it possible to locate alternative iterations of personhood, in both legal and nonlegal contexts.

Person is, then, a key term for thinking about the way entities move in and out of political standing and the conditions for securing power. There is no one solid definition of personhood, as there are always shifting assumptions and parameters being brought to the term and idea. A “person” as a legal entity is endowed with rights and responsibilities. An even more capacious definition would understand a “person” to be an entity capable of acting deliberately and impactfully.<sup>12</sup> This project explores the emergence of normative personhood in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. By normative personhood I mean an increasingly

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<sup>11</sup> Naimou’s analysis draws heavily on Dayan, who examines the ways persons are made and unmade under the law. Dayan focuses on instances in which ghosts and others with a negative relation to personhood (corpses, zombies) appear and act in law. Dayan takes ghosts and dogs as an entry point for thinking about how a legal apparatus develops around entities on the fringe of social life. The most extreme instance of this negative relation to the law is the legal production of slaves, which sets precedents for the prison industrial complex and its gradations of legal suffering.

<sup>12</sup> One term for recognizing agentic entities – both human and nonhuman – might be actor or actant. I use “person” instead because I am interested in the fluctuating parameters of legal recognition, the speaking “person” of first-person prose, and the ways a seemingly obvious commonplace term produces a multiplicity of meanings and possibilities. On actants, see Bennett and Latour.

individuated category focused on self-reflection and consistent interior life. Normative personhood defines the rational individual recognized as an appropriate citizen-subject in the post-revolutionary period. As I explore the role of narrative in facilitating the emergence of this form of personhood, I am also interested in the formidable challenges to normative personhood that simultaneously emerged and persisted in legal frameworks and because of individuals' own first-person claims. I am interested specifically in the requisite conditions for securing a position that facilitates valid first-person speech – and in the ways the parameters for speaking persons negotiate the uncertain boundary between humans and nonhumans. To consider speech and first-person prose specifically in relationship to personhood is to ask what role narrative has in managing the parameters of personhood as well as how the “person” of first-person speech is best understood. In the texts I examine in this dissertation, consistent interior life is often not possible or valuable as a hallmark of first-person prose, and nonhuman identities and actors are often threaded through representations of the human person.

### ***3. First-Person Prose***

First-person prose can be a measure of personhood or an opportunity for testing out an ideology around persons, in ways that are both implicit and explicit. Liberalism presumes a self-same individual person, made distinct from the other forms of matter that pass through it by the organization of the body and held together as a cohesive entity by self-consciousness over time. Liberal personhood requires a single point of origin and a narrative arc tracking progress overtime – and the arrival at the site of rational civic subjectivity (and, implicitly, good Christian virtue). Critics often trace the American first-person prose tradition to Puritan spiritual

autobiography, which emphasizes personal development and individual transformation. This tradition stems most obviously from the work of Miller (1939) and Bercovitch (1975), whose influential scholarship interrogated the Puritan “mind” and the American “self.” Other prominent works include Shea (1968/1988) and Imbarrato (1998). This lens frames a tradition whose primary goal is the representation of coherent, deep-seated identity. More recently, Lisa Lowe terms the autobiography the quintessential genre of liberalism precisely because it “served as a particular powerful genre for the individual achievement of liberty through ethical education and civilization” (46). To look away, then, from forms of first-person prose focused on interior life and personal development, is to reimagine narrating personhood. The multiple and widely influential first-person prose forms central to natural history’s empirical observation invert this focus, taking the faithful representation of the outside world as their primary goal and challenging the consolidation of personal identity suggested by spiritual autobiography.

Alternative forms of personhood must produce alternative forms of first-person narrative, and vice versa. As Allewaert writes in describing the differential forms of personhood in the American tropics, “[o]ne of the key particularities of Afro-Americans in American plantation zones, whether slave or maroon, was that the mythologies of a definitive and single origin that were central to liberal theories of personhood were simply not possible” (14). In addition to recognizing the ways narratives associated with biographical development were unavailable to many people – especially enslaved or formerly enslaved people, considerable scholarship has tracked the failures of cohesive personal identity in the early United States, as criticism has moved away from using personal narrative and self-revelation as the primary rubrics for understanding American literary history. Michael Warner has influentially argued that the evacuation of personal identity in the public sphere of eighteenth century print facilitated the political debate that precipitated the American Revolution. More recently, Russ Castronovo

(2014) has argued that by devaluing consolidated identity and willful authorship, eighteenth-century propaganda networks enabled revolutionary circulation. These critics outline some of the reasons we might want to think about instances when personal identity fails: in place of consolidated individual identities, alternative and potentially revolutionary possibilities appear.

As a measure for personhood, empiricism's first-person observational prose is dramatically different than that of the first-person texts that are often centered in American literary history.<sup>13</sup> Even in their most successful forms, observational accounts are sprawling, dissociative, and focused primarily on external observation rather than on accounting for the speaker's interior life or personal development. If one question this project asks about empiricism's first-person prose is simply what kind of personhood can be measured, produced, or sustained by a first-person prose tradition structured around empirical observation, another and more central question is this: what happens to personhood in a first-person prose tradition structured around observation *when that observation fails to produce order*? First-person prose is a way of taking stock of, defining, delimiting, and opening the category of the person. And it must also negotiate the shifting terrain of personhood when boundaries between inside and outside, human and nonhuman, agent and object become difficult or impossible to discern.

This dissertation uses a focus on first-person prose across contexts reinvigorate conversations about empirical observation and its legacies, particularly in relationship to

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<sup>13</sup> Ian Watt's classic study of the novel links the referential language of empiricism with the epistolary novel. For Watt, the referential descriptive language of empirical observation helps produce biographical specificity in the novel. Certainly empirical prose forms influenced discourses and literatures that upheld liberal personhood and depth models of identity. I am most interested, however, in cases in which this is not the outcome. Influential texts in the history of science including Simon and Schaffer, Cray, and Datson and Gallison inform my thinking about the ways observational norms might impacts subjectivity and personhood.

personhood and questions of human/nonhuman relations. In empiricism, first-person prose functions markedly differently from the way it does in something like autobiography as Lowe describes it. While these more obviously literary genres have been valued for their depiction of subjects growing into worthy citizens, empirical observation produces texts that are intensely focused on reporting the details of what the senses take in. These observations, as Parrish argues, were often embedded in epistolary networks that included friendship, candor, and other forms of attachment. They were not, however, focused on narrative development or the representation of interior life. Observational prose, even that which we might understand as successfully describing and ordering its object, focuses on rigorously accounting for that which is outside the narrator, rather than giving an account of the narrator's specificity or growth. This relative disinterest in plumbing the psychic depths of the narrator can produce openings for atypical forms of self-understanding – and indeed for persons who understand themselves to be nonhuman. Particularly in Chapter 2, I examine the outwardly focused and in this way “impersonal” expectations of empirical first-person prose, the forms of personhood they produce, and the ways nonnormative or atypical claims might revise their very terms.

My archive consists of a group of first-person prose texts, influenced by the discourse of empirical observation, in which human/nonhuman relations and the category of the person are at stake. These texts focus on atoms, lice, fever beds, infected air, and flocking birds. Not neatly reducible to animals, plants, or things, these figures cut across categories of nonhuman beings. In constellating texts that focus on such a range of nonhuman and outside forces, I aim to give a rich account of the outside forces that could determine persons.

This dissertation makes a lot of small moments of slippage – an obscure satire, a six-line case study, a three-page letter published as an appendix, a few entries drawn from a multi-



volume text. From these relatively small moments, I draw out large arguments about the disruption of normative power. While I am also interested in larger and more lasting forms of resistance to liberal politics, I am also committed to enlivening small moments as high-stakes opportunities to think differently. Canonical literary texts ground my analysis from time to time, but the focus of this project is on understudied texts adjacent to the typical works that ground early American and U.S. national literary. This collection of works, each stretching the confines of conventional genres, produces a new archive for early American literary studies. My chapters reach across first-person texts, from political satire and medical texts to political pamphlets and natural historical compendia. My analysis considers texts published in and circulating through British colonial North America and the U.S., but longer Atlantic networks including Europe and the Caribbean also ground my archive. Questions of order, taxonomy, and human personhood run through all of my chapters. Natural history and empiricism and their concerns with taxonomy and observation are core concerns of my thinking as sites of power and negotiation or disruptions.

#### ***4. The Past and The Present (Persons, Humans, Nonhumans, Posthumans, and the Anthropocene)***

I assemble this project's archive both to interpret and discover something about literary representation and political possibility in the past and to open that past for thinking our present and future. Donna Haraway writes that we have entered a moment in which "bounded individualism in its many flavors in science, politics, and philosophy has finally become unavailable to think with, truly no longer thinkable, technically or any other way" (5). In a

twenty-first century defined by incredible climate precarity, ongoing state violence, and a dramatic political failure to produce a more viable world, reactivating and reimagining other ways of understanding personhood has become particularly pressing. The question of Western conceptions of masterful human personhood animated debates about the Anthropocene, named for *Anthropos*, a particular incarnation of man. As an alternative, Capitalocene names the systems of power that produced dramatic climate degradation and its uneven impacts but, Haraway argues, forecloses our capacity to imagine a fruitful future. Haraway offers *Chthulucene*, a term for thinking against the closed form of the human and towards deeply mutually interimbricated collectives that could thrive in a dramatically restructured future.<sup>14</sup> In the epoch Haraway terms Chthulucene, “human beings are not the only important actors....The order is reknitted; human beings are with and for the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of the earth are the main story” (55). In thinking for a future of multispecies recognition that does not try to wave away the politics of human life, this project offers an archive that opens new ways of thinking the nonhuman and the role of first-person narrative in constructing personhood.<sup>15</sup>

What, then, is the role of language in managing the interface between human persons and nonhuman being? How does narrative account for the language of the nonhuman or the possibility of speaking for the nonhuman? To consider this, Barbara Johnson draws on the

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<sup>14</sup> In *Staying with the Trouble*, Haraway moves away from the term “posthumanism,” of which she is often considered a foundational theorist. As Haraway writes: “I am a compostist not a posthumanist: we are all compost, not post-human” (19-20). I take this disavowal to seek ways of thinking human beings as bound to the webs of beings around them, rather than ethereally separated from other beings. I take Haraway’s point, which also acknowledges critiques of posthumanism, but compostist seems less useful to me as a term for thinking human personhood.

<sup>15</sup> Sharon Cameron produces an alternative way of thinking narrative against bounded individualism, by examining the “impersonal” dissolution of individual consciousness into collectivity. Sidonie Smith employs a version of posthumanist thought that resonates with Cameron’s impersonality to read posthumanism in Mary Rowlandson.

linguist Emile Benveniste. Johnson writes that “the notion of ‘person’ has something to do with presence at the scene of speech and seems to inhere in the notion of *address*. “I” and “you” are persons because they can either address or be addressed while “he” can only be talked *about*. A person who neither addresses nor is addressed is functioning as a *thing* in the same way that being an *object* of discussion rather than a *subject* of discussion transforms everything into a thing” (6). Johnson’s analysis is concerned with the intermixture of persons and things, particularly during the Enlightenment moment at which the figurative forms she examines gained new ground.<sup>16</sup> Her position implies that speech is fundamentally anthropomorphic. In considering a poem about a responsive stone, Johnson writes, “Far from answering ‘No,’ the stone should not enter into a dialogue in the first place. When the stone answers, ‘you’re still anthropomorphizing me,’ the stone is right, but by speaking *at all* it stands up against anthropomorphism precisely by using it. The stone can’t defend itself against anthropomorphism without resorting to anthropomorphism” (17). Eduardo Kohn approaches the anthropomorphism of language differently, arguing that an account of nonhuman beings and the way they make cultures and persons – an anthropology beyond the human – requires rigorous attention to nonhuman and nonlinguistic forms of semiosis.<sup>17</sup> My own work asks not how we might expand our account of semiosis to recognize nonhuman forms of communication – or indeed communication across

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<sup>16</sup> Johnson focuses on four figures that can produce this animation of things as persons – apostrophe and prosopopeia (figures of address), and personification and anthropomorphism (figures of being).

<sup>17</sup> See p. 7 for Kohn’s critique of the posthumanities’ focus on linguistic representation. Kohn examines the Quichua term “runa” as a synonym for person that means something more like “self” or “being with a perspective” than human. In colonial contexts, the Quichua meaning of runa as person falls away: “In Quichua...runa means person. It is used as a sort of perinomial marker of the subject position – for all selves see themselves as persons – and it is only hypostasized as ethnonym in objectifying practices such as ethnography, racial discrimination, and identity politics (see chapter 6). This Quichua a term for ‘person’ however, has come to be used in Spanish to refer to mongrel dogs” (139).

human and nonhuman entities as in Kohn's work – but how our understanding of first-person prose and the person as valid speaker might shift if and when we recognize the ways nonhumanness impinges on human personhood. This approach to thinking the nonhuman in relation to speech allows me to take up first-person prose in relation to such various figures as atoms, beds, and birds, taking the distinctions between these entities seriously while also aligning them as nonhuman entities impinging on speech (rather than dividing them into categories of matter, goods, and animals). Significant scholarship in early American studies considers environmental impacts on the body and an increasing amount of scholarship focuses on animals, particularly as discourses of animality coincide with racial ideologies. Comparatively little work in the field, however, focuses on the nonhuman as such. Shifting focus in this way allows a wider archive of nonhuman figures to come into view.

In linking my analysis to posthumanism and other contemporary theoretical texts that interrogate the status of human personhood, I do not mean to suggest that the past and the present are the same, or that the future will reflect the eighteenth century. Instead, I am interested in historicizing alternative conceptions of personhood and their relationship to narrative. These particular forms of subjectivity and particular forms of *personhood* and *narrative* have relationship to politics and to the possibility of navigating the present and making a future.

One of the things that's at stake in my project is historicizing some of the discourses about human and nonhuman that permeate contemporary conversations about the Anthropocene. Bringing together posthumanism with an early American archive has several outcomes. First, tracing these ideologies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries adds depth and richness to what might feel like the "new" ideas of posthumanism, linking them to a long tradition of thinking. Second, it forces us to consider the ways these ideologies, which seem to promise an

alternative future, can and do coexist with normative power structures and enormous violence – including and especially racist, imperialist, sexist, and colonial violence and slavery. One primary critique of posthumanism – in its techno-optimist iteration as well as in its imagination of porous human subjects – is that it does not interrogate or acknowledge racist power structures but instead reproduces them (see Jackson; Atanasoski and Vora). To link posthumanism to this archive looks for ways to think about violence and justice across historically significant categories of human difference while also rethinking the category of human personhood that is inscribed and maintained by the current political order. Third, this archive of small disruptive moments offers resources for differently narrating both the past and the present.<sup>18</sup>

Ideologies that radically divorce human personhood from the nonhuman world have disastrous political and ecological consequences and in fact prohibit imagining a future structured by a different political formation and contingent on thriving in assemblages of human and nonhuman life. If early American studies offers posthumanism a necessary historical mooring post, posthumanism offers early American studies, and especially work in early American studies concerned with empiricist knowledge production, an avenue for imagining a more just present and future. Posthumanist theory can help scholars rethink the legacies of empiricism's first-person prose forms as a stilted and uneven measure of the human person.

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<sup>18</sup> Anna Tsing suggests that our best path forward is to learn to make a life in ruins and specifically in the ruins of a capitalist world that has devastated the lifeways of many humans and nonhumans. Tsing's analysis of the matsutake mushroom and its many human and nonhuman partners focuses on the mutual but unpredictable forms of human nonhuman relations that might allow us to see differently how to make lives in and from ruin, not in flat ways that ignore violence or imagine utopias, but in pragmatic ways. Such a project requires different forms of attention to the narratives we have, as well as new forms of storytelling.

## 5. *Chapters*

*Natural History and Personhood in Early America* draws on science studies, posthumanist scholarship, and archival research to investigate the emergence of normative personhood in American literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In this period, normative personhood came to be defined as an increasingly individuated category focused on self-reflection and consistent interior life. The first-person prose texts I examine tell a different story, one about the more eccentric personhoods that arose from legal frameworks, material pressures, and individuals' own first-person claims. The project argues that the first-person voice developed in the service of eighteenth-century natural history's empirical observation shapes American prose across contexts. The first-person texts I examine often prioritize the observation of exterior phenomena rather than the representation of inner life, unsettling the insistence on emerging interiority and the liberal subject that has grounded earlier scholarship about the first-person voice in American literary criticism.

This project is about rethinking first-person prose along two lines: (1) what is at stake in claiming to be nonhuman; and (2) what happens when nonhuman entities restructure first person description. Since I view first-person speech as one measure of personhood, each of these lines of thought is also about rethinking the parameters of personhood. My dissertation develops three critical interventions. First, my project brings together a new archive for early American literary studies, with the core concerns of natural history in the Atlantic World at its center. Second, the project offers ways of thinking *across* competing theories of personhood. Rather than investigating one cohesive tradition of personhood, I collate competing theories of the person and make use of the gaps between these models. Third, the project develops a rich account of the various outside forces that can determine persons, as a way around the political problems

associated with consolidated individuality and liberal individualism. The project thus contributes to contemporary attempts to conceptualize both the human being and the political subject.

My project moves roughly chronologically, while also considering the ongoing reception and circulation of the project's earliest texts. Each of my four chapters focuses on a key context in which personhood becomes destabilized, and on the ways first-person prose must navigate this destabilization. This project's key concerns, and the genres across which I trace them, cross paths in Philadelphia, which was an important site of American literary and scientific exchange in this period. Particularly in chapters two and three, I use Philadelphia as an organizing unit, a hub that connects texts and offers a point of access to a larger circuit of Atlantic discourse. In addition to drawing together intellectuals from Europe and people fleeing the Haitian Revolution, Philadelphia was the capital of the U.S. from 1790 to 1800 and the home of an increasingly large free black community. This project's concerns with material and political personhood, disease, and natural history collide in the city's networks and institutions. Although each context I examine challenged the stability of personhood, Atlantic slavery fully institutionalized personhood as a paradox, treating human beings as partial persons and property. Each chapter tries to account for the ways American slavery and its ideologies impacts first-person form.

Chapter one, "Talking Heads: Atoms, Lice, Persons," focuses on a pair of anti-revolutionary political satires narrated by nonhumans. Tobias Smollett's *The History and Adventures of an Atom* (1769) and the anonymous *The History of a French Louse* (1779) are both narrated by entities that materially disrupt the human body. The atom and the louse engage in first-person observation to narrate what they see and overhear. These nonhuman voices echo

inside and adjacent to human heads, disturbing the image of a rational individual political subject. These disgusting and disordering narrators are meant to critique the emergence of more democratic forms of government in the Seven Years' War and the American Revolutionary War respectively. I argue that these satires, which continued to circulate through the mid-nineteenth century in the U.S., inadvertently open a more radical political possibility, one focused on deeply inter-imbricated collectives rather than discrete and rational individuals.

Like chapter one, chapter two considers what is at stake in claiming to be nonhuman. "First-Person Salamanders," addresses insanity discourse at the turn of the nineteenth century. I link the surprising distribution of first-person authority in the American physician Benjamin Rush's *Medical Inquiries and Observations, Upon the Diseases of the Mind* (1812) to citation practices in medical science more broadly. *Diseases* models the complex interplay between different kinds of first-person claims and treats patients' observations as valid medical evidence, regardless of the state of their interior lives. This shift makes rhetorical participation available to an unexpectedly wide range of testifiers, including some patients who claim to be nonhumans. In these instances, the category of the human is destabilized as the ground for effective first-person speech. I juxtapose the claims Rush accepts as evidence with anecdotes he cites about the terroristic violence carried out against supposedly insane enslaved Africans in Jamaica to illustrate the limits of the community Rush's practice seems to make possible.

Chapters three and four shift the attention of the project away from first-person claims to be nonhuman towards the ways observation breaks down in the face of pressing outsides. Chapter three, "Fever Beds and First-Persons," focuses on the category of the legal person, empirical authority, and the problem of infected objects. In the aftermath of the Philadelphia's 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic, the African American preachers Richard Allen and Absalom Jones published *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia*



*in the Year 1793* (1794). This observational text often circulated with a selection of supplementary documents, including a letter accounting for the infected beds that were the responsibility of Philadelphia's black nurses during the epidemic. This chapter argues that, in advocating for political and legal recognition as persons, Allen and Jones embraced a model of personhood in which human beings, agentic objects, and matter were entwined, leaning into an association with property that they, as formerly enslaved African Americans, might otherwise have wished to jettison. My analysis begins with Allen and Jones's letter about beds and reads back across the texts with which the letter circulated, including the *Narrative* and Allen's spiritual biography. This approach demonstrates the overlapping rhetorics of empirical, legal, and spiritual discourse and the conflicting forms of personhood that emerge from them.

Chapter four, "*Ornithological Biography* and the American First-Person," focuses on John James Audubon's massive textual companion to *Birds of America* (1827-1838). This chapter tackles the questions of "individuality" and "life" that arise from the *Ornithological Biography* (1831-1839), a text that explicitly connects natural history to biography. I argue that natural history's first-person observers were often faced with flocks of specimens so large as to occlude individual personhood. Like other collectors, Audubon relied on a huge group of aids – including fellow ornithologists, neighborhood children, planters' daughters, and enslaved black people – to amass, describe, and depict his specimen collection. In *Ornithological Biography*, he collapses these labors under a singular title, stretching the category of biography to its limit. Using the examples of the Carolina parakeet, the passenger pigeon, and the pinnated grouse, I show the ways uncountable multitudes of destructive specimen bodies combat consolidated human agency and force a reconsideration of the autobiographical subject.

## **Talking Heads: Atoms, Lice, Persons**

### ***Introduction***

Tobias Smollett's *The History and Adventures of an Atom* (1769) begins with a pair of identity claims. The narrative starts with the invocation "I, Nathaniel Peacock, of the parish of St. Giles, haberdasher and author, solemnly declare." Beginning with this announcement of Peacock's proper name, his location and profession, the text unfolds a set of specific credentials to produce narrative authority and observational validity – the credentials necessary to make reliable observations and write about them in authoritative first-person prose. But as the paragraph continues, the status of valid observational first-person prose becomes wildly distorted. The narrator goes on:

“[o]n the third of last August, sitting alone in my study, up three pair of stairs, between the hours of eleven and twelve at night, meditating upon the uncertainty of sublunary enjoyment, I heard a shrill, small voice, seemingly proceeding from a chink or crevice in my own pericranium, call distinctly three times, ‘Nathaniel Peacock, Nathaniel Peacock, Nathaniel Peacock.’ Astonished, yea, even affrighted at this citation, I replied in a faltering tone, ‘In the name of the Lord, what art thou?’ Thus adjured, the voice answered and said, ‘I am an atom.’”<sup>19</sup>

The *Atom* begins with a familiar claim to identity in which the narrator offers his name, location, and occupation. But by the end of this first paragraph, the idea of a self-similar person able to make claims about sensory experience, fulfilling the demands of empirical observation, has been interrupted by another “shrill, small voice.” This interloper shifts the terms of identity downward

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<sup>19</sup> Tobias Smollett, *The History and Adventures of an Atom*, ed. Robert Adams Day and O.M. Brack, Jr. Athens, GA and London: University of Georgia Press, (1989) 2014, p. 5. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

to a lower scalar register by declaring simply “I am an atom.” This voice is disorienting not only because it is small or unexpected but because it emerges from inside the head of the human narrator, from an unknown “chink or crevice” of the body’s own interior space. This kaleidoscopic introduction, in which first-person identity claims collide with and disrupt each other, sets the stage for a narrative that shifts readers’ attention away from the identifiable locus of personal address and towards the teeming material flows of the body. This turn from identity to the material flows of the body facilitates a critique of demands for the distribution of political rights.

To be sure, the *Atom* is a joke. St. Giles is a disreputable neighborhood, haberdashers make trifles, and the atom’s subsequent narration of its journeys through empty heads, boiling bellies, and anal cavities is willfully absurd. Originally published in London in 1769 and quickly circulated in British colonial Philadelphia, the *Atom* is a Seven Years’ War satire set in East Asia in the thirteenth century. The atom’s narrative, so dense with allusion as to be almost beyond comprehension to later audiences, comments on the court dealings in a war between Japan and China, standing in for England and France respectively.<sup>20</sup> This displacement, which props up the satire’s bombastically overwrought critique, also highlights the global reach of the events it addresses.

In 1779, ten years after the *Atom*’s first publication, an anti-revolutionary satire called *The History of a French Louse; or, the Spy of a New Species, in France and England* appeared in London. The satire’s narrator is a louse who has lived on a series of heads in and around Paris and been witness to the political maneuverings happening behind the scenes of the American Revolution. The louse raises a set of questions about material discontinuity, consciousness, and personhood,

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<sup>20</sup> On the *Atom* and Orientalism, see Aravamudan.

linking these concerns explicitly to the American Revolution and its transatlantic implications. Emphasizing his linguistic skills – how, after all, could a French louse compose a narrative in English? – the louse meditates on the nature of parasitism and its relationship to knowledge production:

“[M]y union with the human being that sustained me, makes me a part of the person by whom I subsist....[B]y the situation of my abode so near the brain [causes], the spirits, which [are] continually issuing from it, [to] form an elementary atmosphere about me, necessarily convey to me all the thoughts which find their way into the head that entertains me....[K]nowing the thoughts which my [host] conceived in French and expressed in English [to her American interlocutors], I necessarily knew what she was saying in a new language; and that from the answers which she made, I knew what questions had been asked, though they were asked in English.”<sup>21</sup> (15-16).

This account of learning focuses on the importance of the louse’s situation on the head of a host and his proximity to the mind, in his “abode so near the brain.” The louse’s narrative and his multilingual literacy are dependent on the effluvia of the heads across which he transverses and on the capacity of their “elementary atmospheres” to make him “a part” of one person and then another in turn. The louse’s identity, refracted in his first-person prose, continually shifts. Like the *Atom*, the *Louse* emphasizes the potential for the material flows of the body to themselves become articulate. Here, language, narrative, and personality become distributed: they are not confined to a single human person. The louse takes on the personality, language, and narrative of his host and blurs the boundaries of supposedly discrete entities. This is significant in relationship to these narratives’ political contexts because it figures the individual person, the key

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<sup>21</sup> Anonymous (Delauney?), *The History of a French Louse; or, the Spy of a New Species, in France and England: containing a description of the most remarkable personages in those kingdoms: giving a key to the chief events of the year 1779, and those which are to happen in 1780*. London: Printed for T. Becket, 1779. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

unit of liberal politics, as unstable and faulty and links this instability explicitly to first-person narrative.<sup>22</sup>

This chapter traces the circulation of these texts in British colonial North America and the early U.S., where the politics these satires critique were taking shape. I consider these texts together because of their similar preoccupation with the instability of the human person, its potential to take in other entities, and its constant expulsion of matter as a site of political critique. I also link these texts because they share a focus on satirizing the major global and Atlantic World events that lead up to the founding of the United States. As an opening stage for this dissertation, this chapter situates the concern with personhood in the Americas in the context of British and French Atlantic World politics and implicitly the larger global dynamics that underpin the Seven Years' War. By beginning with a pair of fictional texts focused on secretive observation, I also locate questions of first-person observational narrative in an archive that is apparently distant from natural history but shares its concerns.

In this chapter, I take seriously the atom's position inside a human head and its status as the terminal unit of matter and the louse's similar position, lodged in the effluvial leakage of the mind. These two conservative satires use the conceits of animate parts to make their critiques. This puts them in conversation with the notions of the "person" and the body politic in political philosophy. These satires are most fully in dialogue with John Locke, whose social contract theory undergirded much of the political upheaval of the 1760s and 1770s. Lockean liberalism presumes the integrity of the individual person as the grounds for seeking political rights. These conservative tracts attack emerging liberal politics by emphasizing the disorder of the individual:

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<sup>22</sup> I am not the first to note a resonance between the *Louse* and the *Atom*. Heather Keenleyside writes that for English readers, the louse "perhaps most readily recalls Tobias Smollett's *The History and Adventures of an Atom* (1769), which also uses an it-narrator to enter a scene of political intrigue." Keenleyside, "Introduction to an excerpt from the *History of a French Louse*," p. 40.

each of the individuals that could be political actors for Locke becomes a mob in these critiques. The *Atom* and the *Louse* illustrate the idea that a politics of individuals is a politics of the mobs by representing individuals themselves as atmospheric mobs that are dangerous, ludicrous, and disgusting. If Locke's premise of orderly bodies at all scales helps undergird movement towards democratic politics for the emergent middle class, these satires argue that without the organizing figure of the sovereign, only chaos remains – a hellish alternative to concentrated sovereign power. If these tracts critique emerging liberal politics, in this chapter I turn those critiques on their heads, arguing that they also open an alternative political model in which individuality gives way to total relationality mutually dependent persons. In this model, individual personhood emerges from a fluctuating, deeply interconnected milieu. As the individual momentarily emerges the group, these satires suggest a model of collective life more dynamic and radical than that of a collective composed of discrete and organized individual persons. Both these satires' critiques and the alternative politics they make visible rely on layered observational first-person narratives and thus invite us to consider their implications for a larger tradition of first-person narrative forms.

This chapter begins by outlining the “it narrative,” a genre of popular tales with nonhuman narrators. This genre treatment offers this dissertation's longest engagement with print history, linking what might be considered “British” texts published in London to the American publics through which they long circulated. I describe the circulation of British-authored it narratives in the U.S. and the link between these narratives and Locke. In the context of this project, this chapter sets up core understandings of personhood in classical texts from political philosophy, links the question of emergent American democracy to these theories,

and begins to outline some of the alternative ways of thinking personhood that can emerge from rethinking observational prose.

It narratives often refract high-level philosophical debates in a popular form and invite questions about scale, political action, and personhood. In conceit and content, I argue that Smollett's *Atom* uses multiplying material flows, composite bodies, and rogue parts to suggest that distributing political power more democratically is neither possible nor desirable. The *Louse* packages a similar critique in an anti-revolutionary tract whose conceit explicitly invokes parasitism and highlights the hollowness of revolutionary republican ideals. Taken together, these two satires and their readerships emphasize the gaps in Lockean personhood and an ongoing anxiety about moving across scales to produce a new and cohesive body politic in the early U.S. In the chapter's closing section I link the very literal parasitism of these two satires' narrators and plots to Michel Serres' theory of the parasite as a quasi-object – an entity not quite subject or object that produces collectivity – to suggest a way of understanding forms of shared discourse liberalism might otherwise wish to cast aside.

### ***1. It-Narratives and Politics***

The *Atom* and the *Louse* are part of a large genre of texts narrated by nonhumans. These tales, often called “it narratives,” were wildly popular in eighteenth-century Britain and the Anglo-Atlantic world. Hundreds of it narratives, written from the perspectives of coins, lapdogs, sofas, fleas, wigs, and hackney coaches, were published in London beginning in the early eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup> The genre saw its heyday between about 1780 and 1800, when a rash of

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<sup>23</sup> It narratives are sometimes called “circulation novels” or “novels of circulation.” Like most American critics writing in the past couple of decades, I prefer the term “it narrative.” This term

new it narratives were published, but it narratives continued to recirculate in reprint editions and in newly composed didactic literature through at least the mid-nineteenth century.

It narratives are a compelling archive for my project for two reasons. First, they often resonate with observational texts associated with natural history writing, which also hinge on a first-person pronoun but demonstrate little investment in the narrator's psychological interiority. Second, it narratives are a largely ephemeral genre that refracts the most intensive philosophical debates of the eighteenth century into popular, inexpensive, and widely circulating forms, emphasizing these debates' widespread influence. As Heather Keenleyside writes in her introduction to a recent anthology, animal it narratives in particular take up "philosophical questions that come into prominence in the wake of Descartes and also Locke: questions about the relationship between sentience, speech and consciousness, or between life and something like personhood or ethical standing" (*xvii*). In these texts, and in animal it narratives in particular, "it is often difficult to separate formal gimmick from ethical commitment," joke from serious philosophical and political intervention (*xviii*). It narratives package high-level philosophical and political critiques in a deceptively ephemeral and smirking form.

The flourishing of scholarship about British it narratives over the past decade coincides with a renewed critical interest in both animals and things. Markman Ellis, for example, reads a series of it narratives about the suffering of lap dogs in relationship to the larger sentimental campaigns of eighteenth-century fiction and especially to the deployment of sympathy in abolitionist discourses. Alternatively, Deidre Lynch and Christopher Flint read it narratives as parables tackling the widespread circulation of money and goods across the British Empire and

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highlights the ways these texts revolve around animated objects and animals themselves and also emphasizes that not all (or even most) of these narratives are novels. Although the it narratives in which I am interested are first-person observational texts, some it narratives are told in the third-person voice.



into the hands of British readers and consumers.<sup>24</sup> Its narrators frequently move across owners – or in the case of the atom and the louse, hosts – from widely various social spheres. In *The History of an Old Wig* (1812), for instance, a wig chronicles its descent from the head of a preacher to the head of a whore and at last to a new life as a broom. These narratives, then, are preoccupied with the relationship between social groups and the prospect of social leveling. Its narratives also insist on the overlapping cultural and material networks that join Britain and its colonies. If its narratives regularly probe the boundaries between humans, animals, and objects, the status of the human being and the political person, these questions intensify as its narratives map movement across geographic, racial, gender, and class boundaries.

Here, I will approach these tales of circulation and overlapping existence by focusing on the *Atom* and the *Louse* in relationship to John Locke’s political philosophy. Lockean ideas about persons, property, and government were central to the political situations in which these satires wish to intervene – the arguments about rights, representation, and taxation in the wake of the Seven Years’ War on the one hand and the British American colonies’ revolution on the other. These satires invite engagement with Locke because of both their conceits, which focus on the relationship between part and whole and the status of the person, and their political referents.

Managing the body in parts was a key concern in eighteenth-century political philosophy. Locke’s influential notion of the person emerged from a world in which it was commonplace to conceptualize the body as an entity that was in a state of constant material flux. As I briefly note in this project’s introduction, Locke addresses this notion when he describes “the constantly

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<sup>24</sup> Ellis, Lynch, and Flint make these claims in essays compiled in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2007. Other key critical accounts include Lynn Festa, “Tales Told by Things” and Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say*.

fleeting particles” of matter that make up a man. Locke minimizes the problem of bodies’ material discontinuity by grounding identity in organized consciousness. Humeral theories of the body, which remained popular through the eighteenth century, focus on the material composition of the human body and its vulnerability to potentially disorganizing outside substances. The supposed effects of “foreign” matter on human bodies was a particular concern for European colonists in the American context. The material vulnerability of white bodies to non-European climates occasionally produced both optimism about the future of national unification, as in John Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s account of American transplants.<sup>25</sup> Much more often, vulnerability to material influence produced anxiety about the potential denigration of white European bodies and their potential to become differently racialized in the Americas.<sup>26</sup>

Locke responded to the problem posed by the porous body with a definition of the “person” that ensured stability. Locke famously declared that the self-same individual is produced and sustained via its organization, not by its material continuity. As he wrote in the *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, “person, man, and substance are three names standing in for three different ideas.” Substance describes those fleeting material particles that perpetually move in and out of all bodies. Man, an animal, retains its identity despite constantly leaking material particles like atoms because of the way those particles are “united to [the] organized living body.” A man becomes a person – for Locke in this essay “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason

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<sup>25</sup> Crèvecoeur describes Americans as a “promiscuous breed” from which “that race now called Americans have risen.” He writes that in America, “Everything has tended to regenerate them: new laws, a new mode of living, a new social system; here they are become men: in Europe they were as so many useless plants, wanting vegetative mould and refreshing showers; they withered, and were mowed down by want, hunger, and war; but now, by the power of transplantation, like all other plants they have taken root and flourished!” (69).

<sup>26</sup> On this notion of embodiment in the British colonial Atlantic world, see Parrish, Iannini, and Allewaert.

and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places” – because of consciousness.<sup>27</sup> Material flows can move in and out of the body without disrupting this organizational structure, and self-consciousness over time preserves the status of the person.<sup>28</sup> Although discourses of personhood in British colonial America and the early U.S. were myriad, Locke’s claims about material organization and self-similarity were powerful tools for imagining stable political subjects.<sup>29</sup>

For Locke, organization is paramount, both for his account of individuals, and for his account of government, which he describes as a coming together of rights-bearing individuals in an organized and mutually beneficial social contract.<sup>30</sup> This focus on the primacy of organization across scales allowed eighteenth century writers, to slide between the scale of the individual and the scale of the state. But the *Atom* and the *Louse* add in another feature, emphasizing disordering and potentially observing substances in order to critique Lockean theories. These texts add in a third register of correspondence – matter to individual to state – to

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<sup>27</sup> John Locke, “Of Identity and Diversity,” Book II, Chapter XXVII, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, New York: Penguin, 1997. p. 296-314. For an argument on the relationship between personhood and first-person prose and an analysis of the tension between Locke’s model of the self-conscious person in *An Essay* and his model of the “picker-up” person in *Two Treatises of Government*, see Keenleyside, “The First-Person Form of Life: Locke, Sterne, and the Autobiographical Animal.”

<sup>28</sup> The supposed power of consciousness to ensure identity is sometimes strained even in Locke’s text, and certainly in the legal systems that emerge from it. See Dayan.

<sup>29</sup> Monique Allewaert argues that Locke’s notion of personhood was not the only model in play in the Americas. Allewaert traces the ways that bodies were often “disorganized and disorganizing” in the American tropics and argues that “this rendering of the body in parts did not signal the end of personhood but the origin of a minoritarian and anticolonial model of personhood that was largely developed by Afro-Americans.” See *Ariel’s Ecology*, especially p. 2-3.

<sup>30</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*. For an influential examination of the “possessive individualism” in which Locke’s theory participates, see C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*.”

suggest that empowering individuals will produce chaos rather than order, and to link that disorder to a proliferation of first-person speakers.

Locke's focus on organization and his omission of matter are especially important for understanding the conservative critiques the *Atom* and the *Louse* advance. In order to underscore the particularity of Locke, I'll turn briefly to Thomas Hobbes as a counterpoint. If one thing at issue for Locke is movement across scalar registers from to orderly individual to orderly state, Hobbes's political philosophy makes these scalar registers irrelevant. In Hobbes's model, all parts are neatly organized in the body of the sovereign. As the frontispiece of Hobbes's *Leviathan* (Figure 1) illustrates, Hobbes's model proposes that politics must be ordered in the body of the king. The frontispiece is without realistic scale, as the symbolic body of the sovereign rises from and looms over the earth. The focus on well-ordered individuals who can bear individual rights and participate in government, so central to Locke, is irrelevant to Hobbes's model of concentrated sovereign power. *Leviathan* and its frontispiece offer an account of human beings as purely material entities who must receive their order from a sovereign.



Detail of the frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), which depicts a sovereign composed of the bodies of his subjects, rising in an orderly fashion from the kingdom itself. Image in the public domain, accessed via Wikimedia Commons.

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Leviathan\\_-\\_Hobbes%27\\_Leviathan\\_%281651%29%2C\\_title\\_page\\_-\\_BL.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5c/Leviathan_-_Hobbes%27_Leviathan_%281651%29%2C_title_page_-_BL.jpg) Accessed July 23, 2019.

These contexts – Locke, Hobbes, and the question of appropriate first-person speech, along with a host of other debates about the parameters of personhood – are especially compelling given the long and widespread circulation of its narratives on both sides of the Atlantic. Its narratives like “The Adventures of the Rambler’s Magazine” (London: *Rambler’s*, 1785) and “The Adventures of a Bible” (London, 1821) are quick to remind readers that the books and magazines that carried its narratives were themselves things, texts printed and reprinted, stowed on library shelves and circulated unpredictably through the networks of the

Atlantic world.<sup>31</sup> Beginning in the 1720s, it narratives came into vogue in the big British magazines: *The Tatler*, *Westminster Magazine*, *Gentleman's and London's*, *Rambler's Magazine*, and other periodicals published it narratives over the course of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth century. The circuits of transatlantic exchange put these magazines into the hands of American readers, especially in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, the literary capitals of British colonial North America and the early United States. Virtually no scholarship has considered the circulation of British it narratives in the American reading public.

Major British magazines had a base of subscribers in North America and the early United States. Even when subscription lists were small, periodicals had an uncanny knack for sticking around, circulating widely beyond their original recipients, and making their way into library collections to be checked out and re-read for many years after their publication.<sup>32</sup> Stand-alone it narratives like the *Atom* and the *Louse* also quickly made their way to American readers, especially when their content concerned American life. Many British it narratives appeared in the collections of popular circulating libraries like the Library Company of Philadelphia or in Philadelphia reprint editions published by the influential printer Matthew Carey and others

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<sup>31</sup> Liz Bellamy characterizes it narratives as texts in which narrators lack independent agency and facilitate movement between otherwise unconnected characters (121). If it narrators famously circulate widely, so too do the texts they narrate. Leah Price has argued that around 1800 books replace coins as the archetypal it narrators. Price argues that after 1800, it narratives – especially those produced by religious societies are concerned with the appropriate consumption of books and “struggle to reconcile the competing imperatives of a person’s relation to his books (imagined as less alienable than other belongings) and a person’s relation to other persons (vehicles in a world that tracts both represent and inhabit by the exchange of print matter” (110). See Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain*.

<sup>32</sup> On British literature in America and vice versa, see McGill, Gardner, and Rezek. Most it narratives do not circulate in contemporary editions. In 2012, a four-volume collection of excerpts appeared focusing on (1) money; (2) animals; (3) clothes and transportation; and (4) toys, trifles, and portable furniture. See *British It-Narratives, 1750-1830*, ed. Mark Blackwell, London and Brookfield, VT: Pickering and Chatto, 2012.

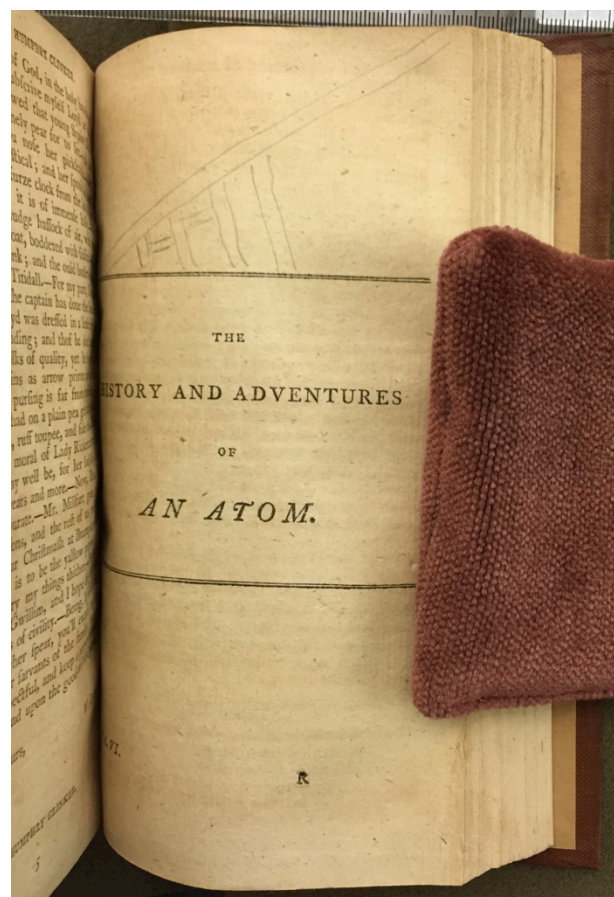


within a few years of their publication. By the 1820s, U.S.-authored it narratives, which were often didactic and directed at children, had begun to appear in substantial numbers.<sup>33</sup>

**L I K E W I S E,**

<b>S</b> HERIDAN's British Education.	Gray's Poems.
Ruffhead's Life of Pope.	National Debt no Grievance.
Works of Anacreon and Sappho.	The State of the Nation.
Dawson's Expedient concerning the Confessional.	Remarks on Do.
Muir's Parable of the Sower.	An Appendix to the State of the Nation.
Goldsmith's History of the Romans. 2 Vol.	Observations on Do.
History of Paraguay. 2 Vol.	A Letter to Lord Hillsborough, on the Affairs in America.
Observations on Italy. 2 Vol.	Another Estimate of the Times.
Caverhill on the Gout.	The Cafe of Great-Britain and America.
Nourfe's Fruit Gardiner.	Witt's last Stake.
Garton's practical Gardiner.	The Captive.
Exemplary Mother. 2 Vol.	Harlequin Premier.
Adventures of an Atom. 2 Vol.	The Sister.
Lydia. 2 Vol.	The fatal Discovery.
Female Confrancy. 2 Vol.	School for Rakes.

An advertisement for the *Atom* in two volumes appeared in the *Pennsylvania Journal* in 1769, shortly after the text's original publication in London. The title is listed in the lower left quadrant of the above list of titles for sale from a Philadelphia bookseller. Image via Readex/America's Historical Newspapers. Accessed May 25, 2017.



The title page of *The History and Adventures of an Atom* from a 1797 edition of *The Miscellaneous Works of Tobias Smollett*. Smollett's works were regularly republished in Britain and the U.S. through the 1850s, and the *Atom* was usually included. This edition includes a geometric illustration produced at an unknown date (likely much later). Image courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia, used in conjunction with LCP's research materials policy.

<sup>33</sup> Extensive archival research at the Library Company of Philadelphia underpins my specific claim that the *Atom* and the *Louse* circulated for many years in the U.S., beginning shortly after their publication, and the larger claim that many British it narratives circulate substantially among American readers.

The *Atom* was sold independently upon its publication and appeared in Philadelphia book advertisements as early as 1769 and again in 1772 and 1804. By 1777, six years after Smollett's death in 1771, advertisements for the *Collected Works of Tobias Smollett*, which included the *Atom*, began to appear in the Philadelphia papers. Editions of the *Collected Works*, each with the *Atom* in tow, came out regularly through the 1780s and 1790s, and by 1803, a Philadelphia edition appeared. Initially, this circulation was the result of intense transatlantic debate about the Seven Years' War and its consequences – an investment in Smollett's cutting satire. As the Seven Years' War became more remote and the atom's satire less accessible, Smollett remained in demand, beloved for his most popular works. Alongside these perennial texts, Smollett's *Atom* snuck in, circulating almost despite itself through the mid-nineteenth century. Surviving copies bear some marks of reading, and we can speculate that readers did indeed dive into the swirling world of the atom.

Like the *Atom*, the *Louse* quickly made its way to British America, where it joined the ranks of Loyalist literature. On its title page, the *Louse* claims to be a fourth edition “translated from the French.” Although a French edition was also published in 1779, there is no evidence that previous editions exist. In 1781, advertisements for a New York edition of the *Louse* appeared in the Loyalist newspaper the *Royal American Gazette*, published in New York City. The text remained valuable enough to American readers that in 1831, after a fire, the Library Company rebound one of its copies of the *Louse* with a group of other similarly damaged pamphlets.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> On Loyalist writing, see Philip Gould, *Writing the Rebellion*. Gould counters the lasting trend in American literary scholarship to focus on the “national narrative of the ‘development’ of American literature” and “the Revolution as a crucial period of political independence that laid the groundwork for future literary and cultural independence” by returning Loyalist literature to the center of British American cultural studies (6). Thanks to James N. Green for helping me understand the significance of these fire-damaged pages at the Library Company of Philadelphia.



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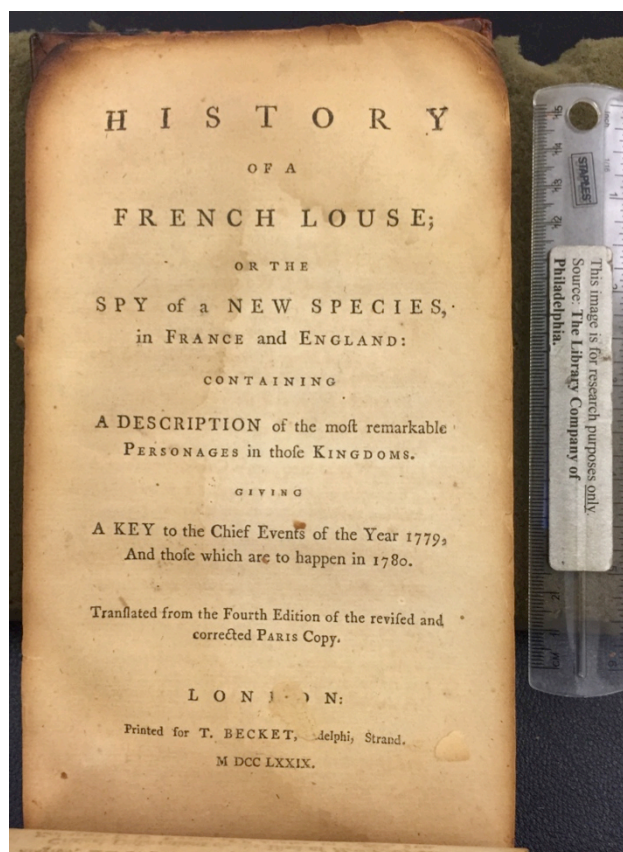
THE  
 HISTORY  
 OF A  
 FRENCH LOUSE:  
 OR THE  
 SPY OF A NEW SPECIES,  
 IN FRANCE and ENGLAND:

CONTAINING  
 A DESCRIPTION of the most remarkable PERSONAGES  
 in those KINGDOMS.  
 GIVING  
 A KEY to the Chief Events of the Year 1779, and those  
 which are to happen in 1780.

Translated from the Fourth Edition of the revised and  
 corrected PARIS Copy.

*They have likewise received by the last ships from London;  
 a variety of new publications, amongst which are, Common  
 Place Arguments, Lord Lyttleton's Letters, &c. &c.*

This advertisement for the *French Louse* appeared in the *Royal American Gazette*, a Loyalist newspaper published in New York City, on June 5, 1781. Although all of the surviving copies of the *Louse* I have located have London title pages, the ad indicates a New York printing by the publishers Mill and Hicks. Ads for the *Louse* continued to appear regularly in the *Royal American Gazette* through September 1781. Image via Readex/America's Historical Newspapers, Accessed May 24, 2017.



The title page of a copy of *The History of a French Louse* with visibly burnt edges. The volume was damaged in a fire at the Library Company in 1831. Readers cared enough about the text to rebind it with a group of other similarly damaged short works. Image courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia, used in conjunction with LCP's research materials policy.

These narratives, which produce political critiques by troubling the distinction between human persons and other forms of matter, continued circulating among American readers for decades after they first appeared. For British and early U.S. readers steeped in debates about race and slavery, the impacts of climate, rational political action, and representative politics, the issues of embodiment and authority these narratives raise were especially potent. Considering these narratives in the context of Atlantic, British colonial, and U.S. reading publics produces a fuller sense of the overlapping relationship between political discourses on politics and persons and their relation to observational first-person prose.

## 2. *Anti-Revolutionary Critique and Consciousness (Talking Heads)*

Both *The History and Adventures of an Atom* and *The History of a French Louse* use a focus on the material flows that produce human bodies to satirize attempts to produce more republican politics. Both works link materiality to consciousness. These two narratives, written ten years apart and concerned with different political situations involving the Americas, offer anti-revolutionary political critiques voiced by small entities that act as parts of human bodies. The atom is literally a particle composing a body. The louse feeds on and becomes similar to the body it inhabits. These small parts tell narratives that differ significantly from those that might be produced by their human hosts. This narrative conceit of a part gone rogue challenges Lockean liberalism and the modes of government Lockean liberalism might produce: if for Locke each individual is self-same and continuous and for this reason a stable basis for good government, for the authors of the *Atom* and the *Louse*, each individual is a wildly noncontinuous multitude and a basis for bad government. These satires mobilize animate particles – an atom and a parasite – to rail against the dangers of distributed political power and democracy.

Smollett's politics are difficult to pin down, but in the *Atom* and his other political writing, almost all of which concerns the Seven Years War, Smollett consistently advocated for securing Britain's American empire. He firmly supported the popular minister William Pitt's work towards this end during the Seven Years War. Smollett's other major concern was Britain's burgeoning national debt. For this reason, he consistently opposed the large annual subsidies Britain paid to Prussia as part of their wartime alliance. After Britain's American interests were safe from French encroachment, Smollett advocated that Britain abandon the Prussian alliance that continued to fuel the Seven Years' War and make peace with France. In these endeavors,

Smollett supported Pitt's successor in power, John Stuart, Earl of Bute. Smollett also consistently opposed catering to "the mob" in politics. Although he died in exile in Italy 1771, before the American Revolution began in earnest, Smollett opposed popular influence and thought that "the attrition of royal prerogative since the Glorious Revolution [of 1688 which set the precedent for British subjects to claim individual rights]...has gone too far."<sup>35</sup> The *Atom* ends with a satirization of the Stamp Act as one more incitement to mob politics, which is in keeping with Smollett's satirization of mob politics throughout the text. Based on this context, Smollett would not have been a supporter of the rights of British American colonists to political self-determination and republican representation.

Even for an eighteenth-century satire, *The History and Adventures of an Atom* is bombastic and unruly. As I noted in the introduction, Smollett casts his satire of the Seven Years' War as the observation made by an atom thousands of years ago in China and Japan. This premise and the text's anonymous first publication were likely meant to shield Smollett from libel charges.<sup>36</sup> The *Atom*'s critique is leveraged at the inept political maneuverings of Parliament and the British crown in the late eighteenth century, and it illustrates this ineptitude by presenting the British court as an incestuous network of paramours whose interactions consist of literal ass kicking and ass kissing, excrement, vomit, and gaseous expulsion.<sup>37</sup> The mob is likewise disparaged as a fickle

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Adams Day, "Introduction" to *The History and Adventures of an Atom*, xxxvi. In addition to this helpful introduction, see Fabel on Smollett's politics.

<sup>36</sup> Smollett had previously spent a year in jail on a libel charge. See Day, "Introduction," *The History and Adventure of an Atom*.

<sup>37</sup> Although eighteenth-century political satire was famously bawdy, Smollett takes obscenity to extremes in the *Atom*. For useful context, see Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England, 1658-1770*. Marshall identifies Smollett's intensity and obscenity, which she calls an expression of "unmitigated disgust," as atypical for British satire in the mid-eighteenth century (276).

and disgusting composite body. The satire offers no solution, disparaging in equal measure monarchical sovereignty, court politics, and the possibility of a government that extends the will of the people.<sup>38</sup> The atom's style is raunchy and difficult to navigate, both because of the density of its prose and because the text runs continuously with no section or chapter breaks, no central plot, and no conclusion of any kind.

While the *Atom* focuses on disgusting bodies to leverage political critique in an observational narrative that is difficult to understand, in the *Louse*, the observational prose is easier to follow. In *The History of a French Louse*, the stakes of political critique and the teeming material world are linked not to the Seven Years War or the British Parliament but to the major players in the American Revolutionary War. The *Louse* is considerably more navigable than the *Atom* as a text: it's composed in short chapters, its jokes are easy to laugh at, and in addition to spying on Benjamin Franklin, the louse tours the scalps of Marie Antoinette; the famous Mademoiselle d'Éon, who had been a diplomat and spy under the male identity Chevalier d'Éon but later identified as female; and Pierre Beaumarchais, a French supporter of the American Revolution. If the *Atom* is characterized by its many barriers to entry for both eighteenth- and twenty-first-century readers, including the conceit of atomism itself, the *Louse* is by comparison accessible, familiar, and domestic.<sup>39</sup> Joining a wave of Loyalist literature circulating in British

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<sup>38</sup> Marshall calls the atom “a blanket denunciation of midcentury political life” (276). For more on Smollett's politics, see Day, “Introduction,” *The History and Adventures of an Atom*.

<sup>39</sup> Even the *Atom*'s earliest readers struggled to track its real-world contexts. Keys to the satire's referents started to appear in 1769 and were often included with the text to help readers follow along. See Day, “Introduction,” *The History and Adventures of an Atom*. Conversely, both the famous figures in the *Louse* and the louse itself were easy to understand. As Robert Hooke proclaimed in the text composed to accompany his famous illustration of a docile louse beneath a microscope, lice were familiar “to everyone.” In fact, lice were so familiar that they were often used to help explain unfamiliar insects to readers to provide a sense of scale. The Comte du Buffon, for instance, described creatures as “the size of a louse,” or thereabouts (106, 104, 118,

America, the *Louse* leverages its narrator to make a large-scale political critique focused on American collusion with France, French designs towards the demise of Great Britain, and the hollowness of revolutionary ideals.

Like the atom, the *French Louse* is a joke. The text is a British satire of American revolutionary politics, the wiliness of the French, and Benjamin Franklin's drunken political and social maneuvering in particular. It's also a text that reduces political personhood to a teeming flow of observing micro-agents. Lice were ubiquitous in the eighteenth century, not least because they so often inhabited the wigs that were essential to the performance of political personhood for much of the century.<sup>40</sup>

This anonymous satire produces an array of critiques, some more and some less obvious: rich French ministers are corrupt, disgusting schemers. American politicians are corrupt, disgusting schemers. Material, animals, and information travel along the threads of empire in the Atlantic world in ways both predictable and unexpected. The political values championed by rebelling Anglo-Americans and associated with respectable statesmanship and republican government are a sham. There are spies everywhere. As in the British Parliamentary world explored by the atom, questions about appropriate political personhood and the scale of personal and political allegiance were central to the politics of the Atlantic world during the American Revolution, and the threat of spies and double agents was widespread. From the beginning, the *Louse* is a satire of social relations that plays on those anxieties. The satire emerges around a biological parasite who unearths the status of Americans abroad as social and political parasites.

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142, 146), "no larger than a louse" (132, 133, 203), "larger than a louse" (109), "twice as big as a louse," and so on.

<sup>40</sup> On wigs, politics, and persons, see Festa, "Personal Effects."

The *Atom* and the *Louse* both produce conservative political critiques of distributed political agency. Both are concerned with the scope of the British Empire and the demands around representative government. In what follows, I will read these texts allegorically as political treatises focused on critiquing the distribution of political right and as literally as texts focused on the material flowing in and out of bodies and on the ways these flows make the individual of Lockean liberalism and unstable basis of identity and a precarious ground for government.

In its spiraling satire of political ineptitude, the *Atom* produces its critique by opening two competing problems around scale and personhood. First, as the opening scene in which the frame narrator Nathaniel Peacock is disturbed by a voice calling out from “[his] own pericranium,” the space around his head, illustrates, the *Atom* suggests that personhood as linked to consciousness always gives way to smaller parts – a ubiquity of increasingly smaller conscious parts that disrupt political subjectivity and that observe the natural world (5). Second, the atom’s roving accounts of digestion and flatulence across bodies of all scales, which are constantly disrupted by kicks, kisses, and “convulsion[s]” of vomit and excrement (128), suggest that organized bodies produce endless strings of moving matter, rather than cohering into self-similar and self-aware persons. These suggestions are both assaults on consciousness as the determinant of the Lockean model of persons. The first challenges Locke because it unhinges consciousness from human persons, which Locke calls the only entity capable of “consider[ing] itself as itself” and instead distributes consciousness across parts. The second because it challenges Locke’s premise of organized, coherent animal bodies that will act in a cohesive and consistent way despite the “constantly fleeting particles of matter” that disrupt them.

If these issues around scale produce philosophical problems for a Lockean model, what is most important for Smollett is that these issues can be useful for political critique. The atom's account of material disorder suggests that the only alternative to total monarchical sovereignty is chaotic individuality. The *Atom* is a satire of what happens when each part speaks. Its critique of mob politics rests on the premise that all matter is indeed composed of atoms and that, given the chance, each of these atoms could speak. These atoms, however, can only speak when they rest on the pineal gland buried deep inside the head of a human being. As the unnamed atom narrator explains, "we cannot communicate except once in a thousand years, and then only when we fulfill a certain place in the pineal gland of a human creature," in which case atoms' narratives echo in the minds of their human hosts and can be recorded (6). Although atoms' access to consciousness is independent, their voices depend on parasitic proximity to human minds.

In some ways, the *Atom* follows a Lockean scheme: the organization of matter makes it possible for the atom to speak, and Nathaniel Peacock is not at all disturbed by the particles flowing in and out of his body until the atom's voice appears. But the extension of consciousness downward – Smollett's joke – produces a miniature world that works on principles all its own. Once readers descend to the atom's perspective, the prospect of scaling back up to anything else – Nathaniel Peacock's own thoughts, for instance – seems impossible, as unexpected narratives emerge and disrupt human persons' activities. The atom, after all, is the voice inside Peacock's skull. It, the atom, introduces itself by claiming, "What thou hearst is within thee – is part of thyself. I am one of those atoms, or constituent particles of matter, which can neither be annihilated, divided, nor impaired" (5-6). The atom's introduction, like the competing identity claims with which this chapter began, distorts "I am" towards the plural and suggests that parts do not cohere into cohesive wholes.



The conceit of atomism emphasizes Smollett's critique by extending the premise of distributed agency to the point of absurdity. As Smollett's narrator informs Nathaniel Peacock, the atom, perceived as the terminal unit of all matter, has been a cultural preoccupation since antiquity. *Atom* comes from the Greek word *atomos*, which means indivisible (Smollett 6). Greek thinkers suspected matter must be divisible to a remote point and no further as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. The Roman philosopher Lucretius, whom Smollett's prose seems to deliberately invoke, produced a surprisingly prescient account of atomic interaction, based on a set of inexplicable affinities, in his poem *De Rerum Natura, On the Nature of Things*, which was composed in the first century B.C.E.<sup>41</sup> His ideas, tinged with atheism, fell out of favor as Christianity rose. During the Renaissance, radical European materialists took Lucretius up and became enamored with the atom again. Jonathan Kramnick explains that accepting Lucretian materialism means accepting a world "full of consciousness" in which "thoughts are not tracked back to persons having them so much as to the shape, order and motion" of atoms.<sup>42</sup> The atom would have resonated with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers as both the seat of thrilling possibility and the source of potentially chaotic material recombination.

For Smollett, the point of constellating these philosophical positions is to argue that a politics based on the further distribution of political rights or moving towards democracy can't work. The political implications of scaling self-consciousness down to the level of the atom are that Locke's conceit of orderly and self-aware entities as the basis for politics looks ridiculous and

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<sup>41</sup> On Smollett and Lucretius's language, see Day. The text of *De Rerum Natura*, was lost entirely for centuries, but a copy was rediscovered in 1417. On Lucretius's return to circulation and his impact on thinkers from Spinoza to Thomas Jefferson, see Greenblatt, *On Lucretius, materialism, and sexuality*, with a sustained reflection on the ways Lucretian materialism figures similarity and difference, see Golberg.

<sup>42</sup> Kramnick, "Living with Lucretius," 19.

the distribution of political rights looks like it will never work – where, Smollett, seems to ask, would we stop? The transience of any organized body emphasized by atomism’s distribution of consciousness and action further suggest that individuals are a bad basis for good government and that the alternative to concentrated sovereignty can only be chaos. As Smollett unfolds a critique of mob politics, he links the formlessness of atomism, in which all entities give way to particles, to a disadvantageous politics of distributed rights.

The atom’s own ambivalent status emphasizes the absence of coherent entities around which to build a distributed politics. The atom’s narrative literalizes the model of a universe composed of teeming semi-animate particles, in which no metaphor for collective embodiment can effectively hold a political world together. The atom is not properly an animal, a plant, or a rock, nor is it a commodity. It doesn’t seem like a coin (Lynch’s archetypal it narrator) or a book (Price’s archetypal it narrator) or a creature (central to the work of scholars like Keenleyside, Lamb, and Ellis). In fact, as the atom jauntily explains, it has been all of these, since “atoms compose all the variety of objects and essences which nature exhibits or art can obtain,” and they last forever, perpetually composing new entities. The atom declares itself an individual, but it has no fixed qualities. It might be animate, or it might not. It might have a will, or not. Indeed, that atom straddles the line between life and death. These features are significant because they emphasize the ways atomism makes the categorizing and organizing structures so central to eighteenth-century natural history and political life fall apart: there are no categories worth accounting for if the smallest unit of all matter in fact sees, remembers, and speaks about its experience transgressing all of those categorical boundaries. Nature, in “all the variety of objects” it might produce, is reduced to the chatter of an atom, Smollett’s conservative satire proposes. The atom’s transience suggests that any coherence of parts into a whole is haphazard

and temporary. The production of a stable politics based on organization in the face of this constant fluctuation would be futile.

The atom's critique of coherent identities suggests that a politics built around distributed rights will perpetually collapse. It also casts the disintegration of entities in terms of an overwhelming reduction to sameness and an overwhelming extension of first-person narrators. This emphasis resonates with the political concerns about managing a sprawling empire during the Seven Years' War. The atom insists that materials that appear to be opposites can be dissolved into sameness, and one individual atom can be lots of things: a grain of rice, excrement, a duck, an intestine, semen, part of a pineal gland (6). As is evident in the atom's account of its journey from a grain of rice in Japan to Peacock's brain and its familiarity with the bodies of nonwhite people, the atom foregrounds the intimate interconnection of affluent white readers in the metropole and places and people stretched across the British empire.<sup>43</sup> British American and U.S. readers would have recognized the events of the Seven Years War cast across the globe to Japan and China. Although America does not appear in the atom's account – the atom doesn't say it has been to America – American readers, caught in the same circuit that moves from global circulation back to the metropole, are invited to marvel with Peacock at the way both matter and narrative finds their way back to an Englishman at home in his study. An explicit invocation of American matter does not appear, but American environments and politics are implicated in the questions of matter and narrative that structure the satire.

The *Louse's* political critique also links an anti-democratic – and in this case explicitly anti-American Revolution – position to the leakiness of the human body. As the narrative of his life

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<sup>43</sup> For more on the ways it narratives navigate these connections, see Festa, "Tales Told by Things."

experience unfolds, the louse disrupts the category of the individual observer by emphasizing his material intermingling with his human hosts. Like the atom that describes bodies perpetually exchanging particles, the louse reproduces familiar eighteenth-century narratives about bodies that leak effluvial matter and a troubling ubiquity of conscious entities. For the anonymous author of the louse, this conceit facilitates narrative access and emphasizes the hollowness of revolutionary ideals.

In this instance, Lockean personhood is troubled by a second consciousness wrapped up in the same material flow as a human person. The louse's speech is, like the atom's, a joke – but like the atom it plays out a philosophical conflict central to the imagination of political agents as self-similar, self-conscious, and individual. If the louse materially disintegrates the human body – it bites, it sucks blood, it takes up residence, it drags bodily residue from one head to another – it also makes the individual multiple. Like the atom, the louse is a semi-autonomous part that cannot be resolved into the whole. The image of a world full of moving and inchoate parasites or parts coincides with a critique of the self-serving disorder Delauney suggests will emerge from rebelling Americans' demands for wider political recognition.

The interconnection of host and parasite in the same atmospheric halo of consciousness and matter advances the louse's plot. This proximity explains how the spying parasite gets its information, as it acquires the language skills necessary to eavesdrop and imbibes the secret thoughts of its host. It also calls into question the ideal of a rational and self-aware political actor who should bear rights in revolutionary political ideology. The passage with which I introduced the *Louse* in the beginning of this chapter, in which the louse holds out the conditions of his speech for scrupulous inspection, highlights the louse's close relationship with the consciousness of his host. His host – his "landlady" – was unaware of her louse infestation and did not speak with the louse or teach him French or English (15). Instead, the louse claims to have learned

because residence in a wig or head of hair “makes me a part of the person by whom I subsist” (15). The brain, the louse insists, leaks, producing an “elementary atmosphere” through which the louse breathes in the sensations, thoughts, and words of his host (15). The louse watches, but he also observes by listening, tasting, and inhaling materials from the leaking body that is his home. In this position, the louse takes up “complete knowledge” about his hosts and their world and reproduces it to circulate without its proprietor. Insisting on the plausibility of this narrative arc, the louse credits his English language skills to the effluvia of the head, out of which the mind leaks its vaporous content continually. This attention to the dissolution of persons into atmospheres and the influence of atmospheres on persons brings to the fore not just the limits of Lockean personhood but the inability to confine personality itself to individuals.

In the case of the *Louse*, the critique of revolutionary politics relies not just on the notion of material flows but on the unfitness of supposedly revolutionary statesmen, both materially and morally, to produce a productive social world. The *Louse* offers a caricature of Benjamin Franklin, social parasite and false figurehead, as a representative of revolutionary political agitation. In a popular excerpt that was cited and republished with reviews, the louse’s “landlady” is invited to dine with Franklin at his Paris residence. Gossip about Franklin was rampant in the British, French, and American press for the whole of the revolution. In France as an American minister from 1776 to 1785, Franklin produced an endless stream of gossip and satire, none of which he did much to stem. As historian Stacy Schiff writes in her account of Franklin’s years in France, he remained a continuous hub of social life, critique, and admiration abroad, where he was a widely known celebrity.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> For a detailed account of Franklin’s doings in France, including a brief acknowledgement of *The History of a French Louse* and the wave of loyalist satire in which it participated, see Stacy Schiff, *A Great Improvisation: Franklin: France, and the Birth of America*, New York: Henry Holt, 2005.

In the *Louse's* critique, Franklin is spying, scheming, drinking, and womanizing. He also becomes a disgusting exemplar of the body politic that will emerge from these values. Introduced as “a man of great note who came from another part of the world,” as “minister plenipotentiary for a considerable people” who’d recently rebelled (19), Franklin is quickly and predictably derided by the louse as a “grotesque figure,” sunburnt, wrinkled, and warty with absurd spectacles (19-20). More than ugly or unsavory, Franklin talks too much, and the louse witnesses considerable political intrigue unfolding at his residence.

In Delauney’s critique of Franklin and his allies, both Franklin’s “grotesque figure” and his status as a host for a parasitic narrator contribute to a critique of republican demands. Far from upstanding citizens or orderly exemplars of a desirable new political system, Franklin and his French allies become mere social parasites leeching off the fortunes of the state in this critique. These men are lousy in the sense that they are lush, corrupt figures siphoning off state resources and in the sense that they are literally louse infested. At one point, for instance, Franklin says to his Beaumarchais, “I think your head seems to itch very much; have you been electrified?” (42). Franklin’s status as host rather than individual challenges the construction of discrete political personhood, but Delauney also suggests that advocates of the American Revolution hiding behind a discourse of republican rights are in fact merely disgusting figures opportunistically scheming to profit from Britain’s downfall.

Like the atom then, the louse offers a different model of consciousness from Locke’s and emphasizes the ways material flows, central to eighteenth-century theories of body and mind, might become unmanageable and links these flows to consciousness itself. Instead, these satires suggest that materiality is inseparable from consciousness and, this being the case, examining the minute flows of matter around the body is a good way to see the problem with the distribution of rights and political power more democratically or popularly.

### 3. *Bodies Politic*

Before turning to the alternative model of collective life I'll argue is opened by these satires, it's necessary to address the collective, large-scale political communities that *Atom* and the *Louse* depict. I have emphasized the texts' fraught accounts of individuality, but the texts also offer a vision of larger scale politics in action. If the conceits through which these satires are conveyed produce both explicit and implicit critiques of Lockean philosophy and its attendant politics, leveraging parodies of self-consciousness personhood to advocate against democratic politics, the unfolding plots of these satires emphasize large scale political disorder. They are concerned explicitly with body politics, flows of information, and revolutionary ideals.

Smollett critiques the collective bodies of both court and mob as disorderly. The atom remembers and narrates the insides of the bodies it has inhabited and their perpetually disruptive, erotic overlaps and affinities. When given the opportunity to speak, Smollett's atom offers an account of the bodily pleasures that dictate the terms of both court order and global conflict. The atom describes a world composed of a profusion of heads, both literal and metaphorical, in place of a unified head of state. The metaphorical heads of state in the Japanese court the atom describes – standing in for eighteenth-century English court and Parliament – are concerned not with wits or speeches but with kicking and kissing. In the king's cabinet, where favors are gained by kissing the “seat of the [first minister's] honour,” the atom describes chaos: “All was bellowing, bleating, braying, grinning, grumbling, confusion, and uproar. It was more like a dream of chaos than a picture of human life” (26). Watching from the inside, the observational atom witnesses the “bellowing” and “braying” of bodies rather than decisive, intelligible human speech. Shifting to the scale of the human person's body, at which Lockean

philosophy would suggest matter is ordered into persons so that persons can be ordered into bodies politic, does not resolve the material chaos the atom witnesses. Instead, Smollett uses the atom's perspective to critique the partisan and luxuriant interactions of a government he believed was insufficiently unified in defense of Britain's interests.

Smollett critiques the court as a chaotic and disordered partisan government. The mob, the only body politic that can emerge from the distribution of rights and political power, is an unruly, multi-headed composite body without the capacity for clear speech. If the court appears as a "dream of chaos," members of the Japanese court describe the general population as "a many headed monster," "a Cerberus that must have a sop" and "a wild beast so ravenous that nothing but blood will appease its appetite" (35). Although this aggregate body makes many heads and mouths, scaling up to the crowd does not produce legibility. Instead, engaging composite bodies exacerbates whims and appetites.

The mob, characterized as a beast with many heads, never speaks. Instead it "growl[s] and grumble[s]" to express its appetites and protest inactivity. Near the end of the *Atom*, enraged by a perceived betrayal, the hydra mob is reduced to "howl[ing] for three days and three nights successively at [the first minister's] gate" (127). This unsustainable, animal noise is silenced by the responsive body: "then [the Beast] was seized by a convulsion, that went off with an evacuation upwards and downwards, so offensive, that the very air was infected" (128). The mob remains a voiceless, infectious beast, emphatically comprised of a belly, bowls, and uncountable, unspeaking heads, in a grotesque parody of the collective body of a functional state. Its powers, such as they are, lie in its ability to create a physical ruckus.

The distribution of political power taking place across the *Atom*'s plot – catering to mob politics or demands for increased political participation – produces a hellish world for Smollett, one in which all parties are more miserable than before. In the atom's account of Japan, human



speech is minimally powerful. Indeed, in the *Atom*'s closing pages, as the taxes of the mid-1760s and the close of the Seven Years War approach, the "Legion," hydra, Cerberus, mob "began to have some sense of its own miserable condition." The pacifying speeches offered by government officials trail off, and the Legion deflates, "leaving a hideous lankness and such a canine appetite as all the eatables in Japan could not satisfy" (129).<sup>45</sup> The mob does not disperse into its components, individual people or atoms who speak or reason for themselves. Pure appetite remains. This many-headed and miserable body politic, far removed from the model of organizing sovereign offered by the *Leviathan*'s frontispiece, is driven by whim and want. Smollett's critique argues that the alternative to the model of sovereignty Hobbes offers is not the deliberative order of a Lockean body politic but the revolting disorder of an unruly monster.

The *Louse*'s critique of large-scale politics rests not so much on inevitable material chaos as on the patent absurdity of revolutionary political values. As the previous section illustrates, the *Louse* unfolds a critique of both revolutionary values and Franklin as their champion. This critique emphasizes parasitism, casting revolutionary politics as unable to fulfill their own promise. Rather than depicting the disordered collective body politic that might emerge under such self-serving individuals, the *Louse* caricatures republican values by reducing them to the miniature. The unnamed louse begins his narrative in the preface of the *Louse* with a lament at "the calamities and trials to which all living beings are exposed" (1). Having considered suicide, the louse declares that he has decided to continue living, facing hardship "with more intrepidity than was shown by the famous Romans, so boasted of in history, Brutus, Cassius, and the haughty Cato" (1). Claiming to outstrip the most famous of the Roman republicans, who, as

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<sup>45</sup> On the use of the figure of the hydra by imperial Britain, see *The Many Headed-Hydra*.

Julie Ellison has argued, were especially central to the construction of virtuous masculinity in the Age of Sensibility, the louse renders republican values ridiculous.<sup>46</sup>

The introductory pages of the *Louse* go on to claim not just republican senators but something like revolutionary values. The louse narrator claims to be a member of the “illustrious republic,” deeply indebted to his “fellow citizens.” Moving beyond his obsession with his personal misfortunes, the louse claims “I now live in a place of freedom, the life of a philosopher” (2). Indeed, the louse intends to rehearse his life to set himself up as a model for virtuous forbearance. Putting these revolutionary aspirations in the words of a louse, Delauney scales political and social relations down to make them laughable, rendering so-called revolutionaries myopic.<sup>47</sup>

If the louse caricatures republican values and plays out the potential political challenge posed by effluvious bodies and their parasites, the narrative’s Franklin centerpiece links these features specifically to the most visibly “American” celebrity in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. The world imagined by this satire is not quite the faceless slough of un-scaleable and unidentifiable teeming bodies imagined by Smollett a decade earlier. Instead, in the midst of Atlantic revolutionary upheaval and in its aftermath, the *Louse* emphasizes the link between disgusting bodies and unsavory revolutionary political ideals – their inability to structure a meaningful collective.

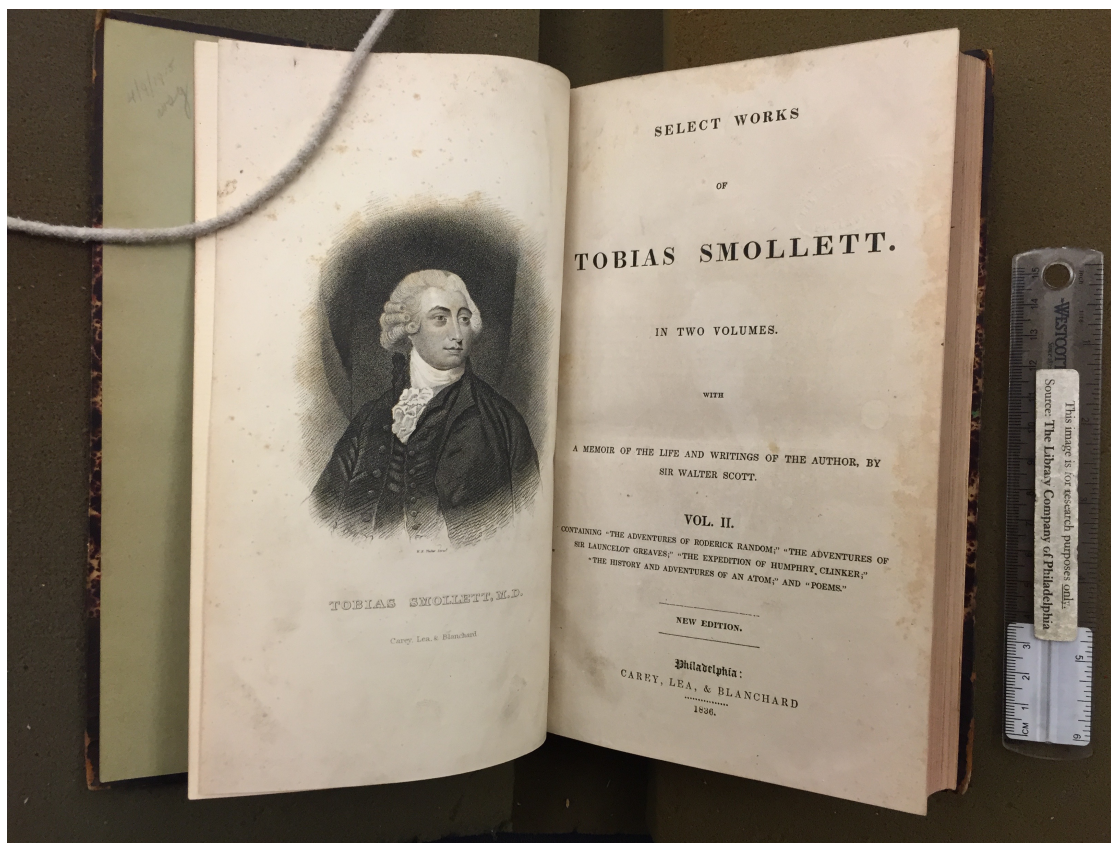
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<sup>46</sup> See Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion*.

<sup>47</sup> Franklin himself employs this tactic in “The Ephemera: An Emblem of Human Life.” In this brief piece, Franklin reflects on the meaning of life by refracting his view downward to “a little kind of fly, called an ephemera” whose endless chatter moralistically reminds readers of the smallness and shortness of their own lives. In the *Louse*, advocates of the American Revolution who invoke republicanism are the butt of the joke. See Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon: “The Ephemera,” 20 September 1778.

#### ***4. Parasites***

In their conceits and their content, these texts argue that a world with distributed political power and distributed narrative access would be a chaotic disaster – disorderly, disgusting, parasitic. Despite the critiques posed by Smollett and “Delauney” of popular, democratic, or revolutionary politics, the hellish state of affairs these political leanings might unleash, and the intensely negative view of parasitic entanglement these satires offer, these texts produce something in excess of those critiques. In their ongoing circulation in British North America and the United States, proliferating alongside cycling metaphors for the body politic and ongoing experiments in democratic government, these satires hold open a space for an alternative politics built around the parasitic entanglement of matter and bodies across space and scale. I have argued that these anti-revolutionary satires couch their political critiques in terms that resonate with the models of the body and the body politic produced by Locke and Hobbes. The alternative to sovereignty arranged by the king, these texts suggest, is not organized Lockean liberal politics but total disorder. If these satires are supposed to be warnings, they also register the possibility of a positive alternative politics. These satires offer a political imaginary that does not congeal or have a form. These minute, chattering narrators, spun off from the collective order of a larger body, model a politics structured around endless relay and reorganization and yielding no form at all. This model might be a positive turn inasmuch as it decenters the willful and consolidated person, emphasizing instead the dependence of any moment of individual being on a shifting milieu.



Title page of an edition of the *Select Works of Tobias Smollett in Two Volumes* published in Philadelphia in 1836. Volume 2 (pictured) included *The History and Adventures of an Atom*. Image courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia, used in accordance with LCP's research photo policy.

The *Atom* lasts. A nearly illegible satire about a government driven by anal stimulation that ends with the taxes that set the stage for the American Revolution, the text sticks around in the early national period with surprising tenacity. The text was still circulating widely when, in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in March 1814, John Adams wrote that “Philadelphia is the heart, the sensorium, the pineal gland of the United States.”<sup>48</sup> Adams had proposed using Hercules, who

<sup>48</sup> Adams to Jefferson, March 3, 1814. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence*, ed. Lester J. Cappon. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1988, p. 496.

cut off the hydra's many heads, on the United States' seal thirty years earlier.<sup>49</sup> Metaphors for the nation as a body manifested widely through the early national and antebellum periods, and literary figures from the Headless Horseman in Washington Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820) to the travelling spirit of Sheppard Lee in Robert Montgomery Bird's tale of perpetual metempsychosis (1833) concerned themselves with the appropriate head and mind for the national body.<sup>50</sup> What might, upon the atom's publication, have suggested a common notion of effluvial bodies gone amuck, sustains this materialist attention to queer, irrational movements of matter and their political challenges, which vibrate at the heart of even the most bourgeoisie political satire.

The *Louse* had a similarly prolonged circulation. As I have shown, the text was initially received in England, France, and British America during the American Revolutionary War as part of a wave of anti-Franklin propaganda. The *Louse* remained in circulation long after the bite of its satire had dwindled – after Franklin's maneuvering in France during the American Revolutionary War had made him a national hero, after the French Revolution had dramatically reconstituted French social and political life, after the Haitian Revolution had rekindled Philadelphians' fears about insurgent French revolutionary thinking, and into a moment when Franklin's deification was complete. It remained, perhaps, because it was ridiculous or a meaningful artifact of a foundational political conflict. But its long circulation also perpetuates the models of political personhood it suggests, even if only to dismiss them.

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker. *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Justine S. Murison links *Sheppard Lee* to Lockean notions of possessive individualism and the difficulty of maintaining rigid boundaries between persons and property in the face of American slavery.

Organized self-consciousness cannot survive the proliferating first-persons emergent in Nathaniel Peacock's mind, nor can consolidated self-aware personhood serve as the grounds for politics for the louse's hosts. This may not be such a bad thing. These narratives, couched explicitly against the emergence of a republicanism structured around individual rights, are able to see a new model for intertwined collective life more clearly than moderate advocates of republican rights, like Benjamin Franklin, or more radical advocates of the American Revolution. These assaults on Lockean consciousness open something more auspicious than political annihilation. To explore this possibility, I will turn to Michel Serres's *The Parasite*, in which Serres uses the concept of parasitism to theorize a political collective in which individual identity gives way to total relationality.

Serres is useful for locating what might exceed the intended critiques of the atom and louse narrators because he uses parasitism to rethink the status of the collective. As I am suggesting these satires do, but more clearly and deliberately, Serres offers a model outside of those offered by Locke or Hobbes. In a move that resonates surprisingly with the account of Hobbes's frontispiece I offered earlier in this chapter, Serres argues that the idea of a collective as an image of or structurally the same as the self is not a good one (124). Locke imagines this and theorizes a transaction in which the collective individual and the collective mirror one another, with similar organization remaining in place across scalar registers. This, Serres writes, is a mistake. Instead, he advocates that we should understand, imagine, and produce collectives via a model of parasites, which he also sometimes calls or "quasi-objects" (225-228). This term, "quasi-object," is useful because it identifies an intermediary zone between subjects and objects. Serres identifies quasi-objects as talismans that produce moments of subjectivity and join individuals – quasi-subjects, he might say – in a circuit of exchange.

In Serres' models of the collective, a charged quasi-object mitigates among a group of individuals. This quasi-object, not quite object, not quite subject, "when being passed, makes the collective, if it stops, it makes the individual" (225). Serres begins to outline the parameters of the parasite, the quasi-object, by using the example of the ball. The ball is a literal example – in a game, the players channel subjectivity through the charged quasi object of the ball to produce a collective. When Serres turns from the example to first-person pronouns, he seems to describe a model of collectivity that is not quite literal but aspirational – a better model than imagining the collective as a vision of the self. Serres describes this desired collective like this: "We are precisely the moving back and forth of 'I.' The 'I' in the game is a token exchanged" (227). He elaborates on this tossing of identity from locus to locus as a politics of participation: "Participation is just that and has nothing to do with sharing, at least when it is thought of as a division of parts. Participation is the passing of the 'I' by passing. It is the abandon of my individuality or my being in a quasi-object that is only there to be circulated.... Being is abolished for relation" (228).

This production of a deeply mutually imbricated collective, what Serres might call an ecstatic, parasitic collective, resonates with the models of personhood opened by the *Atom* and the *Louse* for the purpose of critique. Here the passages with which this chapter began are again instructive. As the atom introduces itself, a part speaking from within Nathaniel Peacocks' skull, the first-person position is fractured, tossed from Peacock, who claims "I am Nathaniel Peacock" to the atom, who mimics his claim, "I am an atom." In the louse's account of his learning, his identity isn't tossed, exactly, from "I" to "I" to form a collective we, as in the atom's

introduction.<sup>51</sup> But his being, knowledge, and consciousness are deeply relational, as he takes on the “spirits” wafting from the brain of the host by whom he subsists.

The phenomenon of distributed identity, disparaged by these satires and linked to the possibility of a parasitic interrelation of beings, opens the possibility of a politics beyond liberalism. Writing about the potential political ramifications of diminishing personal identity and individual action in relationship to the propaganda flows of the eighteenth century, Russ Castronovo argues that liberal subjects “may be most revolutionary when they cease to be identified as subjects at all,” eschewing discrete individuality in order to facilitate revolutionary forms of circulation. In the case of a talking atom or a talking louse, the implications are somewhat different as the texts imagine a world in which human persons are displaced by smaller narrating entities.

These are accounts of overlapping, mutually constituted identity, in which the small parasite or the atom – a kind of parasite in that it is perpetually lodged in a larger body, never an independent entity and in that it is dependent on a human listener to make its voice known – has its identity constituted by a human person and then demands that the human person hear its story in turn. If Smollett and Delauney deride this overlapping, parasitic personhood as a chaotic alternative to Locke’s orderly model, we might view it instead as a locus of promise for thinking about the constitution of a lasting collective not dependent on individuation. Both this threat and this promise are presented in the form of overlapping first-person prose narratives, in which the capacity for observation and speech are offered to surprisingly minute narrators. The

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<sup>51</sup> The atom’s impact here, of producing transient identity, resonates with Lucretius. As Kramnick writes, while for Locke consciousness describes “the ongoing subjective character of a person’s identity...[so that s]tates of consciousness...always track back to a person who is having them or to whom they belong,” for Lucretius, the person is “a transient affair” whose specificity does not persist over time.



status of personal narrative and the distinction between the inside and outside of the body are likewise at stake in these texts.

These satires invite us to consider what might be at stake in claiming to be nonhuman, and in the failure to maintain distinctions between human and nonhuman narrators. To locate this question even in antirevolutionary satires is to suggest how central such concerns were to the late eighteenth century. While the threat of disordered consciousness grounds these critiques, first-person prose need not always be tied to the need for ordered consciousness. Indeed these texts' narrators are capable observers, even as they distort human consciousness. The next chapter of this project also considers what is at stake in claiming to be nonhuman, locating this question more precisely in a system of first-person empirical observation.

**First-Person Salamanders:  
Benjamin Rush, Nonhuman Beings, and First-Person Prose<sup>52</sup>**

***Introduction***

In 1812, Benjamin Rush wrote about a patient who had tried to set the hospital on fire. When questioned about his actions, the patient responded confidently, “I am a salamander.” The salamander patient refused to offer any additional explanation for his behavior. Perhaps surprisingly, his physician, a member of Rush’s medical staff, did not challenge this patient’s claim to nonhuman identity. Rush’s account of the salamander case and its resolution is brief:

Some years ago a maniac made several attempts to set fire to our hospital. Upon being remonstrated with, by Mr. Coats, one of its managers he said, “I am a salamander;” “but recollect (said Mr. Coats) all the patients in the hospital are not salamanders;” that is true, said the maniac, and never afterwards attempted to burn the hospital. Many similar instances of transient return of reason, and some of cures, by pertinent and well directed conversations, are to be met with in the records of medicine. (206)

The salamander patient’s case history appears in *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind*, a text that was a culminating reflection on Rush’s career as a physician in Philadelphia.<sup>53</sup> Rush had joined the medical staff at Pennsylvania Hospital in 1783 and was the

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<sup>52</sup> A version of this chapter is forthcoming in *Early American Literature*.

<sup>53</sup> *Diseases* became a cornerstone of the asylum reform movement in the United States and the standard text in its field in the Americas. It was regarded as the first major U.S. contribution to psychiatry and was reprinted regularly through the mid-nineteenth century and then again in the

head of the hospital's mental health ward, the first of its kind in the U.S.<sup>54</sup> The exchange between Pennsylvania Hospital's salamander patient and his physician invites us to consider the uncertainty around the category of the human person that appears in the layered first-person prose of *Diseases of the Mind*.

This chapter develops a focus on first-person prose to identify what Rush's practice can offer to scholars concerned with personhood and the relationship between humans and nonhumans. In the context of this project, this chapter offers a detailed analysis of the ways observational prose produced knowledge, while also considering the gaps and affordances this prose system offered for negotiating personhood. First-person claims about experience and illness were an important way of both generating medical knowledge and regulating human personhood at the turn of the nineteenth century. "Person" designates an individual or entity with standing for valid public speech, and personhood often endows individuals and entities with rights and recognition.<sup>55</sup> Demonstrating one's fitness for recognition as a human person often depends on demonstrating well-ordered and appropriate interiority. Rather than defining personhood – and the parameters for effective speech – narrowly, in *Diseases of the Mind*, Rush accepts a surprising spectrum of first-person claims as valid. In his eagerness to incorporate patients' accounts into his practice, generating knowledge and facilitating practical solutions, Rush emphasizes outward behaviors over interior life. Rush's system for organizing disease also reflects these priorities: he favors approaching diseases by symptom, rather than cause, and

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twentieth century (Fox and Rush, *Letters*, especially 1132, n. 6.).

<sup>54</sup> Bell writes about the emergence of the mental health ward at Pennsylvania Hospital and other similar institutions (esp. 28). For more on the history of Pennsylvania Hospital and the role of public health in early national politics, see Finger.

<sup>55</sup> In a legal context, human beings do not always count as persons, and persons are not always human beings. For an examination of the ways humans and nonhumans come into personhood under the law, see Dayan.

advocates for practitioners to focus their treatment around symptom alleviation.<sup>56</sup> External manifestations supersede interior causes. In Rush's practice, the "I" his produce is valuable not because of what it reveals about their subjective interiority but because of the information it provides about symptoms – a category that for Rush can include things like pulse and fever but also behaviors and emotions. *Diseases* renders all first-person reporting as potentially useful medical evidence, transforming patients' claims, even those that seem to be about identity, into observations that are calculable as data and treatable as symptoms. This focus on symptoms makes social and scientific authority available to a wide range of testifiers, sometimes including those who claim to be nonhumans, even salamanders.

Rush's pragmatic acceptance of first-person testimony relies on a seemingly paradoxical "impersonal" attitude towards first-person reporting.<sup>57</sup> In line with Rush's approach, this

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<sup>56</sup> Madden describes Rush's rejection of "the taxonomic practices" of other famous physicians. Instead, "Rush asserts that disease 'refutes' these [taxonomic and nosological] categories by refusing to remain in them; disease combines and changes form as it moves from place to place. Rush's teaching is a simpler system, one that classifies by surface symptoms and then attempts to maintain balance and order in the nervous system through stimulation or reduction in stimuli. As he explains, a person need know neither the classification of disease nor its root cause but rather the effect on the system in order to know how to treat it" (255-6). Rush also writes critically about nosology in "On the Causes Which Have Retarded the Progress of Medicine," *Sixteen Introductory Lectures*, 153.

<sup>57</sup> My analysis of Rush draws on Michael Warner's influential notion of normative impersonality as a feature of the early American press. Warner argues that readers in the early republic did not understand themselves to be "receiving a direct communication" from an individual author when consuming print. Instead, readers "incorporate[d] into the meaning of the printed object an awareness of the potentially limitless others who may also be reading" (xiii). The normative impersonality of print allowed writers to evacuate their personal identities and produce valid public critique. Warner, *The Letters of the Republic*, 1990. Sarah Irving's elaboration of the role of natural philosophy's impersonal norms in the production of public knowledge brings Warner's claims closer to my own interests. Irving emphasizes "a close relationship between credible scientific knowledge and political order" (77), which aligns with my own argument about first-person prose and the production of expansive observational opportunities. Cameron advances a theory of impersonality focused on the dissolution of individual personhood rather than on rhetorical norms.

chapter uses “impersonal” to describe a pragmatic approach that values first-person prose not as an avenue for delving into interior life but instead a symptom report that contributes to medical knowledge. In Rush’s practice, two iterations of impersonality come together. *Medical Inquiries and Observations Upon the Diseases of the Mind* is impersonal inasmuch as it strips first-person prose from a focus on psychic life in Rush’s own writing and in the many texts he cites as evidence, including patient letters and literary anecdotes. *Diseases* also illustrates the curious impersonality with which Rush treats his patients, whose claims about their identities Rush often does not contest. Even when he responds to patients’ claims with violence, Rush does not directly intervene in patient’s claims about identity or forms of self-understanding. In *Diseases*, impersonality is a mode of writing *and* of reading and interacting with patients. This mode facilitates the pragmatic acceptance of all persons who behave appropriately, regardless of their self-understanding. The repetition of first-person claims in *Diseases of the Mind* does not lead to fixed, legible subject positions or a rich account of psychic life. Instead, first-person claims are often accepted as evidence without any corresponding assumptions about interior life.

One avenue for approaching Rush’s work might be to focus on the case study, a core genre in medical writing. Case studies sometimes include patients’ first-person narration but often do not. In this chapter, I focus instead on first-person prose, which requires an encounter with the speech of both physicians and patients.<sup>58</sup> *Diseases of the Mind* focuses heavily on first-person observation. Although nearly every page of *Diseases* includes first person claims, this fact has scarcely been noted in scholarship about Rush’s work. This feature positions *Diseases* and

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<sup>58</sup> In “The Patient’s View: Doing Medical History from Below” (1985), Porter argues for “an alternative medical history, largely written from the patient’s point of view” (176). Porter also emphasizes the active role of patients, who often acted as agents in their own care with “initiative, resilience, and the capacity to play the system” (194). My argument accounts for both Rush’s attitude towards patients’ voices and the ways patients themselves might have manipulated his system of care.

others texts like it as a crucial component of the developing tradition of American first-person prose. The text models a relationship between different kinds of first-person narration, and between speaking patients and the physicians who take patients' testimony into consideration as evidence. Rush's citation practice gives particularly notable status to patients' own first-person accounts of their illnesses. As an influential text that participates in a rich culture of medical writing, *Diseases* sheds light not just on Rush's relationship with specific patients, but also on a broader attitude towards observational authority and interior life in the early United States. The text itself is an archive of first-person reporting.

Rush frequently took into consideration patients' understandings of their own illnesses, adapting his cures to the cases he encountered. Rush most often adapted his treatment to patients' claims when patients demonstrated coherent, logical systems of behavior. When patients made potentially disruptive claims about identity and experience, Rush's interventions were often violent. For instance, Rush approvingly cites cases in which physicians kicked those who claimed to be footstools or dogs, urinated on those who claimed to be plants, and offered to bleed to death those who were suicidal. As Justine S. Murison argues, these violent responses "attempted to remind patients of their personhood," using violence and degradation to "force them to give up the idea that their bodies were turning into the pets or household objects surrounding them" (33).<sup>59</sup> These treatments "dr[o]ve a wedge between the patient and his identification with and internalization of the things surrounding him, suggesting an anti-sentimental medical solution to improperly conceived sympathies with the external world" (33). What remains surprising, however, are the moments in which Rush enters a patient's logic and

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<sup>59</sup> Murison writes about Rush's hypochondriacal patients. Bell shows how Rush's treatment of suicidal patients could also involve violently pursuing patients' own logics. Like the salamander case, these cases involve accepting patients' seemingly preposterous identity claims as the ground for further action.

does *not* respond with the violent insistence on appropriate personhood. Such is the case of the salamander man.

The salamander patient's claim to nonhuman identity is permissible for Rush because it can be incorporated into the system of first-person reporting on which his practice relies. His task is not to consider why the salamander patient claims this identity, or to convince him otherwise. Instead, Rush's task is to engage the salamander patient on the patient's own terms, negotiating a pragmatic behavioral fix. This relative disinterest in intervening in interior life is particularly notable because managing consciousness and other forms of interiority became an increasingly central operation of normative power in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>60</sup> As new forms of attention to interiority emerged in this period, new ways of representing psychic life emerged in fiction,<sup>61</sup> and first-person prose was often an avenue for experimenting with influential forms of personhood, consciousness, and self-reflection.<sup>62</sup> My intervention is less to further explore the history of interiority than to make clear the ways Rush's prose turns *away from* intervening in self-understanding or focusing on deep-seated causes of mental disease. Reconfiguring patients' self-understanding is often unimportant in Rush's

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<sup>60</sup> Foucault makes this argument in *Discipline and Punish*. Castiglia argues that in the U.S., "*federal affect* helped recast the bodily coercions of government as the apparently voluntary and internally managed orders of what Foucault calls governmentality, an interior state that is both consensual and self-managing." This process displaced social and political volatility by "moving them *inward* into the privatized spaces of the new middle-class home and, more insistently, within the politicized spaces of the bodily interior" (3). Castiglia also offers a helpful overview in "Interiority."

<sup>61</sup> Lynch contends that a new reading practice attending to novelistic characters' inner lives emerged alongside market transformations in the late eighteenth century, as readers were invited to shore up their subjectivity by "plumb[ing] the depths" of both themselves and the characters they encountered (116).

<sup>62</sup> Keenleyside argues that *Tristram Shandy* plays out competing models of Lockean personhood. In refusing to separate biographical from biological life, Keenleyside argues that Sterne theorizes human personhood as a self-narrating "first-person form" of life, forged in the ongoing process of narrating itself to itself (126, 128).

medical discourse, which sometimes accepts claims to nonhuman identity without objection. While Rush intends to restore these patients to appropriate behavioral norms, he also inadvertently facilitates patients' reconfiguration of human personhood, such that claims to nonhuman identity do not negate the possibility of being recognized as a person.

This chapter begins with two sections analyzing the rhetorical structure of Rush's work and his practice of incorporating patients' first-person accounts into *Diseases*. The argument then considers the ways patients leverage other forms of knowledge within and against this system, as in the case of the salamander patient and in a case involving enslaved Africans in Jamaica whose bodies are desecrated as a warning against dirt eating. Rush's impersonal citation practice allows the salamander's claim to nonhuman identity to circulate unopposed, as a valuable description of symptoms. This patient mobilizes a long popular tradition linking salamanders with fire bolster his authority, and Rush does not object. By accepting patients' claims as valuable and circulating patients' voices, Rush's practice often distributes first-person authority, both in print and in conversation. I link the salamander's successful claim to nonhuman identity with an account of terroristic violence against enslaved people to make evident both the possibilities for renegotiating human personhood that are embedded in Rush's practice and the violent limitations around humanness, personhood, and authority that persist, especially for enslaved people. Despite the violence Rush condones and produces, his attitude towards first-person claims expands the possibilities for effective speech and writing. A person who is also a salamander can participate in the production of medical knowledge without understanding himself as a human being, and the category of the human is destabilized as the ground for rhetorical participation.



## 1. *Rush*

Understanding Rush's attitude towards first-person testimony requires some context for thinking about insanity in the early United States. Concerns about the sustainability of rational human life in colonial climates were the subject of widespread international dialogue from the earliest days of European colonization in North America. Europeans were intensely concerned about climate-driven transformations of both body and mind and the animalization or altered racialization of white European colonials in an American context (see Parrish, Ch. 2). At the turn of the nineteenth century, madness became an especially pressing concern because of the perceived increase in instances of insanity in the wake of the American, French, and Haitian revolutions.<sup>63</sup> If the new U.S. was afflicted by widespread insanity, government by rational citizen-subjects would be impossible. Rush and his peers believed that insanity was a potentially far-reaching problem because diseases of the mind, like other diseases, could be caused by a vast range of triggers, including intense personal and political events and climate. Rush viewed madness as essentially an arterial disease caused by an increase or decrease of pressure in the blood vessels of the brain (17).<sup>64</sup> Rush's mission was to intervene and restore balance in patients' minds so that they could become functional members of American society. Because the mind and body were closely interrelated systems, and because madness could result from any number

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<sup>63</sup> Rush expressed concern about diseases caused by revolution, although he was characteristically equivocal about the prevalence of revolutionary madness. As Altschuler writes, "Rush feared contagious revolutionary energies. He actively spread such energies during the American Revolution, but post-Revolution he could not decide: On one hand, he feared the return of French energies claiming 'revolutions in governments' provoked 'Revolutiana' and 'Anarchia' — American insanities. On the other, he proclaimed madness '[occurred] so rarely from political causes in the United States' that he knew 'but one instance of it.'" ("From Blood Vessels to Global Networks," 222). See also Bell, p. 310.

<sup>64</sup> For a detailed account of Rush's views on blood flow, see Altschuler, *Medical Imagination*, 26.

of apparently unrelated physical and psychological traumas, Rush advocated for a wide variety of treatments for insanity, some peaceable and others violent.

In focusing on first-person reporting, this chapter draws attention to the parts of *Diseases of the Mind* that are concerned with observation and experience. The history of empirical observation in both the natural sciences and medical practice provides essential context for analyzing this collation of first-person observational reports. Rush is usually identified as a medical rationalist, working out from a universal medical theory that all illness was caused by problems with blood flow. Rush persistently warns against the dangers of empirical observation without sufficient guiding principles in place to organize accumulated knowledge (*Sixteen Introductory Lectures*, 164-5, 360-1). But rationalistic systems of inquiry also relied on firsthand sensory observation, and the conflict between empiricist and rationalist perspectives was often one of degrees rather than kinds: what proportion of observation and what proportion of theory produce the most effective medical practices (Warner, *Therapeutic System* and King 20)?<sup>65</sup>

In considering Rush in relationship to empirical observation and its attendant forms of first-person prose, I don't mean to identify Rush as an "empiricist" in the sense of the debates between empiricism and rationalism in eighteenth-century medicine.<sup>66</sup> Instead, my aim is to analyze the forms of agency that are preserved in the collation of empirical observational reports,

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<sup>65</sup> In medical practice at the turn of the nineteenth century, rationalism usually identifies forms of medical practice in which observations are subsumed by a universal medical theory. In its positive connotation, empiricism usually describes a practice in which firsthand observation is the primary driver, while theoretical principles of care are secondary or absent. Critiquing a practitioner as an "empiric" means they're a quack. Rationalism and empiricism, however, have a convoluted history and multiple meanings. By the 1820s, "[b]oth could mean discriminating or mechanical, professional or quackish, scientific or ignorant; they were synonyms and antonyms of each other and of themselves" (Warner, *The Therapeutic Perspective*, 45).

<sup>66</sup> My argument is also not meant to contest or re-date the rise of radical empiricism as the dominant orientation of medical practice in the United States. The emergence of empiricism as a corrective against rationalistic systems occurs after Rush's death, as American physicians increasingly acquire French education in the 1820s (Warner, *Against the Spirit of System*).

even in Rush's system-focused practice. Rush's desire to collect evidence from many testifiers reproduces structures of first-person observational prose that open unexpected avenues for authority for patients. In accounting for Rush's rationalism as the driving focus behind this observational collation, I bear in mind Sari Altschuler's recent call for medical histories that move beyond the history of empiricism.

In *Diseases*, Rush's first-person voice usually guides the reader through his observations about his patients. He uses the first person incessantly, but his own interior life and personal experience are relatively unimportant to this usage. Rush himself is precisely not the point. He writes, for example, "I infer from the increased secretion and even discharge of bile," "I shall now deliver an opinion," "I shall enumerate some of the impressions," "I have once seen the body of a Russian officer," and "I have frequently observed the languor and depression of mind which occur in the evening of life, to be relieved by the variety of incidents" represented in the Bible (15, 17, 38, 96, 124). At this grammatical level, in these sentences, the predicate is more important than the subject. Although each of these phrases begins with "I," the symptoms and pathologies that follow are far more important. Rush's first-person voice is impersonal and persistent: phrases like these appear on almost every page of *Diseases*. This text falls into a genre based around intellectual performance, which is governed by phrases like "I object," "I infer," and "I should perceive," alongside empirical observation's perpetual "I have observed." These phrases indicate a first-person position that is about illustrating skill or accumulating knowledge, rather than demonstrating personality or interiority.<sup>67</sup> In some ways, this context is akin to that of the disembodied public sphere Michael Warner describes, populated by normatively impersonal speakers: the "I" serves as a place-holder, one that validates the following text without

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<sup>67</sup> While physicians' moral standing impacted early American medicine in many ways, in *Diseases*, character (moral standing) and interiority (psychic life) are irrelevant in the majority of the prose.

requiring a specific, personally known individual to attach himself in all his eccentricity to each observation.<sup>68</sup> In this context, however, the purpose of impersonal prose is not to facilitate debate about civic matters but to aggregate knowledge in a circuit of exchange.

Scholars are decidedly split about the legacy of Rush's practice. As Sari Altschuler and Christopher J. Bilodeau write in their introduction to a recent issue of *Early American Studies* devoted to Rush, Rush is "usually cast as hero or villain" (234). In scholarship and even in his own autobiography, Rush's life appears as "jumbled and episodic" and is in perpetual tension with itself (235).<sup>69</sup> Michael Meranze and other scholars have drawn on Michel Foucault to illuminate Rush's contribution to the production of expert medical knowledge and docile citizen subjects in the early republic.<sup>70</sup> Even as he produced and policed virtue, however, Rush preserved opportunities for popular participation in his practice.<sup>71</sup> It is this second impulse towards pragmatic inclusion and collective participation that grounds Rush's attitude towards patient voices in *Diseases*.

Rush participated in the widespread conflict over appropriate first-person speech and the

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<sup>68</sup> Warner does not make his argument in terms of first-person speech. The public print sphere he describes, however, is often about establishing a nonspecific subject position – an avenue for impersonal first-person speech – capable of reaching out to an abstract, unnumbered implicit audience composed of normatively impersonal fellow citizens. Madden writes about Rush's rhetorical construction from a different perspective, emphasizing his self-promotion.

<sup>69</sup> This doubleness is not uncommon in Rush's work. For example, Rosenfeld tracks the tension between popular participation and expert restraint in Rush's two views of common sense.

<sup>70</sup> Altschuler and Bilodeau give a helpful overview of Meranze's arguments (237). See also Meranze, *Laboratories of Virtue* and Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*. Delboug and Terrell also position Rush as a conservative, normativizing agent.

<sup>71</sup> Rush also explores alternative political possibilities in other ways. Allewaert identifies Rush's attention to densely contextualized systems or ecologies that produce life, death, and "the movements of matter" and argues that Rush's attention to parts opens the possibility for a radical anarchy of forms, which disrupts notions of identity and self-similarity. Allewaert suggests this possibility is never realized in Rush and is instead held in check by analogy. See p. 54-63.

parameters of scientific authority in American medicine at the turn of the century. He wrote and practiced in a period before professionalized medical care was dominant in the U.S. Professional physicians were in perpetual conflict with lay practitioners and public knowledge. In an era prior to established professional medicine, educated physicians were not guaranteed pride of place in the treatment of patients or the production of print matter about diseases, whether physical or mental. As Thomas A. Horrocks and others have argued, lay people were generally highly suspicious of professional medicine in the eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth century (Horrocks 67-89, Rosner 27-28). Alternative therapies thrived, both in individuals' personal practices and in the vibrant popular print culture devoted to disseminating medical knowledge.

In some ways, Rush resisted the broad distribution of medical authority in the early U.S. For instance, Rush was not enthusiastic about the *Medical Repository*, the first medical journal published in the United States, because the publication distributed medical authority too widely, allowing too many people to participate in medical debate and focusing on circulating information rather than systemic principles.<sup>72</sup> Although Rush disapproved of the *Medical Repository*, in other ways he embraced the broad distribution of medical authority. He eagerly published his recommendations in popular publications, and his letters articulate his desire to have his medical advice spread widely among readers from all social backgrounds (see for

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<sup>72</sup> The *Medical Repository* is usually considered a more democratic experiment in extending and collecting medical knowledge, and Rush's opposition to the publication is read as an indication of his more conservative politics. While the *Medical Repository* sought to broaden the scope and speed of medical discussion in the U.S., its focus was not on elevating patients' voices or legitimizing first-person patient accounts, which is the facet of distributed authority I am interested in here. The journal includes patient letters extremely infrequently. See Kahn and Kahn and Altschuler, *Medical Imagination* Ch. 2.

example Rush to the Humane Society of Massachusetts, 7 March 1793, *Letters* vol. 2, 629).<sup>73</sup>

Rush argued against publishing medical work in Latin for similar reasons (“Upon the Causes Which Have Retarded the Progress of Medicine,” *Sixteen Introductory Lectures*, 142). Most importantly, Rush responded to and reproduced his patients’ own accounts of their illnesses in his practice. In these ways, Rush consciously built his authority in conjunction with the voices of lay people and patients. One way of preserving professional authority in such a complex medical climate was to selectively share that authority with others, including non-professional practitioners and patients themselves.

If Rush intended to open his practice to public and patient participation in order to pragmatically distribute his own knowledge and secure his professional position, his attitudes also inadvertently left open considerable space for his patients’ voices to circulate alternative ideologies. Because mental disease was associated with other forms of bodily illness, the medical authority offered to patients self-reporting about their illnesses could also be extended to ostensibly insane patients. Like other patients, patients suffering from diseases of the mind took advantage of this opportunity to produce authoritative first-person reports about their conditions and shape their care, both in person and in print.

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<sup>73</sup> Bell writes about Rush’s participation in public campaigns about how to resuscitate people from drowning, as a way of heading off suicide attempts. Rush’s participation in debates about Yellow Fever also involved public dialogue about health, illness, and treatment.

## 2. Letters

Rush's first-person prose appears in *Diseases* alongside letters from other physicians and from patients, who wrote to Rush from around the U.S. Inasmuch as Rush's medical practice involves collating and analyzing firsthand observations, included those provided in letters, it has a relationship to the natural history writing of the eighteenth and nineteenth century and the forms of empirical observation that emerge in natural historical contexts. Empiricism, the system of sensory inquiry that drove the New Science, was especially invested in the Americas. In America, where people and materials from all parts of the globe were brought together by colonialism and its violences, empirical observation could provide European scientific institutions with valuable and novel information about the natural world (Parrish, Iannini).<sup>74</sup> Hunger for this knowledge was so intense that, in practice, metropolitan science was willing to accept testimony about American nature from *any* observer (Parrish, especially 22).<sup>75</sup> In this way, empiricism produced a kind of authority for otherwise marginalized subjects in the Americas.

In natural historical contexts, empirical authority was produced and moderated through first-person testimony, delivered orally or in writing. The massive epistolary networks familiar to

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<sup>74</sup> See also Wisecup's consideration of overlapping medical knowledges and practices in sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century North America. Empiricism is not Wisecup's focus, but her work offers context for understanding conflict about disease, embodiment, and knowledge in early America, with particular emphasis on the exchange of medical knowledge among colonists, Native Americans, and Africans. Gómez produces a history of thinking about the natural world, sensory evidence, and embodiment in the Caribbean in ways that did not rely on or contribute to empirical frameworks (see p. 5).

<sup>75</sup> Parrish emphasizes the role of repeated observation in Baconian empiricism, which allowed non-Europeans and Anglo-colonial subjects to make use of their perceived and real familiarity with American flora and fauna. Rusert examines the ways African Americans continued to use scientific norms to generate authority in the nineteenth century, through what she calls "fugitive science." Rusert emphasizes the possibilities of "a radical empiricism that instead of selecting and rendering experience into static epistemological categories works to amplify experiences and build ever-proliferating connections and relations" (17-18).

scholars of the eighteenth century emerged in part from the desire to observe and catalog the natural world and the need to accumulate first-person testimony about objects both nearby and remote. The testimony of otherwise marginalized individuals often made its way into these letters and was subsequently ensconced as knowledge in the metropole.

Although the history of empiricism unfolds in unique ways in medical practice, Rush's attitude towards first-person observational reporting produces openings for action that are similar to those made available in natural historical contexts. The epistolary practices that dominate eighteenth-century natural history also influence medical contexts. Leading physicians often carried out consultations by letter and relied on the authority of patients' self-observation to diagnose and treat illnesses at a distance.<sup>76</sup> Like other physicians, Rush accepted medical testimony from many observers whom he never met in person. In addition to corresponding with physicians and political men in the Americas and England, Rush corresponded widely with patients. The scope of this correspondence was expansive: Rush received letters from patients all up and down the East Coast, with ailments ranging from gout to hypochondria.<sup>77</sup>

Consultation by post extended empirically based first-person authority to a huge swathe of patients. These writers leveraged the norms of Rush's and other physicians' consultation practices to produce medically valid first-person accounts and participate actively in their own care. If sensory empiricism produced new agency for otherwise marginalized observers in natural historical contexts, Sarah Knott argues that Rush's epistolary medical consultation practice "accorded surprising agency to middling and elite patients who sought advice to fit their

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<sup>76</sup> Wild's study maps British medicine in the eighteenth century in relationship to a variety of literary discourses.

<sup>77</sup> Rush left behind one of the most extensive archives of incoming patient correspondence from the period. His letters are now housed in the Library Company of Philadelphia's collections at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



own self-knowledge” (664). As Knott notes in her analysis of Rush’s incoming correspondence, patients writing to Rush often “disregard[ed]...what related to theory or system” and instead produced letters that “involved embedding observation, reason, and sympathy into short but effective narrative” (659). Knott terms this practice “sentimental empiricism,” noting the way patients express their feelings alongside their observational accounts of symptoms. For Knott, these letters employ the twin discourses of sentimentality and empiricism to produce medical authority and narrative subjectivity.

As Knott’s work shows, empirically driven prose doesn’t always exclude the thoughts, feelings, and ideas we associate with personal identity and interior life. Indeed, across epistolary culture, the personal letter often promises a disclosure of interiority. In the context of *Diseases of the Mind*, however, the discourse of feeling works with and aims to legitimize observational accounts of symptoms. As Rush writes in his introduction, in the context of mental diseases, “more than [the] common [amount of] testimony is necessary to produce conviction” (vi). Rush’s patients account for their own feelings and experiences, as Rush himself does at moments in *Diseases* – but these details are meant to supplement and vindicate observations about illness, producing intellectual “conviction[s].” In the excerpts Rush cites in *Diseases*, the passing mention of an “I” facilitates the circulation of information that offers “testimony” about complex diseases. In a medical context in which the parameters around physical symptoms are so capaciously defined, Rush eagerly accepts all of these comments about experience as evidence of disease or its alleviation.

Even a formal medical text like *Diseases* reflects and reproduces the distribution of authority in popular print and epistolary medical consultation. Although we might expect formal medical treatises to produce a more unified form of narrative or medical authority, in fact, like other works from the period, *Diseases* cobbles together many forms of testimony under a

haphazard umbrella in order to accumulate as much knowledge about diseases of the mind as possible. Rush is invested in producing a medical system, but he preserves all kinds of observational claims in order to fill out examples across that system. This process involves integrating multiple forms of first-person prose, including Rush's claims and those of his patients, into a single volume.

If the use of observational first-person prose by Rush is typical, *Diseases* is atypical because of the extent to which Rush privileges patient voices, pairing his own rigorous observation with his patients' first-person speech. Rush includes several full patient letters in *Diseases*, explicitly placing his patients' first-person symptom narratives in the sphere of legitimate empirical observation. The framing of these letters is as important as their content. Rush devotes five pages in *Diseases* to a letter from a hypochondriac man in Virginia, dated January 5, 1801. It is included because of its informational value as an account of symptoms. As Rush writes, the "mixture of symptoms of hypochondria and hysteria," which he views as the product of a series of changes in blood pressure, "is described with great accuracy" in the Virginian's letter accounting for "the history of his own case" (86). The letter is useful because of its accurate account of symptoms, which Rush can coopt and elevate as medical evidence for his audience. In terms of content, this first-person letter is a diary of symptoms. The writer begins by describing his hypochondria claiming, in his most moving moment, "I am, as it were, all nerve" (87). He reports both physical and mental disorder:

I go to bed, but my mind is distressed, I get a little quiet and perhaps I am to rest... [but then] I hear my heart beat, and feel it thumping the whole night; my mind on fire, able to pursue no train of pleasant thought a moment; I get worse; despair; think of nothing but my wretched condition, till at last I lose several nights of sleep; my pulse is low and threaded, and at last nature makes an effort and gradually restores me. Such is almost

always my course. (88)

This writer's symptoms extend to "distress" and "despair," emotional states that register for Rush as signs of disease. In some ways, this letter describes the tortured inner life of the patient and seems therefore to be worth recuperating in terms of the history of subjectivity. But the extent to which this correspondent treats his mental state as a series of physical symptoms indicates the close relationship between body and mind in early American medicine. A "mind on fire" can be understood only in relationship to a "heart beat" "thumping" and a "pulse low and threaded." Paired with these notes about the pulse, observations about emotion describe the symptomatic pattern of an embodied illness. Mental states are conceived of in relationship to physical symptoms running through the body, and it is this combination of symptoms that is of interest to Rush. This patient's account appears as authoritative as the case studies Rush narrates, and as in Rush's own prose, the "I" serves as a vehicle for launching observations into the space of valid evidence. This valuable, "accura[te]" account explicitly addresses the usual pattern of symptoms in this disease and its habitual "course." As Rush frames this patient's letter as evidence embedded in a comprehensive volume, the patient's symptoms are about the disease and its patterns as much as they are about individual, personal experience. To read this letter with a focus on intervening in and correcting the writer's interior life would be a mistake not just because it would be labor intensive but because it would make this patient's disease and its cure exclusively self-referential, rather than collective and repeatable.

An account communicated to Rush by a clergyman, included shortly after the Virginian's letter, pushes this point further. In Rush's framing, even the clergyman's "extreme misery" and expressions of despair are rendered as an "awful symptom" (95). Sympathy has a role here. In reflecting on the clergyman's case and more extreme cases of despair that make patients suicidal, Rush writes that he is overtaken by the horror of cases so much that "I should lay down my pen,

and bedew my paper with tears, did I not know that the science of medicine has produced a remedy for it...Blessed science!" (97). As Altschuler argues, "Rush scripts reader sympathies for the mentally ill while also modeling how to feel," helping readers "form sympathetic bonds that would make them more likely to care for others and encourage them to be smarter about their own health" (*Medical*, 32). Physicians' and readers' sympathy are part of the landscape *Diseases* produces around the supposedly insane. These exclamations, however, often turn the reader back towards the observational narrative patterns that govern the rest of Rush's truncated case histories. Making use of the clergyman's account as medical evidence means engaging its contents as a pattern of treatable symptoms, rather than continuing to speculate about his interior life. The clergyman's and other despairing and suicidal patients' "state of mind" might be "incomprehensible," but this inscrutability doesn't prevent his first-person claims from serving as useful medical evidence or from shaping possible cures for his condition.

Incorporating letters from private correspondence in a formal medical volume preserves the agency of patients that is established in epistolary consultation practice, but scrapes away some of the focus on sentimental agency central to those individual epistolary exchanges. Rather than emphasizing the individual narrative components of case a history, Rush recirculates first-person accounts with an emphasis on their description of symptoms.<sup>78</sup> Prioritizing description over narrative history, Rush shifts the grounds for participation. The purpose of these letters, joined with the other forms of evidence included in *Diseases*, is to expand the scope of Rush's practice. Rush accomplishes this in part by opening the position of appropriate medical testifier

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<sup>78</sup> Berlant describes the case as an enigmatic occasion "that requires judgment," one that "is always normative but also always a perturbation in the normative." In order to internalize these cases as sites of evidence that support his unifying principles, Rush moves away from the focus on personal history and development that often defines the case as genre. Class offers a helpful overview of the long history of the case as well as new approaches to the genre, while Pomata offers an analysis of the case as an "epistemic genre" central to knowledge production.

to those with information to offer, however disordered their self-understanding may be. Opting not to focus on deep-seated interior causes makes it possible for Rush to treat immediate symptoms and for patients' voices to contribute to both knowledge and patterns of care.

Rush's engagement with his patients' accounts of themselves relies on his ability to read their first-person claims as pieces of evidence that can be incorporated into his knowledge base. In treating patients' accounts this way, Rush takes even identity claims – claims structured around the premise that “I am” a salamander or some other entity, rather than the framework of “I observed” – at face value. In the cases of the Virginian and the clergyman, Rush's investment in collating symptoms allows him to glean useful material from writers whose interior lives and personal identities are disordered. In other instances, the application of impersonal attitudes inadvertently destabilizes allows the ground the “I” rests on and the category of human personhood itself.

### 3. *Conversation, or, First-Person Salamanders*

So far, I have shown that Rush's practice draws on epistolary culture and extends agency in part by embracing a broad spectrum of first-person observational reports about illness. This pattern of distribution appears even in a formal medical volume, which we might expect to consolidate the physician's agency over and above that of patients. Epistolary culture makes visible the distinction between private first-person disclosure and impersonalized, shared epistemological authority as letters move from personal exchange into publication. Letter writers exhibit agency by describing their symptoms, and letters can be strategically excerpted for citation, illustrating the interaction between patients' voices and Rush's value system. But Rush's attention to patients' reports extends far beyond replicating letters. At times, the distribution of authority in *conversation* between patients and physicians mirrors the distribution of authority in *print* in Rush's practice. Contrary to the form of impersonal speech outlined by Michael Warner, which is ensconced in print, the forms of impersonality circulating in Rush's practice exceed print exchange and even personal letters. Impersonality describes an attitude towards testimony that eschews concerns with self-understanding in order to make use of first-person claims produced in conversation as well.

Rush makes his pragmatic attitude around patient testimony explicit, and he prescribes it to others too, writing that however preposterous "a patient's opinion of his case may be, his disease is a *real* one" (106, original italics). Physicians must, therefore, "listen with attention to [patients'] tedious and uninteresting details of [their diseases'] symptoms and causes."<sup>79</sup> Because

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<sup>79</sup> Rush also emphasizes that a patient "should be faithful in communicating to his physician the history of the cause of his disease" and selected information about symptoms in his lecture "On the Duties of Patients to Their Physicians." See *Sixteen Introductory Lectures*, 321-3. On the power of patient narratives in earlier medical contexts see Fissell.

of his interest in accumulating as many “details of symptoms and causes” as possible and his desire to keep patients invested in dialogue with physicians, Rush defends patients’ right to narrate their own experiences of their bodies. This means that Rush sometimes privileges irrational or challenging patient accounts over the advice of physicians and other ostensibly sane interlocutors. That patients could make a wide variety of claims and have those claims accepted relies on both distributed first-person authority and a pragmatic attitude towards care. Although Rush calls these reports “tedious and uninteresting,” he also takes them very seriously.<sup>80</sup> Rush allows patients to speak and makes use of their speech. This pragmatic gesture, which is intended to expand medical knowledge, also inadvertently opens possibilities for challenging the parameters of human personhood. The patients Rush sees in person may be beyond the ability to write measured, coherent letters accounting for their symptoms – but Rush considers their voices anyway. This move resembles the privileging of usually unimportant narrators in the quest for knowledge about the natural world and in Rush’s archive of incoming patient correspondence (see Parrish, Knott). Rush’s commitment to disease management creates a similar opening for unexpected narrators. Even those who are unable to participate in epistolary culture or adhere to the norms of empirical expression can participate in knowledge making and shape their care by offering useful accounts of their symptoms.

Tracking the concessions Rush is willing to make in order to expand the pool of testifiers about disease reflects larger possibilities inherent in his vision of republican politics. If *Diseases* is an archive of Rush’s practice, it is also an archive of political possibility. As Eric Herschthal writes in his analysis Rush’s abolitionist politics, Rush routinely “shaped medical and scientific

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<sup>80</sup> I join Vallee in reading Rush’s attitude as a genuine opportunity for patients to direct their own care.

debates to advance political arguments” (275).<sup>81</sup> His investment in patients’ own logics and testimonies likewise has political ramifications, both as Rush intended and as exceed his intent. While Rush may have intended to open medical practice to patient participation only enough to glean relevant information for care or only in order to make medicine available to rational civic participants, the rhetorical structure of *Diseases* also implies a more flexible attitude around the parameters of social and political participation generally.

In the conversations reproduced in *Diseases*, even more emphatically than in the epistolary examples, Rush and his colleagues respond to diseases of the mind by taking patients’ claims at face value. Patients’ claims about their identities and their behavioral expressions of these claims are the ground for intervention. Even when Rush responds violently to patients’ claims to be nonhuman, he accepts those claims as a starting place for treatment. As I outline in the introduction to this chapter, utilizing a patient’s logic to structure a cure is a common part of Rush’s practice. For instance, Rush advocates taking a patient’s claim to be a plant seriously, treating a patient as a plant rather than trying to understand the psychic patterns that produce this identification (110). In the case of the plant patient and other similar cases, Rush advocates using violence and deprivation to insist that patients behave as human persons. In the case of the patient who claims to be a salamander, however, Rush accepts the patient’s first person claim as evidence without responding violently. Although both of these instances involve ceding ground to the patient’s logic, they do not all afford patients equal power. In the case of the salamander in particular, I argue that we should attend to Rush’s intention *and* to the especially surprising content of the patient’s claim, which continues to circulate in *Diseases*.

The salamander example opens an opportunity for the patient to reconfigure the

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<sup>81</sup> Altschuler also links Rush’s medical theories to politics, arguing that Rush’s emphasis on circulation in his medical practice mirrors his emphasis on open networks of exchange as central to the health of the nation. See “From Blood Vessels to Global Exchange Networks.”



boundaries of the human person in vividly nonnormative terms, threading a nonhuman identity through personhood a side of valid speech. In this example, the entirety of which is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Rush describes a patient accused of attempting to burn down Pennsylvania Hospital. Rush also records this patient's treatment. In response to physicians' accusations that he has committed arson, the patient defends himself by responding, simply, "I am a salamander." This does not seem like a particularly convincing defense. But Rush responds impersonally inasmuch as he advocates against treating this response as an identity claim that would be best addressed by convincing this patient he is a human being. The following paragraphs draw on the first-person prose contexts I have unfolded in this chapter to understand how and why Rush accepts such an unlikely claim as useful evidence and the implications of that acceptance.

While I continue to analyze the rhetorical norms of Rush's practice through the rest of this chapter, I shift my focus towards the perspectives of patients who shape their care by leveraging both their experiences and the popular narratives in which they are immersed. This shift also makes it possible to more fully attend to the relationship between human and nonhuman and the category of the person as a valid first-person speaker. As many critics have rightly pointed out, anxiety about the slippage between persons and animals or things reflects the intensifying social and cultural pressures on the category of the human person at the end of the eighteenth century, especially the ongoing prominence of the Atlantic slave economy, slavery in the Americas, and the increasing magnitude of circulating goods in the Atlantic World. Critics offer compelling accounts of the ways forms of figuration like personification and anthropomorphism register anxiety around the status of the human (Johnson), and the ways fictional accounts of the human body acknowledge the ideological rifts at the heart of the Atlantic slave economy (Murison, especially Ch. 1). The discrepancy between the salamander, who

successfully reconfigures human personhood, and this chapter's final example, involving dirt eaters whose refusal to accept the terms of normative personhood results in dramatic violence, emphasizes the ways slavery shapes possibility in Rush's practice.

With this trajectory in mind, I now return to the salamander patient. The salamander case is a brief example out of which this chapter makes a lot. Critics might produce many different readings of this example. The salamander might, for instance, be a colorful anecdote, an outlandish claim included to brighten up a potentially dull medical volume. It may also be understood as one of many cases illustrating the dangerous ways human being misidentify themselves as nonhumans. Certainly Rush presents the example as a success story, indicating the power of conversation to control the unruly behaviors of supposedly insane patients. I argue that this minor example can bear an extended analysis for three reasons. First, it is an instance in which the patient's speech produces unusually conciliatory, nonviolent behavior among Rush's staff. The patient retains the right to understand himself as a salamander without being coerced into declaring himself human. Second, as I will show, the salamander was a particularly contested animal in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The presence of this figure in particular is thus relevant for understanding Rush's relationship to popular debates about observation and authority. Thirdly, the salamander example offers an opportunity to step into a patient's experience and speculate about the rhetorical tools available for resisting normative human personhood, from the patient's point of view.

Rush's practice of incorporating unexpected first-person claims into formal medical discourse makes his response to his patient's self-declaration slightly less surprising. The patient in this brief but provocative example is not an anxious letter writer reaching out to Rush in distress about his illness. He is destructive and deviant. His case and his claim, however, get aggregated in the same style as other first-person symptom reports. Rather than focusing on

confession or cataloguing causes, the salamander example foregrounds conversation's potential to shock the patient into a recognition of the consequences of his actions for others. After all, this patient may be a salamander but "all the patients in the hospital are not salamanders" (206). The physician inverts the structure of the patient's claim to show the patient the flaw in his original conclusion: if the hospital is not full of salamanders, it shouldn't be burned down. Here as elsewhere in *Diseases*, Rush valorizes logical conversation as a force capable of intervening in diseases of the mind.<sup>82</sup>

The salamander exchange positions patient and physician on unexpectedly equal footing. The physician's rational conversation is supposed to cure the patient. Instead, the patient's claim ends up directing this encounter. This conversation, then, records what happens when an authoritative cataloguing impulse encounters unexpected first-person claims. In a natural historical context, first-person claims often offer novel observations about unknown objects, which can be made to serve metropolitan science. In this medical context, Rush's attitude toward first-person observation by both physicians and patients allows him to render even the most outlandish claim an external feature that can be safely negotiated to produce a functional cure. In choosing to receive a patient's claim in this way, Rush leaves open considerable leeway for the patient's self-understanding. Patients might certainly *have* interior lives and forms of self-understanding, but in this context Rush does not often engage deeply with these facets of patients' experience. Intervening in or correcting the patient's self-understanding is not his primary concern.

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<sup>82</sup> While both the letters and the face-to-face exchanges Rush includes are treated impersonally, the approach that governs Rush's interaction with patients' claims in person is distinct from the approach he takes to patients' letters: the salamander case does not exemplify the progress of a disease, like the Virginian's letter, but instead the activity of a cure. Rather than responding to the salamander patient's identity claim as a singular aberration, Rush treats the claim as a symptom resolvable by conversation. The episode is a study in conversational techniques.

In the salamander case, the patient's first-person claims are dutifully recorded in *Diseases*, and the patient's claim to be nonhuman is accepted in a nonviolent, conciliatory manner, rather than violently disrupted. Because Rush's patient records are incomplete and the mental health records at Pennsylvania Hospital are not accessible to researchers, details about the salamander patient, his case history, and his testimony are scarce.<sup>83</sup> But the few details Rush includes in *Diseases* suggest that this patient is skillfully wielding the image of a salamander in his own defense, to challenge his physicians and set the terms for his own treatment. Rush's response to the salamander's claim indicates the kinds of concessions he is willing to make in the name of pragmatism – so that the patient doesn't burn the hospital down, in this case. Claiming to be a salamander is considerably more challenging than claiming to have a fever or a slow pulse. Unlike the Virginian's statement "I am, as it were, all nerve," which is followed by a description of patterned symptoms, the salamander patient does not elaborate with more information about his illness, experience, or behavior. A further account of salamanders helps clarify the stakes of this patient's refusal to identify himself as a human being.

The statement "I am a salamander" is startling both as a definitive claim to a nonhuman form and as a call to mythic and popular tradition. In making this claim, Rush's patient is trafficking in an idea that circulated extensively in this period: that salamanders were able to survive in fire, or were perhaps even born from it. The salamander image would be familiar to Rush's readership from classical texts and earlier medical systems, as well as from popular print

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<sup>83</sup> Pennsylvania State law 50 P.S. 7111 "prohibits the use of all patient mental health records." Pennsylvania Hospital closes non mental health records for 100 years. See the "General Note" on the "Finding Aid" page of the History of Pennsylvania Hospital Website. Accessible at <http://www.uphs.upenn.edu/paharc/collections/finding/note.html>

culture in the period.<sup>84</sup> Pliny famously described the salamander's mysterious origins and association with fire in his first-century text *The Natural History*, which remained in circulation through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The image of the fiery and sometimes deadly salamander was also a mainstay in the alchemical handbooks and medieval bestiaries from which eighteenth-century natural history emerged.<sup>85</sup> Beyond its potentially magical, deadly, or reparative qualities, the salamander also had a combative political valence. Salamanders appear in accounts of gunfire battles in the seventeenth century,<sup>86</sup> and military "fireships" loaded with combustibles were sometimes also named "Salamander."<sup>87</sup> The image of the salamander and its association with fire were well known.

For readers of a medical volume participating in the accumulation of scientific knowledge, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon's voluminous and influential *Histoire Naturelle*, would be especially relevant context. In Buffon, the salamander's mythic history takes center stage.<sup>88</sup> The salamander entry, published in a posthumous volume edited by Buffon's

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<sup>84</sup> In tracing the cultural resonance of the salamander, I am inspired by Parrish, "The Female Opossum & the Nature of the New World" and Bewell, "Hyena Trouble."

<sup>85</sup> For an accessible overview of the trajectory of ideas about the salamander from Pliny to the seventeenth century, see Simon. The *Oxford English Dictionary* entries for "salamander" and "salamandering" also provide useful context for the salamander's long association with fire. A number of extraordinary medieval manuscript images of poisonous, flaming salamanders are collected online in *The Medieval Bestiary's Salamander Gallery*, accessible at [bestiary.ca/beasts/beastgallery276.htm#](http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beastgallery276.htm#) (accessed January 6, 2019).

<sup>86</sup> In 1705, for example, Jonathan Swift published a satirical rewriting of Pliny, in which he lampoons the British military commander Lord Cutts by drawing on his nickname, "Salamander," which was given to him in recognition of his ability to survive a fiery battle with the French (lines 14-22).

<sup>87</sup> A list of "Fireships" published in the *Pennsylvania Journal* in 1779, for instance, includes the following ship names: Pluto, Infernal, Firebrand, Salamander, and Incendiary.

<sup>88</sup> Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle, générale et particulière, avec la description du Cabinet du Roi* was among the most ambitious and influential natural histories of the eighteenth century. First published in Paris

associate the Comte de Lacépède in 1802, exemplifies the tension between salamander myths and a culture of experimentation and empirical observation. Buffon identifies lizards as “chimerical beings” to which human beings attach “wonderful properties” to rouse their hungry imaginations and test their faith in reason. As Buffon writes, “people have eagerly listened to the fancied history of this favored animal...which was so well fitted to supply poetry with similes, lovers with emblems of gallantry, and heroes with brilliant devices for the ornament of valor” (Lacépède 141). When it comes to salamanders, Buffon suggests that ornamental imagination has shaped and distorted observation. In their examinations of salamanders, the ancients “endeavored to realize the ingenious fictions of the poets,” and “[e]ven the moderns have adopted these absurd fables” (Lacépède 141). The salamander precipitates the “similes,” “emblems,” and “ornament” Buffon and his editor Lacépède view as antithetical to the projects of accurate description and rational scientific organization.

As Buffon articulates, the salamander encapsulates the tension between new scientific empiricism and other systems of thought. Buffon is eager to claim a public victory for careful observation, experimentation, and description. He proudly declares that “of late” “this fire-extinguishing capacity of the salamander has been disbelieved” (Lacépède 142). The turn to experiment, furthered by the authoritative survey accumulated in the *Histoire Naturelle*, aims to stamp out folk beliefs once and for all.

In Lacépède’s rendering of Buffon’s explanation, the salamander is renowned for its supposed ability to put *out* fire, as opposed to starting it. In other versions of the myth, the salamander is associated with fire more generally, or is born from fire or able to withstand heat. Both Buffon’s attempt at an authoritative account and widespread confusion about salamanders

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between 1749 and 1804, the volumes were translated and circulated throughout the Atlantic World. The *Histoire Naturelle* stretches across 44 volumes, 36 of which were assembled by Buffon and another 8 of which were edited from his papers after his death.

persisted in the American press in the decades during which Rush practiced. An excerpt of a letter to Buffon claiming that salamander observers had too quickly rejected the “marvelous” and that salamanders could, in fact, live in fire circulated in U.S. newspapers in the 1790s and early 1800s.<sup>89</sup> Performers who could withstand extreme heat also went under the name “Salamander,” and later in the century ads for “salamander furnaces” and fireproof “salamander safes” began to appear.<sup>90</sup>

If Buffon’s word on the salamander was not quite conclusive, his account nevertheless frames a helpful survey of the salamander’s cultural significance and a taste of the logic of eighteenth-century empiricism as it attempts to filter out other epistemologies. Buffon also presents an important point of contrast to Rush’s practice. In his encounter with the salamander patient, Rush isn’t interested in ferreting out folk practice, any more than he is in dissecting the salamander patient’s self-image. Instead, he accepts the salamander image without comment and moves forward. That the salamander patient gives up on arson is a sufficient “transient return to reason” to satisfy Rush’s needs in this instance (Rush 206). This phrase helps illustrate the kinds of partial gains Rush works towards in his practice as he seeks cures that may incrementally or temporarily return patients to socially functional behavior, even if underlying causes remain untreated. Rush’s rationalism – his confidence in explanatory principles, which can organize and intervene across a range of symptoms – likely contributes to his response to the salamander patient.

This cultural history of the salamander resonates especially strongly with Rush’s text

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<sup>89</sup> See “Natural History,” *Pennsylvania Packet*, April 28, 1789. This excerpt reappears at least a dozen times over the following 15 years.

<sup>90</sup> See for example, “The Spanish Salamander,” *Philadelphia Repository, and Weekly Register*, October 15, 1803. This excerpt was reprinted often over several decades. For later ads, see for example “Salamander Works” furnace ad, *Morning Herald*, p. 1, May 31, 1839. New York, NY and “Wilder’s Patent Salamander Book Safes,” *Evening Post*, p. 3, July 18, 1840, New York, NY.

because of the practice of ahistorical citation frequent in eighteenth-century medicine.<sup>91</sup> Aligning contemporary medicine with a long history of practice was an important way for physicians to hold onto professional authority, even in times of upheaval or reform. Medical professionals were schooled in classical texts because this knowledge base was viewed as essential for contemporary practitioners, and even calls for reform were often figured as *returns* to an earlier set of medical values (Warner, *Against the Spirit of System*, 167, 169). *Diseases* is a long history of mental disease, participating in a medical conversation that incorporates anecdotes from contexts stretched across time and genre (see Altschuler, *Medical Imagination*, p. 2-3). The salamander man's claim – a contemporary claim that resonates with a long cultural history – becomes valid in part because the scope of citational practice in Rush's volume is already so capacious. Not all of these citations or incorporated anecdotes involve first-person claims, but they do illustrate a shared reading practice. As long as it presents a series of symptoms that can be assimilated to the existing discourse, a wide range of information can be safely folded into this version of medical knowledge without comment or conflict.<sup>92</sup> As medical writing integrates disparate evidentiary resources, reaching across time periods, genres, and levels of professional authority, it also expands the avenues for acceptable testimony.

Rather than explaining how ridiculous it is to associate salamanders with fire power, as Buffon does, or digging into the patient's interior logic to dissect this identification, Rush lets his

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<sup>91</sup> A long history also informs the accounts of persons imagining they are animals or things. Foucault outlines some of this lineage in *Madness and Civilization*, p. 117-119. For an account of Rush's attitudes towards nonhuman animals and the impacts of his ideas about animal physiology on his treatment of human beings, see Hinds.

<sup>92</sup> This promiscuous citational practice extends far beyond Rush. For an analysis of the relationship between Shakespeare and American psychology in the nineteenth century, see Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, Chapter 3. Altschuler's introduction also lays out the ongoing importance of literary citations as forms of evidence and, as her argument illustrates, of fiction as a space of medical experimentation and knowledge generation.



patient's claim to nonhuman identity pass by without notice. Rush's interaction with his patients and their accounts of their experiences often follows the same logic as his approach to patient writing. He sidesteps self-understanding and metabolizes patients' claims about their physical symptoms, thoughts, and feelings with a strategic pragmatism. In the salamander patient's case, Rush responds to the claim, "I am a salamander," as something *other than* an identity statement. The solution he finds has to do not with a change in the speaker's sense of himself, but with a change in his actions. He is "cured" not in self-perception but in performative practice. This cure involves not a rectification of appropriate human personhood but a recognition of difference: the other patients are not salamanders.

The salamander patient's incorporation into viable first-person dialogue illustrates the triumph of Rush's system of organization and observation without requiring Rush to overtly counter every problematic emblem from past traditions. The salamander's mythic history can persist alongside the authority of Rush's observation and organization. In this exchange, willful animalization does not change much at all for Rush. Rush accepts a patient's claim to be a salamander, suspending his anxieties about animal-like human beings and relying on a notion of functional personhood based not in appropriate self-perception but in performative practice.<sup>93</sup>

*Diseases of the Mind* was published in the midst of an epistemological transition that reconfigured the relationship between interior life and empirical observation. Although empiricism as a term resonates differently in medical history than in the history of science more broadly, these transitions in observational norms provide important context for considering the relationship between observation and identity in Rush's work. Jonathan Crary argues that shifts

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<sup>93</sup> This emphasis reflects Rush's investment in behaviorism. Critics including Reiss have observed that behaviorism was central to Rush's psychiatric practice and the structure of the nineteenth-century asylum. I have avoided using the term "behaviorism" because of its association with Erving Goffman and later psychological and sociological theories, which detract from my focus on first-person prose in the early nineteenth century.

in observational technologies coincided with the emergence of a more cohesive and willful notion of the self in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In analyzing the emergence of scientific objectivity, Lorraine Datson and Peter Galison track the transition from a more fragmented Enlightenment self towards “a self unified by the will” emerging in the first half of nineteenth century (227). In *Diseases of the Mind*, I am interested in locating not the emergence of these new technologies of the self but the lingering and uneven aftershocks of a first-person prose tradition rooted in eighteenth-century empirical observation. This observational first-person prose tradition circulates alongside and as a meaningful counterpart to the emergence of the first-person novel and other prose traditions steeped in the rhetoric of self-reflection.<sup>94</sup>

The salamander’s claim links this system of first-person prose to the question of nonhuman speech. In the context of Rush’s practice and this argument, we see not the ways we might expand our account of first-personhood to account for a semiotics beyond language (as Eduardo Kohn suggests we might in thinking beyond the human or as Jane Bennett implies would be necessary to fully understand the work of a Latourian assemblage of agentic components) or a deep interrogation of the claim that language itself is fundamentally anthropomorphizing (as grounds Barbara Johnson’s analysis). Instead, in this context, the question becomes: how do claims to nonhuman identity disrupt the terms of a personhood conditioned on the separation of persons from their environments, and of humans from nonhumans? I am arguing here that the salamander’s claim can help us see the terms of Rush’s system anew, and that it also makes the most normative understanding of those terms impossible.

In Rush’s account of his practice, first-person speech, rendered haphazardly as first-

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<sup>94</sup> Many recent critics including Murison have focused on embodiment and affect to unsettle the notion of a more consolidated subject emerging in the nineteenth century.

person prose, does not illustrate growth, virtue, or biography. It produces the conditions for successful social participation by providing an opportunity for the physician to incorporate the aberrant in conversational exchange. It doesn't matter whether the speaker is trying to produce something "impersonal." The work of producing an impersonal claim occurs when Rush folds evidence into his systematic collation of observations. In person as in print, the drive to produce and maintain this observational system requires not just a certain kind of writing but a certain kind of "reading" or response to claims, both oral and written. In this context, impersonality is not a feature of print but a readerly attitude, a stance informed by a commitment to accumulating observations and by the conviction that systematizing knowledge is necessary for the production of stable collective life.

Impersonal responses toward patients' claims extend the category of the rational or acceptable person to include those who can engage in certain appropriate behaviors, regardless of their interior lives. In the patient letters included in *Diseases* and the first-person report of the salamander patient, Rush receives even content that *could* be construed as deeply personal as impersonal information that can be used to produce knowledge and stability. This is Rush's strategy: he opts to understand all claims as symptom reports, rather than delving into patients' interior lives. In many ways, Rush's practice no doubt contributes to expanding the power of educated medical practitioners and authorities. In the instance of the salamander patient, however, Rush's patient productively disrupts theorizations about the category of the human person as valid testifier. Rather than cementing the identity and social position of the individual or modeling the moral life of the citizen, the first-person claims produced in this medical discourse hint at a more capacious concept of the individual person capable of social participation. While Rush's investment in his patients' voices is not entirely specific to him, what *is* surprising is how far he extends the practice of this investment. Far beyond the course of a

fever or a stomach ailment, for Rush's investment in his patients' claims as evidence extends beyond the category of the human. In Rush's practice, even resolutely claiming to be nonhuman is not insurmountable. Indeed, the question of whether people understand themselves to be human or inhuman is sometimes beside the point.

#### 4. *Dirt*

While the salamander's thrillingly resistant claim and its ramifications suggest an opportunity for the reconsideration of personhood, they coincide in Rush's practice with various forms of violence, to which this chapter now returns. Rush's attitude toward first-person reporting generates a system of knowledge-making that destabilizes personhood, rending appropriate self-understanding from functional personhood. Because Rush's practice does not engage deeply with patients' psychic lives or attempt to alter their self-understanding, more possibilities emerge for persons' social and political participation. Rush's attitude toward first-person prose sometimes allows patients to challenge narrow, homogenous renderings of personhood and expand empirical observational discourse beyond its narrowest parameters. The model of community his work proposes, however, is hardly boundless.

This slippage around human personhood in Rush's practice suggests an expansive community of testifiers and civic participants might be possible. But this political vision did not come to structure the United States in the nineteenth century. As other readers of Rush have noted, the potentially radical notions of personhood and community that pulse through his work were never fully realized (see Allewaert 54-63). The asylum movement in the U.S., which flourished from the 1830s to the 1860s, often used the behaviorist techniques Rush recommends to instantiate limited, normative models of personhood (Reiss 163). The historian of science Roy Porter offers this blunt assessment: "Even the advocates of 'moral' therapy were not interested in listening to what the mad had to say for themselves, or in direct, person-to-person verbal communication. They were preoccupied instead with what might be called 'behaviorist' techniques of rendering their speech proper" (Porter qtd. Reiss 34). While I argue that Rush's incorporation of the salamander patient's sly rhetorical maneuvering in *Diseases* preserves

considerable flexibility around “proper” speech, elsewhere, Rush’s practice is less flexible.

In *Diseases*, Rush’s citation practice meets its limits in violent responses that do not permit speech or validate patients’ forms of self-understanding at all. This is especially clear in an example Rush includes about enslaved Africans’ attempts at suicide in Jamaica, in which speech is irrelevant and conversation can never appear as first-person prose. In this case, which involves an unsettled relation between human beings and dirt, the possibilities of Rush’s rhetorical practice violently conflict with his views about the degrading impacts of slavery, and the ways race and slavery are always central to thinking about personhood and humanness come to the fore. Enslaved dirt eaters repeat a form of behavior that unsettles the relations between human person and nonhuman, and this behavior is met with a rigid and violent response. Here, Rush cites an example in which a physician’s only “prevent[ative]” response to suicide by dirt eating is the posthumous desecration of dirt eaters’ corpses. Rush describes this practice, writing,

Dr. John Hunter tells us...that the negroes, when they become deranged, sometimes destroy themselves by eating large quantities of earth. After many fruitless attempts to put a stop to it, it was finally prevented, by cutting off the heads of the negroes who died in this manner, and exposing them to view in a public part of the Island. (132)

This passage is part of a survey of methods that might be employed to prevent suicide. In *Diseases*, the list of potential suicide prevention tactics is long, but the case of the dirt eaters involves an especially terroristic response. Rush repeats Hunter’s example without commenting on its politics, incorporating this violence into his medical system.

Like the other examples Rush includes, the dirt eaters’ case is not a new one. Since the seventeenth century, dirt eating among enslaved Africans had been common in the Caribbean, and it was often interpreted as attempted suicide. Eating dirt and other non-food substances, sometimes called Cachexia Africana by Rush and his peers and now called pica, is often a

symptom of severe malnutrition or hookworm.<sup>95</sup> This information indicates one difficulty scholars face in thinking retrospectively about medical conditions: maybe these people were trying to kill themselves to end their enslavement on sugar plantations. Or maybe they were managing their horrifying malnourishment. Regardless, dirt eating was a major source of conflict between white physicians, enslaved healers, and enslaved communities in Jamaica, which may be one reason Hunter advocates for such a gruesome response to dirt eaters.<sup>96</sup> The act of refusal produced by dirt eating – whether we interpret it as a refusal to work, a desire for suicide, a response to malnutrition, or a feature of non-European understandings of health – involves an attachment to nonhuman matter. In this way, it has a thematic relation to the salamander’s claim to be nonhuman. But the blurred boundary between human and nonhuman meets a dramatically different response in this example.

In Hunter’s example, speech fails. First-person testimony has no part to play. Rather than recording the first-person testimony of ill patients, in this case, Rush describes heads that have been made to communicate outside the paradigms of shared first-person authority, as signs of terroristic power. In this example, the heads of deviant people, wherein patients might understand their own bodies and experiences in a variety of ways, are reclaimed to speak violently on behalf of those in power. The potentially deviant forms of self-understanding that could be let slide in the salamander case cannot be let slide in this example. Instead, this

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<sup>95</sup> Dirt eating was not exclusive to enslaved populations or geographically limited to the Caribbean. As Young documents, “clay-eaters” and others exhibiting pica appear across a huge range of contexts from the Greco-Roman world through the present. Pica is often a symptom of severe hookworm, although there is some debate about whether hookworm was the most likely cause of pica on plantations. See Dunn p. 305 and Hogarth p. 197-8, n. 21.

<sup>96</sup> Hogarth identifies dirt eating as a major source of conflict between physicians and enslaved healers, arguing that “physicians’ writings about Cachexia Africana did more to cast doubt on their professional competency and authority over enslaved bodies than it did to treat the disease” (85).

treatment presages the posthumous decapitation of Babo, the mastermind behind a slave revolt in Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno* (1855). Like Babo's head, described in the last lines of Melville's text as a "hive of subtlety" unmastered and full of unknown plots, the heads of dirt eaters produced epistemologies and forms of resistance that are inaccessible to slave owners and white physicians. After being capture, Babo famously refused to say a word.<sup>97</sup> The scene Rush describes is also one in which enslaved people do not speak, because they are not permitted to do so or because they refused to do so. The scene not one of execution but one in which the heads of enslaved people are exposed "to view in a public part of the island." The Jamaica physician Rush cites uses these heads, the supposed locus of psychic life, identity, and speech, as "public" communicative signs. This display is certainly about desecrating the bodies of the dead, in order to discourage dirt eating. Hunter's act of display also forces these bodies to participate in a kind of public speech, one that exceeds whatever interior subjectivity a human head might otherwise signify. This display occludes the possibility of political participation for dirt eaters and the enslaved populations their bodies are meant to terrify. These people, irrevocably ill in Rush's and Dr. Hunter's estimation and beyond the possibility of being recuperated for life, are not capable of contributing to medical knowledge in the way the salamander patient or those writing letters to Rush are capable. Instead, this example reclaims the bodies and heads of the enslaved and reserves first-person prose for authoritative physicians and violently reinscribes a separation between human persons and other forms of matter, in this case dirt.

In his repetition of Hunter's letter, Rush suggests illness was "prevented" by terror when logic was ineffectual. Posthumous decapitation as a response to insanity, however, reads as total failure. This citation marks the limit of the kinds of cures Rush describes, which in this case are

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<sup>97</sup> On an alternative tradition of narratives in which heedlessness produced a kind of power for Afro-Americans in the Caribbean, and the particular crimes for which posthumous decapitation was used as punishment see Allewaert Ch. 4.



unable to disrupt the behaviors the supposedly insane. It also exemplifies tension between Rush's rhetoric and the forms of violence central to his and other physicians' practices. When Rush approvingly cites physicians who respond to patients' claims by kicking those who claim to be dogs or urinating on those who claim to be plants, he advocates for responses that work within the framework of the patient's logic and allow patients some measure of self-determination. These cures are more violent than conversing with the salamander, but they accept patients' forms of self-understanding as a starting place. When Rush turns to a citation involving enslaved people in the Caribbean, this emphasis on engaging with patients' logic dissipates, and only spectacular violence remains. While enslaved peoples' affiliation with the nonhuman might have been unacceptable to white readers and physicians for a variety of reasons, in this dirt eating case, what is most unacceptable for white physicians is that this affiliation with dirt constitutes an act of disruption and refusal.<sup>98</sup>

Enslaved people are not granted authority by Rush's theory of inclusive first-person testimony. Rush was an abolitionist, and his abolitionism was centered on the claim that black and white people were inherently equal.<sup>99</sup> Rush regularly treated black patients alongside white patients in the wards at Pennsylvania Hospital, as he had during the Yellow Fever epidemic in 1793.<sup>100</sup> He claimed, however, that slavery had degraded the black people enslaved in the U.S.

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<sup>98</sup> The American public was regularly accosted with comparisons between enslaved people, animals, and things, and mainstream abolitionist discourse was often predicated on distinguishing enslaved people from nonhumans.

<sup>99</sup> Herschthal analyzes the tension between the idea of original equality among people of different races and Rush's inability to conceive of a republic that included nonwhite people, arguing that this tension helps explain some of the bizarre claims Rush makes about race, including that blackness was a form of leprosy.

<sup>100</sup> A list of patients admitted to the insanity wards at Pennsylvania Hospital in the years 1784-1787 identifies several patients as "(black)." See "List of Lunatics." Hawke and other critics also

and Caribbean in ways that made their bodies and minds vulnerable to disease. Although they might once have been included in Rush's pool of potentially sane persons, whose behavior can be regulated by some combination of habit, logic, and fear, the Africans in Hunter's example are excluded from the community of first-person testifiers and rational speakers.<sup>101</sup> Rush's claims about suicide and fruitlessness in the example from Dr. Hunter are part of a long tradition of pathologizing enslaved peoples' resistance. Although insanity threatened citizens and individuals, both enslaved and free, white and non-white, for Rush the curative power of impersonal speech does not extend to enslaved people. I write about Rush's relationship to black Philadelphians' abolitionism and advocacy in Chapter 3 of this project. Mainstream abolitionist discourse was structured around the promise of coming into the freedom of normative liberal personhood with its attendant rights and responsibilities. In this way it is unsurprising that Rush's abolitionism did not lead him to a different position with regards to the epistemologies of enslaved people who did not produce the relationships between human and nonhuman on which some forms of abolitionist advocacy rested. The disjuncture between alternative models of personhood and mainstream abolitionist discourse is central to the analysis of my next chapter.

The enslaved Africans Rush mentions in the Jamaica example are a very different population from the population he treated in his epistolary practice and at Pennsylvania Hospital. But this recourse to terror is not exclusive to Rush's comments on Jamaica. In Rush's practice and examples he cites, terroristic approaches to madness appear alongside the forms of treatment I have traced in this analysis. The practice of impersonal citation that promises an

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mention Rush's treatment of black and white patients together. Because of the nature of the surviving and accessible records about Rush's practice, a full tally of his patients is impossible.<sup>101</sup> Herschthal describes an unpublished Rush manuscript titled "Diseases of Negroes" in which illnesses like Cachexia Africana are emphatically linked to slavery rather than race. See p. 290.

expanded community of persons, testifiers, and knowledge-makers does not have uniformly positive results. Rush's work produced both violent responses to patients *and* a more open system for participation, inasmuch he cited and circulated his patient's claims. The rhetorical norms on which Rush relied sometimes allowed acts of resistance and reconfigurations of human personhood to garner legitimacy and continue to circulate.

Although Rush does not eschew violence, his work expands notions of appropriate speech, on the back of a particular narration and reception practice. Focusing on the layered forms of first-person discourse that coexist in the archive of *Diseases of the Mind* helps make these practices and their potential clearer. American treatments for diseases of the mind suggested that the experience of insanity, which fundamentally destabilizes the subject, could best be addressed by casting the net for self-reporting wide and accepting a variety of patient claims without intervening in patients' interior lives. The concept of an impersonal first-person prose, then, opens a window into the ways nonhuman beings circulate through and sometimes even become a part of Rush's human personhood. Rush constantly balances threatening conditions, in the form of madmen in general and in the form of hospital fires and other acts of violence against the allegedly sane in particular, with the desire to organize and convey information under the familiar rubric of medical observation. The difficulty of managing patients' complex behaviors results in a receptive attitude towards first-person reporting, one that sometimes grants authority to persons who exceed the normative boundaries we might anticipate.

## **Fever Beds and First-Persons**

### ***Introduction***

Yellow fever undoes the body, causing infected persons to take on a yellowish cast and heave up grainy black vomit, violently expelling their interiors. Treating the fever also often involved draining the interior fluids of the body out, as patients, particularly in Philadelphia during the city's 1793 epidemic, were often bled in an attempt to cure them.<sup>102</sup> The question of how matter makes persons has been central to both eighteenth- and twenty-first century thinkers. Concerns about the body's vulnerability to its environment and the potential impacts of matter on personhood define much of early American discourse in British colonial and U.S. national contexts. Anglo-colonial and U.S. theories of personhood most often aim to neutralize the agentic impacts of matter. Most famously, John Locke declares that persons are sustained by self-conscious observation over time and that material discontinuity is thus neutralized as a disruptive force. But the possibility or necessity of a politics structured around persons radically vulnerable to outside forces reappeared continually in the eighteenth century. During the eighteenth century, vital materialists often strove to imagine a political world populated by vulnerable, open bodies defined by the flows of impactful matter. In *Vibrant Matter* (2010), Jane Bennett takes up the political problem of considering agency as distributed across matter in

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<sup>102</sup> Benjamin Rush advocated for a 'heroic cure' by which patients were extensively bled and either 'heroically' recovered or died. Rush was critiqued for this position during the 1793 epidemic, and it eventually caused a decline in his medical reputation. See Altschuler 60-61 and Herschthal.

various configurations, such that agency and action are allocated unevenly within eclectic human and nonhuman assemblages. Bennett describes her project as a rethinking of “the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert.” In challenging the alleged distinction between life and matter, Bennett draws on eighteenth-century vitalism to seek a politics of assemblage, in which components interact across webs of “vibrant materiality” (vii). While Bennett argues that these thriving, animate flows should force us to reconceive politics, her account has been critiqued as insufficiently attentive to power.<sup>103</sup>

This chapter takes up Richard Allen and Absalom Jones’s writing about yellow fever to approach these concerns. Specifically, I read Allen and Jones’s narrative about infected beds as an opportunity to reconsider forms of personhood emerging from the interrelationship between living human beings, dead bodies, agentic matter, and objects. In the context of Yellow Fever epidemics, which swept the U.S. repeatedly in the eighteenth century, the vulnerability of human persons to unknown outside agencies became extraordinarily visible. In the Yellow Fever epidemic that swept through Philadelphia in August of 1793, about ten percent of the city’s population was killed.<sup>104</sup> Those who could leave did. Many of those who remained and became

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<sup>103</sup> Lemke summarizes some of these critiques. Especially relevant are the critique that Bennett focuses only on the positive prospects of vital materialism (40) and that the ethics she proposes does not account for large-scale negative social and political impacts on others, reducing ethics to “individualized and voluntaristic” possibilities (43). Chen offers an account that more fully attends to power and specifically race. Chen is invested in the mobility of “animacy” as a term and the consequences of that linguistic mobility for biopolitics, queer of color critique, critical animal studies, and disability theory. Chen considers the ways animacy produces queer and racialized affective formations, new forms of relation, and improper intimacies. See also this project’s introduction on posthumanism and decolonization, fn. 1.

<sup>104</sup> Numbers are hard to pin down, but the general consensus is that around 5,000 people died in the epidemic, with some “newspapers...reporting up to 15,000 deaths” (Altschuler 52). The population of Philadelphia was around 50,000 in 1793. Approximately 20,000 people fled the city. More white people than black people fled the city, so that “the black population seemed to double,” with “Philadelphia’s racial composition momentarily approaching...that of Chesapeake locales—the slave South—with their much heavier concentrations of African

ill were treated by Allen and Jones, who were both prominent black preachers and community leaders. In the midst of the epidemic and its aftermath, first-person observation was both vitally necessary to a community ravaged by disease, wherein readers are eager for potentially life-saving information, and also a source of conflict as the facts of illness and the protocols for response are vigorously debated. Allen and Jones participated as influential observers of the epidemic and made use of their proximity to the sick to counter public slander against their black nursing corps. As disease impacted the urgency of empirical observation it also recalibrated the notion of an appropriate or effective observer, and Allen and Jones positioned their writing effectively in this context.

Allen and Jones and the black nurses whose work they oversaw became central to conflicts about disease, authority, and ethics in the aftermath of the epidemic. In 1794, they published the first black-authored political pamphlet in the U.S., *A Narrative Concerning the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in the Year 1793 and a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown upon them in some late Publications*. In articulating a defense of their practices during the fever epidemic and advocating for black social and political recognition, Allen and Jones also wrote an open letter to Matthew Clarkson, the mayor of Philadelphia, about all the beds for which black nurses were responsible during the epidemic. This letter, and the fever context into which it was written, invite a rethinking of the relation between persons, property, and matter. Beginning with the letter and reading back towards the *Narrative* and Allen's later writing makes clear the ways Allen and Jones's texts were imbricated in larger concerns about property, exchange, and personhood.

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Americans,” with black people comprising 30% to 60% of the city's total population during the epidemic, rather than 15-20% (Newman 92).

In the group of texts circulated under Allen and Jones's names, including the bed letter, the *Narrative*, and later Allen's autobiography, a set of interlocking first-person prose forms produces competing theories of personhood. These documents manage a scenario in which beds became a site for negotiating race, materiality, and personhood. If the *Narrative's* key objective is to seek political personhood, in doing that, it must also acknowledge forms of agency distributed across human beings, objects, and matter. In considering what it might mean to think ethically about distributed agency, without minimizing the ways human personhood has been used as a dividing line around racial, gendered, and other normative categories and without minimizing the kinds of value and power sought by black people in particular, Allen and Jones offer one way of moving forward. In the context of Yellow Fever, Allen and Jones address both a close proximity between human bodies and nonhuman agents *and* a close relationship between legal persons and legally imbued property – property that could be responsible for damage. They describe these forms of relation through a delicate web of first-person prose.

The fight for full recognition as legal persons was essential in Philadelphia's black community, and first-person texts participated in that political work. First-person prose texts, including and especially those often read as spiritual autobiographies, played a central role in this fight for public recognition. Inasmuch as personhood is about producing valid public speech, these narratives were essential. Advocacy for political recognition also turned on a relationship between interior and exterior. Allen and Jones participated in the conflict between demonstrating moral Christian virtues and a kind of rightly-oriented interiority on the one hand and claiming a social form not predicated on interiority at all on the other – the role of first-person observer with observational authority, participating in public debates about civic matters and about health and disease.

This focus on moving objects perceived to be agents of disease links Allen and Jones's fever observations to the goods and objects, which connected Philadelphia to broader networks of trade in the U.S. and the Caribbean. More than this, the index positions Allen and Jones's political claim alongside the nonhuman objects that populate law and with which nonwhite persons were often associated. In this context, where personhood is defined in terms of valid public speech, Allen and Jones achieve political standing in part by embracing and unfolding a close relationship with furniture as both an active disease agent and a form of valuable property, buried and recovered with the care one would take towards a body. Beds become proxies for and coparticipants with human persons.

This chapter asks how the overlapping first-person prose discourses in which Richard Allen was immersed define and disrupt the category of the person itself. Careful attention to Allen and Jones's account of the fever, which ends with a litany not of bodies but of beds, shows the ways matter, animacy, and value were disrupted and redistributed in the context of the epidemic. Even as law protracted the category of the person in Pennsylvania to distribute rights unevenly across the enslaved people who moved in and out of the state with members of the U.S. Senate in Philadelphia, public testimony about fever required an observational prose oriented towards the course of symptoms and the movement of potentially infected objects. As specific objects, wrapped up in ideas about domesticity and intimacy, beds are particularly potent intermediaries, reconfiguring human personhood as closely related to agentic objects and flows of matter, rather than as a distinct and closed form.

Beds as a particular form of property designating wealth and intimacy, closely tied to family and private life, and yet also the site of so much death, are central to this conception of personhood. They are symbolically rich as they signify intimacy, domesticity, and wealth, imbued with material power as infectious agents whose movement must be closely tracked, and



freighted with legal weight, such that it becomes necessary to account for them in a conversation about culpability. To value these objects as co-constitutive with the forms of personhood Allen and Jones generate links the text to much larger debates about personhood, property, and race, while also reconfiguring the spiritual autobiography and empirical observation that have been at the foreground of thinking about Allen, Jones, and their legacies. This chapter begins with a detailed analysis of the beds letter. I argue that the beds letter involves a form of first-person prose that produces a theory of personhood. This form of personhood involves the intermixture of human beings, (diseased) matter, and agentic objects. Because of their association with domesticity and intimacy, beds are particularly well-suited to anchor a rethinking of personhood.<sup>105</sup> I then turn to the *Narrative* and Allen's biography respectively, to unfold the ways the forms of first-person prose and personhood outlined in these texts shift if we read them through the lens of the letter to Clarkson. With the reading of beds in mind, the observational claims of the narrative take on a more speculative tenor. The chapter concludes with a section on property, in which I argue that the beds letter helps us see what a form of political advocacy based around open collectives rather than reproducing liberal values – particularly with regards to personhood and property – might look like. This reading of the beds letter allows us to reimagine the Allen of the biography and the liberal forms of property that seem to inhere in his later life. Instead, we can recover and hold fast to a more open and collective notion of persons, agents, and property that maintains an attention to race, violence, and differential political power.

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<sup>105</sup> The material composition of household furniture in general and beds in particular was also a way that the violences and intimacies of colonialism and slavery found their way into the innermost spaces of bourgeois households in Britain. More information about the construction of the beds circulating during the Yellow Fever epidemic would ground these ties more centrally in the U.S. and its relation to the Caribbean. See Freedgood on mahogany furniture and Lowe on chintz bed curtains. I am also indebted to Ann Laura Stoler's writing about intimacy, race, and colonial power.

## 1. *Beds*

In 1793, Richard Allen and Absalom Jones published *A Narrative of a Proceeding of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia in 1793, and a Refutation of Some Censures, Thrown upon them in some late Publications*. As this title suggests, the pamphlet was published as an act of political necessity. The *Narrative* was the first printed text by an African American copyrighted in Philadelphia, and it leveraged observational first-person prose alongside medical expertise and moral and spiritual authority to defend Philadelphia's black community against public slander.

Allen and Jones's 1794 narrative was printed with several documents appended to it. The first of these is an open letter to Matthew Clarkson, the mayor of Philadelphia and one of the chief architects of the city's response to the epidemic of 1793. This letter is a litany of beds. The letter, which is just two and a half pages long, offers an account of Philadelphia's black nurses in relation to furniture. As Allen and Jones write "we declare that, to the best of our remembrance, we had the care of the following beds and no more" (12). This catalog both outlines the specific responsibility of Allen, Jones, and their community for potentially contaminated property *and* articulates a firm limit around that responsibility "and no more."<sup>106</sup>

This section takes up the nested texts that frame Allen and Jones's *Narrative* to argue that Allen and Jones garner authority in part by returning to questions of goods and property as they overlap with and intervene in the production of human beings, living and dead human bodies, and issues of agency and responsibility. (A) I'll begin by outlining the role of goods in general and furniture and bedding in particular in the political crises surrounding the yellow fever

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<sup>106</sup> I presume that this letter was circulated in manuscript form and/or printed prior to its inclusion in the *Narrative*, but I have not been able to locate documentation of its wider circulation history. The letter is appended to the *Narrative* in its first publication and is routinely included in reprintings of the *Narrative*, including later editions in which the *Narrative* and its supporting documents circulate as addenda to Richard Allen's spiritual autobiography.

epidemic. The ways goods, dead bodies, and living beings were treated during the epidemic overlapped as these distinctions became blurred. (B) I'll draw on this context to outline some of the ways the first-person prose of the beds letter produces a theory of personhood and an ideology around property. (C) As this section begins to show and the rest of this chapter elaborates, this form of personhood involves a fluid boundary between human beings and nonhuman agents and offers new possibilities for thinking against liberal personhood and its attendant forms of ownership.

Yellow Fever descended on the Atlantic Coast in waves in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and fever was a constant problem in the Caribbean. As Sari Altschuler writes, in 1793, Yellow Fever returned “with dramatic intensity” to Philadelphia “for the first time in almost thirty years.” The fever “would strike Philadelphia eight times in the next twelve years, and while the array of 1790s outbreaks around the Atlantic were by no means isolated events, they caused an epistemic crisis in the United States because of their spectacular devastation, because of the impotence of American medicine in the face of that devastation, and because of the amplifying coincided of the epidemics with the social and political concerns of the postrevolutionary moment” (52). Philadelphia, the capitol of the U.S. from 1790 to 1800, was also a hub of Atlantic exchange and closely linked to the Caribbean by trade. The fever, which drove the national government from the city, also nearly dislodged its status as the capitol. Philadelphia rose to power as a trade hub, but in the increasingly conservative political moment of the 1790s, the permeability of the nation to outside influence was a site of much anxiety.

As scholars have thoroughly documented, uncertainty about Yellow Fever's mode of transmission led to two distinct schools of thought. These debates had clear political implications, and each reflected anxiety about Philadelphia's relationship to Haiti and the rest of the Caribbean. A divide emerged between “climatists,” who believed that the disease arose from

the local environment and especially from urban filth and “importationists,” who believed the disease originated in the Caribbean and came from imported Saint Dominguan goods and people. As Phillip J. Gould puts it, the fever debate essentially asked: “Was America ‘naturally’ healthy? Could it only be corrupted by ‘foreign’ influences (whether they be immigrants or goods?” (166). Climatists advocated preventing disease by cleaning up the air, water, and living conditions of Philadelphia. Importationists advocated preventing disease by limiting or more closely controlling imported goods from the Caribbean and the flow of French and Haitian émigrés into the city. In fact, both climatist and importationist positions implicated imported goods, as most climatists argued that the fever had begun from a mass of putrid coffee rotting on Water Street. While the fever was attributed to this local rot, then, it was also linked specifically to coffee, a Caribbean good that signified and felt laced with the violence of Caribbean slavery.<sup>107</sup> As Gould writes, “[e]pidemics of all sorts visibly signified divine retribution for national sins, including...slavery and the slave trade” (161).<sup>108</sup> The fever seemed to many residents of Philadelphia to be a harbinger of divine retribution for slavery on the one hand and a signifier of the threat of violent revolution on the other.<sup>109</sup>

Much of the Yellow Fever epidemic involved the orchestrated movement of people, bodies, and goods both within the city and between Philadelphia and other locales. In Philadelphia, committees spent time daily organizing “carts to convey the dead to a place of

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<sup>107</sup> On this links between coffee with the slave trade, see Nash, *Forging Freedom*. Also quoted Gould 165: “Saint Domingue at this time produced almost half the world’s coffee and sugar. Benjamin Rush’s claims about coffee as the cause of fever, therefore, “make even more sense in light of his anti-slavery writings during the 1770s.” (Gould 165).

<sup>108</sup> See also Altschuler 52.

<sup>109</sup>For more on the closeness of Philadelphia’s intellectual institutions to Caribbean goods and the currents of violence that facilitated scientific and commercial life in the city, see Iannini, *Fatal Revolutions*. Caribbean goods in Philadelphia were attached to guilt about the violence of slavery and to the thread of revolution.

interment, and the sick to the hospital” (Carey 63), and this calculated movement of bodies living and dead was much of the work in which Allen, Jones, and the corps of nurses they helped to organize participated. Carey records the widespread public belief that infected linens helped spread the epidemic in the city. As Carey writes, deaths from fever began along Water-street, where some vessels viewed as possible vectors of the disease were at harbor. From there, “[b]y degrees, it spread... It is said, and generally believed, that the beds and bedding of those who died of the disorder, at first, before the alarm went abroad, were sold, and spread it among the buyers” (Carey 20). Allen and Jones’s letter is a detailed account of the movement of objects within the city, which delimits their responsibility for beds as both potential agents of contamination and valuable items of property ripe for looting. Municipalities also responded to the fever in Philadelphia and in U.S. cities along the Atlantic Coast with elaborate systems that attempted to track and tally the movement of potentially infected goods and people.

Many other communities banned the importation of goods from Philadelphia and prohibited or quarantined the property fleeing Philadelphia residents brought with them to their safe-haven cities as they fled the epidemic.<sup>110</sup> The mayor of New York requested that physicians “report to him in writing, the names of all such persons as had arrived or should arrive from Philadelphia, or any other place, by land or water , and were or should be sick” (38). New York also acted early and characteristically in limiting its commerce with Philadelphia. Prohibitions and quarantines were often applied with special vehemence to beds and bed linens. The city’s leadership resolved in August “that goods, bedding, and clothing, packed up in Philadelphia should, previous to their being brought into New York, be unpacked and exposed to the open air in some well-ventilated place, for at least 48 hours” (42). In addition to being unpacked and

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<sup>110</sup> As Rhode Island’s concern with “all vessels which should arrive from the West Indies, Philadelphia, and New York” indicates, new geographies of threat emerged in these attempts at containment (Carey 52).

exposed to open air, “all linen or cotton clothes, or bedding, which had been used, should be well washed in several washes,” and all incoming goods should be smoked with brimstone fumes and aired out again (Carey 42). Prohibitions on the movement of people and goods were a matter of serious public concerns, and those who “should be so selfish and hardy, as to attempt to introduce any goods, wares, merchandize, bedding, baggage, &c. imported from, or packed up in Philadelphia” were to be considered “enemies to the welfare of the city” (43). All goods were subject to seizure, quarantine, and treatment, and beds and bedclothes are named specifically as potential agents of disease.

Bodies and goods, for the New York physicians, fall into strangely similar categories, as potential sources of infection. What is compelling, then, about these prohibitions as a backdrop for Allen and Jones’s account of furniture is that human beings, vast material flows, and goods combine to account for disease. The crisis of the epidemic was a crisis about the unstable category of the person in relationship to these terms. Concerns about the fever involve not just the circulation of print, narrative, or fact, but the circulation of vessels, persons, and goods.<sup>111</sup> These concerns with circulation are pinned specifically to beds and bedclothes, forms of semi-movable property, the site of sex, birth, and death, the center of domestic life freighted with a new set of infections associations in this context.

Before proceeding to a closer reading of Allen and Jones’s letter, it’s worth stopping to consider what might make beds – and Allen and Jones’s collective first-person claims about them – part of what construct personhood. As I suggest in the introduction to this chapter and

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<sup>111</sup> Debates about effective ways of circulating information have been central to literary scholarship about the epidemic, as in Altschuler. My intention is not to diminish this body of work but to return our attention to the material objects and bodies to which legal injunctions on the Atlantic Coast referred.

throughout this project, valid first-person speech is one measure of personhood.<sup>112</sup> The *Narrative* and its appendixes are documents that explicitly leverage first-person speech to seek public standing. In their writing, Allen and Jones seek and negotiate legal personhood. As a legal form, personhood is closely related to property. Legal personhood has two primary components: it grants rights on the one hand and levies responsibilities on the other.<sup>113</sup> The right to hold property is central to legal personhood and its powers. Liberal ideology over-emphasized private ownership and property acquisition as a way to garner civic standing.<sup>114</sup> We certainly see this in Jones's and especially Allen's acquisition of property, about which I write in greater detail later in this chapter. Certainly two important parts of black campaigns for citizenship and sovereignty involved (1) amassing property and (2) forms of personhood similarly oriented.<sup>115</sup> To understand Allen and Jones's account of beds as an account of personhood, however, is to understand personhood in a different relation to property.

The crisis of the yellow fever epidemic was a crisis about bodies' vulnerability to their environment and the ways agentic persons might be formed from a combination of human bodies, environmental factors, and objects. A form of personhood not focused on the integral, willful, and consistent status of the human person, but instead on ways the body might intermix

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<sup>112</sup> Heather Keenleyside writes about the ways first-person prose plays out competing theories of Lockean personhood in *Tristram Shandy*, arguing that personhood is in the end a "first-person form of life," defined by the constant task of narrating itself to itself over time.

<sup>113</sup> Jeanine Marie DeLombard argues that African Americans often came into personhood only in the negative sense, when they were treated as legal persons capable of being punished as responsible agents under the law. See also Naimou, p. 5, and Dayan.

<sup>114</sup> C.B. MacPherson argued that liberalism overemphasized the individual's possession of their person, attributes, and goods, producing a social world devoted to "possessive individualism" and the acquisition and safeguarding of property rather than collective wellbeing.

<sup>115</sup> Gould emphasizes the ways Allen and Jones sought to prove themselves as fit civic agents through "their possession of property," which "theoretically validates the civic identity of which they are in reality deprived" (175). See also Newman on property and self-government.

with other entities as part of an agentic assemblage would also necessarily require an alternative understanding of property. As Monique Allewaert writes in her work on personhood, “the discreet and individual body is necessary to capitalist property rights...because if a person had shifting boundaries – if its boundaries could not be clearly identified, or if it were conceived of as a collectivity instead of a unitary entity – it would not be possible to claim that this was the sole entity that could claim any given property. If these boundary issues were not resolved, it would also be impossible to determine where a person’s inalienable right to his own body began and where it ended. This would not only raise problems in determining the extent of a person but also would raise problems in determining at which point one could understand a substance as nonperson and thus legitimate alienable property” (191, n. 25).

Understandings of property and of the relation between the terms person, human, and nonhuman are entwined, and this group of terms is intensified for persons who have been classed as property under slavery. Outlining the multiple unstable forms of personhood wrought by Atlantic slavery – what she calls a taxonomy of legal persons – Angela Naimou describes the “millions of humans flickering between being persons and being money.” As Naimou writes, “The unstable transformation of human beings and legal slaves depended upon the power of law to create its own subject of recognition – the legal fiction of the person – as an individual entity entitled to legal rights” (1). As legal personhood “fracture[s] or submerge[s]” certain persons, it also generates new cultural forms of relation” (4).<sup>116</sup> Legal definitions of personhood in Pennsylvania were particularly unsettled. On March 1, 1780, the Pennsylvania legislature passed “An Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery.” The Act stipulated that future children of

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<sup>116</sup> Naimou is particularly interested in the ways “the legal racial slave emerges as a category of personhood in the Americas whose fragments, while degraded, participate in shaping the conditions of contemporary life. Such debris continues in its particular national and historical contexts to do the work of law – to establish, as Caleb Smith puts it, a ‘set of possible selves.’” (7).



enslaved people would be freed at age 28 and prohibited the importation of new slaves into the state. The law's enforcement was complicated by Philadelphia's metropole status. As part of the campaign to temporarily locate the federal government in Philadelphia, for example, slaves belonging to members of Congress were exempted from the law. In the same period, French refugees from Saint Domingue petitioned unsuccessfully to maintain their slaves as property, creating further legal confusion. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, passed a few months before the yellow fever epidemic took hold, further threatened the security of all free black people by declaring that masters had the right to recapture escaped slaves in the North. This law made it possible for any free black person to be kidnapped and sold South on the claim that they were a fugitive and should be returned to an owner in the South. Free black Philadelphians had a fluctuating and uncertain legal status not equivalent to the full legal personhood apportioned to white male citizens. As the parameters of personhood gave way in the face of this legal balancing act, the position of the appropriate first-person speaker likewise shifted.

Some forms of abolitionism relied on making arguments that enslaved people could take on the mantle of liberal personhood and its attendant property rights (see Lowe and section 3 of this chapter on the limitations of this position). More radical forms of abolition, like those that emerged in the Haitian Revolution, implied that "property could not simply be conceived of as passive units of exchange or inheritance" (Allewaert 157). The most obvious and forceful disruption of colonial property rights was the fact that "slave property articulated its vitality, resistance, and autonomy" in revolutionary action. Allewaert also argues that "Afro-American cultural forms like fetish production and Vodou...complicated conceptions of property, object-status and commodification by suggesting that organic and inorganic forms cannot simply be

counted as passive units to be meted out by human agents” (157).<sup>117</sup> Allen and Jones were not practitioners of Vodou or producers of fetish objects – both professed devout Christianity. What I am arguing, however, is that in the context of the yellow fever epidemic, questions of property and its stability and supposed lack of agency were disrupted in some of the ways Allewaert describes, particularly by Allen and Jones’s account of black nurses and their stewardship of infected beds.

As objects, beds are especially relevant for conceptualizing personhood for a least two reasons. First, as potentially dangerous things, they are caught up in legal responsibility and claims to civic fitness – they are relevant to the construction of personhood as a legal and social category. Second, they are wrapped in the language of mourning, intimacy, and animacy. If the first reason – responsibility – has to do with the technicalities of a legal personhood that is always related to but never coincident with humanness, the second reason – linguistic and conceptual ties to mourning, intimacy, and animacy – has to do with the kinds of affects that accrue around persons as valuable civic participants and living agents.

Allen and Jones’s account of personhood participates in mapping yellow fever and its agents. Rather than tracking motion into or out of the city, however, Allen and Jones link the civic value of their nursing corps to the circulation of moveable property. In their letter, Allen and Jones are careful to stipulate that the beds whose motion they account for do not belong to them. The opening sentence of their letter, describing “the care of the following beds and no

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<sup>117</sup> Allewaert further suggest this ideology might make possible “a dissolution of the colonial conception of the object, which would force a large-scale revaluation of property that could in turn challenge the bourgeois models of sociality and personality that historians have argued resulted from the Age of Revolution” (157-9).

more,” position the letter as a document concerned with both responsibility and property. The first entry after this delimiting sentence lays out the form of the entries that follow:

“Two belonging to James Starr we buried; upon taking them up, we found one damaged; the blankets, &c. belonging to it were stolen; it was refused to be accepted by his son Moses; it was buried again, and remains so for ought we know; the other was returned and accepted of.”

This opening phrase establishes the beds to which Allen and Jones refer as “belonging to” James Starr. This phrase suggests Allen and Jones’s respect for property rights and counters Matthew Carey’s claim that Allen, Jones, and their corps of nurses were primarily interested in looting. It simultaneously sets up a complex account of ownership, materiality, and agency, as it introduces the history of a bed that was “damaged” by unknown human or nonhuman agents and separated into parts that were “stolen.” This property became a gift returned, which was “refused” by its proper inheritor and “buried again” like a body by the black nurses accused of stealing it. After its reburial, the career of the bed drifts into the unknown. It may still be there, “remain[ing],” as Allen and Jones suggest, “for all we know.” But its status is precisely unknown, given over to the web of motion, dirt, and disease that exceeds the firmly circumscribed legal responsibility of Allen, Jones, and their nurses.

The contrast between this first bed, whose long trajectory is compressed into a few short sentences, and the *other* bed belonging to James Starr is distinct. The other bed, Allen and Jones write, was “returned,” presumably to James’s son Moses, and “accepted of.” Having been buried and allowed to rise again in a state of imagined cleanliness, this bed returned to the realm of familial property from which the fever had excised it. If Allen and Jones’s designation of Starr as owner and themselves as nonowning caretakers seems like a way of respecting formal legal property rights – and specifically white citizens’ right to private property, the contrast between

Starr's two beds also opens onto something else. The beds in Allen and Jones's care have been *removed* from conventional networks of ownership and conventional understandings of passivity and have become something that is not quite conventional property.<sup>118</sup>

In describing beds that are no longer conventional pieces of property, Allen and Jones speak from a collective first-person position. The forging of a valid collective first-person voice, which is central to the project of the *Narrative*, extends into this appendix. Allen and Jones write confidently of themselves as a "we" here, offering from "our own remembrance" a full account of fever beds. This "we" melds the memories of Allen and Jones, the letter's authors and signatories, while also extending to an unknown number of other black Philadelphians who had a hand in the movement of and care for the beds enumerated in this list. This collective first-person voice cuts against discreet and individual personhood. Allen and Jones do not speak in a sanctioned corporate first-person voice, as they might on behalf of an institution, but they co-opt some of that collective power. The merging of multiple first-person observers reflects the need for multiple and repeated observations to intensify authority.<sup>119</sup>

While the use of "we" bolsters the validity of Allen and Jones's observation and claims, in this situation it also highlights a gap, acknowledging a forced restructuring of individual personhood into which objects and other agents might slide. The confident certainty with which Allen and Jones proceed in parts of the *Narrative* becomes unsettled in their account of furniture which, as the Starr example illustrates, went into the ground and came out again, was accepted and refused, was damaged and stolen, and often became something only indeterminately tracked

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<sup>118</sup> Nonhuman property could be held legally responsible in medieval England, and this history resonates into U.S. law, which sometimes recognizes nonhuman agents even as it violently contorts and punishes human persons at the edge of the "humane." See Dayan.

<sup>119</sup> On the role of repeated observation in production authority in Baconian empiricism, see Parrish. On some of the ways repeated observation could fracture authority and lead to prolonged disagreements, rather than cementing unified factual narratives, see Lewis.

or known. This indeterminacy resulted on the one hand from the general lack of clarity around the spread of Yellow Fever: What, precisely, was the role of beds in transmitting the disease and how could they be made safe for use again? The temporality of this letter, through which beds move as potential agents of disease, tracks a flow of burial and recovery that tows with it the timeline of material contamination. The beds in the Starr example that opens the letter were “tak[en] up” on an undisclosed timeline, but twice later in the letter Allen and Jones specify that beds were “buried a week” or “remained there [in the ground] a week.” The potential agencies at play in this account of beds, then, including human actors who are not owners, beds as freighted objects, and material remnants which may or may not disperse after some time underground.

The intimate relationship between agentic beds, bodies, and matter and its consequences for African Americans become apparent in one of the most famous works of fiction associated with the Yellow Fever, Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* (1799-1901). To tell the story of Arthur Mervyn as a story of beds is to see the novel as a series of perpetual invasions of privacy.<sup>120</sup> Invasion of privacy, secret misdeeds and the threat of

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<sup>120</sup> In addition to this famous literary representation of private spaces and private property during the epidemic, we might turn to some of the many narratives narrated by beds and other pieces of furniture to consider the resonance of beds as particular forms of property bound up in the production of bourgeois intimacy. The fantasy that beds can speak was a mainstay in the narratives written from the mid-eighteenth century onward. In these narratives, speaking beds offer prurient tales of lust and intrigue, drawing on their close proximity to human bodies and especially to sleep and sex to produce raucous and engaging narratives. Claude Crébillon’s *The Sopha, A Moral Tale*, originally published in French and translated into English in 1742, was a founding text in the genre. A libertine tale, its premise is that a man was reincarnated as a sofa and was destined to remain locked in that piece of furniture until two young lovers have sex on the sofa. *The Sopha* promises the kind of salacious view of private life that is also central to the *Atom* and *Louse* of chapter 1. Other imitations focused on couches and sofas followed, and “The History and Adventures of a Bedstead,” an uncompleted narrative, was published in *Rambler’s*

uncontained infection are equally associated with bedchambers across *Mervyn*. Sari Altschuler points out that Mervyn “moves relentlessly toward” the fever, “enter[ing] the city oat the height of the fever and seek[ing] out dens of disease,” rather than fleeing from the city and the fever, at most Philadelphians did. Altschuler characterizes Mervyn’s action as a pattern of perpetual violation as he “repeatedly enters without knocking; he moves uninvited through spaces, trespassing and generally arriving unwelcome and unknown” (75). If this perpetual movement towards fever and violation of private space allows Brockden Brown to play out competing theories of the disease in the novel, it also emphasizes the extent to which the epidemic is a situation in which property and privacy are turned on their heads. Mervyn hides in darkened bedrooms (34), watches as furniture is gathered and redistributed across networks of debt (94), and finds himself surrounded by valuable but infected goods.

In a key scene of the novel, the potential agency of infected beds is directly linked to the specter of black nurses in white bedrooms and the potential powers of supposedly immune black attendants during the epidemic. Looking for a friend, Mervyn creeps into a house uninvited, imbibes air he believes to be infected with yellow fever, and enters a bedchamber. There he sees a bed, “the curtain of which was dropped at the foot so as to conceal anyone within,” emitting “[b]reath, drawn at long intervals; mutterings scarcely audible; and a tremulous motion,” as if animated by a body (112). The bed in this scene is an interior space within the inside of a house, “conceal[ing] anyone” or no one from view. In this closed state, the bed itself seems to admit breath, mutter, and tremble. Considering this scene in relationship to beds buried, recovered, and gone off to locations unknown, we can see Charles Brockden Brown literalizing an imaginary that produces beds as animate bodies. As he infiltrates the bed curtains, Mervyn finds

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*Magazine* between December 1784 and April 1787. These narratives give a taste of the ways beds were understood to be connected with private space, identity, and status.

a human body he does not recognize. The bed sheets themselves aren't breathing after all, but they contain a mysterious being.

Here in the house of the sick, Mervyn finds himself vulnerable to the attacks of a black nurse or servant. The vague "human figure" of the black attendant appears to Mervyn at first to be an ill person or corpse reanimated, as he imagines for a moment "that the dying man had started from his bed and was approaching me" (113). Instead, Mervyn snaps into focus and observes "[o]ne eye, a scar upon his check, a tawny skin, a form grotesquely misproportioned, brawny as Hercules, and habited in livery," before being knocked unconscious by a blow upon the temple that renders Mervyn himself a near-corpse. He awakens to find a burial team in the room, ready to lift his body into a coffin and nail the lid firmly on top (114-115). In this scene, Mervyn, the white protagonist who has been infiltrated by diseased matter which may or may not turn his body inside out, mistakes a bed for a body and a black man for an animate corpse. In this moment in which he attempts to correct his observational failing, identifying a marked fact and body brawny and vital in the face of disease, Mervyn succumbs to the blow of this being. The deliberate blow of the black attendant, who acts effectively in the haze of semi-agents in this house, knocks Mervyn even more firmly out of his position as self-assured and powerful agent. Mervyn's living body becomes indistinct from a corpse, and he wakes to find himself nearly entombed. Rushing headlong towards the fever and its disorders places Mervyn at the mercy of a series of categorical transformations. As in the compressed narrative *Allen and Jones* unfold in their letter, matter, property, corpse, and body are intermixed and power relations become uncertain.

Having established himself as a living person, Mervyn enters into a conversation in which he is asked to do his part to restore order by protecting property rights.<sup>121</sup> One of the undertakers who has nearly buried Mervyn moments before speculates that the servants plundered the house when they realized the dead man in bed wouldn't recover. Now, property relations are in total disarray: "Perhaps no one in America can claim the property. Meanwhile, plunderers are numerous and active. An house this totally deserted, and replenished with valuable furniture will, I fear, become their prey. Tonight, nothing can be done towards rendering it secure, but staying in it" (117). This statement and the suggestion that Mervyn stay in the house implicitly invites Mervyn to stake his wellness and the possibility on his recovery to the protection of private property rights. This Mervyn agrees to do, heading the undertaker's suggestion that he wrap himself in a carpet since "[e]very bed in the house has probably sustained a dead person" (117). In this environment, in which each bed is marked by the infectious potential of a dead body, its cloud of effluvial matter, and "the gangrenous black vomit" emitted in sickness, Mervyn's best bet is to lie on the floor wrapped in a carpet. Later in *Arthur Mervyn*, having survived his night in the carpet, Mervyn describes another house full of sick beds "appear[ing] as if someone had recently been dragged from" them (127). Mervyn's narrative, then revolves around indeterminate and blurred relations between dead bodies

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<sup>121</sup> Barnard and Shapiro describe Arthur Mervyn as taking place against "backdrop concerning colonial trade networks and the culture of commerce" (xii). Brown critiques commercial vice "by systematically linking the novel's frauds, fortunes, and other commercial activity back to their roots in Atlantic slavery," emphasizing that "[s]lavery not only generates the wealth that allows the novel's merchants to practice their guile but also provides the initial context for events that set of cycles of violence that being far away but literally come home to roost in the novel's domestic relationships and spaces, which are filled with luxurious goods purchased with the profits of slavery and its associated economy" (xxx, xxxi). To be tasked with the protection of property is to be drawn into and further implicated in these violences. Gould emphasizes commercial relations as the center concern for both Carey and Allen and Jones in the 1793 epidemic, as all parties grappled with "the ideological inextricability...between sentiment and the capitalist market, between benevolence and supply and demand as the regulators of human behavior" (158).



(Mervyn is nearly buried alive) and bodies and objects (beds that seem to breathe or maintain the appearance of bodies that have left them). In this disordered scenario, property rights break down, and black actors acquire certain disruptive powers.

Like *Mervyn's* beds, the beds Allen and Jones describe seem to take on the quality of bodies. In Allen and Jones's account of property buried and recovered, fever beds are treated as commensurate with bodies that might be buried and later exhumed, by appropriate partners or by grave robbers. Again Allen and Jones seem to be concerned with property rights, but what they describe is the combination of beds with other forms of material, including bodies; their occasional return to owners; and their ultimate redistribution without pay or exchange across subterranean and above ground spaces. For example, of the two beds belonging to Samuel Fisher for which Allen and Jones take limited responsibility, both were buried. One was then "taken up by us to carry a sick person on to Bush hill and there left; the other was buried in a grave, under a corpse" (21). At Bush-hill, the city's public hospital, which Arthur Mervyn's companion Wallace describes as a place where he was forced to lie on a mattress "whose condition proved that a half decayed corpse had recently been dragged from it," covered in "the detestable matter that flowed from [the] stomach" of his dying neighbor, Fisher's bed is no longer recoverable or assignable as Fisher's bed. Instead, in this space, which Matthew Carey describes as a place with "[n]ot the smallest appearance of order or regularity" in which "[t]he dead and the dying were indiscriminately mingled together," the bodies of humans and the distinction between living body, corpse, noncorpse, object, and flowing matter become nondiscreet (61). This intermingling of nondiscreet entities can't be undone, and Fisher's bed is lost.

The second bed tenuously identified as Fisher's private property was "buried in a grave under a corpse" (21). This bed's fate has also exceeded its status as Fisher's property. Its association with an unnamed corpse exceeds its link to Fisher, or to Allen or Jones specifically.

This bed, submerged, belongs to its body now. Several of the other beds in Allen and Jones's letter, they write, were buried in the Potter's Field, Philadelphia's graveyard for the poor or unknown, and the only graveyard open to black Philadelphians.<sup>122</sup> In these instances, the commensurability of persons and objects – the way beds might stand in for persons – does not appear in the overt projection of face or voice – beds' observational or communicative capacities.<sup>123</sup> Instead, things become agentic semi-persons because of their capacity to leak, move, and infect, and like bodies to be buried and rise again.

Beds buried in private lots rather than graveyards also experienced strange material transformations. One of Thomas Willing's beds was buried "six feet deep in his garden, and lime and water thrown upon it," presumably to prevent its infectious properties from leeching into the soil. This particular entry indicates that even beds buried on *private property* no longer upheld understandings of property as discreet, materially stable, and individually possessed.

This repetition of temporary and uncertain burial and material recombination is further muddied by a lack of clarity about who is responsible for the beds once they have been buried. Allen and Jones continue to limit the responsibility they take for the beds while also dissolving their clear observational testimony in a web of belief and speculation, declaring of a bed buried in the Potter's field, for instance, "further knowledge of it we have not" and describing the fate of other beds – "stolen," "buried," or "taken up by the owner" – with "we believe." The fate of fever beds is at the edge of fact – buried beds are not available for observation, nor can they indicate from their graves that they remain submerged. Beds offer no proof of their location or

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<sup>122</sup> The African Methodist Episcopal Church purchased a private burial ground for the interment of black congregants in 1810 and assisted with funerary costs for black Philadelphians. See Nepa, "Cemeteries" and Newman, *Freedom's Prophet*, p. 130.

<sup>123</sup> Here I am thinking of Johnson's emphasis on prosopopeia and what she understands as the fundamental anthropomorphism of language.

status and even a careful litany becomes a litany in a semi-religious sense, hinged around belief. Beds, then do not fall under the purview of discreet and separate human observers who can confidently describe, move, and exchange them. Instead beds drift in and out of the “we” ’s knowledge and belief and intermix with corpses, soil, lime, and other materials.

As objects, beds produce a relation between living and dead bodies, furniture and other forms of property, earth, and disease matter. They also produce narratives that focus on the unknown processes by which one of these becomes the other, as beds are found damaged and remain in place “for ought we know.” They are objects that are both valued – they can be stolen – and without significant monetary value – as they are sometimes too dangerous to be accepted by their former owners. Beds are buried like bodies and they concentrate around them a form of care that is about fear, matter, and contamination. In producing an account of the beds which were their responsibility, Allen and Jones embrace a kind of proximity to property – a way that human beings might become persons in conjunction not just with matter but with moveable goods. While such a proximity might be undesirable for formerly enslaved African American preachers engaged in advocacy around their rights as human persons, Allen and Jones do not in this instance eschew an affinity between human and nonhuman beings. Lingering on these beds as figurative and agentic objects – the letter is not just a list but a lyric – opens new opportunities for thinking personhood, property, and collectivity. Allen and Jones describe the collective stewardship of objects for the common good, in a scenario in which human persons and nonhuman objects are mutually vulnerable to and powerful in their relation to diseased matter. In this crisis, in which black Philadelphians have been tasked with dangerous civic work, Allen and Jones write that they limited their responsibility because of other persons, writing “we never took the charge of more than their burial, knowing they were liable to be taken away by evil

minded persons” (22). But burial is also the only action that can be confidently described around beds whose properties and transformations are so unknown. Allen and Jones respond to this freighted object by embracing and articulating the indeterminacy of circulation – of objects and of matter among persons and objects – as part of a public missive designating responsibility.

If one or several forms of personhood are being but forward here in law, Allen and Jones in fact model another form, more akin to the idea of assemblages composed of multiple agentic parts than Locke’s model of a carefully organized and self-identical whole. Allen and Jones’s letter does not indicate a capacity to confidently narrate experience over time but instead dips into speculative and lyric prose to reconfigure responsible stewardship. With this reading of beds and its construction of personhood in mind, the first-person prose of Allen and Jones’s pamphlet looks different. The next section of his chapter approaches Allen and Jones’s *Narrative* and its observational prose in light of the beds letter.

## 2. *Narrative*

Allen and Jones's bed letter is addressed to Mayor Clarkson, but the *Narrative* was composed in response to Matthew Carey. Carey published the first edition of *A short account of the malignant fever, lately Prevalent in Philadelphia: with a statement of the proceedings that took place on the subject in different parts of the United States* in the fall of 1793, just as the epidemic was beginning to lift. *A short account* collated some of the ongoing debates about the epidemic, the responses of various communities to Philadelphia, and the motion of persons and goods into and out of the city during the fever. It also villainized Philadelphia's black nurses, whom Carey accused of greedily overcharging and looting. Carey also repeated the assertion that black people "were not liable to the fever" (78).<sup>124</sup>

Carey's account was widely consumed as an authoritative compilation of fever knowledge. By the time he amended his account of in a fourth edition in 1794, *A short account* had already circulated widely. Even as he rhetorically cautioned readers as to the haste with which his manuscript was prepared, Carey established himself as a gatekeeper for knowledge around the epidemic. His preface to the expanded second edition, published in November 1793, calls the text as an "imperfect account" while reaffirming Carey's mission "to collect together while facts are recent as many of the most interesting occurrences as [he] could for the information of the public" (v). Carey stakes his own observational prowess and his editorial skill on the volume, writing "[m]ost of the facts mentioned here have fallen under my own observation. Those of a different description I have been assiduous to collect from every person of credibility possessed of

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<sup>124</sup> Carey later rescinded his assertion that black people were totally immune to yellow fever but maintained the position that "the number of [black people] that were seized with it, was not that great, and, as I am informed by an eminent doctor, it yielded to the power of medicine in them more easily than in whites" (78).

information (*vi*). Carey thus centralizes his own ostensibly reliable observations while also determining the “credibility” of other observers. The volume introduces itself as a stable site in the midst of the epidemic’s intense disorder. Carey did not draw on the observations of Allen, Jones, or other black nurses in the city, who did not have the social standing to contribute to this authoritative description of facts.

In the immediate aftermath of the epidemic, Allen and Jones entered the print sphere to respond to Carey directly. Their narrative also put pressure on the structures of public knowledge making. If the epidemic was a site of much deliberate and accidental miscommunication, it also resulted in more opportunities to contribute publicly to knowledge about health and disease.<sup>125</sup> While the fever epidemic was a major crisis, it also fomented considerable scientific and literary production and produced opportunities for public contestation around disease, embodiment, and authority. In the context of an active medical crisis, writers employed first-person empirical discourse to produce narrative authority and facilitate social and political access. Allen and Jones produce their composite first-person voice to do this.

Allen and Jones write into this context to demand authority and publicly claim their moral value, leveraging their collective first-person voice around observation, sensory experience, facticity, and knowledge. This purpose is evident in the narrative’s title and its opening passage. The title establishes the text as a combative “refutation” of the “censures” “thrown upon” black people in publications. The opening passage identifies the narrative as a necessary counterweight and consequence of existing publications in response to this “partial representation of the conduct of the people who were employed to nurse the sick,” Allen and

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<sup>125</sup> This difficulty of communicating around fever had lasting impacts in American print. One impact was that the *Medical Repository*, the first medical journal in the United States, was founded several years after the epidemic, in 1797 in large part to centralize and increase the efficiency and speed of debate about the causes of ongoing fever epidemics (on communication and fever, see Altschuler Ch. 2). See also Waterman on intellectual and cultural production in the 1790s.

Jones “step forward and declare the facts as they really were; seeing that from our situation, on account of the charge we took upon us, we had it more fully and generally in our power, to know and observe the conduct and behavior of those that were so employed” (3). Allen and Jones thus explicitly frame themselves as more valued purveyors of “facts as they really were” than the prominent Carey, dislodging the white male citizen from the position of ideal observer. Allen and Jones make this claim in light of their proximity to the fever and the role of black nurses, which granted them intimate access to the fever and its victims – “to know and observe the conduct” of those employed as nurses.<sup>126</sup>

The collective first-person voice in Allen and Jones’s *Narrative* makes a claim about the African American community on the back of an extended series of empirical observations about the impact of yellow fever on the city. Although the text certainly has an investment in demonstrating the moral goodness of the black community, its authority hinges on successful observation. As Jones and Allen write in a key moment, “The public were informed that in the West-Indies and other places where this terrible malady had been, it was observed that the blacks were not affected with it. Happy would it have been for you, and much more so for us, if this observation had been verified by our experience” (15). Countering the “assurance” they received “that people of our own colour were not liable to the infection,” which was used to call them into service to support “our fellow suffering mortals” – white Philadelphians – Allen and Jones instead make claims from their own experience. They rhetorically displace Carey as those most able to

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<sup>126</sup> This opportunity to produce authoritative information based on close and repeated observation closely resembles the form of agency Susan Scott Parish identifies as available to African, Native, female, and Anglo-colonial observers in the context of eighteenth-century natural history networks. See also Knott, Iannini, and Chapter 2 of this dissertation. The model of first-person authority associated with an epidemic differs from both that of natural history, focused on exploration of the natural world, and that of mental health, in which patients’ interior narratives are collated by a practicing physician. In this context, exposure to illness produces distributed authority rooted in the capacity to closely observe the transfiguration of the familiar.

“verif[y] by our experience” the facts of the fever, especially as they regard questions of race. Allen and Jones forcefully respond to Carey’s account by producing a composite first-person voice, a “we” through which they adjudicate between conflicting accounts of the fever and the role of black people in responding to it. This first-person voice, rooted in Allen and Jones’s authority as prominent spiritual figures, also intervenes in matters of fact, as they offer an unflinching account of yellow fever and its symptoms drawn from the collective experiences of the nurses under working under their direction.

The work Allen and Jones do in intervening in the yellow fever debates is a form of what Britt Rusert calls *fugitive science*, built around “a dynamic and diverse archive of engagements with, critiques of, and responses to racial science, as well as other forms of natural science.” If the narrative itself highlights a way that the science of illness was being practiced by black actors, focusing on the beds letter helps us see Allen and Jones as more aligned with other “black practitioners [who] did not primarily use science to affirm their status as liberal subjects, as citizen(-scientists), or even, as white abolitionists would do for them, as fully human, though that fact sometimes served as the starting point for practitioners of fugitive science. More often, natural science served African Americans as a springboard for complex meditations on being, subjectivity, and existence” (5). As Rusert theorizes it, “[f]ugitive science aspired to and enacted freedom in terms that challenged possessive individualism just as often as it asserted that black people were not, in fact, objects but people. More than simply establishing the fact of black humanity, African Americans used natural science to profoundly meditate on the category of the human itself – on its possibilities, limits, and its complex relationship to blackness, a concept that exceeds a simply biological or even transparently empirical relationship to race” (6). While we might understand the *Narrative* itself to be part of what Rusert terms “*oppositional forms of fugitive science*...composed of explicit critiques of racial science aim to make a direct intervention into



scientific discourse,” the beds letter takes Allen and Jones into the territory of “*speculative fugitive science*” inasmuch as it “use[s] the rich imaginative landscape of science to meditate on slavery and freedom, as well as the contingencies of black subjectivity and existence” (18). To focus on Allen and Jones’s work in relationship to newly imagined or maintained relationships to property, object-ness, and collectivity moves the *Narrative* and its attendant texts into the speculative territory Rusert describes.

Allen & Jones claim empirical observation for themselves in this instance and tie the offer of observation to a set of other political projects, including the abolitionist documents appended to the *Narrative*, and the theorization of matter, property, and personhood that rests below the surface of this account. The work of this text is thus fugitive inasmuch as the pamphlet leverages empiricism in pursuit of political power. But we might also see this volume, including the *Narrative*, the bed letter, and numerous other documents, as a whole as a document of speculative fugitive scientific practice when we follow the letter, which insists on orienting careful observation and tabulation towards uncertain and collectives ends, with the consequence not just of advocating for rights on the terms offered but in fact of reorienting the available terms themselves. In bringing the bed letter to the forefront of analysis, the *Narrative* emerges as a text in which the terms of observation and ownership are uncertain. The *Narrative* produces a corporate, collective first-person voice that merges spiritual standing with accounts of empirical observation, intervening in medical debates and claiming empirical authority in this way. It also records incredible confusion about the living, the dead, and the power one attains by bearing various relations to the living, the dead, and their property.

In their observations about fever itself, build on their “opportunities of seeing and hearing” many affected with it, Allen and Jones describe bodies turned inside out and mind disordered. And opening the body further is an essential part of their nursing care. Allen and

Jones were called upon and directed by Benjamin Rush, who oversaw the work of the black nursing corps during the epidemic. Rush's positions on the causes of treatment shaped the care these nurses provided. As Chapter 2 of this project describes in detail, Rush's circulatory ideology emphasized that health was the product of a balanced and continuous circulation of blood in the body. Rush, who ascribed to a climatist position and linked the fever's causes to local environmental ills, proposed bleeding people to remove diseased blood from the body. The dramatic blood loss of Rush's "heroic cure" was blamed for some deaths, but Rush argued that those who survived were cured of yellow fever (see Altschuler 60-61). Allen and Jones used their observational status to confirm the effectiveness of bleeding and argued that "bleeding patients early in the course of the fever" is most effective. Black nurses "made it a practice to take more blood from [patients they reached early], than is usual in other cases," and that "these in a general way recovered" (17).<sup>127</sup> The body is thus conceived by Allen and Jones as by others as an open system whose health can be restored by opening it further.

The open and disordered bodies Allen and Jones describe were paired with disordered minds. Allen and Jones confirmed the widely held belief that fear of the fever and anticipation of death contributed to infection. It awed them to be asked by people who were still healthy "to take charge of them in sickness and of their funeral" (16). Many people "appeared as though they thought they must die, and not life; some have lain on the floor to be measured for their coffin and grave" (16). This action – imagining the vulnerable body as a corpse and offering it to the furniture of the dead – indicates the scope of authority given black nurses, who were presumed to be future survivors of the epidemic and the ways the admixture of living, dead, and object impacted those who were not yet ill.

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<sup>127</sup> Allen and Jones note the large scale of their care, claiming that black nurses "bled upwards of eight hundred people" (17-18).

If the actions of those who were well were alarming, the sick patients black nurses encountered were often “raging and frightful to behold,” “requir[ing] two persons, to hold them from running away” or jumping out the window (14). Patients in the throes of fever behaved as unreasonable and unpredictable agents and were “nailed down” and locked in “to prevent them from running away, or breaking their necks” (14). Others were overtaken and “lay vomiting blood, and screaming enough to chill [their nurses] with horror” (14). Black nurses in this context restrained white patients, inverting the contexts of slavery in which black bodies are restrained by white people. Sick people slip out of rationality and narrative – however fantastical or damaging narrative may be, as the anticipation of illness was – and become volatile bodies moving rapidly at their own peril, expelling blood and vomit. The healthy, rational citizen subject, corralled by consciousness and confidently possessing property, falls out of this scene altogether. As bodies came undone, property was also thrown out of standard circuits of value, ownership, and exchange.

Property is at stake in the ways Allen and Jones situate black nurses in relationship to white attendants. As they fend off the accusations that black nurses are thieves, Allen and Jones retort with an account of property theft by poor whites. White people demanded and received unreasonable payments for the small actions of “putting a corpse in a coffin” or “bringing it downstairs” (9). The movement of bodies at exorbitant prices corresponds with the thieving of goods, as Allen and Jones recall the story of a white woman whose pockets were found full of the buckles and other belongings of the patient she had been tending (9). Others white attendants, when Allen and Jones “were called to remove the corpse,” were found drunk, with their patients’ rings on their fingers and in their pockets (9). These examples anchor Allen and Jones’s claim that white nurses behaved worse than black nurses during the epidemic. They resonate with the many scenes of suspected looting in *Arthur Mervyn* and other texts about the epidemic. Bearing in

mind the valuable but untrackable beds of the *Narrative*'s concluding letter, these scenes also indicate the uncertainty about what should belong to whom in the aftermath of fever death. The strategic moralistic claim that white nurses stole more than black ones is produced alongside the shadow acknowledgement that property itself is in enormous flux, as are the rights of the dead. Responsibility for removing corpses from beds, enclosing them in coffins, and ferrying them from homes, outsourced to strangers, interrupts the private space of death and mourning in which rings and buckles might be properly appointed to new owners. Neither that which remains in the house or that which is removed from it – body, bed – can be confidently accounted for.

If many readings of the *Narrative* focus on its leveraging of moral and spiritual authority to open space for black voices in American politics, what I have tried to show in this reading are the ways unsettled concerns about embodiment, agency, and property animate the content of the narrative. The speculative terms of the bed letter linger alongside the *Narrative*'s more confident observational and moral claims, heading off any reading of the *Narrative* as a straightforward defense of black respectability on the terms of normative citizenship. In the *Narrative* itself, Allen and Jones acknowledge the rumors of furniture movement near the end of the document. They write that, in addition to whatever Carey has said, rumors about their handling of beds are flying far and wide. As Allen and Jones put it, “we have found reports spread, of our taking between one, and two hundred beds, from houses where people died; such slanderers as those, who propagate such willful lies are dangerous, although unworthy of notice” (20). The rumors themselves are uncertain – stealing one bed is quite different from stealing two hundred. But regardless, in this passage, Allen and Jones distance black nurses from beds, and from “willful lies” about theft. Insisting on their respect for private property, Allen and Jones write that they welcome “any person hath the least suspicion” of their work with beds to “endeavor to bring us

to just punishment” so that the truth might show itself (20). The supplementary letter to Mayor Clarkson picks up this thread to straighten the record. What the letters shows, however, is less straightforward. It indicates not just a careful respect by black nurses for white property but instead the way property itself was transformed and displaced by the fever. No longer confined to the private, intimate, domestic space of the home, beds circulated as a collective responsibility and possible agent, carefully treated and tracked until they disappeared from view.

### **3. Property**

If restricting the circulation of goods and furniture was one major response to the yellow fever epidemic, the return of goods to major thoroughfares of Philadelphia – the return of commerce to the city – marked its end. As Carey writes in his account, by late October 1793, people started to return “in crowds” to Philadelphia, and simultaneously the stores reopened and “[t]he customhouse, for weeks nearly deserted” became again thronging with citizens selling their vessels of goods (Carey 68). Presumably this was to mark the beginning of a return to normal property relations, but I have found no record of the beds in the Potter’s Field being dug up and returned to their proper owners. Allen and Jones’s *Narrative* joined Carey’s remarks and many other texts in this post-fever circulation. As a circulating object, the *Narrative* brings together spiritual and empirical discourses and holds them in suspension alongside an account of personhood produced by the merger of living and dead human bodies, infected objects, and matter. As I have noted, the text of the *Narrative* was appended from its first publication to a number of other documents including abolitionist speeches and the beds letter that has been central to my analysis. In later editions, Richard Allen’s spiritual autobiography became the headliner, and the *Narrative* and its paratexts were folded in as biographical evidentiary narratives. In this closing section, I want to argue that this chapter’s reading of the beds letter allows us to reimagine the Allen of the biography, the AME, and the liberal property relations that seem to inhere in these. Instead, recovering and holding fast to a more collective notion of persons and agents, one that does not flatten out race and violence or avoid questions of power.

Richard Allen was born enslaved in 1760 and became well-known as a Methodist preacher while still enslaved. He purchased his own freedom in August of 1783.<sup>128</sup> His manumission agreement is the very first such document on file at the Pennsylvania Abolition Society in Philadelphia.<sup>129</sup> After rising to prominence in mainstream Methodism, Allen weathered significant conflict with white church leaders and established Bethel Church, a Methodist church at which Allen preached to black congregants who had broken with their integrated congregation. He eventually became a founder of the African Methodist Episcopal church and one of the most influential voices in Philadelphia's large and active black community. After many requests that he do so, Allen composed *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen*, a brief biographical account of his life, which was published posthumously in 1833.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Allen was born in Philadelphia, enslaved to the lawyer Benjamin Chew and was later sold to a Delaware farmer. He moved back to Philadelphia after completing a circuit of itinerant preaching in 1786. See Newman, Ch. 1.

<sup>129</sup> The Pennsylvania Abolition Society was founded in 1775 and was instrumental in drafting and passing Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Act of 1780. This white abolitionist organization provided considerable support for formerly enslaved and fugitive people in Philadelphia and had close links to the African Society and other predominantly or exclusively black organizations in the city.

<sup>130</sup> Like Allen, Jones had been born enslaved in Sussex County, Delaware in 1746. Jones's master moved to Philadelphia when Jones was 16, and in 1774 Jones bought his own freedom. Allen and Jones were co-founders of Philadelphia's Free African Society, which supported the city's substantial free black population. Jones was of an older generation, and he was less involved in the production of independent black institutions than was Allen. While Allen broke fully with the white Methodist church, winning a series of court cases that recognized the African Methodist Church as an independent, self-governing corporation, Jones headed S. Thomas's African Episcopal Church, "which did not claim complete independence from the white Episcopal hierarchy" (Newman 71; see also 122). Allen was younger, with a politics more oriented around black autonomy, and was the foremost black leader in the U.S. for decades. While Allen and Jones are partnered, then, Allen emerges as a primary figure in imagining black autonomy in the U.S. at the turn of the nineteenth century.

My interest in Allen's autobiography is in its genre and the assumptions that genre carries about liberal subjectivity. Allen participates in an emergent tradition of black autobiography.<sup>131</sup> In her reassessment of the emergence of modern liberalism, which focuses on "mak[ing] legible the forcible encounters, removals, and entanglements often omitted in liberal accounts of abolition, emancipation, and independence," Lisa Lowe argues that autobiography emerges at the turn of the nineteenth century as the quintessential genre of liberalism. As Lowe writes, autobiography became "a particularly powerful genre for the individual achievement of liberty through ethical education and civilization" (46). Lowe argues that black autobiography is always shadowed by all that liberalism's structuring abstractions are unable to resolve. Reading Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), which can be seen to "epitomize the most eloquent narration of individual redemption through modern liberal institutions," Lowe argues that Equiano's freedom was nonetheless "ever tenuous; kidnapped, traded, and captured, he is transferred from one owner to another; once his manumission is purchased, his life as a freed man is continuously threatened by the possibility of forced abduction and reenslavement" (49). Equiano's narrative and other slave narratives by writes from Mary Prince to Frederick Douglass including "important digressions that mark the limits of the genre for containing and resolving the contradictions of colonial slavery" (48). Allen's autobiography differs from those described by Lowe in that it spends very little time in Allen's experience of enslavement before shifting to an account of his religious ministry and black

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<sup>131</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the first usage of "autobiography" in 1797. The term did not become dominant until the mid-nineteenth century. The tradition of life writing, however, far precedes autobiography as a term. In this chapter, the distinction that is important is around a tradition focused on ordering and accumulating a life narrative around a coming into liberal rights and freedoms, especially the acquisition and protection of property. See Chapter 4 of this project for a deeper engagement with questions of biography, autobiography, and life writing.



institutions building. Its narration of freedom, however, is shadowed by the forms of precarity Lowe highlights.

Reading Allen's autobiography in relation to his account of beds helps make evident the way this narrative form – structured around liberal subjectivity – holds open the possibility of a politics outside liberalism. Rather than seeing the autobiography as an articulation of a black founding narrative, as Newman does, I want to focus on the “we” that dominates much of Allen's biography – the “we” of his congregation – in relation to the collective observational “we” of the beds letter.

I want particularly to read the letter about beds in relationship to the founding and sustaining of Bethel Church in Philadelphia, which both Allen and Jones helped to purchase, and of the founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, in which Allen was the central actor. Both the African Methodist Episcopal Church and Allen himself were deeply focused on property acquisition. The AME provided a space for black autonomy and authority. Allen's church facilitated forms of black self-government that were not otherwise possible in the U.S. at the turn of the nineteenth century, and it relied on property acquisition to do that.<sup>132</sup> Historians identify Allen as a quintessential figure of black uplift who excelled at fulfilling the promise of

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<sup>132</sup> The African Methodist Episcopal church was founded in Philadelphia as part of a break with the Methodist Church over issues of self-governance. The formation of the AME follows on decades of conflict between the congregation at Philadelphia's Mother Bethel and white Methodists in the city and country. The founding of the AME was the result of many conflicts about the scope of black autonomy in the Church. Bethel Church, at which Allen led a congregation that was initially under the umbrella of mainstream Methodism and which later became the home of the AME, was a contested site. Allen gathered his initial congregation there in the wake of an incident in which parishioners attempted to forcibly segregate an integrated congregation mid-service at another Philadelphia Methodist Church. The black congregants walked out. Later, Bethel's congregation defended its space, shouting over white preachers attempting to wrest the pulpit from black leaders and blocking the church aisles with furniture to prevent white authorities from taking control of the space. See Newman. The AME's legal success relied on corporate personhood law and the church's successful incorporation. See Gordon.

liberal citizenship, even as he was denied citizenship rights. Allen acquired “as many as ten pieces of property,” both related to and unrelated to Bethel, and left property to each of his children upon his death (Newman 195, 197-8). This acquisition of private property as a way of demanding “a solid, irrefutable black place in American society,” as Newman puts it, aligns with Allen’s uplift ideology rather than a critique of the American order (197). The AME was both a state within a state and an island of property and authority. This focus on the acquisition of property and goods looks somewhat different in light of the shifting account of fever beds that has been the driving force of my analysis here, and which undergirds the declarations of the *Narrative* and shadows the forms of ownership central to the AME.

While *The Life, Experience, and Gospel Labours of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen* does not record at length the specific violences Allen experienced while enslaved, the narrative includes several meditations on the violence of being owned. Allen does not overtly critique his former owner but instead deploys the language of familial attachment to record the separation of his own family. On page 6 of his 21-page text, Allen writes that his enslaver was “what the world called a good master....more like a father to his slaves than anything else” (6). This repetition of the “good master” trope is followed immediately by the fact that after owning Allen’s family for many years, Allen’s master was “brought into difficulty” and “not being able to pay for us...he sold my mother and three children” (6). This is the last mention of Allen’s family, who are never named or described, and the impact of their loss goes undescribed. Allen instead describes his hard work for his master, emphasizing the ways he and his brother performed intense “honesty and industry” to convince their master that “religion made slaves better and not worse” (6). Allen parlays this move into converting his master, who came to believe that slaveholding was sinful and allowed Allen to buy himself. Allen thus engages an ideology of Christian redemption and

hard work to gain stability and eventually emancipation, even as he understands himself and his family to be unprotected property who might at any time be sold away to cover debts.

In his liberty, Allen traveled as an itinerant preacher and build up his public reputation. His account of this in the *Life and Labours* is shadowed by sickness – fall fever and pleurisy (8), inflammatory rheumatism (9) and the threat of future sickness. This illness and need for care is tied to Allen’s legal vulnerability. In describing an invitation to preach in the South in 1785, which he did not accept, Allen writes that he was warned “not to mix with the slaves” – presumably to safeguard his status as a free black man. Allen refused the invitation not explicitly on the grounds of his legal precarity but instead on the grounds of potential illness. As Allen writes, “if I was taken sick, who was to support me?” (11). The specific ways freedom is shadowed in Allen’s narrative by what Lowe would term the limits of liberal ideals of freedom and their attendant relationship to property have to do with *both* the tenuousness of Allen’s freedom, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, whatever his fame and standing, *and* the vulnerability of his body, which might require care and attention not available to him in certain locations.

Allen’s *Life and Labours* shifts about halfway through from “I” to “we” – and to a focus on the acquisition of Mother Bethel and the founding of the AME. The autobiography’s culminating event is the AME Conference of 1816, at which black leaders from various cites agreed “to become one body under the name of the African Methodist Episcopal Church” (21). The production of a composite body, a corporate body, displaces individual narrative. The autobiography dos not mention the 1793 yellow fever epidemic at all, and offers no scaffolding for connecting Allen’s text with the other works to which it was attached, including the *Narrative* and the beds letter. I want to suggest that we can productively read them with and against one another to think about personhood, property, and speech.

The investment in property evident in the history and publications of the AME, and in Allen's own life, indicates a collision between the spiritual and material worlds, between the politics of seeking black citizenship and the foundation of an autonomous space for worship. But what might it mean to see these paired investments in relation to an obsession with circulating beds? As obvious and as necessary as the careful account of beds thought to be potentially infected agents might be for any observer, and as much as essential to the defense of black integrity as such an account might be in the face of accusations that black nurses had been willfully spreading disease or stealing furniture, the letter's construction of personhood also exceeds these more transparent needs. Slightly less obviously, the letter's resonant prose indicates an investment in the way things help make persons in their circulation and in their accumulation of affect, atmosphere, and narrative force. To attend to this investment in forms of personhood constructed by the interplay of human bodies, material flows, and beds, as they circulate outside of traditional understandings of liberal subjectivity demands a new account of property structured around attenuated agencies and collective responsibility. One might claim that this account is outweighed by the AME's later investment in property acquisition as the site of secure political standing and in the necessary abolitionist gesture to assert enslaved and free black people's full humanity, fitness for literal forms of subjectivity and ownership, and absolute distinction from nonhuman objects and beings. In the AME's later relation to property we might see a more conventional form of ownership that eschews the unsettling but compelling material mixture that appears in the letter accounting for beds. What I am suggesting instead is that Allen and Jones's account of beds can help us identify an alternative ideology concerning property, personhood, and narrative, one that puts pressure on the model of personhood assumed by conventional readings of Allen's work.

As they circulate together, these texts bring together empirical claims with spiritual claims, autobiographical life narrative, and speculation about distributed agency. Biography, narrative, and the bed letter focus on property and its accumulation and circulation. In the bed letter, however, we see Allen and Jones walking a much finer line with regards to the appropriate relation of property to person. Reading this juxtaposition of texts puts further pressure on the strategies and tactics used to secure public personhood in the early nineteenth century. To tell the story of a fever is not to tell the story of a life in the sense that a spiritual autobiography might compel. Still less does a litany of beds serve those purposes. The bed letter continues circulating with Allen and Jones's primary text, bearing forward the vision of persons made by and in conjunction with objects and matter and disrupting the ideologies of persons and property held out by conventional readings. Even as the division between persons and property was insisted upon for obvious reasons in abolitionist discourse, and as evincing liberal individualism becomes a site of abolitionist strategy, this alternative remains in circulation. Alongside the emphasis on careful and accurate observation in the main body of the text and virtuous and industrious living in Allen's autobiography, the text functions as a medication on questions of property and citizenship. The bed letter helps us see what a form of political advocacy, based in first-person observation but not on reproducing liberal values, particularly with regards to property, might look like.

## ***Ornithological Biography: John James Audubon and the American First-Person***

### ***Introduction***

The Passenger Pigeon went extinct on September 1, 1914 when Martha, the last representative of her species, died in a zoo in Cincinnati. Until the 1870s, passenger pigeons migrated above the eastern United States in flocks so large they took days to pass overhead, but by the turn of the twentieth century, these hordes had been pared down to a few individuals, stragglers on the road to oblivion. The Carolina Parrot, sometimes called the Carolina Parakeet, was declared extinct in 1939, having been hunted as a pest for more than a century. The Pinnated Grouse is considered “vulnerable” and is no longer found in many of its previous habitats.<sup>133</sup>

In the nineteenth century, as naturalists increasingly accepted the idea of extinction, they nonetheless continued to collect, organize, and describe innumerable specimens, proofs that the earth was teeming with life. Perhaps no nineteenth-century natural history appears more abundant than John James Audubon’s *Birds of America*, published in four double elephant volumes beginning in 1827. Massive in every sense, the volumes became famous for their astonishingly life-like images. For twenty-first century readers, this work is necessarily conditioned by trying to understand how Audubon and the natural history context from which he emerges can possibly

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<sup>133</sup> To my knowledge 3 other birds Audubon depicted have gone extinct or nearly extinct since the publication of *Birds of America*. The Esquimaux Curlew, now the Northern Curlew, is considered “possibly extinct” and was last seen in 1981. The Pied Duck, now the Labrador Duck, went extinct around 1878 and the Great Auk in 1852.

make meaning in a contemporary moment shadowed by the extensive and ongoing extinction of animal species, very possibly including human beings.<sup>134</sup> The preceding chapters of this dissertation consider what is at stake in claiming to be nonhuman and the outcomes of strained and failed forms of observation that reconfigure personhood. This chapter extends Chapter 3's engagement with questions of (auto)biography and the inability to retain a distinction between observer and observed. By focusing on Audubon's accounts of once-multitudinous birds that have now gone extinct or nearly so, I also mean to suggest a resonance between Audubon's attempts to manage multiplicity and the extinction events of the twenty-first century. A failure to understand the role of flocks in sustaining life likely led to the extinction of the passenger pigeon.<sup>135</sup> More than that, the system of bounded individualism and exclusively human personhood Audubon's text tried – and I will argue failed – to achieve helped produce the contemporary extinction event.

This chapter engages first-person prose in Audubon's *Ornithological Biography*, the text composed to accompany the plates in *Birds of America*. Published across two continents over eight years beginning in 1831, the *Biography* forces us to consider the strange conjunction of biography and natural history, of individual and collective life writing. Natural history perpetually interrogated the relationship between the human person and the specimen. If biography is a prose form dedicated to writing the lives of individuals, natural history must narrate mass life through the rubric of the exemplary specimen. In Audubon, these distinctions are troubled by the suffocating multiplicity of species and individuals on the one hand and the threat of violent

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<sup>134</sup> For a riveting account of the extinction event in which we are now living, see Kolbert (2014). Chapter 3 addresses the Great Auk and Audubon's role in representing the species during the period of its extinction.

<sup>135</sup> On flocks as central to the viability of passenger pigeons see Greenberg.

extinction – of humans or other species – on the other. Flocks and other multitudes threaten discrete individuality, and natural history registers these pressures in its first-person prose. This chapter takes up various forms of unruly multiplicity in *Birds of America* and the *Ornithological Biography*, the available strategies for managing this multiplicity, and the forms of personhood and narrative that emerge when these strategies fail.

In the *Biography*, virtually every descriptive entry utilizes the first-person voice. These entries exemplify the mode of narrative personhood that shapes a range of first-person discourses at the turn of the nineteenth century: these “I” narratives are explicitly about other lives. An example from Volume 1 illustrates this ungainly narrative pattern. In the description accompanying his Snow Bird engravings, Audubon writes, “I have seen Snow Birds far up the Arkansas [River], and in the province of Maine, as well as on our Upper Lakes. I have been told of them congregating so as to form large flocks of a thousand individuals, but have never seen so many together” (73). First-person comments like these are interwoven with the snow bird description, and with the descriptions throughout these volumes. They often move from individuals out to unexpectedly large congregating flocks. The first-person pronoun is a necessary attendant to these detailed descriptions, but its primary function is to legitimize exterior observations, the things Audubon has “seen” and heard. Audubon’s feelings, character, and identity are relevant here only inasmuch as they facilitate an exterior narrative. The snow bird is what matters. This slip into the first-person augments the believability of the other sentences in Audubon’s rich description, of the snow bird’s easy flight, its migration, its mating patterns, and its color. Likewise, in the biography of the Carolina Parakeet later in Volume 1, Audubon’s description relies on his own observations of the species, predicated on the choral repetition of first-person claims: “I have seen,” “I have seen,” “I have frequently seen them,” “I have



represented” (136-138). These phrases repeat the characteristic language of natural history writing and inscribe an individual focused always on exterior life, as opposed to interiority.

As the image of a congregation of a thousand Snow Birds suggests, Audubon’s accounts of flocking birds often engage different models of collective organization.<sup>136</sup> Audubon’s flocks open questions about collective politics and the category of the human person. These concerns are common in natural history writing which was omnipresent genre in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic world and often central to international dialogue about the Americas. As earlier parts of this project have suggested, the Americas were perceived as a site of abundance and were the driving force behind imperial collecting from the sixteenth century forward. But the Americas were also the source of concern about torpid climates and their impacts, which became ever more urgent in the wake of revolutions of the late eighteenth century and the United States’ desire to establish itself as a new, stable and democratic state.<sup>137</sup> Texts like Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* participate in this dialogue, refuting the so-called “Buffon thesis,” an influential theory advanced by Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, which held that the American climate was fundamentally degenerative (Jefferson, 45-50). Both torpid climates and the onslaught of unorganized specimens in the Americas threatened the

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<sup>136</sup> Audubon structures some of his biographies, like the account of the Golden Eagle, around individual conflict between man and bird. These biographies aim to define the appropriate relation between the human and the personified, racialized beast – figured in the terms of the “noble savage” or “noble slave.” Turning to the passenger pigeon and other species defined by unmanageable multiplicity challenges the rhetoric of successful mastery present elsewhere in the text. For more on the stakes of racialized birds in abolitionist literature, see Fielder 2013.

<sup>137</sup> See Parrish, Iannini, and Allewaert.

integrity of the human person.<sup>138</sup> These concerns, deeply intertwined with the Atlantic slave economy, were explicitly racialized. European and white American naturalists worked hard to retain the status of observers as distinct from specimens, producing a rhetoric of white human mastery, even as natural history relied on black and indigenous labor and expertise.

Audubon's descriptions of flocks bring together the questions of politics – how a collective should be ordered – and the issues of race and human personhood that are central to natural history writing in the U.S. The staggering multiplicity of Audubon's flocks is exacerbated by the material unruliness of his texts and the idiosyncratic representational practices on which Audubon relied to produce the images in *Birds of America*. Reading representations of Audubon's flocking birds for their affective and material energies helps make visible an alternative politics nascent in but not intended by Audubon's works.

The overlapping first-person prose forms characteristic of natural history writing are in full view in Audubon's volumes. This chapter argues that the first-person speaker in natural history volumes models an impersonal subjectivity, produced in response to both the descriptive demands of the discourse and the overwhelming hordes of specimens that first-person observers must confront. Although natural history stretches, challenges and disrupts biographical models, these two genres have a shared limitation: they illustrate the difficulty of narrating an "I" without a reliance on exteriors and others. The consolidated individual, both genres ultimately suggest, is impossible. And the fight to produce coherent individuals is always violent: biographies are often of the dead, and even when they are of the living, they seek to make life stagnant, holding persons in a state of suspended animation in order to view them clearly. Natural history, that

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<sup>138</sup> An incredible range of scholarship has examined challenges to the social, legal, rhetorical, and material category of the person in this period. Key works include Best, Johnson, Bennett, deLombard, and Allewaert.

other form of life writing so fundamental to defining the individual, openly replaces the living with the dead. The genre's empirical observation reconstructs personhood by requiring an observer who can cope with life across a massive scale and continue narrating in the face of pressing multitudes. In Audubon, the resulting narratives describe failures of precise observation, sensory distortion, and a dissolution of the observer into the observed, disrupting the more normative forms of personhood associated with depth and consistent interior life.

This argument begins with Audubon's complex personal biography and the category of biography itself in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mapping expectations about the individual in both biographical and natural historical discourses. Next, I trace the pressures that put this category under siege, including the ungainly and unorganized volumes of *Birds of America* and the *Ornithological Biography* and the problem of numerous specimens. The biographies of the Carolina Parakeet, the Passenger Pigeon, and the Pinnated Grouse illustrate the ways multiplicity threatens the consolidation of individual identity. Each of these flocking birds figures multiplicity differently in Audubon, and as the affiliation between the domesticated grouse and enslaved laborers helps make clear, these representations of collective life are implicitly concerned with the numerous nonwhite persons whose labor and expertise made Audubon's volumes possible but who were not recognized as full persons by Audubon. The final section turns to the images that accompany these biographies to suggest that a reduction to the surface, in both prose and specimen depiction, is one strategic response to increasing pressures on the emergent depth model of individuality and the form of personhood that follows from it. Audubon's pressed specimens mirror the kind of compressed personhood that emerges in his first-person prose and emphasize the dangerous power of flocking multitudes. Recognizing this first-person prose form and its impersonal tendencies reorients attention towards the gaps in more masterful models of American individuality and the alternative possibilities that shadow normative personhood.

### 1. *Biography as Natural History*

Literary criticism often continues to assume that first-person prose will offer a “life story.” To unfold this assumption, my argument begins with the question of life, and its most prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary iterations, biography and natural history writing. By virtue of its definition, biography literally inscribes life, “giving the rules for how lives are to be writ” and therefore modeling how a life or a living person should look (“biography,” *OED Online*). The genre rises to prominence in the early nineteenth century as a mechanism for governing the chaotic multiplicity of life, restricting life to the scale of the individual. Biography’s ordering mechanisms, however, are insufficient to the mass of disruptive living beings that confront natural history writers. Natural history forces us to imagine an impersonal biography, a biography stretched beyond the scale of individual attachment, teleology, or psychic life.

By bringing together biography and natural history, this chapter considers narrative and personhood as they emerge alongside the amorphous category of “life” in this period.<sup>139</sup> The category of “life” is certainly at stake, both in the fictional and nonfictional life writing that appears so prominently in the eighteenth-century press and in natural history, the emergent life science that helps consolidate the category. As Michel Foucault has argued, the first decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a shift towards the life sciences as the category of life itself solidified. At the cusp of the modern episteme, Foucault argues, surface-level descriptive taxonomies of natural history gave way to the depth model of inquiry, focused on the interior organization of the organism – the study of the systems that maintain its life. A cusp figure

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<sup>139</sup> Many current critical arguments about life situate themselves in relationship to biopolitics. I choose not to do this because I am most interested in first-person narrative forms and the possibilities they open as the classical episteme’s rhetorical devices linger in the modern episteme. My thinking about biopower and biopolitics is shaped by the 2016 volume edited by Cisney and Morar.

caught between these epistemes, Audubon helps us see how this earlier model of natural historical description and the subjectivity it inscribes continued to thrive in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The unresolved category of the “life” slips into each of his descriptions.

First-person reporting is the default mode of natural history, which emerges from the empiricist imperative to produce knowledge based on sensory experience. This demand produced an enormous number of first-person observational letters, often received as interpersonal correspondence but circulated widely and sometimes reprinted in specialized periodicals. Most scholarship about first-person natural history focuses on travel narratives, which give geographically organized accounts of specimens collected on a voyage or in a specific locale. In texts like William Bartram’s *Travels* (1791), travel writing, personal narrative, and the development of taxonomic systems go hand and hand. Often, these texts’ ostensibly innocent first-person observers inhabit the role of conquerors, translating unfamiliar landscapes into scenes that are passively subordinate to imperial omniscience (Pratt).

In North America in the first decades of the nineteenth century, these issues of conquest and exoticism remain relevant. But the lens of travel narrative doesn’t account for the way first-person observation works in texts focused on comprehensive accumulation, rather than the narrative arc of a geographically specific exotic adventure. Natural history volumes organized by kind focus on a particular species group, like birds or fish, rather than on all the natural specimens gathered in a single place or along a single route. While this emphasis does not exempt these texts from the racist politics of other natural histories, it does distance them significantly from travel narratives. These volumes, and Audubon’s foremost among them, offer access to a pervasive but often ignored first-person prose discourse devoted entirely to fulfilling descriptive norms.

First-person natural history appears in catalogues and compendiums like the *Ornithological*

*Biography*, even when they focus primarily on describing specimens. Although the narrative focus shifts away from the speaker's experiences, the "I" remains surprisingly important. As in the examples of the Snow Bird and the Carolina Parakeet, this first-person reporting often takes on an impersonal valence. In considering Audubon, I draw on my work in Chapter 2 of this project, using the term "impersonal" to designate speakers *not interested in representing interiority or describing scenes appropriately associated with the individual*. My use of this term differs from Michael Warner's because of my focus on empirical observation rather than rational impersonal debate about the communal affairs of the state. Rather than focusing on the "biography," "character," or "persona" of the individual speaking, which is often assumed to be a key goal of first-person literary writing, the impersonal first-person voice speaks in order to convey the details of an external scene to readers. Personal transformation, teleological arcs of action, and the consolidation of identity under the pronoun "I" are therefore more or less off the table as narrative goals in this context.

John James Audubon was born Jean Rabin on April 26, 1785 in the city of Les Cayes in the French colony of Saint Domingue, present-day Haiti. The illegitimate child of the French merchant Jean Audubon and his creole mistress, Jean Rabine, Rabin left Saint Domingue for his father's estate in France around 1791 to escape the growing unrest that would culminate in the Haitian Revolution. Biographers continue to debate Rabin's racial identity. He certainly had at least one mixed-race sister, also born in Les Cayes, and he certainly entered France and lived as the white creole son of Jean Audubon. In France, Rabin became Jean Jacques Rabin and later, in the midst of a complex adoption process, Jean Jacques Fougère. Eventually, he became Jean Jacques Audubon. In 1803, having failed to excel as a child of the French gentry, Rabin was sent back to America, to Mill Grove, the family plantation just outside Philadelphia, in part to escape

conscription into Napoleon's growing army. Somewhere between Nantes and Philadelphia, Jean Jacques became John James Audubon (see Ford, 1964; Rhodes, 2004).

During his travels in the United States and other parts of North America over nearly five decades, until his death in New York in 1851, Audubon consistently lied about his Caribbean birth. He took an inventive approach to biography, apparently. He tried to convince people he was British, but his terrible English gave him away. His interlocutors frequently claimed he had been born in Louisiana, a narrative Audubon fostered during his many months in New Orleans, or in Kentucky, where he lived for some time. In the rising era of the autobiography, Audubon routinely produced and sold a version of his own, curating himself as a public figure with a cohesive biography that covered over the complexities of his life. This manufactured narrative ignores Audubon's specifically Haitian birth, his illegitimacy, and the questions of race these circumstances might invite, instead establishing him as a nationally American figure with a recognizable adventurous pedigree. Already, then, biography is about erasure, the potentially painful production of a coherent life narrative that consolidates whiteness and produces legible individuality. The production of biography requires a kind of violence, a kind of making stable, cohesive, and maybe even dead. Audubon's biography – what we know of it, how he constructed it, the ways contemporary scholars continue to argue about it – foregrounds the issues of identity and individuality that are a central source of social and political tension in this period.

Because natural history writing required speakers to establish themselves as credible empirical observers before slipping into descriptive prose, the *Ornithological Biography* begins with a stab at Audubon's biography. Audubon identifies the address as a space in which he will become "known" to readers, presumably by revealing details about his origins, experience, and moral and intellectual fitness to observe the natural world with fidelity. As Audubon puts it, the reader is "an individual to whom I am as yet unknown, and to whom I must therefore...present some

account of my life, and of the motives which have influenced me in thus bringing you into contact with an American Woodsman” (v). Even an introductory note promising personal revelation begins immediately with the type of the “American Woodsman.” The note seems to promise an encounter with Audubon, a fulfillment of that type, as though the bird specimens are secondary to the person. In fact, in what follows, this is not the case. The vast majority the text has nothing to do with Audubon in particular at all. The *Biography* does include a smattering of adventure episodes interspersed with its bird descriptions, and each volume expands on Audubon’s “life narrative” incrementally. These anecdotes work towards the construction of a coherent public persona. But these “personal” fragments, which were omitted from subsequent editions entirely, comprise much less of the text than the biographies themselves.

The consolidation of identity under the banner of typology and biography at work in Audubon’s legacy grates against both the incoherence of the events of his life *and* the disparate, externally focused first-person prose that is often the hallmark of his genre. Although he was never trained as a naturalist or much of a painter either, after the publication and success of *Birds of America*, Audubon took on the status of a national genius and an American Woodsman. This typology has expanded into an “Audubon” brand that remains familiar in the present. What’s interesting about Audubon as an example, then, is that even when we look to him as a figure with considerable celebrity wattage, for whom the construction of autobiography and the illusion of self-revelation were paramount, his first-person prose circulates as successful natural history only when it turns away from his interior life. The *Ornithological Biography* forces us to ask: Across what scale is biography possible? What does biography *do* if not represent an individual? What models of the individual emerge when we abandon “biographical” constructs and expectations? If biography and autobiography are implicitly personal examples, Audubon raises the possibility



of an impersonal biography, a life narrative stretched across such a large frame that individual identity necessarily dissipates.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the parameters of life writing were changing. Critical conversations about life run from the major essays on human understanding by the likes of John Locke and David Hume to the vitalist debates about the origins of animacy.<sup>140</sup> These debates were fundamental to the construction of new post-revolutionary democratic societies in the late eighteenth century. The great social contract theorists agreed: you cannot theorize a social contract if you do not know what an individual is. Life writing thrived alongside and participated in these philosophical debates. The “Life” was a prominent literary form in the eighteenth century, but the “life” is not self-similar with the biography.<sup>141</sup> If life is a term with too much slippage, between the singular and the plural, the concrete and the abstract, “biography,” which promises to limit life to the individual, gradually becomes the dominant term.<sup>142</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, the categories of “biography” and “life” had significant

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<sup>140</sup> For a useful articulation of the political stakes of bodily organization and the origins of “life,” see Jacyna.

<sup>141</sup> Heather Keenleyside links the “life” narrative explicitly to natural history and natural historical types, and to the models of personhood that emerge from first-person prose.

<sup>142</sup> The term “life” remained in play, most obviously in the examples of the famous slave narratives of the period, from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789) to the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave, as Written by Himself* (1845) to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Nevertheless, biography became an increasingly popular way to describe life writing, and it promised a cohesive narrative structure not realized by the “Life” of the eighteenth century. Scholars are rethinking early American biography in ways that promise to complicate my claims here. See especially Christopher A. Hunter’s forthcoming work. Lowe uses the term autobiography to describe a long tradition of life writing before the advent of the term. Lowe’s focus on the narrative strands that detract from the teleological narrative of the liberal individual taking on the mantle of citizenship align with my focus on the disordered lives drifting within and beneath Audubon’s biographies.

overlap. Seventeenth and especially eighteenth century writers eagerly applied “biography” retroactively to earlier forms of life writing. But the term wasn’t consistently used to title new works we might now call “biographies” or “autobiographies” until the mid-nineteenth century. Benjamin Franklin is instructive on this point: his *Autobiography* was published under a slew of titles beginning in 1791, but it didn’t become an “autobiography” until 1849. In the intervening decades versions of the text circulated in French and English as a “life,” a “private life,” a “public life,” a “sketch of a life,” the “memoirs of a life,” and a “memoir.”<sup>143</sup>

The wide and varied usage of the term “life” illustrates the challenge facing both biographers tasked with narrating human lives and first-person observers tasked with narrating the natural world. “Life” itself is a disordered, multiple form, one which must be produced and reproduced ad nauseum without resolution. In Franklin’s case, the title “life” gestures explicitly to singularity, but the noun itself can also be collective. Life can refer to an individual’s life but also to the whole of the external universe, both instantiating singularity and working furiously against it.

The Oxford English Dictionary records biography’s first usage in 1671, in reference to a book “giving rules how lives are to be writ” (“biography,” *OED Online*). As this emphasis on “giving rules” makes clear, the biography form is meant to regulate the vast expanse of knowledge and experience that might fall under the rubric of the life, producing narrative order and legibility. If life writing could be expansive, biography offered a set of “rules” to narrow its scope, aspiring to consolidate an individual life, the actions of “a particular person” (Webster 1828). The limitation that biography promises is not, as we might expect, the limit of the human – until the mid-nineteenth century some writers used biography to refer to “the life cycle of an

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<sup>143</sup> The websites of both the Library Company of Philadelphia and the Library of Congress offer helpful accounts of the *Autobiography*’s publication history.

animal or plant” – but in fact the limit of the individual. Biography is not a collective genre. Over the course of the nineteenth century, biography and autobiography become the narrative measure of the individual.

Biography was necessary to “give the rules” to human and nonhuman life, all of which required increased narrative governance. This usage is obviously present in Audubon’s *Ornithological Biography* and in the work of his predecessor, the Scottish ornithologist Alexander Wilson, whose *American Ornithology* (1808-1814) paved the way for Audubon. Wilson casually employs “biography” in his introduction, describing his desire to move beyond “the manners and description of each respective species” he represents and instead “to become, as it were, their faithful biographer” (2). This gesture smacks of anthropomorphism, a charge leveled against Audubon by both contemporary and historical critics.<sup>144</sup> But more than a simple slippage into the language of human life writing, these instances indicate the precarious separation of human beings from other forms of plant and animal life amid the furious production of descriptive writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

An overabundance of living beings and descriptive demands troubles both reading and writing in this context. The *Ornithological Biography*, which has been identified as a testament to Audubon’s blossoming public persona (Irmscher), is in fact replete with just the form of externally oriented first-person prose characteristic of descriptive observational writing. Biography fails under the bulk of the project. Recording meticulous descriptions of birds’ bodies and behaviors gathered over three decades, rather than his own growth, Audubon’s text frustrates expectations

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<sup>144</sup> In their history of scientific objectivity its visual technologies, Datson and Gallison use Audubon as evidence as conflict during the shift from the aestheticization of species to “truth-to-nature” representation, noting that Audubon’s “elegantly symmetrical and sometimes anthropomorphized compositions of birds...were sharply criticized by some contemporary naturalists as falsifications of nature” (79). On Audubon’s difficulty with Philadelphia’s scientific establishment, see Peck and Sound 2012.

that first-person life writing will offer a familiar narrative arc mirroring the structure of a human life. Indeed, the only guiding narrative here involves the casual violence of shooting birds, as Audubon endlessly accumulates specimens.

Both the norms of biography and natural history struggle to reign in the birds Audubon observes, and his disordered volumes produce even greater confusion. The *Ornithological Biography* is a uniquely illogical text. Neither geographic nor chronological nor taxonomic, the text dissipates existing structures for ordering individual and collective life. At a glance, the table of contents suggests that Audubon is at least vaguely following his travels across regions, and the original volumes had to be loosely chronological. Audubon kept having to take trips to look at new things and collect additional specimens to complete his work, and earlier volumes were published as he continued to accumulate information for later ones. Audubon's observations, however, are not presented strictly chronologically, and he engages in the forms of temporal compression natural history often demands, surveying decades of observation in his prose, referencing events in the aughts and teens regularly in a singular biographical entry as he tries to construct his observations as a new whole in the 1830s. Audubon's own life, stretched across the frame of his hundreds of specimens and the decades of observation assembled piecemeal in these volumes, becomes increasingly difficult to map, and the possibility of consistent, coherent individual personhood seems all the more distant. *Ornithological Biography* models a non-chronological life narrative, both for Audubon as its first-person speaker and for each of the birds whose lives it details.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Allewaert uses "anabiography" to describe a life story composed of "a series of discontinuous episodes" that tend towards multiplicity and fail to "crystalize and identity or personality" (151). An anabiography stretches the category of the personal and resonates with Jane Bennett's description of "a life" as a current of energies and affiliations that fails to concretize in a discreet

Natural history usually relies on taxonomy, rather than biography, to order the chaotic multiplicity of the natural world. Taxonomy offers a grid for containing multiplicity while also securing the place of white human persons as outside of and superior to all other creatures. Taxonomy does not always or even conventionally rely on first-person prose to establish its order. The most influential and expansive set of volumes organizing animal life in the period, the Comte du Buffon's massive *Histoire Naturelle*, was written in the third person. But neither Buffon's classificatory scheme nor his formal choice to describe specimens in third person entries established concrete norms for other works. Audubon's project was modeled on previous studies of national birds, especially Wilson's *American Ornithology*.<sup>146</sup> Wilson wrote in the first-person, and he deemed the taxonomic organization of American birds impractical. In the introduction to his first volume, Wilson wrote, "however desirable" it may be to "proceed, regularly, through the different Orders and Genera according to the particular system adopted," this method "is in the present case altogether impracticable; unless, indeed, we possessed living specimens, or drawings, of every particular species to be described; an acquisition, which no private individual, nor public Museum in the world, can, as yet, boast of" (7). In Wilson's view, the absence of a total specimen collection made taxonomic organization impossible.<sup>147</sup> And certainly "no private individual," however ensconced in the natural history networks of the period, could carry out such a complex

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person, place, or thing. Audubon's nonchronological life narratives *do* concretize themselves in the form of depicted specimens, but the wandering form of the "biographical" throughout his project resonates with the anabiography Allewaert describes.

<sup>146</sup> Lewis lays out the centrality of ornithology to debates about knowledge-making in the early republic. Debates about the migration of swallows arose in American newspapers as lay observers contributed and circulated competing reports about swallows' behavior, complicating the idea of democratic fact-making in the new republic.

<sup>147</sup> This was one common position about taxonomy in the period. See Kelley, Chapter 2.

task. Individuals, he suggests, do not have the skills to organize the onslaught of American birds.

But Wilson balanced his complaints about taxonomy's impracticality with a deep engagement with taxonomic possibilities. His introduction, for instance, goes to great lengths to explain why non-taxonomic organization was necessary, and Wilson includes a taxonomically organized chart of names and a reference index to allow his readers to "instantly" move between his own pragmatic organization and a total taxonomic overview of his world (9).

Audubon does not share Wilson's enthusiasm for taxonomy. If taxonomy falters in the best of scenarios, in Audubon, it fails completely. The *Ornithological Biography* largely skirts the taxonomic debates that dominated natural history in these decades. As a taxonomist, Audubon was a bit of a laughing stock. And he is flippant about the choice to move away from taxonomy in his introduction. Rather than apologizing, as Wilson does, or offering a methodology for reading his text taxonomically after its publication, Audubon chides readers for wanting systematic organization. As he writes in his 1831 preface, after declaring that he will forego taxonomic organization, "I can scarcely believe that yourself, good-natured reader, could wish [for taxonomic organization]; for although...a grand connected chain does exist in the Creator's sublime system, the subjects of it have been left at liberty to disperse, and are not in the habit of following each other as if marching in regular procession to a funeral or a merry-making" (ix). Rather than producing a "regular procession," Audubon insists he will "simply offer you the results of my own observation with respect to each of the species in the order which I have published the representations of them" (ix). Representation – the arbitrary order in which Audubon published his plates, based on the readiness of his drawings, the timeline of his many engravers and colorists, the demands of his publication market, and the availability of specimens to draw – will lead the way. Readers, furthermore, should feel free to skip over the more technical parts of the *Biography's* descriptions, written by the Scottish ornithologist William

MacGillivray to add scientific clout to Audubon's field observations, "just as [they] please" (xx). The volumes promise totality and undercut it in the same stroke: readers should take pleasure in reading piecemeal, rather than struggling through the unpleasant whole.

The challenges of reading associated with *Ornithological Biography* and its partner images in *Birds of America* are both material, as readers must move across disproportionate volumes, and cognitive, as readers must leap across organizational systems. If, for instance, a reader already has some sense of the organizational system one should use from the likes of Buffon or Wilson, Audubon's system can be disastrously confusing. As readers try to reconcile incompatible organizational systems, epistemological gridlock ensues. Contemporary readers wishing to experience this phenomenon should begin with Dover's 1967 mass-market paperback reprint of *Birds of America*. This celebratory edition reproduces the octavo version of *Birds of America*, which was originally published in the 1840s in 7 taxonomically organized volumes, moving systematically through finches, thrushes, hawks and so on (Audubon, 1967). Reading this text, the biographies do seem to fall in line, as Audubon suggested. They don't chronologically reproduce Audubon's own life, but they play off one another to produce more cohesive accounts of species groups and their interrelationships. Moving from this sequence to Volume 1 of *Ornithological Biography* in its original edition is totally bewildering.

## 2. *Plurals*

Audubon's birds are too numerous to organize at the level of the species, and even more so at the level of the individuals that compose a potentially dangerous migrating flock. Flocks of birds that threaten human life must be diminished, in the standard view of nineteenth-century naturalists, and Audubon offers a full first-person account of this kind of regular violence. To accompany his cacophonous image of the Carolina Parrot [Figure 4], in a biography littered with first-person claims, Audubon writes not just about the life of this bird but about all the ways to kill it. By Audubon's account, Carolina parrots are great scavengers of fruit and grain, and while they are engaged in their foraging, farmers and observers regularly "commit...great slaughter among them...The living birds, as if conscious of the death of their companions, sweep over their bodies, screaming as loud as ever, but still return to...be shot at, until so few remain alive, that the farmer does not consider it worth his while to spend more of his ammunition" (136). The threat of the horde justifies a necessary slaughter, the inevitable violence of its end. The living here mourn the dead, "screaming as loud as ever" over their suffering and demonstrating a pathological commitment to their flock, "return[ing]" endlessly at their own peril. This description of widespread slaughter, which other scholars have noted reflects the pervasive racialized violence of the period (Iannini), also relies on an idle first-person claim to produce closure: "I have seen hundreds destroyed in this manner...and have procured a basketful of these birds at a few shots, in order to make choice of good specimens for drawing the figures by which this species is represented in the plate now under your consideration." In this example, the "hundreds destroyed" can be meted out, a manageable "basketful at a time," and figured for viewers' pleasure. Flocks of Parakeets and their killing may occur at vast scales, and this species may appear frighteningly and pathologically committed to collective well-being – but the



biography describes effective representational strategies for managing this multiplicity.

Violence against the multitude is not always so successful, nor the causal personification of species so permissible. Audubon's passenger pigeons, represented in Plate 26 of *Birds of America*, look emphatically docile [Figure 1].<sup>148</sup> But as I mention in this chapter's introduction, passenger pigeons were among the most dramatic and destructive "pests" of the nineteenth century. Now, more than a hundred years after Martha, the so-called "last passenger pigeon" died in a Cincinnati zoo, with lone pigeon carcasses perched in natural history museums as warning signs for extinction, this phenomenon is hard to imagine. But in North America until the 1870s, passenger pigeons were like weather. They migrated above the eastern United States in flocks so large they took days to pass overhead and so destructive they left trees and fields stripped bare in their wake.

When Audubon began the engravings for *Birds of America*, he was not interested in reproducing the conventional iconography of the passenger pigeon [Figure 2] or in accurately representing the destruction produced by migrating pigeon flocks. The conventional iconography of the passenger pigeon in the nineteenth century presents the birds as an undifferentiated flock, identifiable only by the way they fill the sky overhead. A more accurate depiction would be more like Walton Ford's contemporary work "Falling Bough" (2002) (water color, gouache, ink, and pencil on paper, 60 3/4 x 119 1/2 inches). Ford presents an image of a flock of passenger pigeons destroying the landscape while also rendering its parts frighteningly mobile and animate. The "falling" bough of the piece's title is in fact being held aloft by the beating wings of the innumerable passenger pigeons that cover its surface. This arrangement

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<sup>148</sup> This choice does not reflect a shortage of specimens. While birds were damaged by hunters' bullets and by each other while roosting en masse, and most were plucked and packed as food, Audubon makes no mention of a problem with acquiring intact birds to draw.

depicts something much closer to the scene Audubon describes in his biography of the passenger pigeon than does Audubon's own plate.

Audubon famously represented birds in familial units at life size, and his domestic representation of a pair of passenger pigeons does not deviate from this practice.

This section takes the discrepancy between Audubon's domestic portrait and his description of a flock of terrifying and disgusting passenger pigeons as an invitation. Audubon strains to confine these flocks to a pastoral discourse – so much so that he describes pigeon dung falling “in spots, not unlike melting snow” all around. He fails to resolve the devastating flock, the mounds of dung, the falling trees into his pacific nature. But reading the scene literally – taking Audubon's ugly pastoral at its word, rather than pointing out its absurdity, offers a way of locating possibility in Audubon, outside the confines of the violence he enacts and intends.

This analysis has no interest in valorizing Audubon. Audubon is the racially ambiguous illegitimate child of a French planter born in Saint Domingue just before the Haitian Revolution. He makes a strange, obsessive, and incredible work. This work reflects the accumulated violences of the Atlantic World, as Iannini argues, and Audubon's representational strategies often play out fantasies of white, male, human domination. My reading *is*, however, interested in pressing on the conjunction of pastoral repose and pigeon dung. This stretching of the pastoral produces an inadvertent ethics, whereby the ugly affects of the natural world – the combination of pigeons, pigeon dung, tree branches, and human bodies – works against the concretized domestic pair to produce a network of actors from which the human center is displaced.

N<sup>o</sup>. 15.

PLATE LXII



Drawn from Nature &amp; Published by John J. Audubon, T.R. &amp; C.L.S.

Engraved, Printed &amp; Coloured by R. Havell.

Figure 1: "The Passenger Pigeon." Robert Havell, Sr. and Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Passenger Pigeon*, 1829, from *The Birds of America*, 1824-38. Hand-colored engraving. Image courtesy of the National Audubon Society at <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america>. Accessed June 24, 2015.



Figure 2. This widely-circulated image, originally published in the *Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News*, July 3, 1875, displaces the conventional iconography of hunters taking aim at a flock. While the human beings in this image are hunting pigeons, the pigeons themselves appear as an endless current of migrating life. Image in the public domain, accessed via Wikimedia Commons. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Passenger\\_pigeon\\_shoot.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Passenger_pigeon_shoot.jpg) Accessed July 25, 2015.



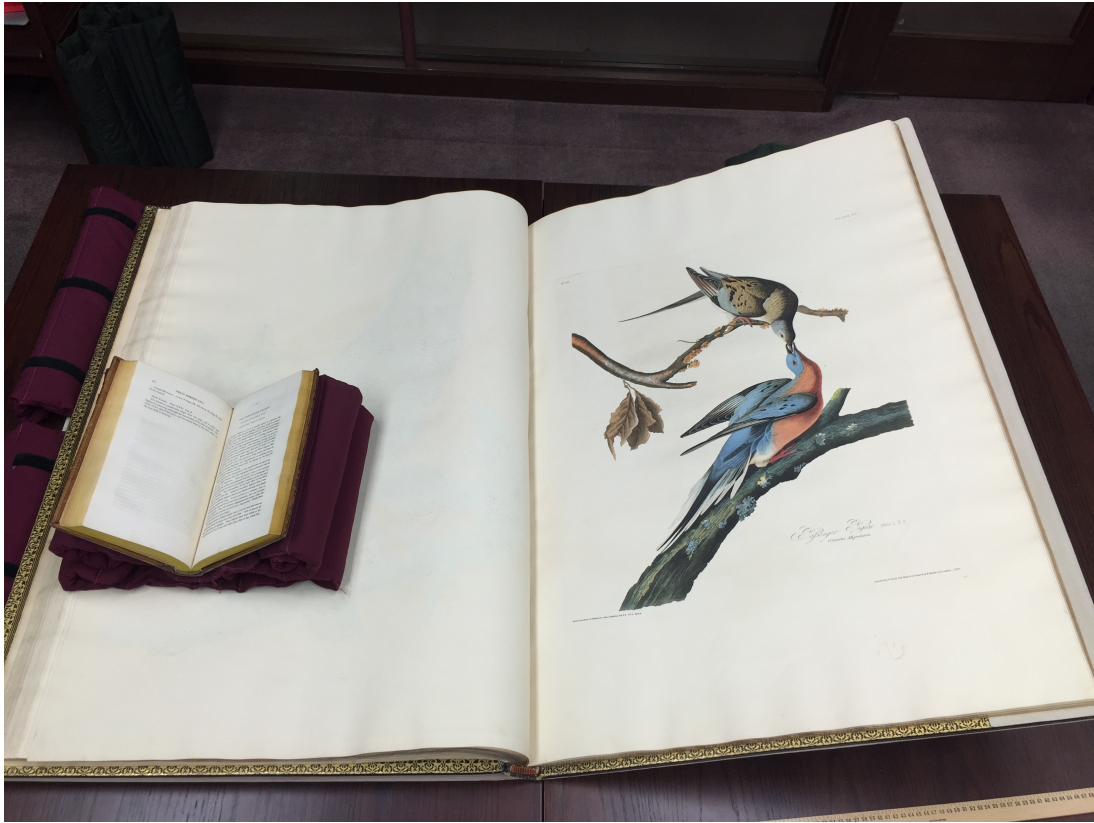


Figure 3: This image depicts the passenger pigeon biography in *Ornithological Biography* and alongside the matching image from *Birds of America*. It illustrates the scalar difference between the plates, circulated in four large volumes at bottom, and their explanatory text, in the five smaller octavo volumes. Image courtesy of Special Collections at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

*Birds of America* was a famously massive undertaking, and Audubon's commitment to representing bird specimens at life size considerably complicated its production and circulation. *Birds of America's* 435 plates, engraved from Audubon's original watercolors, were printed on double elephant folio paper, the largest available in the 1820s. When Audubon was ready to hire an engraver and begin production, he could not buy copper plates large enough to accommodate his images in the U.S. The work had to be engraved abroad, first in Edinburgh by William H. Lizars and then in London by the father and son engravers Robert Havell, Sr. and Robert Havell, Jr.<sup>149</sup> In the end *Birds of America* was nearly as immobile as the mass of physical specimens from which it emerged [see Figure 3]. Although the *Ornithological Biography* was printed in smaller octavo volumes, it is massive in its own way. Composed of 497 first-person bird biographies interspersed with descriptions of landscape and adventure stories, the text loops across more than three decades of observations.<sup>150</sup> As many scholars have articulated, natural history challenged readers to navigate text and image in complex ways to produce associations and meanings across representative formats.<sup>151</sup> In Audubon's work, which involved text and image published in separate volumes in dramatically different sizes, these challenges were

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<sup>149</sup> For information on Audubon's subscription process and the production of his engravings, see Fries.

<sup>150</sup> The number of biographies is greater than the number of plates. Audubon originally planned 400 plates, to be issued in 80 numbers containing 5 plates each and bound by subscribers in 4 volumes of 100 plates each. When he ended up with more species than he was counting on, he expanded his work by 7 numbers of 5 prints each, for a total of 435 images. Even then, Audubon was running out of room and so, reluctantly, he included images of multiple species per plate in the final 7 numbers. He wrote individual biographies for each of these species. Audubon also included biographies for several species not illustrated in the plates at all.

<sup>151</sup> Iannini gives an overview of these reading practices in the American context.

exacerbated.<sup>152</sup> The pages of the bird volumes are notoriously difficult to turn, and matching plate to biography while reading through is impractical at best.

If the material navigation of Audubon's volumes proved a major challenge, so too did appropriately narrating his birds' lives. Although the text is called a "biography," and presumably aims to shape a set of cohesive life narratives, governing the chaotic multiplicity of life and restricting life to the scale of the individual, these tactics falter in Audubon's writing. Moving from beginning to end, as in the case of a standard human biography and providing a full account of a life is increasingly difficult when one must also account for a flock of individuals, their relation to species, and their migration. If the biography form promises a revelation of individual identity in the form of "the history of the life and character of a particular person," as Webster suggests, it's challenging to produce a "biography" of a type, and indeed of a dead type, a dead specimen meant to stand in for a living horde. "Biography" in this text really means "writing about the life of a thing, which is really just a type of thing, which was once alive, and which I have now produced in a lively and accurate way for you to experience as almost-alive again, while I tell you how it moved, and how I killed it."

This distorted biography sounds like it might produce a masterful first-person perspective, but in practice, Audubon's specimens continuously overwhelm him. Audubon's passenger pigeon biography begins without overt violence. The biography takes on some decidedly narrative elements, orienting the reader in time and space. He addresses the reader explicitly and shapes his account of the magnitude of passenger pigeons in migration with a particular set

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<sup>152</sup> The text and images were published separately to circumvent a British copyright law requiring those publishing books with text in Britain donate one copy to each of the Royal Libraries. See Thomas, 2006 and Fries 1973.

of observations he made on the Ohio River in Kentucky in 1813. The fragile “I,” the undeveloped observer in this scene, is literally overwhelmed by the one billion birds Audubon estimates he sees flying overhead in a single sitting. “I have commenced my description of the species,” Audubon matter-of-factly begins. “I saw,” he predictably continues, “at my leisure, immense legions still going by...” (321).

And yet the intermediate materials are anything but “leisurely” or comprehensive. Instead, these first-person phrases facilitate Audubon’s description of a flock of birds whose number he cannot calculate: he offers a calculation three separate times in this description, but ultimately, “finding the task which I had undertaken impracticable,” satisfies himself with sitting, staring at the skies “literally filled with pigeons,” with pigeon dung falling in spots “not unlike melting flakes of snow” all around him, lulling his “senses to repose” (321). In response to such overwhelming multiplicity, Audubon’s observational capacities shut down. He comes back to this scene several times, proposing different methods of counting, but the sheer number of passenger pigeons in his observational field exceeds individual calculability. Finally, in an odd mathematical paragraph, he settles on the outrageous figure of one billion birds overhead.

This difficult scene of counting and its forced conclusion indicate a political threat. As Molly Farrell’s work about enumeration argues, the act of counting helped make persons, enslaved people, animals, and objects knowable. Counting indicates the possibility of social control. And the rhetorical gesture of counting itself is more important than verisimilitude. The point for Audubon isn’t that anybody can go back and check his accuracy but that he remains confident in his own capacity to enumerate. Farrell emphasizes the role of enumeration in *countering* the possibility of an organized aggregate unavailable to white numerical mastery. These



dynamics – the struggle to count and the undercurrent of political anxiety about the uncountable – play out across Audubon’s descriptions.

Audubon describes pigeons as an overwhelming horde indistinguishable from the landscape. At the roosting ground where hunters wait on their prey, pigeons “alighted everywhere...until solid masses as large as hogsheads were formed on the branches all round. Here and there the perches gave way under their weight with a crash, and, falling to the ground, destroyed hundreds of birds beneath, forcing down the dense groups with which every stick was loaded” (324). In place of an accurate count or a convincing account of habits, Audubon relates his observations of “[m]ultitudes...destroyed,” birds “killed in immense numbers” with no apparent ensuing diminution of their flocks (321, 323). Locked into this scene, with birds piling up in ever more “solid masses” all around and hunters endlessly emptying rounds, Audubon admits, “I found it quite useless to speak” (324). This image of the weighted tree, born down by a horrifying multiplicity of birds, shows us a nature that literally destroys its own structuring units. This image of the falling tree is repeated across accounts of the passenger pigeon in the nineteenth century.<sup>153</sup> Alexander Wilson, Audubon’s immediate predecessor, included a similar description, and also compared pigeon flocks to tornadoes.

In the case of birds, which migrate unpredictably and fly maddeningly overhead, observation is always a dynamic and scattered process, one that inscribes an individual in the flock at which he is shooting. And in the face of the massive numbers of a species like the passenger pigeon, filling all available space and displacing other elements of the natural world

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<sup>153</sup> For an overview of these representations, see Rosen and Kolbert. Alexander Wilson, Audubon’s immediate predecessor in American ornithology, included the image of the falling tree and vividly compared pigeon flocks to tornadoes.

with their own bodies and excrement the narrating “I” is fully subsumed by his specimens.<sup>154</sup>

One reading of these passages would focus on the confident slaughter of passenger pigeons. This reading would say something like this: People kill birds! They make first-person claims about those killings. Masterful white/male/human subjectivity survives in the form of efficient slaughter and expands to include the passing flock. Given the subsequent extinction of the passenger pigeon, this kind of reading is especially tempting. But whatever mastery hunting pigeons might represent, the ghost of deathly multiplicity hangs over it. Hunters might kill birds, but the whole world is crashing down with them.

A return to the passage that begins this section illustrates the stifling impacts of flocking birds: pigeons appear “everywhere,” in “solid masses,” literally dragging the landscape down with their weight and slicing through the masses of their fellow birds on the way down. No matter how many birds get shot down, Audubon finds it “quite useless to speak” in the face of a cloud of dynamic noise and flesh that language cannot hope to approach. Subjectivity here is glutted. There is simply too much. Audubon’s life cannot possibly contain, organize, internalize the multiple overlapping bird narratives he conveys. American natural history in general and ornithology in particular was designed to produce rhetorical and material mastery. But it consistently found such mastery impossible and ultimately had to value modes of subjectivity that appended persons to the world around them without imposing order.

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<sup>154</sup> This concern – what happens to a first-person narrator overwhelmed by the chaotic material plenty of the natural world – resonates with posthumanist scholarship interested in understanding human subjectivity in relationship to larger networks of materiality and vitality. The model of personhood I explore must confront critiques that suggest that “the apparent overcoming of the subject-world opposition [in posthumanism] threatens merely to consolidate it,” assimilating the exterior world to human consciousness in the form of an “all colonizing subjectivity rather than decentering the human subject or dissolving subjectivity into the natural world” (Taylor 2013, 6). In the case of Audubon, this colonizing model of subjectivity often fails to take hold in the face of expansive multitudes.

The scene of crashing tree limbs and mountains of pigeon carcasses reads as some fantasy of extermination gone wild. The moments in which Audubon's prose stretches towards the pastoral suggest a slow giving-oneself-over to what might once have been too disgusting to bear. Taken together, the hunting scene and the counting scene open an unresolvable ugliness, wildly at odds with the cooing pigeons of Audubon's image. It is the "repose" disrupting Audubon's observations I want to take seriously as a fissure for thinking both with and against Audubon.

Audubon's image performs one kind of response to the overwhelming multiplicity of the flock. The image ignores it. Although his biography obsessively describes the activities of a billion-bird flock, Audubon's passenger pigeon represents a single couple. Paring the horde down to a single pair helps make representing the pigeon more manageable. A single domestic pair is constructed as a personified unit, considerably easier for viewers to identify with than the flock. The passenger pigeon is understandable only in as much as it can be represented domestically, minimally.

The entrance of repose – pigeon dung as lullaby – produces something else entirely.<sup>155</sup> The violence produced by both hunters and pigeons in Audubon's observations is dramatic and deadly. But the entrance of "repose" on the scene suggests something like an inversion of what Sianne Ngai calls "ugly feelings." If ugly feelings are useful for Ngai because they are minor affects, pervasive and indistinct, Bartlebyan but diagnostic affects produced by ongoing social and political violence, it is this unresolved ugliness that produces diminishment and passivity for the otherwise-violent observer in Audubon.

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<sup>155</sup> In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway uses pigeons to model a form of "tentacular thinking" necessary given that "bounded individualism in its many flavors in science, politics, and philosophy has finally become unavailable to think with, truly no longer thinkable, technically or in any other way" (5). Audubon's pigeons do not model the cooperative, mutually reinforcing interspecies relations Haraway tacks in her work, but their sheer abundance eviscerates Audubon's attempt to individuate.

In a world where birds are weather and dung is supposed to be snow, accounts of the passenger pigeon model a politics of human-animal relations structured not around sympathy but instead around the suffocating excesses of an abundant nature. This non-sympathetic encounter moves readings of Audubon and the human/animal interface away from simple allegory or interpersonal identification. Instead, the repose itself – which disrupts Audubon’s dutiful counting, his careful observation – blurs the bounds of observer, hunter, landscape, bird, dung, tree, waste, food, person, animal. The disorienting affect of this scene is quite different from the affect of Audubon’s account of other flocking birds, like the Carolina Parakeet, whose individuals are easily picked off by farmers’ children or the Pinnated Grouse, a fully domesticated multitude that Audubon links to enslaved people. A brief account of the grouse illustrates this contrast.

The account of multiplicity that emerges in the biography of the passenger pigeon figures an abundant nature that suffocates the observer who tries to describe it, pressing away interior life and even sensory experience with its bulk. Juxtaposed with a domesticated multitude, the racialized threat implicit in this failure to manage unruly pigeons become clearer. The account of a domestic multitude in the biography of the Pinnated Grouse<sup>156</sup> is explicitly linked to white racist fantasies about black labor: the crowd of grouse is tamed, gleefully caught, and grimly executed by Audubon’s “Negroes,” the enslaved black people he owned even through years of poverty and whose hunting and tracking skills made his volumes possible. If Audubon’s ostensibly biographical life narrative in the introduction to the *Ornithological Biography* covers over his Haitian birth in part to preserve his white status, his narratives of bird catching with slaves

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<sup>156</sup> Plate 186 is labeled “Pinnated Grouse.” In the *Biography*, Audubon uses the conventional spelling “grouse.”

acknowledge black labor while affirming racist stereotypes and modeling the passive submission of a multitude to white control.

Audubon begins the pinnated grouse's biography with a surefooted claim that "not a bird of the species is at present to be found" in places where it used to be abundant, while "a few still exist" in the lower parts of Kentucky and other regions (492). This confidence in an individual's ability to map the relative availability of specimens across a vast geographical space illustrates the totalizing gesture of natural history at work. Unlike the pigeons roosting forests to the ground, the domesticated multitude is familiar and reliable. In Henderson, on the banks of the Ohio River in the midst of a landscape Audubon describes as a pastoral respite, "year after year," he "studied the habits" of this species, learning by slow accumulation and easy familiarity (491). In this most fully domesticated of observational contexts, akin to writing natural history about the herbs in the kitchen garden, Audubon figures an unthreatening scene of abundance and multiplicity, describing the pinnated grouse as an annoyance, a crowd that can occasionally be destructive or distasteful, but a problem suitable for children to resolve (491). Like other more unruly hordes, grouse disrupt life on the farms at Henderson, but "[t]he farmer's children, or those of his negroes" chase them away (491).

This horde can enter the domestic scene without threatening its tranquility or the dream of consolidated subjectivity because, as Audubon insists, "[t]he Pinnated Grouse is easily tamed and kept," "breeds in confinement," and functions successfully alongside fully domesticated fowl. Audubon accounts for purchasing pinnated grouse "sixty in bulk," which he domesticates by cutting "the tips of their wings" and turning them loose in the garden (495). The grouse become tamed, a "gentle" constituency "mingling occasionally with the domestic poultry," and are allowed to live on until, in the spring, their wild mating is the end of them. As Audubon writes,

“[m]any laid eggs, and a good number of young ones made their appearance, but the Grouse at last proved so destructive to the young vegetables, tearing them up by the roots that I ordered them to be killed” (495). The passive construction Audubon uses to describe both the acquisition of the sixty grouse and their killing indicates total mastery. He simply “ordered them to be killed,” presumably by the same black slaves whose domesticated obedience they were meant to model. The easy figuration of the grouse as manageable property, a living good domesticated and traded, mirrors the prevailing hope among white slave-owners for peaceful rather than unruly slave populations. In contrast to the “easily tamed and kept” flock of grouse, the horde of untamed birds roosting the forest down in clouds of dung marks a corollary, a threat of untamable others. These biographies figure competing notions of mastery, the one successful and the other endlessly violent but utterly failed.

This account of a domesticated multitude, killed at the first sign of unruliness, is followed immediately by an extended account of Audubon working with his slaves to catch a separate group of wild grouse in their nets. The experiment runs smoothly through several rounds, catching dozens of Grouse “prisoners” until the game is disrupted “on account of the loud bursts of laughter from the negroes, who could no longer refrain” (496). Even these relatively personal anecdotes fall back on the model of the experiment, carried out by Audubon with his attendant laborers, and traffic in the observational discourse produced by twenty-five years of professionalization and reflection. Importantly, the anecdote, which openly relies on the cooperation of enslaved blacks, displaces laughter and “personal” reactions onto the accompanying enslaved black people, rather than emphasizing the personality or personal response of Audubon or another white observer. The ostensibly childish personal reaction of black laborers disrupts the experiment.

This biography of an unthreatening multitude returns to the image of the weighted tree familiar from the biographies of the passenger pigeon, to substantially different effect.

Accounting for their migration and feeding patterns, Audubon notes that, when migrating, pinnated grouse feed on sumac bushes, often landing “in such numbers that I have seen them bent down by their weight; and I have counted more than fifty on a single apple tree, the buds of which they entirely destroyed in a few hours” (501). Like other multitudes, migrating grouse can leave trees “bent down by their weight,” destroyed and picked clean. But these are not birds bringing trees crashing down under their own weight, or drowning out first-person observational capacities, erasing speech, sight, or counting with their bulk. Instead, Audubon confidently counts here: “fifty on a single apple tree,” a lot, but a countable bunch.

The biography of the pinnated grouse pairs an image familiar from the passenger pigeon’s biography, of birds that overwhelm the trees on which they roost, posing a grotesque threat against the human person, with a narrative of domestication and taming explicitly facilitated by enslaved black people. These competing images suggest that certain forms of multiplicity can be managed via effective and racialized forms of violence, but other multitudes keep on coming in monstrous perpetuity. This discrepancy, between the images of pigeons and of grouse, helps make clear the disjuncture I want to take as an invitation, bringing the figurative account of collectives together with the literal scenes Audubon describes. Audubon’s repose, his stilted pastoral, unfolds neither confident erasure nor masterful domestication. More than tracking the violence that emerges when pressing multitudes are rendered as idealized pastoral subjects, this reading holds onto its failure. Audubon links domesticate multitudes to enslaved people, perpetuating a fantasy of seamless white control. But he also faces overwhelming flocks, destroying landscapes and diminishing his senses. To Audubon, the inability to count, to number, to produce individuals produces something like a narrative horror. And yet, his account

suggests a more productive opening. A nature lulling observers into oblivion suggests a politics outside the violent singularities these observers would produce.

These competing images of multitudinous specimens highlight the space between navigable and unnavigable specimen groups, tinged with the threat of diminished humanity and dispersed whiteness. If natural history often requires an exteriorly oriented first-person prose, attuned to the meticulous details of the specimens at hand at the expense of personal development, the countless flock sends this prose form into overdrive. Narrating the pressing outside washes away stable forms, from trees to shooting persons.



### 3. *Specimen, Surface, Person*

As the previous sections shows, the disintegrating personhood produced by failed observation in Audubon's biographies appear in the unruly material objects that are the double elephant folio and the ungainly volumes of the *Ornithological Biography*. If the mass of biographies Audubon and MacGillivray compose leaves open many questions about the models of individual personhood that could produce narrative authority in the early United States, I have been suggesting that an attentive form of sensory observation that often fails to preserve individual integrity defines the alternative model of the individual on which this text and this field more broadly rely.<sup>157</sup> This impersonal first-person prose undoes critical expectations about both the representative goals of first-person life writing and the political possibilities such writing opens. This final section turns to the representative practices that Audubon used to produce his images, to advance this chapter's visual analysis and bring Audubon's representations of flocking birds into conversation with the multitudes of human beings whose labor helped produce them. Audubon was famously proud of the liveliness of his images, which continue to circulate widely, often with little or no sense of their original context. In their strategies of compression and elision, these plates themselves extend the collapsing gesture that has been central to this chapter's argument. The prominence of compression in natural history's visual and material representational practices amplifies the move away from depth models of identity, while also emphasizing the threat of flocking specimens, which might press personhood away entirely.

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<sup>157</sup> My investment in surfaces resonates with the recent critical turn towards surface reading (Best and Marcus, 2009; Love 2013). Rather than advocating for surface reading, however, this chapter tracks a compression to the surface facilitated by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century empirical observation.

In comparing Audubon's representation of a domesticated pair of passenger pigeons [Figure 1, Plate 62] to the conventional iconography around the species [Figure 2], I have argued that Audubon's image pares down the uncountable horde of pigeons into a countable couple in an attempt to stave off the sensory disorder described in the pigeons' biography. Plate 62, like all of Audubon's images, is also a little flat. Although he was deeply committed to illustrating his volumes at the size of life, Audubon presented smashed specimens, images distorted towards the surface, rather than the real, dimensional thing. He had no training in perspective, and was unable to accurately produce depth in his drawings. But even more than that, he was unwilling to produce depth. Audubon invented his own distinctive representational practice, using a compass-like instrument to directly plot the points of a specimen body onto the page as he drew. He produced his images using a unique process of indexical transfer, literally moving a compass back and forth from a freshly killed specimen to the page. This commitment to indexical transfer prohibits perspectival depth: it's a flat geometry, the pure transfer of distances recorded with no allowance for spatial recession. Perspectival representation requires scalar distortion, which Audubon would not stand for. Art historian Jennifer Roberts writes about this process compellingly and in great detail, but the point, for me, is that Audubon was unwilling to sacrifice surfaces for depth.<sup>158</sup> Depth, his images suggest, was not the point. Instead, his commitment to representing individuals requires collapsing his specimens to faithfully render observations as planar for his viewers and readers. In this way, Audubon's images themselves suggest the kind of subjectivity that also lies flat across his prose, in which individuals' interior lives are made irrelevant to representation.

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<sup>158</sup> Roberts gives an engrossing account of this practice. She reads Audubon's commitment to lifesize representation as part of a literalism meant to counter unreliable, fictitious paper money, of which the Panic of 1819 and his subsequent bankruptcy made Audubon distrustful. On natural history's visual representational practices and their resistance to depth more generally, see Gaudio 2003.

While the flat geometry of Audubon's perspective is visible in Plate 62, the Carolina Parakeet [Figure 4], represented in Plate 26, is more ambitious, and the flatness of the image more apparent. As the frame of the print becomes more crowded, moving more fully towards representing a horde or flock in all its overwhelming vibrancy for the aesthetic pleasure of the viewer, Audubon's failure to represent depth becomes more obvious. As the killing and representation of multiple birds increases, the illusion of depth is conversely eliminated. Death presses against the surface of these images in their foliage, too. Many of Audubon's prints include bright, dense backgrounds, ranging from the full sea scene unfolding behind the Great Auk (plate 341) to the greenery stenciled aback the Pinnated Grouse (Plate 41, Figure 5). Most images in *Birds of America* contain at least some live foliage. The trees accompanying, the passenger pigeons and Carolina parakeets in plates 62 and 26, however, are conspicuously dead, eviscerated by the pressure of their specimen groups.

N° 6.

PLATE 26.



Engraved by Robert Havell, Sr. & Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon. F.R.S.E. R.M.S.

*Carolina Parrot* Males 1. F 2 Young 3  
 PSITACUS CAROLINENSIS.  
 Plant Vulgo. Cuckoo Burr.

Engraved Printed & Coloured by R. Havell & Son, London.

Figure 4: “The Carolina Parrot.” Robert Havell, Sr. and Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Carolina Parrot*, 1828, from *The Birds of America*, 1824-38. Hand-colored engraving. Image courtesy of the National Audubon Society at <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america>. Accessed May 15, 2016.





Figure 6: “The Pinnated Grouse[e].” Robert Havell, Jr. after John James Audubon, *Pinnated Grouse*, 1834, from *The Birds of America*, 1824-38. Hand-colored engraving. Image courtesy of the National Audubon Society at <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america>. Accessed July 27, 2015.

It's impossible to think about the collapsed specimens Audubon depicts in his plates without recalling the image of the collapsing tree threatened repeatedly in his prose. *Birds of America* and the *Biography*, then, revolve around a set of collapsing forms, some willful – the representation of a flattened specimen, the collapsed, impersonal first-person form that makes room for narrating the outside in exhaustive detail – and others necessary – the terrifying collapse of a tree beneath a flock of birds, the evisceration of sensorial function in the face of an uncountable multitude. This requisite compression belies the title of the biography and the accounts that position these texts as feats of vivacity and rhetorical mastery. Far from the self-possessed observer embodying Lockean cohesiveness and safely managing his specimens, or the empirical observer fulfilling what Audubon calls a desire for “entire possession of the what I saw” (*vii*), the natural historical observer confronted with violent multiplicity must compromise – must compromise depth, teleology, accuracy, self-consolidation. In that compromise, there is possibility for other futures and other forms.

In the *Ornithological Biography*, readers encounter an individual observer whose sensory capacity disintegrates in the face of a composite flock of birds, the bodies and excrement of which are sufficient to destroy landscapes. These specimens forcible dislodge the narrator from a form of personhood that might consolidate a form of closed personal identity, and the strategies of impersonal narration, biography, and taxonomy are futile. From this failure to order personhood as separate from the observed outside, emerges a possibility for conceiving personhood in productive relation to the nonhuman.

What kind of person stretches himself out beyond possibility to sustain the vivacity of a web of birds? This is the model of individuality suggested by the *Ornithological Biography* and crystallized in Audubon's errant first-person prose, where biographical expectations and what many critics have labeled as shameless self-promotion grind against the extinguishing multitude.

The *Ornithological Biography* is an artifact of chaotic multiplicity, a world in which persons were often defined by their disappearance among the collected bodies of animals being amassed all around them, rather than by capably distinguishing themselves from these masses. A focus on the strange compression of Audubon's images gives material presence to the forms of reorganization and failed containment I have been reading into his prose. Later interpolated into narratives of American expansionism and linked repeatedly to the American literature of the mid-nineteenth century, Audubon is a strange example, riding the wave between epistemological periods. In his work, the expansive energies of an earlier prose tradition collide with biographical expectations in a first-person prose tradition that often works against rather than alongside the consolidation of identity and the production of cohesive narrative personhood.

Thinking against biography, we might productively think with natural history compendiums, attending less to their overtures to taxonomic order and more fully their pressing flocks and collapsing trees, instead. Attending to flocks so large as to occlude individual personhood pushes these norms further still. The natural historical description that has been a central focus of tracking first-person prose histories in this project has been at the center of calls for new methods in literary studies – whether those of surface reading or those of posthumanists interested in deep relation and slow observation. In attending to observational first-person prose and its many moments of slippage around humanness, this project opens a historical archive for rethinking personhood with the present and the future in mind.

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