

Cities Without Citizens
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Philadelphia: Stought Foundation, 2003

THE GUANO OF HISTORY
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My recall is nearly perfect, time has faded nothing. I recall the very first kidnap. I've lived through the passage, died on the passage, lain in the unmarked, shallow graves of the millions who fertilized the Amerikan soil with their corpses; cotton and corn growing out of my chest, "unto the third and fourth generation," the tenth, the hundredth.

—George Jackson, *Soledad Brother* (1970)¹

How is it that the dead speak? How is it that the dispossessed can tell their stories? How is it that the past survives in the present and informs the future, silently, but without pacifying or silencing a single torment, or a single torture? What can memory be when it seeks to remember the trauma of captivity, loss, and displacement? What makes someone choose death over living? In what way does death leave behind a decomposing trace that, turning into earth at the time of death, gives meaning to the memory, the violence, the wounds, the protests, the cries of anger or suffering, the several death sentences on which a nation—America, for example—has been founded?

How can an event that takes place only in its passage, only in its decomposition, leave something behind that, guarding a trace of itself, inaugurates, and even composes, a history—in this instance, a history of dispossession and diaspora, a history without which the history of America could never be written? The very moment there is death, the very moment slavery exists, the very moment populations are removed and exterminated, wealth and rights are distributed unequally, acts of discrimination are committed in the name of democracy and freedom, America finds itself in mourning, and what it mourns is America itself.

This mourning begins, Jackson suggests, with "the very first kidnap." Identifying himself with the millions lost in the passage and the fifteen million and more captured and enslaved in the Americas—we should not forget that he is in prison as he writes, that he is, as he puts it, living a kind of death, as if he were in the hold of a ship—Jackson transforms the space of his captivity into a space haunted by the ghosts of a broken and painful past. Remembering the wounds of history, the violent displacements effected by the transatlantic crossing of black captives and reinforced by the ensuing processes of exploitation and enslavement, he bears witness to a consciousness of dissociation that, acting as a mode of testimony and memory, registers the violence of the historical processes he describes.² The stakes of the past are experienced in terms of death and mourning. Jackson's act of memory endlessly reenacts this condition of loss and displacement—"unto the third and fourth generation, the tenth, the hundredth"—not in order to overcome captivity or facilitate survival, but to reenact the story of slavery, to embody the death and mourning that makes America America. Without the recognition of this loss, he seems to suggest, we could never respond to the historical caesura introduced by slavery. What is at stake here is a body that bears the traces of what it undergoes, the trace of its decomposition but also its loss of citizenship and rights, its transformation into commodities and capital, and its inscription within an exploitative economic system of international dimensions.

What is at stake is also a mode of language that would remain faithful to the traces and history of this body, that would give body, make tangible, what it wishes us to understand. This strategy can be read in the way in which Jackson enacts his sense of dispossession and displacement by dispersing his voice across several voices, by sundering the singularity of the historical moment in which he is writing. The voice he stages—the voice of the "I" who has "nearly perfect" recall, but also the "I" who has "lived through the passage, died in the passage, lain in the unmarked, shallow graves of the millions who fertilized the Amerikan soil with their corpses"—belongs simultaneously to the past, the present, and the future. It is the voice of a living ghost, or, more precisely, the living voice of several ghosts. The movement of the passage reinforces this ghostly survival of the past in the present and future since, as is so often the case in black diasporic writing, everything in it proceeds by citation—and not only when it cites a fragment of the biblical refrain—"unto the third and fourth generation"—that appears repeatedly in the five books of Moses. Nevertheless, by alluding to the story of Exodus, Jackson evokes the biblical story most central to the lives of his dispossessed and enslaved brethren. The appropriation of the Exodus story became a means for African Americans to articulate their sense of historical identity as a people. Identifying the story of the bondage and slavery of the Israelites with their own servitude, they drew from the story the hope that they, too, would be delivered to freedom.

This helps explain why, if Jackson evokes the centrality of the Exodus story within the history of enslavement and violence to which he refers, he does so not only to direct us to a significant, neuralgic point in the shared history and social memory of black religious discourse—a history and memory that belong to his inheritance—but also, in particular, to remind us that the refrain he cites belongs to the curse that God declares he will impose on *the guilty*—who will not be cleared of their transgressions and sins and who will have the "iniquity of the fathers" visited "upon the children and the children's children, unto the third and fourth generation." Jackson's use of

the refrain therefore points, from his perspective, to the irony of God's curse: that the sins of *the guilty*—the sins of the slaveholders, for example, and not the sins for which he has been *declared* "guilty"—are visited on the damned of the earth. In other words, Jackson suggests that the suffering and death experienced by the violated bodies and minds of dispossessed populations is visited upon them by men and not God, by the greed and lust of men and not the jealousy or anger of God, by racist and capitalist policies and not heavenly dictates. If these oppressed minority populations are "chosen," it is not by God, but rather, as in this case, by an America that seeks to flourish over the fertilizer that these minorities will have become, over the death and mourning that defines their experience.

If we can take Jackson's passage as evidence of what would be required for us to speak in the name of freedom—there is little doubt that the passage belongs to his efforts throughout his prison letters to define the nature and conditions of freedom—what it tells us is that, in order to speak in the name of freedom, in the name of justice, we must speak of the past we inherit and for which we remain answerable, we must speak of ghosts, of generations of ghosts—of those who are not presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born.³ We must speak of the victims of political, nationalist, racist, colonialist and capitalist violence, or of any of the other forms of oppression and extermination that we still today have not overcome. We must engage in a politics of memory that is also a politics of the future. This memory and this future, in order to be just, in order to be worthy of their names, would emerge from a respect for the dead, and perhaps especially for the living dead. Together, this memory and this future would name an obligation: remember the dead, keep the memory of the dead alive, think your relation to a past that, never behind you, haunts you, tells you for what you are answerable.

Why begin this way? For at least three reasons. While these memories from a singular moment in our history may seem discreet, distant, even gnomic, many paths cross there, the relations among an entire network

of motifs: slavery, destiny, fate, violence, racism, colonialism, subjectivity, memory, history, rights, language, death, mourning, and so forth—all of which raise fundamental questions about who we are in relation to what we call "America." If this beginning imposes itself, then, it is not in order to begin an analysis of a singular political writer—here the Black Panther Field Marshall and founder of the People's Army, George Jackson—but rather to begin to expose something essential to our history that goes beyond his particularity, that gives us to our history. Jackson's assassination in San Quentin Prison on August 21, 1971 sealed the fame he already had achieved with the publication of *Soledad Brother* one year earlier and ensured that this hero of the movement against black oppression and American imperialism would become a canonical figure for various movements of resistance, for the often violent struggles for freedom and justice both inside and outside America—resistances and struggles that, as Jackson well knew, belong to the long history of efforts to actualize equality, to realize, that is, the promise of the right to representation for everyone, the promise of an America that to this day still does not exist—which is why it must always be mourned. It is toward this experience of mourning that Jackson's writings are oriented. If, as Jean Genet wrote in 1986, the Panthers were "haunted by the idea of death,"⁴ Jackson argues that this hauntedness delineates the contours and conditions of ethical and political gestures that, organized around extended acts of mourning, can be joined to moments of affirmation, even if such affirmation is linked to a critical insistence on death and mourning.

Second, in order to begin to evoke and lay out the terms of what the work of Emerson compels us to think, especially as it engages the world of which his work is such an important articulation—a world which bore witness to vast capitalist development, to the rise of various secondary institutions (such as schools, asylums, factories, and plantations), rapid urbanization and industrialization, a growing inequality in the distribution of wealth, and several modes of displacement and extermination—a world in which debates over the nature of war, revolution, race, slavery, liberty,

democracy, and representation were of crucial importance in America's effort to invent its national and cultural identity. Emerson's engagement with the changing historical and political relations of this world, with a process of transformation wherein his language works to change further the shifting domains of history and politics, and wherein the traces of the historical and the political are inscribed within the movement of his language, remains, I think, a model for us, not only for thinking the relation between political gestures and the language without which they would never take place but also for responding to the demand that we become answerable for our future by, among so many other things, confronting the ways in which the past lives on in the present. Emerson's turn toward the past, his turn toward the loss, death, and mourning that characterize our experience, becomes the condition for his conviction—a conviction I believe he shares with Jackson—that, in transforming the language he inherits, he can perhaps change much more than language, he can perhaps work to transform the relations within which we live, he can perhaps, in spite of the impossibility of ever securing freedom and justice, delineate the experience of freedom and justice as a *praxis* of thought that begins from the presupposition that we are always, in advance, related to others. I emphasize this last point because, as we will see, a call to rethink the concepts of freedom and justice traverses his work. We might even say that Emerson's works are nothing but the very trial of these two concepts.

Third, in order to respond to a passage, to the dictates of a passage that is haunted both by the memory of the dispossessed over whose deaths America grows and expands and by its relation to the entirety of the history that is encrypted within the passage from Jackson with which I began. The passage can be found in Emerson's essay, "Fate," an essay that, although not published until 1860, had its beginnings in the months immediately following the passing of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, and in the context of heated debates over the question of slavery and the slave trade, the admission of territories into the union with or without slaves, the

unfolding of the ideas of manifest destiny and racial difference, the removal and extermination of the native population, the expansion of the American empire into the Pacific and the Caribbean, and emancipation and secession. As such, "Fate" is perhaps Emerson's most profound and searching engagement of the idea of manifest destiny in terms of questions of race, his most moving effort to provide a kind of secret genealogy of what makes racism and slavery possible. Perhaps Emerson's principle statement about the conditions and possibilities of human freedom and justice, the essay seeks to convey to us the reasons why, already in antebellum America, three or four generations before Jackson's publication of his prison letters in 1970, everything is haunted by death, oriented around death, and especially around the death encrypted within the American landscape. Indeed, in the closing lines of the passage to which I refer, Emerson tells us that "the German and Irish millions, like the Negro, have a great deal of guano in their destiny. They are ferried over the Atlantic, and carted over America, to ditch and to drudge, to make corn cheap, and then to lie down prematurely to make a spot of green grass on the prairie."⁵ Once these few lines are contextualized within the historical moment in which they were written, and within the essay to which they belong—both of which refer to the violent history of American colonization and imperialism—they put before us the violence, the inequality, the economic oppression and colonialist and racist exclusions that affected—and continue to affect—so many human beings in the history of not only America but of the earth. Emerson here reminds us that instead of celebrating the ideals of liberal democracy and of the capitalist market in an affirmation of America's expansionist desires, we should never neglect this manifest fact, composed of innumerable instances of suffering and death—a fact that was true in Emerson's time, but is even more true today: never before have so many men, women, and children been subjugated or exterminated on earth, never have so many human beings, that is, been transformed into guano. It is here that Emerson and Jackson join forces, as they suggest that any meditation on freedom and justice, any

action taken in the name of these two experiences, should take its point of departure from this mournful and deadly fact.

If I have begun this way, then, it is because I have wanted to suggest that there is a way in which, before us, in advance of us, Jackson already will have read Emerson's essay, "Fate," even if his eyes never once cast their glance on even one of its pages. He will have taught us how to read Emerson, how to understand the reasons why, like him, Emerson is perhaps one of America's greatest mourners, which is to say one of its most significant and aggressive defenders. In asking us to remember the dead, to engage an inheritance that, even today, belongs to what we still call our future, Jackson and Emerson demonstrate that there can be no thought of the future, no experience of hope, which is not at the same time an engagement with the question "How shall we conduct our life?" We can only begin to answer this question, they suggest, by learning to read historically, by learning to mourn, by exposing ourselves to the vicissitudes of a history in which we are inscribed and to which we remain urgently and dangerously responsible because it is we who are at stake.

I begin again, this time with Emerson, although, as Jackson reminds us, time has perhaps faded nothing.

Emerson opens his essay, "Fate," by noting the chances, the coincidences, that have led to several discussions in Boston, New York, London, and elsewhere, on the theory of the age or the spirit of the times. For him, however, "the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live? We are incompetent to solve the times. Our geometry cannot span the huge orbits of the prevailing ideas, behold their return, and reconcile their opposition. We can only obey our own polarity. 'Tis fine for us to speculate and elect our course, if we must accept an irresistible dictation" (*W*, VI: 3). As Stanley Cavell has rightly suggested, the question of the times is here the question of slavery.⁶ What has yet to be noted, however, is the extent to which Emerson's essay is really less a challenge of the institution of slavery—although it is this, too—than an

attempt to engage and make manifest the "huge orbits of prevailing ideas" without which this institution could never exist. In particular, it is an essay about the idea of fate that prevailed in mid-nineteenth-century America—American "manifest destiny"—and all the discursive and material means whereby this concept was supported, maintained, and mobilized in order to sustain slavery. Emerson explicitly points to the role of the idea of fate in the justification of slavery in a journal entry from 1852 entitled "*Abolition*." There, he writes: "*Abolition*. The argument of the slaveholder is one & simple: he pleads Fate. Here is an inferior race requiring wardship, —it is sentimentality to deny it. The argument of the abolitionist is, it is inhuman to treat a man thus."⁷ What Emerson seeks to alert us to in this passage but also within his essay is the way in which fate (whether it appears as "manifest destiny," "providence," "natural law," or "predestination," to name only a few of the terms under which this ideologeme was circulated) served to inform and shape a racial ideology that could be used to describe and hierarchize the world's peoples. "Fate" therefore seeks to delineate the conditions under which—given the uncertainty with which we must struggle with the past in order to give the future a chance, with prevailing ideas, for example, that irresistibly move us, as if by a kind of dictation, in the direction of slavery—we may experience freedom—a freedom from fate, perhaps, but even so, a freedom that, taking its point of departure from the transit between the past and the future within which something new is produced, passes through what it inherits in order to invent its future.

Viewing "fate"—in a first sense—as another name for limitation, as another name for what limits us, Emerson directs his writing against not only the rhetoric of unlimited privilege and expansion that informs the idea of manifest destiny but also the blindness of such rhetoric to the death, the violence, and the injury it precipitates. "Let us honestly state the facts," Emerson writes, "Our America has a bad name for superficialness. Great men, great nations have not been boasters and buffoons, but perceivers of the terror of life" (*W*, VI: 5). Providing us with a list of the disasters and

catastrophes—diseases, the elements, earthquakes, and all manner of accidents—that so often remind us of our finitude and mortality, he then proceeds to hint at the disasters and catastrophes that are of our own violent making. “The way of Providence is a little rude,” he tells us, “The habit of snake and spider, the snap of the tiger and other leapers and bloody jumpers, the crackle of the bones of his prey in the coil of the anaconda—these are in the system, and our habits are like theirs. You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughter-house is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity,—expensive races,—race living at the expense of race” (W, VI: 7). This passage about human carnivorousness, and the gracefulness with which its conditions are concealed from itself, is, in Cavell’s words, “a parable about the cannibalism, as it were, in living gracefully off other *human* races.”⁸ Emerson already had made this point in his 1844 address on the tenth anniversary of the emancipation of the British West Indies. Anticipating the figure of the slaughterhouse he will later use in “Fate,” he writes: “From the earliest moments it appears that one race was victim and served the other races. From the earliest time, the negro has been an article of luxury to the commercial nations. So has it been, down to the day that has just dawned on the world. Language must be raked, the secrets of slaughter-houses and infamous holes that cannot front the day, must be ransacked, to tell what negro-slavery has been.”⁹ This is why so much of Emerson’s effort in “Fate” is directed at evoking and analyzing this language. As is so often the case, however, this work of analysis can be read more easily in the *practice* of Emerson’s writing, in its staging and treatment of the rhetoric of manifest destiny, race, and slavery, than in any explicit and straightforward arguments. This perhaps is also why, in an essay that is throughout concerned with all the violence committed in the name of America’s “manifest destiny,” Emerson takes the remarkable risk of never once using the term “manifest destiny.” Suggesting in this way that there is nothing manifest about “manifest destiny”—nothing natural or obvious about it—he instead seeks to exhibit what are for him its as yet “unpenetrated”

causes, the various arguments that, made in its name, make it possible.

The term “manifest destiny” was first coined by the editor of the *Democratic Review*, John O’Sullivan, in an 1845 essay arguing for the annexation of Texas. Simply entitled “Annexation,” the essay predicted “the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.”¹⁰ But the idea of the providential character of America’s expansionism was scarcely new. Not only did it rely on arguments drawn from both Puritan claims for the preordained, divine purpose of their mission and Calvinist conceptions of predestination, but O’Sullivan himself already had written of America’s “boundless futures” in his 1839 essay, “The Great Nation of Futurity.”¹¹ The extension of American boundaries, he suggested, would secure the extension of democracy, or, as Andrew Jackson had put it in his justification for Indian removal, the extension of the “area of freedom.” As Emerson reminds us, however, these arguments—motivated by what he once referred to as the Anglo-Saxon’s “Earth-hunger,” his “love of possessing land” (W, 12: 135)—only ensured the deadly fact that the territorial and economic expansion of the United States would be achieved at the expense of Native Americans and other minority communities. In his 1856 speech on the Kansas-Nebraska act, describing the way in which proponents of American “manifest destiny” disguise cruelty with euphemism, he writes: “Language has lost its meaning in the universal cant. *Representative Government* is really misrepresentative;...*the adding of Cuba and Central America* to the slave marts *is enlarging the area of Freedom. Manifest Destiny, Democracy, Freedom*, fine names for an ugly thing. They call it otto of rose and lavender,—I call it bilge water. It is called Chivalry and Freedom; I call it the taking of all the earnings of a poor man and the earnings of his little girl and boy, and the earnings of all that shall come from his, his children’s children forever” (AS, 113-14).

The resulting cruelty and violence of such language was naturalized, however, by arguments that, gaining their strength from closely

related Enlightenment ideas of progress, suggested, in the wording of Eric Sundquist, "that the exploration of foreign lands and the conversion of alien peoples through political and economic expansion took place according to organic laws of growth." Within the context of such arguments, the narrative of "a relentless conquest in which the march of one civilization destroyed or utterly changed many others through dispossession and absorption" was supported by what Sundquist goes on to call a "political and cultural medium in which conquest could be naturalized, or set within a panoramic elaboration of predestined history."¹² In many respects, Emerson's discussions of race and manifest destiny during the 1840s and 50s should be understood as his analysis of this medium—a medium that, including all the discourses of scientific racism, physiognomy, geology, ethnology, and evolution that worked together to consolidate the racial privilege and hegemony of white America, belongs to Emerson's inheritance. Emerson's analysis here follows not only the political implications of his antislavery discourse but also his attempt to measure and limit determinist explanations for human achievement. Emerson's essay "Fate" is in fact a kind of anthology of all the various determinisms at work in mid-nineteenth century debates over the relations among the races. Arguing in the essay that "a good deal of our politics is physiological," Emerson ventriloquizes nearly every scientific explanation for racial difference available to him. The entire essay can be read as an evocation and analysis of the various kinds of discourses that have throughout history—but especially throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—worked to enable one race to live, as Emerson tells us, "at the expense of other races," at the expense, that is, of what he elsewhere calls "the guano-races of mankind."¹³

The emergence of ethnology by the late 1840s as a recognized science of racial differences, for example, presumably offered scientific validation of black inferiority and thereby reinforced the claims of southern slavery. "The mission of Ethnology," as one southern writer declared, "is to vindicate the great truths on which the institutions of the South are

founded."¹⁴ Following the scientific ethnology of Samuel Morton's *Crania Americana* (1839) and *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844)—works that sought to define mental capacity in terms of skull size and shape—the Alabama physician Josiah Nott notoriously defended and promoted polygenesis. Basing his claims on a wide range of biblical and ethnographic materials, he argued that, because the races had different origins and different degrees of development, they could be classified and hierarchized according to their general capacities. "Dr. S. G. Morton," he wrote in 1849, "by a long series of well-conceived experiments, has established the fact, that the capacity of the crania of the Mongol, Indian, and Negro, and all dark-skinned races, is smaller than that of the pure white man."¹⁵ As he explained five years later in the *Types of Mankind*—a book he co-wrote with the Egyptologist George R. Gliddon and which sought to justify the enslavement and eventual extinction of nonwhite peoples—the Caucasian races were fulfilling a law of nature. They were as "destined eventually to conquer and hold every foot of the globe," he argued, as the inferior races were destined to extinction: "Nations and races, like individuals, have each a special destiny: some are born to rule, and others to be ruled....No two distinctly marked races can dwell together on equal terms. Some races, moreover, appear destined to live and prosper for a time, until the destroying race comes, which is to exterminate and supplant them."¹⁶ Or, as he put it in his introduction to the book, "Human progress has arisen mainly from the war of the races. All the great impulses which have been given to it from time to time have been the results of conquests and colonizations."¹⁷ Considered natural or organic, expansion and enslavement were justified by claims that they guaranteed freedom and independence, encouraged the development and regeneration of resources and land, and confirmed a fated and future-oriented historical process that could be supported by scientific models of racial difference.

Emerson's most remarkable passage in "Fate" about the deterministic languages with which slavery was justified—a passage that encrypts the entire history of the rhetoric of American colonization and

imperialism, that seeks to provide a genealogy of the rhetoric that served to justify the living of one race at the expense of another—occurs soon after he refers to the role of physiology in American politics and history. I cite the passage in its entirety:

The book of nature is the book of Fate. She turns the gigantic pages,—leaf after leaf,—never re-turning one. One leaf she lays down, a floor of granite; then a thousand ages, and a bed of slate; a thousand ages, and a measure of coal; a thousand ages, and a layer of marl and mud: vegetable forms appear; her first misshapen animals, zoophyte, trilobium, fish; then saurians,—rude forms, in which she has only blocked her future statue, concealing under these unwieldy monsters the fine type of her coming king. The face of the planet cools and dries, the races meliorate, and man is born. But when a race has lived its term, it comes no more again.

The population of the world is a conditional population; not the best, but the best that could live now; and the scale of tribes, and the steadiness with which victory adheres to one tribe, and defeat to another, is as uniform as the superposition of strata. We know in history what weight belongs to race. We see the English, French, and Germans planting themselves on every shore and market of America and Australia, and monopolizing the commerce of these countries. We like the nervous and victorious habit of our own branch of the family. We follow the step of the Jew, of the Indian, of the Negro. We see how much will has been expended to extinguish the Jew, in vain. Look at the unpalatable conclusions of Knox, in his "Fragment of Races,"—a rash and unsatisfactory writer, but charged with pungent and unforgettable truths. "Nature respects race, and not hybrids." "Every race has its own *habitat*." "Detach a colony from the race, and it

deteriorates to the crab." See the shades of the picture. The German and Irish millions, like the Negro, have a great deal of guano in their destiny. They are ferried over the Atlantic, and carted over America, to ditch and to drudge, to make corn cheap, and then to lie down prematurely to make a spot of green grass on the prairie. (*W*, VI: 15-17)

There would be much to say about this passage, but here I only wish to signal four indices of the contexts in which it should be read, and to which I believe it responds.

First, Emerson's passage, with its innumerable layers and strata, comes to us in the form of the very geological strata of which he is writing. Like the earth that bears the traces of the entirety of its history, Emerson's language inscribes, within its very movement, the traces of all the texts that have informed his own. As such, it demands that we rake his language, that we reckon with it in order to see how it often ventriloquizes language that has been used to justify what, for him, goes in the direction of the worst, in the direction, that is, of the sentences that close this passage. The link between geology and language was pervasive during Emerson's day and we need only recall his claims in "The Poet" that "language is fossil poetry" or that "as the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin" (*W*, III: 22) or Whitman's claim that "the science of language has large and close analogies in geological science, with its ceaseless evolution, its fossils, and its numberless submerged layers and hidden strata, the infinite go-before of the present."¹⁸

Second, Emerson's effort to relate the history of natural, geological processes to the theory of the evolution of man borrows its terms and figures from his readings in the geological sciences—readings that included the writings of, among others, Buffon, George Cuvier, Charles Lyell,

and Robert Chambers.¹⁹ For Emerson, in bringing together time and space, geology seeks to make the past legible to the observer. Borrowing a figure from Chambers' *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, he goes on to suggest that geological layers are "leaves of the *Stone Book*."²⁰ He extends the metaphor even further when he describes Cuvier studying before a broken mountainside: "In the rough ledges, the different shades and superposition of the strata, his eye is reading as in a book the history of the globe."²¹ If the book of Nature is the book of Fate, then, it is because the history of the processes of nature is also a study of the irresistible processes that have led to the emergence of man.

But, if present geological formations can be explained by studying the history of geological transformations, the study of previous changes in the earth also predicts the succession of deaths that, for Emerson, composes the movement of history itself. "Every science is the record or account of the dissolution of the objects it considers," he writes, "All history is an epitaph. All life is a progress toward death. The [sun] world but a large Urn. The sun in his bright path thro' Ecliptic but a funereal triumph...for it lights men & animals & plants to their graves" (*J*, III: 219-220). To say that human history belongs to the history of nature, then, is to say that human history is a history of death, or, more precisely, a history of the life and death of innumerable generations, all of whom have left their traces in the earth's strata. The lessons of geology are the lessons of one species or race succeeding or surviving another. As John Harris writes in his 1850 *The Pre-Adamite Earth*, referring to the time required to produce the earth's sedimentations and strata: "How countless the ages necessary for their accumulation, when the formation of only a few inches of the strata required the life and death of many generations. Here the mind is not merely carried back, through innumerable periods, but, while studying amidst the petrified remains of this succession of primeval forests and extinct races of animals, piled up into sepulchral mountains, we seem to be encompassed by the thickest shadow of the valley of death." Referring to geological strata as

"monuments" or "platforms of death," he confirms Lyell's sense of the endless mutations and fluctuations that, characterizing both the organic and inorganic worlds, help account for the sudden extinction of whole organic creations, and the introduction of others.²² These "catacombs" or "chapel-houses," "crowded with organic structures which lived and died where they are now seen; and which, consequently, must have perished by some destructive agency, too sudden to allow of their dispersion," bear the traces of "the thousands, not of generations, but of species, of races...which have all run through their ages of existence and ceased."²³ This is why, as Thoreau would put it, the world is to be considered a vast compost heap. The hieroglyphic of nature, he writes, "is somewhat excrementitious in its character, and there is no end to the heaps of liver, lights and bowels, as if the globe were turned wrong side outward; but this suggests at least that Nature has some bowels, and there again is mother of humanity."²⁴

Third, in linking the rhetoric of a natural development that gives birth to man to the related processes of colonization and capitalism, Emerson alerts us to the rhetoric with which, as I already have suggested, the violent colonization and appropriation of land and peoples for political and economic reasons often was justified. This history of conquest and colonization, it was argued—in which "victory adheres to one tribe, and defeat to another," in which "the English, French, and Germans" could plant themselves "on every shore and market of America and Australia" and monopolize their commerce—was as natural as the successive superposition of one geological stratum upon another. As Lyell himself notes, in a passage from *The Principles of Geology* that Emerson may very well have had in mind here, "When a powerful European colony lands on the shores of Australia, and introduces at once those arts which it has required many centuries to mature; when it imports a multitude of plants and large animals from the opposite extremity of the earth, and begins rapidly to extirpate many of the indigenous species, a mightier revolution is effected in a brief period, than the first entrance of a savage horde, or their continued

occupation of the country for many centuries, can possibly be imagined to have produced."²⁵ Having pointed to this process of dispossession, however, Lyell goes on to emphasize that it belongs to the economy of nature:

The successive destruction of species must now be part of the regular and constant order of Nature....We have only to reflect, that in thus obtaining possession of the earth by conquest, and defending our acquisitions by force, we exercise no exclusive prerogative. Every species which has spread itself from a small point over a wide area, must, in like manner, have marked its progress by the diminution, or the entire extirpation, of some other, and must maintain its ground by a successful struggle against the encroachments of other plants and animals....The most insignificant and diminutive species, whether in the animal or vegetable kingdom, have each slaughtered their thousands, as they disseminated themselves over the globe.²⁶

Associating the violence of colonization, possession, and extermination with the progress of nature, Lyell's rhetoric here resonates with the justifications that so often gave voice to American manifest destiny. Emerson reinforces this point by describing the processes of colonization and possession as a kind of "planting." As Patricia Seed has argued, "The action of the colonists in the New World was planting; the colonists were metaphorically plants in relation to the soil, and hence their colonial settlements were referred to as plantations. Thus, when the English most commonly referred to their colonies in the New World as plantations, they were referring to themselves metaphorically as taking possession."²⁷ This metaphor often was literalized by one of the rituals whereby new lands were claimed: in addition to building houses and fences, settlers would assert their occupation and possession by cultivating and, in particular, fertilizing the land. Indeed, as Seed reminds us, the verb *to manure* in sixteenth-century England meant, among other things,

"to own."²⁸ What is at stake for Emerson, then, is an understanding of the ways in which violence and dispossession—and the death that comes from them—are disguised by acts of naturalization. If he identifies America with these processes of dispossession (he tells us that America belongs to the same family of colonizers), the nervousness of its "victorious habit" lies in its recognition—acknowledged or not—that its drive for territorial acquisition, along with the enslavement and death this drive produces, betrays the promises of freedom and independence on which it was founded.

Fourth, Emerson's final lines should be read in relation to the context of the importation of guano into America in the 1840s and 50s—both as a fertilizing resource and as a metaphor—a context that Emerson understood to belong to the history of American colonization and imperialism. As James Skaggs has noted, "declining agricultural productivity in the United States prior to the Civil War led to an ever-increasing demand for fertilizers." "In middle and southern states such as Maryland and Virginia," he goes on to explain, "farmers (growing crops such as tobacco and cotton, both of which are especially hard on the land) faced bleak futures as soil exhaustion became increasingly pronounced."²⁹ In response to this exhaustion—the result of several factors, including climate, erosion, the removal of organic matter and nutrients, soil toxicity, destructive methods of cultivation, and a market that focused almost entirely on tobacco and cotton³⁰—agricultural journals such as the *American Farmer*, the *New England Farmer*, *De Bow's Review*, *The Southern Planter*, and *The Southern Agriculturalist* urged crop diversification and rotation, along with the application of fertilizers. The demand for fertilizer was partially filled by various artificial manures, but especially by Peruvian guano. The best guano came from the Chincha Islands, just twelve miles from the coast of Peru, in the bay of Pisco. Since the islands received very little rainfall, the naturally high nitrogen content of the guano remained undiluted in a pungent, brownish-yellow concretion that was also very rich in phosphate. In some of the ravines of the islands, it was said to be nearly 300 feet deep and some speculated that it must have begun

to accumulate there soon after the biblical flood.

At war with Bolivia in the late 1830s and experiencing several civil wars in the early 1840s, Peru found its economy shattered and, in order to reduce its enormous war debt, it began to negotiate with foreign companies for the selling of its guano. In 1841, Peru's President, Manuel Menéndez, formally nationalized the country's guano resources and, for the next thirty-five years, the Peruvian government would earn most of its foreign revenues from selling guano to other countries. In 1842, the London firm, Anthony Gibbs & Sons, shared a monopoly on exports for five years and, in 1847, gained sole control of British and North American markets. By 1846, Peru had received more than \$1.3 million in guano advances and by the 1860s seabirds supplied more than 75% of the government's revenues. Exact figures for the first few years of what Lewis Gray has called the "guano mania" in the United States are not available because the Department of Treasury did not begin gathering import data on the commodity until 1847.³¹ However, estimates suggest that between 1844 and 1851 approximately 66,000 tons per year (valued at \$2.6 million, at an average price of \$49 a ton) entered the United States, mostly through Baltimore and New York. In 1851, the importation of guano into North America was consigned to the Peruvian firm Felipe Barreda and Brother and, by the late 1850s, over 400,000 tons per year were coming in at \$55 a ton. The first commercial fertilizer used to any significant extent in the United States, guano was advertised as a fertilizer that would help regenerate the American landscape. Horticultural journals of the period were filled with testimonials, chemical analyses, directions for its use, state-by-state statistics on its success with crops from tobacco and cotton to wheat, corn, oats, peas, potatoes, melons, asparagus, and so forth. It was repeatedly said to be more valuable than all the gold mines in California and it was regarded, in the wording of one southern farmer, "a blessing to the nation." In the mid-1850s, presumably citing a minister about to pray for the fertility of a Massachusetts farm, Emerson suggests that America's land "does not want a prayer, [it]

wants manure" (J, XIV: 171).

High prices, however, encouraged searches for substitutes and even encouraged fraud. By 1854, several varieties of guano had been imported from Africa, Central America, the Caribbean, and assorted Pacific islands, but, according to one contemporary U.S. government study, "they were either found to be worthless or far inferior in quality" to those of Peru. Dishonest businessmen also labeled several different products as pure Peruvian in order to defraud farmers and prospective clients. There was even a thriving underground market for used Peruvian guano bags—bags with the Peruvian government stamp—that some unscrupulous dealers refilled with spurious guano and sold as genuine guano. As Skaggs notes, "such practices were so prevalent by 1846 that Maryland legislature mandated oversight of all guano sold in its jurisdiction, a charge of forty cents per ton being tacked onto the retail price by the state's 'guano inspector,' William S. Reese, who officially inspected every sack at the port of Baltimore and issued grade stamps."³² A test was soon devised so that prospective buyers could decide in advance whether or not the guano they were about to purchase was genuine or not, genuine meaning that it came from Peru and not, say, Africa. The buyer would place a small sample of the guano on a hot iron shovel. If the guano was genuine, it would leave behind a pearly white ash and, if it was fraudulent, a colored ash.³³

Many farmers and legislators soon argued, however, that the only way to overcome these difficulties, to make sure that Peruvian guano was available to everyone, was to challenge the Gibbs monopoly. The United States made several efforts to persuade the Peruvian government to loosen its monopoly and to lower its prices, but without success. On December 2, 1850, in his first State of the Union address, President Fillmore made special reference to guano. Amidst remarks about such pressing matters as slavery, the increasing significance of foreign trade and commerce to the national economy, and the growing significance of the United States in the international arena, he declared: "Peruvian guano has become so desirable

an article to the agricultural interests in the United States that it is the duty of the Government to employ all the means properly in its power for the purpose of causing that article to be imported into the country at a reasonable price. Nothing will be omitted on my part toward accomplishing this desirable end."³⁴

After several episodes in which American businessmen tried to steal guano from Peruvian islands with the help of American officials (including then Secretary of State, Daniel Webster), Senator William Seward presented a petition to Congress in March of 1856 on behalf of the American Guano Company (a company formed in 1855 at a reported capitalization of \$10 million and wishing to claim and mine the Baker and Jarvis islands in the mid-Pacific, which it believed to be rich in guano deposits). Seward hoped to make it easier for American entrepreneurs to claim global guano deposits under United States government jurisdiction. The resulting Guano Islands Act (1856) furthered Seward's drive for American commercial supremacy and resulted in America's first overseas territorial acquisitions. In the wording of the Act, whenever the government "should have received satisfactory information that any citizen or citizens of the United States have discovered a deposit of guano on any island, or other territory not within the lawful jurisdiction of any other Government," then, at the discretion of the President, it shall "be considered as appertaining to the United States for the use and behoof of the discoverer or discoverers, and his and their assigns, and may, at like discretion, be taken possession of in the name of the United States, with all necessary formalities."³⁵ Within the ten years following the passage of the Guano Islands Act, American entrepreneurs sought to claim every island, rock, or key that might possess deposits of guano. They were soon followed by the French and the English, who hoped to share in the plunder—often, the enormous resources of native peoples whose cultures were violently altered or destroyed. As Skaggs tells us, "between August 1856 and January 1863 (when the Lincoln administration suspended the law by declining to process additional requests for title during the duration of the

Civil War), the U.S. Department of State accepted ten separate bonds on fifty-nine islands, rocks, and keys in the Pacific and Caribbean."³⁶

When Emerson evokes the figure of guano in his essay "Fate," then, he recalls a commodity that bears the traces of the history of American imperialism and colonization, of the consequences, that is, of America's conviction in its so-called "manifest destiny." But he also wants to suggest the ways in which political liberty and economic prosperity in antebellum America are entangled with the oppression, and often the death, of millions of slaves and ethnic immigrants. As he puts it elsewhere, "in each change of industry, whole classes and populations are sacrificed" (*J*, XIV: 16). This point is confirmed with great force when we note that the workers involved in supporting and maintaining the guano trade included not only the German, Irish, and African Americans to which Emerson refers but also, among so many others, the Peruvian convicts, natives, and Chinese coolies that worked the Peruvian guano fields. According to Evelyn Hu-Dehart, from 1849 to 1874, as many as 100,000 contract laborers or "coolies" were transported, under deception or coercion, across the Pacific to help meet the demand for cheap labor on the coastal guano fields.³⁷ There would in fact have been no guano trade without these laborers. Amidst the ravages of war and the labor shortages resulting from the end of African slavery, Peru—hoping to encourage foreign investment and unable to find enough cheap labor among the small coastal peasantry, freed slaves, or the highlanders, to meet the growing demand—decided to seek it overseas.

When it was clear that European immigrants were not drawn to the lack of available land and low wages in Peru, the Peruvian government—following the example of the British planters in the West Indies and Cuba—resorted to the importation of Chinese laborers. In south China, Westerners used Chinese "runners"—just as their counterparts in Africa were called—to "recruit" poor young men, often by force but also by persuading them that they were to work the gold mines in California. Some boarded ships in Amoy or other Chinese ports, but the greater number probably passed

through the Portuguese colony of Macao. As Hu-Dehart points out, many of the same ships and captains used in the African slave trade "transported Chinese coolies, packing them on board in the same way as slaves, across a 'middle passage' that was even longer in distance and more arduous."³⁸ Mortality rates on these ships—often referred to as "floating coffins"—were as high as 30% or more, due to overcrowding, insufficient food, lack of proper ventilation, and poor hygienic conditions.

Once the Chinese laborers arrived in Peru, they were auctioned, and then housed in long, rectangular slave quarters. The working conditions on the islands were unbearable, not only because of their inhospitable nature—the climatic conditions on the islands made any work there a matter of privation and hardship, since the heat and lack of rainfall made water and food supplies very scarce—but also because of the viciousness with which the laborers were driven to dig and load the guano. In response to these harsh conditions, the coolies often chose to commit suicide in order to escape their enslavement. One contemporary account published in *The Southern Planter* in 1855 tells of mass suicides, sometimes involving up to fifty coolies at a time. These suicides were so frequent that the Peruvian government was forced to station guards around the cliffs and shores of the islands to prevent them. Stories about the atrocious work conditions in the guano fields, often similar to abolitionist accounts of the abuse and mistreatment of southern slaves, were published in several southern agricultural journals in the two decades before the Civil War. Eventually, the gross abuses in the recruitment and transportation of the coolies generated such fierce international and national criticism that the Peruvian government suspended the trade between 1856 to 1861, and only reopened it later under the more relaxed supervision of the Portuguese. But the pressure experienced by the Peruvian government to stop what often was referred to as "another African slave trade" did not prevent the deaths of tens of thousand of coolies and Peruvian laborers—many of whom, buried in the guano fields in which they died working, became, like the flesh and

carcasses of birds and sea lions, part of the guano that soon would be exported to the United States to fertilize its lands and crops. To recall this history is to begin to delineate the world that made Emerson's figure possible.

If Emerson takes the risk of ventriloquizing the language of proslavery propaganda—we can find in "Fate" echoes of most of the important proslavery arguments: biological determinism, pre-Adamitism, the black's arrested evolution, and the eventual extinction of the black race, and his citations from Knox often have been understood as signs of his own latent racism—he seeks to recontextualize this language not only within an antislavery argument but also within a more general reflection on the nature of race and the violence that takes place in its name. In regard to the citations from Knox, for example, we need only register the adjectives he uses to introduce and describe the English anatomist's language. Far from endorsing Knox's evolutionary theories, Emerson states that the book's conclusions are "unpalatable," that its writer is "rash and unsatisfactory," and that its truths are "pungent and unforgettable." With this last phrase, in particular—referring as he does to the one adjective that always is associated with guano: "pungent"—he suggests that Knox's book is a piece of guano, a book to be condemned, but a book that, fertilizing racist soil, enables the transformation of minorities into guano. The strength of Emerson's criticism becomes clearer if we recall that Knox's claims for the racial superiority of the Anglo-Saxon are made in the name of its racial purity. What kind of purity can there be, Emerson suggests, if America's prairies and crops are composed largely of foreign bodies: the seeds that are imported from England, the fertilizer imported from Peru and elsewhere, the bodies and blood of peoples from Africa, Germany, Ireland, Peru, China, and so forth—all of which will become part of the "American" body? What his extraordinary figure tells us is that the American body should be understood as neither "American" nor even entirely human.

If Emerson's identification between ethnic minorities and guano

encourages us to rethink our relation to the violent enterprise of slavery, however, this identification does not belong to him alone. From Melville's allegorical assault on American imperialism, "The Encantadas," in which the white imperialist's desire to occupy the enchanted isles is associated with the whitish remains of the various seabirds that nest on them, the guano that covers and dominates the island's rocks and earth, to Thoreau's *Walden*, which tells us in its first pages that "men labor under a mistake" and that, "by a seeming fate" or "necessity," their "better part...is soon ploughed into the soil for compost," to Douglass's famous 1852 "Fourth of July" speech, which depicts a group of slavers headed for the slave-market and mourns for those "wretched people" who "are to be sold singly, or in lots, to suit purchasers" and who will soon become "food for the cotton-field, and the deadly sugar-mill," to Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, which, in an extraordinary passage that describes the spot of earth on which Charles Bon was born, refers to "a soil manured with black blood from two hundred years of oppression and exploitation until it sprang with an incredible paradox of peaceful greenery and crimson flowers and sugar cane sapling size and three times the height of a man," the figurative association between laborers and manure works to exhibit the violence of oppression and of colonialist and imperialist expropriation, the injuries and scars, the deaths, murders, and sometimes collective assassinations that have supported capitalist expansion.³⁹

If such rhetoric offers a graphic rendering of the familiar trope of the black "blood and tears" that nourish the land (implicitly in the context of agriculture) that appears so often in abolitionist writing, it does so in order to work against proslavery arguments that, asserting a similar identification between slaves and the material bases of America's growth and development, argued for the necessity of slavery. Perhaps the most celebrated example of this proslavery position—a position that takes its point of departure from the tension between the twin imperatives of democracy and capitalism—is offered by James Hammond's famous "Mud-Sill" speech,

delivered to the United States Senate in March 1858. There, aligning himself with the earlier proslavery rhetoric of Henry Clay, John Calhoun, and others, he claims that "the greatest strength of the South arises from the harmony of her political and social institutions"⁴⁰ and he goes on to explain that "in all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is, a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have, or you would not have that other class which leads progress, civilization, and refinement. It constitutes the very mud-sill of society and of political government....Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to that purpose to her hand. A race inferior to her own, but eminently qualified in temper, in vigor, in docility, in capacity to stand the climate, to answer all her purposes. We use them for our purpose, and call them slaves."⁴¹ The relation between Hammond's metaphor and that of the "guano-races of mankind" that are fertilizing the land is reinforced when we remember that the mud-sill of a structure—the lowest part of the structure—is generally embedded in the soil. As Sundquist notes, "the spread of the Cotton Kingdom into the Deep South from the 1820s to 1850s (resulting in a tenfold increase in production, to a peak of nearly five million bales per year, three-fourths of the world's cotton, by the outbreak of the Civil War) guaranteed the survival and expansion of slavery."⁴² Marx already had confirmed the South's dependence on slavery in 1847. "Without slavery you have no cotton," he tells us, "without cotton you have no modern industry. It is slavery that gave the colonies their value; it is the colonies that created world-trade that is the pre-condition of large-scale industry. Slavery is an economic category of the greatest importance."⁴³

But what is the status of the principles of freedom and autonomy to which Hammond has recourse here? If Anglo-Saxon freedom and equality are achieved through slave labor, then what possibilities exist for this conduit of Saxon identity? In what way do emancipatory discourses of rights, equality, and citizenship depend on forms of racialization and on the

invisibility of the practices of domination and discipline? As Marx explains—and here he points both to the history of racial subjugation and enslavement, and to the entanglement of slavery and freedom—despite the presumed universalism of such principles, the democratic rights to self-determination Hammond proclaims depend on the success of a violent politics of oppression, of economical and ideological enslavement, and thus of the destruction of autonomy. In Werner Hamacher's words, "the process of the practical universalization of individual and social liberties"—the dream articulated by the rhetoric of manifest destiny—"often has gone hand in hand with a process of oppression, disenfranchisement, and the massacre of countless persons and peoples. And this process—one hesitates to call it a process of civilization—has to this day continued to thrive on the massive, capitalist exploitation of individuals and peoples."⁴⁴ The process of civilization and refinement to which Hammond refers has always been a process of capitalization. As Hamacher goes on to explain, "the formation of cultural ideals, which is supposed to culminate in the *autonomy* of the self, is at the same time a process of the *automation* of the mechanism of capital. It is a process of the obliteration of labor, the obliteration of a violent history and of the particularity of the socio-economic and politico-cultural forces that sustain this autonomy, a process of the erasure of those who are always insufficiently paid and of that which cannot be counted. Whoever invokes the universalism of *this* freedom and *this* equality always invokes, whether or not he acknowledges it, *this* history of automatization, colonialization, and exploitation."⁴⁵ Whoever appeals to equality, Emerson would say, does so within a history of inequality, within a history in which the America that was to be the realization of the promise of the right to representation for everyone, perhaps can never exist, perhaps can only exist in the form of a promise, but a promise which must be enacted and performed with every breath we take.

This is why, we "must call to mind the history of the universalization of the principle of autonomy...not in order to discredit the universalist ethics of the claim to freedom—this claim can never be simply

fulfilled and never completely discredited—but rather to see the paradoxes of its principles clearly whenever they become political realities in history, that is, where they make history."⁴⁶ As Emerson reminds us in his essay "Man the Reformer," in a passage that again seeks to tell us why we must learn to mourn, in order to be the Americans that we are, in order to be the Americans we are still not: "We are all implicated...in this charge; it is only necessary to ask a few questions as to the progress of the articles of commerce from the field where they grew, to our houses, to become aware that we eat and drink and wear perjury and fraud in a hundred commodities. How many articles of daily consumption are furnished us from the West Indies....The abolitionist has shown us our dreadful debt to the southern negro. In the island of Cuba, in addition to the ordinary abominations of slavery, it appears, only men are bought for the plantations, and one dies in ten every year, of these miserable bachelors, to yield us sugar" (W, I: 232).

Learn to mourn, then, remember the dead, keep the memory of the dead alive, think your relation to a past that, never behind you, haunts you, tells you for what you are answerable. As Walter Benjamin would have it: "To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'as it really was.' It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger....Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe if the enemy wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious."⁴⁷