FRAGILE BELIEF: SECULARITY AND THE ANTEBELLUM AMERICAN NOVEL

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A dissertation submitted to Johns Hopkins University in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Baltimore, Maryland
December, 2016
ABSTRACT

Fragile Belief re-evaluates the relationship between secularity, ethnocultural pluralism, and the novel in the US through an excavation of the experience and representation of religious difference during the first half of the nineteenth century. Secularization narratives have predominated historical accounts of the novel, but in the “spiritual hothouse” of the antebellum US neither secularization nor the history of the novel have proceeded along such straight historical lines. My study joins the ongoing interdisciplinary conversation about secularism by distinguishing what I call “American secularity” as a condition engendered by the surfeit of belief in the US rather than by the naturalization of unbelief. Whereas the secularization of Europe was, according to Charles Taylor, driven by the reformation of the Catholic Church and the rise of humanism, “American secularity,” I contend, emerged within the pressurized environment of global religious contact in the US, a result of sectarian proliferation, indigenous spiritual resistance, European immigration, and the importation of Islam and West African religious traditions via the slave trade. The novel, I argue, arose in the wake of disestablishment in the US as a singular genre for mediating global religious difference as well as for interrogating secularism’s imperative to define “religion.” The authors I treat in each of the chapters track the genre’s development alongside the expansion of public Protestantism in the US. Chapter 1 examines the dynamics of religious contact and exchange between Protestantism and Native American religion in Lydia Maria Child’s first novel Hobomok (1824). In chapter 2, I show how the novels of the New England aristocrat and devout Unitarian Catharine Sedgwick tested the outer limits of liberal
Protestant tolerance through the sustained and unassimilable presence in her fiction of celibate religious outsiders. Chapter 3 places Herman Melville’s novels *Mardi* and *Moby-Dick* in the context of the Mormon crisis of the 1840s. Finally, chapter 4 concludes outside the borders of the nation by recovering the political theology of black emigration movements in Martin Delany’s *Blake; or, the Huts of America*, abolishing plural religious expression and rejecting the foundational assumptions governing public Protestantism in the US.

Advisors: Eric Sundquist, Jared Hickman
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my sincere thanks to Eric Sundquist for being a model of intellectual responsibility, for having a faith in my abilities to do this work, and for giving me the opportunities to prove them. His has been a steady and guiding hand throughout. Jared Hickman deserves more praise than I can offer here for his tireless attention to my writing and his willingness to follow me along even the most esoteric lines of thought. Our conversations have enlarged the scope of what I thought it was possible to do in this discipline, and I have often left his office, to quote Hannah Adams, “so strongly excited, that extreme feeling obliged me to lay aside my employment.”

Without the support of the Women and Gender Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University in 2014, I would not have been able to visit the Catharine Maria Sedgwick papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society, which proved essential to the development of my second chapter.

I wish to thank my parents, Terry and Donna Shreve, for their encouragement of everything I’ve pursued, big and small. I’ve never for a moment doubted their unconditional support and am all too aware how fortunate I am to have it. I am grateful to my sister Clare, as well, for being a continuous source of comic relief, even when it has come at my expense.

Most importantly, Joanie, thanks for sticking with me, for being my best friend and constant companion through all of this, for laying me down when I’ve had no place to fall. And to Caleb: thanks for letting daddy go to work so much.
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INTRODUCTION

SECULARITY AND THE RISE OF THE AMERICAN NOVEL

Between 1789 and 1865, the world’s first secular nation also became one of its most religiously diverse.¹ This was not by design. The drafters of the United States Constitution could hardly have anticipated that their decision to isolate civic institutions from religious ones would be a crucial element in the efflorescence of religiosity several decades later. But the separation of church and state at the federal level, besides enshrining a certain conception of religion at the heart of national identity, accelerated disestablishment movements at the state level, and by 1819 every state in the union but Massachusetts had eliminated religious preferences and assessments, creating the conditions for what Jon Butler has called the “antebellum spiritual hothouse.” From 1820 onward, the nation boiled over with genuinely novel religious movements (Mormonism, Spiritualism, and Christian Restorationism), utopian communities (the Oneida Community, Brook Farm, and revived Shaker communities), innumerable upstart prophets, and dozens of immigrant churches, not to mention Native American prophetic movements and independent African American churches and religious communities in both the North and the South.²

For a country without an official ecclesiastical center, the rapid cross-pollination and pluralization of US religion triggered vital confrontations with how “true” religion

¹ See Stark and Finke, 22-108.
² For more on the religious diversity of the period, see Butler, 225-256; and Hatch, 17-48. For an account of slave religion in the southern US, see Raboteau, Slave Religion, 211-88. For accounts of the black church, see Lincoln and Mamiya, The Black Church; Du Bois, Negro Church; Raboteau, Fire, 79-116; and Newman, Freedom’s Prophet. On Native American resistance movements, see Dowd and J. Martin.
ought to be distinguished from “false” religion and with the forms public religion could take in a disestablished state. These were encounters that occurred in the routine interactions between citizens and neighbors as well as in the highest echelons of state power. Out of the theological, political, and epistemological anxieties these new conditions engendered emerged what John Modern has termed the “evangelical public sphere,” a civic space shaped and dominated by a generic and unabashedly public form of Protestant Christianity (“Confused Parchments”). Public Protestantism was born from the union of several evangelical denominations (mostly consisting of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists) and supported by a diffuse network of tract societies, voluntary associations, and revivals, which were responsible for disseminating a set of behavioral and theological norms that became virtually synonymous in the early republic with religion as such. As recent theorists of secularism have observed, the success of Protestant consolidation in the US was essential to the career of American-style secularism, for public Protestantism provided that nascent ideology—whose raison d’être is to distinguish the religious from the non-religious—with a conception of religion around which to organize and differentiate itself.

But the interdependence of American secularism and public Protestantism was far from an inevitability, for germinating within the tumult of the Second Great Awakening were the stirrings of other meta-religious ideologies alternative to the Protestant-inflected liberal state. Besides being a spiritual hothouse, therefore, the antebellum era was also an

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3 On the idea of the “moral establishment,” see Sehat, 51-72. For broad discussions of the characteristic features of public Protestantism, see Albanese, American Religion, 276-83; and Hutchison, 60-65. And on the American theology underlying the “Evangelical Republican synthesis,” see Noll, 161-208.

4 For a definition of “American-style secularism” see McClay. For discussions of the central purpose of secularism, see Mahmood, Religious Difference, 1-30 and Hurd, 1-21.
incubator for secularism(s). The antebellum novel is a key archive of these unrealized vectors, for it arose in tandem with public Protestantism as the definitive genre for not only narrating the nation but also mediating religious diversity in the wake of disestablishment. Considering the novel’s rise in relation to that of public Protestantism is essential for understanding the singular and contingent careers of secularization and secularism in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Ever since Georg Lukács wrote that “the novel is the epic in a world abandoned by God,” histories of the novel have been secularization stories, making the novel into the indisputable literary genre of a secular age (88). For Lukács, the novel emblematized the existential dislocation of modernity and thematized the ontological absence. In the US, secularization stories have continued to be at the center of recent histories of the American novel. But instead of chronicling the loss of a unifying religious worldview as Lukács did, they have tended to see the novel’s rise in the US as a story of liberation from the fetters of Protestant culture. Cathy N. Davidson’s seminal The Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America, for example, argues that popular novels in the late eighteenth century “replaced the authority of the sermon or Bible” by “relocat[ing] authority in the individual response of the reading self” (72). More recently, in Truth’s Ragged Edge: The Rise of the American Novel (2013), Philip Gura has characterized the history of the novel in the United States between 1790 and 1870 as an

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5 See Arac.
6 As Seidel has recently argued, secularization narratives have been implicit in the history of the novel. For subtle example of this, see Watt and McKeon. For unabashedly triumphalist accounts of the secularity of literature as a freedom from the impositions of religion, see James Wood, The Broken Estate and Susanna Lee, A World Abandoned by God: Secularism and Narrative.
7 Alexander Cowie’s The Rise of the American Novel (1948), which is one of the earliest books to use the “rise of the novel” in its title, barely mentions the religious commitments of the numerous authors it treats. For a powerful account of literary studies’ dependence on a secularization narrative for its own self-definition, see Kaufmann.
“arc from traditional religion to self-consciousness” (xii), which is mirrored in the transition from a world defined by the relationship between an individual and God to one privileging human agency. Gura qualifies his thesis by admitting the ways in which notions of free will were still embedded in a theological framework even late in the century, but the thrust of his narrative is clear: the novel’s rise is an emancipation from the strictures of dogma. Finally, in *Preaching and the Rise of the American Novel* (2013), Dawn Coleman uses Max Weber’s theory of secularization as “the differentiation and autonomization of subsystems” to describe the American novel’s rise as a battle for cultural authority that it waged with antebellum preaching. All of these accounts, in spite of their differences, present the American novel’s rise as a declaration of independence from the constraints of Protestantism.

At the other end of this spectrum are two recent histories of secularism that place the antebellum novel at their respective centers, Tracy Fessenden’s *Culture and Redemption* (2007) and John Modern’s *Secularism in Antebellum America* (2010). Both these books characterize American-style secularism as interwoven with—and virtually equivalent to—public Protestantism. In this way, each revives what Catherine Albanese calls the “consensus model” of US religious history (*American Religious History*, 5) but with the difference that Modern and Fessenden, unlike their predecessors Robert Baird, Sidney Mead, and Sidney Ahlstrom, both see Protestant consensus not as a triumph of religious freedom but as an ideological ruse with all-too-real consequences. For Fessenden, consensus is “a convenient fiction” which assumes the “status of truth” through the violent exclusions of religious others, while for Modern it is the unconscious embrace of “a viral set of first principles about the truth of religion” (12) in which “both
the religiosity of Protestantism and the secularity of the democratic nation-state conformed to an unmarked and unacknowledged metaphysical scheme” (20). Since, for Fessenden, this revival and interrogation of Protestant consensus is grounded in the Protestant management of literacy, American novels of the mid-nineteenth century, even as they strived to recover subaltern voices excised from public Protestant discourse, were ultimately compromised by their desire for ecumenical unity. Modern, conversely, treats not the genre of the novel but one novel in particular: *Moby-Dick*. He organizes his book entirely around the composition and publication of sprawling, blubbering fiction of whale hunting, political economy, and cosmic rage, seeing in it both a diagnosis of and an aesthetic resistance to the claims of a “monstrous” secularism that it can never fully escape (8). Both Modern and Fessenden concur that antebellum religious freedom was never all that free and antebellum religious pluralism never all that plural. For them, the novel, the generic embodiment of a secular age, took one of two forms in relation to the consolidation of an exclusivist Protestantism: complicity or resistance.

What is lacking in both the secularization stories of the cultural historians, on the one hand, and the religious historians, on the other, is the degree to which both the novel and public Protestantism alike were grappling with the plural religious landscape of the US after the dissolution of the established churches that had formerly mediated religious difference through a combination of taxation, policing, and legislation. The rise of the American novel occurs in relation to the outpourings of the Second Great Awakening, but this relationship ought to be characterized neither a triumphant tale of aesthetic liberation from religion nor a tragic one of complicity or failed resistance. Instead, I wish to claim,

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8 Modern’s reading of *Moby-Dick* echoes, perhaps unconsciously, Samuel Otter’s in *Melville’s Anatomies*. 
the antebellum novel emerges as a distinctive genre of meta-religious reflection, seeking through the capaciousness of its form to encompass Protestant and non-Protestant religions alike and to theorize the generic category of religion itself. When I speak of the “rise” of the American novel, then, I intend to evoke both a cultural-historical arc (the novel’s rise to respectability) as well as a narrative operation (it narrates ascents over the religious diversity below).

Public Protestantism in the antebellum US presented one way of contending with the religious fracture on the ground, asserting itself as the generic form of true religion (defined by its practical ethics, its embrace of religious choice, its celebration of democratic equality, its faith in words, and its belief in an immanent and intimate God) against which all other religions were to be judged.9 As Fessenden has argued, this led to the establishment of “particular forms of Protestantism” as an “unmarked category” that has defined the boundaries and governing assumptions of post-Protestant secularism ever since, even as this “unmarked category” has remained invisible to it. At moments, however, Fessenden’s argument (and Modern’s, too) falls into the trap of practically equating Protestantism with secularism, an equivalency Michael Warner has usefully critiqued, offering a more supple definition of liberal secularism as “the metareligious understanding of post-Calvinist Protestantism, generalized as an understanding of religion per se” (612-13). Warner’s critical addition to this conversation is to see secularism not as Protestantism reconstituted in such a way that it can no longer recognize itself, but as a second-order understanding of religion which, in this particular case, takes Protestantism as its generic form. If liberal secularism may therefore be

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9 For roughly equivalent characterizations of public Protestantism in the period see Noll, 4; Fessenden, 2; Albanese, *American Religion*, 278-81.
characterized as a metareligious leap, then it is possible to imagine other such leaps, other possible secularisms rising up from within the laboratory of narrative fiction’s confrontation with religious plurality. Treating the novel’s relationship to religious plurality in this way is an attempt to answer Elizabeth Fenton’s challenge to scholars of American literature and religion to “address secularity’s relationship to traditions beyond Christianity while also interrogating Christianity’s own claims of ownership over secularism” (64).

The metareligious imperatives of the antebellum American novel are a reaction to the set of conditions I am calling “American secularity.” The implications of this term will become clearer as this chapter progresses, but my central claim is that the distinguishing feature of secularity within the context of the United States is the surfeit, and not the absence, of religious belief. Secularity in its most general form (and here I am borrowing again from Warner) refers to the conditions governing social experience after religion has been established as an independent category. That is, it names the cluster of epistemological, ontological, and anthropological assumptions that form the background against which the historical process of secularization may proceed and the political doctrine of secularism may arise. (This grants that secularization and secularism may come in many and varied forms.) By this broad definition, secularity need not require the retreat of religious belief as its precondition. Instead, its distinguishing features are the installation of something called “religion” as a concept to be defined and

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10 Stout also sees American secularism as a response to religious diversity, but for him this history is mostly benign, ignoring the ways in which the religion-secular binary has been used to exercise power. For a trenchant critique of Stout, see Cady.

11 See Warner, “Was Antebellum America Secular?”
the naturalization of belief as a set of doctrines or practices that can be chosen.\textsuperscript{12} I intend this reconceptualization of secularity as a New World corrective to the Eurocentrism of Charles Taylor’s account in \textit{A Secular Age}, an analysis of which I will take up now.

\textbf{i. American Secularity}

Taylor begins \textit{A Secular Age} by identifying three types of secularity: (1) religion’s retreat from the public sphere; (2) the overall decline of religious belief within a society; and (3) the naturalization of religious choice. The last of these (secularity 3) is the real subject of \textit{A Secular Age} and secularization, in light of this, thus names the historical process responsible for engendering this background of modern belief, which Taylor describes as a transition “from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (3). For Taylor, the emergence of the choice to either believe or not believe is the product of historical events unique to Western Europe: the creation of a new conception of the self capable of the disembodied reason necessary to see religion as a choice (the buffered self), a revision of the relationship between the cosmos and human society (the immanent frame), and a renegotiation of the boundaries between the religious and the political. At bottom, the story Taylor tells is “that of the abolition of the enchanted cosmos, and the eventual creation of a humanist alternative to faith” (77). This story begins with the long series of reform movements within the Roman Catholic Church culminating in the Protestant Reformation. Roman Catholicism, by creating its own antithesis in the humanism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

\textsuperscript{12} See Hurd, 11; Modern, \textit{Secularism}, 3.
dramatically altered the way in which religious belief—conceived as a Jamesian total 
response to life—was experienced and cognized. Taylor calls this the “Master Reform 
Narrative” and spends the first third of *A Secular Age* tracking how European Christianity 
sowed the seeds of its own marginalization, giving his own spin to Marcel Gauchet’s now 
classic formulation that Christianity is “the religion of the end of religion” (230).

Taylor’s account of secularity is deliberately Eurocentric, which he readily 
acknowledges. His defense of this geographical constraint is that he is trying to 
understand a “set of forms and changes which have arisen in one particular civilization, 
that of the modern West—or in an earlier incarnation, Latin Christendom” (15). What is 
problematic about this decision is that it brackets the effects of colonialism and global 
contact on Europe and thus forecloses any discussion or even recognition of the porosity 
of the borders between Europe and the rest of the world, not to mention the tremendous 
impact cultural data gathered abroad had on European conceptions of religiosity, a 
feature of European history I will discuss in greater detail in the next section. There is, 
however, one colonial enterprise Taylor does treat at length, that “great enigma of 
secularization theory” (425), the United States of America (425).

The US occupies a strange place in Taylor’s stadial history of the secular. On the 
one hand, it is the only nation to exemplify the characteristics of what Taylor calls the 
Age of Mobilization, exhibiting what he describes as a “strong neo-Durkheimian 
identity,” which is to say a widely held belief in the providential design and divine favor 
of the civil order. This is evident, he argues, in the presence of a “civic religion” in the 
US linking national history to providential destiny, whose core assertion is, he writes, 
“God is present because it is His design around which society is organized” (455). Taylor
attributes the creation and maintenance of this “civic religion” to the advent of denominationalism; once the state guaranteed the freedom of religion, the various churches could invest the nation with a sense of moral purpose and divine selection. Or, as Taylor puts it, “the Republic secures the freedom of the churches; and the churches sustain the Godly ethos the Republic requires” (453). But the exemplarity of the US for what Taylor calls the Age of Mobilization is unsettled by his other claim that the religious pluralism of the nineteenth century also primed it for the Age of Authenticity, the period after World War II when religious and non-religious worldviews multiplied exponentially in a “super-nova effect” (528-29).

José Casanova explores this moment of historical dissonance in Taylor’s account in an essay on A Secular Age, wondering whether US history might actually dismantle Taylor’s unidirectional narrative of the secular from paleo-Durkheimian to neo-Durkheimian and, finally, to post-Durkheimian societies, and, if so, whether this fact might “constitute an almost insuperable impediment to the widespread acceptance of a stadial historical consciousness that views unbelief as the quasi-natural developmental result of a kind of secular coming of age and of adult maturation” (273)? Casanova’s conclusion is that “what Taylor calls the nova and even supernova effects of the age of authenticity have always been operative in the United States, but only to multiply to the nth degree the myriad options of belief rather than those of unbelief” (273). There are broad implications to this New World counter-argument to Taylor’s thesis. By suggesting that European secularization might better be viewed as the exception rather than the rule for how the rest of the world experiences global modernity, Casanova questions whether the characteristic features of Taylor’s Age of Authenticity are even present in the
antebellum US, and if indeed they are whether their effect isn’t, in fact, the inversion of the pluralization Taylor tracks—a ceaseless multiplication of kinds of belief rather than kinds of unbelief. Trenchant as Casanova’s critique is, I think it can be broadened even further as a grounds for reenvisioning from a transhemispheric perspective Taylor’s historical narrative and the sociological processes animating it.

For Taylor, the pluralization of moral/spiritual options (the nova effect) can be traced to “the original duality,” the “positing of a viable humanist alternative” to orthodox Christianity qua Roman Catholicism (299). Over time, he argues, new belief positions emerge to level critiques not only at “Deism” and “the new humanism” but at “orthodox religion” as well. As these positions multiply, they activate new cross-polemics and generate even more possible options through a process Taylor calls “mutual fragilization,” his term for the experience of living in a pluralized world where one is aware of and often proximate to religious or non-religious options that are available as live possibilities. The “mutual fragilization of all the different views in presence, the undermining sense that others think differently,” is, Taylor concludes, one of the essential features of a secular age (303).

Taylor’s description of “mutual fragilization” is in keeping with the views of other prominent theorists of pluralization and secularization. In a 2007 essay, for example, Peter Berger argues for the difference between what he calls chosen religions and taken-for-granted religions. The latter are those religions into which one is born, while the former, which are characteristic of religions in the US, require individuals to “reflect about the cognitive and normative assumptions of their tradition, and consequently . . . make choices” (23). Taylor’s description of secularity 3 as the condition
that strips away the naivety of pre-modern faith is indebted to the distinctions Berger
draws here and in earlier work, yet Taylor (along with Hans Joas, whom Taylor cites
approvingly) mischaracterizes Berger as saying that the loss of religion’s taken-for-
granted status necessarily implies the difficulty of believing a chosen faith.13 This is all to
say that, as a purely descriptive term, Taylor’s use of “mutual fragilization” is not
original. Where he innovates, however, is in according to fragilization a central role in
the pluralization of options, which he calls the nova (and later, the super-nova) effects.

In Taylor’s schema, the nova effect can be mapped along a spectrum of belief-
unbelief. What “generates the nova effect,” he claims, are individuals who “in face of the
opposition between orthodoxy and unbelief . . . were cross-pressured, looking for a third
way” (302). As people (which, for Taylor, consist mostly of intellectuals and cultural
elites) wrestle with the fact that both orthodoxy and unbelief exist as viable worldviews,
they invent third ways (and fourth and fifth and sixth ways) that mediate between these
two gravitational poles, the “original duality.” Taylor thus takes a dialectical approach to
religious pluralization, a process that, if we were to plot it on a line, would look like this:

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13 See Joas, 21-26; and Taylor, 808n4, 846n19.
This linear model of religious pluralization is appropriate for mapping how worldviews differentiate themselves in modern Europe, since the conflict between established churches and heretical movements was so essential in shaping the intellectual history of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because it framed new belief positions in the terms of dissent or orthodoxy. But it does not hold as a model for the United States, where the belief-unbelief dyad is simply not supple enough to account for the global sprawl of religious possibilities in North America, some of which pre-existed the European colonization of North America, others which were transported there through immigration and the slave trade, and others still which emerged from acts of religious creativity. If we accept Casanova’s claim that the super-nova effect in the US multiplied “to the nth degree the myriad options of belief rather than those of unbelief,” we must then try to understand the experience of fragilization in the United States in fresh terms.

The antebellum US was certainly not immune to the theological cross-pressures or fragilization that Taylor describes, but they operated differently there and with different effects. Catherine Albanese makes the best claim for the generative effects produced by inter-religious contact when she asserts, “the shape and operation of American religious life—all of it—is best described under the rubric of religious combination” (224). In place of the religious free market envisioned by R. Stephen Warner, Albanese characterizes the religious landscape of the US as “a vast bazaar of the

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14 Since the “exclusive humanism” that Taylor argues broke orthodoxy Christianity’s hold on the popular imagination in Europe was never present to the same degree in the US before the Civil War, the dialectical creation of new belief positions proceeds along other lines. The humanisms that did emerge in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were often more accommodating to religious belief than they were antagonistic. See Turner, *Without God*. 
spirit” where selves and souls were sold and “new and combinatory American religions and religion” were bought (203).\textsuperscript{15} Crucial to this interpretation of American religious history as animated by contact and combination is a theory of the self as peculiarly receptive to forces, spiritual channels, and religious traditions other than its own. Whereas Taylor claims that reform movements within the church gave rise to a new kind of subject, a buffered self, impervious to the world of spirits and for whom “the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind” (8), Albanese argues for the existence of an American self that exists betwixt and between the porous and the buffered. Because magical thinking and practices often co-existed with Enlightenment discourses of disembodied reason in the US, those intellectual forces naturalizing the buffered self in Europe only served to reinforce a wide-spread belief in magic on the other side of the Atlantic and allowed for more capacious interpretations of “mind” to arise.\textsuperscript{16} This enabled the emergence of what Albanese calls “metaphysical religiosity,” which she distinguishes from both evangelical and mainstream-denominational religion on the basis that it “privileged the mind in forms that include reason but move beyond it to intuition, clairvoyance, and its relatives such as ‘revelation’ and ‘higher guidance’” \textit{(Republic}, 6). Metaphysical religionists represented selves whose relationship to supernatural forces and whose capacity to reflect upon those forces defy Taylor’s easy binaries.

But Albanese’s explication of metaphysical religiosity can be broadened to include yet another class of religionist. While the plural religious world of the antebellum

\textsuperscript{15} I take Albanese’s image of the “bazaar of the spirit” to be a subtle rebuke to what was being called in the 1990s the “new paradigm” of American religious history, which explained American religious history through free market economics. For the most polemical version of this thesis, see Stark and Finke.

\textsuperscript{16} See also Butler, \textit{Awash}, 67-97; and Quinn.
US engendered selves receptive to other religious possibilities, it also produced ways of being in the world best described as meta-religious. Albanese’s metaphysical religionists sought to create novel synthetic or syncretic religious forms, but among the many pining for a grand religious synthesis were those who, in the midst of gathering elements from a variety of spiritual traditions, engaged in second-order reflections upon the nature of those things being gathered and the conceptual umbrella under which they were thought, in this case “religion.” To put it another way, I am claiming that the combinatory character of American religion makes it so that fragilization operates vertically as well as horizontally, further crowding an already replete religious landscape while also trying to ascend above it. Meta-religious thinking, as I am characterizing it, is a habit of mind, but it also implies a kind of buffered self neither Taylor nor Albanese fully accounts for, one that is buffered not by its impermeability to forces outside it but by its capacity to float periously and sometimes delusionally above the fray of religious difference. Mutual fragilization, therefore, rather than generating new worldviews and belief systems intended to mediate, with increasing subtlety, the poles of belief and unbelief, instead issues in forms of meta-religious ascent that in turn produce unifying conceptualizations of religious plurality. Thinking about fragilization in this way can, I believe, help us both to reconfigure the relationship between secularity and religious pluralism in the antebellum US as well to resolve the seemingly contradictory forces governing the experiences of and responses to religious diversity during the period. This tendency finds its fullest expression in novelistic representation. But first, it’s necessary to ground this theoretical elaboration of American secularity in a brief history of religion and religious diversity in the US.
ii. Inventing American Religion

How Americans experienced and represented religious difference changed dramatically after constitutional disestablishment. This section examines the transformations of “religion” before and after this pivotal moment and is anchored by the experiences of two missionaries whose direct encounters with the religious diversity of North America inspired creative revisions of the relationship between religion and the religions: David Brainerd, a disciple of Jonathan Edwards, and Phillip Schaff, a German-born Lutheran minister who migrated to the US in 1844. The experiences of these two men catalyze the distinctions I wish to draw between how religious diversity was experienced before and after disestablishment, but they are also exemplary of the impact that the foundational pluralism of North America had upon people across periods. The anecdote I treat from Brainerd’s diary is intentionally microcosmic, intended to illustrate how the direct encounter with religious others in North America incited extemporaneous re-negotiations of what religion was and to whom it could be applied. My reading of Schaff, on the other hand, examines the more comprehensive and abstract set of conceptual innovations he devised to theorize sectarianism once constitutional secularism had been accepted as self-evident.

As a generic term for an independent and universal category of human experience, religion is an invention of European colonialism. Although originally used in early Latin Christendom to denote cultic rituals and later to identify those who had taken monastic vows, it was in the crucible of early modern European colonial expansion

17 See J. Z. Smith; and Peterson and Walhoff, 1-18.
that “religion” emerged as an anthropological category to describe the beliefs and rituals of non-Europeans, a definition that remains mostly intact to this day.\textsuperscript{18} The need to taxonomize the rituals and beliefs of non-European societies incited by cultural contact gave rise to “the question of the plural religions (both Christian and non-Christian)” that, in turn, “forced a new interest in the singular, generic religion” (J. Z. Smith, 271). This desire to classify a diverse array of practices as so many species of a common genera was far from politically neutral, for the anthropological discourse of religion was almost immediately used as a mechanism of power abroad (against colonized peoples) and at home (against Catholics).\textsuperscript{19} Concepts like “true religion” and “natural religion” gradually arose (most notably among the Cambridge Platonists and the Deists) to answer the epistemological problems generated by this onslaught of anthropological data. Philosophers like Lord Herbert of Cherbury defined “natural religion” exclusively in terms of propositional belief, which inspired tolerationist discourses of the late seventeenth century to separate belief (or opinion) from practice. John Locke, and later Thomas Jefferson, employed this division to great effect as a way of delineating the boundaries of religious freedom, wittily condensed in Jefferson’s famous remark in \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia}, “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg” (Query XVII).\textsuperscript{20} The North American colonies in the eighteenth century inherited this concept, but the religious landscape in which they found themselves demanded creative adaptations of it.

\textsuperscript{18} Ward, for instance, argues that “establishment of a world trading system” and the “search to define the essence of religion” were “culturally interrelated” enterprises (38).
\textsuperscript{19} See Harrison, 61-98.
\textsuperscript{20} For more on Cherbury and the rise of humanism and rationalism, see Byrne, 22-36.
The religious world of eighteenth-century British North America was more plural than has often been acknowledged even though the particular anxieties and upheavals of the nineteenth century had not yet been activated. As Jon Butler and others have shown, the diversity of religious groups was “unmatched by any Old World society” (73). During this time, Methodists and Baptists began to attract large numbers of congregants, immigrant churches began to grow, and, despite the persecutorial violence of the Salem witch trials, magical and occult practices persisted throughout the colonies. In addition to this, the rapid growth of masonic societies, which were themselves committed to an ecumenical religious vision, is revealing of a desire to experiment with new forms of fraternity and worship. This was also a period in which denominational switching became more frequent, anticipating the religious mobility that would become characteristic of the voluntaristic society of the early republic. Perhaps the most unique and puissant expression of religious creativity in the era, however, was the prophetic resistance movements of Native Americans that absorbed and transformed European discourses of religion in order to contest the encroachments of Anglo-European culture. The originary act of linguistic violence that reduced a diverse collection of indigenous North American tribes into “Indians” ultimately facilitated this “self-conscious pan-Native Americanism,” which answered the violence and exploitation of white settlers with modern religion-making (Martin, 692). In 1745, David Brainerd met one of these prophets during one of his missions. His encounter represents a critical moment in which

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22 See Beneke, 88-112.
23 While these movements trace their origins to the mid-eighteenth century, they would continue in various forms throughout the nineteenth century. See J. Martin and Dowd.
contact between missionaries and indigenes on the ground compelled innovative redescriptions and reattributions of religion.

In an entry dated September 21, 1745, Brainerd, stationed on Juniata Island along the Susquehanna River, records witnessing a Native dance he believed to be a ritual communion with the devil. Seeing this triggers in him the memory of a chance meeting he had had with a Native American prophet several months earlier, a “devout and zealous reformer, or rather restorer of what he supposed was the ancient religion of the Indians” (329). Brainerd begins recounting this scene by describing the prophet’s approach. Covered head to toe in bear skin and wearing a painted wooden mask, “no man would have guessed by his appearance and actions, that he could have been a human creature” (329). The account is deliberately dehumanizing, but the man’s humanity is restored once he sheds his ritual garb and the two enter the prophet’s house to “discourse” about Christianity (329). The prophet shares his own history with Brainerd, explaining that he had for several years removed himself from the world, during which time God had taught him his religion and convinced him of the corruption and degeneracy of his fellow “Indians.” His subsequent life, he says, had been devoted to restoring his people to their former vitality. Brainerd was not blind to the parallels between his own crises of faith and those of the prophet, especially given the latter’s solitary conversion experience in the wilderness, which had taught him to love “all men, be they who they would, so as he never did before” (330). He approvingly remarks that this man “had a set of religious notions that he had looked into for himself, and not taken for granted upon bare tradition” and, moreover, that he “seemed to be sincere, honest, and conscientious in his own way, and according to his own religious notions” (330). In concluding his brief sketch of this
striking colloquy, Brainerd writes—perhaps to his own surprise—that “there was something in his temper and disposition that looked more like true religion than anything I ever observed amongst other heathens” (330).

That a Native American spiritual leader and a New England missionary were able to approach one another as social equals in this moment humanizes and deepens both of them. Critics like Sandra Gustafson have long celebrated this historical collision, applauding Brainerd’s willingness to grant the prophet an “interiority and a spiritual authenticity” (89). Although neither the prophet nor Brainerd is converted by the other, their conversation in the prophet’s home appears to be a rare moment of cross-cultural sympathy between two individuals, both of whom were deeply convinced of certain theological truths, sincerely dedicated to spiritual and social reform, and acutely sensitive to their own sins as well as those of their people. Men who ought to have been cosmic rivals could, in this instant, meet as far-flung peers to complain about back-sliding, to swap conversion narratives, and to argue the finer points of their respective theologies. What troubles sanguine readings of the episode, however, is Brainerd’s attribution of “true religion” to the prophet, which at first blush seems like the highest compliment he was capable of paying but in fact exposes and reinforces the boundaries of respectable religion in the eighteenth century.

Brainerd’s use of “true religion” to describe the disposition of an indigenous spiritual leader would have baffled Christopher Columbus, who in his infamous report to his royal patrons asserted that the indigenous people of the Americas had “no religion,” by which he seems to have meant that they were a people who “stood prior to idolatry” (Ward, 41). Brainerd’s use of “true religion,” by contrast, denotes a quality inherent in a
person (“something in [their] temper or disposition”) and not one’s acceptance of a set of theological propositions. As Richard Pointer observes, Brainerd would have been using the term as Jonathan Edwards had defined it in *Religious Affections*, where he writes, “true religion, in great part, consists wholly in the affections” (95). So when Brainerd credits the prophet’s disposition with the signs of “true religion,” he very clearly does so solely in reference to the man’s de-ritualized self. By this I mean that Brainerd only recognizes the man’s interiority after the two have removed themselves to a private hut and the ritual accoutrement of masks, sticks, and heavy bear-skin robes have been entirely discarded. Indeed, the prophet’s emergence from the chaff of ceremonial garb dramatizes the cultural emergence of a universalizing version of “true religion”—one that crosses the borders of church, denomination, and even culture. Thus, even as Brainerd renders the native prophet in achingly human terms, he also does violence to the vitality and significance of his elaborate garb and ritual practices (scoffing, for instance, at the flatness of the prophet’s dirt floor because of its having been so frequently danced upon) by locating “true religion” exclusively in the other man’s disposition. The ugly effects of this separation between true and false religion are apparent in Brainerd’s reaction to the native dances on the isle of Juniata that initially inspired his recollection of the meeting, for it is precisely his revulsion at the ritual dancing which leads him to elevate, by way of contrast, a pan-Indian prophet as a vessel of true religion.

Brainerd’s tête-à-tête is evidence of the impact of immediate contact upon the definitional boundaries of the evolving concept of “religion.” At this time, these ripple effects were mostly localized, but after 1788 the relationship between the religions and

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24 See Pointer, 117-18.
religion would become integral to the formation of national identity and, after 1820, severely strained by the sudden explosion of new religious movements. Central to this was the redefinition of religion inscribed in the United States Constitution.

Both religious choice and the generic category “religion” are enshrined in the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment to the US Constitution. They read, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” According to Butler, the adoption of these two clauses marked “America’s postrevolutionary institutional transformation in religion” and have proved just as important to US religious history as the nation’s “burgeoning spiritual creativity” (258). Rather than settling the question of “religion and government in America,” the First Amendment “opened a long dialogue—sometimes a heated argument—that has lasted now for almost two centuries” (258). Battles over the meaning of the establishment clause have been waged in the pages of academic journals, in the courts, in town squares, and, sometimes violently, in the isolated communities of religious outsiders.

Twentieth-century discussions of the Establishment clause have focused on the relationship between “church” and “state,” two words that don’t appear in the first amendment but that have nevertheless become integral to interpretations of the clause following the 1878 United States Supreme Court decision in Reynolds v. United States. The defendant in that case was a Mormon convicted of bigamy who had subjected himself to legal scrutiny in order to test the scope of constitutional religious protections. Although the Court ultimately upheld the prohibition on polygamy on the grounds that the Free Exercise Clause only protected privately held beliefs and not actions in violation
of civil laws, the majority opinion was not, in fact, based on the language of the Free Exercise Clause, since, according to Chief Justice Morrison Waite, “the word ‘religion’ is not defined in the Constitution” (98). The imprecision of the clause necessitated that Waite look “elsewhere . . . to ascertain its meaning, and nowhere more appropriately, we think, than to the history of the times in the midst of which the provision was adopted” (98). The most appropriate documents to consult, he concluded, were the writings Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, especially Jefferson’s 1801 missive to the Danbury Baptist Association wherein he glosses the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses in unambiguously Lockean terms, stating that they erected “a wall of separation between church and State” (Jefferson, 397). Waite’s interpretation of the establishment clause on the basis of Jefferson’s letter is, as Noah Feldman has argued, not wrong, for nearly everyone who partook in the debates over the phrasing of the religion clauses understood their intended purpose to be the protection of “liberty of conscience of religious dissenters from the coercive power of government” (Feldman, “Intellectual Origins,” 350). The motivating desire in these early debates to preserve the agency of the individual in choosing his or her religious identity reveals just how ingrained this idea of religious selfhood was in the popular imagination. Waite’s decision thus concretized a version of religion amenable to the Locke-inflected imaginations of the founders, but this only really serves as a stately cover for the intrinsic and volatile ambiguity of “religion” as it is deployed in the religion clauses. Even as they institutionalize the principle of religious voluntarism, these two clauses also invest the republic with a mandate to determine the content, boundaries, and territoriality of “religion.” The founders appear

not to have reflected overmuch on the multivalent meanings of “religion,” and they could hardly have predicted how this concept would transform over the next two centuries. But whether intended or not, the world’s first secular nation was born bound to a category still in the process of definition.

The decades following the ratification of the Constitution were witness to a cascade of state-level disestablishment movements in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. These primarily took the form of protracted legal battles centered on concrete disputes over parish taxes and religious provisions for public office, and because these fights took place over years (and, in the case of Massachusetts, over decades) the “significance of the final political disestablishment for culture was minimal” (Green, 144). That being said, the long career of disestablishment in New England was an essential marker of the nation’s transition to a voluntary society as the lengthy debates over the meaning of liberty of conscience that began in the courtrooms spilled first into newspapers and, subsequently, into the collective consciousness of the nation. But even as disestablishment enabled creative new religious movements to multiply and, in some cases, to thrive, evangelicals seized the institutional latitude it afforded to expand into a diffuse, informal religious establishment through the formation of voluntary societies (the American Tract Society, the American Sunday School Union, and the American Bible Society, for instance), periodicals, and schools. Disestablishment thus became thoroughly integrated into the theology of evangelical Protestants, since, writes Mark Noll, their belief in the unmediated communication between the self and divine seemed “to trivialize the importance of institutions once held to mediate regeneration” (174). Lyman Beecher, who famously opposed disestablishment in Connecticut before eventually coming around
to the notion, wrote in his Autobiography that disestablishment was “the best thing that ever happened to the State of Connecticut. It cut the churches loose from dependence on state support. It threw them wholly on their own resources, and on God” (344). This movement among evangelical Protestants to support the religious possibilities of the disestablished state was a key element in what Noll calls the “Christian Republican synthesis,” which was responsible for the ascendency of public Protestantism in the mid-nineteenth century, an institutional signifier for a series of conceptual revolutions about the nature and political status of religion marking the simultaneous creation of an American Christianity and a Christian America.

Nathan O. Hatch describes the first half of the nineteenth century as “a period of religious ferment, chaos, and originality” unlike any other in American history (64). The rapid growth of new sects, churches, prophets, communities, and movements meant that contact with alternative religious forms increased exponentially. What distinguished many of the most successful homegrown religious movements that sprung up during this period from earlier ones was their acute self-consciousness of the swirling proliferation around them, which became integrated into their identities. Mormonism, for example, which I will have more to say about in the next section, traces its origins to the moment when, in the burnt-over district of western New York, a young Joseph Smith petitioned God to know which of the many sects preaching in his ear was “right, or which was wrong” (J. Smith, “Sketch Book,” 9 Nov. 1835). The epistemological uncertainty bred by the voluntary principle roused Smith to seek guidance from a transcendental authority. Besides being a religion produced by an “excess of choice” (Modern, “Confused Parchments”), Mormonism, in its foundational text and throughout Smith’s other
writings, returns again and again to the problem of religious freedom; indeed, Smith was still musing over it in the final sermon he delivered before being murdered at the hands of a mob. The Christian Restoration movement, likewise, led by Alexander Campbell and Barton Stone, sought to eliminate Protestant sectarianism entirely through an uncompromising return to the singular authority of the Bible.26 And Spiritualism, which began when Margaret and Catherine Fox claimed to hear “rappings” from the spirit world, reflected “the rise of a religious syncretism that wedded popular supernaturalism to Euro-American Protestantism” (McGarry, 10).27 All these movements saw themselves as responses to the specter of “sectarianism” (even as their own religious innovations further exacerbated this problem) by offering new theologies, ecclesiologies, and social forms through which religious multiplicity could be conceptualized and contained. The tension between fracture and consolidation that these groups embodied is the same one Taylor struggles with in A Secular Age and why he calls the US the “great enigma of secularization theory.” One of the most astute nineteenth-century thinkers to identify and theorize these competing forces was Philip Schaff for whom the problem of sectarianism in the US was a life-long preoccupation.

Shortly after arriving in the small village of Mercersburg, Pennsylvania in 1844 from his native Germany, the twenty-five-year-old Schaff delivered an ordination sermon on the condition of Christianity in the United States. As if intentionally setting out to enrage his new neighbors, his inaugural address railed against the rank religious opportunism he believed existed in his new homeland. American Christianity, he argued, was being corrupted daily as a consequence of rampant sectarianism, the roots of which

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26 For more on the role of Christian Restoration movements in the period, see Hatch, 67-81.
27 For a thorough history of American Spiritualism, see Braude.
could be traced to the absence of an established church, which gave free rein to Protestantism’s most destructive tendencies. But these roots were also characterological, for the American people were, Schaff imagined, a “conflux of beggars, adventurers, liberty dreamers, culprits, and open blasphemers of religion” (“Ordination,” 9). He would later publish these views in his classic text, *The Principle of Protestantism* (1845), which, unsurprisingly, was not received any better in the broader American theological community than it had been among the German immigrants who first heard its central ideas.28 A decade later, however, Schaff’s position on sectarianism had evolved as a result of his having actually lived in Pennsylvania among the Americans he had formerly derided. In *America: A Sketch of the Political, Social, and Religious Character of the United States* (1855), he offered an expansive and almost cosmic revision of his earlier position. The religious scene he had before characterized as a Miltonic pandemonium he now compared to the universe in the moments before creation, as a world in a state of “chaotic fermentation” (260) on the cusp of producing yet unimaginable forms of Christian unity. It was, he wrote—in a display of his knack for vivid phrasing—the “ecclesiastical Thohuvavohu [formlessness] of the New World” (261).29

The fecund formlessness of the New World notwithstanding, the problem of sectarianism in the US continued to plague Schaff. Unchecked by “the fetters of ecclesiastical and civil forms and regulations,” he wondered in *America* whether Protestantism in the US, “being left to its centrifugal and unchurchly tendencies,” would “at last break up into atoms” or whether it would “come together, consolidate,

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28 For a broad account of Schaff’s early life and the evolution of his thinking on religious freedom and sectarianism, see Graham, *Cosmos*, 1-44.
29 *Thohuvavohu* is the transliteration of the Hebrew word for “formlessness” used in Genesis 1:2.
concentrate itself, and out of the phoenix-ashes of all Christian denominations and sects, rise glorified” (263). These two “tendencies,” the centrifugal and the centripetal, aptly describe the oppositional forces at play across the religious landscape of the US at mid-century. Through voluntary societies and denominational unions, public Protestantism was consolidating itself into a diffuse, informal official religion, but the centrifugal energies over which Schaff fretted were still alive both within and without the Protestant fold.

Like Taylor, Schaff speaks about these two forces as if they are inherently oppositional and thus irreconcilable, neglecting the possibility that they might in fact be co-dependent. What I’ve called vertical fragilization—a sociological mechanism incited by the surfeit of belief endemic to the American religious landscape—provides a link between them. Sectarian fracture and proliferation are features of North American religious history from first contact onward, but were both, as we have seen, exacerbated after the founding of the Republic and the naturalization of religious choice. Contact between religious others created—for the Protestant religious imaginary at least—a cognitive problem in need of resolution. One solution to the anxieties of sectarianism was the invention of the denomination, essential to which was a common belief in “true religion” as any form of worship and practice that resembled Protestantism. This is the reason so many non-Protestant religious groups in the US eventually come to behave like Protestant denominations. (Until, for one reason or another, they don’t, and latent differences again rise to the surface.) The rise of public Protestantism (and, by extension, the story of American-style secularism) was but one possible means of achieving a

30 On the history of the denomination, see Martin, Hudson, and Mead.
consolidation of religious difference incited by proximity and contact, and even though public Protestantism prevailed in the nineteenth century as the dominant form of religious centripetality, it is not unimaginable that other possible, unachieved trajectories lie dormant in the archives of nineteenth-century American religion and literature.

The novel, I wish to claim, is a privileged literary genre through which this peculiar dynamic of the antebellum era is enacted and secularisms alternative to that derived from public Protestantism are imagined by means of metareligious ascents. Yet other literary genres also grappled with the problem of religious diversity in their own ways, and how they did so helps to clarify the novel’s contribution. In the next section, I consider two other literary genres in the period (the dictionary of religions and New World scripture) that both formally enact, respectively, the centrifugal and centripetal tendencies of American religion.

iii. The Compiler and the Translator

Although both Hannah Adams’s *A Dictionary of All Religions* (1780–1817) and Joseph Smith’s *The Book of Mormon* (1830) are representative examples of genres other than the novel to arise in the early decades of the Republic as literary means of contending with the cognitive, political, and theological problems raised by the surfeit of belief, the two could not be more different with respect to their authors’ sensibilities, compositional histories, motives for publication, and formal structures. Adams’s encyclopedic tome was unique among the numerous dictionaries of religions flooding the literary marketplace of the eighteenth century for the rules she devised to ensure her fair and neutral treatment of all religious groups; and *The Book of Mormon* was a prophetic
narrative notable for its formal complexity, its embrace of the epistemological assumptions of modernity, and its rewriting of Christian sacred history as a story of the discovery and settlement of the Americas. Adams’s text presents a centrifugal array of religious possibilities, and Smith’s attempts a centripetal gathering of racial and religious difference into a tenuous reconstituted whole. Despite their considerable differences, these two works expose the immense difficulty conceptualizing religious difference posed for those who held to the idea that some sense could be made of the excess of belief in the antebellum US at the same as they illuminate the spectrum of literary works engaged with the conditions of “American secularity,” two poles against which to position the distinctive cultural work performed by the novel.

Hannah Adams’s encounters with global religious diversity were textual rather than experiential. Born in 1755 in the small town of Medfield, Massachusetts to the perennially failing businessman Thomas Adams, she inherited her father’s passion for books and reading and spent her adolescence devouring sentimental poetry and popular romances in isolation from the wider world. Unsurprisingly, she had little experience with religious groups other than the Conregationalism of her neighbors and appears not to have been wracked by any particular anxiety over theological matters. But Adams was saddled with an insatiable intellectual curiosity and in her twenties, regretful over the time she believed she had wasted in belletristic pleasures, threw herself into academic pursuits. With the help of the young Harvard men who filtered in and out of her family home—which her father had turned into a boarding house after his English goods store went bankrupt—she pieced together the rudiments of a classical education. But one boarder in particular altered the trajectory of her life when he presented her with a small
pamphlet excerpted from Thomas Broughton’s *Dictionary of All Religions from the Creation of the World To this present Time* (1742), her reading of which, she later wrote, “awakened my curiosity, and I assiduously engaged myself in perusing all the books which I could obtain” (qtd. in G. Schmidt, 31).³¹

What most enticed Adams about Broughton’s dictionary was the religious surplus it displayed, but what most offended her about it was Broughton’s division of religion “into True and False” (Broughton, sig. a2⁵). Such easy categorical distinctions between true and false religion were not unique to Broughton, for from the genre’s amateur beginnings in 1605 with Samuel Purchas’s *Purchas his pilgrimage; Or, Relation of the world and the religions observed in all ages and places discovered*, the dictionary of religions was an instrument of Protestant propaganda employed less to illuminate the diversity of global religious forms than to stymie the spread of idolatry, Catholic and pagan alike. Even as the authors of these dictionaries admitted “the fact of religious plurality as the way of the world” in their presentation, their final aim was always to eliminate it (Masuzawa, 57).³² In her own compendium of religious plurality, Adams set out to avoid replicating these biases, the basis for which was a set of four rules she devised to guide her presentation of the material, all of which appeared unaltered in the advertisement preceding each of her dictionary’s four editions:

1. To avoid giving the least preference of one denomination above another: omitting those passages in the authors cited, where they pass their judgment on the sentiments, of which they give an account: consequently the making use of any such appellations, as *Heretics, Schismatics, Enthusiasts, Fanatics*, &c. is carefully avoided.
2. To give a few of the arguments of the principal sects, from their own authors, where they could be obtained.

³¹ For a full account of the route by which Adams was led to publish her compendium, see G. Schmidt, 31-40.
³² For more on the history of this genre, see Masuzawa, 37-63 and J. Z. Smith. For an example of the anti-pluralistic imperatives of this genre, see Alexander Ross’s preface to *Pansebia: or, a View of all Religions in the World*, sig. A3⁵.
3. To endeavor to give the sentiments of every sect in the general collective sense of that denomination.
4. To give the whole, as much as possible, in the words of the authors from which the compilation is made, and where that could not be done without too great prolixity, to take the utmost care not to misrepresent the ideas. (*Dictionary of All Religions*, “Advertisement”)

Crude though they might seem to modern eyes, Adams’s rules were a self-conscious attempt to give contradictory and even seemingly absurd religious claims equal weight, a way to achieve theological neutrality within a genre that had historically been the work of defenders of the faith.

We might even go so far as to say that Adams’s rules constituted an innovation that began to secularize the dictionary of religions. By secularization I do not mean that Adams entirely excised her personal religious biases from the work but rather that her rules elevated her in her role as compiler to an archimedean point from which to survey and mediate religious difference. The compiler, rather than casting off the accumulated dross of religious belief, merely ascends—however fleetingly—above it. This particular spatial relationship between compiler and subject is made explicit in the title she gave the second edition of her dictionary, *A View of Religions*. But while the authorial persona of the compiler empowered Adams to see interreligious squabbles from on high, the author herself remained an embodied person with a mind that had to absorb the paradoxes and contradictions of this jumble of religious possibilities, and her account of the production of the first edition of her dictionary is striking for its affective and physiological detail.

Near the end of her life Adams wrote a memoir in which recalls her visceral reactions to the study of religions:

*Stimulated by an ardent curiosity, I entered into the vast field of religious controversy, for which my early reading had ill prepared me. . . . As I read controversy with a mind naturally wanting in firmness and decision, and without that pertinacity which blunts the force of arguments which are opposed to the tenets we have once imbibed, I suffered extremely from mental indecision, while perusing the various and contradictory arguments adduced by men of piety and learning in defence of their respective religious*
systems. Sometimes my mind was so strongly excited, that extreme feeling obliged me for a time to lay aside my employment. . . . Reading much religious controversy must be extremely trying to a female, whose mind, instead of being strengthened by those studies which exercise the judgment, and give stability to the character, is debilitated by reading romances and novels, which are addressed to the fancy and imagination, and are calculated to heighten the feelings. (Memoir, 13-14)

The first thing to note about this passage is Adams’s discomfiting assault on the diminished capacities of her sex—a theme throughout her career. Cringe-inducing though it may be, I think we should avoid dismissing Adams’s self-portrait too quickly, for although she ascribes the habits of her mind to the inferiorities of her sex, these habits might just as easily be said to be representative of a latitudinarian mode of religious thought superior to that of the disputatious cholars she claimed to admire. We might say, for example, that rather than lacking “firmness” and “decision,” Adams’s mind was “adaptive” and “expansive,” or that her worry over the “debilitat[ing]” effects of novel reading was actually her way of cultivating something like Keats’s “negative capability.”

There is a way, then, to see in Adams’s self-deprecating gesture the articulation of a disposition that made her peculiarly well-suited to the task of presenting hundreds of contradictory and disparate cosmologies, theologies, and worldviews. The impact of this undertaking upon such a mind as Adams, however, was “mental indecision” and nervous complaints, a set of interlinked physical and cognitive symptoms caused by having adopted a secular perspective that was forced to weigh “various and contradictory arguments” without the benefit of a clean division between true and false religions. Adams eventually overcame her metareligious nausea (she proceeded, after all, to publish three more editions of the book over the following thirty-five years) but her experience wading through the vast multiplicity of religious thought and practice is a striking example of the affective tolls such contact could exact.
Leigh Eric Schmidt describes the period in which Adams worked on her dictionary (the Revolutionary War to the first stirrings of the Second Great Awakening) as “one of the most fecund in all of Euro-American history for the generation of new classifications by which to map the religious world” (2004). The metamorphoses the dictionary underwent over the course of its publication history mirror these broader trends, with each subsequent edition requiring the addition of new material, the revision of old material, and, in two instances, the retitling of the book and a substantive altering of its form. (It nearly doubled in size between the first and third editions, as well.) The first edition, titled *An Alphabetical Compendium of the Various Sects Which have appeared in the World from the beginning of the Christian Aera to the present Day*, was divided into two parts, an alphabetically ordered list of Christian sects (the compendium of the title) and an appendix with essays about four other religions (“Pagans, Mahometans, Jews and Deists”) as well as a geographic survey of religious beliefs and practices, which included brief but detailed descriptions on a variety of indigenous religious systems. The structure of the first edition recombined elements from previous dictionaries into a formal *bricolage*, likely a reflection of the distinctions Adams felt compelled to draw between both Christian and non-Christian religions as well as non-Christian and indigenous (or “primitive”) religions. Christianity’s internal diversity could be organized alphabetically while non-Christian universal religions would be represented through short essays, and all other religious systems would be organized by place. Adams retained this structure in the second edition of the dictionary but changed the title, as I mentioned above, to *A View of Religions, in Two Parts*, which is important for placing the compiler at a vertical remove from her subject matter, transforming her into a
cartographer mapping a landscape over which she hovers. If Adams’s four rules ensure her agnosticism, the title of second edition renders her a meta-religious figure. Between the first and second edition, Adams also began to rely less on secondary accounts of religious groups and more on primary ones, which further elevates the compiler above the squabbling faithful. Besides revealing just how malleable religious taxonomies were, Adams’s changes to her dictionary chart a particular kind of formal response to the avalanche of ethnocultural information pouring in from around the globe.

In the fourth edition, published in 1817, Adams abandoned religious taxonomies altogether in favor of an alphabetized potpourri of religious difference. The categories that had given shape to previous editions of the dictionary were now consigned to the ungainly title, *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religious Denominations, Jewish, Heathen, Mahometan, Christian, Ancient and Modern*, jumbling multiple classificatory schemes together without any indication of their relationality. In the title, “Religions” and “religious denominations” sit uneasily beside one another before spilling into the then standard list of the four major religions, which is followed by a temporal schema dividing ancient and modern religions. By 1817, then, the body of Adams’s dictionary had become a virtually unmediated presentation of global religious fragmentation, such that “Indians” could be sandwiched between the seventeenth-century English Protestant movement for church autonomy (“Independents”) and the doctrine of Christ’s pre-existence (“Indwelling Scheme, see *Pre-Existents*”); “Mahometans” (Muslims) could border the “Magi”; and a dead second-century Egyptian sect remembered for worshipping Adam and Eve’s third son Seth (“Sethians”) could precede an extensive essay on the living, growing United Society of Believers, otherwise known as the Shakers. To peruse only the
body of the book is to experience a mélange of global religious possibilities unshackled from categorical constraints. In the preface to his own dictionary, Broughton had commented upon the danger of alphabetical ordering, writing that “[t]he form of a *Library or Dictionary* necessarily requires, that the several subjects or articles be thrown and blended together, without any other connexion than the *alphabetical order* of their *titles*. Hence *Pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan* Articles are promiscuously jumbled together” (vii). His solution had been to include a table of contents directing readers to series’ of entries that would allow them to construct chronological histories of a given religion on their own. But Adams, who also worried over the radical centrifugal force of her presentation, attempted to stave off the possibility that her dictionary would be received as a pluralistic orgy of religious options by book-ending the alphabetical dictionary with two original essays on the history of Christendom, which survey, respectively, the religious world at the time of Christ’s birth and the state of Christianity in the early nineteenth century. These two essays are a formal method of constraining the splay of religious difference by locating it within a Christian historical framework.

The anxieties over sectarianism and division plaguing the earliest religious dictionaries recur in both these essays. It is in the second, though, that Adams ponders “the diversity of sentiment . . . exhibited in the preceding pages” (371), carefully minimizing the extent of intra-Christian division in order to bracket sectarianism as a problem unique to the non-Christian world. But in the last paragraph of the volume she admits her own uncertainty about Christianity’s world-historical career: “Why providence has suffered the Christian religion to be hitherto confined to so small a portion of the globe is also a mystery which we cannot fathom. But we are encouraged by

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many prophecies in the sacred scriptures to expect a period when the gospel shall be universally extended, and received with unanimity” (376).33 It is a question freighted with meaning for a Christian-exceptionalist worldview that was crumbling under the pressures of globality.

Generically speaking, Adams’s query moves away from the historical argumentation and data analysis evident elsewhere in her dictionary and toward a rhetorical mode more akin to prophecy. Although she intended her two framing essays to reassert Christian exceptionalism in the face of global religious plurality by making Christianity the master narrative for all religious difference, when she treats Christianity’s imperial setbacks abroad she confronts the limits of her historical method. Thus, the providentialist faith surreptitiously controlling the ecumenical dictionary of religions up to this point had begun to dissolve, and Adams, finally, could neither embrace unchecked proliferation nor any longer comprehend it within the bounds of sacred history. She never produced a fifth edition.

As a young woman, Adams had dreamed of being a novelist. In the eyes of many, Joseph Smith was one.34 The Book of Mormon is a story of diaspora that begins in ancient Israel around 600 BCE when the patriarch Lehi, after having visions of the destruction of Jerusalem, leads his family (including his three sons Nephi, Lemuel, and Laman) first

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33 The importance of this query to Adams is evidenced by the fact that it had been removed in an 1815 British version of Adams’s third edition assembled by Thomas Williams in an attempt to eliminate any creeping doubts about the Christianity’s world historical preeminence. In her fourth edition of the dictionary, Adams adopted many of the Williams’s changes, but made certain to restore the query in her revisions of the concluding essay.

34 The history of dismissing The Book of Mormon by labeling it a romance or disputing its authorship is long. It begins with Alexander Campbell’s Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon (1831), which simply called the book a romance, and Eber D. Howe’s Mormonism Unvailed (1834), which identified the novelist and minister Solomon Spaulding as its real author. But even Joseph Smith’s greatest twentieth-century biographer, Fawn Brodie, who accepts Smith as its sole author, emphasizes the book’s value as narrative fiction, lamenting that Smith didn’t give up his prophetic career to turn novelist.
into the desert and then across the ocean to the Americas. Once settled in the New World, they are given the good news of Christ’s advent, making them the first Christians by several hundred years. After many generations, the Nephites develop a sophisticated civilization that eventually splits along genealogical lines into two peoples, the Nephites and the Lamanites (after Laman, one of the wicked brothers of Nephi). Because of a curse enacted upon the Lamanites that darkens their skin, this also becomes a racial division. (The Lamanites were considered to be the ancestors of American Indians.) The bulk of The Book of Mormon consists of what are called the large plates, which narrate the history of the Nephites and their ongoing conflicts with the Lamanites from about 130 BCE to 385 CE. Despite Christ’s theophanic appearance to this people after his crucifixion, Nephite history ultimately crumbles as a result of decades of war. At times, The Book of Mormon seems poised to unravel into an apocalyptic tumult of religious fracture without end, but by virtue of its being a historical narrative rather than an alphabetical dictionary it is propelled towards forms of resolution that Adams’s dictionary is not, offering creative, albeit disconcerting, answers to Adams’s anxious query about the past and future of Christendom. Whereas Adams attempts the containment of religious excess through historical framing devices, Smith attempts to rewrite all of human history as a story of religious consolidation.

The Book of Mormon’s deep engagement with the pressures of religious pluralization is a consequence of its having been conceived amidst the sectarian battles raging across the burnt-over district in the early nineteenth century. This region, writes Whitney R. Cross, had during these years become a “center of gravity for spiritual stimuli” and a hotbed of theological innovation. Between the upstart prophets, nomadic
sects, masonic chapters, and a medley of Protestant denominations vying tirelessly for new congregants (Universalists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists among them) the social world then congealing along the banks of the Erie Canal was primed to foster a deep sense of uncertainty within those who had come to care for the fate of their immortal souls. The Smith family, who moved to the region in 1803, were the intellectual progeny of both the village enlightenment and evangelical revivalism, a people drawn to enthusiasm but tempered by reason. Nowhere is the dual cultural inheritance of enlightenment and revivalism clearer, however, than in the circumstances which precipitated what has come to be called Joseph Smith’s First Vision, an event that draws these two strains together as a form of response to the anxieties of pluralization.

Smith’s first vision sprang from his desire to occupy, like Adams, an archimedean point from which to distinguish true religion from false, to mediate the cacophony of theological claims and separate the spiritual wheat from the earthly chaff. The inciting factor for this event was his involvement with a Methodist revival that likely occurred in Palmyra, NY around 1818. Such revivals, writes Richard Bushman, “occurred periodically [in the region] from 1799 on, touching first one town and then another” (Joseph Smith, 52). In one of his accounts of the vision, Smith recalled that “the confusion and strife amongst the different denominations” was such “that it was impossible for a person young as I was and so unacquainted with men and things to come to any certain conclusion who was right and who was wrong” (1842). To resolve this

35 Asael Smith, Joseph’s paternal grandfather, was a reader of Thomas Paine and one of the first Universalists in Vermont. Joseph’s parents could best be described spiritual independents: his father, Joseph Sr., reported several visionary experiences but remained skeptical of religious institutions, and his mother, Lucy Mack Smith, spent much of her life prior to the founding of her son’s church in search of a spiritual home. For more on Smith’s family, see Bushman, Rough Stone Rolling, 8-29. The “village enlightenment” is Jaffee’s term.
dilemma, he ventured alone into the woods to ask God what the right religion to choose was, and the answer he received from the two ethereal figures who descended from the heavens to visit him was that he ought to choose none of them, for none was true. Whereas Adams had devised a method to represent antagonistic or contradictory claims fairly without having to discriminate between them, Smith believed such judgments ought to be left to God, since only He had the capacity to see from above the “tumult” and confusion. Over time Smith would have more visions, culminating in his discovery of a set of golden plates hidden in a hill by Moroni, the son of an ancient Nephite general. These plates represented a material answer to the question he had first posed to God as a teenager and, when “translated,” they would reveal a counter-factual history explaining the roots of global religious difference.

Of the many formal differences between The Book of Mormon and Adams’s dictionary, one of the most important is the former’s relentless linearity. While the lexicographical technology of alphabetization had enabled Adams to present a sprawl of religious differentiation without concern for either chronological progression or the contradictions of conflicting truth claims, The Book of Mormon proceeds unidirectionally, both in its narrative and also in its composition. What I mean by this is that the narrative’s shuttling towards the advent of Christ to the Nephites is mirrored in the book’s composition, which, because it was dictated orally in the space of a few months and thus never subject to ex post facto revisions, advances irreversibly towards its end, forced to correct factual errors or narrative dead-ends not by eliminating them from the final text but by inventing justifications for them.36 This aspect of the book is easy to

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36 See Taves for a thorough and incisive naturalistic account of the composition of The Book of Mormon.
overlook given the degree to which The Book of Mormon fetishizes and announces its
textuality. Its obsession with its bookness is most evident in the interventionist editorial
presence of Mormon, who claims responsibility for abridging, revising, and re-organizing
the physical plates he had received from his forebears. As Grant Hardy observes,
Mormon’s editorial hand is visible throughout the text, interrupting the narrative, for
instance, to provide, “brief comments explaining his editorial decisions and sources or
noting the fulfillment of prophecies” (111). The Book of Mormon offers readers all the
information necessary to reconstruct its history as a book.37 But the original manuscript
of The Book of Mormon, which was delivered to the printer Egbert B. Grandin as an
unvarnished transcription of Joseph’s dictation with neither punctuation nor chapter
breaks, materializes the stream of consciousness that produced it. Since Smith’s method
of composition obviously prevented him from ever returning to early sections to revise
them, any factual and or textual problems he needed to resolve had to be done
sequentially, creating, in effect, a narrative at once linear and retrospective. Reminding
ourselves of this aspect of The Book of Mormon is essential for understanding how it
functions as a narrative.

Evidence of the book’s spontaneous orality can be detected in the hesitations and
obvious deferrals scattered throughout the text, which immediately strike one as signs of
a storyteller weaving a narrative in real time. The most apparent of these (because they
are the most monotonous) is the repetition of the phrase, “And it came to pass,” which
begins every third or fourth sentence, especially in the early books. There is every
indication that this is not a deliberate style choice but a rote means of transitioning

37 Smith went so far as to claim that the title page of the 1830 edition was also revealed to him.
between narrative events. Similarly, when the history described in the large plates approaches the birth of Christ, the narrative transforms into a countdown clock of sorts, repeatedly recurring to the number of years remaining until the event, as if Smith were planting linguistic flagposts to help him keep track of his timeline. While these tics suggest a mind arranging a complex narrative in real time, they offer little in the way of analytic interest. (A reader may at these moments be inclined to agree with Mark Twain’s withering assessment of *The Book of Mormon* as “chloroform in print.”) Yet beneath the tedium of its phraseology, some of its stylistic tics help us to see how the book revises itself diachronically to resolve the real intellectual problems it creates for itself. One can imagine Smith as having begun *The Book of Mormon* as something of a lark (or, more uncharitably, as a con) but over the course of its composition narrating himself into intellectual, theological, and historical corners that only leaps of his peculiarly capacious imagination could resolve.

One of the most fertile residues of the book’s real-time composition are the self-correcting appositive phrases scattered throughout its sentences, many of which not only fail to clarify the phrase they refer to but actually revise it. They are clear evidence of *The Book of Mormon*’s self-revisionist tendencies on a micro-scale. Take, for instance, the following examples from the book of Alma: “Now if a man desired to serve God, it was his privilege; or rather, if he believed in God it was his privilege to serve him” (Alma 30:9); “Behold, Ammoron, I have written unto you somewhat concerning this war which ye have waged against my people, or rather which thy brother hath waged against them” (Alma 54:5); “Yea, and I had murdered many of his children, or rather led them away unto destruction” (Alma 36:14). In the first example, the appositive is obviously a
reformulation of the original phrase, the purpose of which seems to be to clarify the theological message it communicates, namely, to assert belief in God as a precondition for obedience. The second is a revision of fact, intended to correct what appears to be a misstatement in the initial clause. And the third, which comes from Alma’s confession of his sins, reads as an attempt to provide a more lyrical alternative to the original. Admittedly, all of these might be interpreted as deliberate rhetorical strategies employed by their respective speakers in the text, but it is a persistent enough pattern throughout the large plates to suggest that, as he translated, Smith used appositives as a stylistic strategy for revising thoughts without having to backtrack.

If this theory is true, one would presume that as Joseph became more confident in narration these tics would disappear. Not only do they not disappear, but their frequency actually increases. The book of Jacob, for instance, which appears early in *The Book of Mormon* but was in fact one of the very last portions Joseph dictated, contains, by one count, the most appositive phrases. The bug, it seems, had become a feature. One example of this occurs during a sermon Jacob gives in the temple when he excoriates its audience by declaring, “But wo, wo, unto you that are not pure in heart, that are filthy this day before God” (Jac. 3:3). The purpose of the appositive phrase, “that are filthy this day before God,” is a clarification of the preceding phrase “not pure in heart,” but in a way that builds and extends the meaning of the original phrase rather than overwriting it. The appositive imbues the original sentiment with a visceral specificity (“filthy”) that the negative formulation (“not pure”) lacks. What I am flagging here is a pattern of dynamic self-revisionism occuring throughout *The Book of Mormon*, a stylistic indicator of a phenomenon that I believe is also happening at a conceptual level in the text. By this I
mean that just as *The Book of Mormon* revises its sentences in real time (a peculiar effect of the circumstances of its composition) it also enacts similar transformations in its thinking about globality, race, and religion.

Sectarian difference, as we saw above, provided the impetus for Joseph’s first vision, and the anti-sectarian message Joseph received from the two supernatural figures who appeared to him in the woods is evident throughout *The Book of Mormon*. But the book complicates this problem by also positing itself as a history of American Indians, which overlays an ethnocultural dilemma (polygenesis vs. monogenesis) atop the sectarian one. *The Book of Mormon* is thus tasked with telling two separate stories, one of racial declension and another of sectarian proliferation, and it tries mightily to keep these two separate as its narrative is propelled centripetally towards the racial and religious consolidation promised by Christ’s theophanic appearance to the Nephites. Nevertheless, that same propulsive force that drives the narrative towards consolidation into a unified civic faith also charts its aftermath, an apocalyptic and irreversible pluralization of religious difference in which religious difference and racial difference become indistinguishable.

In the early books of the large plates (which comprise the long, plodding history of the Nephite people after they have established themselves in the Americas) religious others are not distinguished by ethnic group. Take, for instance, Nehor, an itinerant preacher in Alma 1, who wanders the land declaring the virtues of an established church and espousing theological universalism, a figure who would not have been out of place in Palmyra in the 1820s. His heresies are reluctantly tolerated until he enters into a dispute with an orthodox Nephite and murders him, presumably because his theology has assured
him the gates of heaven would open regardless of his actions on earth. Other false prophets, like Korihor later in the book of Alma, materialize throughout these sections to test the limits of Nephitic concepts of religious freedom and to demonstrate God’s interventionist power. After Christ appears to the Nephites in 3 Nephi, however, this pattern undergoes a dramatic shift.

Following the theophany of Christ’s to the New World, Nephite culture enters a period of peace and unity that lasts for two centuries. During this time, the narrator exclaims, “There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God” (4 Ne. 1:17). Here, the absence of criminality is associated with the absence of “Lamanites” (the racialized enemies of the Nephites) and, by extension, “any manner of –ites.” In the nineteenth century, as categories of race and religion were still forming, the suffix “-ite” could potentially identify either a racial or a religious group. (The Mormons themselves faced this dilemma when detractors racialized them through the appellation “Mormonites.”)38 In this case, Lamanite still refers to an ethnic group, but because of their association with bad theologies and bad practices, we can begin to see the forging of a link between racial and religious identities. Later in the book, when sectarianism again rears its head, Mormom laments that “there were many churches which professed to know the Christ” (4 Ne. 1:27). Conflicts over the true nature of Christ, spurred on—according to Mormon, who sounds eerily like Philip Schaff here—by their envy of the true church, begin to compete with one another. The subgroups who emerge out of these conflicts are divided between the members of the true church—the Nephites, the Jacobites, the

38 See Reeve, 20.
Josephites, and the Zoramites—and the members of the false churches—Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites. Here, genealogical lines have become co-extensive with religious affiliations, where Lamanite, Lemuelite, Nephite, etc. refer simultaneously to ecclesiastical communities and ethnic communities.

This final conceptual turn is the end result of the text whose sheer momentum and inability to backtrack leads to the conflation of racial and religious difference into a single anthropological category, which instead of resolving religious difference through the articulation of a new, unified church, renders the centrifugality of sectarianism a bodily, as well as a social, condition. Its apocalypticism notwithstanding, this collapse is instructive insofar as it arrives at a correlation between race and religion that went unacknowledged by many in the period eager to cling to definitions of religion as an ahistorical and autonomous category unburdened by its colonial origins. In *The Book of Mormon*, Smith seems to work his way to this insight in reverse, beginning with religious figures whose heresies are analogous to familiar intra-Protestant theological and ecclesiological divisions and ending with warring religio-racial groups for whom reconciliation is impossible. The apocalyptic conclusion to *The Book of Mormon* signifies its inability to consolidate these foundational categories, which, perhaps, explains why in its final pages—because its earlier sections cannot be revised—*The Book of Mormon* restarts the entire process, imagining in the book of Ether the diaspora of the Jaredites, a Hebraic clan who traveled to the Americas hundreds of years before the family of Lehi. That this pre-nephitic diaspora results in a similar situation is only further evidence of both the intractability of the problem posed by the confluence of race, religion, and
globality for theories of religious synthesis as well as a telling indictment of Smith’s historiographical method in the large plates to solve it.

iv. Meta-Religious Pluralism and the Antebellum Novel

The novel is distinct from both New World scripture, on the one hand, and the dictionary of religions, on the other, for three reasons. First, novels engage with religious diversity through the conflicts between characters, reenacting scenes of religious contact and exchange as encounters between embodied selves. This means that contact, rather than being merely a pedantic problem of reconciling propositional beliefs, is interwoven with and transformed by the identic complexity of human bodies, bringing race, gender, sexuality to bear on its effects. Second, because the novel, as a genre, is confined to an immanent narrative frame, it does not admit unambiguous transcendental intervention in the same way as a text like The Book of Mormon. Instead, the mutual fragilization produced by encounters between religious others is mediated by entities (sometimes other characters, sometimes narrators) who assume meta-religious positions in relation to the religious proliferation on the ground in order either to synthesize the differences represented or to theorize “religion” itself. And finally, because of their sensitivity to history and social life, antebellum novels integrate the changing institutional conditions of religious belief into their representation of difference, which most frequently takes the form of reflections upon religious establishment and disestablishment. The following chapters will unfold the meta-religious pluralism on display in antebellum novels, but before introducing those, I wish to consider one particularly rich example of these dynamics from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s second novel Dred.
Stowe published *Dred* in 1856, four years after her earth-shattering debut, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The novel begins as a sedate plantation romance in the mode of Caroline Lee Hentz but gradually reveals a radical slave revolt brewing underneath its placid exterior. As with all of Stowe’s early novels, *Dred* is as concerned with the religious politics of the antebellum US as it is with its racial politics. These two strains come together at the end of the novel’s first volume in the novel’s most elaborate set-piece, a revivalist camp meeting.

No event more forcefully conveys the distinctiveness of American Protestantism and its powers of religious consolidation than the camp meeting. After the momentous Cane Ridge revival in Kentucky in 1801, in which thousands of men and women spontaneously gathered for several days to pray, sing, and preach, the camp meeting quickly became the symbol of a public religion that promoted private conversion, of a religious emotionalism that triumphed over narrow dogmatism, and of an idealism that could galvanize a nation. These were elaborate public spectacles carefully calibrated to convert sinners and to strengthen communal bonds even as they sought to reproduce—often unsuccessfully—social and racial hierarchies through the meticulous arrangement of props and people, separating, for instance, black preachers and congregants from their white equivalents. Popularized by Presbyterian settlers on the frontier and subsequently adopted by Methodist circuit riders, camp meetings were “the most powerful engine in the process of American church growth, frontier acculturation, and benevolent reform” in the era (McLoughlin, 127). Even as techniques of revivalism were formalized over the course of the nineteenth century—regulating permissible speech, credentialing speakers, and moving from the spacious outdoors to the cramped indoors—they remained a potent
emblem of evangelical religion’s promise throughout the first half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{39}

As the daughter of one of the towering (and most prickly) crusaders for the Protestant moral order, Lyman Beecher, Stowe was no stranger to revivals, and the camp meeting in \textit{Dred}, which is composed of a series of short scenes juxtaposing the event’s alternating displays of ecstasy and hypocrisy, reflects her intimacy with its inner workings. In this way it avoids the cliches that had come to dominate representations of Protestant revivalism in the early republic. These tended to take one of two forms. Either they were sentimental peans to the spontaneous formation of apostolic communities beneath the canopies of nature’s temple, or they were skeptical exposes that cast aside weepy sentimentality to reveal the cynicism and exploitation lurking beneath the placid surface of the camp meeting.\textsuperscript{40} Neither of these modes, however, effectively captures the combustive intermixture of egalitarianism and racism, of spontaneous eruptions of enthusiasm and liturgical formality, or of theological unity and inspired heresy that are on display in \textit{Dred}.

As Stowe’s narratorial gaze sweeps across the camp meeting, we witness choreographed worship, ministerial slave trading, intradenominational fist-fighting interrupted by collective hymning, lay debates over the finer points of the doctrine of election, the soteriological reflections of slaves, and the attempts by a variety of erudite onlookers to make sense of the human variety unfolded before them. This last pattern is especially important, for Stowe recurs throughout the chapter to moments in which

\textsuperscript{39} For thorough histories of the frontier camp meeting, see Johnson and Bruce.
\textsuperscript{40} For examples of the former, see Flint, “The Camp Meeting” and Howells, “Louis Lebau’s Conversion.” For the latter, see Lowell. For an account of literary representations of camp meetings, see Shurter.
characters or the narrator assume meta-religious positions that variously critique, aestheticize, and muse over the religious display beneath them, a model of the novel’s ascent above the opposing forces of proliferation and consolidation over which Schaff and Taylor wrung their hands.

The three figures who make this move are the eponymous rebel slave Dred, the enlightened slave owner Edward Clayton, and Stowe’s narrator. The first of these occurs during an outdoor evening sermon when Dred, unbeknownst to both the congregants and the preacher, sneaks into the treetops to incriminate the entire Protestant enterprise with a tempest of condemnations stitched together from the King James Bible. The situational irony that lends the episode its energy—in which the reader knows this is theater while the audience experiencing Dred’s onslaught of recrimination is left unsure as to whether or not they are hearing the actual voice of God—locates Dred, momentarily, in a liminal position between a transcendent moral order and a corrupted immanent one. His quite literal meta-religious ascent reveals the moral possibilities and limitations inherent in such a rise. The latter are a consequence of the transitoriness of Dred’s authority, for as soon as he descends from the treetops he loses his ability to pierce the collective hearts of his audience. At the same time, it is significant that the voice delivering this uncompromising indictment from on high emanates from a black body, for it activates in the novel, fleetingly, a radical theology of racial embodiment.

Unlike Dred, Clayton is a religious magpie who claims to “present [himself] to almost all religious exercises” (254). His capacious appreciation of religious diversity excludes him, however, from claiming any religious affiliation. “It is my misfortune,” he laments, “that I cannot receive any common form of faith, though I respect and
Clayton’s peculiar disposition leads to his most effusive moment of meta-religious speculation after he sees his sister Anne Clayton shrink from the theatrical emotionalism of a group of slaves worshipping together. He is prompted to launch into an impassioned encomium to the aesthetics of religious experimentation:

[L]ook around you. See, in this wood, among these flowers, and festoons of vine, and arches of green, how many shocking, unsightly growths! . . . You would have well-trimmed trees and velvet turf. But I love briers, dead limbs, and all, for their very savage freedom. Every once in a while you see in a wood a jessamine, or a sweet-brier, or grape-vine, that throws itself into a gracefulness of growth which a landscape gardener would go down on his knees for, but cannot get. . . . Just so it is with men. Unite any assembly of common men in a great enthusiasm . . . and you will have brush, underwood, briers, and all grotesque growths; but, now and then, some thought or sentiment will be struck out with a freedom or power such as you cannot get in any other way. You cultivated people are much mistaken when you despise the enthusiasms of the masses. There is more truth than you think in the old ‘vox populi, vox Dei.’ (254)

The ornate simile around which Clayton structures his defense of unfettered democratic religious proliferation figures the camp meeting (a site of enthusiasm) not as a space of Protestant consensus but as an untended garden of religious creativity. For Stowe and many other writers of the period (typically, but not exclusively, women) botany was a rich metaphorical regime through which to figure aesthetic enterprises. In this instance, Clayton leverages a set of botanical tropes to interweave aesthetic and political-theological, recuperating a populist aesthetics of religious diversity rather than critiquing the moral failings of public Protestantism. His own position in relation to this wild blossoming is that of an appreciative observer, a meta-religious romantic.

Finally, there is the narrator, who meanders through the camp meeting celebrating its flashes of collective uplift and lighting its darker corners. Unlike Dred and Clayton, she is not embodied, but neither is she a disinterested observer. Her omniscience is more that of a stage manager than a deity, an entity who can “draw” a “scene,” but who is unable to interfere (269). By virtue of her disembodiment, she is able to assume a more
sedate tone in representing the event, capable of alternating between lyrical appreciations of individual experiences of interior transformation and subtle judgments on the meeting’s most egregious transgressions. She is the meta-religious persona as sympathetic voyeur.

Each of these narrative personae are simultaneously inside and outside the “sacred canopy” of evangelical Protestantism: watching it, judging it, perhaps even at times longing to be engulfed by it, but apart from it nevertheless.41 Their presences reveal the diversity and conflict seething beneath the surface of this most representative scene of Protestant consolidation, the moral hypocrisy it countenances and the economic exploitation it enables, as well as the dappled beauty it conceals beneath its projected image of uniformity.

The camp meeting in *Dred* thus epitomizes the capacity of novels to break through the frame of Protestant consensus. The novel, therefore, cannot be characterized merely as complicit in the hegemony of public Protestantism nor as heroically resistant to it. These trajectories are subordinate to the primary act of ascent. Earlier I suggested we take Michael Warner’s definition of liberal secularism as the “metareligious understanding of post-Calvinist Protestantism” as the basis for theorizing the novel’s tendency to develop its own meta-religious understandings of religion, which are derived not from Protestant exclusively but from the plural religious world Protestantism was colonizing. As my brief reading of *Dred* shows, these meta-religious leaps are themselves pluriform. In the chapters that follow I track the history of the antebellum novel alongside the growth of public Protestantism, beginning with disestablishment and the rise of the

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41 For the “sacred canopy,” see Berger, *Sacred Canopy*. 
historical novel in New England and concluding with an alternative religious
establishment outside the US that rejects the foundational commitments of public
religions in the modern world.

Chapters one and two explore novelistic responses to disestablishment in
Massachusetts and the historical origins of American secularity. The first, “Hobomok and
the Grounds of American Secularity,” reads Lydia Maria Child’s historical romance,
Hobomok (1824), as a sustained reflection upon religious establishment and religious
diversity in the early years of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Although written in the
midst of disestablishment and the stirrings of the Second Great Awakening, Child’s novel
returns to a scene of initial global encounter in the Americas. The critical conversation
surrounding this novel has tended to overemphasize the theme of miscegenation, ignoring
the fact that the bulk of the text is about religious fracture and the turbulent process of
establishing a dissenting state-church in New England. Hobomok, I argue, excavates a
pre-establishment moment of contact between indigenous religion and Protestantism to
represent American secularity in its infancy, to recover the motives for religious
establishment, and to imagine postestablishment alternatives to it. The novel’s concluding
vision of a religious toleration achieved through sentimental domesticity, although more
inclusive than the Puritan state-church, nevertheless excludes indigenous religiosity from
its Protestant borders. Yet, I show, Child obliquely registers how even a purportedly
autonomous domesticity remains caught in processes of mutual fragilization occasioned
by American secularity.

Chapter two, “Catharine Sedgwick’s Celibacy Plots,” examines ecumenism,
heterodoxy, and celibacy in Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s novels of the 1820s. An early
convert to Unitarianism, Sedgwick was politically committed to the principle of religious liberty and suspicious of exclusivist theological claims. Her first three novels are laboratories of religious inclusiveness, and fictional form becomes the aesthetic means through which she explores the problem of lived religious diversity in a voluntary society. Across these early novels, Sedgwick develops a character type, the celibate female religious outsider, whose theological radicalism and social marginality locate her at the periphery of national culture and test the limits of her novelistic ecumenism.

Celibacy, as a sexual and religious practice antithetical to the liberal Christian valorization of marriage, becomes important narratologically as well, for these characters are located in celibacy plots that challenge the universality and teleology of Sedgwick’s courtship plots. In Hope Leslie, this trajectory reaches an endpoint when the religious outsider, Magawisca, a Pequot and a representative in Sedgwick’s mind of pre-Christian natural religion, arises as an alternative heroine. The ecumenical imperative that animates Sedgwick’s fiction here threatens to undermine the special status of Christian revelation by valorizing Pequot religion, a dilemma exacerbated by Magawisca’s refusal to marry into the Christian community. After Hope Leslie, Sedgwick increasingly insulates her novels from explicit theological reflection upon religious diversity, and evades the narratological problems it poses. In her late fiction, I argue, Sedgwick endorses a religious-secular binary in order to separate literary practice from religious thought, a decision which allows her to contain the questions that energized and troubled her early work, but that nevertheless persist even in her final novel, Married or Single?, as a kind of unexpungable remainder of novelistic representation.
Chapters three and four consider authors and novels that address themselves to the constraints imposed on bodies and beliefs by Protestant discourses of religious freedom after 1840. “Melville, Mormons, and Religious Bodies” examines Herman Melville’s novels *Mardi* (1849) and *Moby-Dick* (1851) in relation to the Mormon crisis of the 1840s. The basis for this is Melville’s lament to to his friend and patron Evert A. Duyckinck that *Mardi* had been “driven forth like a wild, mystic Mormon into shelterless exile” (Correspondence, 154). Fleeting as this simile is, it shows Melville elegizing the visionary religious movements of the 1820s and ‘30s and hints at his anxieties about a religious landscape increasingly hostile to marginal religious communities. I begin by comparing two religiously plural communities in the fantastic archipelago of *Mardi*, the first of which is an archetype for religious establishment and the second for religious disestablishment, attending to how, despite their apparent differences, each of these religious communities devises methods to control the bodies of religious dissidents even when they guarantee the liberty of conscience. Public Protestantism at mid-century also managed the excesses of religious expression through an insistence on bodily conformity, a bit of political sleight-of-hand achieved through a theologically sanctioned division of the body and the soul. Both Melville and early Mormon theologians, I argue, collapsed the body into the spirit and, by extension, the allegorical into the literal, challenging the metaphysical bedrock of public Protestantism. I conclude this chapter by examining how *Moby-Dick* represents religious identity in explicitly bodily terms and the impact this has upon the novel’s multivalent representations of religious bodies.

Finally, chapter 4, “The Exodus of Martin Delany,” recovers the political theology of black emigrationism (what I call “Canaan politics”) in Martin Delany’s
Blake, or, the Huts of America (1859-1862), one of very few novels written by an African American published before the Civil War and the only one to come out of the emigrationist movement of the 1850s. The novel begins in Mississippi with its eponymous hero’s attempts to foment a transnational slave rebellion, which eventually fails, and concludes in Cuba with the establishment of a new pan-African religion. Blake’s initial insurrection in the antebellum South is, I contend, an act of resistance not just against slavery but against the entire political theological order of the post-1830 South, a sacred canopy with the master-slave dyad as its tentpole. The rebellion that ensues borrows Protestant strategies of legitimation and turns them against Protestantism itself. In the process, Blake emerges as a black Moses, which, due to the distinctly Protestant character of his rebellion, is beset almost immediately by a crisis of legitimacy. This Mosaic crisis spurs the abandonment of the rebellion and the literal exodus into Cuba, where Blake assumes a new role as the de facto leader of an inchoate black nation. In this new black Canaan, he creates a shared public religion during the process of nation-making, part of which entails the rejection of religious diversity in favor of a shared theological scaffolding. He reimagines the establishment of state religion not as a regressive return to Old World state-church formations but as a practical political and theological precondition for inoculating the new society from hypostasized racial hierarchies. My reading of Blake, which takes the dissertation to the cusp of the Civil War, also returns it to Child’s exploration of the historical origins of US state-church formations that I examine in the first chapter. As the novels preceding Delany’s have all tried to think about theological diversity within a society that presumes religious voluntarism, Blake stages a final reversal by denying religious diversity and religious
choice at the ground level in order to realize a post-establishment form of public faith shielded from racial oppression.
CHAPTER 1

HOBOMOK AND THE GROUNDS OF AMERICAN SECULARITY

Strange vicissitudes of circumstance, over which I had no control, have brought me into intimate relation with almost every form of Christian faith, and thereby given me the power of looking candidly at religious opinions from almost any point of view.

—Lydia Maria Child, Letters from New-York (1845)

At first glance, Lydia Maria Child’s slender debut novel, Hobomok, published in 1824 when its author was just twenty-two years old, might seem a slight contribution to the sweeping archive of American secularization. Set in the struggling Puritan community of Salem in the late 1620s, the novel reconstructs the crisis of religious authority that led to the establishment of a Reformed state-church in the young colony and the subsequent eruption of Anglican resistance to it. Mary Conant, Child’s reluctantly Puritan heroine, has fallen in love with the Anglican zealot Charles Brown, but ultimately marries Hobomok, her devoted Indian protector, after reports that Brown, having been exiled to England by the Puritan elders, has perished at sea. Brown miraculously reappears at the end of the novel, compelling Hobomok to renounce his wife and young son and disappear into the west. His self-sacrificial act restores equilibrium to the settlement and permits the newly constituted Brown family to guiltlessly claim the New World as their own. Through its inhabitation of the early American religious landscape and its reenactment of the process of religious establishment, the novel manages—despite its small frame—to produce a peculiar and unprecedented literary explication of the phenomenology of religious diversity in the New World.

Initial responses to Hobomok ranged from casual disregard to outright opprobrium. Although early reviewers found its style admirable they recoiled at its frank
decoration of the marriage between a Puritan woman and an Indian warrior. Not until Child won the support of George Ticknor, the preeminent literary gatekeeper of the period, was she able to secure favorable reviews of *Hobomok* that would launch her into the stratosphere of Boston’s cultural elite. But her bold representation of Anglo-Indian intermarriage, which so offended the sensibilities of the novel’s early readers, is precisely what has excited its contemporary ones and has remained the focal point of critical attention since the novel’s recovery in the 1980s.¹ Eve Raimon remarks, “Judging from much of the commentary about *Hobomok*, one would assume the theme of miscegenation dominates every page” (32). While race and miscegenation are essential concerns of the novel, they are ultimately subordinate to its more conspicuous engagement with religious diversity and theological fracture. Indeed, the novel’s plot turns on Puritan unrest, Anglican recalcitrance, and pressing questions of toleration in a world where traditional sites of religious authority had been systematically upset. The impact this has upon how the novel’s scene of miscegenation ought to be read is, as we shall see, to link the reification of racial identity to the privatization of religious identity.

Child’s abiding concern over religious diversity suffuses *Hobomok* and reflects the changing conditions of religious belief in her age. In the early nineteenth century, the

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¹ Karcher’s introduction to the reissue of Hobomok emphasized the strain of protest and political idealism that runs throughout the novel, the culmination of which is Mary Conant’s marriage to Hobomok. Since then, the most persistent thread of critical inquiry into the novel has been how dynamics between race and gender play out through the formal conventions of the historical romance. Early critics followed Karcher in praising (sometimes guardedly) Child’s protest of patriarchal authority and her explicit challenge to egregious forms of racism. Such readings have come under scrutiny from critics who interrogate the ways *Hobomok* either essentializes racial categories through gender (see Tawil), exposes the limits of sympathy as a strategy of reform (see Ryan), or uses race and gender to construct national narratives (see Sweet and Vaux). Most of these readings hinge on the transgressive scene of miscegenation as central to the meaning of the text. More recent work on the novel, however, has done much to expand the possible terms of engagement with the text. Notable among these works are Gustafson’s investigation into the failure of deliberation in Child’s novels, Hoeller’s consideration of the formal and thematic significance of sacrifice, and Sederholm’s treatment of theology and praxis in relation to the novel.
United States was experiencing a profound and unprecedented proliferation of forms of religious expression, which included the rise of denominationalism within Protestantism, evangelical revivalism at an unprecedented scale, the active creation of new religions and utopian fringe groups that legitimately threatened mainline Protestant morality, the sustained resistance to Protestant hegemony by Native American prophetic movements, and, less visible, the creative development of syncretic religious forms among African slaves. The religious landscape of Child’s formative years was, in the words of Nathan O. Hatch, one of “ferment, chaos, and originality unmatched in American history” (64).

Child herself was ambivalent about the new religious sects and denominations she saw springing up everywhere around her. In an early letter to her brother Convers, Child confessed that she was in “more danger of wrecking on the rocks of skepticism than of stranding on the shoals of fanaticism” (Letters, 2), yet her conviction in the significance of religious belief and the reality of its objects was a constant throughout her long career. Nearly everything she wrote evidences a continual struggle to reconcile the religious tumult around her with the transcendent and universal truths she was convinced existed beyond the pale of this world. In her Letters from New York, for instance, she writes,

And all the highest truths, as well as the genuine good, are universal. Doctrinal dogmas may be hammered out on theological anvils, and appropriated to spiritual corporations, called sects. But those high and holy truths, which make the soul at one with God and the neighbour, are by their very nature universal—open to all to receive. (72)

A decade later, this sentiment would balloon into her imposing three-volume history of world religions, The Progress of Religious Ideas, which attempted, in a manner not unlike that of Hannah Adams or the religious pluralists of our own moment, to represent every existing religion neutrally, under the assumption that each was a bearer of higher truth. Motivating this experiment was a desire for interreligious dialogue dating back to
her childhood, when she longed to “become acquainted with some good, intelligent
Bramin, or Mohammedan, that I might learn, in some degree, how their religions
appeared to them” (vii). Child’s first novel is a laboratory in which to imagine such
encounters within the context of the settlement of British North America. Her assessment
of the intellectual contribution of *The Progress of Religious Ideas* may also be applied to
*Hobomok*: “The facts [it] contains are very old; the novelty it claims is the point of view
from which those facts are seen and presented” (vii).

Although *Hobomok* looks back upon the formation of a state-church by English
settlers, Child wrote and published her first novel in the midst of Massachusetts’s long
march to disestablishment, when the Congregationalist order that had been at the center
of religious and political life in the commonwealth since the 1600s was making its last
stand at cultural relevancy. Part of the reason for the persistence of the Massachusetts
“establishment” was that it was never really a religious establishment in the traditional
sense, insofar as it was never centralized in the way, for example, the Church of England
was. Instead, Congregationalist churches in Massachusetts were autonomous entities,
whose advantage in the nascent religious marketplace of the eighteenth and early
nineteenth centuries derived from the fact that the Act of 1692 had guaranteed each town
a Congregationalist church supported through taxation. Each church was, therefore,
“securely bound . . . to a corresponding geographically bound area” (Cushing, 170). By
the end of the eighteenth century, the commonwealth had made some concessions to
dissenters within local parishes by doling out certificates allowing individuals’ taxes for
the support of public worship to be redistributed to the church polity of their choosing,
but this was, from the outset, an imperfect and oft-abused system. Although taxation was
what eventually powered the disestablishment movement in Massachusetts, the process, which occurred via a series of high-profile court cases between 1785 and 1833, charted the gradual loss of the state’s power to determine what constituted ministerial authority, to manage the terms on which debates about religious participation were waged (and how religionists were classified), and to validate certain forms of worship and ecclesiastical polity over others. On the whole, this series of court decisions was a lagging indicator of the naturalization of religious voluntarism and the proliferation of new religious groups, but it also marked the belated recognition by the state that it “needed to construct a new conceptual space in which competition could take place” (Neem, 384-85).

Disestablishment, thought of as an institutional manifestation and intensification of an underlying experience of American secularity, is thus a crucial context for *Hobomok*.

The specter of unfettered sectarianism was the source of much hand-wrangling among liberal and conservative Protestants alike, not to mention the slew of less easily classifiable religious innovators like the Mormons, Shakers, and Oneidaists, who blended creative theologies with new social and ecclesiastical forms to stave off endless fracture. William Ellery Channing, the reluctant leader of American Unitarianism, for instance, argued that heresy “does not consist in the adoption or profession of wrong opinions, but in a spirit of division, of dissension, of party, in a factious and turbulent temper” (15).

Such skepticism registers the phenomenological fragility produced by the proximity and multiplication of so many conflicting belief positions.

In *Hobomok*, Child struggles to produce a vision capable of accommodating the entire spectrum of religious diversity in the United States without sacrificing the particularity of historical faiths. She does so by rendering legible what we might call the
primal scene of American secularity, a pre-establishment moment in the 1620s where multiple cosmologies and theological systems were brought into direct contact with one another. This decision allows her to draw an implicit analogy between the disestablished religious world of her historical moment and the pre-establishment moment of global contact. The novel underscores this double vision (of pre-establishment and disestablishment) by oscillating between two narrators, one the author of a manuscript from the 1620s and the other his descendant, a contemporary American who, in the manner of the historical romances of Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper, is adapting, paraphrasing, and contextualizing the content of the manuscript. The act of establishment functions in *Hobomok* (as it did historically) to shore up theological difference among Puritan dissenters and to ensure religious homogeneity through calculated gestures of compromise and exclusion. Although Anglicanism ultimately emerges as the primary object of *Puritan* antagonism in the novel, Child recognizes another (racialized) site of theological and cosmological cross-pressure: Native American religion.

Indian religion (as I will hereafter call it, in an effort to remain faithful to the monolithic terms through which Child considered the diverse array of indigenous religious forms, problematic though that may be) in the novel appears neither as the foreign and inassimilable beliefs of the other nor as liberal Christianity posing beneath the thin mask of natural religion. Instead, native beliefs and ritual practices—at an early moment of European contact—become the site for Child’s subtle reanimation of the tense relationship between what Jonathan Z. Smith calls the “plural *religions*” and “the singular, generic *religion*” (71), a relationship that emerged in seventeenth- and
eighteenth-century European discourse as a result of the “explosion of data” (75) gathered through colonial and missionary apparatus.² Importantly, Child strives to present and preserve indigenous practices and belief as a religion, the consequence of which is to disembed it from its racial context and make it available as something an Anglo-European settler could, theoretically, convert to, but which also remains distinct from Christianity. It retains a hard kernel of particularity.

The novel’s structure and its naturalization of native beliefs and practices as legitimate and available alternatives to Protestant Christianity turns Hobomok itself into a kind of disestablished text, one that formally exemplifies and imaginatively attempts to resolve the problems posed by American secularity. The text registers fragilization both formally and phenomenologically, which has the effect of detranscendentalizing the novel’s figuration of divine truth and ultimately channeling the eclipsed light of transcendence through its multifarious expressions in individuals. One of the central anxieties of Hobomok is how to posit a political form for the management of religious diversity that addresses the problems posed by a multiplicity of irreducible beliefs, a deity inaccessible except through individual expression, and the relationship between nascent racial categories and an evolving discourse of religion without either regressing into antiquated church-state arrangements (and the exclusionary tactics they entail) or enabling the endless proliferation of religious possibilities and the subsequent conflicts such a situation would inevitably inflame. The novel’s ending, I will argue, tries to posit a middle way by advancing immanent domesticity as a postestablishment alternative to

² Debates about “natural religion,” which often made reference to indigenous practices in the New World, flourished in the eighteenth-century and were permanently enshrined in the establishment clause in the First Amendment of the US Constitution. Butler notes that this constituted a substantive “redefinition of the term ‘religion’” (Awash, 258).
patriarchal religious establishment. Its concluding vision, which actively rewrites the historical record, stands as Child’s imaginative answer to the violence of religious establishment and the incomprehensible free-for-all of disestablishment. It is an order that exists temporally within the established church but conceptually beside it. *Hobomok* allows us to recover a submerged aspect of the socio-religious background motivating the turn towards domestic sentimentality during this period and to see it as one possible response among many to the changing conditions of religious belief and the experience of radical religious diversity. This chapter aims both to explicate Child’s novel as a particularly self-reflective and instructive literary engagement with American secularity and also to gesture towards a history of sentimentalism in the US that foregrounds the roles race and religious diversity played in its formation.3

### i. Setting, Settling, and an American Establishment

The historical sources Child consulted as she wrote *Hobomok* typically dedicated no more than a few pages to relating the early history of Salem, but all register the explicitly ecclesiastical significance of this community in contrast to the encroaching worldliness of New Plymouth and its various satellite colonies. Cotton Mather makes the most of this distinction in *Magnalia Christi Americana*, where he identifies Salem as the first settlement in New England founded solely for the purposes of the “propagation of

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3 The only other dominant mode of representing religious diversity during the period would have been the encyclopedia or dictionary. Between the early seventeenth century and the late nineteenth century, dozens of encyclopedias of religions and denominations were published. But while these works put diverse religious groups into proximity with each other under the category “religions,” they also allowed each unit to exist independently, as a separate entry or chapter, thereby neglecting the processes of exchange between them and the effects of mutual cross-pressures. The novel, on the other hand, because it must embody religious belief and practice in characters through the mechanism of plot, requires representations of contact, confrontation, and dialogue. The representational demands of the novel direct American writers towards encounters with religious diversity.
religion” (1:66). Others had, according to Mather, “aimed no higher than the advancement of some worldly interests” (1:65-66) and failed as a result. But Salem represented an extension and fulfillment of the original errand, both in the motives for its settlement and the subsequent events that occurred there.

The most crucial moment in Salem’s early history is the arrival of John Skelton and Francis Higginson, the latter of whom was a well-known nonconformist preacher from England. The two men proved instrumental in the establishment of a dissenting church in British North America when they formed and ratified a covenant of grace on August 6, 1629. Like Mather, the other early historians of New England Puritanism all highlighted this event as a signal and original ecclesiastical achievement.° Mather’s account, however, remains the most forceful and succinct:

> They set apart the sixth day of August . . . for the settling of a Church State among them, and for their making a Confession of their Faith, and entering into an holy Covenant, whereby that Church State was formed. (1:70, emphasis in original)

We shall see further on how Child redistributes the narrative emphasis of these events for her own ends, but it suffices to say at this point that Salem’s significance in the early years of settlement is vested in the ratification of Higginson’s covenant and the establishment of a dissenting (non-Anglican) church-state in the New World. *Hobomok* turns on this central religio-historical axis by locating its narrative at this inchoate historical juncture. Before considering how Child represents Higginson’s arrival and the act of establishment in chapter 9, it is necessary first to examine how Child represents the

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° See Morton, 99; Hutchinson, 11-12; and Hubbard, 118. Their assessment has also been reiterated in contemporary treatments of the period: “The formation of the Salem church . . . was a pivotal event that set the course for the religious development of the Massachusetts Bay Colony” (Bremer, 37).
fractious Puritan community in Salem and how she imagines the motives for establishment.

The early history of the British colonies in the New World showed how difficult transplanting religious establishments could be. In Child’s rendering of the religious landscape of early-seventeenth-century New England, dissenting Puritans, devout Anglicans, polytheistic Indians, Familists, and antinomians all coexist in a community of reluctant toleration, theological dispute, and cultural intermingling. In fact, despite the looming threat of Indian raids on the small settlement, no real suspense emerges from this landscape. By actively slackening narrative tension and deflating the sensationalism typical of captivity narratives and novels about Indians, Child shifts the narrative focus to the interaction between multiple religious visions in contact and at odds with one another in the young settlement. This is evident, for instance, when Hobomok interrupts the Puritan elders to warn of an impending raid by his rival Corbitant. Within three short paragraphs at the end of the chapter, the elders are warned, a party is gathered, and the invading natives are captured. Violence hovers on the margins of the narrative but never quite enters the horizon of possibility. The bulk of this same chapter is devoted to what emerges as the novel’s more pressing drama: the hairline theological fractures threatening the solidarity of the fledgling community.

In chapter 5, the Puritan patriarchs (Governor Endicott, Roger Conant, Mr. Oldham, and Thomas Graves) gather together to pit their respective theological opinions against one other. Hobomok enters the scene and prompts the dialogue by asking whether

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5 See Butler, esp. chapter 2. Although Butler emphasizes the difficulties state church establishments faced in their transplantation to the New World, this changed between 1680 and 1760 and “the state church tradition was firmly if not perfectly replanted” (128).
the “Englishman’s God” is not “bigger than the Pequods and the Mohegans” (Child, *Hobomok*, 37). When he departs, Roger Conant remarks, “It is a shame on us that an Indian must teach us who is ‘our shield and our buckler’” (37). As the chapter progresses, the theological positions of each of the characters come into focus: John Oldham defends a theology of leniency, leisure, and recreation; Roger Conant insists on an ethic of self-denial and repeats a refrain against toleration, which for him is simply a cover for license; Governor Endicott, the resident Augustinian, maintains a position firmly resistant to theological speculation and in favor of ecclesiastical authority; and Thomas Graves, whose surname affirms the essential dolor of his character and whose physiognomy leaves much to be desired, defends the soon-to-be heretical positions of inner light (theological compensation for the dullness of his features) and “the inward outpouring of prayer” (39). Endicott and Conant immediately recognize Graves’s latent antinomianism. By designating Graves—one of the novel’s most bathetic minor characters—the representative for this heresy, Child distances her novel’s own theological commitments from explicitly antinomian ones, which is surprising given Child’s own theological liberalism. One might reasonably have expected her first novel to include a radical lay preacher in the mold of Anne Hutchinson, but instead there is only Graves, whose views Endicott swiftly repudiates. The men’s dispute is abruptly terminated when Hobomok re-enters the scene and warns of the Indian raid.

One of the questions this debate and others like it raise is how private theological convictions are arrived at. On the whole, the divisions between the Puritan elders seem to be the result of temperamental differences rather than intellectual ones. The scenes of Puritan debate, therefore, demonstrate the nascent fracture within the Puritan community
while also suggesting that for Child, theological commitment has more to do with circumstance, experience, and feeling than it does with reflection, logic, and discipline, or, in other words, that “contradictory sentiments owed their origins to native difference of character” (69). Nevertheless, Child also qualifies this by refusing to dismiss theological division as entirely a product of experience. After Higginson’s sermon several chapters later, the narrator further considers intra-Puritan debates: “Various were the discussions held that day. . . . [Some] entered into theological controversies, in which a penetrating eye might discover the embryo forms of Familism, Gortonism, and divers other long forgotten sects, which in their day and generation had a reason for the faith that was in them” (68). By claiming that these sects “had a reason for the faith that was in them,” Child admits that differences in belief and religious affiliation might not be totally reducible to freaks of temperament but instead serve as reasonable responses to certain social conditions.

This moment of sympathy for the internal fracture within the Puritan community has consequences for how these incipient differences might be resolved. Chapter 5, as we have seen, insists on theological diversity among English Protestants in North America but, as Sandra Gustafson demonstrates, the conflict among the Puritan patriarchs never rises to the level of deliberation capable of resolution; the positions are too deeply held to be overcome with reasonable debate. Francis Higginson, therefore, enters the scene in order to quell disputatiousness and to reconcile hardened theological (and temperamental) divisions by providing the community with a political and theological center as well as a common enemy.
Although Child’s sources report that Francis Higginson delivered a sermon on August 6, 1629, its contents have not survived. The document that was preserved and that proved most important for both Higginson’s contemporaries and later historians alike was the covenant he was instrumental in framing, for it marked the establishment of a unique Reformed Protestant church-state in the New World. Although renewed with substantial modifications several years later, its initial formulation proved an enduring document of early American consensus. Its significance lies in the fact that the covenantal model it employed would come to define the Massachusetts church-state tradition for over a century. Child, however, does not mention the covenant in *Hobomok* even once, opting instead to invent a short excerpt of Francis Higginson’s inaugural sermon as Salem’s first minister. It is the rhetorical centerpiece of the novel and represents Child’s re-imagining of the act of establishment.

Higginson begins the sermon with his text, Psalm 105:43, “He brought forth his people with joy, and his chosen with gladness” (64). The psalm itself is a poetic retelling of the Israelites’ captivity in Egypt, their subsequent release into the wilderness, and the journey to Canaan. Higginson uses this story as a type for the Puritan journey to the New World. Holding fast to jeremiadic tradition, he argues that the peculiar danger facing God’s chosen people, who have been “brought forth . . . with joy,” is that they will be lulled into complacency: “Yea, though God hath brought us out from among the horsemen and chariots of Pharaoh . . . yet may not the name of Jehovah be forgotten in

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6 Two years after *Hobomok* was published, Charles Wentworth Upham (1826, 20) would declare that the original 1629 covenant was “a declaration of Christian independence, made at the institution of the first American Congregational church. . . . Were not the principles of the Reformation exhibited and established in that covenant which was drawn up and adopted on this same 6th of August?”
the desert, as well as in Egypt?” (64). This biblical reminder of how an errand can err leads Higginson to the sermon’s ecumenical imperative.

The most important moment of the sermon comes when Higginson tries to unite the fledgling Puritan community through an act of theological integration. He does this by including within his address each of the positions of the Puritan elders expressed in chapter 5, thus gathering pluriform Puritan dissent into ecumenical unity. After publicly criticizing the over-zealous Anglicans, he first restates Roger Conant’s position: “Liberty of conscience is the gilded bait whereby Satan has caught many souls. The threshold of hell is paved with toleration” (65). Next, he echoes Endicott’s argument that the inner light of scripture should be left to those qualified to comprehend it when he exhorts his audience to “leave hidden matters with God, and difficult texts of scripture with the elders of the church. I cannot, if I would, tell you the value of a godly, exemplary ministry among you” (65). Even antinomianism and Quakerism momentarily surface in the performance when Higginson urges his audience to “talk little about religion, and feel much of its power. Follow the light which is given you. ‘Commune with your own heart, and be still’” (65). The sermon’s language and movement are carefully calculated to balance the various disputes which threaten to tear the community apart even as its own argument nearly collapses into theological illegibility. The sermon, which here substitutes for the covenant as the foundational document of establishment, becomes a signal moment of how a state-church cultivates consensus and restrains internal fracture while at the same time demarcating religious others against which this new consensus can understand itself. In this case, it is Anglicanism.
Prior to the sermon, the devout Anglicans in the community had been tolerated, but Higginson uses the pulpit as a stage for public condemnation, accusing them of being “violent and impatient in matters of religion,—given to vain forms, and traditions of men; adhering with a blind, pertinacious zeal to the customs of their progenitors” (65). In this way the sermon effectively shores up theological fracture within the Puritan community through an act of ecumenical synthesis and religious othering. Child’s implicit critique of this performance, despite Higginson’s occasional glimpses of theological liberalism, is the inability of its ecumenism to account for the religious diversity of the pre-establishment scene. This critique enables her to position Hobomok against the sermon it (re)produces by implicitly contrasting the rhetorical act of religious establishment to the disestablished novel, which attempts to account for the full spectrum of beliefs and practices scattered across the religious landscape.7

ii. Indian Religion and the Disestablished Novel

The temporal location of Hobomok’s narration is often hard to locate, because it oscillates between the voice of the manuscript, the contemporary male descendant-narrator, and Child herself, thus extending its vision well beyond the narrow confines of the theological claims of Higginson’s sermon. The novel’s capaciousness allows it, therefore, to contain both the sermon and its setting. This representational breadth enables Child to look beyond the circumscribed boundaries of ecumenical unity achieved in the interests of political expediency. But the novel resists the sermon in another, subtler way

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7 Dawn Coleman (2013) has argued persuasively for the American novel’s anxious and intense engagement with the sermon, the dominant rhetorical form of the period. Although she confines her analysis confines to the years 1850-52, when concerns over the moral legitimacy of the American novel gave way to those of aesthetic autonomy, she acknowledges that this relationship has roots in earlier decades.
as well by adopting the sermon’s formal mechanisms and using them to proffer an alternative rhetorical model for containing the diversity of the religious landscape.

Higginson’s sermon, we recall, used the story of the Israelites’ flight from Egypt—as recounted in Psalms 105—to typify the Puritan journey from the Old World to the New. Throughout *Hobomok*, Child develops a biblical counter-text of her own in how she uses the story of Jacob and Rachel from Genesis 25:32 to combat the problematic assumptions embedded in Higginson’s narrow typology.

Child explicitly refers to the story five times throughout the novel, in each case slightly modifying its terms. In the Genesis version of the tale, Jacob, the son of Isaac, who has fled to his uncle Laban’s house fearing retribution from his brother Esau for stealing his birthright, falls in love with Laban’s daughter Rachel after chancing upon her at a well, but is forced by Laban to marry her sister Leah first. After performing fourteen years of labor for Laban, Jacob is finally permitted to marry Rachel. Given that *Hobomok* also contains the story of two marriages, it would be reasonable to expect the novel to allude to this tale solely in that context. Instead, Child’s references to the biblical text focus primarily on Mary's more conventional Puritan friend, Sally Oldham. When Thomas Graves, shortly after his arrival, begins courting Sally, he fruitlessly attempts to woo her by twice likening himself to Jacob and Sally to Rachel. Several chapters later, Mr. Collier compares another of Sally Oldham’s suitors to a Jacob laboring for a Rachel. The allusions that characters make to Jacob’s marriage plot thus seem to confine the novel’s use of the text to an intra-Puritan romantic subplot, a way of providing some comic relief from the sensationalism of the main plot.
But the scope of this allusive pattern is significantly extended when at the beginning of chapter 4 the narrator uses an event late in the story of Jacob’s indentured servitude to Laban to analogize the Puritan experience in the New World: “Jacob's heart could not have swelled with more exultation, when he journeyed from Padan-aram with his two bands, than was evinced by our forefathers, when they exhibited their newly arrived riches to the wondering natives” (29). Here the Puritans’ departure from England is linked not to the Israelite exodus from Egypt but to Jacob’s removal from his uncle Laban’s house in Padan-Aram with his wives (Rachel and Leah), children, and livestock. Although the narrator intends to describe the thrill the Puritans experienced upon showing the indigenous Americans their “riches,” the more substantial effect of the analogy is to refigure the Puritan errand from England to the New World in domestic, rather than despotic, terms, highlighting the familial bonds still binding the new community to England, with its King a figure more avuncular than autocratic. This is a point Child repeatedly underscores through Mary’s attachment to the memory of her grandfather’s estate. The oppression experienced in England, rather than being raised to extreme heights through a comparison to the Israelite enslavement under Pharaoh, is instead likened to the more mild injustices Jacob suffered while living under Laban’s roof.

This analogy also revises the Puritan account of the relation between settlers and indigenes in New England. The psalm that Higginson uses in his sermon renders the New World a gift given to the settlers by God: “He gave them [the Israelites] also the lands of the nations, / That they might take possession of the fruit of the peoples’ labor” (Ps. 105:44). But Child’s biblical counter-text resists this reading of the New World as God’s
gift to his chosen people. During his journey from Padan-Aram to Shechem Jacob encounters his brother Esau, to whom he offers his riches and with whom he reconciles. By following the logic of Child’s allusion to the biblical Jacob it becomes clear that in her rendering of cultural contact in the New World, the native inhabitants, instead of being either an obstacle or an absence, are a positive presence.

This subtle reproof to Puritan figurations of the errand in the New World sets the novel’s vision against the act of religious establishment initiated by Higginson’s sermon. However, when Child undertakes to represent and reconcile the religious diversity of the pre-establishment New World scene, she confronts the dissonance between her desire to advance a religious universalism and her historical conviction that the religious groups populating this landscape “had a reason for the faith that was in them” (68). The broad religious spectrum under observation, which includes indigenous religious forms, British occultism, multiple Protestant sects, and Anglicanism, realizes the conditions of American secularity and fosters a representational and narratological dilemma.

As many have noted, the religious views advanced in the novel appear to follow the work of an earlier generation of liberal Christians who sought to universalize religion either through the articulation of a religion of reason or by reducing it to a common human sentiment. Child seems mostly to endorse this view and thus reduces certain forms of sectarian division to affective excess. However, although she is mostly unsympathetic to Protestant divisiveness, Child doggedly insists upon the difference of Indian religion, refusing to assimilate it into the universalizing worldview shared by deists and other liberal Christians. What is most significant about Child’s representation of this primal scene of American religious diversity is that while she draws belief positions into
increasing proximity with one another, emphasizing points of contact and exchange, she also refuses to discount the particularities of religious difference. Hobomok is not, as Nancy Sweet has claimed, "such an exemplar of Christian virtue that . . . he no longer plausibly resembles a Native American" (120). Child’s insistence on difference is less rigid in her representations of Christians—as the ending of the novel shows, ecumenism seems both possible and desirable—than it is when she considers the whole spectrum of religious belief. Native religion becomes the crucial category that Child, to her credit, refuses to reduce simply to an expression of an ahistorical natural religion, to no religion at all, or to a religion ontologically inferior to revealed religion.

By representing Indian religion positively and declining to erase its particularities through universalizing gestures, the world of Child’s novel becomes one of contact, exchange, and mutual fragilization. Beliefs, in keeping with my earlier definition of American secularity, retain their particularity, but become familiarized and even domesticated as a result of proximity. Such nearness makes them optional alternatives at the same time that they exert theological pressure upon each other. Hobomok’s interruption of the theological debate in chapter 5, for instance, is a brief but significant moment wherein Child plays a native polytheism against Puritan monotheism. The effect of this moment ultimately strengthens Roger Conant’s theological convictions but nevertheless demonstrates the interplay between these two frames. Besides this interruption, Child fragilizes beliefs and practices through formal strategies by constructing careful parallels between episodes and even individual sentences. In this way she draws analogies between groups that have the effect of collapsing the conceptual distance between them.
Although native religion is thinly represented in the novel, it is not absent from it. This is a departure from conventional views of the novel, like that of Joshua David Bellin, who has taken *Hobomok* to task for what he regards as its inadequate representation of Indian belief and practice, accusing Child of failing “to see Indians in the tapestry of spiritual diversity” (88). But Bellin misrepresents Child’s treatment of Indians, for there is ample evidence in *Hobomok* of her wrestling (not always successfully) with the complex legacy of the systematic exclusion, massacre, and dispossession of Indians by European settlers, as well as the historical practice of reading indigenous religion through a narrow, Christianizing lens. In her representation and diagnoses of the pre-establishment scene of American secularity, Child utilizes formal techniques to draw Indian religion into conversation with Anglicanism, Puritan orthodoxy, and dissenting Protestant heterodoxy, in a way that emphasizes both its comprehensibility and, consequently, its optionality. Indian religion is a distinct and felt presence in the religious landscape, consisting of a pliable polytheism, an intricate ritualism, and a primary sense of wonder and awe produced through the observation of nature.

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8 While Roger Williams’s widely read *A Key into the Language of America* (1643) was among the earliest works to provide a substantively engage Indian religion, the most popular contemporary example would have been Hannah Adams’s *A Dictionary of All Religions* (1817), which includes a lengthy entry on the topic. One possible source that has not been proposed in discussions of the novel is Samuel Farmar Jarvis’s lecture, *Discourse on the Religion of the Indian Tribes of North America* (1820). In the review of *Yamoyden* for the *North American Review* that inspired Child to write *Hobomok*, John Gorham Palfrey mentions that Dr. Jarvis was an early advocate of the poem. A long summation of Jarvis’s lecture had appeared in the *North American Review* just a year prior to Palfrey’s review. Jarvis’s discourse, despite its adherence to biblical history, remains admirably sympathetic to Indian religion. He concludes by declaring, “The Indians are idolators; but their idolatry is of the mildest character, and has departed less than among any other people from the form of primeval truth” (63). Although Child does not appear to have read Jarvis’s *Discourse*, she may have been familiar with his work through the *North American Review*. 

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In chapter 1, Mary’s heterodox Protestantism and Hobomok’s native ritualism are brought into contact when both characters perform elaborate ceremonies in the moonlit forest. The narrator—that is, the embodied first-person narrator of the fictional manuscript contained within the contemporary narrator’s tale—chances upon Mary as she steals off in the night. Believing herself alone, she opens “a vein in her little arm” with a pocket knife and uses her blood to write “something on a white piece of cloth” (13). From there she draws a circle in the ground, steps into the enchanted ring, and traces its circumference three times while incanting couplets about her marital future, “Whoever’s to claim a husband’s power, / Come to me in the midnight hour” (13). As her ceremony concludes, Hobomok enters the area and discovers Mary. He performs a brief ritual with the Spirit Rocks there, almost as a matter of course, which includes tossing a stick onto the pile of rocks and uttering a short prayer. Almost immediately thereafter, Mary’s father and her other future husband, Charles Brown, track her down and lead her home.

Hobomok’s ritual act, because it occurs in the vicinity of Mary’s, lends legitimacy to the girl’s otherwise strange, earnest, courtship rite. Although there is no clear source for Mary’s ritual, Child likely means for her reader to infer its origins in English occult practice, a claim confirmed by the narrator’s condescending description of Mary’s “childish witchery” (12). In bringing these seemingly disparate two acts together in the same narrative moment, Child underscores an implicit relationship between native religious practice and English metaphysical religion, one that Catherine Albanese has

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9 Where other Indian tales deploy violence as a crucial element for providing suspense and incident, Child evacuates such threats from her novel. She also refuses to countenance Indian sacrifice. The “Spirit Rocks” upon which Hobomok performs his ritual in chapter 2 refer to “Sacrifice Rock” outside Plymouth. By using an alternative name for the rocks, Child distances Indian ritualism from human sacrifice. Yamoyden, like Hope Leslie (1826) and numerous other texts, are unable to represent Indian religion without direct reference to human or animal sacrifice.
argued is central to thinking about cultural exchange in the New World by alerting us to “the parallel tracks on which Indian and black spiritual practice and English ‘superstition’ were traveling” (111). Mary’s solitary courtship dance and her eventual marriage to Hobomok are both protests of patriarchal authority, as some have claimed, but neither is reducible to that motive. Indian religion and folk occult practices legitimate each other in the novel through their physical (and narratological) proximity as well as their structural likeness. (In this case, both involve sticks and incantations.) The novel’s marriage plot and its nationalist project overshadow these more fleeting moments of contact and formal instances of religious proximity, but it is significant that, at the outset of *Hobomok*, Child hints at the availability of Indian practices to Anglo-Europeans and their nearness to forms of English heterodoxy, even as the novel’s narrator confesses their political limitations.

Two chapters after the scene in the woods, Child considers the theological pressure that Indian religion exerts upon other beliefs. After Hobomok leaves a tense political gathering with Sagamore John to meditate alone in the wilderness, the narrator sketches the relationship between the “natural religion” of the Indians, Western philosophy, and the revealed religion of the New Testament:

> Philosophy had never held up her shield against the sun, and then placed her dim taper in his hand while she pointed to the “mundane soul,” in which all human beings lost their identity; nor had [Hobomok] ever read of that city [described in Revelation] “whose streets were of gold, and her gates of pearl, in the light of which walked the nations of them which were saved”; but there was within him a voice loud and distinct, which spoke to him of another world, where he should think, feel, love, even as he did now. (34)

Child’s respective characterizations of these alternative visions of the afterlife are not favorable, and her careful balancing of the first two clauses highlights their respective inadequacies. Philosophy’s immanent vision, which intentionally evades the luminosity
of transcendence, insists that death is simply a return to a state of undifferentiation.\textsuperscript{10} Opposite this is the splendor of John’s New Jerusalem in the second clause, the inadequacy of which derives from its partiality and exclusivity. Hobomok’s approach to question of the soul’s immortality walks a middle path, where immortality entails neither the annihilation of identity nor the existence of an eternal and transcendent abode whose gates are open only to a fortunate few. Instead, it is the perpetual endurance of consciousness in a world structurally analogous but nevertheless preferable to this one.

The relevancy of Hobomok’s meditations on the fate of his immortal soul become immediately clear when an arrow shot by Corbitant interrupts his contemplation and initiates a standoff between the two men. When Hobomok eventually prevails, he raises his tomahawk over the head of his enemy to kill him, at which point the narrator turns one more theological screw when he notes, “‘Love your enemy,’ was a maxim Hobomok had never learned” (34). Hobomok ultimately spares Corbitant only because he hears the sound of approaching voices and not because he holds mercy dear. Thus, the narrator’s interpolation of Jesus’s counter-intuitive imperative at this moment signals Child’s sense of a pivotal shortcoming in native religion as she’s representing it, but this acknowledgement of a perceived limitation does not suddenly constitute an unconditional endorsement of revealed religion. What I think we are seeing in this moment is Child’s narrator allowing Christianity—just after its visions of the afterlife have been called to account—to exert its own cross-pressure back onto Indian religion, thereby reversing the

\textsuperscript{10} Child’s invocation of the “mundane soul” anticipates a passage from \textit{Letters from New-York} where she writes, “There is something impressive, even to painfulness, in this dense crowding of human existence, this mercantile familiarity with death. It has sometimes forced upon me . . . an appalling night-mare sensation of vanishing identity; . . . as if the uncomfortable old theory were true, and we were but portions of a Great Mundane Soul, to which we ultimately return, to be swallowed up in its infinity” (44).
current of the previous paragraph. The novel, in presenting a scene of silent contemplation that bleeds into an instant of ethical decision-making, thus renders, in the most immediate terms possible, an interplay between the moral and theological systems brought into contact through Anglo-European settlement of the Americas.

Moments like these indicate the extent to which Child uses the representational breadth of the historical novel to engage the religious diversity of New England in the 1620s, to produce moments of contact both at the level of style and of plot, and tentatively to unfold a universalizing vision capable of encompassing this difference without succumbing to the exclusionary pitfalls of religious establishment. One consequence of this fragilizing process is that Hobomok’s practices and beliefs are brought near enough to those of the Puritans that they become optional rather than essential, disconnected (briefly) from Hobomok’s racial identity. Child thus does more than simply represent a pluralistic world in which various peoples co-exist; she imagines one in which belief positions are engaged in active processes of exchange and pressure that have an effect upon how religion is conceived and experienced.11 This distinction helps us to understand how Child narrativizes the conditions of American secularity as they were emerging in her own historical moment differently than both her contemporaries and her source materials. As a character, Hobomok remains importantly different from the English settlers, but he is also comprehensible to them in a way that allows his culture to become available as a social and theological option. Mary’s decision to wed Hobomok is a concrete manifestation of this availability.12

11 For a persuasive description of the difference between these two kinds of pluralism see Taylor, 303-4.
12 Mills downplays the significance of the marriage except as it represents “the final tragedy in a series of cruel events” (14). He is right that this is how many of Child’s contemporaries would have read the marriage, but neglects Child’s earlier considerations of Indian religiosity.
Historically, there is little evidence that English colonists (unlike their more promiscuous French counterparts in the north) willingly left the cold comforts of their colonial homes to marry within Indian tribes. James Axtell has carefully documented and described the phenomenon of the “white Indian,” white settlers who had been (for the most part) captured as children and who, when given the opportunity to return home, “refused repatriation once they were absorbed by Indian society” (304). Faith Leslie, from Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Hope Leslie*, is a paradigmatic example of this phenomenon. But Mary Conant differs from such “white Indians” in that her resolution to leave Puritan society and take Hobomok as a husband is a willed choice rather than a consequence of kidnap. This is not to say her decision is unaffected by circumstance, made as it is in the midst of grief, despair, and the callous obstinacy of her father. These facts, however, merely provide Child an alibi for the blasphemous implication that Indian life might be a legitimate, or even preferable, alternative to Puritan life. The crucial point thus remains that Hobomok does not capture Mary; Mary chooses to be with Hobomok. Hobomok himself even worries over this possibility during their escape and tries to verify her sanity with a series of queries. Her “brief answers,” the narrator reports, were “so prompt and rational that he could not admit their doubt” (123). In fact, over the course of the chapter the narrator, Hobomok, and Mary herself all independently confirm that she is still sensible of her decision and its consequences.

When Mary agrees to marry her Wampanoag suitor, she consciously and deliberately participates in the meticulous nuptial rite of his tribe and, in doing so, makes indigenous forms of worship and belief available as religion, as something theoretically capable of conversion to and not simply conversion from. It creates a bi-directional flow
of cross-pressures such that “Indian religion,” as a presence within the representational spectrum of the novel, acts as a belief system with the capacity both to react to and affect Puritan Christianity by virtue of its proximity and contact. Exchange and mutual fragilization are, therefore, the peculiar effects of a primary experience of religious diversity in a world lacking the ecclesiastical apparatuses of Europe. By rejecting the narrow representational bounds delimited by the state-church, *Hobomok* narrates the production of the peculiar conditions and consequences of American secularity from within an official history of religious establishment. These facts, however, strain the novel’s ideal of belief as well as its conception and figuration of a transcendental reality, which is the basis for a *religion* capable of encompassing *religions*.

**iii. The Syncretic Self**

As Child grapples with the pre-establishment world of the Salem settlement and the insistent difference of Indian religion, she also strives within the novel to imagine her own post-establishment alternative to the Puritan church-state, one capable of accommodating all those groups with “a reason for the faith that [is] in them” (68). This struggle causes the novel to undergo its own experience of upward fragilization. Mary Conant, who acts as the novel’s model for capacious belief, embodies this universalizing process even as she reflects upon it.

Carl Sederholm provides the most sustained analysis of Mary’s religiosity to date, reading her private ritual acts as indicative of her capacity to “divide the signifiers of spiritual practice from the signifieds of theological dogma” (561). The distinction between practice and doctrine in the novel is an important one, but it is equally important
to recognize that the novel does not reject propositional belief altogether. While Child rejects the dogmatic statements of professional theology, her novel becomes a medium for exploring the tenuous theological propositions generated by experience. For Mary, it should be said, does have beliefs, and they are neither without content nor reducible to praxis.

Over the course of the tale, Mary partakes of the practices or beliefs of every religious group represented in the novel. Her religious identity is fluid and absorptive in a way unlike any other character, aligning her with those who Albanese designates “metaphysical religionists,” but they do not result in a unified, synthetic theology or practice (Republic, 6). Her ritual act in the forest, for instance, doesn’t comport theologically with her Anglican sympathies. Neither does she offer any clear statement of belief that might reconcile these heterogeneous beliefs and acts. Mary’s mother, conversely, makes multiple theological claims that resonate with an identifiably liberal religious theology, but Mary herself neither reiterates nor fully endorses them. Taken as a whole, Mary’s statements of beliefs and her religious practices appear syncretic rather than synthetic, such that she becomes a vessel for a motley collection of available practices and beliefs which do not merge into a coherent whole but exist beside one another pluralistically and, as we shall see, prismatically.

Shortly after Mary leaves the Salem community, Mr. Skelton informs Roger Conant that his daughter is not dead but has married Hobomok, consoling his parishioner with the claim that “she was bereaved of reason, when she did this deed; and peradventure the Lord may yet raise her up to be ‘a burning and a shining light’” (133). While we have already seen the care Child takes to emphasize Mary’s sustained capacity
to reason, what is more interesting in Skelton’s consolation is his citation of John 5:35. His suggestion that Mary may be the vessel of a new dispensation, figured through a “shining light,” resonates far beyond his narrow intentions, because what Skelton unintentionally articulates is that the capaciousness and diversity of Mary’s beliefs, not their precise content, are what differentiates her from the other characters in the novel and makes her the bearer of a new dispensation. By attending to how “light” figures in the novel we can begin to see what it is that Mary comes to represent and also clarify the status of transcendence in the immanent frame of *Hobomok*.³³ Throughout her life, Child retained a liberal faith in a fundamental, benevolent reality grounding being and belief, but the legibility of this reality becomes obscured within the novel by the profusion of religious expression, and especially the insistent particularity of native religiosity.

Child claimed to have written the first two chapters of *Hobomok* in a sudden burst of energy the same day she read John Gorham Palfrey’s review of *Yamoyden* in the *North American Review*, which explains why the first chapter feels so distinct from the rest of the novel.¹⁴ In it Child figures the religious light that the first wave of Puritan settlers carried to the New World as a transcendent entity impervious to historical accident. Although they “brought [this light] hither in their own bosom” (6), the light itself remains protected from the violence of the world. As the novel progresses, however, light and its ultimate source, the sun, cease to be as definitively independent of the world of human experience. Later in the novel, when the sectarian lines dividing the Puritans from the

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³³ The “immanent frame” is Charles Taylor’s term and refers to an experience of the world insulated from transcendental forces. See Taylor, 539-93. Novelistic worlds, in general, reflect this worldview insofar as the unambiguous presence of the divine disrupts their commitment to verisimilitude. Even when novels suggest the supernatural intervention, they tend to route to leave room for doubt.

¹⁴ See Karcher, 20-21.
Anglicans are most firm, the narrator reconsiders this light, observing that “spiritual light, like that of the natural sun, shines from one source, and shines alike upon all; but it is reflected and absorbed in almost infinite variety; and in the moral, as well as the natural world, the diversity of the rays is occasioned by the nature of the recipient” (69). Here Child constructs a figure for transcendence that avoids the dangers of absolute relativism without divesting individuals of a moral imperative. First, she affirms a transcendental reality (“spiritual light”) available to every individual without prejudice. But like natural light, which produces color by scattering when it touches objects, spiritual light produces religious variety by refracting off individuals. Child thus insists on the refraction and dispersion of spiritual light, affirming in this analogy the brute fact of religious difference. The final clause, however, adds a caveat: as different objects are capable of refracting more colors, so too, she suggests, can different kinds of people embody more diversity. The prism, of course, was the classic example of a highly refractive object, and Mary is the exemplar of a prismatic ideal by virtue of the sheer surfeit of her religious expressions. The transcendental light carried by the Puritan settlers has not disappeared, but it has ceased to be visible except in isolated individual expressions. The image, which establishes an equivalence between embodied diversity and moral quality, suggests that only through capaciousness of character can such a resolution to the fractures and cross-pressures of American secularity occur.

The novel thus stages a progressive immanentization of “light,” where a pure, transcendental substance is occluded except for its numerous partial expressions in character. But this immanentization should not be narrowly read as conventional secularization. Religious belief is neither evacuated from the novel nor, as David
Reynolds claims in *Faith in Fiction*, does it simply give way to secular morality as in many “anti-Calvinist” novels written by liberal Christians. It is more closely aligned with what Ann Douglas calls “the descent of God,” except that this descent occurs not as a consequence of the rise of sentimental discourse but through a process of generalization prompted by the imperative to account for and reflect an ever-greater variety of practices and convictions. The plurality of beliefs the novel is committed to representing pulls *Hobomok* toward an immanent (but not narrowly secular) resolution. This is a significantly different kind of detranscendentalization than that of the European novel, which Georg Lukács famously defined as “the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God” (88). In *Hobomok*, as in many American novels of the period, God has not abandoned the world; instead, He is obscured by the multitude of His expressions.

The prismatic individual compensates for this obfuscation of transcendental reality by mediating between the transcendent and the immanent. In chapter 6, Mary, alone in the woods, stares at the night sky and utters an apostrophe to the moon:

> Fair planet, . . . how various are the scenes thou passest over in thy shining course. The solitary nun, in the recesses of her cloister, looks on thee as I do now. . . . Thou hast kissed the cross-crowned turrets of the Catholic, and the proud spires of the Episcopalian. Thou hast smiled on distant mosques and temples, and now thou art shedding the same light on the sacrifice heap of the Indian, and the rude dwellings of the Calvinist. And can it be, as my father says, that of all the multitude of people who view thy cheering rays, so small a remnant only are pleasing in the sight of God? Oh, no. It cannot be thus. Would that my vision, like thine, could extend through the universe, that I might look down unmoved on the birth and decay of human passions, hopes, and prejudices. (48)

Elsewhere in the novel Child uses the sun to figure transcendence, yet in this moment of reflective reverie, Mary imaginatively inhabits another planetary body: the moon.

Although suspended above the earth, the moon is nevertheless caught in earth’s orbit, drawn gravitationally towards and yet independent of it. In the novel’s symbology, the moon is a celestial body that mediates an abstracted transcendence and a chaotic
immanence. That Child uses the moon to imagine what it is like to see global religious
diversity exemplifies the detranscendentalizing effect occasioned by the experience of
diversity and bespeaks the felt need to retain an overarching vision of unity without the
sacrifice of particularity. The moon remains at a distance from the conflicts that occur on
the ground even as it bears witness to them. It is an engaged and proximate observer, but
an observer nevertheless. Like the narrator of a novel, the moon is a nearly omniscient,
but not quite transcendent entity.

That Mary in this moment projects herself into space as the moon and not the sun
helps to clarify her position as the centerpiece of domestic life at the end of the novel and
domicity itself as Child’s postestablishment alternative to the exclusivity of
establishment and the disorder of pre-/dis-establishment. Mary’s status at the end of the
novel is the result of her upward fragilization. The novel does not deny the existence of
transcendent, universal truth, but the source of this truth has become so diffuse that some
body is required to mediate between radical diversity and its increasingly imperceptible
foundations. Child’s own hesitancy about the consequences of religious establishment as
well as the free-for-all of disestablishment, leads us finally to consider what alternative
vision she develops in the novel.

iv. From the Domestic Imaginary . . .

At the end of the novel, after Charles Brown miraculously reappears in
Massachusetts, and Hobomok has marched stoically into the frontier, Mary Conant, her
father, her new husband, and her half-Indian son recombine to form a new (and New
World) family. Child’s concluding vision is an attempt to literalize the religious and
cultural diversity of the early Puritan settlement through the figure of a single, cohesive family unit with the prismatic Mary at its center. This domestic configuration represents a significant and deliberate departure from the historical record. According to the Puritan historians whom Child consulted, neither Brown nor the other Anglicans who were banished to England ever returned, so by resurrecting Charles Brown at the end of *Hobomok*, Child signals her detour into an alternative history.

The ending has often been read as an intentional, utopian vision of the young Child’s republican ideal, but it is more explicitly a qualified ideal of religious pluralism, for the central moral achievement it represents is one of benign tolerationism.¹⁵ In their newly erected house, Roger Conant and the Browns co-habitate in relative peace despite their theological and ecclesiological differences, the result of careful domestic management and the remembrance of a mutual experience of intense suffering following Mary’s flight from Salem. As the narrator tells us, “Disputes on matters of opinion would sometimes arise; but Brown seldom forgot his promises of forbearance, and they were always brought to an amicable termination” (149). Child presents the ecumenical ending of the novel as the tenuous realization of inter-denominational toleration achieved through a sympathy engendered by sacrifice and loss.¹⁶

In *The Feminization of American Culture*, Ann Douglas famously connected clerical disestablishment to the rise of domestic sentimental culture in the United States, which she unapologetically savages. Although subsequent scholars (most notably Jane

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¹⁵ I recognize the potential anachronism of using the 20th century term, “religious pluralism,” to describe Child’s vision. However, it seems an apt description, especially given that the concept of religious pluralism, as Amanda Porterfield has ably shown, “grew out of liberal Protestantism” and still “carrie[s] traces of Protestant idealism about denominations and millenialist expectations of a universal church” (25).

¹⁶ See Hoeller.
Tompkins) have complicated the evaluative claims of Douglas’s project by emphasizing the cultural work sentimentalism performs, the descriptive dimension of Douglas’s argument has largely been ignored or forgotten. What is crucial about this aspect of Feminization is that it calls attention to the deep relationship between disestablishment, the experience of rapid religious fracture and proliferation, and the rise of sentimentalism. The ending to Hobomok produces this relationship in miniature when sentimental domesticity supplants an exclusionary church-state in the novel’s final pages.

The vision of domestic toleration and cohabitation Child depicts, constructed in a counter-factual narrative space, is conceptually alternative to religious establishment, but is not, as critics of the novel have repeatedly noted, without its own problems. The fragile reconciliation between the most rigid Puritan dissenter (Roger Conant) and the zealous Anglican preserver (Charles Brown) comes, however, at the expense both of Mary’s heretical leanings and Hobomok’s ritualism. Practices and beliefs native to Hobomok’s tribe, rather than being preserved in Mary’s son, are erased through education and breeding. Likewise, the numerous rivulets comprising Mary’s religious expressions converge into the homogenous stream of domestic duty. Whereas Higginson’s sermon strove for Protestant unity through gestures of compromise and intentional exclusion, the domestic ideal at the end of Hobomok aims to imagine a rubric capable of accommodating the entire religious landscape of the period. The complex forms of interaction, exchange, pressure, and fragilization between theologies and cosmologies that characterize American secularity, however, diminish as theological difference is

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17 For an even-handed summary of the Douglas-Tompkins debate see June Howard.
reduced exclusively to private conviction, as something capable of being tucked away in the corners of the self. In their place, sympathy and toleration govern public interaction.

Child’s domestic vision contains difference through sentiment, performing a function similar to that of the established church. The central failing of this final vision is its inability to include either Indian religion, which it expels, or Mary’s radical syncretism, which it suppresses. Although Charles Brown’s patriarchal ecumenism ultimately triumphs in the novel, it is a concession that should not occlude Hobomok’s complex representation of American secularity.

The ending also alerts us to the social and theological limitations of the domestic. As Tracy Fessenden has shown, “to consider the career of secularization in America culture is therefore also necessarily to consider the consolidation of a Protestant ideology that has grown more entrenched . . . even as its manifestations have often become less visibly religious” (5). Instead of requiring testimony for memberships like the established church, disestablished domesticity entails the withdrawal of theological conviction from public discourse into private thought. The fine web of sympathy enabled by a shared Protestantism replaces the activating cross-pressures that emerge from contact and exchange. To her credit, Child seems acutely aware of what her novel’s conclusion excludes and guarded about the domestic vision it presents. Charles Brown and Mary Conant’s marriage concretizes the sympathy and toleration that suffuse the novel’s concluding ideal of domesticity, but it is important to observe that their courtship only achieves legitimacy after Hobomok grants Mary a divorce.

To annul their marriage, Hobomok retains an English lawyer who witnesses him performing a ritual act of annulment peculiar to his tribe and faithfully reports this in a
letter to Mary: “This doth certify that the witch hazel sticks, which were given to the
witnesses of my marriage are all burnt by my requeste: therefore by Indian laws,
Hobomok and Mary Conant may be divorced” (146). By recording Hobomok’s transient
act in a legally binding document, the letter enshrines an indigenous practice in an
emergent Anglo-European archive, a material testament to how the union between the
two English settlers attains its legitimacy. Thus, although the newly constituted Brown
family appears to be an autonomous emblem of American Protestant domesticity, its
validity rests on an experience of contact with a system of beliefs and practices it is,
finally, unable to assimilate. In a muted, but no less fundamental way, relationships of
contact, exchange, fragilization, and dependence persist: the singular religion, whether
sentimental or civic, cannot erase the plural religions. The only remainder of this
foundational, miscegenational union is little Hobomok, Mary’s son, a boy of mixed race
who physically embodies the procreative and racial effects of Mary’s voluntary embrace
of indigenous religious practices. Even as the novel telegraphs the erasure of his identity
through acculturation, it retains traces of this inassimilable presence (the boy’s dark eyes,
the lawyer’s letter gathering dust in some drawer) within the white Christian world that
Child saw being constructed around her.

v. . . . to the Eclectic Church

One of the last pieces Child published in her lifetime was an article for The
Atlantic in 1871 entitled “The Intermingling of Religions.” The essay presents Child’s
late vision of the “Church of the Future,” an ecclesia that would gather together elements
of all the world’s religions to form an eclectic and heterogeneous whole. Child begins,
however, not by imagining the shape or progress of this church but by turning back to the origins of Christianity, placing it within the religious and cultural milieu of the Near East and Mediterranean during the first century after Christ’s death. One of the first Christian churches, she notes, had been established in Alexandria, which, because it “encouraged the greatest freedom of discussion” and “unbounded toleration of opinions,” was home to “zealots and philosophers from all quarters, eager for controversy” (Child, Reader, 422). “Such a seething caldron of doctrines,” she writes, “the world had never witnessed” (422). From these descriptions of first-century religious pluralism, Child concludes that Christianity, at its birth, was already a hybridized form, interacting with and being transformed by the surfeit of theories and doctrines circulating throughout the ancient world. The Church of the Future, she prophesies, would emerge from the contact between the world’s religions in her own historical moment and would “gather forms of holy aspiration from all ages and nations, and set them on high in their immortal beauty, with the sunlight of heavens to glorify them all” (434). This church, she writes, would be called “The Eclectic Church.”

Eclecticism was a philosophical movement begun in the early nineteenth century by the French philosopher Victor Cousin that aimed to supersede all previously existing philosophical systems by combining their best parts into a new, stable, and superior whole. Joan Scott writes that “the point of eclecticism was not synthesis, but rather, to extract the partial truth from each system and cumulate them into the whole truth” (118). It was not a philosophical advance so much as a philosophical standstill, developed out of the belief that all that had to be said had already been said and all that was left for philosophers to do was to prune and combine what had been received from the past. By
papering over the fissures between conflicting philosophical systems, Cousin, a political conservative with deep professional investments in an institutional status quo, saw a way of developing a philosophy that would prevent the social eruptions of the French Revolution. Foundational to the project, for instance, were the claims that (1) the self was inviolable and preceded experience and (2) reason a universal entity (available only to God) independent of individual subjects. These postulates enabled Cousin to posit objective and inviolable philosophical norms intended to constrain the excesses of subjectivity. Eclecticism, claims Jan Goldstein, was “a powerful argument in favor of common standards and values and against the kind of social and political contestation that bred instability and revolution” (162).

Childs’s Eclectic Church is not the religious equivalent of Cousin’s philosophical eclecticism but the two have certain elements in common. Child heralds this new church by writing, “From all parts of the world come increasing manifestations of a tendency toward eclecticism. Men find there are gems hidden among all sorts of rubbish. These will be selected and combined in that Church of the Future now in the process of formation” (434). As with Cousin, the central idea here is that the best aspects of a given religious tradition can be decoupled from the worst, an enactment of Child’s claim in The Progress of Religious Ideas that “theology is not religion” (vii). (Child would put this theory into practice with her final book, Aspirations of the World: A Chain of Opals, which assembled excerpts from an array of religious texts for devotional purposes.) Her belief that such a feat was possible without either distorting or doing violence to the traditions it plundered is evidence of the conservative and stabilizing influence she wished to exert over global religious contact in the period. As suspicious as we might
now find this desire, it nevertheless avoids the Christocentric assumptions of comparative theology, the field of study that emerged in the late nineteenth century as the disciplinary precursor to Comparative Religions. Most works of comparative theology were governed, as Tomoko Masuzawa and others have noted, by the assumption that the universal religions of the world were all more or less pure manifestations of an immutable universal religion, an aspect of their essence only visible once the accumulated dross of tradition had been scrubbed away. Christianity, unsurprisingly, was almost universally hailed by these men as the only religion truly worthy of the name. James Freeman Clarke, whose *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (1871) was indebted to *The Progress of Religious Ideas*, argued, for example, that comparative theology “considers the adaptation of each [religious] system to every other, to determine its place, use, and value, in reference to universal or absolute religion” (2). Unlike Clarke, Child does not posit an “absolute religion,” but “The Intermingling of Religions” still shows how her imagination was pulled toward institutional and monumental forms capable of achieving religious unity without sacrificing the particularities of difference. Her Eclectic Church figures the animating tensions in *Hobomok* on a global scale.

Child concludes the “Intermingling of Religions” by figuring the “Church of the Future” in architectural terms:

> Milan Cathedral, lifting its thousand snow-white images of saints into the clear blue of heaven, is typical of that Eclectic Church, which shall gather forms of holy aspiration from all ages and nations, and set them on high in their immortal beauty, with the sunlight of heaven to glorify them all. (434)

The woman who began her literary career in the midst of Massachusetts’s laborious march towards disestablishment with a novel that reimagined the establishment of a Protestant church-state in the New World, ends it with the hazy image of a future
ecclesiastical order typified by one of the most imposing monuments of the established religion against which Protestant Christianity had defined itself, Roman Catholicism. The Milan Cathedral, and especially the multitude of statues and spires adorning it, was a source of much aesthetic commentary in the nineteenth century. Victorian critics like John Ruskin and Oscar Wilde deplored the eclecticism of its architecture. Ruskin accused it of “stealing from every style in the world: and every style spoiled” (469n1). What these men found so aesthetically affronting are what Child celebrates as signifiers of the universal church to be. Yet even as the aspirational diversity of the Milan Cathedral monumentalizes Child’s own vision of an ecclesia-to-come, its immobility jars with the fluid intermixture of lifeworlds and belief systems, the “seething caldron of doctrines,” that she argued at the beginning of the essay were characteristic of first-century Alexandria. The irreconcilability of these two elemental figures for religious diversity—liquid and stone—are evidence not of Child’s having finally overcome the conflicts she diagnosed in Hobomok but of their radical expansion from the petri dish of seventeenth-century Salem to the entire world.
CATHARINE SEDGWICK’S CELIBACY PLOTS

Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s first novel, *A New-England Tale*, published in 1822, begins, in many respects, where *Hobomok* ends. Whereas Child’s historical excavations of a New World religious establishment open onto a postestablishment vision of ecumenical domesticity, *A New-England Tale*, which was set in the 1820s, announces—even embraces—from its outset a world where Christianity, nominally freed from the constraining formalism of the church-state, has diffused into sympathy and practical virtue:

There are too many who forget that our religion is not like that of the ancients, something set apart from the ordinary concerns of life; the consecrated, not the ‘daily bread,’ a service for the temple and the grove, having its separate class of duties and pleasures; but is ‘the leaven that leaveneth the whole lump,’ a spirit to be infused into the common affairs of life. (7)

This is Weber’s Protestant ethic in a triumphalist key. For Sedgwick, religion, now disarticulated from ecclesiastical spaces and state power alike, has spilled into daily, secular life, free to buoy and shape the daily lives of republican individuals.

Sedgwick began her literary career alongside liberal Christianity’s full emergence as a visible and coherent movement in New England and the mid-Atlantic, and she remains the paradigmatic liberal Christian novelist of the early Jacksonian period. But her entry into the literary world was also coincident with her decision to remain unmarried, forever linking her authorial career to her marital status. Her early novels explore the conditions of American secularity at the intersection of sexuality and novelistic form. They do so by privileging the lives of single women who embody socio-religious forms
resistant to the procreative ecumenism of liberal theology.\(^1\) In this chapter, I examine how celibacy plots disturb the orderly teleology of marriage plots in Sedgwick’s first three novels with the result that belief is fragilized.

For almost two decades prior to the publication of Sedgwick’s first novel, the liberal movement within Congregationalism had been threatening Massachusetts’ already tenuous church-state system. After the Unitarians seized Harvard in 1805 and local congregations began installing liberal ministers in their pulpits, the crisis reached a fever pitch. As a member of the aristocratic families who comprised the Berkshire elite (the so-called “river-gods”), Sedgwick’s voluntary conversion to Unitarianism in 1821 placed her at the heart of the controversy and made her a pariah among her orthodox family and neighbors. Upon learning of Sedgwick’s renunciation of Calvinist orthodoxy, for instance, one particularly distraught aunt told her, “Come and see me as often as you can, dear, for you know, after this world, we shall never meet again” (Dewey, 157). Her embrace of Unitarianism provided the impetus for her to write her first novel, as the recently founded Unitarian Book Society had commissioned her to write a tract tale for them. Although her relationship to the denomination was complex and often ambivalent, she spent the remainder of her life securely within its fold.

The manifest anti-Calvinism of *A New-England Tale* made it a minor succès de scandale upon its publication and sealed Sedgwick’s fate as an apostate. Moreover, the novel’s rejection of the political and theological claims of the New England Orthodox

\(^1\) “Ecumenism,” which broadly refers to a Christian concern for the whole church, has a long history in Christian thought beginning in the patristic era. In gained currency in the nineteenth century when it began to be used to describe an ideal of intra-Christian unity. Sedgwick doesn’t describe herself as “ecumenical,” but I believe it is a historically appropriate term to describe the latitudarian dimensions of her religious thought. See “Ecumenism” in Hillebrand, *Encyclopedia of Protestantism*.  

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instates the assumptions which ushered the disestablished religious world of the 1820s into being as axiomatic features of all her subsequent work. In fact, throughout the initial phase of her literary career, which spans the publication of her first three major novels (*A New-England Tale* in 1822, *Redwood* in 1824, and *Hope Leslie* in 1826), one can see Sedgwick attempting in increasingly sophisticated ways to formalize the plural religious world that ecumenical liberal theology imagined and to resolve its contradictions. Because her conversion and her entry into letters occurred almost simultaneously, Sedgwick’s engagement with both the religious landscape of her era and the central tenets of liberal theology took place almost entirely in and through her fictional practice. Hers was, to borrow David S. Reynolds’s enticing formulation, a “fictional faith” (50).

It is a familiar fact of US literary history that liberal Christian theology accommodated itself much more readily to novel writing than did the Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards of Samuel Hopkins. As it matured in the early decades of the nineteenth century, liberal theology could be broadly characterized by the desire “to reject dogma in favor of free inquiry,” “to be suspicious of religious authority that conflicts with individual reason,” and “to replace a preoccupation with the metaphysical aspects of theology with an orientation toward living rightly and doing good in this world” (Williams, 579). As Reynolds has shown, these anti-doctrinal tendencies made narrative an increasingly attractive form of religious instruction and theological exploration while simultaneously “answer[ing] a widespread liberal impulse to avoid theoretical controversy on behalf of practical application” (97). Although the liberal denominations in the US (primarily Unitarianism and Universalism) sought “to institutionalize religious impulses that by their very nature are in tension with structure
and definition” (Williams, 579), the impulses themselves found a more comfortable residence in the capaciousness of fictional prose narrative.

These basic tenets and tendencies found their clearest and most forceful expression in the sermons of William Ellery Channing, the apostle of American Unitarianism and a close friend of Sedgwick’s whose work profoundly shaped her own theological thinking. Indeed, the seeds of Sedgwick’s theological rebellion were planted in 1813 when Channing attended her father, Theodore Sedgwick, on his deathbed as he dramatically renounced Hopkinsian Calvinism. Channing, whose thought was profoundly influenced by Scottish Common Sense philosophers of the eighteenth century, placed great emphasis on the theological value of moral intuition and practical virtue. In his most famous sermon, “Unitarian Christianity,” delivered in Baltimore in 1819, he articulated a conception of “this world” that was not a tantalizing illusion masking the glories of the invisible realm but

a place of education, in which [God] is training men by prosperity and adversity, by aids and obstructions, by conflicts of reason and passion, by motives to duty and temptations to sin, by a various discipline suited to free and moral beings, for union with himself, and for a sublime and ever-growing virtue in heaven. (54)

It is a short path from this world to the operations of narrative fiction, because while Channing intended his sermon to illustrate the individual’s moral standing and relationship to God in this world, it could in another context could serve as an apt description of the bildungsroman. But individuals committed to Christian education and self-cultivation had nevertheless to confront the fact of sectarian division, which Channing addresses in a concluding gesture of epistemological humility.

Acknowledging that religion produces “many strange conceits, wild theories, and fictions of fancy,” he nevertheless admits that all people are “sharers of the common
frailty” and ought, therefore, to abstain from the “habit of denouncing and contemning other denominations” (76). Instead, Channing encourages “charity, forbearance, [and] a delight in the virtues of different sects” (76). His valorization of forbearance recalls the distinctly Protestant origins of religious toleration and the growing commitment among Protestants toward religious voluntarism.2

Sedgwick’s early ventures into narrative realism were grounded in Channing’s liberal theology and exemplify, as Nancy Sweet has shown, the doctrines of good works and “salvation by character” that were so central to nineteenth-century Unitarianism. But they also demonstrate a commitment to narratological forbearance, by which I mean the imperative to represent religious outsiders earnestly and faithfully, inventing new ways of accommodating religious difference through the plasticity of form.3 Although Sedgwick was not the first liberal Christian novelist in the US, she is among the first to make her narratives foreground the voluntary principle as a theme. But Sedgwick’s approach to the problem of religious difference is distinguished by the fact that the most potent religious

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2 Historically, liberal theology and the political toleration of Christian difference have a common origin in seventeenth and eighteenth-century discourses of natural theology. John Locke serves as the single most important figure, having given toleration its first full articulation in the Letter Concerning Toleration, arguing that “the toleration of those that differ from others in matters of religion” accords completely with “the Gospel of Jesus Christ” and “the genuine reason of mankind” (117). As Noah Feldman has shown, the Lockean theory of liberty of conscience became the “dominant theoretical framework” (“Intellectual Origins,” 384) for arguments against national religious establishment, which were eventually codified in the Establishment Clause in the first amendment to the US Constitution. Toleration became a constitutive part of American Unitarianism not only because of its commitment to the free inquiry of individuals, but also because of its own enduring status as Christian heresy. Emerging out of the Congregationalist church, Unitarian Congregationalists had long suffered accusations of heresy. Denied the toleration they sought from their conservative brethren, they were forced to strike out on their own, but the experience certainly made the toleration of difference a recurring feature of liberal theology.

3 The explicit religiosity of Sedgwick’s early fiction did not go unnoticed by the critical establishment and distinguished her from her contemporaries in the US. If James Fenimore Cooper was, in the words of one reviewer, a “wonder-working Scott,” then Sedgwick was a “religious Edgeworth” (Gardiner, 279). The distinction is apt, for it intimates how Sedgwick’s genealogy is distinct from Cooper, the most direct inheritor of Scott’s Waverly novels. Hers is denominational in its origins and more indebted to a British tradition of the novel-of-manners embodied by Edgeworth than it is to the historical romance.
outsiders in her fiction are women whose religious commitments lead them to remain unmarried.

Celibacy, and especially female celibacy, was a category in flux during the early decades of the nineteenth century, inflecting the nation’s sexual politics as well as its literary practices. Despite the plethora of articles descrying (and, on occasion, defending) the lives of old maids and spinsters, many women in this period saw in celibacy, which Margaret Fuller called “the great fact of the time,” the promise of autonomy and “spiritual dignity” (413). As Benjamin Kahan writes, “A celibate way of being in the world is a being toward independence” (41). In some cases, celibacy was defended, as Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller has shown, through recourse to republican discourses of liberty, but for many women, enveloped as they were in the plural, porous religious world of the US, celibacy’s “history as a calling or vocation” (Kahan, 35) was a precondition for religious self-expression. This is evident in the reinvigoration of Shaker communities in the early nineteenth century as well as the sudden surge in popularity of Emmanuel Swedenborg’s writings on celibacy and “conjugial love.” But in the eyes of many, unmarried women (who were almost universally presumed to be celibate) posed a threat to a republican society that had come to see marriage and family as essential to its stability and reproduction, potentially upending the predominant ideology of separate spheres.4

For novelists, especially female ones, celibacy was also a narratological problem, given that the “wedlock ideal was so embedded in the very organization of the traditional novel” (Boone, 19). One of the ways celibacy enters into the novel is through what

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4 See Lee Chambers-Schiller.
Kahan calls “the celibacy plot,” which he defines as a narrative thread in which “the reform politics of celibacy act as a narrative motor that intersects the courtship plot perpendicularly, blocking it and keeping it from progressing” (51). Sedgwick’s celibacy plots do not go quite this far, but her entire career could be characterized as an attempt to slacken the tension between celibacy and courtship plots, to write them in a way that they run parallel, rather than perpendicular to each other. (Her last novel, after all, is titled *Married or Single?*) In her novels after 1830, Sedgwick’s single women embody the traits of self-cultivation and modest reform characteristic of liberal Christian subjectivity; they exist to assist the reproductive mission of the central romantic couple and constitute a “rewriting of spinsterhood as that which must be included within marriage” (Lubovich, 31). But in her earliest novels, where the celibate characters are also religious outsiders, celibacy plots and courtship plots are in conflict, and it is their antagonism that provokes a broader set of narratological and theological tensions.

Sedgwick had shown an interest in celibate practices (both Catholic and Protestant) in private writings produced before her inauguration as a public author. In the journal she kept during her 1821 trip through New York and Canada, she observes, “I was here and in all the Convents we have visited struck with the pleasing effect which the active and benevolent lives of the Sisters produced upon their countenances, which almost uniformly looked healthy and peaceful. How different from our Shaking Quakers whose sickly and vacant faces are the witnesses to their cloistered and, at best, negative lives” (*Papers*, reel 7, box 11, folder 4). In her second novel, *Redwood*, she would revise her assessment of the Shakers, but their presence here is indicative of her early thinking.

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5 For thorough accounts of Sedgwick’s thinking about celibacy across her career, see Berend and Lubovich. For more extensive histories of single women in the US, see Lee Chambers-Schiller, Degler, and Kitch.
about the effects celibate lives had upon individuals and communities. In her first three novels, however, the celibate is distinguished by her heterodoxy, and it is through the formal tension between the central marriage plots and the peripheral celibate plots that Sedgwick explores the conditions of American secularity, the effects of fragilization, and the transformative roles of visionary women in American life. The lives of these women are a gendered site for exploring the effects of religious voluntarism at its most politically charged, examining what happens when a set of voluntary religious commitments entail the rejection of an institutional center of republican life.

The primal historical scene for the relationship between celibacy and heterodoxy in Sedgwick’s work is the story of Mary Dyer (or Dyre), the Quaker martyr hanged in Boston in 1660 for heresy and dissension, which she recites in her 1831 sketch, “Mary Dyre.” Originally published in *The Token*, an annual holiday gift book, Sedgwick begins the tale by apologizing to her readers for presenting them with the history of a “Quaker Martyr,” a woman who “may appear to the fair holiday readers of souvenirs, a very unfit personage to be introduced into the romantic and glorious company of lords and ladye loves; of doomed brides; and all-achieving heroines” (*Tales*, 151). She admits, as well, to having not even “selected the most romantic heroine” from within Quaker history, ignoring sensational figures like Mary Fisher, the “maiden missionary” (151) who evangelized in Constantinople, or Catharine Evans and Sarah Chevers, who survived the Inquisition. In choosing Mary Dyer as the subject of her sketch, Sedgwick eschews the “aids of fiction” and the trappings of romance in favor of moral realism.

Mary Dyer is remembered for her unfaltering sacrifice on behalf of the cause of liberty of conscience. Having been originally banished from the Massachusetts Bay
Colony to Rhode Island for preaching Quaker theology, she returned to preach against the persecution of other sectaries and was nearly hanged before being spared by the intercessions of her son. She was banished again to Rhode Island, where she decided to return to the Massachusetts, finally being condemned to the gallows and executed. Sedgwick uses Mary Dyer’s several journeys to and from Massachusetts to fashion a character torn between the limitations of private, domestic life and a conscience impelling her into public. In a sly remark midway through the sketch, Sedgwick writes that “we who believe that woman's duty as well as happiness lies in the obscure, safe, and not very limited sphere of domestic life, may regret that Mary did not forego the glory of the champion, and the martyr, for the meek honours of the wife and mother” (*Tales*, 159).

The stark differences between the “obscure” world of domestic life and the “glory of the champion” is indicative of the incompatibility between motherhood. In Mary Dyer are linked the refusal of the limitations of domestic life, the origins of American religious freedom, and the challenge heterodoxy posed to the Protestant establishment. The sketch concludes with a meditation on Boston Common and the legacy of Mary Dyer:

> Boston Common, has always appeared to us one of the choicest of nature's temples. The memory of the good is worthy such a temple; and we trust we shall be forgiven for having attempted to fix there this slight monument to a noble sufferer in that great cause, that has stimulated the highest minds to the sublimest actions; that calls its devotees from the gifted, its martyrs from the moral heroes of mankind; the best cause, the fountain of all liberty—*liberty of conscience!*” (163-64)

In embracing her identity as a Quaker and shedding that of both wife and mother, Mary Dyer comes to embody liberty of conscience as a form of public sacrifice, as something that must be confronted in the Common and not confined to the hearth.6

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6 Historically, much of attention that has been paid to the relationship between American literature and Unitarian theology has been about the changes wrought by revolutions in biblical hermeneutics and the changing meditations on language such revolutions occasioned. However, I am less interested in thinking about the problems of philology and exegesis that Unitarian hermeneutics raised than in how Unitarians
The connection between the celibate religious outsiders in *A New-England Tale*, *Redwood*, and *Hope Leslie* is confirmed by the space she devotes to these characters in the prefaces to each of the novels, even though the roles they play in the plots are relatively minor. In *A New-England Tale*, this is Crazy Bet, the wandering millennialist madwoman who skirts the margins of the plot. Although confined to the genre of the “sketch” rather than the “tale,” Bet exerts a palpable cross-pressure on the novel’s theological understanding of marriage; she almost seems to catch Sedgwick by surprise, drawing narrative attention towards herself and troubling the novel’s immanent frame with her irruptive visions and electric enthusiasm. In *Redwood*, this figure assumes the form of the stoic and charismatic Shaker eldress, Susan Allen, whose spiritual autobiography constitutes the novel’s celibacy plot. The symptoms plaguing *A New-England Tale* mostly disappear in this novel, as Sedgwick devises narratological strategies capable of accommodating competing theological systems through meta-religious ascents. Finally, in *Hope Leslie*, there is Magawisca, the daughter of a Pequot chief who sacrifices her arm for the novel’s hero, Everell Fletcher, but ultimately refuses to convert to Christianity and live among the Puritans. Sedgwick posits Magawisca’s indigenous religiosity as a form of natural religion intended to act as a curative for the violence and division of Protestant sectarianism, but this reading of Native American belief and practice introduces the troubling possibility (for Sedgwick, at least) that native religion might actually be the truly universal religion and Christianity merely a local one, which leads her hastily to reassert Indian particularity and to re-Christianize natural

imagined the world and the cosmographical and theological diversity lodged within it. Sedgwick’s novels, characteristic of liberal theology, do not expose a denominational preference, attempting instead to realize stories within the world liberal Christianity imagined. Philip Gura remains a crucial authority on the linguistic revolution that occurred within the liberal movement. See also Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration*. 
religion. In the wake of this shock, the celibate religious outsider virtually disappears from Sedgwick’s fiction until her final novel, *Married or Single?*, where she reappears as a figure concealed from public life, the private remainder of a former era of visionary possibility.

Over the course of these three novels, we can observe a process whereby a heterodox celibacy plot is first disarticulated from the liberal Christian courtship plot and then gradually enlarged to the point where it becomes a legitimate alternative, threatening the courtship plot’s presumed centrality to novelistic form. In this way, Sedgwick’s celibacy plots imperil the ecumenical claims typical of liberal Christianity during its ascent in the first half of the nineteenth century even as she writes from within its fold.

**i. Neither marrying, nor giving in marriage**

Generically speaking, *A New-England Tale* is like a seed vault of nineteenth-century American literary genres, housing the germinal forms of the sketch, the novel of manners, the romance, regional fiction, homiletic realism, the didactic tract, and the Unitarian sermon. From what we know of the novel’s composition, this generic hybrid appears to have been less a product of intent than of formal experimentation. Sedgwick had begun writing *A New-England Tale* as a didactic religious tract for the recently established New York Unitarian Book Society. In her own account of the novel’s birth, she writes, “I had no plans, and the story took a turn that seemed to render it quite unsuitable for a tract” (Dewey, 153). Although she never elaborated what this “turn” was, it proved significant enough, when coupled with the encouragement of her brother Robert, to incite her to spin the small tract into a single-volume novel.
The generic hybridity of *A New-England Tale* is confirmed by its paratexts. The work’s full title, for example, *A New-England Tale; or, Sketches of New-England Life and Manners*, immediately points to the work’s generic poles: towards the “tale” (plot-oriented) on one end and towards the “sketch” (description-oriented) on the other, a distinction to which we will return below. Of more immediate importance is the title page’s epigraph, taken from Robert Burns, which broadcasts the slippery territory between religious (didactic) and secular (novel) forms that the work straddles:

> But how the subject theme may gang,  
> Let time and chance determine;  
> Perhaps it may turn out a sang,  
> Perhaps turn out a sermon. (2)

The generic contingency introduced by the epigraph (which asks not, *what kind of book is this?* but *what kind of book will this be?*) announces its involvement in a process of formal discovery, the young author hedging about what kind of writer she will be. But the novel’s formal diversity represents more than just the experimental soundings of a literary novitiate, for generic difference in this novel also functions as a means of managing religious difference by confining characters in separate generic registers in order to quarantine radical theological claims and minimize the contagious effects of religious contact. These divisions, however, begin to fray when the novel’s sole religious outsider, Crazy Bet, who is confined to the genre of the sketch, reveals herself to be ensnared in a transcendental marriage plot that fragilizes the immanent, liberal Christian worldview expressed via the novel’s courtship plot.

The “tale” in *A New-England Tale* is that of Jane Elton, orphaned as a girl and adopted by her severe Calvinist aunt, Mrs. Wilson. Mrs. Wilson’s own children have already been morally disfigured by their mother’s orthodoxy, but Jane, ever pure, slips
the yoke of Calvinist recrimination when she befriends Mr. Lloyd, a middle-aged Quaker widower who has recently moved to the small, New England town where the novel is set. After nearly marrying the genial but flawed skeptic and man-of-the-world Albert Erskine, Jane escapes from her aunt’s long shadow, marries Mr. Lloyd, and voluntarily converts to Quakerism.

Jane’s final conversion is significant in the novel, since Quakerism, as it was in “Mary Dyer,” is the denominational embodiment of religious freedom. But because of this, Quakerism also has no special claims to truth; it is at once a historically specific community and also an arbitrary one, which is evident in the ambivalence of Mr. Lloyd, who, although he “had been brought up a Quaker,” remains one only because “he had seen no reason to depart” (180-81). Both his “affections,” and presumably those of Jane, too, “were too diffusive to be confined within the bounds of sect” (181). The reason the novel gives for his decision to remain, along with Jane, among the Quakers is suggested by a couplet from the seventeenth-century English poet George Crabbe, which Sedgwick quotes: “Minds are for sects of various kinds decreed / As different soils are formed for different seed” (182). This couplet evokes the organic metaphor at the heart of Sedgwick’s understanding of the voluntary principle, but the emphasis on “decreed” (the italics appear in the original, hinting at a pun in de-creed) also implies that while an individual’s sympathies may extend far beyond the “bounds of sect,” it remains necessary still to reside within particular religious communities. Their denominational identity, then, is a worldly convenience. The same is true of their marriage.

The novel’s confinement of marriage to this world is first articulated by the Methodist servant girl Mary Hull when she urges Jane earlier in the novel to reconsider
her first engagement with Erskine. Reminding her of Erskine’s lack of religion, she observes, “I know, you think there is nothing binds hearts together like religion—that bond endures where there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage” (121, emphasis mine). This final remark is from the gospels (nearly identical versions appear in Matthew 22:23-34 and Mark 12:18-27, while Luke 20:27-40 contains an expanded form). In the biblical episode, several Sadducees (a Jewish sect that denied the resurrection of the dead) approach Jesus and pose to him a hypothetical scenario about a woman who has been married and widowed seven times. When she dies, they ask, to whom will she be married in the next life? Jesus replies, “You are mistaken, not understanding the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matt. 22:29-30, emphasis mine). Although marriage here is being used to press Jesus on the details of the resurrected state rather than to say anything specific about the endurance of nuptial bonds, this exchange became a critical reference point for theological discussions of marriage and celibacy in the nineteenth century.

The phrase, as Lawrence Foster has shown, was especially useful to sexually experimental religious communities in the US during the period. The Shakers, for instance, employed it to defend their own celibate practices on the grounds that if marriage doesn’t exist in heaven, then it must be an essentially worldly and thus irreversibly corrupt institution. In Mormon theology, the phrase was used to defend polygamy by interpreting it as saying only that “no marriages would be performed in the afterlife” (Foster, 17). One’s marriages in this life, however, would carry over into the

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7 See Lawrence Foster, 15-18.
next one, making multiple marriages in this world an imperative. Of importance to the more sentimental strands of liberal theology were Swedenborg’s visions of the spiritual world, which led him to affirm that in Heaven there was no marrying of an earthly (or scortatory) kind; nevertheless, one would be given the opportunity to remarry in heaven once she discovered her true spiritual partner, who was not necessarily her earthly spouse. Sedgwick’s use of the phrase in *A New-England Tale* is different from any of these groups. For her, “neither marrying, nor giving in marriage” is simply a confirmation that the nuptial bond ceases to be meaningful after death, rendering marriage a welcome and necessary earthly institution without any additional spiritual baggage.

Uttered only once in the novel, the content of this phrase is so thoroughly diffused throughout *A New-England Tale* that it could almost serve as a key to the whole text. Nearly every character has a past in which this biblical episode makes pertinent questions about the endurance of the marriage bond: Mr. Lloyd is a widower, Mrs. Elton and Mrs. Wilson both widows, Crazy Bet a woman made insane by the loss of her fiancé on the day before their wedding, and Lucy Willett—whose story Bet tells—a girl who commits suicide after bearing witness to the gruesome murder of her lover during Shays’ Rebellion. The Sadducees’ query is apposite for the novel’s author as well as its characters, given both Sedgwick’s own decision not to marry (despite an attractive offer

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8 Patricia Cline Cohen notes how Swedenborgian theology became an important touchstone for liberal sentimental conceptions of marriage in the early nineteenth century and gave rise to the term, “spiritual marriage”: “Central to ‘spiritual marriage’ was a belief that profound love, expressed in the physicality of sex, was all-important, for men and for women” (316). Sedgwick occasionally defended her own celibacy with arguments that made oblique reference to “spiritual marriage.” Zsuzsa Berend and Maglina Lubovich both persuasively argue that Sedgwick’s decision to live single was not a rejection of marriage as an institution, or an attempt to subvert its authority, but a moral act that reinforced the immense social importance of marriage in a republic.
from William Cullen Bryant) and the eerie fact that her father held an annual rendezvous with the spirit of his deceased first wife for most of his adult life.9

When Jane finally renounces her irreligious lover Erskine, she echoes her earlier conversation with Mary Hull and affirms that “religion alone can produce unity of spirit; . . . it is the only indissoluble bond—for when the silver chord is loosed, this bond becomes immortal” (145). She thus identifies religion, and not love, as the enduring union that survives death. Elizabeth Barnes sees in this moment a deflation of the otherworldly significance of marriage. Jane, according to Barnes, demonstrates that “unity of spirit,” rather than being a consequence of marital union, is “essentially self-generated” (83). Although Sedgwick might have disagreed about whether the “self” is the entity responsible for the (re)generating, Barnes rightly argues that Jane’s “marriage is not meant to confer on her a wholeness she would otherwise lack. . . . Such a representation of romantic love prevents heterosexual bonding from becoming too exclusive” (83). Thus, the novel’s marriage plot—Jane’s prolonged and circuitous courtship with Mr. Lloyd—seems less teleological than it does contingent: whom you marry matters for the time being, but not in the longue durée of eternity. That Mr. Lloyd is a widower underscores this point, demonstrating how subject human coupling is to chance and circumstance. But while Barnes’s reading of the marriage plot confirms the novel’s basic orientation towards marriage, it neglects the multiple ways Sedgwick thematizes marriage elsewhere in the novel. The most forceful alternative to this immanent vision of marriage comes from Crazy Bet, the novel’s one truly heterodox

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9 Theodore Sedgwick was married to Elizabeth Mason, his first wife, for less than five years. She died at the age of 26 after catching smallpox from him. According to Timothy Kenslea, Theodore, who had been visited by his dead wife shortly after her burial, annually experienced her presence, declaring to his children, “I have had my dream!” (qtd. in Kenslea, 14).
figure. As Victoria Clements and others observe, Bet contributes little to the actual plot of the novel, a figure suited to the sketch and not the tale. Indeed, one could excise her entirely without sacrificing narrative coherence. Nevertheless, she is one of the first characters introduced in the novel, and it ends with the image of her corpse. Bet’s strange ubiquity in *A New-England Tale*, along with the representational charity Sedgwick affords to her visionary experiences, ultimately destabilizes the novel’s immanent containment of marriage.

While all the other characters in *A New-England Tale* inhabit recognizable denominational identities, Bet is *sui generis*. The novel’s consummate religious outsider, she draws together Protestant millennialism, early Universalist theology, and aspects of nature religions into a confounding and energizing whole. She first appears in chapter 1 when she interrupts Jane’s wicked aunts while they bicker over which of them will be burdened with the care of their recently orphaned niece and chastises them for their callousness and hypocrisy. This occasions a narratorial digression to flesh out the strange, irruptive woman’s history:

> This was a middle aged woman, whose mind had been unsettled in her youth by misfortunes. . . . There were some who noticed in her quickness of feeling that indicated original sensibility, which, perhaps, had been the cause of her sufferings. . . . Wherever there was an awakening, or a camp-meeting; crazy Bet was sure to be found; she was often seen by moonlight wandering in the church-yard, plucking the nettles from the graves, and wreathing the monuments with ground-pine. She would watch for whole nights by the side of a grave in her native village, where twenty years before were deposited the remains of her lover, who was drowned on the day before they were to have been married. (13-14)

As this passage indicates, Bet’s enthusiasm, her preoccupation with the fate of the deceased, and her status as a social and religious outsider can be traced to the trauma of

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10 Sedgwick was no great lover of evangelicalism. She described one revivalist preacher whose preaching she witnessed as a “singularly wolffish looking person” whose muth “disclos[ed] black and broken teeth the decay of humanity somewhat deducting from the pure fiend” (*Power*, 139).
her fiancé’s death on the day before their wedding. This is not an arbitrary detail, either, for it marks Bet’s exclusion from participation in domestic life by transferring that union from earth to heaven.

Neither widow, wife, nor maid, Bet exists in a state of perpetually deferred reunion, and the novel repeatedly indicates that this failure of nuptial fulfillment underlies her millennial expectations. The narrator notes, for instance, that she has been seen,

> when the sun came rejoicing over the eastern mountain’s brow, and shot its first clear brilliant ray on the grave, to clap her hands, and heard to shout, “I see an angel in the sun, and he saith ‘Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such, the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years.’” (14)

That solitary ray of light, which literally points from the heavens to her lover’s grave, links Bet’s spiritual capacities and eschatological expectations to her experience of prenuptial loss. Her citation of Revelation 20, one of the central prooftexts of American pre-millennialism, further underscores this point.11

Bet confirms the origins of her spiritual eccentricity in the novel’s most electric set-piece, when she leads Jane on a midnight sojourn through the woods to the house of a dying girl. During this long sketch, which is utterly inessential to the advancement of the plot, Bet, arrayed in a crown of leaves, variously convenes with the dead, shares the tragic tale of a suicide, and communes with the heavens while declaiming lyric poetry.

11 We should not read Bet’s biblical utterances as merely signifying traits of her character and otherwise contentless. They have theological content that Sedgwick was certainly aware of. Critics who have treated Bet have tended to overemphasize and overpraise her Romantic pantheism on display in this scene, even reading her as “an alternative heroine” (Vasquez, 135). According to Sweet, for instance, Bet “encourages Jane to understand nature as divine revelation, superior to all the orthodoxies of Calvinism” (112). But Bet remains firmly within a Protestant millennial tradition, and exaggerating her pantheism distorts the theological and biographical content of her actual speech. Not only does she frequently quote passages from Revelation, she also claims to convene with the “sometime disobedient” spirits whom Christ, according to at least the prominent Universalist theologian Elhanan Winchester, raised up and posthumously saved after his crucifixion.
The most charged moment of this interlude comes when she pauses before two
inosculated beech trees, which she spins into an allegory of her deferred union:

“See ye these, child,” said she, pointing to the trees, “I knew two, who grew up thus on
the same spot of earth;—so lovingly they grew,” and she pointed to the interlacing of the
branches—“young and beautiful; but the axe was laid to the root of one—and the other
(and she pressed both her hands on her head, and screamed wildly) perished here.” A
burst of tears afforded her a sudden relief. (94)12

By pressing her hands to her temple and screaming, “here,” Bet affirms not only the role
her lover’s death played in the loss of her reason but also that his fate and hers remain,
like the two trees, intertwined across the veil. Her psychic death has relocated her to a
liminal space between the living and the dead, lending her imagination a soteriological
and eschatological hue while also keeping alive the question of the ontological status of
her deceased lover.

Bet’s apparent correspondence with the invisible world raises the question of her
status in a novel whose aesthetic we would broadly describe as realist. In her preface to
the novel, Sedgwick, while claiming that she has made “no personal allusions . . . to any
individual” insists that the one exception to this is her “sketch of a real character under
the fictitious appellation of ‘Crazy Bet’” (3, emphasis mine). Sedgwick’s biographer,
Edward Foster, identifies Susan Dunham (known locally as “Crazy Sue”) as Bet’s likely
source. Dunham was a madwoman who was a fixture in the Berkshires for many decades,
often entering residents’ homes uninvited or borrowing the occasional infant for an
afternoon.13

12 Sedgwick’s choice of the beech tree is notable. Although it’s not particularly significant for my analysis
here, beech trees are peculiar in that they occasionally grow into one another through a process called
“inosculation.” If Sedgwick was thinking of inosculated beech trees in this passage, it further emphasizes
the mortal pain of Bet’s loss.

13 In an unpublished letter to her brother from 1818, Sedgwick relates to one of her brothers a grotesque
anecdote about an encounter Crazy Sue had with a black servant named Fortune. Briefly, Fortune had been
frightened by Sue and threatened her with a fork he was holding when Sue then lifted a hammer over his
head, threatening to kill him if he did not repeat a series of statements asking for God’s forgiveness.
Clements, who does not deny Foster’s source, reads Sedgwick’s prefatory invocation of Bet as a gesture that decouples the real historical person from the fictional character, a severance that disrupts Sedgwick’s own realist effort. She contends that Crazy Bet’s significance lies in her “embodiment of a fundamental dilemma for all American writers in the nineteenth century and beyond: the capacity of language to convey the object world” (42). Bet, that is, challenges literary realism by revealing the mediation of all representation. But given the importance Sedgwick places upon her being a “real character,” Bet’s significance lies not in the way she is freed from the mimetic strictures of realism but in her expansion of what constitutes realism in a plural religious landscape. Bet becomes a characterological site for confronting experiences of the world that fail to conform to the buffered realities of liberal Christians. Nor is this kind of epistemological and representational generosity consistent across Sedgwick’s career, as evidenced by her 1849 sketch, “Magnetism Among the Shakers,” which presents a skeptical and distancing account of an elderly Shaker’s experience of magical forces. Thus, by admitting Bet’s visionary mode of being in the world as a valid perceptual reality, the novel enacts the fragilization of its immanent frame—a world where God does not speak and the dead remain safely buried—as well as its terrestrial vision of marriage.

As the gears of the marriage plot whir and buzz their way to completion, Bet recedes into the background of the narrative. Jane and Mr. Lloyd eventually marry and the novel’s “tale” concludes when the central couple returns from their Quaker wedding.

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Kenslea also suggests that Crazy Bet may have been Catharine’s means of representing the vexed love affair of her parents. Her mother, who was often institutionalized for bouts of melancholy, died young. Her father, meanwhile, experienced annual visitations from the apparition of his first wife (34-35).
in Philadelphia, “happy in each other, and devoting themselves to the good and happiness of the human family. Their good works shone before men; and ‘they, seeing them, glorified their Father in heaven’” (183). Were aesthetic completion the goal, this would have been an ideal place for the novel to conclude: the liberal couple has married, the orthodox have suffered for their beliefs, and a bright future peaks over the horizon. Even the biblical verse at the end of the sentence reaffirms the theological cornerstones of the novel (a doctrine of good works, the reliability of conscience, and glorification through virtuous action). But Sedgwick refuses to let this moment of narratological and theological closure stand as an ending, because, she writes, “there yet remains something to be told of one of the persons of our humble history, whom our readers may have forgotten” (184). That person is Bet, and by returning to her story at the end of the novel, Sedgwick rends open the careful narrative closure achieved in the previous paragraph.

Sick and dying, Bet visits Mary Hull’s house, where Mary tries to put her to bed. Bet refuses, saying, “I cannot stay here. The spirits of heaven are keeping a festival by the light of the blessed moon” (185). After remarking, “The spirit cannot soar here” (185), she sings a snatch of Alexander Pope’s “The Dying Christian to his Soul” and flees into the night. Her body is discovered the next day in the churchyard, “her head resting on the grassy mound that covered the remains of her lover” (185). This final image impresses on the reader the text’s central theological question: is the afterlife indeed a place “where there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage”? Bet’s devotion to her drowned fiancé and their perpetually deferred nuptials cannot help but raise the possibility that maybe, as Swedenborg had envisioned, there is a kind of marrying in the next life, that perhaps Bet and her fiancé might be reunited after all.
Clements contends that the “narrative supremacy of the marriage plot is significantly sidetracked by Crazy Bet” (46), but Sedgwick’s first celibate religious outsider—whose millennial visions of universal resurrection and whose death upon the grave of her lover suggest not only the eternal endurance of souls, but of their eternal union, too—reinforces rather than undermines the transcendental significance of marriage. Bet’s death, more than merely a pathetic and sentimental image, suggests the existence of an alternative marriage plot unfolding in the novel’s background, in the realm of the sketch, one whose resolution cannot not occur in this world. Those critics who have praised Bet for her creative energy (we might say her authority) by claiming that her extra-social existence renders her a paragon of female autonomy neglect the fact that Sedgwick situates Bet’s manner of being within the context of a marriage deferred.

In a deeper way, too, Sedgwick seems uneasy with ending her novel in a strictly immanent register. She intuitively senses (from a theological perspective) that, as J. Hillis Miller would observe over a century later, “no novel can be unequivocally finished, or for that matter unequivocally unfinished” (7). The conviction of the existence of another world, however remote, and Bet’s tenuous contact with that world occasions Sedgwick’s digression at the end away from “man’s stories” and toward “God’s plot” even though this move fragilizes the novel’s liberal-theological courtship plot.

We are offered a glimpse of that fragilization earlier in the novel when, during their sojourn in the woods, Bet urges Jane to “worship with [her]” (94). Jane obliges, and kneels with her, having “caught,” the narrator tells us, “a spark of her companion’s enthusiasm” (94). At close proximity, Bet’s “enthusiasm” is actually contagious. Bet creates for Jane a linguistic and affective world with the capacity to envelop her. Jane’s
own implicit commitment to religious forbearance enables her participation and momentary conversion. Elsewhere in the episode, Jane tempers Bet’s more extravagant claims and visions, but here she succumbs to the charge of the moment.

This scene becomes emblematic of the novel’s relationship to Bet. By admitting Bet’s perspective into *A New-England Tale*, Sedgwick risks catching the “spark of her . . . enthusiasm,” and it renders the novel’s immanent frame contestable rather than absolute. Sedgwick’s blending of the “tale” and the “sketch” creates the generic conditions for the latter, at the last instant, to displace the former and unsettle its central terms.

Sedgwick’s ambitious second novel, *Redwood*, also dramatizes the tension between a liberal courtship plot and a celibacy plot grounded in the history of Protestant heterodoxy, and to reconcile these two narrative vectors she assembles new conceptual frameworks for rising above the fray of competing theological claims and sensory experiences, striving to represent the lives of celibate, heterodox women without allowing the narrative’s world to unravel as a consequence of their disruptive excess.

**ii. Voluntarism among the “World’s People”**

*Redwood* is a quintessential expression of the aspiration of American literary narratives in the early nineteenth century to encompass the nation in its totality. It reaches beyond the regional world of *A New-England Tale* to treat the geography, manners, history, social types, and politics of the republic in a single, uninterrupted narrative. What distinguishes Sedgwick’s second novel from other similarly ambitious narratives is its installment of religious voluntarism as a thematic cornerstone, exploring the multitude of
forms religious choice could assume and developing new categories to articulate the boundaries of the voluntary principle. Although Sedgwick accepted the voluntary principle as an indisputable fact of religious participation and, indeed, even embodied it through her own conversion to Unitarianism in the 1820s, she was only ever a cautious partisan. Late in her life, she lamented to her niece that under the “voluntary system . . . a man may revert to heathenism (and some do!) and no man call him to account” (Power, 95). In Redwood, this ambivalence expresses itself through her representation of Shaker society, the most famous celibate religious community in the US. The novel’s celibacy plot, contained in the spiritual autobiography of the Shaker eldress Susan Allen, resists the slack critiques of Shakerism Sedgwick elsewhere in the novel verges on endorsing. The pressure Susan’s narrative exerts on the implicit norms of the novel’s liberal Christian framework spurs the novel’s drama of voluntarism, obliging Sedgwick to theorize a metareligious faith acknowledging the contingency of all religions and to develop extradiegetic modes of religious representation that insulate the narrative voice from the contagion of enthusiasm.

Redwood begins when the atheistic Virginian Henry Redwood injures himself in a carriage accident in Massachusetts while traveling with his vain daughter, Caroline. The two are forced to stay in the humble New England home of the Lenox family while Henry convalesces. We come to learn that Henry had been, in his youth, a student of the philosophes, reading voraciously in “all that reckless and busy infidelity has invented” (44). During the same period, he had also covertly married an innocent rural girl only to abandon her while he luxuriated in Europe with his bachelor friend and mentor in infidelism, Alsop. Predictably, the young, abandoned bride perished, but not before
urging her errant husband to change his ways and, unbeknownst to Henry, birthing a daughter. The girl, who has been raised as Ellen Bruce in Massachusetts, now lives with the Lenoxes, the same family that cares for Henry and Caroline (his daughter from his loveless, arranged second marriage) in the wake of their accident. Ellen’s narrative of paternal discovery lends the novel its momentum and occasions its contentious marriage plot, as Ellen and Caroline vie for the charming, but financially insecure, Charles Westall. Although Ellen Bruce’s tale is at the center of Redwood, much of the critical attention paid to the novel was aimed at its controversial Shaker subplot.

The character linking the Shaker plot to the main plot is Emily Allen, a girl recently adopted by the Lenoxes, whose own family, shortly after immigrating to the United States, had temporarily joined the Shakers. All but one of them, Susan Allen, left the community to live among “the world’s people.” After the remaining members of the Allen family die, Susan reclaims Emily for the Shakers who, during her years in the world, had grown attached to James Lenox, a romantic interest in direct conflict with the strictures of Shaker practices. These competing impulses engender a crisis of faith that eventually convinces Emily to leave Shaker society and marry James, a decision made much easier following a sensational episode in which the seductive, charismatic Shaker elder Reuben Harrington kidnaps her and abandons her with an alcoholic Indian while he tries to embezzle money from a Shaker bank.14

The narratives of Emily and Susan Allen comprise the novel’s most concentrated inquiry into the limits of religious voluntarism, but this depends upon categorical distinctions Sedgwick draws elsewhere in the novel. The first of these is between

14 See Morse, xvi.
accidental and essential faiths. An accidental faith, the narrator asserts, is that “which knows no reason for its existence, but is the result of being born in a Christian community, and of an occasional attendance” (44). In Sedgwick’s spiritual economy, accidental faiths are the faiths of religious monopolies, inhibiting the promptings of conscience and weakening the consciences of their adherents. Henry Redwood, whose casual relationship to established Anglicanism ultimately leads him to infidelism, is the chief example of this.\(^{15}\) The obverse of accidental faith is an essential faith, which an individual enters into voluntarily, and the drama of voluntarism is the interior transformation necessary for an individual to choose an essential faith over an accidental one. The Shaker subplot is a particularly rich illustration of this, since Shakerism, with its odd rituals, its insistence on celibacy, and its segregated communities, was an object of fascination, scorn, and fear for Americans throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Shakerism is an essential faith subject to suspicion, depending as it did on an ethic of renunciation and the otherworldliness this reinforces. In this reading of the sect, Shaker society is the exemplum of an otherworldly faith that eventually proves itself functionally equivalent to the French infidelism decried elsewhere in the novel, which is nowhere more evident than in how Reuben Harrington exploits his religious authority to kidnap Emily Allen, a sensational dramatization of otherworldliness as worldliness in disguise. Such an interpretation of Shakerism reflects the world as liberal Christianity perceived it since, in the eyes of many antebellum liberal theologians, “orthodoxy and infidelism were closely related, often as cause and effect. The outrages of orthodoxy bred

\(^{15}\) Although Anglicanism, at the time Sedgwick wrote *Redwood*, was no longer the established church of Virginia in the novel’s present, it would have been during Henry Redwood’s youth.
infidels” (Dorrien, xxi). Liberal religion had posited itself a “third way” (Dorrien, xxi) between these extremes. Although Redwood invites this mapping, the novel’s actual representation of these two poles is asymmetrical. Sedgwick happily throws the infidels to the wolves, but with the Shakers—who are framed here not as orthodox Calvinists, but as sectarian dogmatists—she wavers, a consequence of the fragilizing presence of Susan Allen.

Just as Sedgwick insists on the reality of Crazy Bet in her preface to A New-England Tale, in the preface to the second edition of Redwood, she defends her representation of the Shakers on the basis of experiential knowledge, claiming “an advantage from long residence in their neighborhood, from frequent opportunities of personal observation, [and] from a kindly intimacy with some of their members” (xiv). This, she contends, supplements the “imperfect knowledge . . . obtained from reading their few books” (xiv). She also distinguishes Aunt Susan as having been modeled after a real “sister, a woman of rare gifts . . . whose history . . . I have told substantially as she related it to me” (xv). Sedgwick’s excessive insistence on her personal contact with the Shakers underscores again the importance she attributed to mimetic fidelity where religious groups were concerned.

Susan is initially described as a “half crazy woman and a half saint” (79), terms that closely resemble descriptions of Crazy Bet, but when she appears in the novel for the first time, the characterization becomes much more flattering: her face reveals a “habitual independence and native dignity” and her eye “beam[s] with intelligence and tenderness” (80). Even Debby, trying to account for the influence she exerts over Emily, reluctantly admits that Susan possesses a “kind of nat’ral authority, as if she was a born-queen” (82).
These qualities make her particularly amenable to the austerity—punctuated by episodes of orgiastic excess—required of life in the Shaker community.

Susan’s spiritual autobiography, which she recounts to Emily in chapter 14, constitutes the novel’s celibacy plot. Her narrative, which is also a brief history of the first Shaker community in the US, begins by rehearsing the familiar concerns about the dangers of the sect and the way those fears were assuaged. Having been introduced to the Shakers by her parents, Susan’s anxieties about the strangeness of their society melt away when she is brought before the founder of the Shakers, Ann Lee. Like one of Max Weber’s charismatics, Ann speaks to Susan with a “celestial melody in [her] voice . . . and a weight in all her words” (251) and her face reveals “a boldness and innocence that seemed, as it were, like the truth and gentleness of the gospel she preached” (251). Once convinced of the veracity of Ann Lee’s dispensation and the depravity of all natural desire, Susan joins the Shaker community and, in doing so, renounces her lover, William Harwood. Despite the magnetic pull of affection, Susan remains steadfast, giving into sentiment only once, years later, when the destitute Harwood dies drunk and miserable at her doorstep. Her final suppression of instinctual feeling she describes as “the last struggle of nature” (254). Although Emily recoils from her aunt’s narrative, at no point does the narrative intervene to comment on Susan’s story of how she came to embrace the Shaker dispensation and to reject marriage and a life among the world’s people.

Despite what are obviously Sedgwick’s ethical and theological qualms over the suppression of her natural sentiment on the grounds of its assumed depravity, we are meant to take Susan’s story seriously as an example of how Shakerism could come to be embraced as an essential faith. But this possibility does not alter the fact that Shakerism
was still a religious community founded on the exclusivist claims of a new dispensation and isolated from American society both socially and sexually. In order to shield its ecumenical outlook from Shakerism’s socio-religious worldview, the novel assumes a narratological distance from Shaker society by adopting representational strategies drawn from the secular social sciences. In this way, the narration in Redwood is markedly different than in A New-England Tale, which, as I demonstrated in the previous section, indulges the unique perceptual reality of its celibate religious outsider.

Chapter 15 of Redwood, which immediately follows Aunt Susan’s spiritual autobiography, substitutes the intimate and unmediated account of the previous chapter for the dispassionate one of professional history: “The Shaker society at Hancock, in Massachusetts, is one of the eldest establishments of this sect, which has extended its limits far beyond the anticipations of the ‘unbelieving world,’ and now boasts that its outposts have advanced to the frontiers of civilization—to Kentucky—Ohio—and Indiana” (256). The next several pages, which the narrator apologetically excuses as a “long digression” (260), are a historical essay on Shaker society, a model of thick description. As she meticulously enumerates the practical benefits of Shaker society— their commitment to orderliness, their heterodox beliefs, and their attitudes towards child rearing—the narrator’s tone remains removed but sympathetic throughout, establishing a distance between the narrator and the society she represents; the voice of the liberal Protestant narrator slides into that of the secular ethnographer.

Besides being a history, the long digression on the particulars of Shaker life also establishes a distance between the narrator and the society she represents, as it transitions from a general outline of actual Shaker history to its description of worship in the
fictional community at Hancock, where Reuben Harrington is preaching and leading a
Shaker dance. The narrator characterizes the Shaker dance as a collective performance of
religious conformity. The “insane worship,” she unsparingly observes, proceeds with
unsettling discipline, “as if it was composed of so many automatons, their arms rising and
falling mechanically” (263). The disparity between this detached description of Shaker
ritual as an expression of blind obedience and the sympathetic, unmediated, and highly
particularized account of Aunt Susan’s conversion creates a problem for the novel’s
voluntaristic vision that is resolved characterologically through Emily Allen’s apostasy.

At the apex of her spiritual crisis, Emily wanders to the Shaker cemetery, where
she meets an elderly gardener tending the flowers around the graves. Sensing her turmoil,
he comforts her, saying, “You are wearied with this kind of strange, still life, child. . . . it
is nat’ral, it is nat’ral—I don’t blame you for it. I always feel sorry to see an young and
tender plant put into soil it don’t love; it never takes root fairly—never thrives” (273). He
admits that while he is “in the main a believer” in the Shaker creed, the Shakers “are
foolish about some things” (274), and advises Emily to leave Hancock and return to her
family. The old man’s counsel strikes Emily with the force of a revelation:

Though not a very skilful reasoner, she came to the just conclusion, that such Shakers as
the crafty Harrington and the frank gardener, were not Shakers by divine impulse; that
the ties which attached others to the society were not in all cases indissoluble—and that,
perhaps, the society itself did not exist by prescriptive divine right. (274)

This awareness of the immanent forces which give rise to religious communities and
religious dispensations undermines the exclusivist claims of the Shakers and Aunt Susan
without denying the virtues of the sect. More importantly, the floral metaphor of the
gardeners—echoing the couplet from Crabbe that Sedgwick cites in *A New-England
Tale*—leads to her intuition that the various religions are better suited for some
individuals than others just as certain soils are better suited for some plants than others. In *A New-England Tale*, however, some faiths, like Hopkinsian Calvinism, are detrimental to individuals. And unlike Jane Elton, who converts from Calvinism to Quakerism, Emily does not convert *from* Shakerism *to* something else. Her new awareness of the contingency of all religious claims leads her to a theological position that sees religious plurality and optionality as sufficient in itself.

Whereas *A New-England Tale* embeds its characters and its narrator alike on a level plane of competing theological claims, introducing the startling visionary ruptures of its otherwise confident immanence, *Redwood* exerts a far greater degree of formal control, leveraging religious voluntarism as a meta-religious concept above the fray of theological competition. Of course, Sedgwick’s voluntarism is not without its own commitments, but these get quietly implanted in its prospective outlook. The introduction of dispassionate ethnographic description further secures an objective, conventionally secular stance that allows Sedgwick’s narrator immunity from the complexities of lived religious practices, from the weeds as well as the flowers.

The sensational conclusion of the Shaker subplot obliquely anticipates the subject of Sedgwick’s third novel. After Reuben Harrington kidnaps Emily, he leaves her at the rude hut of “Sooduck the Indian,” an alcoholic medicine man, whom he bribes with liquor. Sooduck is a grotesque caricature, a gothic prop transported to the American scene, with a “visage in which brutal sensuality was mingled with fierceness that neither time nor event could tame” (287). However, even though Sedgwick includes the Indian solely as a gothic prop, she attempts to add some shades to the character in her description of his profession.
Emily remembers having “heard this man described, and marvelous medical skill imputed to him” (287). Hung throughout his hut are the “signs of his profession,” which include the “rattles of rattlesnakes,” “skins of snakes,” “the plumage of birds,” and “bunches of herbs and root” (287). Having catalogued these objects, the narrator intervenes to comment on the efficacy of aboriginal magic. “Without taxing our credulity to believe in all the marvelous cures that are ascribed to them,” she suggests, “we see no reason why the simples they extract from the bosom of our kind mother earth should not prove as innocent and quite as efficacious as the drugs of foreign soils” (287). Unlike the mysterious Nelema in Hope Leslie, whose prophetic and medicinal capacities are given more credence, Sedgwick here struggles to apologize for indigenous practices from a narrowly secular perspective.

The specter of the degraded Indian troubles the resolution of Redwood’s sensationalized Shaker subplot. In a novel where African slaves, impoverished immigrants, Southern aristocrats, and orphans are afforded conversion narratives intended to afford them dignity, the fact that the novel’s sole representative of indigenous culture amounts to nothing more than an exhausted literary device strikes a dissonant chord with the novel’s ecumenical ambitions. Hope Leslie, Sedgwick’s next novel, attempts to remedy this by placing indigenous beliefs and practices at its theological and narratological centers. For Sedgwick, the return to the early colonial period also stands as something of a test of her ecumenism, how and in what ways a literary aesthetics devoted to an expansive representation of religious difference can accommodate forms of non-Christian religiosity.
iii. Natural Religion and the Novel

*Hope Leslie* marked Sedgwick’s entrance into the flourishing field of the historical romance. Consciously writing to and against the early nationalist frontier romances of both Cooper and Child, Sedgwick’s third novel further raises the historical stakes and narratological complexity of her fiction, but here the formal problems posed by the representation of religious plurality are retrofitted onto the emergent colonial scene, which adds Native American religion (figured as an exemplary form of natural religion) to the sprawl of Protestant sects. Even more so than in Sedgwick’s previous novel, *Hope Leslie*’s courtship plot enacts a union symbolizing the formation of national identity and the transcendence of theological provincialism. Its celibacy plot is likewise expanded, no longer confined to interspersed sketches or a peripheral subplot, but actually constituting a rival courtship plot, the stakes of which are the racial and religious identity of the New World.

Hope Leslie is the novel’s eponymous heroine and its representative of religious capaciousness. A more impetuous Mary Conant, Hope manifests a “superiority to some of the prejudices of the age” since “those persons she most loved, and with whom she had lived from her infancy, were of variant religious sentiments” (127). Her exposure to a plurality of beliefs enables her to rise above theological difference, which in turn “permitted her mind to expand beyond the contracted boundaries of sectarian faith. Her religion was pure and disinterested—no one, therefore, should doubt its intrinsic value, though it had not been coined into a particular form, or received the current impress” (128). In a sentence that closely mirrors Emily Allen’s revelation about sectarian

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16 Of course, the conflation of natural religion with Indian religion is a troublesome one and I do not wish to be perceived as naively concurring with Sedgwick’s rendering of Indian religion. See Harrison 126.
fallibility in *Redwood*, the narrator tells us that Hope “was led to doubt [the Puritans’] infallibility” after having heard her Anglican aunt Grafton “rail . . . at some of [their] peculiarities” (128). Where Sedgwick’s earlier heroines inhabit either a somewhat arbitrary sectarian form (Jane Elton) or are betwixt and between forms (Ellen Bruce), Hope’s religion, having expanded “beyond the contracted boundaries” of denomination or sect, is beyond form.

The novel’s celibate religious outsider is Magawisca, the daughter of a Pequot chieftain and a first-hand witness to the savagery of the Pequot War, which she “recites” for Everell Fletcher early in the novel in a remarkable act of subversive historiography. Magawisca represents Sedgwick’s first attempt to fully imagine a native character, but she is also the heir of Crazy Bet and Aunt Susan. Whereas Crazy Bet was relegated to interspersed sketches and Aunt Susan to a decentered subplot, Magawisca is, for the first third of *Hope Leslie*, the novel’s sole heroine and the object of Everell’s affections. Magawisca’s prominence in the novel should not be unreflectively celebrated, for Sedgwick is not immune to the representational perils immanent to the New World historical novel and the romance. As Michael D. Bell notes, Magawisca, in a strictly mechanical sense, functions later in the novel as a mere foil to Hope Leslie, acting either as the “dark heroine” who exists only to “rival to the fair heroine” or as the exemplar of “the perils of [wild] nature” against Hope’s “tame nature” (218). Without dismissing this functional role out of hand, her predominance in the early chapters of the novel and her

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17 The novel does include another celibate character, Esther Downing, whom I have opted not to treat. My reasoning for this is that she exists as a prototype for the sort of single woman Sedgwick will feature in her subsequent novels, a liberal Christian helpmate for the central couple whose primary aims are modest social reform. *Hope Leslie* is the novel in which this shift from the celibate religious outsider to the liberal Christian maid occurs. See also Gould.
subsequent rejection of the central couple to fulfill political purposes independent of the marriage plot far exceeds the conventional part Bell ascribes to her.

Sedgwick’s earlier avatars of the celibate religious outsider exerted a fragilizing effect on those novels’ liberal Christian worldview by embodying religious forms that were antithetical to Sedgwick’s own ecumenical Protestantism. Crazy Bet’s theology, grounded in a unique perceptual reality, undermines the immanent frame of *A New-England Tale*, while Susan Allen’s spiritual autobiography models a sincere commitment to dogmatism that troubles Emily Allen’s belief in the contingency of all dispensations. But the religious outsider in *Hope Leslie*, Magawisca, is at first the embodiment of a natural religion that seems to be in concert with Sedgwick’s own beliefs. When Sedgwick returns to the site of New World encounter, she imagines not unbridgeable gaps of difference, but a foundational unity based in the intuitive “natural religion” of Native Americans, which she then deploys as a curative to Protestant factionalism. To assert a true religion underlying all historically particular religious forms requires her, however, to ignore the specificity of Indian practice and differentiation between tribes.

As with *A New-England Tale* and *Redwood*, Sedgwick discusses the status of this figure in the preface to *Hope Leslie*. But where she had before insisted on the reality of these characters, here, in her first historical novel, she departs from that pattern when she asserts that Magawisca “has no prototype among the aborigines of this country. Without citing Pocahontas, or any other individual as authority, it may be sufficient to remark that in such delineations, we are confined not to the actual, but the possible” (4, emphasis mine). This is a surprising turn, in the first instance because Sedgwick teases Pocahontas as a ready-made historical source for Magawisca, begging the comparison without
endorsing it. Sedgwick’s assertion in her first two novels that her heterodox characters were grounded in actuality gave credence to what would have appeared to a genteel audience to be eccentric beliefs and practices, but here Sedgwick underscores Magawisca’s fictionality. Although we might attribute this to Sedgwick’s recognition of the gaps and distortions of a settler colonial archive (and thus the necessity of supplementing the Pocahontas figure with the materials of fiction) it nevertheless affords her more representational latitude.

Why then, if Magawisca exists only in the realm of the possible, does Sedgwick invoke Pocahontas? Like Pocahontas—in certain of her legendary constructions—Magawisca spontaneously and dramatically presents herself as a vicarious sacrifice for a white male captive, but where Pocahontas’s conversion to Christianity remained an integral part of her narrative, Magawisca retains her native religiosity. Despite numerous entreaties from Everell and others, and despite her exposure to Christian scripture, she never joins the “catechised Indians” (293). This difference, as Gary Dyer claims, revises the Pocahontas myth in order to “demythologize the choice involved in Pocahontas’s conversion to Christianity and her union with an Englishman” (307).

Magawisca’s refusals indicate the significance Sedgwick attributes to the independent validity and sufficiency of natural religion. Even though the novel’s characters do not always take this position (even Hope is aghast at the possibility that her

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18 Paul Thifault highlights the convention of linking the Pocahontas narrative to anti-Catholic discourse when he contends that “in terms of American literary nationalism, Pocahontas’s first appearance in US drama exists at the intersection of religious, racial, and expansionist discourses. Her initial viability as a symbol for American identity seems to owe to the fact that her wedding ‘contract’ vents Protestant fears about the murky political allegiances of Roman Catholic immigrants at the same time that it presents white territorial expansion into native lands as the consummation of a consensual, interracial agreement” (14-15). Thifault’s argues further that the Pocahontas plays of the eighteenth century reveal a “longstanding Catholic-Indian connection” that frontier romancers in the nineteenth century “adapted . . . to engage with contemporary political issues” (27).
sister, Faith, might have “gone native” after she is captured by Magawisca’s tribe), Sedgwick endorses Magawisca’s theological utterances throughout. A “bright witness to the beauty, the independence, and the immortality of virtue” (354), she has also reaped the benefits of European knowledge and been exposed to the “revealed” texts, which have confirmed for her not the necessity of conversion, but the “natural equality of all the children of the Great Spirit” (276). Magawisca’s theology is not an accurate depiction of Pequot beliefs in the seventeenth century, but a de-Christianized cover for Sedgwick’s own liberal theology, which might leads us not merely to browbeat Sedgwick for her misrepresentation of native religiosity but also to appreciate her desire to see in Indian religion the lineaments of a universal liberal theology.

Magawisca’s explicit statements of belief emphasize the unity and sufficiency of the Great Spirit (“There may be those that need other lights; but to me, the Great Spirit is visible in the life-creating sun” [198]), the correspondences between the natural world and the spiritual world (“the Great Spirit, and his ministers, are everywhere present and visible to the eye of the soul that loves him; nature is but his interpreter; her forms are but bodies for his spirit” [354]), and the transcendental beauty of moral living (“Life is naught but the image of the Great Spirit—and he hath most of it, who sends it back most true and unbroken, like the perfect image of the clear heavens, in the still lake” [270]). These statements reflect the theology espoused by Unitarians and early Transcendentalism in the late 1820s, albeit without reference to the advent of Christ. By routing these convictions through indigenous beliefs, Sedgwick posits liberal theology as natural theology, a true and universal religion free from the problems posed by the regional and historical particularity of the Christ story.
Natural religion has a complex history dating back to Augustine and has never been, as Peter Byrne notes, a “unitary notion” (1). Broadly, it describes a theological system derived from reason and natural observation without reference to divine revelation or scripture. Among the earliest and most astute explicators of this particular distinction in the US was Ebenezer Gay, the eighteenth-century liberal minister and an important theological forefather of Channing and Emerson. In his 1759 lecture “Natural Religion as Distinguished from Revealed,” he defends natural religion as

that which bare Reason discovers and dictates . . . which is possible to be discover’d by the Light, and practis’d by the Power of Nature, [and] consists in rend’ring all those inward and outward Acts of Respect, Worship and Obedience unto God, which are suitable to the Excellence of his all-perfect Nature. (46)

Revealed religion is thus only “an Additional to Natural” (52), a supplement whose sole value is its capacity to direct human reason towards duties and truths already present to it but that it might otherwise overlook.

Late in Hope Leslie, the narrator echoes Gay by using scripture to assert the superfluity of revealed religion. Just prior the sudden and gruesome combustion of the Catholic seducer Sir Philip Gardiner, the narrator pauses for a brief theological meditation:

Nature has her ministers that correspond with the world within the breast of man. The words, “my kingdom is within you,” are worth all the metaphysical discoveries ever made by the unassisted human wisdom. If all is right in that “kingdom,” beautiful forms and harmonious voices surround us, discoursing music. . . . Man cannot live in tranquil disobedience to the law of virtue, inscribed on his soul by the finger of God. (339)

This short passage is the novel’s theological centerpiece and anticipates what will become a tenet of liberal Christian theology in the following decades, voiced by Channing in his famous sermon “Likeness to God,” by Emerson, who, remarking on this same passage, would claim that heaven, which is the kingdom of God, is the “state of holiness itself,” residing “wholly in the character, and in that alone” (3:27, 25). For
Sedgwick, the citation of Luke 17:21 (“my kingdom is within you”), is intended to resolve both a formal and a theological problem, enabling her to posit a universal religion available to reason and independent of any particular sect or church. But the passage itself follows a curious logic. It affirms the natural, and therefore immanent, responsiveness of the human subject to moral laws and the beauty of ethical living, yet insists this insight can only be communicated via a revelation unavailable to “unassisted human wisdom.” Revelation, therefore, serves merely as the means by which a pre-existent truth makes itself available to reason.

The essential (if not practical) superfluity of revelation is given institutional and narratological expression in the novel’s commitment to anti-formalism, an important and explicit feature of *Hope Leslie* and helps to understand how Sedgwick’s relationship to religious plurality develops within her fictional practice after *Redwood*. In that novel, Sedgwick posited religious voluntarism as a meta-theological position while at the same time defending (and keeping her distance from) the essential faiths of individuals. *Hope Leslie*, by contrast, recovers an eighteenth-century discourse of natural religion in order to radicalize the voluntary principle endorsed in *Redwood*. Nature—and the religion that emerges from it—exceeds ecclesiastical, legal, and ritual forms of containment, giving the lie to Protestant divisiveness: instead of requiring that one have a formal religious identity (*New-England Tale*), or acknowledging the suitability of different temperaments for different sects while remaining above them (*Redwood*), Sedgwick verges in *Hope Leslie* on effacing difference altogether (although, as we will see below, she finally reasserts it) such that disestablished, ecumenical religion becomes true religion, and
rather than flowering in the ruins of New World religious establishments, it precedes them.

The limits of ecclesiastical formalism are investigated through the exertions of the Puritan establishment in Massachusetts, which enforces orthodoxy not through dicta but within the multivocal form of the heresy trial. The novel contains three such trials, each of which nominally attempts to reaffirm orthodoxy through argumentation. The first trial is that of Nelema, an Indian healer accused of witchcraft for curing a venomous snakebite. Condemned to die by the Puritan magistrates, Hope secretly frees her. The second is that of Samuel Gorton, the famous proto-Universalist, whom Sedgwick calls “the Swedenborg of his day” (172). Hope, interested in Gorton’s “genuine enthusiasm and mysticism,” cannot “bear” the attacks made on him during the sham trial (172). Magawisca’s is the novel’s third and final trial and differs from the previous ones as a consequence of Magawisca’s moving testimony on her own behalf, which circumvents the formalized procedures of the event by speaking directly to the hearts and minds of the audience. Her final speech generates a “contagious” feeling among the audience that causes “every voice, save her judges, [to] shout[] ‘liberty!—liberty! grant the prisoner liberty!’” (309). “Reason” and “nature,” in this instant, vie for the right to pass judgment on her: “[G]uided by the best lights they possessed, deciding against her—the voice of nature crying out for her” (310). Sedgwick, of course, sides with the “voice of nature,” which articulates a truth in excess of the constraints exercised by the defenders of orthodoxy. In these moments of unification under the aegis of nature, we can see how Native American religiosity becomes in Hope Leslie not one form of belief competing with others, but a confirmation of the falsehood of Christianity’s sectarian tendencies.
This, however, raises the uncomfortable question of whether the natural religion practiced by the Pequot is, in fact, the true universal religion and Christianity merely a superfluous addition to it. While Magawisca’s embodiment of natural religion exposes the limitations of Puritan establishment in particular and religious formalism in general, literary formalism intervenes to do what religious establishments cannot. Through most of the novel, Sedgwick de-Christianizes “true religion” in order to universalize it, but at its conclusion, faced with the possibility of allowing native religion to stand for universal religion, she re-Christianizes it.

During Magawisca’s departure, Sedgwick reasserts the historical specificity of the Pequot in a final effort to re-particularize native religion, to assert the superiority of the Christian dispensation, and to refigure the implications latent in her image of “the consecrated church planted on the rock of heathen sacrifice” (74). Standing in the woods with Hope and Everell prior to her final departure from the novel, Magawisca, “not, for a moment, overcoming her deep invincible sense of the wrongs her injured race had sustained” (349), explains why she cannot join the happy pair as their exotic third:

My people have been spoiled—we cannot take as a gift that which is not our own—the law of vengeance is written on our hearts—you say you have a written rule of forgiveness—it may be better—if ye would be guided by it—it is not for us—the Indian and the white man can no more mingle, and become one, than day and night. (349)

This passage, which serves as the novel’s condensed statement on the historical rupture at its heart, is deeply fraught. The replacement of standard punctuation marks with dashes introduces a stylistic staccato and grammatical ambiguity that troubles the logical relationship between the disjointed clauses. In later editions of the novel, the punctuation of these lines was altered for clarity:
My people have been spoiled; we cannot take as a gift that which is our own; the law of vengeance is written on our hearts: you say you have a written rule of forgiveness—it may be better if ye would be guided by it; it is not for us: the Indian and the white man can no more mingle and become one than day and night. (Sedgwick [1842], 230)

The differences between the two are subtle but significant. In the second version, the punctuation divides the passage into two distinct parts, with the first being a diagnosis of the differences between an Indian “law of vengeance” and a white “rule of forgiveness” and the second a statement of the irreconcilability of the two. The single em-dash separating these two logical units lends them a visual balance and draws a stark distinction between them. But in the original version, the logical relationship between the two thoughts is held in suspense. The crux of this is the isolated phrase, “It may be better,” poised suspensefully between the conditional it clearly anticipates and the earlier clause it potentially modifies. In other words, “it may be better” could be introducing “if ye would be guided by it,” but it could also be problematizing the assumed preeminence of the “rule of forgiveness”: “you say you have a written rule of forgiveness—it may be better [than the law of vengeance],” but it may not.

This ambiguity is significant because it continues to hint at the ways in which the “written rule of forgiveness,” the counterintuitive centerpiece of revealed religion, might be undermined at the very moment Sedgwick invokes it to differentiate Anglo-European and Indian religion. This also invites the question as to what exactly the nature and origins of “the law of vengeance” are, since, on its surface, this “law” seems to contradict Sedgwick’s earlier declaration that all people have had the “law of virtue . . . inscribed on [their] soul[s] by the finger of God” (339). If it is God who inscribes the “law of virtue,” who bears responsibility for engraving the “law of vengeance”? One possible answer is history.
Hope Leslie is highly attuned to the travesties committed by Anglo-European settler colonists upon indigenous peoples in the New World, and it might be that the disastrous effects of colonialism are responsible for how the “law of vengeance” came to be impressed on Pequot hearts as well as for Magawisca’s conscious choice—speaking here as representative for her people—not to embrace the “written rule of forgiveness.”

Given what the bearers of that rule perpetrated, it is not unimaginable that the law of vengeance “may be better.”

The final twist in this vacillating passage comes when Magawisca rejects the “written rule of forgiveness” by saying simply, “It is not for us.” Again, ambiguities abound, clustering around that troublesome “for.” Does Magawisca mean to challenge Christianity’s claim to universality by insisting that it was written for some people but not for Indians. Is it the Christian failure to be “guided by it” that prevents its practice? Or is Magawisca simply stating a collective preference, a fundamental ill-suitedness of the Christian message to Indian experience? At various points the novel proffers evidence for all these possibilities, whether it be that the “most serious obstacle to the progress of the Christian religion . . . [is] the contrariety between its divine principle and the conduct of its professors” (53), or that Indians are “restrained [in their compassion] by their interpretation of natural justice” (74). The passage, condensed and fragmented as it is, obfuscates the cause of Magawisca’s departure. Sedgwick does not necessarily negate the universality and sufficiency of natural religion the novel elsewhere ratifies, but Magawisca’s inability to embrace the “written rule of forgiveness,” which may only be the result of historical experience, nevertheless reinforces the superiority of Christianity within Sedgwick’s spiritual economy even as it invites readings undercutting it. The
written rule, contingent though it may be, is the sliver of difference allowing Hope to assert herself as the liberal Protestant heroine and Magawisca to recede into the wilderness.

Magawisca’s departure removes her simultaneously as a romantic rival for Everell and also as a potential (unmarried) helpmate of the symbolically overdetermined young republican couple as they enact their fraught allegory of national beginnings.19 Her celibacy plot poses the most serious threat to the success and future couple, and when she finally leaves the novel’s purview, she does so to pursue a vocation as a leader of her people, taking her religion with her. What remains is Hope’s anti-formalist New World religion, which augments natural religion with a minimum of Christian revelation. Hers is a religion that, because it exceeds its recognizable forms, can become the Christian secularism Sedgwick had first envisioned in *A New-England Tale*, an impermeable and default background for social action, moral deliberation, and aesthetic realism.

iv. The Return of the Repressed Celibate

References to religious plurality virtually disappear from Sedgwick’s next two novels, *Clarence* (1830), a novel of manners set in New York City, and *The Linwoods* (1835), a historical romance about the Revolutionary War. After *The Linwoods*, Sedgwick would not publish another long work of narrative fiction for two decades, experimenting instead with didactic tales, travelogues, and short stories. But in 1857, a

19 Sedgwick’s own family history was entangled with the practices of Indian removal in the eighteenth century. See Karen Woods Weierman for a thorough analysis of how the captivity narrative of Eunice Williams (a distant Sedgwick relative who became the model for Faith Leslie) became a recurrent item of Sedgwick family lore and of the direct role Theodore Sedgwick played in Indian removal: he bought his “first property, site of what would become the Sedgwick homestead . . . from Elisabeth Wuwaumpequinaunt, widow of Daniel, who was killed during the Revolution” (427). Sedgwick, argues Weierman, layers the experience of the Stockbridge Indians atop her revisionist history of the Pequot War.
decade before she died, she published her final novel, *Married or Single?*, which stands as her most sustained and nuanced engagement with the social value of spinsterhood and the lived realities of marriage. While its title strips the foundational narratological question of Sedgwick’s oeuvre down to its bones, the novel also finds Sedgwick, in her dotage, returning to the celibate religious outsider, whose presence in the text is reduced to a single climactic chapter.

Sedgwick introduces Ida Roorbach, an artist and medium, after the novel’s untamed heroine, Grace Herbert, receives a letter from her wealthy and deceitful suitor, Horace Copley. Unsure how to interpret Copley’s declarations of attachment, Grace visits the famed medium in her meticulously curated home. As she crosses the threshold of Ida Roorbach’s room, the narrator provides an intimate description of the mysterious woman and her crowded quarters.

In one sense, Ida Roorbach is an ancient figure, the most recent iteration of a long and ancient line of oracular women, variously described as a “Pythoness,” a “sybil,” an “oracle,” and a “seeress.” At the same time, she is also aggressively modern (her house brims with phrenological heads and a library consisting of Carlyle, Emerson, and Mesmer) and peculiarly American, the daughter of a “Dutch father” and “a Yankee itinerant teacher” (208) who “probably owed her spiritual inquisitiveness to the maternal source, as the Dutch superstitions were of the material order, concerning themselves chiefly with haunted houses, and human subjects” (208). This latter genealogy, sensitive as it is to the mysteries of materiality, links her to traditions and theologies in New England whose origins can be traced to the radical reformation, of which Sedgwick’s first
religious outsider, Crazy Bet, was also an inheritor. But where Bet receives her visions from on high, Ida Roorbach detects the unseen things circulating through this world.

The recollection of Bet here is not incidental, for Sedgwick clearly intends Ida Roorbach as a reflective return to the initial formation of her literary and sexual identity, when a little tract tale she was writing took a sudden “turn” and became a novel. This is most clear when Grace spies a “ponderous volume of Emanuel Swedenborg” (208) open on Ida’s table, “and the thought crossed her mind that it might serve her oracle instead of the intoxicating fumes of the Delphic cave” (208). Sedgwick does not disclose the title of the book, but it is almost certainly *Conjugial Love*, given that it was Swedenborg’s most popular work among nineteenth-century Americans and that it is also the most apropos of his visionary tomes to Grace’s dilemma. In it, some angels, angels, seeing Swedenborg “meditating on conjugal love” (53), transport him into heaven to deliver an elaborate visionary explication of Jesus’s response to the Sadducees that in Heaven “there is neither marrying, nor giving in marriage.” Sedgwick’s recollection of this volume and this verse transports us back to the central exegetical problem animating her first novel, revealing the degree to which she was, at the end of her life, revisiting and revising the most basic questions at the heart of her literary career.

In Sedgwick’s first three novels, the celibacy plot was, as Kahan states, “a narrative motor that intersects the courtship plot perpendicularly,” but Ida Roorbach is not granted a plot of her own nor does she interrupt or forestall the progress of the marriage plot. Indeed, her function in the scene is to assist Grace in discovering the intentions of her lover by employing her peculiar power to divine the latent spirit of a text. When Grace hands her Copley’s letter, she holds it for fifteen minutes until,
“springing to her feet, she threw [it] into the fire, as St. Paul shook the viper from his hand” (211). The violence of her reaction clearly reveals the letter’s sinister intentions, but Grace remains uncertain, and when she presses Ida Roorbach on it, the medium responds only by saying, “I am not permitted to impart to you what I experienced. . . . [B]ut now, my eye is turned to the day-spring from on high, and the word borne into my mind to speak to you is, Work out your own deliverance!” (211). This final cry removes the celibate from becoming an accomplice in the heroine’s courtship plot. We might perhaps even read it as a last declaration of spiritual and narratological autonomy by a character type who had once dominated Sedgwick’s fiction but is now confined to a single chapter.20

Married or Single? revisits Sedgwick’s earlier work in a broader way as well in its theorization of the religious function performed by the novel, which Sedgwick does in language that echoes the preface to A New-England Tale, with which this chapter began:

It might seem natural and decorous, that one approaching the limit of human life should—if writing at all—write a book, strictly religious, but the novel (and to that guild we belong) does not seem to us the legitimate vehicle of strictly religious teaching. Secular affairs should be permeated by the spirit of the altar and the temple, but not brought within the temple’s holy precincts. (vi)

In A New-England Tale, we recall, Sedgwick had declared that “our religion is not like that of the ancients, something set apart from the ordinary concerns of life; the consecrated, not the ‘daily bread,’ a service for the temple and the grove.” The disestablished religious world of the 1820s held forth the promise that the sacred had spilled into every nook and cranny of mundane life and that the novel would be the form

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20 Reynolds, who also recognizes the strangeness of Ida Roorbach, dismisses her as a foil intended to demonstrate the final failure of the “visionary mode” in a novelistic world where “secular affairs have been elevated to a level of sanctity” (55). But such a reading neglects the care and artistry with which Sedgwick represents the spiritualist.
of its expression. But in this late preface, Sedgwick revises her original vision by reconstructing the barriers she had earlier dissolved. Although “the spirit of the altar” must still permeate “secular affairs,” the “temple’s holy precincts” now remain apart from everyday life. The impact of this view on literary form is that the novel had ceased in her eyes to be a “legitimate vehicle of strictly religious teaching.” Sedgwick seems to be saying in this last phrase that while the novel may provide avenues for which some religious teaching may enter—some missive from the temple to the commons—it is nevertheless bounded in ways that render it a separate sphere of intellectual and moral activity. It is no longer an appropriate vessel for theological experimentation but must pursue secular ends.

By the 1850s, the kinds of radical women whom Sedgwick had encountered in her youth and whom she had imagined in her early novels had not ceased to exist (Pythonesses and seeresses were alive and well in New York City), but they were now confined to private rooms hidden from public view. The figure of the celibate religious outsider undergoes a secularization narrative in the form of privatization. Of course, this was an era in which the rise of Spiritualism, as Ann Braude has shown, had democratized the otherworldly activities Ida Roorbach specializes in. But Ida Roorbach nevertheless feels like a character out of time, the stubborn remainder of a past era who has returned as if from the repressed unconscious of American secularity at a moment when the logic of an ecumenical liberal theology virtually indistinct from a secularism that had become so utterly pervasive as to be almost unnoticeable.
On February 2, 1850, Herman Melville sent his friend and patron Evert A. Duyckinck, the father of American literary nationalism, a copy of his most recent novel, *Mardi; and, a Voyage Thither*. Published the previous year, *Mardi* was Melville’s first foray into romance, and despite his hope that this strange, sweeping novel would prove to the world that he was more than an exotic travel writer, it was met with critical confusion and popular neglect. In a letter accompanying the gift, Melville pled with Duyckinck to open his famously vast library to the fugitive book:

> Again: (as the divines say) political republics should be the asylum for the persecuted of all nations; so, if *Mardi* be admitted to your shelves, your bibliographical Republic of Letters may find some contentment in the thought, that it has afforded refuge to a work, which almost everywhere else has been driven forth like a wild, mystic Mormon into shelterless exile. (Correspondence, 154)

The rhetorical flourish of casting Duyckinck’s library as a “bibliographical Republic of Letters” that ought to fulfill the moral obligation of all republics to be an “asylum for the persecuted” by admitting *Mardi* would have been adequate to communicate the essential point Melville intends to make here. Yet in that arresting final clause, he likens *Mardi* to a “wild, mystic Mormon” cast out beyond the borders of the polity, extending the original metaphor of the novel’s poor reception into a particular experience of religious persecution and turning a conceit that was ostensibly a remark upon a literary marketplace suspicious of creative experimentation into an elegy for those visionary movements of the 1820s and ‘30s that had, by the late 1840s, been exiled to the margins of national life.
Melville’s decision to compare *Mardi* to a Mormon is especially curious when we consider how rarely Melville referenced Mormonism. Besides a few dim allusions in *Mardi*, the only other places in which Melville mentions the Latter-day Saints are the first chapter of *The Confidence-Man*, his late poem “The New Ancient of Days,” and a review of Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail* that he penned in 1849 for *The Literary World*.¹ This last piece, at least, offers the most indisputable evidence for Melville’s knowledge of the Mormon flight from the United States at the time he wrote his letter to Duyckinck, since Parkman details several encounters with Mormon pioneers venturing westward towards the Utah Territory, nearly all of whom he represents as militants. Whether or not Melville had read *The Book of Mormon* or any of the various exposes of Mormonism, it is safe to assume that since “the Mormon controversy was one of the most drawn out and highly publicized events” of the century (Moore, 27), he would have been familiar with the major events that shaped early Mormon history: the emergence of Joseph Smith as a prophet in the burned-over district of upstate New York during the late 1820s; the translation and publication of the *Book of Mormon* (the Golden Bible) in 1830; the formation of Mormon communities in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois; the persecutions those communities suffered at the hands of local settlers as they sought to establish a holy city on the frontier; the murder of Smith by a mob in Illinois in 1844; and the subsequent Mormon migration to the Utah territory under the leadership of Brigham Young after 1845. Hardly anyone living during the period could ignore the fact that the astonishing

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¹ Virtually no one has considered the relationship between Melville and Mormonism, save for a spattering of Mormon scholars who have attempted to draw out thematic similarities between the two. See, for example, Rees and Rust. Melville was, however, quite familiar with the Shakers, having visited the Shaker settlement in Hancock, MA on July 21, 1850, while he was writing *Moby-Dick*. While there he purchased *A Summary View of the Millennial Church*, a Shaker church history, which he read and annotated. For more on this connection, see Sealts.
rise of Mormonism as a major religious movement had inspired “previously unseen levels of organized opposition in the United States” (Fluhman, 13), and this years before the rumors of Mormon polygamy terrorized the American public.

Mormonism was a lightning rod for national anxieties throughout the 1830s and ’40s, giving rise to what J. Spencer Fluhman calls “political anti-Mormonism,” a shape-shifting discourse of religious intolerance directed against Mormonism that revealed both the contradictions and conceptual ambiguities embedded in nineteenth-century definitions of “religion” as well as the failure of the disestablished state to accommodate—or even to make sense of—a visionary movement that was not only wildly popular but also transgressed Protestant norms (82). This discourse, which circulated through an army of pamphlets and books (with titles like *Mormonism Unvailed*, *Mormon Delusions and Monstrosities*, *Mormonism Exposed and Refuted*, *Mormonism Dissected*, and *Mormonism Portrayed; Its Errors and Absurdities Exposed*), in essays written by leading religious historians eager to distinguish Mormonism from mainstream Protestantism (Robert Baird and Philip Schaff chief among them), and in innumerable articles in periodicals criticizing the movement, equivocated as to whether Mormonism was or was not a religion, a political movement in the guise of a religion, a fruit of religious liberty, or a threat to it. Tragically, the discursive violence of political anti-Mormonism was a prelude to and precondition of the physical violence that eventually beset early Mormon communities, reaching a pitch in the Mormon War in Missouri in 1838. Anti-Mormon discourse thus gave way to and was reinforced by anti-Mormon violence, the latter of which laid bare what Fluhman calls “a systematic failure of American disestablishment” (95). John Lardas Modern takes this claim further when
he asserts that violent antipathy towards Mormonism was “integral in the making of a secular imaginary” since—besides revealing fundamental contradictions in how religion was conceptualized and regulated in the period—it “served to consolidate an evangelical public sphere” (“Confused Parchments”).

The specter of anti-Mormon violence lies behind Melville’s invocation of Mormonism in his letter to Duyckinck, which makes his sympathetic characterization of the Mormon all the more striking. Refusing to represent Mormonism in the familiar terms of anti-Mormon discourse (as either irreligious, anti-religious, tyrannical, or impostrous) or in the begrudgingly ecumenical terms of his liberal contemporaries, Melville casts the Mormon in a romantic mold, as a type in the process of disappearing from the American landscape, not unlike the stock figure of the vanishing Indian. This is evident first in his imagining a singular “Mormon” rather than plural “Mormons”—a subtle distinction that isolates the individual Mormon from the essential communal context of early Mormonism—and second in his use of the modifiers “wild” and “mystic,” which together transform the religious isolato into a prophetic, misunderstood visionary. Although historically imprecise, it is a powerful and heretical representation because it neither denies Mormonism its status as a religion nor degrades the value of the revelations that flowed from it. Mormons are not the objects of the letter’s critique, but rather the civic order that failed to harbor them. This attentiveness to the religious politics of the late 1840s is significant because it signals Melville’s sense of wistfulness and worry over a national culture increasingly dominated by a public Protestantism that had infiltrated nearly every facet of American life.²

² See Modern, 1-48; Albanese, American Religion, 276-83; and Hutchison, 60-65.
In this chapter, I explore Melville’s novelistic engagement with religious diversity and the disestablished state around the year 1850, when public Protestantism had grown into a muscular, diffuse, and normative public religious force in the US. *Mardi*, I argue, introduces the categorical distinctions and methods of discipline used by public Protestantism to regulate the scope of religious freedom in the US. The novel issues a statement of the problem, unfolded through its representation of two religious publics, one established (Maramma) and the other nominally disestablished (Serenia), demonstrating the means by which each stunts and inhibits plural religious expression through the constraint of bodies. Maramma achieves this by sacralizing spaces, objects, and persons, an operation that—in this case—deprives sacred things of any animating life force and creates an economy of scarcity essential for the management of bodies and worship alike. Serenia, on the other hand, uses its elevation of love as a universal principle (circularly affirmed through its availability to reason) as a means of repressing bodily expression even as it preaches religious freedom. Public Protestantism in the US, likewise, disseminated a version of religious freedom that traded bodily conformity for interior liberty. Maintaining this required the essentialization of a set of roughly analogous categorical pairs, including—but not limited to—body and soul, politics and religion, practice and belief. As I demonstrate in the second section, a powerful means of resisting Protestant constructions of religious freedom was the collapsing of its foundational categories into one another, and it is here that Mormonism and Melville converge again. I argue that both Melville (after *Mardi*) and Mormon theologians like Joseph Smith and Parley Pratt rejected the binaries used to structure American religious life and instead embraced metaphysical, theological, and exegetical literalisms that
collapsed the soul into the body (and, as an aesthetic corollary, the allegorical into the literal) in order to challenge these conditions and to imagine alternative forms of religious freedom. I conclude with a reading of religious bodies in *Moby-Dick*, showing how Melville recasts the scenes of religious, racial, and erotic contact I have been tracking in the previous two chapters in exclusively corporeal terms and how he imagines new religious syntheses issuing from them.

Although I am not concerned with deducing the particulars of Melville’s religious disposition, it is a topic worth remarking briefly upon since it remains a pressing source of critical concern. The first wave of post-World War II critics to grapple with Melville religious identity viewed him primarily as a romantic anti-Calvinist, as titles like *Melville’s Quarrel with God* and *Moby-Dick and Calvinism: A World Dismantled* indicate. The Melville that has emerged since then is less a satanic adversary to theological orthodoxy than a restless spiritual seeker or a skeptical pluralist. (Or both, since they aren’t mutually exclusive.) The foundational prooftext for this line of thinking is a remark made by Nathaniel Hawthorne in his journal after Melville had visited him in England in 1856. Hawthorne wrote of his old friend, “he can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief; and he is too honest and courageous not to try to do one or the other” (qtd. in Melville, *Journals*, 628). Because it so perfectly encapsulates the image of the heroic seeker that so many like-minded readers have discovered in Melville’s writing, this laconic sentence has exercised an outsized influence on how critics of the past twenty years have figured Melville’s religiosity, forging a loose critical consensus of Melville as a man perpetually approaching the horizon of absolute truth. William Potter, for instance, discerns in Melville’s career an urgent desire to detect
“those eternal truths shared by all religions beneath their orthodox differences” (xiii).

Hilton Obenzinger has argued that Melville’s “skeptical, questioning attitude toward life” made him a classic “wisdom writer” (181). And, most recently, Brian Yothers has celebrated Melville for embracing the principle of “sacred uncertainty.” Although much is true in these characterizations, to paint Melville as either a religious seeker or a career skeptic reproduces what we might think of as the original sin of secularism, which is to accept religion as a natural and ahistorical category and, by extension, the religions as unproblematically comparable social formations. Although Melville wrestled with the angels of theology and comparative religions, he struggled equally with questions of ideology and history. How he approached the one set of questions and how he approached the other are, I argue, not isolable.

i. Mardi’s Religious Publics

Mardi is a strange fiction. What begins as a sea-faring travelogue in the manner of Melville’s first two books (Typee and Omoo) quickly mutates into an allegorical romance when the narrator (Taji) abandons ship with his Norse shipmate Jarl, eventually arriving at a strange archipelago (Mardi) where Taji murders a priest preparing to sacrifice Yillah, a white woman whom we later learn is the orphaned daughter of European colonists. When Yillah is eventually recaptured, Taji, having now assumed the identity of a sun god, sets out on a picaresque to reunite with her with a party consisting of a historian (Mohi), a poet (Yoomy), a demigod (Media), and a philosopher (Babbalanja). The novel

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3 The worst version of this view (and also, for that reason, the most revealing) is Walter Donald Kring’s Melville’s Religious Journey, which reads Melville’s signing of the membership roster at All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City a sign of a tormented religious journey coming to a serene close. 
4 See J. Z. Smith; Asad, Genealogies, 27-54; and Asad, Formations, 21-67, 181-204.
ends with Taji committing suicide at the edge of the archipelago determined to pursue Yillah beyond the grave.

Book-ending the latter half of this quest are two religious societies that the travelers visit in their search for Yillah. The first of these, Maramma, is an impoverished and autocratic civilization besieged by religious violence and beholden to entrenched spiritual hierarchies. The second, Serenia, is a peaceful, egalitarian, and just spiritual community governed by right-reason and the spirit of love. Both are hyperbolic examples of how religion operates under, respectively, an established church and a disestablished one, and while the novel tilts in favor of the idyllic Serenia (as evidenced by the fact that all but one of its characters long to reside there) the two societies are bound by their shared aim of ensuring religious conformity through bodily conformity. The difference between how they achieve the corporeal discipline of subjects is revealed in how each conceptualizes the relationship between spirit and matter. In what follows, I turn first to Maramma to examine how sacrality operates as an attribute of objects, people, and spaces to nominate anything devoid of spirit. Serenia, by contrast, elevates spirit into an omnipreent force that operates through bodies but remains independent of them, reproducing in a philosophical register an exaggerated form of the divisions drawn by public Protestantism to enable its hegemonic ascent. I conclude this section with a glance at the novel’s final pages, wherein Taji enacts an alternative to either of these by attempting his self-deification (a theosis)—an act born of his irrepresible carnal desire for Yillah. The result of this is a radical dissociation of mind from body, revealing a

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5 The differences between them are so stark that it has become a commonplace in criticism of the novel to accept the distinction wholesale and advance pallid claims about Melville’s Christian utopianism. For a clear example of this, see Franklin.
fundamental absurdity at the heart of his attempt to transcend his body and anticipating
the turn to new forms of material corporeality and exegetical literalism that define *Moby-
Dick*, which, I argue, mirror similar lines of thought that were developed in Mormon
theology during the 1830s and ‘40s.

Melville’s initial plan for *Mardi* was to write a “Romance of Polynesian [sic] Adventure” (qtd. in Sten, 67). Given the fierce debates that raged over the truthfulness of
his first two books, he reasoned in a letter to his English publisher John Murray that “a
real romance of mine is no Typee or Omoo, & is made of different stuff altogether” (qtd. in Sten 67). *Mardi*, he hoped, would not only confirm the facticity of his earlier works
but would also allow him the “play of freedom & invention accorded only to the
Romancer & poet” (qtd. in Sten 67). No longer hamstrung by the mimetic demands of the
tavel narrative, Melville’s first romance exploded the narrow bounds of the form through
which he had made his name.

Both *Typee* and *Omoo* were shaped by the nascent discourses of anthropology,
ethnography, and ethnology. The narrators of each are white American seamen who
strive to penetrate the peculiarities Polynesian culture with a gaze that is at once querulous
and naïve. “No one,” writes Andrew Delbanco, “is likely to mistake [Melville’s] early
books for the work of a scrupulous field anthropologist” (78). But as Jenny Franchot has
eloquenty argued, the adoption of the anthropological gaze of an amateur initiates a
“movement through the heterogeneous space of cultural otherness,” eventually homing
that gaze upon Christianity (161). Melville’s excoriations of missionary hypocrisy in
these works scandalized the defenders of piety and spawned furious denunciations in the
press that, like religious outrage over popular art today, only served to bolster his
reputation. After *Typee* and *Omoo*, however, Melville’s interest in deflating missionary pride waned as he was drawn to more fundamental questions about the relationship between religion and society. *Mardi* was his opportunity to pursue these questions by turning the anthropological gaze he had cultivated in *Typee* and *Omoo* away from Christian missionary projects in Polynesia and towards fantastic civilizations drawn from the muddle of his own Marquesan encounters, his prolific reading, and his charged imagination.

Yothers rightly recognizes that *Mardi* is something of a “climax for the development of religious difference” in Melville’s novels (71), but his triumphal claim that the prominence of this theme is to make “the celebration of religious difference” into a “fundamental human value” strikes me as too rosy an assessment of the complexities and political dimensions of religious difference on display in *Mardi* (70). Rather, Melville’s treatment of religious difference in *Mardi* is far more concerned with the material conditions shaping religious experience than it is with the philosophical effort to reconcile contradictory truth claims.6 In *Mardi*, Melville reflects upon the consolidation of Protestantism and the contradictions of the disestablished state during the late 1840s through his representation of imaginary religious societies.

The isle of Maramma is home to a vast number of deities (with as many affiliated worshippers) and governed by a “High Pontiff” who is “prince, priest, and god, in his own proper person: great lord paramount over many kings in Mardi; his hands full of scepters and crosiers” (323). This ecclesiastical vocabulary would seem to place Maramma in the tradition of American literary anti-Catholicism, but Melville evades this

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6 See Yothers, 69; Suzuki, 382.
critique somewhat by incorporating elements of Catholicism, Hinduism, Marquesan religion, and Protestantism into its representation, allowing each religious strain to defamiliarize the others and reveal the substrates binding them. Maramma is a society only imaginable in a world in which wildly disparate worldviews can be put in relation to one another, a socio-religious *bricolage* and a limit-case of religious establishment that becomes the object of an imaginative ethnography whose methodology is accretion rather than argument. Just as professional anthropologists aspire to discover generic categories from comparative studies, Melville’s jumbling of religious traditions in Maramma is a means of interrogating the material origins and political function of one category in particular: *the sacred*.

A simple word count reveals how central sacrality is to this section: 11 of the 25 uses of the word “sacred” (44%) in *Mardi* occur in this 40 page segment (6%). Throughout these chapters (105-117) Melville explores the uses and abuses of sacrality through an array of religious forms, which include sacrifical offering, scapegoating, idol-making, and sacred genealogy, and it is within this context that he considers the state’s strategies for managing religious plurality. In Maramma, the stark delineation drawn between sacred objects and profane life functions as a method of religious containment and social control.

As Melville knew, the sacred is first and foremost an anthropological and not a theological category, and the difference between sacred and profane realms a sociological invention rather than a representation of the actual state of the world. His view is congruent with Emile Durkheim’s in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, that the defining feature of religion is the separation of all objects, persons, and rites into two
ontologically distinct categories: the sacred and profane. For Durkheim, *sacred* and *profane* are adjectives that identify a given noun’s ontological status and, contrary to the claims of some post-Durkheimian critics neither constitutes a hierarchy in which sacred things should in every case be “regarded as superior in dignity and power to profane things” (35) nor in every instance inspires awe or terror. Often, Durkheim remarks, a profane object may be regarded with the same respect as a sacred object or, conversely, a sacred fetish item may be beaten to a pulp so that it becomes “more amenable to the wishes of its worshipper” (36). Like Durkheim, *Mardi* treats the sacred as a quality imbued (or, rather, attributed to) objects and persons, rather than a kind of feeling or an actual ontological reality. Because the sacred-profane dichotomy is a social phenomenon, it is sustained entirely through individual and group practices. In Maramma, sacralization acts as an embalming fluid, the only function of which is to preserve in perpetuity those things that are without spirit. The chapters that comprise the Maramma sequence range over the kinds of willful blindness necessary to sustain this sacred order as well as the kinds of violence it both inflicts and also reproduces. Religious difference is present in this society, but only as an endless cycle of sacralization and sacrilege, of worship and defacement.

The first view we get of the Mammian sacred order is the Morai, a sacred site cordoned off from the profane world. Besides the 1,847 former Pontiffs entombed there, the most instructive objects of veneration in the holy enclave are the statue of the god Doleema, a “burly man” in whose bulbous gut rests the dried bones of human bodies sacrificed to him, and, beside him, the husk of a tree housing the god Ananna, on whose branches are hung baskets of rotting fruit (336). Both images, like the sepulcher of the
Pontiffs, signify the lack of any animating life force, any spirit; they are monuments to the decay and eventual death of living things in this sacred order. This is made explicit when the blind guide Pani arrives to pay homage to the two deities with two women and a young boy. As Pani approaches the idol and the tree, he mistakes the former for the latter and tells his charges that this “is the holy god Ananna who lives in the sap of this green and flourishing tree” (336). His statement is erroneous in two ways: he first misidentifies the stone idol as the dead tree and then mischaracterizes the condition of the latter. The multiple levels of confusion he introduces reveal an equivalency between the two monuments, for neither is animated by any living spirit; both are dead receptacles for living things.

The following chapter illuminates the political consequences of this social order through two grim historical anecdotes. The group’s resident historian Mohi explains that the human bones in Doleema’s stomach belonged to a class of individuals in Maramma specially marked as sacrificial victims for the insatiable god. Once in the isle’s history, he continues, a group of these condemned people decided to flee into the wilderness to escape death, where they were pursued by one of Doleema’s devotees. They eventually gave themselves up for fear of “the vengeance of the deity” they “sought to evade” (341). The second story Mohi tells is that of the false prophet Foni (read: “phony”), a heretical figure who once rebelled against the Pontiff and, upon failing, escaped into the wilderness with what remained of his followers where they lived like “demoniacs” (341). Until he is eventually slain many years later while feeding himself with the offerings left at the Morai, Foni, unlike other sacrificial victims, remains permanently outside the borders of Maramman society, and the effects of this prolonged extra-social existence are
dehumanization. Thus, in the first case, Melville illustrates how Maramma controls dissent through the establishment of a sacralized social order so penetrative that, in the one case, those most victimized by it internalize its logic, and, in the other, those who try to escape it are bound to it by its exclusively distribution of resources to sacred sites.

The visit to Morai and the unsettling history the travelers learn there set the stage for their encounter with the internal religious diversity of Maramma when they enter the massive Temple of Oro. Oro is the supreme deity in Mardi, and, like the omniscient and omnipresent Christian God, he is both ultimately unknowable and practically inaccessible. His temple on Maramma is a physical representation of his relationship to the “innumerable” inferior deities worshipped by individual Marammians. As the narrator observes, while “all Mardians bowed to the supremacy of Oro, they were not so unanimous concerning the inferior deities; those supposed to be intermediately concerned in sublunary things. Some nations sacrificed to one god; some to another; each maintaining, that their own god was the most potential” (345). In the nave of the temple is a “vista of idols” devoted to these “sublunary” gods, arranged in lines that are reordered on a daily basis. The constant shuffling of deities creates an atmosphere of tumult and confusion, since an idol’s location in the temple one day has no bearing on where it will be the following day. Further adding to this confusion is the fact that the idols themselves are all “more or less defaced” (345), an unfortunate and all-too-frequent consequence of combative encounters between rival worshippers. Adherents to one deity will deface an idol only to find their own deity defaced sometime later, instituting a pattern of reciprocal sacrilege in which all the idols eventually become virtually unrecognizable. The whole scene is a grim parody of what Tracy Fessenden calls an
“energized and contestatory pluralism” (217), reducing religious contact to sacrilege, the only lasting effects of which are confusion, contradiction, and disorientation. At the same time, all this clamor does nothing to shake the foundations of the temple or to unsettle the sacred order that structures it. It is staticity masquerading as dynamism, a scene of religious difference that is in actuality a scene of religious interchangeability.

This critique is deepened when Taji and his companions meet with the idol-maker Hevaneva, which turns attention to the process of sacralization and the question of what it is that invests idols with the spirits of the gods they are supposed to represent. Melville lifts this episode almost verbatim from William Ellis’s *Polynesian Researches*—a crucial source for Melville’s early fiction. In the original account, Ellis reports having spoken at length with a Polynesian idol-maker whose candor and pragmatism he clearly admired. This man, writes Ellis, “appeared a serious inquirer after truth,” who when asked whether “he really believed [his idols] were the powerful beings which the natives supposed,” answered frankly that “although at times he thought it was all deception, and only practised his trade to obtain the payment he received for his work, yet at other times he really thought the gods he himself had made were powerful beings” (259-60). The idol-maker attributes the transformation of the wood not to “the alteration his tools had effected in the appearance of the wood, or the carving with which they were ornamented,” but rather to the act of delivering them to the temple where they “were filled with the *atua* [god]” (260). In Melville’s version of this scene, the philosopher Babbalanja inquires of Hevaneva “what he thought of his trade; whether the images he made were genuine or spurious; in a word, whether he believed in his gods” (*Mardi*, 353). Hevaneva replies,
When I cut down the trees for my idols . . . they are nothing but logs; when upon the logs, I chalk out the figures of my images, they yet remain logs; when the chisel is applied, logs they are still; and when all complete, I at last stand them up in my studio, even then they are logs. Nevertheless, when I handle the pay, they are as prime gods, as ever were turned out in Maramma (354)

The parallels between Melville’s and Ellis’s treatment of this figure are obvious, but Melville alters it subtly to relocate the moment of sacralization in the exchange of currency rather than in the idols’ relocation to the temple. Furthermore, since the idols themselves are made from the discarded wood Hevaneva uses to build canoes, not only are they not inhabited by gods but they also serve no purpose other than to be exchanged. They are sub-functional, second-order commodities whose only value is the price paid. Thus, while Ellis’s version of this episode admits the possibility that the idols may embody a spirit, Melville’s dispenses with the conceit entirely, reducing the wooden idols to inoperative matter.

The final example of the spiritual emptiness of sacrality in the Maramma chapters—both in the sense of its being the last as well as the most important—occurs when Yoomy encounters with a solitary hermit whom he later discovers is the High Pontiff Hivohitee. In the darkness of the Pontiff’s austere bamboo tower, Hivohitee asks Yoomy to describe what he sees, to which Yoomy replies, saying that he sees “nothing” (361). Hivohitee replies, “Then thou hast found me out, and seen all! Descend” (361), a revelation that admits the ontological hollowness of sacred things, depriving objects of spiritual substance by isolating them from the world. This extends, we now know, from the lowest echelons of the social hierarchy to the highest, for Hivohitee’s ascetic existence (he is compared several times to the famous pillar monk, St. Stylites) is a living

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7 See Weinstein for a reading of this scene as “an efficient market economy” (94). Weinstein, however, sees this market as rewarding idleness

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example of this principle. The only difference between his presentation of sacrality and the earlier ones in the Maramma sequence is that he knows it and embraces it.

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Serenia is the antithesis to the horrors of Maramma. Taji and his troupe arrive at this haven of tranquility and true religion after journeying through a series of thin allegories of European nations in the throes of the revolutions of 1848, as well as Vivenza, a satirical allegory of the United States at mid-century. Given the violent upheavals on display in each of these islands, it is little wonder that Serenia is so attractive to the group.

Greeted by a placid old man and a host of emissaries dressed in white robes, the travelers learn that Serenia was founded upon the precepts and life of the prophet Alma, the Mardian Christ. Here the sacred-profane dichotomy that structures life in Maramma is dissolved, as sacrality in the form of universalizing love permeates every facet of quotidian life. Just as nineteenth-century Protestants in the US celebrated their loose, voluntary establishment as an antidote to the illiberal constraints of Roman Catholicism, the Serenians view themselves as the best alternative to Maramma, where “many are oppressed; for heresies, many murdered; and thousands perish beneath the altars, groaning with offerings that might relieve them” (625). Serenia replaces the violent enforcement of orthodox creeds with common practices made possible by the spirit of love, and ancient and rigid hierarchies with an egalitarian order of mutual benefit. Unburdened by the divisions and turmoil of other, less enlightened communities, Serenia

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8 For more on anti-Catholicism in US literature see Elizabeth Fenton, Religious Liberties and Jenny Franchot, Roads to Rome.
marries Christian precept to secular life, appearing to achieve peace, harmony, and equality in a world of storm and strife. It seems, in short, the ideal secularized community, albeit one that retains an avowed relationship to a religious foundation. But this utopian atmosphere conceals the informal mechanisms and categorical distinctions through which Serenia ensures the homogenous practices of individuals even as it promises the freedom of belief. In this way, it represents the conditions of public Protestantism in their most hyperbolic and idealized form.

Although the Serenians live their lives in accordance with the example of Alma, the prophet’s teachings are themselves superfluous insofar as the community would remain identical whether or not Alma had lived, for, the old man informs his listeners, Alma “but opens unto us our own hearts. Were his precepts strange we would recoil—not one feeling would respond; whereas, once hearkened to, our souls embrace them as with the instinctive tendrils of a vine” (626). The untroubled correspondence between immanent reason and transcendent love allows each to legitimate the other in an unbroken loop. In this way, Serenia posits through its elevation of “mystic love” as its “ruler” (625) what Talal Asad calls “a transcendent notion of the sacred,” which historically developed through the “emerging discipline of comparative religion” and came in time, he argues, “to be constituted as a mysterious, mythic thing, the focus of moral and administrative disciplines” (33). The creation of a sacred order that is so intimately reinforced by daily life has profound effects on the conceptualization and management of religious plurality.

Babbalanja raises this very issue when he asks the old man how the Serenians contend with dissent from Almaic orthodoxy: “But what, if widely [a man] dissent from
your belief in Alma;—then, surely, ye must cast him forth?” (626). His response is a firm negative:

No, no; we will remember, that if he dissent from us, we then equally dissent from him; and men’s faculties are Oro-given. Nor will we say that he is wrong, and we are right; for this we know not, absolutely. But we care not for men’s words; we look for creeds in actions; which are the truthful symbols of the things within. He who hourly prays to Alma, but lives not up to world-wide love and charity—that man is more an unbeliever than he who verbally rejects the Master, but does his bidding. Our lives are our Amens. (626)

The old man’s declaration signals another shift from the spiritual institutions of Maramma to the disciplining norm of Almaic love. The basis for Serenia’s universal toleration of divergent beliefs (“if [a man] dissent from us, we then equally dissent from him”) is an inversion John Locke’s famous declaration in A Letter Concerning Toleration that “every one is orthodox to himself” (215). The Serenian version of this quintessentially liberal principle is grounded in a commitment to epistemological humility, ceding the authority to know “absolutely” that a dissenter is “wrong, and we are right.” Indeed, the content of an individual’s belief is ultimately beside the point, for Serenians care little about “men’s words” or stated beliefs, but rather “look for creeds in actions.” Orthopraxy, and not orthodoxy, structures Serenian religious life, a feature underscored by the old man’s critique of hypocrisy (deeds that fail to match words) at the end of the passage.

We know from marginal notes Melville made in his wife Elizabeth’s copy of the six-volume edition of The Works of William E. Channing that Channing, the apostle of American Unitarianism and the progenitor of liberal Christian theology, was a major source for the depiction of Serenia.⁹ The borrowings are so extensive that Robert Milder

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⁹ See Dawn Coleman’s meticulous study of the marginalia Elizabeth Melville’s copy of The Works of William E. Channing, the six volumes of which she received as a gift from her father, Lemuel Shaw, in 1848.
has remarked that the Serenia chapters read “as though Melville were catechizing the
voyagers from William Ellery Channing’s *Unitarian Christianity*” (Milder, 77). Even
without the marginalia, the parallels between Channing’s sermons and Melville’s
descriptions of Serenian life are not hard to detect. Concerning the compatibility of
reason and revelation, for instance, Channing proclaims in one sermon, “I am not
ashamed of the gospel of Christ, because it is a rational religion. It agrees with reason;
therefore I count it worthy of acceptation” (233). Of the importance of right action over
right belief, he asserts that “we esteem him, and him only a pious man, who practically
conforms to God’s moral perfections and government” (381). And on the topic of
theological difference, he pleads in the same sermon that his listeners approach other
religionists in a spirit of humility, reminding them that “we ourselves are sharers of the
common frailty, we dare not assume infallibility in the treatment of our fellow-
Christians” (382). The basic lineaments of Serenian social and religious life, it is clear,
owe much to Channing.

But American Unitarianism was only one facet of a broader revolution of the
conditions of religious belief in the period that had evangelicals at its forefront. Mark
Noll characterizes this transformation as a synthesis between “evangelical Protestant
religion, republican political ideology, and commonsense moral reasoning” (9). And
Catherine Albanese sums up one of the most important effects of this synthesis when she
observes that during this period “[t]he similarity among Protestants also became a
similarity with other Americans” (276). Disestablishment, rather than impeding this
process, actually accelerated it. “In place of the formal mechanism” of religious
establishment, writes Noll, “came informal, voluntary means of exerting social influence
that did not require a formal establishment” (175). By 1850, Public Protestantism was exercising its influence upon the daily life of Americans through a network of churches, periodicals, schools, and voluntary societies like the American Tract Society and the Bible Society.

More suspicious treatments of Noll’s grand synthesis see in Protestantism’s ascension as an informal religious establishment the birth of American-style secularism, understood here as a diffuse ideological network of assumptions about reality and religion that crossed even the deepest of internecine fissures. Modern, the most prominent of these critics, extends Sydney Ahlstrom’s famous claim that commonsense realism was the “vast subterranean influence” of American Christianity in the nineteenth-century to argue that because this philosophy, which “assumed that every human was endowed with the capacity for radical reflexivity and epistemic independence,” was so compatible with republicanism, it “habituated” Anglo-Protestant versions of “true religion” (Modern, 22). Nor was its allure confined to any one denomination, for its “promises of immediacy and transparency appeal[ed] to the lonely (and attentive) evangelical, the Unitarian seeker and the phrenological examiner, to the would-be spirit-seer and the ethnographer as well as to those whose sensibilities were explicity hybrid” (23). In Modern’s account, Noll’s synthesis ushers the “metaphysics of secularism” into being, which not only fail to liberate individuals from the shackles of orthodoxy but in fact constrain agency in even more insidious ways by masquerading as freedom.

On a more practical level, the effects of this transformation on the nation’s management of religious diversity are eerily similar to what Melville represents in Serenia. In this way, he anticipates William R. Hutchison’s argument that despite the
numerous theological battles of first half of the nineteenth century, heterodox beliefs were rarely predictive of whether a given sect would be tolerated by the larger Protestant culture. Instead, the determining factor rather whether a given group engaged in “radical or allegedly radical behavior” (30). This line of thinking, voiced by luminaries like Channing as well as conservative evangelicals like Philip Schaff and Robert Baird, held, according to Hutchison, that “a dissenter could hold wildly heretical opinions and yet be tolerated so long as he or she was ‘our sort of person’” (31). Or, as the anonymous author of a treatise on tolerationism wrote for the New Englander in 1847, “Good heretics are, alas! as possible as orthodox sinners” (194). Serenia’s soft approach to religious heterodoxy, encapsulated in the principle of right action over right belief, in the spirit of the law rather than its letter, mirrors the way that the Protestant establishment enforced public orthopraxy, both through legal mechanisms and informal influence, even as it tolerated privated heterodoxy. In Mardi, Serenia condenses the allure of public Protestantism (its promise of a placid society in which behavior is uniform and charity universal) at the same time as it hints at its lapses and its limits.

Taji is the only character to withstand the lures of Serenia, an act of resistance stemming from his carnal pursuit of Yillah. Late in the Serenia sequence, when he is on the cusp of renouncing his search for the ethereal maiden, Taji’s body suddenly seizes with a desire to renew the quest: “Then, then! my heart grew hard like flint; and black, like night; and sounded hollow to the hand I clenched. Hyenas filled me with their laughs; death-damps chilled my brow; I prayed not, but blasphemed” (639). Although inarticulate even to himself, Taji’s hardened heart and chilled brow are physiological indicators of his rebellion to Serenian love, pre-psychological signifiers of an attempt to
restore the primacy of the body against the disciplinary claims of the spirit and of a carnal
desire poised in opposition to Serenian charity. On its surface, Taji’s carnality would
seem to be an antidote to the bodily conformity induced by sacralization, a pure
expression of erotic and epistemological freedom. Yet to praise the romantic quest
uncritically would be to ignore the way Melville troubles this narrative thread from its outset.

Taji’s desire for Yillah originates in his murder of her captor, the Mardian priest
Aleema. Upon freeing her, however, Taji does nothing to dismantle the mythos of Yillah
that Aleema to justify his her sacrifice. Instead, out of an erotic urge for possession, Taji
integrates himself into that myth and by doing so subjects himself to the very process of
spiritualization and disembodiment that Yillah has undergone. It is carnal love, he claims,
that compels him to “prop [his] failing divinity” (159), which he continues to do long
after Yillah is kidnapped.

Ultimately, both Taji and Yillah are imperilled by spiritualization. At the end of
the novel, neither of them seem embodied in any normal sense of the word, becoming
instead, in Taji’s case, a false god, and in Yillah’s, a vessel of some elusive and universal
principle, whether, in Franklin’s words, of “Truth or Happiness or the Absolute or the
eternal Lure” (45). John Wenke notes the irony of this transformation when he claims
that Taji’s “fictionalized, metaphysical kinship [with Yillah] is inimical to his desire for
earthly, physical love,” rendering him incapable of “continu[ing] to impose his self-
deifying fiction while at the same time leading her to love with the repressed passion of
her buried human nature” (43). The result of this quandary is that when Taji finally
reaches the outer rim of Mardi, both he and Yillah have become ghosts. He admits as
much to his companions when he tells them, “Taji lives no more. So dead, he has no
ghost. I am his spirit’s phantom’s phantom” (653). Through its rhetorical excess, this
declaration underscores the profound disembodiment that has resulted from his self-deification. The first sentence (“Taji lives no more”) begins with a familiar, if ambiguous,
statement in the third purpose announcing an altered state of being that might indicate
either a transformation of the self or some form of radical self-alienation. Then, still in
the third person, he clarifies that assertion by saying that Taji is “so dead, he has no
ghost,” which eliminates the possibility of an intelligence surviving the death of the body
that housed it. The first-person pronoun is reintroduced in the last sentence (“I am his
spirit’s phantom’s phantom”), finally announcing the relationship between the speaking
subject and the body to which it is nominally attached. On a purely semantic level, the
sentence is almost illegible, but it rhetorically communicates the failure of self-deification
(thesis), a disconnection from physicality so profound that it can only be expressed as an
infinite regress of disembodiment. In spite of its intensity, this moment is also absurd,
since however much Taji may be experiencing a dissociation from his body, he still
remains bound to it—it is still the thing that speaks. Thus, the enactment of a theosis
(born of carnal desire) as a means of liberating oneself from the constraints placed upon
the body by a Serenian worldview structured around the separation of belief and practice
and of body and soul finally serves only to aggravate that ontological disjunction to such
a degree that the two are experienced as permanently disconnected.

In the postmortem he wrote for *Mardi* in his letter to Duyckinck, Melville, we
recall, described the book as having been “driven forth like a wild, mystic Mormon into
shelterless exile,” drawing a direct line from the novel to the violent consequences of
public Protestantism’s consolidation, which had threatened Mormon bodies with violence and perpetuated an often incoherent discourse devoted to delegitimizing Mormon identity. Because *Mardi* does not offer a satisfactory resolution to the problems of spiritual selfhood and bodily life it introduces, it leaves us with the question of how to think about religious identity and religious freedom in a way that resists the body-soul distinction and the many categorical pairs that emanate from it (practice-belief, public-private, politics-religion). This is where the connection between Melville and Mormonism deepens, for both responded to the conditions of American secularity and the pressures of modernity by turning away from the spirit and towards the letter to envision novel forms of corporeal religiosity.

**ii. The Literalist Turn**

“All governments ought to permit every man to enjoy his religion unmolested. . . . Every man has a natural, and, in our country, a constitutional right to be a false prophet, as well as a true prophet” (J. Smith, “King Follett”). Joseph Smith spoke these words during his last public address, which he delivered two months before being murdered at the hands of a mob. Ostensibly a funeral sermon for King Follett, a local man who had been crushed to death in a well by a bucket of rocks, little of its content actually concerns the life of the man who occasioned it. Instead, “The King Follett Sermon” is one of Smith’s most extravagant doctrinal statements as well as an eerie meditation on his own legacy as a prophet. His startlingly unconventional defense of religious freedom appears early in the address when he claims that every individual has a “natural right” to be a false prophet, which speaks to both Smith’s conviction that continuing revelation was the
provenance of all people and also his (correct) sense that many classed him with the false, rather than the true, prophets. Nor would those doubts have been quelled by the remainder of the address, a large part of which was a materialist history of the cosmos claiming that God was once a man with a body, that there was a plurality of gods, and that men could become gods.

For all its theological extravagance, the sermon is at its heart an attempt to confront the precarity of bodies by exalting them. To the family of King Follett, whose body was mangled by a tragic accident, Smith promises a reunion in the next life, where all bodies will be restored to health. To the assembled community of saints threatened by a hostile public, Smith offers the promise of perpetual community in the future, where “there will be no fear of mobs, persecutions, or malicious lawsuits and arrests”; and to posterity, Smith issues a series of cryptic pronouncements that recast his own body in the mold of a martyr. The sermon is a powerful example of a pattern among early Mormon theologians to defend their nascent society from the normative pressures of public Protestantism through the radical reappropriation of contemporary discourses of the body.

The quintessential feature of Mormonism, argues Richard J. Cummings, is its “literal-mindedness,” which he defines as

>a distinct mind-set which presumes facticity in scriptural accounts, interprets scripture at face value, and by extension, tends to favor one-to-one equivalence over ambiguous multivalence, a reductive simplicity over abstract complexity, the concrete over the speculative, the categorical over the tentative, and finally, the palpably material over the vaguely spiritual. (93-94)

Literal-mindedness can, of course, take many forms, but Cummings reserves his highest praise for what he calls “creative literalism,” defined as “an open, implemental literalism which affords new insights and challenges old ways of thinking” (94). Smith’s creative
literalism was, I wish to argue, a means through which to issue theological rejoinders to the governing assumptions of mainstream Protestant culture.

The Mormon imperative to literalize began with Joseph Smith’s first vision, in which God and the Son appeared to him in the forest, and continued up until “The King Follett Sermon,” which contains his rehabilitation of *theosis*, the doctrine that men could *literally* become gods. Smith was especially responsive to the pressures of natural science, materialism, and modern historiography, and his increasingly eccentric theology reflected this sensitivity, collapsing Pauline distinctions between the body and the spirit, literalizing aspects of Christianity that had long been interpreted figuratively, and corporealizing bodies once thought to be spiritual. In this, writes Terryl Givens, lies “the essential core of the Mormon heterodoxy: the conflation of heaven and earth into the same material universe” (140). The Mormon apostle Parley Pratt would flesh out Smith’s literalism in several important theological treatises, developing a materialist theology that promised “an eternal life of realities, of bodies and spirits immortal, of flesh and bones incorruptable, of inheritances everlasting, of mansions eternal, of food and clothing, and gold and silver, and precious stones, and cities, villages and gardens celestial” (104-5). But Smith’s “creative literalism” applied itself to genealogy as well as cosmology, for he was “among those who took literally the relationship between lineage and blood” (Mauss, 22). One of the most controversial examples of this particular literalist strain in early Mormonism was the doctrine of “believing blood,” the belief that an individual’s conversion to the true church entailed a bodily transformation.

Smith articulated this doctrine relatively late in his career, but it is consistent with his broader belief in genealogy as the ultimate form of legitimation. As early as *The Book
of Mormon, he can be seen constructing illustrious genealogies for himself that validated his prophetic stature. In the second book of Nephi, for instance, the patriarch Lehi reads aloud to his son Joseph the text of brass plates engraved by the biblical Joseph, from whom Lehi is descended. These ancient plates prophecy the arrival of a “choice seer” who “shall be called after me [Joseph]; and it shall be after the name of his father. And he shall be like unto me; for the thing which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand, by the power of the Lord, shall bring my people unto salvation” (2 Ne. 3:15). As confusing as the multiplication of past, present, and future Josephs is here, the “choice seer” could only have been Joseph Smith, Jr., the son and namesake of Joseph Smith, Sr. During the dictation of The Book of Mormon, Smith also began (reportedly at the behest of John the Baptist) to baptize his small cadre of disciples in the Aaronic Priesthood—a ritual act supposed to restore long-dead ecclesiastical hierarchies—a ritual act that invested them with immense spiritual authority. Nevertheless, while these prophecies and rituals established ancient lineages, they said little about the actual bodies of those to whom they were directed.

In a discourse he delivered in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1839, Smith took his genealogical literalism a step further by asserting that the conversion of a gentile to the true faith entailed far more than a transformation of the soul: “the effect of the Holy Ghost upon a Gentile is to purge out the old blood & make him actually of the seed of Abraham. That man that has none of the blood of Abraham (naturally) must have a new creation by the Holy Ghost, in such a case there may be more of a powerful effect upon the body & visible to the eye than upon an Israelite” (Cook and Ehat, 4). In the moment of conversion, the convert’s blood is literally exchanged for the blood of Abraham by the
operations of the Holy Ghost, permanently altering his or her appearance. This is what is called “believing blood,” a mysterious process of bodily transformation that turns Gentiles into Jews. It is a strange, scandalous, and philo-semitic doctrine that brazenly reverses the Pauline discourse of Christian conversion, for where Paul believed baptism in Christ “consists of a new birth that is understood as substituting an allegorical genealogy for a literal one,” Smith believed baptism resubstituted the original literal genealogies for the allegorical ones.10

Although hardly a cornerstone of Mormon theology, the doctrine of “believing blood” did not die with Smith. Brigham Young reaffirmed it in an 1855 discourse when he averred that gentiles, upon their conversion, “will be broken off from the wild olive tree, and be grafted into the good and tame olive tree” (269). In the twentieth century, Bruce McConkie listed “believing blood” in his controversial encyclopedia *Mormon Doctrine* (1966), and although he qualifies it as a “figurative expression,” he maintains that “the more of the blood of Israel that an individual has, the easier it is for him to believe the message of salvation” (“Believing Blood”). The doctrine’s uneasy status within official Mormon theology notwithstanding, its development in the late 1830s hints at Smith’s deliberate attempts to reframe religious identity in corporeal terms.

Smith first preached the doctrine on June 27, 1839 at the end of a particularly tumultuous period in early Mormon history. Only a few months prior, Smith had been imprisoned in Liberty, Missouri along with several other prominent Mormon leaders following the escalation of hostilities between Mormons and Missourians in the fall of 1838. The rise in anti-Mormon violence prompted Smith to more sustained thinking

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10 Neither Smith nor other early Mormon theologians abandoned Pauline universalism entirely, instead maintaining it in tension with assertions of literal Israelitic identity. See Green.
about the relationship between religion and public life in the US. As early as the 1830s, anti-Mormon writers had begun to racialize Mormon bodies as a way to delegitimize their theological claims and to justify exclusion from the national polity. W. Paul Reeve has demonstrated that the “Mormon” label very quickly “became a distinct nomenclature employed by outsiders to differentiate between themselves and as ‘citizens,’ people with rights to life, liberty, and property—or the blessings of whiteness—and ‘Mormons’ as people shorn of those same basic rights” (21). Over time, phrenologists, physiognomists, and practitioners of other racial pseudo-sciences developed elaborate theories of what they insisted were the distinguishing features of Mormon bodies. The doctrine of “believing blood”—along with Smith’s own willingness to submit to phrenological examination in 1840—may have been, therefore, a rearguard maneuver intended to articulate a positive theory of Mormon bodily difference not by rejecting pseudo-scientific discourses of the body but by appropriating them and integrating the genealogical literalism before the united front of secular and Protestant discourses could fully subsume the Mormon body and declare its inferiority.¹¹

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There were strains of the literal in Melville, too, and after the aporia of Mardi’s final chapters, Melville’s fiction begins to veer distinctly towards developing novel materialisms. In White Jacket (1850), for instance, the narrator’s eponymous coat gradually consumes him to the point that his identity becomes indistinguishable from it. And in Pierre (1852), Melville explores the unsettling effects of a biological materialism

¹¹ See Bitton and Bunker.
that converts all human relationships into family ones. But it is in *Moby-Dick* that we find Melville’s most sustained exploration of the implications these transformations posed to religious identity and theological thought.

Like Smith, Melville had rejected metaphysical dualisms and pursued aesthetico-theological projects (novels and poems rather than scriptures and revelations) that explored the impact of philosophical materialism, globality, and the natural sciences upon Christian worldviews. As Sharon Cameron has meticulously demonstrated, Melville’s fiction flattens the allegorical into the literal and the soul into the body. This, she argues, collapses “a generic or definitional crisis (how to distinguish what is literal from what is allegorical) into a philosophical one (how to distinguish the body from the soul)” (12). Even as the characters in *Moby-Dick* perform the hermeneutical exercise of interpreting bodies and objects allegorically—even to excess—the novel itself refuses such distinctions. The central tension of *Moby-Dick* is, therefore, “between the spirit and the letter, one exegetical in its focus, the other affixed to the bodily thing itself” (Cameron, 19). For Melville in mid-career, all roads led back to the body, with *Moby-Dick* being but the most hyperbolic examples. Although I am going to bracket what Cameron refers to as the “more primitive questions of identity” that preoccupy *Moby-Dick*, I wish to retain her sense of the importance of literalization as corporealization, in which those aspects of the self that had been traditionally confined to the immaterial soul become rendered on and through the body. This, I claim, has a profound impact on how Melville represents the dynamics of American secularity in *Moby-Dick*.

Melville’s sense of the primacy of bodily life has its origins not in theophany, as it did for Smith, but in the perils of life at sea. The immediate threats that arise in the
business of whaling make allegorization into a life-threatening activity. As Ishmael insists in “The Affidavit,” for instance, the white whale ought not to be considered “a monstrous fable, or still worse and more detestable, a hideous and intolerable allegory” (205), for such a view dismisses the being’s physical heft, its capacity to endanger life and limb. Even as Ishmael probes knotty metaphysical questions raised by the various operations of a whaling ship, the novel repeatedly interrupts these interpretive digressions to remind readers of the mortal dangers punctuating daily life aboard a ship and the ontological terrors they induce. Nowhere is this clearer than in chapter 35 of Moby-Dick, “The Mast-Head.”

In the chapter, Ishmael imagines a “romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded” young sailor stationed at the masthead of a whaling ship who “loses his identity” in the “mystic ocean,” where “every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it” (158). Yet were this sailor, in the throes of his reverie, to “move [his] foot or hand an inch,” he would tumble to his death and his “identity [would] come back in horror” (152). The immediate object of Melville’s critique is Romantic pantheism, which—through the work William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge in England and Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel in Germany—came to be loosely defined by the beliefs that “nature was alive” (72), that “only that all-embracing one life really existed,” and that “all divisions were ultimately unreal” (79). The tragic descent of Melville’s romantic Platonist from the masthead vividly dramatizes how the belief in

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12 Melville’s relationship with German Romanticism is complicated, because he received so many of the ideas second-hand. See Johnson for how Melville read Emerson and Coleridge. See Hurh, American Terror, 175-90 for an excellent explication of Melville’s strange friendship with the British philosopher George Adler.
one’s integration with the natural world risks self-annihilation. Writing to Hawthorne in 1851, Melville makes a similar, if less mortal, point when he complains that Goethe’s motto to “Live in the all” is utter “nonsense,” since it offers no succor to the “fellow with a raging toothache,” for every throb of the rotting tooth recalls him to the fact of his body, to the corporeal frame he cannot escape even if he would (Correspondence, 193).

There is also a latent bit of exegetical literalism afoot in “The Mast-Head.” The most potent image in this brief episode (the careless slip of a hand or foot precipitating a deadly fall) would seem to be a literal reading of Deuteronomy 32:35, “Their Foot shall slide in due Time,” which, incidentally, is the prooftext for Jonathan Edwards’s most famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Edwards famously used the verse to exhort his parishioners against the comforts of soteriological assurance, urging them to be vigilant in their awareness that it was God holding them “over the Pit of Hell, much as one holds a Spider, or some loathsome Insect, over the fire” and keeping their feet from sliding into damnation (Sermons, 411). Melville inverts Edwards’s reading by turning attention away from the soul and toward the body, vividly rendering a foot that actually does slide, the cause of which being his momentary neglect of his own body. Similar moments recur throughout Moby-Dick as Melville draws attention again and again to how the immediacy of bodily life upends romantic notions of self-transcendence achieved through either dissolution, obliteration, or absorption into nature. Wheras Edwards exhorted his audience to recall the precarity of their souls, Moby-Dick demands that its characters and its readers alike recall the precarity (and the particularity) of their bodies.
Melville’s youthful sea-faring may have birthed his corporeal imagination, but its scope extended significantly after *Mardi*, profoundly impacting his representation of religious diversity. While Yothers and others have emphasized Melville’s so-called “religious syncretism” by attending to his vast reading across religious traditions and his elaborate negotiations of the rival truth claims, such readings too often treat religious diversity as a problem of propositions rather than of bodies. But, as the Mormon example shows, the religious body was a critical site of consternation, violence, and resistance in the antebellum US, exposing the limits and incoherence of early American notions of religious freedom. In *Moby-Dick*, Melville replicates global religious encounter in miniature, reproducing the scenes of contact and exchange I examined in the novels of Child and Sedgwick but in what Cameron calls “emphatically physical terms” (1). These modes of interaction are collapsed into the collision of bodies, displacing onto the body those aspects of religious identity and religious exchange formerly relegated to the mind or the soul. One effect of this turn towards religious corporeality is that because the representation of religious diversity becomes a private encounter between bodies, it thus suspends—or at least reroutes—the immediate anxieties over public Protestantism’s infiltration into daily life that trouble *Mardi’s* depiction of Serenia.

Whereas *Mardi* attends to the constraints that religious publics place on bodies, *Moby-Dick* is interested in the religious resonances and the revisions of religion that occur through both bodily touch and antebellum discourses of the body. In Melville’s renewed attention to corporeal life, he can be seen wrestling with the aftereffects of Taji’s failure to transcend his body through carnality. The animating urge of *Moby-Dick* is not to deify the self through an ascension of the spirit but to reinvest bodily life with
communal and identic meaning without having to make reference to the immaterial. This aspect of the novel is unfolded in the evolving relationship between Ishmael and Queequeg, whose intimate encounters offer a radically alternative view of religious contact to that of the sweeping the religious publics of *Mardi*.

**iv. The Presbyterian and the Pagan**

Ishmael and Queequeg first meet when Ishmael spies the tattooed Polynesian looming in his doorway and suffers a fit of hyperbolic terror at having to spend the night with him. The nearly mortal altercation that follows eventually cools enough for two to share a bed together. When Ishmael awakes to find his bedmate’s dark, elaborately marked arm draped over him in “the most loving and affectionate manner,” he reasons that an outsider, seeing them in their intimate repose, “would have almost thought I had been [Queequeg’s] wife” (25). Although obviously designed to offend the sensibilities of Melville’s more conservative readers, Queequeg’s loving touch also establishes a unique physical intimacy between the two men.

What makes this encounter religious as well as erotic is revealed when Ishmael, drifting in that smeared space between waking and dreaming, is momentarily unable to distinguish the patchwork arm of his bedmate from the quilted counterpane covering his body, leading him to recall an episode from his youth in which his stepmother, as punishment for playing in the chimney, had sent him to bed in the middle of the day. He eventually falls asleep only to wake up in the middle of the night to feel the pressure of a “supernatural hand placed in mine” (26). Queequeg’s arm, he explains, rouses “similar” “sensations” in him, albeit without the “awful fear” (26). Whether an entification of the
deity or a psychological projection compensating for an isolated boy’s estrangement from loving contact, the difference between the two hands—and thus the difference between Ishmael’s reaction to them—is the embodiment of the one and disembodiment of the other. Queequeg’s mnemonic touch removes the terror of spectral contact precisely because it is attached to a body composed of flesh and blood; spiritual comfort of the kind the young Ishmael experienced in his bed, on the other hand, is a terrifying substitute for human touch, failing to engender the sensations of fraternity and companionship of the other.

This scene contains the seeds of the dual forms of corporeal religiosity in Moby-Dick, both of which answer the body-spirit dilemma that concludes Mardi. The former, which I will call corporeal universalism, is embodied by Ishmael and stems from his abiding need for human rather than divine contact. It culminates in an ecstatic vision aboard the Pequod that promises to be a salve for existential orphanhood, a version of Serenia eroticized. Queequeg, by contrast, embodies what I will call corporeal particularism, a way of being religious in which the body itself becomes the site of religious identity as well as a means by which to resist universalizing discourses of the body, both Protestant and secular, that would diminish, demean, or otherwise erase his identic particularity.

Ishmael and Queequeg’s first night together is a private encounter between bodies, but it is also a microcosm for colonial encounter, the scene of global religious contact writ small. It replays the classic American scene of miscegenation, but the fact that the two lovers are men purges it of the anxieties over reproduction typically attending such encounters, drawing attention instead to the way physical intimacy
engenders the desire for mutual understanding—a stark contrast to the pleasureless suffering of the miscegenation scene in Hobomok. Samuel Otter sees in this intimate moment of bodily encounter a salve to the corrosive categories and methods of antebellum racial science, writing that, “in the dark, the ethnological charge is drained from bodies, replaced by a less defined erotic intensity” (160). But if anything, the chapters that follow this demonstrate the degree to which Ishmael’s ethnological imagination is ignited by his erotic encounter, instilling a desire to deduce the inner life beneath his Polynesian companion’s dark skin through the discourses and methods of racial science. He becomes, in short, a loving ethnologist.

As Queequeg goes about his quotidian business of dressing, shaving, eating, lounging, and peddling heads, Ishmael scrutinizes his companion’s appearance, demeanor, visage, and manners, assuming a subversive ethnological gaze. Melville deliberately plays with the conventions of antebellum ethnology, as when Ishmael, having taken note of the particular contours of Queequeg’s head and its resemblance to busts of George Washington, concludes that Queequeg must be a “George Washington cannibalistically developed” (50). Where ethnology often sought confirmation of the ontological inferiority of racial others, Ishmael discovers in Queequeg previously unseen contours of beauty and nobility. At the same time, the intersubjective dynamics of this scene hint at the divergence between Queequeg’s and Ishmael’s respective approaches to religious being. As Ishmael strives for identic penetration and eventual integration, Queequeg, who is “always equal to himself” (50), remains an identic whole, unfractured and unperturbed. Ishmael beholds Queequeg like a lover beholding a beloved, but
because he does so through an ethnological lens implicitly recalibrates the terms of cross-cultural encounter.

All this peeping into Queequeg’s private life would seem to have little to do with “religion” in any strict sense until, on their second night together, Queequeg invites Ishmael to participate in his nightly ritual of worshipping his ebony idol Yojo. Ishmael reluctantly agrees, justifying this act of ritual participation to himself as a fulfilment of his duties as a Christian rather than a flouting of them:

I was a good Christian; born and bred in the bosom of the infallible Presbyterian Church. How then could I unite with this wild idolator in worshipping his piece of wood? But what is worship? thought I. Do you suppose now, Ishmael, that the magnanimous God of heaven and earth--pagans and all included--can possibly be jealous of an insignificant bit of black wood? Impossible! But what is worship?--to do the will of God--THAT is worship. And what is the will of God?--to do to my fellow man what I would have my fellow man to do to me--THAT is the will of God. Now, Queequeg is my fellow man. And what do I wish that this Queequeg would do to me? Why, unite with me in my particular Presbyterian form of worship. Consequently, I must then unite with him in his; ergo, I must turn idolator. So I kindled the shavings; helped prop up the innocent little idol; offered him burnt biscuit with Queequeg; salamed before him twice or thrice; kissed his nose; and that done, we undressed and went to bed, at peace with our own consciences and all the world. (52)

Readers of the novel have long noted the subversive beauties of this passage: its mischievous adoption of a catechistical form, its casual dismissal of the first commandment, and the self-satisfaction Ishmael radiates after performing an act that would have sent many pious hand-wringers spinning. But it is also a scene that resembles those moments of common worship in the novels I examined in chapters 1 and 2.

*Hobomok*, we recall, begins with Mary Conant performing a ritual act upon the same stones that Hobomok employs in his worship and reaches its emotional apex when, under distress, Mary weds Hobomok through a ritual performance. Similarly, in Sedgwick’s *A New-England Tale*, Jane Elton is reluctantly drawn into Crazy Bet’s ecstatic nature worship on their twilight journey to John Mountain’s house. In each of those instances, the Protestant heroines’ participation in the worship of religious others is circumscribed
or otherwise qualified by the narrative, either because it occurs beyond the boundaries of
the social or because the actors are not fully conscious of what it is they are doing.
Melville, by contrast, leaves Ishmael no such loophole. Rather than merely targeting the
hypocrisies of the orthodox or asserting the intrinsic value of foreign religious practices,
Melville in this moment makes a positive argument for an alternative story of Christian
secularization in a religiously diverse world.

When Ishmael dismisses the first commandment on the grounds that it would be
absurd for the incomprehensibly glorious God of Calvinism to be “jealous of an
insignificant bit of black wood,” he creates a space for other gods within a Christian
cosmology. By then invoking Jesus’s version of the golden rule from the Sermon on the
Mount as a literal imperative to partake in the ritual practices of others, he builds a
Christian theological case for worshipping those other gods. The importance of Ishmael’s
stunning conclusion that he must “turn idolator” in order to fulfill Jesus’s imperative lies
in the etymological ambiguities of that “turn.” The word that first comes to mind is, of
course, convert. But there is also a sense in this instance in which conversion (to turn
around) is also a kind reversion (to turn back) given the insistence within Christian
historiography to see idol worship as a primitive religious form the advent of Christ had
destined for obsolescence. Ishmael’s willingness to engage with Queequeg’s religious
practice (for the ostensible purposes, of course, of turning Queequeg Presbyterian) makes
idolatry acceptable Christian theological framework and, as a result, refutes a historical
narrative of unmitigated religious evolution where earlier forms are progressively
discarded. There is a way, then, to see in this passage a glimpse of an alternative
experience of colonialism and imperialism, one in which the throngs of traders,
missionaries, and experts dispersed across the globe did not develop epistemological regimes to dehumanize and delegitimate other peoples and other gods, but engaged with them out of a genuine curiosity born of love.

Melville deserts this utopian chimera about as quickly as he introduces it, for Ishmael abandons his idolatry in chapter 17, “The Ramadan,” where the perspective he assumes is that of the liberal tolerationist. Its comic veneer notwithstanding, the chapter is a focused and self-contained critique of the ecumenical posturing I have identified in Child, Sedgwick, and, to some degree, Stowe. To introduce what he calls Queequeg’s “Ramadan”—a period of ascetic stillness for which the Islamic holy month provides as a rough analogy—Ishmael, having just discovered his bedmate sitting silently with legs folded in the middle of their shared room, decides not to disturb his friend’s “Fasting and Humiliation” on the grounds that he

cherished the greatest respect towards everybody’s religious obligations, never mind how comical, and could not find it in my heart to undervalue even a congregation of ants worshipping a toad-stool; or those other creatures in certain parts of our earth, who with a degree of footmanism quite unprecedented in other planets, bow down before the torso of a deceased landed proprietor merely on account of the inordinate possessions yet owned and rented in his name. (79)

Over the course of this long, circuitous sentence Ishmael asserts his tolerationist credentials by adopting a meta-religious perspective similar to the kind I have examined in Hobomok, Redwood, and Dred, wherein a character temporarily assumes a semi-omniscient point of view in order to describe religious difference in its totality. He does this first by imagining himself as a naturalist stooping to sympathize with a “congregation of ants worshipping a toad-stool.” This picture is lathered in condescension, as the idea of Ishmael bestowing his approval on the religious practices of insects reveals the lurking arrogance embedded in the metareligious gaze. This vantage then shifts in the next clause to a more sweeping anthropological perspective, one that
encompasses not only other “parts of our earth” but “other planets” as well. From this perch Ishmael wonders at certain “creatures” on Earth who worship the “torso of a deceased landed proprietor.” Whether Melville has in mind specific religious practices (possibly Christianity, but the reference is too opaque to be certain) or not, its bemused tone nevertheless betrays a meta-religious smugness.

In the other novels I’ve examined, meditations on religious plurality like this one typically issue in some expression of awe at the variety of cosmological difference and an appreciation of its theological or aesthetic value, but Ishmael’s are met with a performative rebuke. When Ishmael discovers that Queequeg’s Ramadan will be an affair of several days rather than several hours, he panics, and, fearing Queequeg might die, demolishes the door to their room in order to break the fast. Despite Ishmael’s best efforts to stir him, Queequeg remains unmoved until the following morning, at which point Ishmael feels compelled to clarify the boundaries of his tolerationism, stating that he has “no objection to any person’s religion . . . so long as that person does not kill or insult any other person, because that other person doesn’t believe it also” (82). One’s religion is thus acceptable so long as it makes one’s being in the world (and that of others) more, and not less, comfortable. In a sentence structurally identical to the sentence in the novel’s first paragraph describing Ishamel’s setting out to sea, he asserts, “When a man’s religion becomes really frantic; when it is a positive torment to him; and, in fine, makes this earth of ours an uncomfortable inn to lodge in; then I think it high time to take that individual aside and argue the point with him” (82).13 The focus of Ishmael’s criticism

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13 The sentence I refer to is this one: “Whenever I find myself grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and
represents an important shift in his thinking about how to draw the boundaries of true
religion. No longer is it the case that all practices and beliefs are worthy of toleration.
Now, a religion is worthy of censure when it appears one’s own body or the bodies of
others are under threat.

To communicate this to Queequeg, Ishmael adopts the role of a natural historian of religions, explaining that

beginning with the rise and progress of the primitive religions, and coming down to the
various religious of the present time, all these Lents, Ramadans, and prolonged ham-
squattings in cold, cheerless rooms were stark nonsense; bad for the health; useless for
the soul; opposed, in short, to the obvious laws of Hygiene and common sense. . . . This
is the reason why most dyspeptic religionists cherish such melancholy notion about their
hereafter. . . . [H]ell is an idea first born on an undigested apple-dumpling. (82)

By reducing the foundational story of Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit to a story of
indisgestion, Ishmael moves away from theological or anthropological arguments for true
religion and towards physiological ones, reframing human religiosity corporeally from
within Lamarckian evolutionism.14 In making this argument, Ishmael parrots the
language of antebellum health reformers like John Harvey Kellogg, Sylvester Graham,
and Elizabeth Blackwell to explain human degeneracy.15 The “Christian physiologists,”
as they were called, combined Christian theology with physiology, phrenology, racial
science, and the reformist drives of the temperance movement to launch religious
movements focused on the health and beauty of the human body.16 Nor were such
pursuits confined to any one denomination, as Spiritualism, Seventh-Day Adventism, and
a bevy of other Protestant sects dabbled in radical health regimes that promised to reform

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14 For more on Melville’s relationship to Lamarckian evolutionism, see Kyla Schuller, “Specious
Bedfellows: Ethnicity, Animality, and the Intimacy of Slaughter in Moby-Dick,” Leviathan 12.3 (2010): 12-
13.
15 See Engs, 69.
16 See Whorton, 38-66.
the body. Kellogg, for instance, who developed an entire theology of “biologic living,” believed that “race degeneration” was the harbinger of the apocalypse (Wilson, 137). Blackwell, likewise, made a remark in the introduction to her book *The Laws of Life* (1852) that sounds strikingly familiar to Ishmael’s Lamarckian digression: “Who ever imagined Adam suffering from dyspepsia, or Eve in a fit of hysterics. The thought shocks us—Eden becomes our hospital” (Blackwell, 16-17). By ventriloquizing the Christian physiologists at this moment, Ishmael seizes a contemporary method of mapping the boundaries of true religion in terms of the body as a means of delegitimating Queequeg’s fast.

But the claims of Ishmael’s digressive lecture are disproven when he sees that Queequeg’s body remains as hale and hearty after his ritual as it did before it. In a wonderful reversal of Ishmael’s patronizing gaze in the opening paragraph of the chapter, “The Ramadan” concludes with Queequeg giving Ishmael a look of “condescending concern and compassion, as though he thought it a great pity that such a sensible young man should be hopelessly lost to evangelical pagan piety” (83). Thoroughly chastised, Ishmael attributes to Queequeg (who hasn’t spoken a word) the authority of true religion in recognizably Protestant terms (evangelical piety) but expands their scope with that additional, transformative adjective, “pagan.” In this last twist, Melville issues a silent defense of cultural relativism and cross-cultural humility, but even more significant here is that Ishmael’s attempt to discredit Queequeg’s religion on the basis of its (presumed) bodily effects is in fact defied by Queequeg’s body. His “evangelical pagan piety” is communicated not through a tract or a sermon but through the rhetorical force of his body. In the example of the Mormon doctrine of “believing blood,” which I explicated in
the previous section, the body of the convert was said to have transformed along with the soul as a way to racialize Mormons positively before they could be racialized by their enemies. In “The Ramadan,” Queequeg’s body becomes the site both for Ishmael’s discursive effort to delegitimize a religious practice and the source of resistance to it. The disparity between Ishmael’s revulsion at the perceived excesses of Queequeg’s religious practices in “The Ramadan” and the glimpse into new forms of religious intimacy and revived conceptions of idolatry offered by the twilight sacrifice to Yojo in “A Bosom Friend” calls into relief Ishmael and Queequeg’s respective ways of embodying religion. Melville makes this difference abundantly clear when Queequeg and Ishmael meet with the Quaker owners of the Pequod (Captains Bildad and Peleg) to sign their names on the ship’s roster. As a precondition of Queequeg’s joining the ranks of the Pequod’s crew, Bildad asks Queequeg to “show that he’s converted” and if he is “at present in communion with any Christian church” (87). Ishmael, speaking as Queequeg’s proxy, answers that the Kokovokan is a member of the “first Congregational Church” (87). Both Quakers misunderstand Ishmael’s meaning, with Bildad believing that Queequeg attends Deacon Deuteronomy Coleman’s Congregationalist church in Nantucket and Peleg casting doubt upon the assertion by noting that if Queequeg was a member of a church, he must not have been “baptized right,” for “it would have washed some of that devil’s blue off his face” (88). Peleg’s remark brings the bodily nature of Queequeg’s religious identity to the fore once again by suggesting that Queequeg’s tattoos must be an outward sign of an inward state and, more generally, that a body ought to signify a religious identity. Ishmael responds to the captains’ queries with a spontaneous sermon, informing them that his first Congregational Church is that
same ancient Catholic Church to which you and I, and Captain Peleg there, and Queequeg here, and all of us, and every mother’s son and soul of us belong; the great and everlasting First Congregation of this whole worshipping world; we all belong to that; only some of us cherish some queer crotchets no ways touching the grand belief; in that we all join hands. (88).

While Peleg and Bildad applaud Ishmael’s rapturous vision of the primitive church of humanity, wherein the “queer crotchets” of religious particularity are subordinated to the “grand belief,” this brief exchange exposes a fissure between Ishmael and Queequeg. Ishmael’s vision of a community of bodies operating under the aegis of the “grand belief” implicitly devalues the “queer crotchets” that structure Queequeg’s way of being in the world. And, for Queequeg, while the “devil’s blue” on his face is obviously not the sign of an unregenerate soul, it is the bodily sign of a lifeworld distinct from and not assimilable to Ishmael’s universalizing vision. To clarify this difference, I turn now to two late chapters that crystallize these paradigms of corporeal religion in their most exaggerated forms, “A Squeeze of the Hands” (chapter 94) and “Queequeg in his Coffin” (chapter 110).

“Queequeg in his Coffin” concludes with Queequeg, who has just willed himself to recover from a mysterious ailment, inscribing upon the coffin he commissioned for himself the tattoos adorning his body. Ishmael elucidates the origins of these markings, observing that they had been

the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by these hieroglyphic marks, had written out on [Queequeg’s] body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them[.] (480)

In figuring Queequeg’s body as a “wondrous work in one volume,” Ishmael invites the reader to see Queequeg’s body first and foremost as an exegetical problem. Yet the universal illegibility of his tattoos—with no Rosetta stone to extract their meaning—
dooms any attempt at interpretation to failure. This leaves readers with two options: either to revel in the impenetrability of Queequeg’s body as Ahab does at the end of the chapter when he exclaims, “O! devilish tantalization of the Gods!” (481) or to resist the lure of trying to decode the content of Queequeg’s scripture-skin and direct attention instead to the form of the tattoos and the nature of their transmission. The former approach would make Queequeg into another ambiguous emblem in a book already full of them (e.g. the doubloon nailed to Pequod’s masthead or the Rorschachian etchings on sperm whales’ hides). Taking the latter approach, we can see that the tattoos comprise two different texts: “a complete theory of the heavens and the earth” and “a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth.” Together, these form a comprehensive religious worldview, wedding together a metaphysics, a theology, a cosmology, and an epistemology. Their content, however, remains a mystery, even to Queequeg. For most, the tattoos are merely a signal of alterity (as in Peleg’s remark that they would have disappeared had Queequeg been baptized) but they also make Queequeg’s physical body the sole vessel for a religious worldview that is transmissible but incommunicable, an act he performs when he copies the tattoos onto his coffin. His is a religious body in the most literal and particular sense.

While Queequeg represents the apex of religious particularity, Ishmael, in “A Squeeze of the Hands,” expresses a corporate religion of the body. In this chapter, Ishmael ecstatically describes the process of squeezing lumps of sperm extracted from the corpse of a sperm whale. He exults in the aroma and texture of the fluid which renders him “divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice, of any sort whatsoever”
(416), momentarily erases the relentless pursuit of the white whale. The perpetual squeezing slowly induces an experience of communal ecstasy:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their sentimentally; as much as to say,—Oh! my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill-humor or envy! Come, let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and sperm of human kindness. (416)

Ishmael’s call to “join hands” in his pithy sermon to Bildad and Peleg is here metaphysicalized and rapturously extended. The joining of hands was a common trope in Melville’s work during this period, appearing, for instance, in his review of Parkman’s *Oregon Trail* where, bristling at Parkman’s obvious racial bias, he writes, “We are all of us—Anglo-Saxons, Dyaks, and Indians—sprung from one head, and made in one image. And if we regret this brotherhood now, we shall be forced to join hands hereafter” (416).

But in this chapter, the joining of hands transforms into the squeezing of hands, which, unlike the more passive “join” injects an element of applied pressure into the vision, physically broadcasting the desire of one’s own body to be ever closer to the body of another, unsatisfied until the two forms are integrated with one another. It is the act of squeezing that lends the scene its erotic urgency and ecstatic energy, with its potential, in the medium of the sperm, to dissolve bodily difference, and along with it, all “social acerbities.” This is a religious, even a mystical, vision of human union, the heightened experience of which is reflected in the prose itself: its exclamatory tone, its adjectival excess, its rhythmic and progressively intensifying repetitions of “squeeze,” and its euphoric imperative to Ishmael’s “dear fellow beings” to squeeze not only their hands but their whole bodies into some undifferentiated universal whole. While this chapter at first
feels leagues apart from Queequeg’s casual embrace of Ishmael in the Spouter Inn and the childhood memory of his contact the supernatural hand this recalls, it’s not hard to draw the line from that early moment of spiritualized erotic touch to this intoxicated literary performance and to see how Ishmael’s experience of communal squeezing expands his urgent need for a human community born out of intimate touch into a comprehensive religious vision. As Peter Coviello writes, in light of this late interruption of eroticism, “Ishmael’s seaside encounter with Queequeg is made to seem markedly preliminary” (All Tomorrow’s Parties, 134).

If Ishmael’s mystical flight can be said to issue in a politics, it is only what Bersani calls “a comically anarchic sensuality” (145). As with most visionary experiences, however, this one is both too fleeting and too sullied by the material circumstances that give rise to it. Nor is Ishmael unaware of its ephemerality, as he admits in the very next paragraph, lamenting, “in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity” (416). Instead, the demands of daily life require the individual to relocate this desire for connection, “not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the hearth, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fireside, the country” (416). The erotic apotheosis of squeezing hands, once translated to the banalities of everyday life, reduces to a tame sentimentalism that refigures the bodily fusion of personal and communal identity into the sympathetic relationality of domesticity.17

Thus far I have considered Queequeg’s exemplary religious body and Ishmael’s visions of a corporate religious body. But what, in Moby-Dick’s materialist cosmos, are

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17 See also Casarino, 172-85.
we to do with the bodies of gods? And, moreover, what do the relationships between
gods and men tell us about the changing conditions of religious belief in Melville’s own
historical moment?

Throughout the novel, the whale is a synecdoche for the incomprehensible and
immeasurable intelligence of the world, but it is not until chapter 102, “The Bower in the
Arsacides,” that we actually see a reverence for the whale liturgized and formalized. It is
a fitting place to conclude, not least because it is one of the only chapters where
Polynesian religion appears in Moby-Dick—thus repeating with a difference the sacred
spaces of Maramma—and one of only a few glimpses we get of the post-Pequodic
Ishmael. The chapter begins with Ishmael visiting the island of Tranque in the Arsacides,
whose king, Tranquo, he has befriended. Tranquo, having come into possession of a
sperm whale skeleton, converted it into a temple for whale worship. Although the
ostensible purpose of Ishmael’s visit is to measure the whale’s skeleton, he confronts a
set of new realities about divinity and the possibility of belief in a secular age out of
which arise the novel’s final iteration of Ishmael’s integrative ideal of bodily communion
and return us to the attempts by Taji and also by Joseph Smith to break the conceptual
division between body and soul.

Tranque’s skeletal temple is a poor facsimile of a living church and an irreverent
parody of the spectacle of worship. Built out of the desiccated bones of a corporeal God,
the temple feebly replicates the life of the once magnificent creature with an “aromatic
flame” installed in its skull to mimic the “vapoury spout” and a vibrating jaw meant to
frighten “devotees” (Melville, Moby-Dick, 449). Whatever awe the whale once inspired is
lost in this hollow temple, for, Ishmael notes in the following chapter, “only on the

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profound unbounded sea, can the fully invested whale be truly and livingly found out” (454). Although Yothers, for instance, reads the Arsacidean scene as an emblem of Melville’s religious syncretism, blending images from Christianity, Islam, Transcendentalism, and Polynesian religion to reflect “on the nature of both reality and divinity” (79), the temple at Tranquo seems less like a holy site for religious intermingling than it does a Polynesian iteration of an evangelical amusement park ride, failing either to please or to proselytize. Ishmael even compares this scene to a literal leviathanic tourist trap in the British aristocrat Sir Clifford Constable’s Yorkshire estate, which was famous for selling access to the creature’s every crevice. Each of these two exhibitions of the whale’s body signify the whale’s long fall from an incomprehensible mystery into religious kitsch, on the one hand, and a spectatorial lark, on the other. This bathetic representation reduces the momentousness of what Ishmael calls, as he enters the temple’s precincts, the “privilege of Jonah” (448). His experience of the place reveals that this singular privilege is not what it used to be and, given the whale’s historical entanglement with Yahweh, neither is God.

But what exactly was the Jonah’s privilege? Ishmael’s use of the term suggests that Jonah’s great fortune was to have been granted an inside view of the living whale, an experience that installs the errant Hebrew prophet, along with Job, as a towering biblical type for human-whale encounters in *Moby-Dick*. But whereas Job’s rhetorical confrontation with the leviathan typifies an incomprehensible theodicy (“Canst thou catch the Leviathan with a hook?”), Jonah’s typifies a much more intimate and even sensual encounter with the leviathanic body, one that results from being passively consumed rather than from violently penetrating; he is alone in his knowledge of a living leviathan’s
inner recesses. Ishmael’s valorization of the Jonahic privilege is an extension of the integrative desire I’ve been tracing throughout the novel, except in this case the other body is cetaceous rather than human and, therefore, not site of erotic or utopian union but of total absorption into a radically different and exponentially larger being. It is as close an approximation to absorption into the deity as nature affords. “The Bower in the Arsacides,” however, reveals to Ishmael the impossibility both of a Jonahic experience and also of believing that such an experience could ever have been impossible.

Melville accentuates the dissonance between Jonah’s and Ishmael’s experiences in several chapters. The most grotesque of these is when Ishmael describes gutting an infant whale to study its inner being, but chapter 84, “Jonah Historically Regarded,” a semi-dialogue that pits the common-sense reasoning of a skeptical Sag-Harbor sailor against literalist readings of the Jonah story cribbed from John Kitto’s *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*, better chrystallizes the changing conditions of belief represented in this shift. In that chapter, Melville is keen to the absurdity of the exegetical acrobatics required to make the claim that Jonah’s whale was really a bag of wind, or that it was merely a whale carcass, or that it was actually a ship with a whale on its prow, or that it was a whale but Jonah hid in its mouth rather than its stomach. Even if one of these glosses *were* true, it would obviously erase what is most enticing about the Jonah story. What finally binds the Sag-Harbor sailor (who doesn’t believe in the Jonah story) and the biblical apologists (who do, but feel compelled to explain it away) is the shared sense that the story as it is written could not have happened, that it could not be literally true. Only by rejecting the tale’s facticity, it seems, can the story’s essence be preserved. Yet in

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18 See Pardes.
dramatizing the deflation of the Jonahic privilege into an experience that can be purchased for pennies (as it was at Sir Clifford Constable’s estate), Ishmael hints that those historical transformations which had deprived the world of literal Jonahs might also present new theological possibilities in a materialist key.

Even though Ishmael’s entrance into the arched ribcage of the Arsacidean whale does not induce Jonah’s terror, his wandering eye is drawn not the whale at all, in fact, but to the floral abundance growing about it, occasioning one of his most baroque and confounding theological utterances:

Through the lacings of the leaves, the great sun seemed a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure. Oh, busy weaver! unseen weaver!—pause!—one word!—whither flows the fabric? what palace may it deck? wherefore all these ceaseless toilings? Speak, weaver!—stay thy hand!—but one single word with thee! Nay--the shuttle flies—the figures float from forth the loom; the freshet-rushing carpet for ever slides away. The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened; and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. For even so it is in all material factories. The spoken words that are inaudible among the flying spindles; those same words are plainly heard without the walls, bursting from the opened casements. Thereby have villainies been detected. Ah, mortal! then, be heedful; for so, in all this din of the great world’s loom, thy subtlest thinking may be overheard afar. (450)

Melville’s likening of the pastoral scene of the Arsacides to a nineteenth-century textile mill has prompted several critics to read this scene as a comment on the relationship between the pastoral and industrial in the nineteenth century.19 But the analogy is even more striking for the way it refigures the work of nature as a surfeit of activity at once deafening and ceaseless. Neither the omnipotent sovereign of Calvinist theology nor the magisterial whale, the weaver-god is actually a kind of cosmic wage laborer, producing works of nature with such vigor that it remains unable to hear the voices that appeal to it from below. Whether or not this god even has agency is unclear; Ishmael’s apostrophe deftly leaves open the possibility that the weaver-god could be either a true intelligence

19 See, for example, Royster, 315-17.
or simply a mechanical force only capable of deafening activity. Whatever it ultimately is, the world this god fashions is a stifling one, with religious difference (the “thousand voices” that speak through the loom) vanishing amidst the unremitting bustle of nature. Nor is there any way within the “material factory” of our world to adjudicate among the multitude of voices and positions. Instead, Ishmael posits some nebulous space outside the “casements” of this factory wherein our “subtlest thoughts may be overheard” and “villanies” may be “detected,” but who or what inhabits this space beyond language and matter is never specified.

Initially, Ishmael’s apostrophe to the weaver-god contrasts the labor of the world’s loom with the dry bones of the dead whale, and the explosive life of nature appears to overwhelm the symbol of stasis. Yet when he turns his eye back to the whale, Ishmael wonders whether that “mighty idler” (450) could, in fact, be the “cunning weaver,” since it is the whale’s stillness that attracts the local flora to it, its motionless form determining and directing the patterns of the vines. By drawing living plants to its frame, the dead whale is reanimated in ways that far exceed the tacky mechanical inventions of the priests, the dessicated god resurrected through organic processes that have little to do with human labor. This final image also comments on the state of religious adherence in Melville’s own historical moment, the suspicion that Christianity, despite the persistence of its liturgical forms, was worshipping only the skeleton of a once living god, but which Ishmael sees in the process of being reborn. The natural abundance accumulating upon the bones of the Arsacidean whale hints at an organic form of religious renewal that, while it may not revive the dead god, aestheticizes and enlivens it. Here is the final turn of the Melvillian screw: in a scene that initially appears to degrade and foreclose the
“privilege of Jonah,” Ishmael is, at last, permitted a Jonahic view of an immanent natural world dynamically reconstituting a lifeless God.

Ishmael’s meditations in the Arsacidean temple grapple with irreversible changes to the conditions of belief, massive cultural changes whose effects are subsequently inscribed on his body. The local priests protest Ishmael attempts at measuring the whale’s skeleton, but they descend into internecine squabbles when he asks them to tell him the canonical length of the skeleton. Ishmael then makes the measurements himself and records the “valuable statistics” by tattooing them on his right arm. Here, in a scene which occurs chronologicaly after novel’s plot has concluded, Ishmael’s body has become a hybrid thing in which a pagan cultural and religious practice (tattooing) becomes a medium both for aesthetic self-expression (he reserves space on his arm to tattoo a poem of his own composition [450]) as well as for recording measurements that are, in one context, profane data and, in another, sacred numbers. Ishmael has borrowed the form of Queequeg’s religious body, but secularized it; he is a walking profanation.

Ishmael’s body thus stands a stark alternative to the secularized body that public Protestantism envisioned, a skin whose evolving textualization literalizes a changing worldview. Through this process, Ishmael also achieves—albeit it in a slightly modified form—that urge for corporeal integration running throughout the text, albeit in a slightly modified form: the texture of his skin mirrors that of Queequeg’s and the numbers he tattoos record the dimensions of a whale not unlike the one that consumed Jonah. But the textualization of Ishmael’s body does not, as in Queequeg’s case, also imply its scripturalization, or at least not in the sense that it is immutable. As the blank space on
Ishmael’s arm implies, it is a text still in the process of becoming, a dance of contingency and permanence.

*Mardi,* we recall, protested Serenian love with a theosis born of carnal desire. The result of Taji’s futile attempts to prop up his flagging divinity was a profound dissociation of body and spirit. Joseph Smith, likewise, took up this same theme as part of a larger theological project to—intentionally or not—dismantle the prevailing assumptions and distinctions governing antebellum Protestantism. In both his doctrines of theosis and of believing blood, Smith sought to imagine the material exaltation of human bodies. In raising men to the status of gods, Smith also returned the body of God to a human frame, crashing the Christian cosmos into earth. But at the end of *Moby-Dick,* as Ishmael—whose body has become a kind of secular scripture—records the measurements of a dead god, Melville looks towards another horizon of being in the world, one in which the divisions that enabled Protestant hegemony are denied from the outside and the religious body can make itself anew.
CHAPTER 4
THE EXODUS OF MARTIN DELANY

Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken, and we are escaped.
—Psalms 124:7, read aloud by Martin R. Delany at the National Emigration Convention of Colored People, August 26, 1854

Up to this point, I have been considering the American novel’s representation of religious diversity and its relationship to the rise of public Protestantism from within the geographical context of New England. But in the antebellum era the American South—largely as a result of the denominational fractures caused by the slavery debate—developed an exaggerated and insidious form of public Protestantism all its own. In this chapter, I turn to an examination of the effects that southern Protestant consolidation, along with the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, had upon the literary and political imagination of Martin Delany, one of the most ardent emigrationists of the period as well as one of the only African American writers to publish a novel before the Civil War.

For a growing class of black intellectuals in the 1850s, the territorial advances of US slave-holding interests suggested that universal bondage was in the offing. Divine judgment, they reasoned, would soon follow, and no blood struck upon the lintels of their doorways would spare them from God’s wrath. In their eyes, the only alternative was escape. Black emigrationism was the political movement developing out of these conclusions, and although it was plagued by accusations that its projects were no better than or different from white-led colonization efforts, it remained fundamentally “an ideology of empowerment,” one “centered on the notion that a black-ruled nation could provide a refuge for those African Americans who found racism intolerable” (Power-
Greene, 4). Integrationists, despite their reservations about the future of African Americans in the US, demanded that the nation live up to its founding ideals and forge black communities within its bounds. Emigrationists, on the other hand, sought refuge in new Canaans where they believed they could create social orders free from the seemingly perpetual burdens of racism.

In one of a series of six essays written for *The Anglo-African Magazine* advocating the collective emigration of African Americans to Haiti, the black Protestant Episcopal minister James T. Holly alerted his readers:

> The social ostracism of the colored people in the United States is complete and irremediable. . . . They must escape as Lot from the guilty and doomed cities of the plain, not even looking back upon this accursed land—lest like the wife of Lot, they should be turned into signal monuments of Divine vengeance; or like that Slavish generation of Israelites, who hankered after the flesh pots of Egypt, be doomed to wander in the wilderness of darkness and error until they are all slain by the avenging hand of God[.]

(242)

By layering the biblical accounts of Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction atop the wilderness experience of the Israelites, Holly grimly prophesies the nation’s future and crafts a cautionary tale about the perils of nostalgia. While he knows these imaginary pilgrims may yearn to steal one last glance at the land of their birth or salivate over remembered “flesh pots,” Holly has no sympathy for retrospective longing. For “the only means by which a suffering people can seek their political regeneration” (241) is to break decisively with an old social order and construct a radically new one in its place. The Israelites’ forty years in the wilderness, he reminds his readers, were a punishment, not a prerequisite.

Appearing in the same issue of *The Anglo-African Magazine* were several chapters of Martin R. Delany’s *Blake; or, the Huts of America*. As for Holly and many others, the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 had led Delany (already a well-known editor,
physician, orator, abolitionist, and journalist) to devote his considerable energies to emigrationist schemes. ¹ Blake, his sole novel, is the most sophisticated and capacious expression of his thinking from within emigrationism, yet because it begins with its titular hero’s attempt to incite a mass land-based slave rebellion, the novel at first glance hardly seems a representative emigrationist narrative. Brazen in its representations of black radicalism, the first of the novel’s two parts is a revolutionary picaresque through the antebellum South as Henry Blake, a former slave, foments insurrection across the region. It is only after a narrative turn midway through the text that Blake abandons his rebellion, flees north to Canada with what remains of his family, and then travels to Cuba, where he simultaneously plots a new uprising, forms a nascent Pan-African nation, and fashions a new black religion. Despite the novel’s hectic pace and geographic scope, it is anchored by the story of Israelite liberation in the book of Exodus. But, like Holly’s prophetic warning, Blake does not merely rehearse the biblical narrative. Rather, it deliberately recombines and reappropriates the elements of the Exodus paradigm in a way that shifts focus to the occupation of Canaan, Exodus’s discomfiting epilogue. I examine Blake’s complex engagement with the Exodus story in order to elaborate the political theology of black emigrationism it advances, or what I call its Canaan politics. In Blake, we can see anew how emigrationist thought expanded the field of view in black Exodus politics to question what kind of social world needed to be established to sustain black subjects after liberation.

¹ The revival of black emigrationism in the 1850s can be attributed almost entirely to the Compromise of 1850 and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law. Emigrationist sentiment was very much a pragmatic response among black intellectuals to the terrifying advances of slave interests and the annihilation of “free” as a meaningful category for African Americans anywhere in the United States. See Dean Robinson, 11-12.
Exodus may well be the most pivotal story in the shaping of African American political discourse. It offered free and slave alike proof of God’s capacity to liberate an oppressed people, a narrative through which they could assert their collective sense of divine chosenness in the midst of subjugation. Although Exodus had served as a common point of reference for black Americans throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, only in the 1840s, according to Eddie Glaude, Jr., had it “sedimented as the predominant political language of African Americans” (56). This shift gave rise to what Glaude (following Michael Walzer) calls black Exodus politics, which he defines as “a form of common complaint against oppression,” a “‘hope against hope’ for deliverance,” and a practice of criticism that “pressures a given society to live up to its ideals” (111). On the other end of the spectrum of political appropriations of Exodus is “political messianism,” which embraces the eschatological dimensions of Exodus and is characterized by an “extraordinary sensitivity to and something like a longing for apocalyptic events” (Walzer, 138). The slave rebellions of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner are the starkest examples of this apocalyptic attitude in US history.

The Fugitive Slave Law impelled emigrationists to reject Exodus politics as a viable narrative of political action. Their alternative lay not in the endorsement of political messianism but in the devoted attention they paid to finding and populating new black homelands, which in turn gave rise to a politics from within the Exodus paradigm whose focal point was Canaan itself, the narrative’s culmination, not the story of freedom and wandering. By concentrating on the journey’s end, emigrationists transformed Exodus from a drama of collective liberation into one of collective definition, whose purpose was to enable the creation of a people (ethnogenesis), a law (jurisgenesis), and a
God (theogenesis). Their politics aspired to nothing less than establishing what Robert Cover calls a new “normative universe” (a *nomos*), an “integrated world of obligation and reality from which the rest of the world is perceived” (4, 31). *Blake* exemplifies this approach to Exodus, and religion is the medium through which the novel realizes a normative universe unburdened by hypostatized racial hierarchies.²

Insofar as religion is a category continually being reimagined and reconstituted, claim Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof, it “is a political enterprise intimately linked to the imagination of new social intellectual communities” (6). While acts of religion-making may sometimes be mechanisms of governmentality intended to “legitimize certain politics and positions of power” (religion-making from above), they may also be opposed to the interests of the state (religion-making from below), as when marginalized people “draw on a religionist discourse to reestablish their identities as legitimate social formations” (Arvin and Dressler, 21). In Delany’s novel, acts of religion-making from below catalyze the creation of new communities opposed to a theopolitical universe licensing human bondage.³

This chapter begins by showing how mainline Protestant denominations in the antebellum South constructed a “sacred canopy” for slavery that sought not only to legitimate the peculiar institution but also to naturalize the social hierarchies on which it depended.⁴ I then turn to *Blake* to recover its Exodus-inflected critique of political

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² All recent historians of the role of Exodus in African American thought have identified *Blake* as a major contribution to this tradition. See, for example, Callahan, 122-24; Coffey, 165; and Rhonda Thomas, 75-79.

³ Delany’s own religious vision was doggedly immanent and relentlessly liberationist. Beginning with his earliest essays for *The North Star*, he developed theological positions that kept this-worldly conditions rather than other-worldly promises relentlessly in view. For discussions of this, see Adeleke, “Religion,” 80-92; and Wilmore, 111.

⁴ The “sacred canopy” comes from Berger, *Sacred Canopy*. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section.
messianism as a response to the political and theological mileu of the South, examining how Delany recasts events from Moses’s biography to expose the crisis of legitimation plaguing antebellum slave rebellions. This crisis, I argue in the second section, ultimately motivates Blake to abandon his rebellion and leads him to Cuba where he puts Canaan politics into practice. I then read the scene of religion-making in the novel’s second part to explore Delany’s reimagining of religious establishment in modernity as a means of cosmically legitimating blackness in a global public overrun by pharaonic forces. Finally, I consider how Delany’s *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party*, which documents his search through West Central Africa for an emigrationist destination, reimagines Canaan politics in physiological terms. In these final sections I revisit what Robert Levine refers to as the “pragmatically innovative means and utopian ends” of Delany’s “black nationalist program” (190). By returning *Blake* to the context of black emigrationism and exploring the political theology it elaborates, I contest standard accounts of nineteenth-century black nationalism(s) that assume its secular or conventionally Protestant character, where religion is one element of many underneath the umbrella of the nation-state.5

My argument is framed by the different political trajectories of the novel’s two parts, a formal distinction somewhat muddied by the fact that *Blake* only ever appeared in

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5 In unfolding the role and function of religion in Delany’s novel through its encounters with political-theological order, I have throughout this essay intentionally kept discourses of black nationalism at the periphery, not in order to disavow their centrality to emigrationist thought, but to foreground the cosmic stakes underwriting emigrationists’ flexible uses of “nationality.” Moreover, nationalist discourse alone fails to capture the radical element of differentiation at the heart of the emigrationist imagination generally, and Delany’s imagination in particular, which holds out hope for the possible emergence of new communities that authorize new ways of being, new frameworks for conceptualizing others, and new gods. The intersection between these activities and familiar accounts of black nationalism is that both are defined by their “registered opposition to the historical and ongoing racism of the US state and its various institutions and apparatuses” (Lubiano, 157).
periodicals during Delany’s lifetime. Indeed, until 1970, Katy Chiles shrewdly observes, “this book had never been a book” (323). Persuasive as Chiles is about the interpretive gains to be had from a close attention to the serial context of Blake’s publication, a nearly complete manuscript of the novel preexisted its serialization. As Delany’s correspondence and the editorial notes prefacing Blake’s publication in The Anglo-African Magazine and the The Weekly Anglo-African attest, he had completed a 600-page manuscript by 1859. The novel, therefore, ought to be understood as a serial publication and a “predefinitive manuscript” (32), in Pierre De Biasi’s sense, i.e., a text that exists in a nearly complete form but that can still accommodate additional revision. We cannot know how much Delany revised Blake between its two serial publications, but we can safely say that the clearly flagged formal division between parts 1 and 2—epigraphs and all—at the head of the chapters reproduced in each week’s edition of The Weekly Anglo-African (part 1 begins on 23 November 1861 and part 2 on 18 January 1862) reflects Delany’s sense of overarching structure as well as his need to communicate it in a serial context.

In sum, I wish to argue that Blake—its strange textual history and missing final chapters notwithstanding—is the fullest expression of the political-theological possibilities of emigrationist thinking, a novel that reimagines the relationship between religious belief and public life as a strategy for contending with the global dispersion of racial discourse. Delany ended the proceedings of the 1854 National Emigration Convention with a reading of Psalms 124 and a prayer. The psalm recounts the Israelites’ escape from Egypt and concludes with the image of this people in the moment of their
liberation as a lone bird escaping from the snare of a fowler. Blake explores the significance of that flight.

**i. The Sacred Canopy of the Antebellum South**

The sale of his wife by the Mississippi slave-holder Colonel Franks is what impels Blake to rebel against not just the institution of slavery but a religious milieu that used theology to legitimate human bondage. As Delany well knew, slavery had attained a virtually cosmic status in the antebellum South, a consequence of the intimate relationship formed between slaveholding interests and Southern Protestant denominations in the wake of the slave rebellions of Denmark Vesey (1822) and Nat Turner (1831) as well as the sectional crisis of 1835. From the 1840s on, Protestant denominations began to separate in northern and southern branches, beginning with the Methodists in 1844, the Baptists in 1845, and the Presbyterians in 1857. Once divided along regional lines, southern Protestant denominations began to coalesce around slavery as both their *raison d’etre* and their theological center.

In an 1848 lecture he delivered in Rochester, NY, Delany repudiated the inter-denominational theological consensus emerging in the southern churches when he argued that since “[i]t was not uncommon for christian ministers (so called) to teach that slavery is a Divine institution,” the church itself must be “anti-Christian” (“M. R. Delany,” 2). And in *Blake* he emblematizes the bond between slavery and the churches during an early scene in which a rainstorm threatens to postpone a slave auction. Just as the crowd’s patience begins to wear thin, an anonymous sympathizer breathlessly arrives to announce “that those concerned had kindly tendered the use of the church which stood nearby, in
which to continue the sale” (26). The church thus shelters the exchange of human property in an act literalizing the sacred canopy these churches had drawn over the peculiar institution.

The figure of the sacred canopy comes from Peter Berger, who famously argued that religion “legitimates social institutions by locating them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference” (33). Berger calls this process “cosmization,” the conferring of “a semblance of inevitability, firmness and durability” (36) upon such institutions. By the time Delany began writing *Blake*, southern clergy had constructed their own sacred canopy, which, according to Mitchell Snay, disregarded the historical conflicts between denominations in order to devise a religious worldview that “sanctified” slavery.

Reeling from the slave rebellions of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner, the illicit distribution of David Walker’s incendiary *Appeal to the Colored Peoples of the World* in 1829, the sectional crisis of 1835, paranoia reigned among Southern elites about the threats slaves posed to the peculiar institution. Slaves were policed with increased vigilance than they had been in the preceding decades, literacy laws were diligently enforced where they existed and invented where they didn’t, and, because scripture and direct revelation had underwritten previous attempts to stage land-based slave rebellions in the nineteenth century, the religious education of slaves was immediately curtailed. For many Southern clergy these new conditions were a betrayal of the missionary promise of New World slavery (that slavery was a providential tool for the mass conversion of Africans to Christianity) and, thus, fuel to the abolitionist fire. Fearful, they renewed efforts to justify slavery on theological grounds and to innovate novel methods of Christianizing slaves. Ecumenical, organized, and earnest, this generation of clergymen
set aside the conflicts that typically characterized American denominationalism to create a sacred canopy for the South with the master-servant dyad as its centerpole.

The sanctification of slavery was first and foremost a theological project initiated by southern clergymen who sought to develop “an elaborate scriptural justification of human bondage, a slaveholding ethic to guide the conduct of Christian masters, and a program to bring the Gospel to the slaves” (Snay, 9). That this theological project was of a piece with the disciplinary and surveillance measures instituted to control slaves in the period is nowhere more clear than in a sermon the theologian and preacher Thomas Henley Thornwell delivered in Charleston, where Denmark Vesey staged his failed rebellion in 1822. “The name of Jesus,” he told his audience, “is not a name for conspirators to conjure with—it carries no danger with it” (399), and slavery, “which is not repugnant to the spirit of the Gospel, in its present relations to our race” is simply “one of the schools in which immortal spirits are trained for their final destiny” (430). Although Thornwell conceded that slavery was an institution suitable only for a fallen world, many of his more extreme colleagues elaborated pro-slavery millennialisms in which the master-slave relationship would continue ad aeternum as a “millennial bound-labor system” (Maddex, 54). The intellectual edifice these men created, it should be said, was the outcome not of a vast theological conspiracy but of the convergence of interests of a group of religious elites whose attachments to the social order of a particular geographical region led them to construct a theological bulwark in its defense. This effort constituted an act of religion-making from above whose chief effect was to mask slavery’s contingency by claiming its perpetuity. The new theology placated slaveholders
worried over the incendiary potential of the Bible, it allowed clergy access to slaves, and it sacralized an institution that had become the defining feature of Southern society.

Essential to the new theology’s dissemination as well as its moral justification was the development of a missiology centered on plantations. How slaves were to achieve salvation when they were forbidden from learning to read was a question of signal importance for southern clergy in the 1840s and ‘50s. Plantation missions were a means for these men to feel that they were fulfilling their evangelistic duties without upsetting the standing order. Charles Colcock Jones, the so-called “Apostle to the Negroes” and the most important figure in the theorization and implementation of plantation missions, tried to calm slaveholders anxious about the consequences of their slaves receiving any religious education by explicitly “disclaim[ing] any intention of interfering with the social status quo” (Sernett, 62). The ministerial office, he wrote in *The Religious Instruction of Negroes*, was to “subserve the interests of masters and servants, for time and eternity” (271). Once plantation missionaries had renounced any desire to meddle with the institution of slavery, the way was open for the cosmization of slavery, since every time a missionary preached to slaves, he peddled a theology whose purpose was to reinforce and legitimate the social order of the antebellum South.

Since slaves had been prohibited from learning to read and write, the primary form of religious instruction for plantation missionaries had to be oral. Sermons were part of this work, but the more important goal of ingraining this theological system in the minds of slaves was achieved through catechistical education. To this end, Jones wrote and distributed a special catechism “prepared *expressly* for the Religious instruction of the negroes” (*Catechism*, 4). Eventually employed across the nation and translated into
multiple languages, Jones’s catechism was impressive for its theological density, a fact of its design he felt compelled to account for in the preface to the third edition when he wrote that while “some have suggested that it might be less theological, in its cast,” he believed missionaries ought “to carry the people of our care through a regular and plain system of Scripture doctrine and practice, and thus put them in full possession of the plan of salvation” (5). Jones seems oblivious to the contradiction between the legal denial of full humanity to slaves and his belief in slaves’ intellectual capacities and their concern for the state of their souls, but this aspect of catechism’s design indicates how important it was for Jones for slaves to see their existences within a fully articulated theological and political system.

We know from their own accounts, as well as the expressed frustrations of southern clergy, that many slaves were far too keen to swallow whole explicit sermonic directives to “obey your masters.” Jones, for instance, reported that during a sermon about the duties of servants to masters with Paul’s letter to Philemon as his text, “one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those that remained looked anything but satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine” (qtd. in Raboteau, Invisible, 31). How successful Jones was in actually convincing slaves to swallow his system is therefore uncertain, but its intent is clear.

Although designed specifically for black slaves, references to the legitimacy of slavery and the duties of masters and servants occupy only a small part of the catechism. Yet throughout this nuanced, weighty introduction to Christian theology and history, Jones unobtrusively inserts arguments attesting to the benignity and perpetuity of slavery while, at the same time, establishing the master-servant relationship as the type of the
God-Human relationship. The catechism introduces Abraham, for instance, as both the founder of God’s visible church and also the first slaveholder:

Q. When we look into the Bible, where do we find God first openly, forming, or establishing his Church on earth? or what holy man do we find Him choosing out from all the world, with whom to begin his Church?
A. Abraham. Gen. 17:1-14, 22-27

Q. Who is the first Master that is mentioned in the Bible?
A. Abraham. Gen. 14:14, 15; 20:14-17; 24:35

Q. Who is the Master of us all in Heaven?
A. God. Col. 4:1

Questions and answers like this appear throughout the catechism, weaving the dignity of slaveholders and the obligations of servants into the warp and woof of a much vaster theological system. In this way, Jones slowly and subtly builds a Christian cosmos with slavery at its center.

In a surprising historical twist, the justification for the South’s sacred canopy rested on the separation of religion and politics. In *The Religious Instruction of Colored People*, Jones defended plantation evangelism on the grounds that “we separate entirely their religious and their civil condition, and contend that the one may be attended to without interfering with the other” (193). Southern clergy “vigorously accepted the principle of separation of church and state” as a means of cordonning slavery off from ministerial concerns, insisting that “the existence of slavery itself was considered a political, or civil, question” (Snay, 9). To challenge slavery as an institution on theological grounds was therefore to penetrate irresponsibly the political with the religious. In doggedly insisting upon the autonomy of civic and religious spheres (the very foundation of the United States’ much-vaunted religious pluralism) these gentleman theologians crossed denominational lines to create a common theology with the
institution of slavery at its core. The secularization of the public sphere thus created the conditions for the sanctification of the status quo, allowing public Protestantism in the South to install itself as a religious establishment, a sinister example of the “autoimmunity” of the disestablished state.6

Delany includes set-pieces throughout Blake that show the empirical failure of this theology for the conditions of slaves in this world, and when Blake rejects the passive eschatology dispensed by his in-laws (as when, for instance, after her daughter has been sold, Blake’s mother-in-law comforts him with a line from Cowper, “He move’in a mystus way, his wundahs to puhfaum” [16]) he denies both a cosmic scheme with slavery at its center and a social order that, by differentiating between religious and civic spheres, permitted the cosmization of racialized oppression in the first place.

ii. Mosaic Crisis

Because of the scope of the post-1835 theopolitical regime in the south—reaching even into the hearts and minds of slaves themselves—the initial target of Blake’s ire is “the religion of [his] oppressors” (21), not slavery itself. Nevertheless, when Blake first gathers his co-conspirators together he refuses to disclose his plot until Andy (a slave and a Baptist preacher) has sacralized the occasion with a prayer. Only after the three men have knelt together in solemn reflection and Andy has sung an anthem does Blake reveal that he has a “plan for a general insurrection of the slaves in every state, and the

6 “Autoimmunity” is Jacques Derrida’s term for the capacity of any living organism to have its own internal methods of self-protection turned against itself, or, in Derrida’s words, for “protecting itself against its self-protection by destroying its own immune system” (73n27).
successful overthrow of slavery!” (39). For critics intent on reading the rebellion as a purely political (and therefore secular) act, Blake’s demand for liturgical observances seems superfluous. Their presence, however, clothes Blake’s insurrection in the coarse fabric of a Protestant sect, reappropriating the form and methods of Protestant sectarianism to turn them against the white Protestant hegemony responsible for sacralizing slavery.

Sectarian separation is, as the eminent nineteenth-century church historian Philip Schaff wrote, a principle “deeply seated in Protestantism itself,” and the US, he lamented, is the “classic land of sects” (*America*, 120, 115). Schaff perceived how Protestantism’s privileging of individual experiences with scripture made room for revelations outside the constraints of formal church hierarchies, which facilitated dubious seizures of theological and ecclesiastical authority. Sectarian profusion was the fruit of these changes and a phenomenon common enough that Schaff could glibly generalize the inaugural scene of sectarian formation as follows:

> Any one who has, or fancies that he has, some inward experience and a ready tongue, may persuade himself that he is called to be a reformer; and so proceed at once, in his spiritual vanity and pride, to a revolutionary rupture with the historical life of the Church, to which he holds himself immeasurably superior. He builds himself of a night accordingly a new chapel, in which now for the first time since the age of the apostles a pure congregation is to be formed. (*Principle*, 116)

His evident disdain aside, Schaff highlights the superciliousness motivating sectarian formation even as he acknowledges the theological and ecclesiastical mechanisms breathing legitimacy into it. The inaugural meeting of Blake’s rebel organization mirrors Schaff’s caricature of Protestant sectarian formation, yet Blake embraces this self-interested functionalism rather than resisting it. He repurposes religion as a naked political instrument for the oppressed, retaining the form of the sect in order to annihilate
its conditions of possibility. As Blake implores his co-conspirators, “make your religion subserve your interests, as your oppressors do theirs! . . . They use the Scriptures to make you submit . . . and we must now begin to understand the Bible so as to make it of interest to us” (41). Scripture ceases to matter as the revealed word of God and becomes instead a practical tool for improving lived conditions, a thing “of interest” only when it can be made to “subserve . . . interests.” For Blake, the Bible has all along been nothing but a tool; Protestant sectarianism, nothing other than social and political interest theologized.

Blake’s rebellion thus weaponizes the mild eschatology of the gentleman theologians by reducing scripture to pure function, a strategy that—as Blake’s deputies are quick to observe—has unintended implications for his burgeoning Mosaic leadership. When Blake discloses his plan, he tells Andy and Charles that what he proposes is so clear “even Whitehead’s Jack could understand it as well as his master” (40). The reference here is to Charles Whitehead’s 1835 novel The Autobiography of Jack Ketch, whose eponymous narrator—a hangman whose father was hanged for theft—is an amoral creature living among the moral. The name Jack Ketch, which originally belonged to a notorious seventeenth-century executioner, had long been synonymous in England with the devil, an association through which the novel reminds readers of its narrator’s casual anomie. The “master” Blake alludes to is the lawyer Jabez Snavel to whom Jack Ketch is apprenticed and who uses his legal expertise to exploit the law for his own gain. By invoking him here, Blake underscores the transparency of his own plan to exploit the theopolitical logic undergirding the slave system. Nevertheless, as the import of Blake’s declaration reveals itself, Andy proclaims, “ah not only understan’ myse’f, but wid da
knowledge I has uv it, ah could make Whitehead’s Jack a Moses!” (40). Blake references “Whitehead’s Jack” to convey the immediate intelligibility of his message, but Andy extends the allusion to imply that this fact also potentially democratizes the Mosaic role, such that anyone—even “Whitehead’s Jack”—could be “a Moses.” In this way, he gestures toward the pitfalls of Mosaic leadership in a religious space so ungrounded that even Jack Ketch might be made into a lawgiver and leader.

Scholars are used to reading Blake as a black Moses. For Levine, the novel makes “clear” that “Blake may be regarded as a Mosaic leader” (195); Adélékè Adéèkó argues that Blake is modeled after the “Old Testament Moses leading the enslaved people of Israel out of Egypt” (40); and Rhondda Robinson Thomas variously refers to him a “fictionalized radical Moses” (76), a “Mosaic savior-judge” (78), and a “Pan-Africanist Moses” (79). Many of the novel’s characters even encourage this typological relationship. What has been overlooked, however, is that Delany identifies Blake with Moses to critique that typology rather than to valorize it. The force of Blake’s first part is not merely to elevate a Mosaic leader but to reveal the transcendental absence at the heart of a Protestantized Moses.

The moral and theological ungroundedness of Blake’s enterprise is made explicit in the chapter “Henry at Large,” which tracks the early days of his itineracy and his emergence as a Mosaic leader. Delany’s narrator reports,

> With speed unfaltering and spirits unflinching, [Blake’s] first great strive was to reach the Red River, to escape from his own state as quickly as possible. Proceeding on in the direction of the Red River country, he met with no obstruction except in one instance, when he left his assailant quietly upon the earth. A few days after an inquest was held upon the body of a deceased overseer—verdict of the Jury, ‘By hands unknown.’” (68)

This multilayered passage reveals its details slowly. What the narrator first presents as an abstract “obstruction” is revealed to be an “assailant” whom Blake had to murder; only
when the narrator reports the inconclusive findings of a white jury do we learn that the “assailant” was in fact an overseer. As the passage transitions from Blake’s perspective to that of the white community as a whole, their shared object of attention transforms from an ambiguous “obstruction” into a brutal and mysterious murder. Blake’s guiltless transgression of white norms, in which an overseer diminishes into a mere “obstruction,” signals his movement into a reality in which law, whether moral, spiritual, or civil, has ceased to hold sway.

The event recalls the scene in Exodus 2 when Moses, upon beholding the injustices perpetrated against the Hebrews in Egypt, is led to commit a similar crime. In the episode, Moses observes a taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave and, seeing no witnesses, murders him. Despite the care he takes to conceal the crime, word of the deed still spreads, which Moses learns the following day when he breaks up a fight between two other Hebrews. His interrogation of the man who began the quarrel ends with an indictment of Moses’s illegitimate exercise of juridical power when the man asks, “Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” (Ex. 2:11–14). While Moses’s murder of the taskmaster signals the emergence of his political consciousness, the two questions posed by the combative Hebrew unmask his penchant for assuming the authority to transgress legal norms. As if in answer to these questions, Moses subsequently experiences a theophany in the desert in the form of an ever-burning shrub that reveals an external authority (Yahweh) formidable enough to legitimate his future actions. Blake, by contrast, remains utterly unmoored, a Moses without a bush.
Delany explores the implications of this difference as the novel moves from Blake’s murder of the white overseer to his conversion, an event that parallels the movement in Exodus from Moses’s transgression to his theophany. Blake’s arrival at the banks of the “Red River” (meant to evoke the Red Sea) recalls the solitary religious experiences of many an evangelical luminary, and, like them, he too falls upon his knees, prays, and arises a “new man” (69). His sense of divine election in this moment is entirely interior, a burning bush passed through the subjectivizing of Protestant religious experience, which deprives it of the transcendent clarity of Moses’s encounter. In lieu of an encounter with a burning bush occur three events that “fully establish” Blake’s faith: he escapes the notice of a passing steamer, dodges a “squad of alligators” by dangling from a stray limb, and uses some floating logs that vaguely resemble a “raft” to cross the red river (70). Although Delany’s narrator withholds commentary as to whether this sequence of random events is or is not a sign of “divine aid,” the parodic tone of the scene indicates how Blake’s need to assure himself of the cosmic legitimacy of his undertaking (especially after an irrevocable act of violence) causes him to seek validation in the most arbitrary of incidents. Later, the narrator confirms the inadequacy of Blake’s perspective by intervening when, on his return trip to Mississippi, Blake interprets the simultaneous appearance of a comet, a meteor, and a pulsating star in the sky as divine verifications of his mighty undertaking. Despite Blake’s private feelings about these cosmic events, the narrator insists that “the emotions were located in his own brain, and not exhibited by the orbs of heaven” (124). The felt absence of divine affirmation throughout the narrative unsettles Blake’s Mosaic role, reminding us time and again that what is missing from the rebellion is the voice of God.
This theological crisis extends even to the biblical injunction at the center of Blake’s rebellion: “Stand still, and see the salvation.” Indeed, this particular verse—as nineteenth-century readers would have known—is one already troubled by problems of authority. Moses bellows the command to his fellow Israelites on the banks of the Red Sea in the belief that Yahweh is preparing to decimate the oncoming Egyptian army. Yahweh, however, immediately chastises his prophet’s impudence: “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward” (Ex. 14:15). The key prooftext around which the novel’s exegetical combat turns is thus a definitively unauthoritative biblical utterance.

By making Moses’s presumptuous declaration the basis for political action in the novel’s first part, Delany embeds a crisis of protestantized Mosaic leadership into his representation of a black Moses and thus brings the theophanic gulf at the center of the rebellion plot into sharp focus.

Blake’s abandonment of the rebellion is the inevitable outcome of the failure of Protestant religion-making to legitimate collective millennial violence. Readers of the novel fluent in the twists and turns of biblical narrative would have known that the only biblically sanctioned response to this failure would have been to “go forward,” an implicit directive that prompts the novel’s most explicit reflections on the virtues of emigrationism and the political value of Canaan.

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7 For two notable examples of how nineteenth-century Americans read this verse, see Henry Ward Beecher’s sermon, “The Battle Set in Array,” in Freedom and War: Discourses, 84-110, which he delivered in the wake of the attack on Fort Sumter; and Harper’s long narrative poem about the life of Moses, Moses: A Story of the Nile, 33.
ii. After Exodus Politics

Although Delany’s creative retelling of the Moses story reveals the problem of legitimation plaguing the insurrection, Blake nevertheless strains to justify its surrender when his deputies press him about the success of his mission: “I have taught the slave that mighty lesson: to strike for Liberty. ‘Rather to die as freemen, than live as slaves!’” (128). In this instant, Blake reframes his picaresque across the South as a pedagogical project, citing the motto “rather to die as freemen, than live as slaves” (set apart in the original text with quotation marks) as a prooftext. The phrase, which first appeared in Thomas Jefferson and John Dickinson’s 1775 declaration to the Continental Congress arguing the necessity of taking up arms against Great Britain, had become a rallying cry for slave rebellion after the African American Presbyterian pastor Henry Highland Garnet’s fiery reappropriation of it in his 1843 “Address to the Slaves of the United States of America.” By having Blake utter this phrase just as his rebellion collapses, Delany, who knew Garnet’s speech well, distinguishes the “Address” as both an intertext for the first part of Blake as well as a point of philosophical departure from its messianic message.

The “Address” ably summarizes the motives for Blake’s rebellion. Garnet argues that because liberty is God-given, slavery is not only unlawful but also a form of voluntary submission. For any individual to permit subjugation is therefore to defy God’s will, which makes resistance a moral obligation, one too often hindered by calls for patience and a passive faith in providential intervention. Rejecting his mother-in-law’s counsel to be patient, Blake likewise insists on the voluntary nature of servitude when he refuses to be Colonel Franks’s slave and goes on to organize a mass rebellion in the
Garnetian mold. The parallels between the two works indicate the degree to which Delany’s text tests the logic and implications of his older friend’s famous speech, yet it is at the very instant of Blake’s citation of it that the novel departs from the thesis of the "Address."

Garnet dismantles Exodus-inspired arguments for either emigration or divine deliverance by exposing the typological sloppiness at the heart of contemporary appropriations of Exodus. In Theophus Smith’s words, Garnet “uses the figure to reject the figure” (61). (In this light, Delany’s counterfigural use of the Moses story may be read as a retort to Garnet, a means of keeping the Exodus paradigm alive by using it to critique its critique.) Garnet’s most pointed attack on Exodus occurs in the same paragraph as the motto Blake quotes to his deputies: “If you must bleed, let it all come at once—rather die freemen, than live to be slaves” (7). Garnet’s aim is to upset the emigrationist hope of constructing a black nation in some new Canaan by claiming that no mass exodus could escape the reach of US slave interests. Where the “children of Israel” had only one Pharaoh to escape, Pharaohs were now “on both sides of the blood red waters.” Egypt, by extension, was everywhere:

You cannot move en masse, to the dominions of the British Queen—nor can you pass through Florida and overrun Texas, and at last find peace in Mexico. The propagators of American slavery are spending their blood and treasure, that they may plant the black flag in the heart of Mexico and riot in the halls of the Montezumas. (7)

For Garnet, the Exodus paradigm fails to account for the global scope of the slave system, its transatlantic networks of exchange and influence. By calling attention to how the extra-national flow of slave interests ensured that no safe haven for black Americans could ever exist, Garnet demands that emigrationists contend with the typological problem of pharaonic ubiquity. The problem of Exodus-thinking, he asserts, is two-fold.
For one, it gives the oppressed too much hope in the possibility of providential intervention (“You are a patient people,” he sarcastically remarks). And then, even if providential deliverance were possible, the geographical omnipresence of the slave economy had transformed the entire globe into Egypt.

Glaude cites Garnet’s “Address” as the most eloquent defense of “political messianism” in antebellum African American letters and uses it as a foil for his own version of black Exodus politics. Yet he misconstrues Garnet’s rejection of Exodus “as a model for political action” when he claims that “it induced in slaves and freemen a passive gradualism in which the group, like the children of Israel, waited for providential deliverance” (146). Garnet did deplore the “passive gradualism” that Exodus-thinking sometimes inspired, but Glaude conflates this critique with a rejection of emigrationism, one based not upon emigrationism’s passivity but its misapplication of the Exodus paradigm to modern global conditions. Emigrationists were actually among the most vocal critics of passive providentialism, as the prominent emigrationist Mary Ann Shadd Cary demonstrated when she chastised integrationists for biding time until “a powerful miracle for the overthrow of slavery would be wrought” (116). By eliding the difference between these two applications of the Exodus paradigm in Garnet’s “Address,” Glaude ignores emigrationism’s imaginative potential and political nimbleness.

Delany, who was close with Garnet throughout the 1850s, had absorbed the typological lesson of the “Address,” and his emigrationist thinking develops with the full recognition of pharaonic ubiquity. In “The Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent,” delivered at the first National Emigration Convention in 1854, Delany observed that the “progress made in territorial domain” by “whites” had been
attended by a “usurpation and encroachment on the rights and native soil of some of the colored races” (252). “The determined aim of the whites,” he concludes, “has been to crush the colored races wherever found. . . . The Anglo-Saxon has taken the lead in this work of universal subjugation” (253). He further acknowledges these vast networks of influence in Blake through the insidious conversations between Colonel Franks and Judge Ballard about political economy that begin the narrative, through Blake’s voyage aboard a slaver to Africa, and through the multiple transpositions and rechristenings of the slave trader The Merchantman, which Eric Sundquist identifies as “the very symbol of the intersecting forces that [kept] slavery in existence” (200). While Delany recognizes that emigrationism could never achieve a permanent escape from the forces of “universal subjugation,” in Blake he imagines an alternative to Glaude’s either/or proposition of Exodus politics or political messianism, a third way that resists both the immanent, unending conversation of the former as well as the unsettling immediacy and mass violence of the latter. Canaan politics, as I am calling it, posits an end to Exodus-thinking, the implications of which Delany explores even more fully in the second part of Blake.

Canaan politics reenvision the occupation of ancient Israel under the conditions of pharaonic ubiquity. It entails the seizure of land by an oppressed people as well as the creation of a new normative universe, a new paradigm of social behavior, and a new cosmology in which to embed them. Whereas Exodus politics challenges the nation from within the nation, Canaan politics insists on creating a social order outside of Egypt’s both figurative and literal, a new order whose greatest ambitions are endurance and cosmic protection rather than conquest and imperial expansion. Cary, for example, urged
emigration so that African Americans might build “strongholds” in foreign lands and “if need be, defend them” from the insatiable hunger of the pro-slavery party in the US, which she configures as “the serpent that aims to swallow all others” (114). Walzer and Glaude privilege the disciplining wilderness experience of the Israelites as the figurative heart of the Exodus paradigm, while Delany, like fellow emigrationists, viewed such tarrying in “the wilderness of darkness and error” as utterly unnecessary, urging African Americans to do all they could to hasten the arrival at Canaan.

Serious reservations should attend Canaan talk of any kind, for literalized Canaans have historically tended toward bloody conquest, occupation, and the displacement of indigenous peoples. As David Brion Davis observes, identification with the Israelites in the Exodus narrative has led many groups to “combine benevolent paternalism with the kind of brutal slaughter God had sanctioned in the Old Testament” (104). Walzer raises this problem in *Exodus and Revolution* only to circumvent it by supposing that “if the movement from Egypt to Canaan is taken as a metaphor for a transforming politics, then attention is focused on internal rather than external wars, on the purges of the recalcitrant Israelites rather than on the destruction of the Canaanite nations” (142). Walzer’s conditional construction brackets the unsavory aspects of the Exodus narrative through figurative abstraction, an elegant, albeit dubious, evasion of the annihilation of the Canaanites. Delany’s novel, to its credit, ably addresses these tensions.  

*Blake* avoids the familiar colonial justifications for occupying Canaan in two ways. First, the novel eludes the troubling teleologies of Exodus narratives by evacuating

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8 For self-proclaimed “Canaanite” critiques of Walzer’s appropriation of the Exodus narrative, see Said, 86-106; and Warrior, 261-65.
Blake’s journey to Cuba of any providential content. Delany portrays the transnational flows of the slave trade rather than the invisible hand of providential design as stimulating migration. Although it later comes to light that Blake himself is a Cuban aristocrat (investing him with additional authority and helping to legitimate his second insurrection), his journey to Havana is driven entirely by his desire to reunite with his wife, who had been sold at the outset to a white couple en route to Cuba. As a potential Canaan, then, Cuba is no Promised Land, but merely a land. Second, the occupation narrative in Blake is made indistinguishable from a narrative of collective liberation. Because of the territorial reach of slave power (pharaonic ubiquity), every potential Canaan is also (if not already) a potential Egyptian satellite. Nowhere was this more the case than in Cuba. Furthermore, since Blake’s act of resettlement will displace settlers and not indigenes, there is a measure already in place to prevent the fall into what Mark Rifkin calls “settler common-sense.”

But even as the novel endorses this liberationist-settler narrative, it also registers the difficulty of reconciling the dual narratives of occupation and liberation. To resolve this tension, Delany gives expression to his new paradigm through the “unique supplication” of Abyssa Soudan, a Muslim turned Methodist whom Blake frees from an African slaver. “Emanating from any other source,” the narrator notes, Abyssa’s prayerful interweaving of occupation and emancipation “could hardly be approved of” (283):

> Make bare thine all conquering; uncover thy impenetrable shield; sway thy matchless scepter; put our enemies to flight before Thee that not one have courage to stand, and at every stroke of the weapon may they fall as dead men before us! . . . We have been captured, torn from friends and home, sold and scattered among strangers in a strange

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9 This, it should be said, marks a change from Delany’s earlier theological position in The Condition, where he explicitly argues that South and Central America are providentially ordained homes for Africans in America.
land; yea, to and fro the earth. Sorely oppressed, mocked and ridiculed, refused and
denied a common humanity, and not even permitted to serve the same God at the same
time and place, in the same way and manner as themselves. Change, O change, we
beseech Thee, this state of things! . . . [E]nable us we beseech Thee to go forth and
conquer even unto a mighty conquest! (284, emphasis mine)

Abysa’s prayer, which makes the call to “strike for liberty” coextensive with a “mighty
conquest,” is admissible solely because of her subaltern status (287, 284). From any other
position, her appeal to God to “enable us . . . to go forth and conquer” would evoke the
imperialist logic of slaughter and displacement. But because of her having been, like so
many others, “sold and scattered . . . to and fro the earth” and “refused and denied a
common humanity,” she becomes emblematic of a common experience of suffering that
licenses her vision of occupation and liberation.

The creep of slave interests, so concretely rendered in the Fugitive Slave Law,
held out the terrifying possibility that every social order touched by slavery would be the
potential home of hypostatized racial hierarchies. To put it another way, slavery was the
economic vessel of a theologized racism, with racial discourse endemic to it. Although
racial discourse was diffused through the flows of the slave trade, it originated in what
Jared Hickman has called the “cosmic drama” of global cultural encounter where it
functioned as “the prototypical attempt to articulate a ‘global’ conception of life” (147,
156). In Blake, the emigrationist call for a black nation elsewhere was thus also a call for
a new normative universe that could provide a bulwark against a virtually universal racial
discourse.

Because Canaan politics involves the creation of new institutions and social
realities in modernity, religion-making, as “a political enterprise intimately linked to the
imagination of new social intellectual communities,” is its foundational procedure. The
religion that Delany imagines, however, is neither violently eschatological like political
messianism nor progressively secular like Exodus politics. Instead, it strenuously aspires to avoid the gradual annihilation of a people through indefinite oppression by threading the line between secularized hope and messianic immediacy. Compelled by the universal penetration of racial discourse, it reimagines the relationship between theology and politics in modernity by establishing a public religion that rejects some of the foundational principles of modern religions even as it is adapted to the particular conditions of a secular age. It creates an anti-racist sacred canopy under which the business of collective life may be conducted and enduring social institutions built.

iii. The Black Canopy

Blake’s geographic shift from the US and Canada to Cuba parallels a shift in the novel’s form, as extended dialogues about government, race, and religion replace the rapid transpositions and revolutionary calls to arms of the first part. Although Blake hatches another rebellion plot in Havana, revolutionary violence recedes in favor of attempts to establish durable institutional frameworks in a world of encroaching pharaonic power. This attention to policy, legislation, and territory evinces the privilege Canaan-thinking gives to deliberation and perpetuity over narrative propulsion. If part one of Blake is the story of Moses then part two, we might say, is that of Joshua.

In Cuba, Blake assembles a council to erect the scaffolding for a new pan-African nation. As the council deliberates, it becomes clear that religion-making is essential to the process of nation-building. This collective model of religion-making, which turns away from the subjectivist Protestant sectarian model of the first part, raises questions among the assembly. The Cuban aristocrat Madame Cordora asks what this religion will be and
wonders whether she, as a Catholic, can “conform to [the] observances” of the new order (257). Blake responds with “a word of explanation” that identifies the Christian denominations to which various council members belong before elaborating the distinctive characteristics of the new religion that will replace them:

I, first a Catholic, and my wife bred as such, are both Baptists, Abyssa Soudan, once a pagan, was in her own native land converted to the Methodist or Wesleyan belief; Madame Sebastina and family are Episcopalians; Camina, from long residence out of the colony, a Presbyterian, and Placido is a believer in the Swedenborgian doctrines. We have all agreed to know no sects, no denominations, and but one religion for the sake of our redemption from bondage and degradation, a faith in a common Savior as an intercessor for our sins; but one God, who is and must be our acknowledged common Father. No religion but that which brings us liberty will we know; no God but He owns us as his children will we serve. (258)

This passage is worth pondering both for what it implies about the relationship between religion and the state in the new pan-African nation as well as for what it can tell us about the scope of Delany’s Canaan politics. The few critics who treat this scene tend to dismiss it: Wilson J. Moses reads Blake’s speech as a regrettable instance of anti-Catholic pan-Africanism that reveals Protestant Christianity as “an essential, rather than an accidental quality of Anglo-African nationalism” (48), while Chiles sees it as a pallid rehearsal of Jeffersonian toleration that “relocates disparate faiths into a loosely defined Christianity” (346). Neither reading captures the radical implications of Blake’s spontaneous dispensation. The speech, which begins as an enumeration of global black religious diversity within the council, immediately effaces religious difference when Blake reminds the collective that they have agreed (off-stage) to replace “sects” and “denominations” with “one religion” devoted to their “redemption from bondage and degradation.” The connection Blake poses between effacement of religious difference and the redemption from bondage is a deliberate rejection of the use of church-state separation in the antebellum South to enforce a theologically sanctioned pro-slavery
social order. Blake rejects terms to create a new religious establishment intended to protect black people.

Antislavery activists before Blake had fulminated against what they saw as the essentially racist character of American religion. Black abolitionist and emigrationist Samuel Ringgold Ward made this assertion unequivocally, claiming more than “an ugly excrescence upon American religion, racialized oppression was . . . a cardinal principle, a sine qua non, a cherished defended keystone, a corner-stone, of American faith” (41).10 The background assumptions governing religious life in the US, this argument concludes, inspired historically unprecedented systems of oppression. Thus, when Blake insists that no aspect of the new religion may be “borrowed from [any] denomination, creed, [or] church: [any] existing organization, secret, secular, [or] religious” (258), he affirms the importance of religious novelty to this new order. “If we are to consult our oppressors,” he avers, then “our very assemblage is in violation of the laws of God” (258).

Blake’s insistence upon the novelty of his pan-African religion contrasts with arguments leveraging black “anciency” (Brooks, 135) made to legitimate what was perhaps the first public pan-African religion—Prince Hall freemasonry, of which Delany himself was a member. Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, African American freemasonry was, writes Joanna Brooks, a “precious venue for . . . the exercise of black political authority” (116). Delany was personally familiar with how early African American masons had adapted—in ways that clearly resemble Blake’s new religion—the “universals of Freemasonry’s civil theology grounded in human dignity” to claim “political freedom for Africans and people of African descent throughout the

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diaspora” (Walker 94). Anciency was an essential part of this political project, as black masons retraced the elaborate transhistorical pathways of masonic genealogy to lay claim to a heritage that challenged assertions of the Anglo-Saxon origins of culture and scientific knowledge. Indeed, Delany’s famous 1853 speech on the history of freemasonry concluded with the revelation that since Africa was the birthplace of Euclid, the site of Pythagoras’s creation of his eponymous theorem, and the land where Archimedes first shouted “Eureka,” then “Ancient Freemasonry” was originally African (“Origin,” 67). Yet Blake’s demand that his new religion owe nothing to any previously existing organization (even secret, masonic ones) suggests that Delany had rejected ancieny in favor of novelty. It is a move that deliberately cuts the cord of history in order to make a modern pan-African identity from scratch.

Motivating the demand for novelty is the desire to prevent the incursion of the “American religion” into the new nation and with it the return of racialized oppression. Blake thus fashions—to borrow José Casanova’s phrase—a “public religion in the modern world,” but one that effaces religious difference through the construction of a common theological frame, abandoning liberty of conscience at the same time that it introduces religion back into public life. Talal Asad argues that modern nations confine religion either to “private belief and worship” or to “public talk that makes no demands on life” (199). Blake’s religion refuses these circumscriptions, instead making immediate and persistent “demands on life” by issuing a liberationist call to collective “redemption” and making the dignity of black people an article of faith. These are what cause Blake to discard liberty of conscience, the cardinal principle of modern religion, but this decision should not be read as signaling a regression into either inquisitorial witch-hunts or the
politico-theological wars of sovereignty that tore through early modern Europe. To assume either of these would be to endorse the “schema of good and bad religion” that Tracy Fessenden argues has been dominant throughout US history, where the former is “associated with freedom and enlightenment” and the latter with “coercion and constraint” (3). Blake’s religion constrains the freedom of belief only to keep at bay the far crueler constrictions of racial hierarchies, which were historically allowed to propagate through appeals to liberty of conscience. It becomes a cartographic tool for mapping the boundaries of a new normative universe free from ravist discourse, and in doing so reimagines the relationship between religion and the modern nation-state.

The introduction of a common religion back into public life is thus a distinctly post-Protestant strategy of cosmic protection, a calculated response both to the theological underpinnings of racial hierarchies and the geographical boundlessness of slavery. When Blake insists on a common belief in a God who “owns us as His children,” he deploys theological innovation as a shield against racial discourse, establishing an order that makes the cosmic validity and dignity of this particular people a precondition for collective life. Rather than erasing racial difference, this new nomos ensures that ethno-theological assumptions of racial inferiority—which slavery helped to produce and which in turn helped to perpetuate slavery—do not slither back into public discourse. In this way it also marks a critical inversion of Berger’s account of religion-making that I discussed at the outset of this essay, in which religions legitimate states and institutions by placing them within a cosmic frame of reference. For one, Blake’s religion, in what Leslie Lewis calls the “ethnogenesis of communal identity,” cosmizes a people, not an institution (63). Moreover, Blake opts not to legitimize this social order—à la Berger—
through the concealment of its essential contingency but makes the process of creation a transparent, collective event. In place of the Bergerian sacred canopy, Blake installs a black canopy.

The new religion’s transparently communal origins, along with its central theology of redemption for this people now, lend it a doggedly this-worldly orientation, which neither denies its own historicity nor seeks release from an immanent frame. It imbues religious establishment with the foundational assumptions of a secular age and thus bypasses the twin dangers of universalizing a particularized religion, on the one hand, and of transcendentalizing the nation, on the other. Delany avoids the former by acknowledging the territorial limitations of the religion (Cuba) and their particular application for a historically situated people (those who have been labeled black), and the latter by situating this religion temporally in secular time, what Benedict Anderson (borrowing from Walter Benjamin) terms the “homogenous, empty time” (24) of nations. Blake’s foundational act of religion-making thus shares many of the metaphysical assumptions of nationalism, but it does not reduce religion to pure function, for the central beliefs that Blake adumbrates constitute the fundamental preconditions for participation in the public sphere, a blockade against an insidious and virtually axiomatic racism. It is a critical prelude to the ongoing work of nation-building and an indispensable element of Delany’s Canaan politics, one that is acutely sensitive to how theological precepts gave rise to the inhuman conditions against which African Americans protested.
iv. Bitter Canaan

Blake’s act of religion-making is intended as a beginning, not an end. His carving out of a political-theological (and pre-territorial) space within which to construct a new anti-racist metaphysics enables essential conversations about policy and collective organization to occur. The scenes of both formal and informal communal deliberation punctuating the last several chapters of the novel draw out aspects of this normative universe only implicit in the moment of collective coming-into-being by raising questions of identity and belonging internal to the new communitas. In short, they reveal the autonomic processes that thicken and detail this world and that, while they bear some resemblance to the immanent conversations of Exodus politics, are directed to the definition of a new normative universe rather than to the revision of an existing one.

The most important of these autonomic moments comes during the council’s second official meeting at the house of Carolus Blacus, Blake’s father, when Madame Montego raises the problem of the “equality of the black and white races” (285). The issue is a crucial one for determining whether the new black nation, worshipping a God “who owns us as His children,” will ultimately retain racial hierarchies (albeit reversed) or abolish them. Despite his assurances that all of the council’s policies should be “plain, simple, and at once comprehensible to every black person, however illiterate” (285), Blake’s response to Madame Montego is ambiguous: “A useless expenditure of time, Madame, it would seem to me. . . . ‘Ethiopia shall yet stretch forth her hands unto God; Princes shall come out of Egypt’; ‘Your God shall be my God, and your people my people,’ should comprehend our whole policy” (285). These two biblical citations are from Psalms 68:31 and Ruth 1:16. The former, which Albert J. Raboteau calls “probably
the most widely quoted verse in Afro-American religious history” (*African-American Religion*, 104), was the central prooftext of Ethiopianist discourse, providing biblical evidence of a noble African past and holding out the promise a rich future. Blake invokes it here to signal the global potential nested in his own nascent Pan-African nation. The latter verse is from the book of Ruth—hardly a standard source of prooftexts in either Ethiopianist or emigrationist discourse—and is uttered by Ruth (a Moabite) when she pleads with her Israelite mother-in-law Naomi to travel with her to Bethlehem. Ruth promises to renounce her homeland and her Gods in her plea to be with Naomi even though no bonds of nation or family still tie them, which, when read in the context of Madame Montego’s query, model the kind of supplication whites must show to blacks for equality to be possible. Taken together, the two verses form the threads of a policy prophesying the growth of a black nation and requiring that equality in this new social order be dependent upon the universal acceptance of its political-theological framework. Blake’s cryptic reply to Madame Montego is fundamentally optimistic, imagining an avenue for achieving racial equality without sacrificing its foundational beliefs, but it is complicated by the disaffection and rage of Gofer Gondolier, a character Delany introduces late in the novel as a counterweight to Blake’s hopefulness.

Although we will likely never know how *Blake* ended, we can assume that it did not end well. After Cuban authorities defuse an attempted rebellion by Havana’s black population, state-sponsored violence and surveillance create an atmosphere of terror that obscures the boundless optimism of “The Grand Council.” As racial tensions heighten, the fragile institutional architecture of Blake’s inchoate nation begins to teeter, and in the midst of this tragic din, Blake, silent and resigned, recedes into the novel’s background.
Despite Levine’s hopeful conviction that *Blake* ended “with a series of relatively nonviolent scenes that enabled Blake to emerge at the helm of a regenerated society” (216), there is little of that utopian light to be found amidst the pervasive suffering of the novel’s extant final chapters. Visions of a self-sustaining black nation flutter into view only to be cast aside by the immediacy of physical violence. The new Canaan becomes a bitter Canaan.¹¹

Bitterness is a condition as well as an attitude at the end of *Blake*, the fact of unremitting oppression as well as the cluster of contradictory feelings stirred by it. The vengeful caterer Gofer Gondolier gives voice to this bitterness and embodies the disquieting potentialities latent in Blake’s second act of religion-making. Even his name hints at his moral disfigurement: “Gofer” is a corruption of “Godfrey” (lit. “the peace of God”) and “Gondolier” is a reference to his former position attending a Spanish grandee fond of watersports. As his corrupted ur-Christian name suggests, he is a self-aware product of racial oppression and his resentment and rage run deep. The carving knife he clings to is intended, he informs the council, not for animals, but for men.

Gofer exists in the novel to probe and transgress the limits of Blake’s new framework for social life. He first appears on the periphery of the council’s deliberations as a self-appointed guard and remains silent during Blake’s long panegyrics and ecstatic theologizing until the very end when, just after Blake has urged the council’s new religion be free of any debt to existing institutions, he exclaims, “And we want no more of their gospel neither!” (259). The council laughs, but the force of his cry lingers. In suggesting that the “gospel” be cast by the wayside along with the infrastructure of

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¹¹ The phrase “bitter canaan” is taken from the title of the sociologist Charles S. Johnson’s study of Liberia.
Western Christendom, Gofer challenges the nominally Christian basis upon which Blake’s new religion grounds itself, pressing these nascent formations into realms Delany himself—a fastidious Protestant—would likely have been uncomfortable with. A kind of subaltern double to Blake, Gofer speaks from the literal and figurative margins of the council, making declarations that explore the discomfiting limits of Blake’s public theological frame.

His most visceral intervention is also the last extant line of the novel. As violence increasingly becomes a part of daily life for Havana’s colored population following the group’s failed coup, an indignant Gofer walks out onto the street to “spread among the blacks an authentic statement of his outrage”: “Woe be unto those devils of whites, I say!” (313). This radical and “authentic” declaration inverts the moral and cosmological associations that had been attached to emergent racial categories. Over the course of several centuries, Christian theology had made blackness the symbol of evil, fallenness, and corruption, and whiteness the symbol of goodness, innocence, and purity. For Gofer to call whites “devils” is to reverse the moral associations of color while still upholding the hierarchical structure supporting them. Blake, of course, abstains from theologizing the satanic during the “Grand Council,” but his express statements do not prohibit such conclusions. When Blake invokes a God “who owns us as His children,” he creates the potential for the demonization of those outside the ethnos. A God “who owns us as His children” may not necessarily own them.

Gofer’s interventions into the new nation’s ongoing process of self-definition show the fragility of Blake’s black nation, its reconciliation of difference and its

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12 See Washington, Anti-Blackness, for the long history by which anti-blackness became integrated into English Christianity.
theologizing of shared identity. Gofer’s language traces its limits and explores its darker corners from the periphery. The relationship between Blake and Gofer during this last movement of the novel reintroduces into Canaan politics the threat of political messianism, where Blake seems increasingly to favor deliberation, conversation, and institution-building and Gofer to favor forcing the end. Gofer’s positions, radical as they are, never actually disavow or deny the political and theological architecture instituted by the Grand Council. He still speaks within and not outside it. What his rhetoric does is not to undermine but to thicken this world in the process of becoming with a bitterness derived from the experience of unremitting oppression and the disappointment of thwarted plans. Gofer thus adds a complementary and complex affective dimension to the unsustainable jubilation of nomic invention, and his various declarations unearth the more troubling potentialities latent in Blake’s own vision. The rhetorical and theological battles taking place at the end of the novel—not to mention the immediate violence occurring on the streets—are, therefore, part of a process by which the newly constituted community continues to define itself by itself. This is not murmuring for the fleshpot of Egyptians, or retrospective longing for the world left behind, but a common commitment to a social order still coming into being.

Despite the coherence of Gofer Gondolier’s utterances within the counternomic frame established by the council, the world at the end of the novel still seems on the verge of unraveling. That we don’t know how the novel ended only heightens this sense of grim indeterminacy. But whether we imagine a successful rebellion and the formation of a self-sustaining Pan-African nation in Cuba, or an apocalypse of racial violence, it is the novel’s world-maintaining imperative that remains.
v. Canaan Politics on the Ground

When Blake began appearing in The Anglo-African Magazine in 1859 Delany was preparing to travel to West Central Africa to scout territory for a possible emigrationist destination, a venture he later recounted in The Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party (1861). As an editorial note in The Weekly Anglo-African announcing the serial publication of Delany’s novel in its entirety acknowledged, “the departure of [the novel’s] author on an Exploring expedition to Africa” (Weekly Anglo-African, 16 Nov. 1861) had interrupted Blake’s initial run. Delany’s homecoming, the note implied, ensured that the “whole work” could now be printed. Over the course of Blake’s publication in The Weekly Anglo-African, discussions of and advertisements for The Official Report appeared in close proximity to serialized chapters, establishing these essential documents of Delany’s emigrationism as two halves of a totalizing vision that aimed to ensure the survival of a black republic in a global order increasingly hostile to peoples of the African diaspora. Whereas Blake meditates on the institutional foundations necessary to preserve a black nation from the linguistic, political, and theological regimes that propagated racial discourse, The Official Report obsesses over the survival of actual bodies in a foreign land. It thus presents readers with Canaan politics in a pragmatic and physiological key.

The Official Report strongly emphasizes the climatological and epidemiological conditions in West Africa, often tediously enumerating local flora and fauna, the symptoms of and treatments for diseases, and minute diplomatic encounters. Much is made of how far apart trees should be planted, how bees reproduce, what agricultural
productions are most suited to the climate, and how cities should be organized. Although Delany’s literary inclinations occasionally prevail (for instance, his discussion of the characteristics of black and white ants in the region unspools into an almost Thoreauvian allegory of race relations), the work generally resists the kind of speculative and counterfactual flights that characterize Blake in favor of the practical realities of collective life, the object of his inquiry.

The fine-grained attention Delany pays to the material conditions of the site and their implications for his larger project is nowhere more visible than in his discussion of disease. Section 6 ostensibly analyzes the microbial threats posed to emigrants, but it also encapsulates the complex of conditions that Delany believed necessitated emigration yet threatened its success. This conceptual flexibility is evident from the outset when Delany describes in pathological terms the peculiar cluster of symptoms emigrants were likely to experience upon first seeing African soil. These emotions, which affect the “entire physical system,” begin, he writes, as a “hilarity of feeling almost akin to approaching intoxication” (27). After several days, however, these feelings subside into “actual febrile attacks,” producing in the subject “a feeling of regret that you left your native country for a strange one; an almost frantic desire to see friends and nativity; a despondency and loss of hope of ever seeing those you love at home again” (27). What he is describing, of course, is nostalgia. (And here we should recall Holly’s biblically inflected warning about retrospective longing with which this essay began.) By characterizing nostalgia as “a mere morbid affection of the mind . . . arising from an approaching disease” (27), Delany empties it of any ideological content, thereby reducing it to a physiological condition, the only cure for which is time. This discussion precedes Delany’s careful
inventory of the more conventional diseases threatening emigrants, like “native fever,” “ulcerated opthalmia,” and “Guinea worm” (27, 28, 42). What is important to note about this section is how Delany’s focus on disease draws attention away from the discursive and institutional concerns of Blake to the immediate bodily well-being of emigrants. Both works show a mutual interest in the themes of survival and endurance so crucial to Canaan politics, but do so in distinct registers.

If Blake can be said to articulate the themes of Canaan politics from the top down by representing the creation of a new social order that would inoculate a black republic from the oppression wrought by racial discourse, then The Official Report may do the same from the bottom up, demonstrating how the protection of black bodies from physical ailments becomes an essential precondition for ensuring the survival of those living, breathing individuals who both perpetuate that new social order and are also its beneficiaries. This bottom-up approach to Canaan politics peaks in the final paragraph of section 13 when Delany first figures global racial oppression in physiological terms as a “disease” that “has long since been known,” before concluding, “we have found and shall apply the remedy” (62). As evidence that emigration is this remedy, Delany offers an interpretation of Psalms 68:31 (“Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God”) that he attributes to none other than Henry Highland Garnet, whom he claims has resolved the long-standing ambiguity attached to the word “soon” in the verse. According to Garnet, Delany writes, “soon” denotes not some providentially ordained future date but rather “the period ensuing from the time of beginning” (62, italics in original), a clear signal that in order for the biblical prophecy to be fulfilled, emigration must begin immediately.
Delany’s citation reveals Garnet as a common source for both Blake and The Official Report. Here, however, the theologian’s words are intended to assuage apocalyptic anxieties, not stoke them. If these Israelites would only march, the argument implies, then God would surely follow, and Canaan could be built. This last plea against passivity and for collective action restores some of the optimism that is lost at the end of Blake. Lurking behind it, though, is Delany’s fear that too many of his fellows would continue, in his eyes at least, to “stand still.”

For all of the attempts by Delany and others to establish a black nation elsewhere, emigrationism in the 1850s was never destined to succeed, the unfortunate outcome of demographic and organizational factors well beyond the control of its partisans.\(^\text{13}\) Given that he devoted himself to the often thankless work of Reconstruction in the years following the Civil War, Delany likely recognized this, too.\(^\text{14}\) But if antebellum emigrationism was a movement doomed to failure, the discourse it produced was nevertheless endowed with unique speculative capacities that find their most charged expression in Blake, which aspired to think at the outer limits of the Exodus paradigm, to envision what a Canaan for African Americans could be, and to construct a public religion in the modern world unbound from the foundations of public Protestantism.

\(^{13}\) See Davis, 132 for the demographic problems that emigrationism confronted.

\(^{14}\) For detailed of Delany’s various emigration projects see Rollin, 85-89; Sterling, 167-75; and Adeleke, Without Regard to Race, 70-77.
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